

Writing

In the Early Vedic Period, writing was not as important as the spoken word. Grammar was oriented towards the spoken word and phonetics, and not the written text. Evidence from Asoka's rock inscriptions demonstrates that although writing was prevalent prior to 300 BC, it was not used for literary purposes. The reluctance to use writing could have been due to the sectional interest of the priests and Brahmins who maintained a monopoly over the sacred texts by extending the knowledge to or withholding it from different groups. It was repeatedly emphasised that members of the lower caste, Sudras, were to be excluded from benefiting from the sacred wisdom. As a result the oral tradition was the only acceptable form for imparting information.

An injunction in the Vedas states that if a Sudra hears the Veda, his ears shall be stopped with molten tin or lac. If he repeats the sacred texts, his tongue shall be cut out and if he stores them in his memory, his body shall be struck in two.

The oldest writing materials used were palm leaves and strips of birch bark. Copper plates were used to record documents such as deeds of gifts, etc.