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THE EVOLUTION OF TAKRI SCRIPT IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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Abstract: Takri script is an important yet understudied part in the history of Indian writing system. Like many other Indian scripts, Takri also evolved from the Brahmi script, via Sharada and Devashesha scripts, in the hilly mountains of the North-western part of Indian sub-continent, which mostly covers the present-day Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, from 16th to early 20th century. It emerged as a script for merely record-keeping, but soon adapted to the social, economic and political needs of the people, thus becoming the script of the masses. This paper traces this evolution of Takri script in Jammu and Kashmir, its administrative and cultural significance, and its eventual decline due to the colonial and postcolonial need for standardization. In this paper, special attention has been given to the Dogri Takri, also known as the Namay Dogra Akkhar in Jammu, and the ongoing efforts for its revival.

Index Terms: Takri Script; Dogri Takri; Sharada Script; Namay Dogra Akkhar; Jammu and Kashmir

1. INTRODUCTION:

Scripts are not merely tools of communication but important cultural markers. They preserve religious texts, record administrative histories, and reflect social structures (Kalyanaraman, 2014). The history of scripts in India is marked by dynamic evolution, regional variation, and cultural adaptation. Among these many regional scripts, Takri script holds a distinctive place in the northwestern Himalayas, particularly in the regions of present-day Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand. Emerging around the 16th century CE, Takri developed from the Sharada script through its intermediate form, Devashesha or "later Sharada." While Sharada was reserved for literary and religious purposes, Takri evolved into a more practical and accessible writing system for administrative, commercial, and everyday use by common people.

For nearly four centuries, Takri was employed to record revenue accounts, royal decrees, manuscripts, and even Christian missionary texts. Its many regional variants — including Chambeali, Jaunsari, and Dogra Akkhar — reflect the diversity of linguistic traditions in the Himalayan belt. The Dogra variation, later standardized as *Namay Dogra Akkhar* during Maharaja Ranbir Singh's reign, was even used as the official script of Jammu for a time. However, the gradual dominance of Urdu and Devanagari after the late 19th century led to the decline of Takri, confining it to oral memory, neglected manuscripts, and a handful of practitioners.

Today, Takri survives more as a cultural marker than a functional script. Recent revival efforts by scholars, cultural activists, and government bodies have sought to preserve it as part of Jammu and Kashmir's heritage. Yet, questions remain regarding contemporary awareness of the script, especially among the younger generations. This study, therefore, not only traces the historical trajectory of Takri but also examines its present status and prospects for revival.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

I. To trace the historical evolution of the Takri script in Jammu and Kashmir between the 16th and 20th centuries.

II. To analyze the causes of the decline of Takri and its replacement by Urdu and Devanagari.

III. To assess the current level of awareness of Takri among youngsters in Jammu and Kashmir.

IV. To investigate contemporary revival efforts by scholars and cultural activists.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating historical-documentary research with empirical sociolinguistic inquiry. The historical dimension reconstructs the evolution and decline of Takri through secondary sources, while the empirical dimension gauges current awareness and revival efforts through surveys and interviews.

3.2 Data Sources

- **Secondary Sources:**
  - Scholarly works (e.g., Deambi, Upadhyay, Magotra, Kalyanaraman).
  - Archival manuscripts, inscriptions, and publications in Takri.
  - Reports and news articles of cultural programs and workshops on Takri revival.
- **Primary Sources:**
  - Survey: Online questionnaires distributed among school and college students in Jammu and Kashmir.
  - Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with scholars and cultural activists promoting Takri/Namay Dogra Akkhar.

3.3 Data Collection:

- **Survey:**
  - Target group: Students (secondary school and college level) in J&K.
  - Tool: Structured questionnaire with close-ended and open-ended items.
  - Sample: 250 participants.
  - Focus: Awareness, recognition, writing ability, family knowledge, interest in learning.
- **Interviews:**
  - Participants: Scholars and cultural activists involved in Takri promotion.
  - Focus: Historical perspective, revival strategies, challenges in preservation, community reception.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data (survey) were analyzed through descriptive statistics, while qualitative insights (interviews) were derived via thematic coding of interview transcripts.

4. THE ORIGIN, DECLINE, AND REVIVAL OF THE TAKRI SCRIPT

4.1 Origins and Historical Development

The Takri script occupies a distinctive place within the lineage of Indian writing systems, representing a vital link between the ancient Brahmi script and the vernacular scripts of the northwestern Himalayas. According to Salomon (1998), Brahmi—dating to the 3rd century BCE during the Mauryan period—served as the foundational ancestor for a wide array of South Asian scripts. During the Gupta period (4th–6th centuries CE), Brahmi diversified into several regional variants, one of which—**the northern Brahmi or Kutila**—gave rise to the Sharada script around the 8th century CE in the Himalayan belt (Salomon, 1998; Upadhyay, 1989).

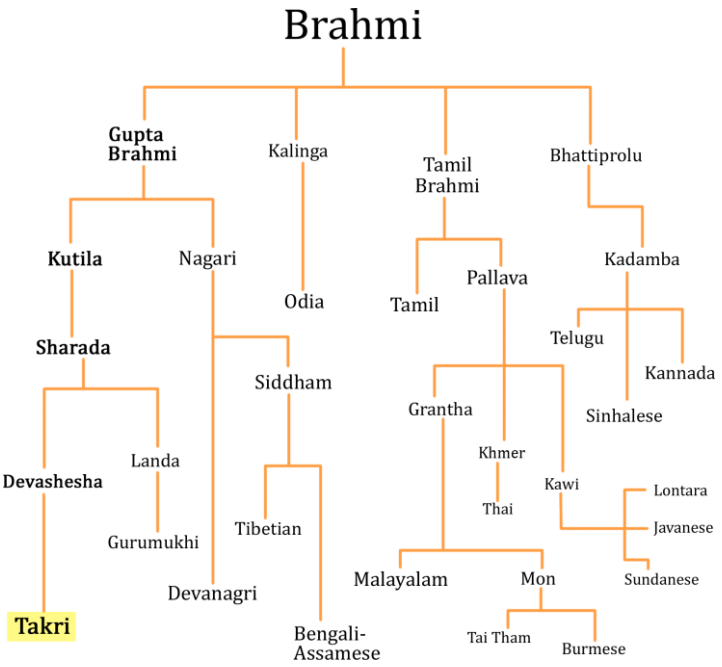


Figure 1 - Evolution of Takri script from Brahmi

The Sharada script soon became the principal medium for Sanskrit learning, religious texts, and royal communication across the **Pir Panjal Range**—covering present-day **Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Haryana**. It appeared prominently in temple inscriptions, administrative orders, and manuscripts. One of its earliest examples, the **Saharan Prashasti inscription** from Chamba, testifies to its early adoption and formalization in the hill states (Deambi, 2008). Between the 9th and 12th centuries CE, Sharada attained prestige as a script of scholarship and administration.

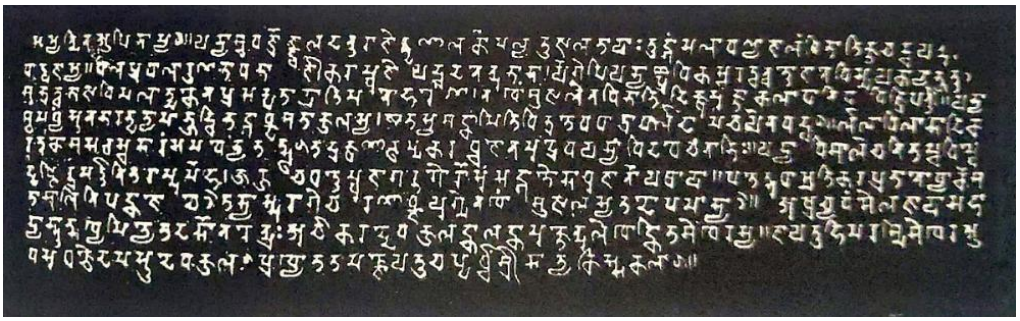


Figure 2 - Text of Saharan Prashasti Inscription incised on a stone tablet from Chamba (H.P.), circa 10th Century

However, from the 13th century onwards, it began to decline due to shifting political and cultural landscapes. Yet, rather than disappearing, it diversified into two major offshoots: **Landa** and **Devashesha**. The **Landa script** evolved into **Gurmukhi**—the script of Punjabi—while the **Devashesha** or "later Sharada" developed into **Takri**, which was suited for use in the **hilly regions** of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

Takri thus emerged between the **14th and 16th centuries CE** as a practical, cursive, and simplified script. It was designed for **everyday writing, administrative communication, and commercial record-keeping**, distinguishing itself from the more formal, liturgical Sharada (Sharma, 1985; Deambi, 2008).

The term *Takri* itself conveys its social function. Some scholars link it to *tanka* (coin), suggesting its association with trade, while others connect it to *Thakur* (landholder), denoting elite usage (Grierson, 1908–1928). Both explanations reflect Takri's transformation from a priestly script to one accessible to merchants, officials, and the common populace.

By the 16th century, Takri diversified into several regional variants across Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Uttarakhand. Linguistic surveys (Grierson, 1903) and subsequent scholarship identify at least **thirteen regional variants** across northwestern India, including **Chambeali, Dogri, Bhatteali, Kangri, Kochi, Kulvi, Kashtwari, Madeali, Gaddi, Gahri, Kinnauri, Jaunsari, and Sirmauri**. These shared a

common base but differed in letter shapes and pronunciation patterns, showing how Takri adapted to the needs of diverse hill communities.

In **Jammu and Kashmir**, the main form was **Dogri Takri**, locally known as *Dogra Akkhar*. It evolved through two stages:

- **Old Dogri (Ganmat)** — used before 1857, lacked vowel signs (*matras*), had fewer sounds, and was unstandardized. Landowners mainly used it for records, sometimes taking advantage of its ambiguity.

- **New Dogri (Namay Dogra Akkhar or Dvigrit Akkhar)** — standardized after 1857 under **Maharaja Ranbir Singh**, led by **Jyotshi Bishweshwar**, Principal of Ranbir Pathshala. The reformed version introduced consistent spelling and teaching methods, making it suitable for administration and education.

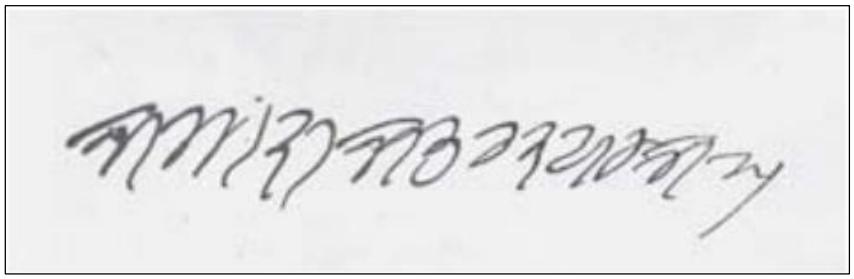


Figure 3 – Signature of Maharaja Ranbir Singh in Takri

This reform not only simplified and unified the script but also made it accessible to ordinary people, reflecting Maharaja Ranbir Singh's broader vision of modernization and literacy. During his reign, Dogri also gained royal recognition and was made a **court language** alongside Persian and Bhasha (contemporary Hindi). All government officials were required to know Takri, and petitions to the Maharaja were written in it instead of Persian.

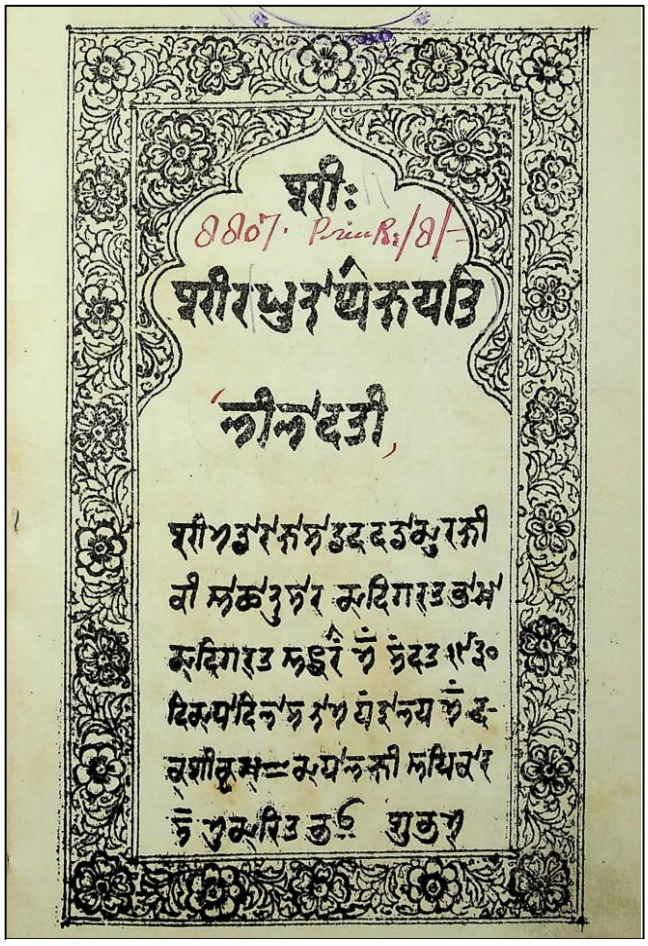


Figure 4 – A page from the book 'Leelavati' printed in Namay Dogra Akkhar in 1931 at Ranbir Prakash Press

The royal printing press—**Vidya Vilas Press**—also began producing administrative manuals, legal codes, and educational primers in *Namay Dogra Akkhar*, making it one of the few indigenous scripts of the era to achieve formal standardization and widespread administrative use. This period not only witnessed Takri's flourishing in bureaucratic domains but also in literature, pedagogy, and art. The script appeared in *Bahi Khatas* (merchant ledgers), **Basohli paintings**, royal decrees, and inscriptions, reinforcing its cultural centrality.

4.2 Decline and Replacement

The advent of colonial administration and the corresponding shifts in language policy marked the beginning of Takri's decline. By the late 19th century, British authorities and regional rulers began promoting more standardized scripts such as **Urdu** and **Devanagari** for administrative and educational purposes. These scripts were perceived as politically advantageous and better suited for wider communication across the subcontinent. As a result, the official recognition of Takri was progressively withdrawn.

In **1944**, the Jammu and Kashmir government officially adopted **Devanagari** for the Dogri language, effectively displacing Takri from administrative, literary, and educational domains. Following India's independence, most regional languages previously written in Takri—including Dogri—transitioned entirely

to Devanagari. Consequently, Takri receded from public life, surviving only in personal manuscripts, inscriptions, and oral memory (Snedden, 2001; Magotra et al., 2020).

This marginalization was not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also reflected deeper socio-political transformations. As literacy became increasingly standardized under colonial education systems, regional scripts like Takri were relegated to the periphery, resulting in the gradual erosion of a unique cultural and administrative heritage.

4.3 Revival and Contemporary Status

The 21st century has witnessed a cautious yet determined revival of the Takri script. Scholars, academic institutions, cultural organizations, and governmental bodies have launched multiple initiatives aimed at preserving and revitalizing this endangered script. These efforts encompass research, digitization, education, policy advocacy, and public engagement.

4.3.1 Individual and Scholarly Contributions

One of the most prominent figures in this revival is **Dr. Shikha Magotra**, who has combined academic research with cultural activism. Her doctoral work focused on developing computational models for Takri text segmentation, which laid the groundwork for later digital preservation initiatives. Recognizing the emotional and cultural resonance of Dogri's ancestral script, Dr. Magotra began teaching Takri through online courses and interactive community programs such as the *TakriLipi* WhatsApp group. These efforts have reached many students and reconnected younger generations with their linguistic roots.



Figure 5 – Slide from the online class of Takri script

4.3.2 Technological and Institutional Initiatives

Organizations such as **Aksharaya** have played an instrumental role in the technological revival of Takri by developing transliteration tools that convert Dogri written in Devanagari into Takri and by creating Unicode-compatible digital fonts. The inclusion of Takri in the **Unicode Standard (2010)** represented a major milestone, granting it official digital recognition and ensuring its compatibility with modern computing systems (Pandey, 2014).

Academic institutions have also shown increasing engagement. **Jammu University** and **Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University (SMVDU)** have initiated research projects, curriculum proposals, and awareness campaigns focusing on Takri studies. The proposed establishment of a *Centre for Takri Script* at Jammu University in collaboration with the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) signals growing institutional recognition.

Governmental agencies have complemented these academic efforts. The **Himachal Pradesh government**, in partnership with IGNOU and the National Manuscripts Mission, began training specialists in Takri as early as 2009. Over 1.26 lakh manuscripts, including many in Takri, have since been documented and translated, contributing to the script's preservation.





Figure 6 and 7 – Workshop on Takri Calligraphy organized by JKAACL

4.3.3 Cultural Advocacy and Popular Representation

Cultural activism has further propelled public awareness. The award-winning film *Saanjh* (2017), directed by **Ajay Saklani**, featured Takri in its title design and credits, thereby reintroducing the script to popular media. Local administrations have also promoted Takri through public signage, murals, and heritage displays, enhancing its visibility in urban and educational spaces.

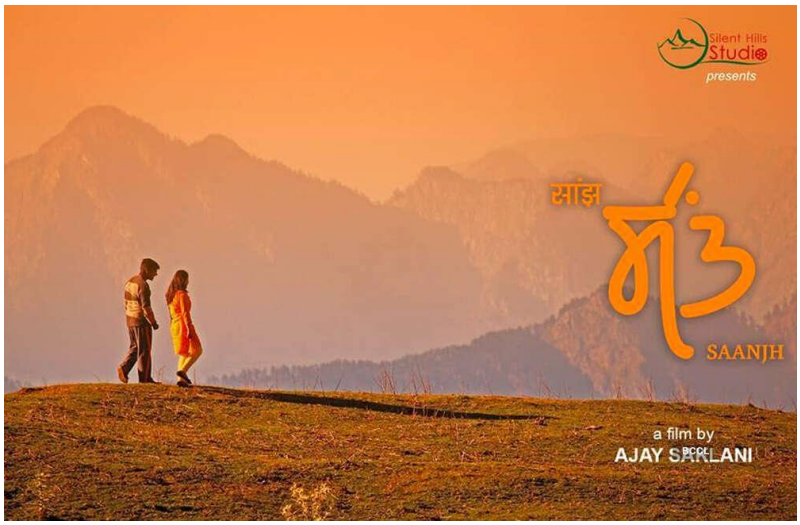


Figure 8 – Title page of the film 'Saanjh' by Ajay Saklani

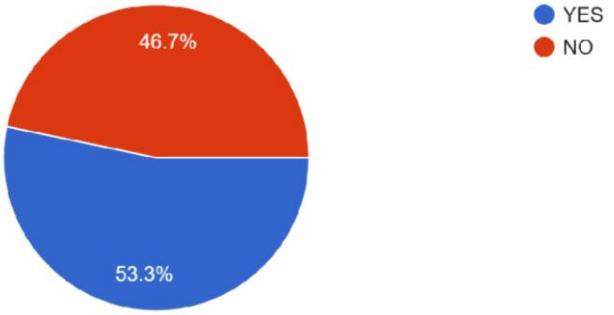
The **Jammu and Kashmir Official Languages Bill (2020)**, which granted Dogri official status, further reinforced the need to reclaim Dogri's original script as a marker of cultural identity. These converging efforts—academic, governmental, and cultural—constitute a multi-layered movement toward the renaissance of Takri.

4.4 Survey Findings and Youth Perception

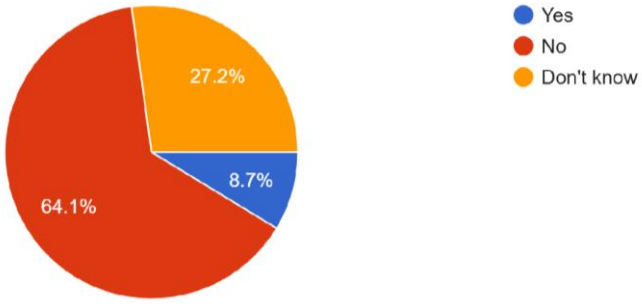
To assess the current awareness and attitudes toward Takri among youth, a structured online survey was conducted among 250 students aged 10–25 years from various schools and colleges in Jammu. The findings are summarized below:

- **Demographics:** Approximately 50% of respondents were aged 10–13, representing middle school students, with the remainder comprising high school and college participants.

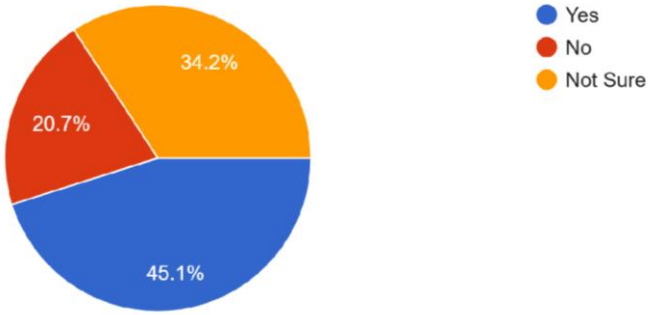
- **Awareness:** 53.3% had heard of the Takri script, primarily through school programs or cultural workshops.



- **Family Knowledge:** Only 8.7% reported having family members familiar with Takri, indicating minimal intergenerational transmission.



- **Historical Awareness:** When asked about Takri's historical presence in Jammu and Himachal Pradesh, 45.1% responded affirmatively, 20.7% negatively, and 34.2% were uncertain.



- **Writing Proficiency:** Less than 5% could write even a few Takri characters, reflecting limited practical familiarity.

  Despite low proficiency, **64% of respondents expressed interest in learning Takri**, suggesting significant potential for revival through educational initiatives. Students proposed several creative strategies for promoting the script, categorized as follows:

- **Educational Measures:** Inclusion of Takri lessons in curricula, short-term certificate courses, and dedicated teaching sessions.

- **Cultural Initiatives:** Calligraphy contests, festival signage in Takri, and heritage exhibitions.

- **Digital Strategies:** Development of learning apps, daily word campaigns, and social media awareness drives.

These responses collectively reflect both curiosity and a sense of cultural pride among youth, underscoring that institutional and pedagogical support could meaningfully revive the script.

4.5 Insights from Interview: Dr. Shikha Magotra

An in-depth interview with Dr. Shikha Magotra revealed critical insights into the challenges and potential of Takri revival. She highlighted the **historical prestige** of Takri as an official administrative script alongside Persian during the Dogra period, with significant legal texts—such as the *Ranbir Dand Vidhi (Ranbir Penal Code)*—published in both Urdu and Dogra Akkhar.

Dr. Magotra emphasized that community response, particularly from youth, has been encouraging. However, the existence of **multiple Takri variants** remains a major obstacle to standardization and unified teaching. Many individuals are unaware of their regional variant (e.g., *Namay Dogra Akkhar*), leading to confusion that undermines coherent revival strategies.

She further observed that government initiatives, while symbolically supportive, often lack sustained impact. True revival, she argues, demands systematic scholarly documentation, variant consolidation, and curricular integration. While her outlook remains cautiously optimistic, she views the survival of Takri primarily in terms of **heritage preservation rather than functional restoration**—unless major institutional investment materializes.

Her ongoing outreach programs, such as *Dogra Mittar* classes, nonetheless demonstrate the enduring emotional and cultural resonance of Takri within the Dogra community.

5. CONCLUSION

The story of the Takri script is one of transformation, loss, and renewal. Originating from the ancient Sharada script, Takri evolved through Devashesha into a practical writing system for the people of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand. Unlike the classical Sharada or the plains-based Gurmukhi, Takri became the everyday script of the hills—used for trade, administration, and daily communication.

Its golden age came during the reign of Maharaja Ranbir Singh, when *Namay Dogra Akkhar* was standardized and made the official script of Dogri. This period marked not only linguistic growth but also cultural pride and educational reform. However, with the rise of Urdu and Devanagari during the colonial era, Takri gradually lost its official status and faded from use.

Today, efforts to revive Takri show that it still holds emotional and cultural importance. Scholars, students, and cultural activists are working to digitize, teach, and reintroduce the script through online learning, Unicode inclusion, and academic research. Surveys among youth show strong interest in reconnecting with this part of their heritage.

Reviving Takri is about more than saving a script—it is about restoring a connection to the region's identity, history, and pride. Its journey from ancient inscriptions to modern revival reminds us that languages and scripts live on as long as people continue to value and use them.

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