Chola Inscription on a Menhir from Mepara, Rajakumari Panchayat, Idukki District, Kerala*

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Abstract

Some years back, at Mepara close to Rajakumari, an inscription was noticed on a menhir belonging to the Megalithic period. The contents of the inscription remained undeciphered till recently. Initial readings of the inscription indicate that it belongs to the 10th year of Rajendra Chola. This article tries to give a brief account of the inscription and its importance.

Keywords: Menhir, Chola, stampage, praśasti, trade-route, Roman coins, Ay-Venad.

Introduction

An inscription was noticed on a menhir belonging to the Megalithic period at Mepara by late Dr. John Ochanthuruth way back in the 1990s. He makes a reference about it in one of his articles but, he never appears to have deciphered the inscription or published an in depth account of it till his untimely demise (Ochanthuruth, 2003:15). The author had once accompanied him to the site and taken stampage and photographs of the inscription but due to reprographic issues, it did

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not yield the desired results. Hence, the site was revisited to evaluate its current status, to take pictures of the inscription and make attempts to decipher it. This article presents a brief account of the menhir and discusses the importance of the inscription based on the transcription provided by Dr. K. Rajan and Dr. S. Bala Murugan.

The menhir

The inscription bearing menhir is located in K.P.Tilagar Estate, Mepara (090.59710'N 770.086989'E), which is close to Kajanappara in Rajakumari panchayat, Nedumkandam block, Udumbanchola taluk of Idukki district. A road from Rajakumari leads south to Kajanappara which has a Government Higher Secondary School and a Post Office. 50m south from the school a small road running east and then turning south, leads to Shiva temple. The estate is to the west of the road. From the road, a pathway cut westwards through the lateritic hillock leads to the site.

This menhir is of Gneiss rock and erected atop a lateritic hillock that offers panoramic view of the surroundings. The area surrounding the menhir is currently overgrown with thick vegetation of grass and shrubs (Pl.1 and 2). This menhir is oriented in a north-south axis and roughly measures slightly over 6m in height, 5m in maximum width and has an average thickness of about 30 cm. It defies explanation how such a large stone came to be erected there.

In local myths, the erection of the stone is considered as an endeavour of Bhima, the strongest of Pandava brothers represented in the epic *Mahabharata*. Hence, some people also call it Bhimankallu. Some of the locals worship this menhir even today, as evident from the few stone lamps; a metal bell etc., kept close to it (Pl.3). There are many places in Kerala where local legends associate large menhirs to the Pandavas and Bhima in particular.

The inscription

The inscription is engraved towards the bottom of the stone's eastern surface (Pl.2 and 4). It is in a partly damaged state and some letters are totally lost. There are almost 13 lines in the inscription and it tentatively read as follows:

Text

1 ஸ[ஹி]ஸ்ரீ. . . . . ஏழரை . . . . .

2 கொண்டு பெராற்றங்கரை கொட்டக் . . .

3 ஸ்லஉனஅஞ்ச வித்து . . ஊனயுங் . . .

4 யும் வேண்டி . . . . . கைக் கொண்டு

5 வீர ஹிஊஹாஸனத்து வீற்றுந்தருளிணக் கொப்பர

6 கௌரிபந்ரான உடையார் ஸ்ரீ ராஜெந்து

7 தெவற்கு யாண்டு [ய] ஆவது . .

8 . . . .

9 . . . .

10 . . . .

11 ட சொழ . . . .

12 பெதிமங்கலத்துடைய . . . . . .

13 ஒஉஈ[ஹாஜநொஉ]

Transliteration

1) *Swasti Śri….ezhari…..*
2) *Koṇdu Perāttankarai kottak…..*
3) *Llanai ancu vittu…..naiyun*
4) *Yum vendi….kaikkondu*
5) *Vīra Simhāśanattu Vīttuntarul inak ko para*
6) *Keśaripanmarān Udaiyār Sri Rājentya*
7) *Tevarkku yāndu āvatu* (10)
8) ….
9) ….
10) …
11) *Da Cozha*
12) *Petimankalattudaiya*
13) *Prama(hajanom)*

The inscription is a *praśasti* in Tamil language and alphabets interspersed with a few Grantha words and alphabets. It starts with the invocation *Swasti Sri*. It is apparently assignable to Rajendra-I (1012CE-1044 CE) the son of Raja Raja Chola. Line 1-5 of the *praśasti* recounts his appellations and achievements. He is referred to in the inscription as Ko-Parakesarivarman alias Udaiyar Sri Rajendra Chola-deva and dated to his 10th year of reign or 1022CE (as his regnal year com-

mences from 1012 CE) (Sastri, 1935: 231). Chera kings Rajasimha and Rajaraja who reigned from Makotai or Mahodayapuram are considered as his feudatories (Narayanan, 1996:70-71). In line 2 of the inscription there is apparently a reference to his tussle with the Chieftain of Perattankarai and of his being victorious. The place Perattankarai mentioned in the inscription may be a reference to Makodai, which was located on the banks of Periyar *Per = Periya – attan = river – karai* = banks or Periyaattinkarai = Makodai /Kodungallur.

Discussions

Rajendra-I who succeeded Raja Raja-I to the Chola throne, like his predecessor, invaded and annexed the Kerala region, somewhere between his 7th and 10th year of reign. An inscription of Rajendra from the south wall of Thanjavur temple dating to his 10th year vouches his conquest of Kerala. In this inscription, after his war with Chalukya king Jayasimha, he states of his conquering the "principal great mountains (which contained) nine treasures" (Hultzsch, 1916 vol. II-part-I: 93-95). This conquest of the mountains is also reiterated in his Tirumalai inscription dating to his 13th year (Hultzsch, 1907-08: 232-233). Sastri felt that meaning of the phrase '*Navanidillulap-perumali-galum*' offered by Hultzsch is unclear or unintelligible (Sastri, 1935: 245). The English transcript of the 6th line in Tirumalai inscription provided by Hultzsch reads "… *el-arai ilakkamu = nava-nedi-kkula-pperu-malaigalum vikkiram-virar*…" (Hultzsch 1907-08:232).

The phrase '*Nava-nedi-kkula*' possibly carries a connotation to the Yadava Kula or Vrsni race or the Ay-Venad kings. (*Navani* = (butter) *di* = (of) *kkula* = (lineage) = (perumal = king)-igalum (ruling/belonging to) Vikrama vira. The Vikrama Vira mentioned is possibly a reference to the Ay-King Vikramadita Varaguna, the most renowned king of the Ay *kula* who was defeated by Pandaya-Chola kings earlier. Hence, phrase '*el-arai ilakkamu = nava-nedi-kkula-pperu-malaigalum vikkiram-virar*' possibly implies to mean of 'the hill ranges that once belonged to the Ay sovereign Vikrama vira'.

Ancient Tamil literary work *Purananuru* mentions of the family of Yadava or Ay kings residing in the hilly regions. One of the earliest mentioned king of this family is Ay-Andiran and he is referred to as the 'lord of Podiya mountains ranges' (Podiya Mountains are synonymous with the Agasthiyar hill ranges, extending along the western fringes with Kerala along the Kanyakumari-Tirunelveli-Madurai districts). It is stated that Ay-Andiran was quite wealthy and is one of the

seven great philanthropists praised in Tamil literature (C.f. Rao, 1908: Vol.1.17, 275 and Narayanan, 191). Rajendra-I reiterates this view in his Thanjavur inscription and states that "the principal great mountains contained nine treasures".

The area of Nedumkandam - Munnar located on the hills now in Idukki district after the decline of the Ay supremacy, came under the clout of the Venad-Chera rulers. Apparently this area was part of the ancient territorial divisions called Kilmalainatu and Munninatu referred to in the inscriptions from Trikkoditanam and Perunna respectively. Narayanan is of the opinion that Kilmalainatu must have possibly incorporated parts of Devikulam, Todupuzha and Muvarrupula taluqs of Idukki district, and Munninatu was possibly located to the east of Tiruvalla (Narayanan 189-190). There is possibility that, Munninatu denotes the area around the upper-eastern reaches of Idukki district (Munnar-Marayur) regions. The area was possibly called Muninatu or Muninadu on account of the large number of *Muniara* or (dolmens) dotting the area.

Even if the usage 'high mountains' referred to in the Thanjavur inscriptions is contemplated, there is no denying the fact that the hill ranges of Idukki was an economically rich pocket and as it was essentially an important spice producing centre from ancient times. The arterial spice trade route connecting the ports of Kerala / Malabar Coast in the west to the Tamil heartland in the east, ran through the passes in the hills, now running across the districts of Idukki, Pathanamthitta and Kollam. The early historic antecedents of this trade route is vouched from the treasure-trove of Roman coins dating between 1st Century BCE and 2nd Century CE, discovered from the sites of Nedumkandam, Idamakuduru and Poonjar, all located in Idukki district. Interestingly Mepara is situated 30 km north of Nedumkandam by road (Sathyamurthy, 2009:117-118).

Chola kings Raja Raja and Rajendra-I had conquered the Pandya territories before entering the Kerala region. After the fall of the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Chera-Venad rulers appear to have regained their respective territories. The Munnar region was with the Punjar royal family. The Punjar royal family was apparently of Pandya decent or their vassals. Manavikrama Kulasekhara Perumal of this dynasty acquired sovereignty over the tracts around the high hill ranges. The Punjar family was annexed to Travancore dynasty by Marthanda Varma with the conquest of Tekkumkur and Vadakkumkur, in the 1749-50. John Daniel Munro took it on lease from the Kerala Varma Valia Raja

of the Punjar royal family by a deed dated July 11th 1877, and started extensive plantation in the region (Menon, 1967:166). Nothing much is known regarding the late medieval history of Munnar hill ranges till the advent of Munro.

Concluding observations

This inscription newly deciphered is important on two accounts. Till today, the entire array of reported Chola inscriptions has remained exclusive to the ancient south Travancore region, now comprising the Kanyakumari district in Tamil Nadu. In earlier reported Chola inscriptions, there are references to the coastal towns of Vizhinjam, Kollam,
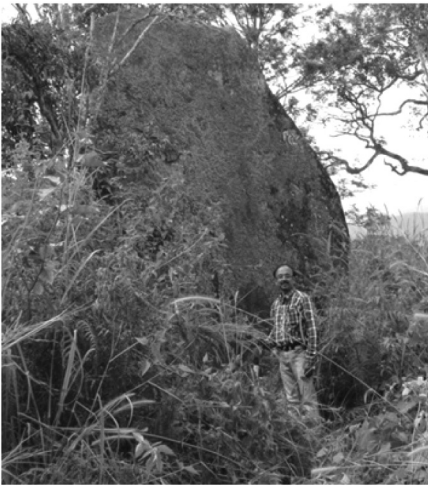
Pl.1.The mehir amdist thick vegetation

Pl.2.Inscription on the eastern face

Pl.3. stone lamps and a bell placed near the menhir.

Pl.4.The inscription of Sri Rajendra Chola-I

and Makoti/Kodungallur being conquered and devastated by Raja Raja, Rajendra-I, Kolotunga etc. For the first time, this inscription from Mepara brings to fore the hegemony of the Cholas in the hill ranges of Idukki district during early 11th century CE. The interest behind annexation of the hilly terrain around Munnar by the Cholas was possibly to gain hold of the spices and the arterial trade route that traversed the region. Cholas were great perpetrators of international maritime trade as vouched from several sources. To maintain their clout over trade the Cholas waged many battles and even sent diplomatic missions abroad (Sastri, 266-267).

Secondly, this is also for the first time, that a menhir belonging to the Megalithic cultural assemblage, possibly coeval to the times of the Roman coins discovered from Idukki district (1st Century BCE and 2nd Century CE), is found to be reused almost 1000 years later during Chola monarch Rajendra's 10 year of reign (1022 CE) to inscribe an inscription. This is a unique instance not reported earlier and hence the menhir needs to be protected for posterity.

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