

Meaning and Significance of Epigraphic Records: Towards a Theory for Interpreting Inscriptions

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Abstract

Popular practice or lokavyavahara and the knowledge emanating from various texts are the two pramana-s or logical sources of meaning as perceived by the anumana school of Indian thought. Interestingly, the Anumana School gives ample chances for the play of individual genius by including knowledge acquired from Adhyatma, i.e., personal experiences. It is the adhyatma pramana which brings in basic changes in the existing knowledge. In studying inscriptions, an advantage of this theory is that it provides a specific method by which it becomes possible to arrive at specific connotations and denotations beyond the boundaries of glossaries and lexicons. Further it helps scholars to situate the epigraphic material in its socio-cultural context and also to open up new areas of exploration, thereby facilitating a dialogue between the past and the present. Rising above the level of paraphrasing the texts, the perspective can release several voices, suppressed in the discourses of the past and introduce new subject matter for fresh historical investigations.

Keywords: Inscriptions, pramana, lokavyavahara, anumana school.

India is one of the richest civilizations that have left behind large number of written documents pertaining to various aspects of the past. The earliest phase of its documented history is attributed to the period of the Indus civilization, roughly dated to a period between 2300 to 1700 B.CE. Indus sites that are scattered over a vast area have yielded several thousands of inscribed seals albeit the fact that they are yet to be deciphered convincingly. The earliest datable and intelligible written documents of ancient India are in the form of the edicts of the Mauryan emperor Asoka, engraved on natural rocks and free-standing stone pillars of the third century CE. Following the Mauryan period several dynasties and kings have issued records of their own furnishing much valuable information about various aspects of their economy, society and culture. The total number of inscriptions published or noticed so far amounts to several hundreds of thousands. These immensely rich epigraphic documents are the main sources, especially for reconstruct-

ing the ancient and medieval periods of Indian History. In other words, it is almost impossible to write anything about Indian History without referring to this or that inscription of the past.

A recent theoretical position in the study of history may be characterized as a reciprocal concern with historicity of texts and textuality of history. The phrase 'historicity of texts' means the historical specificity of all modes of writing including the epigraphic records and their studies. This is on the basis of a linguistic view-point regarding relations between words and their meanings. According to this view, the meanings are produced from the context in which the word is uttered or situated. That is to say that the meaning is a social construct (Monrose, 1989:18ff). By 'textuality of history' the exponents of this theory mean to suggest that the past is accessible only through linguistic mediation of texts. It has also to be stated that the texts of the past are themselves subjected to subsequent textual mediations when they are viewed as documents to reconstruct the past. These new developments in the areas of History and Linguistics have not been sufficiently recognized in the epigraphic circles due to several constraints including the importance given to problems of external features of palaeographic features, such as formation of letters, orthographic details and so on. It has been convincingly shown that formation of letters and the art of writing themselves are determined mainly by contextual pressures.

This is equally applicable to all written documents including inscriptions that belong to ancient and medieval epochs of History. Since the meaning is not textual, but contextual, it cannot be obtained by simply paraphrasing the record. This can be illustrated by an example from Kerala. The Tarisappalli copper plates issued in 849 AD, the fifth regnal year of Sthanu Ravi Perumal of Mahodayapura, are well known to scholars from the mid-nineteenth century. There are references in this record to various artisans, such as *taccar*, carpenters, *izhavas*, coconut pluckers and toddy tappers, *vannar*, washermen, *eruviyar*, salt panning people, and al, male and female serfs etc. The significance of the presence of these groups in an urban settlement like Kollam cannot be understood until the passages are placed in their right historical context of the formation of village communities in Kerala. Each rural settlement in a given locality is a unit of economic production and a bundle of socio-economic relations. Such a unit of production comes into existence with all the necessary artisans and service groups within it. When a new settlement emerges, the same pattern is followed in that unit also (Varier, 1994). Scholars have described this as 'localization

of goods and services' (Stein, 1999). Historians and scholars have observed after examining a number of various types of settlements that a rural-agrarian element was present in the medieval urban settlements in Europe as well as in the East (Pacione, 2009). Hence the presence of functionaries of an agrarian unit of production at Kollam. Various uses of land in the locality under consideration are also indicated in the relevant passages. In addition to this, the passage throws much welcome light on the nature of various duties and functions of the newly emerging urban settlements during the formative period of the rule of Perumals in Kerala.

There are innumerable examples to show that meanings of inscriptions are ephemeral and changing. At a primary level, epigraphic expressions have their lexical meanings, which are quite inadequate for understanding the social, economic and cultural significance, that is, the cultural milieu of those expressions. Sometimes, the meaning and significance of a text or a corpus of records are altogether missed in a certain intellectual context of historiography. Thus, Robert Sewell, the pioneering historian of the Vijayanagara Empire could not realize the import of the inscriptions of that dynasty. He dismissed them as 'documents, when viewed as state papers, seldom yield more than a few names and dates' (Sewell, 1966: 2). A reason for this attitude towards a particular kind of data is the nature of the prevailing practices in the writing of history. Writing in the last years of the nineteenth century Robert Sewell understood history, mainly as political history and for him state was formed by means of military action, i.e. through annexation of territories. This was the 'popular practice' which shaped Sewell's narrative, and his textual representation of the past had a specific function in the context in which it was circulated. It is interesting to note in this connection that two or three decade later, scholars and historians were heavily depending on the Vijayanagara epigraphs which yielded immensely rich information about the various aspects of South Indian History and polity during the Vijayanagara rule. Thus, B. A. Saletore detected a Karnataka Nationalism in the founding of the Vijayanagara kingdom, which was in all probability an influence of the strengthening Indian National movement (Saletore, 1934:39; Stein, 1994:6). At the same time Sewell saw a rivalry between 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' which had a validity in the context of the imperialist trends of Indian historiography. To put it in other words, in the linguistic mediation, the Vijayanagara epoch acquired different meaning in different textual representations.

Prevalent practices, on certain occasions can induce the formation of counter discourses against the existing views thereby implying that the popular practices can influence the meaning production in many ways. 'Oriental Despotism' was a blanket phrase to characterize any form of state in the oriental societies. It was in this intellectual context that the Uttaramerur inscriptions were brought to light. According to the records, the purport was to register some arrangements made in front of the King's representative to choose local members to constitute various *Variyam-s*, or Committees to carry out different functions of the local administration. In the context of the debates on the issues of the Indian local self-government, the Uttaramerur inscription readily produced a meaning of democracy to explain the village administration under the Cola regime (Sastri, 1966:205). This was a counter discourse against the theories of Oriental Despotism, Hydraulic Societies etc (Kosambi, 1957: 1417-19). The events which led to the formation of rules and regulations, for electing the members, not once but twice within a short span of time are accessible only through the mediation of the inscriptional texts and the textuality of the history of village administration is well represented in the case under discussion. The notes and comments, which are attached to the epigraphs, are historically specific to the age of the discovery and publication of the records.

Meaning is generated not by *vyavahara* the prevalent popular practice alone, as suggested by some Indian semantic Schools. Literary texts also supply meaning to inscriptional texts. Buddhist label inscriptions, scattered widely in the ancient Buddhist sites all over the sub-continent, bare testimony to this observation. The labeling records are intended primarily to register the offerings to the *Caitya-s*, and *Vihara-s* etc. Socio-economic and cultural significance of these label inscriptions was not fully recognized by scholars and epigraphists until recently. A careful look at the inscriptional texts indicates some pattern in recording the texts of the records. The practice was prevalent among Buddhists, and it had strong textual support. The *Mahayana* Buddhist texts prescribe certain rules for a gift to become valid in the religious sphere. A gift thus depends for its value on the factors such as the faith, learning, morality and intention of the giver, the manner and moment of the gift, and the qualities of the done (Varier, 1987). This idea of gift as a merit-acquiring act is different from the primitive reciprocal gift and these changing conceptions of a social act were the outcome of corresponding changes in the social order. The meritorious religious gift-giving is best explained and supported by the Mahayanist principle

of Bodhisattwa. According to the earlier belief in the *hinayana* Buddhism each individual had to strive for himself for attaining Nirvana, the eternal deliverance. Mahayana philosophy propounds that the merit acquired by somebody could be transferred to others and the transference of merit is known among the Mahayanist schools as *punyaparinama*' (Ibid: 10). The Mahayana texts, which praise the new principle of gift, throw much welcome light on the changed concept of gift-giving and the popular practice of *dana* in the context of *caitya* worship. Thus the textual knowledge of an institution could charge meaning into a corpus of inscriptions. In the light of this 'new meaning' the gifts in the form of votive *stupas*, structural portions of *Caityas* and *Stupas* and at a later stage, landed property in the form of whole villages acquired new importance. It was this newly charged meaning and significance of the *dana* records of the *Satavahanas* and *Guptas* that was developed into a heated debate on Indian feudalism. In the historical context of the feudalism debate, a variety of texts including those pertaining to Indian and European history contributed much to generate meaning and to form a discourse with political overtone. Without entering into the details of the generated meaning what should be noted here is the part played by the textural knowledge in the meaning-production. The knowledge emanating from the texts is known to the semantic school referred to above as *veda*, a term derived from the root 'vid', meaning, 'to know'. It is worth noting here that the *veda* or the textual knowledge is thrown up by the entire body of texts produced and circulated in a given culture. This necessitates a consideration of relations between various texts.

An excellent example for illustrating this is the recurrent theme of nucleated families in the edicts of Asoka. Major rock edicts mention that tending of mother and father is right conduct- *matari pitari sususa sadhu*- while commenting on this passage R.K. Mukherjee opined that the edicts follow the upanishadic dictum '*Matr devo bhava; Pitr devo Bhava*' etc (Mukherjee, 1995: 208) . There are some Buddhist mythical stories which relate how the sons had suffered a lot for not obeying parents or hurting them. One such story describes how a merchant had to carry a burning wheel on his head for a long period of sixty four thousand years for leaving his mother in distress without lending ears to her request not to leave her alone. The canonical Buddhist texts have scanty references to nuclear family consisting of father, mother and their children with necessary servants and slaves (*dasa bhataka* groups). These references in the Mauryan edicts can be taken as an indi-

cation of the nuclear family system which was spreading and gathering momentum. Actually, it may not be incorrect to argue that Asoka was emphasizing on the family as the unit of social life which was essential for increasing the efficacy and manageability of commodity production in the villages. An inter-textual reading of the texts of the edicts is sure to generate new meaning and significance for the Mauryan inscriptions.

Popular practice or *lokavyavahara* and the knowledge or Veda emanating from various texts are the two *pramanas* or logical sources of meaning as perceived by the *anumana* school of Indian thought. Interestingly, the *anumana* school gives ample chances for the play of individual genius by including knowledge acquired from *Adhyatma*, i.e. personal experiences. It is the *adhyatma pramana* which brings in basic changes in the existing knowledge. This seems to call for some elaboration. Let us take for example the National History perspective. According to the current popular practice in the historical writing, almost all narratives are in the framework of Nation-state perspective. Nation is the central paradigm of the current historical consciousness. However, recently, the nation and its centrality and attributed glory have been seriously questioned and a local history perspective has started to become an accepted *vyavahara* in the historical writing. Journals exclusively devoted to local history such as *The Local Historian* are published regularly. The *Adhyatma pramana* becomes important in such an intellectual context. In the national history perspective, localities are considered as parts of a structural whole, i.e. the Nation. In the local history perspective locality is viewed as a unit of life, or more specifically, a unit of economic production with all functionaries and occupational and service groups which are necessary for community life (Karashima, 1984:40). Here, inscriptions supply some information which are supported and supplemented by other forms of texts including old manuscripts, family records etc., several Cola records provide information to reconstruct old villages which were units of economic production and community life. Instead of looking at these villages as divisions of some larger areas, they can be studied as units of community life, which merged together for various social economic and cultural purposes to form a larger unit of the *Nadu*. The importance of these *nadu* units of medieval times lies in the fact that they were spontaneous units of production and reproduction incorporating a number of basic village nuclei. This seems to explain why the local magnates and chieftains were becoming more and more powerful in spite of an overarching sovereignty existed at a supra-local level. Ideas should

come from the *adhyatma* supported by the data based on information from contemporary sources including inscriptions for participating in such debates on National–Local paradigms,

The *adhyatma pramana* is capable of releasing several unheard voices which were suppressed by popular *vyavahara*. Looking afresh at *Amarakosa* from a socio- historical perspective, D.D. Kosambi was able to bring out several valuable information regarding the lower strata of society in ancient India for which a thorough search in the contemporary epigraphic material was essential” (Kosambi, 1955: 57-9). We have seen that the meaning and significance of epigraphical records are generated when they are situated in their right historical contexts. The three *pramana*-s, which generate the meaning, are popular practices or *lokavyavahara* textual and intertextual knowledge, or *veda vyavahara* and the knowledge acquired from personal experience, *adhyatma*. This theory of meaning was formulated by Mahimabhatta, the author of the famous text *Vyaktiviveka* with a view to challenge the principles of *dhvani* which carried away the meaning from concrete materialism to idealism and to establish the *anumana* principle which attempts to fix the meaning firmly on the ground of material life-world (Pilla, 1988). In studying inscriptions, an advantage of this theory is that it provides a specific method by which it becomes possible to arrive at specific connotations and denotations beyond the boundaries of glossaries and lexicons. Further it helps scholars to situate the epigraphic material in its socio-cultural context and also to open up new areas of exploration, thereby facilitating a dialogue between the past and the present. Rising above the level of paraphrasing the texts, the perspective can release several voices, suppressed in the discourses of the past and introduce new subject matter for fresh historical investigations.

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