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Introduction to Indian Epigraphy and Palaeography

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Abstract

Inscriptions are the most important source for early and medieval Indian history and hence a good knowledge of epigraphy and palaeography is necessary for students of Indian history. Only from the late eighteenth century onwards, real interest was evinced in epigraphical studies, that too by the English administrators and scholars. The office of Epigraphist for India that came up in 1886 and some other institutions have so far collected nearly a hundred thousand inscriptions from various parts of India, the bulk of which comes from the south. Because of the complexity of scripts and languages used in those inscriptions over the centuries, the decipherment, editing and publication of the texts of the inscriptions could not keep pace with the progress in collection. About forty to fifty per cent of the collected inscriptions are yet to be published. Earnest efforts are therefore required to train a good number of young scholars/historians in epigraphy and palaeography.

***Key Words*:** Epigraphy, Palaeography, Brahmi, Vatteluttu, Grantha, Siddhamatrika, Prakrit, Sanskrit.

Ancient and Medieval Indian history is mostly written on the basis of inscriptions, which are found in several thousands all over India. Though strictly speaking an inscription is the writing engraved or inscribed on some hard medium like stone or metal plate, writings in ink and paint are also included sometimes under this category. Legends found on coins and on metal and terracotta seals are also studied here. The inscriptions in our country start appearing from the time of the Mauryan dynasty say from the early third century BCE and go up to the seventeenth century and even later. They are found in various languages and various scripts. Since the writing system of the Indus valley/Harappan civilization that prevailed in the first half of the third millennium BCE has not been deciphered satisfactorily, that is not considered for the time being. The ancient scripts used in the inscriptions are all familiar to us now and there are teachers and guide books to teach those scripts. But during the last quarter of the eighteenth cen-

tury when some European scholars and administrators took interest in knowing these scripts there were very few indigenous scholars to guide them. Practically there existed little interest among our people to read the old inscriptions. After this, particularly after the establishment of the Asiatic Society in Kolkata in 1784, things began to change gradually, thanks to the efforts of several European and a few Indian scholars in deciphering old inscriptions and within half a century most medieval period inscriptions could be read and understood. And finally in 1837 James Prinsep the most outstanding palaeographer of the times presented his more or less complete table of the Brahmi alphabet used in Asokan inscriptions. In between there were several other people who published their readings of many inscriptions of the tenth century and earlier in the journal of *Asiatic Researches*. In the latter half of the 19th century the progress in Indian epigraphy was remarkable, in keeping with the other archaeological discoveries at many important ancient sites with monuments like Sanchi, Mathura, Bharhut, Amaravati and so on. Many monographs and reports on archaeological sites contained also the texts of the inscriptions of those sites.

In south India Colonel Colin Mackenzie in the course of his official duties (as Surveyor) in the Royal Corps of Engineers serving the East India Company collected copies of nearly eight thousand inscriptions using some local assistants during 1783–1815. But a systematic survey for inscriptions by properly trained epigraphists had to wait for half a century more. In 1872 James Burgess inaugurated the famous Indological journal *Indian Antiquary* which helped the publication, by several scholars, of properly edited texts and translations of inscriptions. Two years later A.C. Burnell published his work on South Indian Palaeography, a pioneer work in the field. In 1894 G.H. Ojha published a comprehensive book on Indian palaeography, namely *Prachina Lipimala* in Hindi. Two years later (1896) John Georg Buhler brought out his most standard work *Indian Palaeography (Indische Palaeographie* in German) which summed up all the knowledge available then on old Indian scripts.

A separate Epigraphist's post was created by the Government of Madras Presidency in 1886 and E. Hultzsch was appointed as the first incumbent of the post. This post was later designated as the Epigraphist to Government of India, but his office continued to function in Madras (Chennai), some time in Bangalore, and then in Ootacamund. Since 1967 it is functioning in Mysore. From the beginning, Hultzsch started in earnest to collect inscriptions from several important places,

like Mamallapuram, Thanjavur, etc. in Madras Presidency (comprising the present Tamil Nadu, a major part of coastal Andhra Pradesh, and the northern part of present Kerala). The work of deciphering, editing, and publication of the collected inscriptions was also carried on simultaneously. From 1889 the official epigraphical (biennial) journal called *Epigraphia Indica* started its publication. This journal carried detailed discussion of some important inscriptions along with their texts, translation, and illustrations. Also the epigraphical series *South Indian Inscriptions* was started from 1890 onwards and Hultzsch was responsible for the major part of the first three volumes, wherein both the texts and full-length translations are given. As on today, some 30 volumes have been published in the *South Indian Inscriptions* series[1] containing about 15,000 inscriptions in all. The Archaeological Survey of India has been bringing out another prestigious series, called *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* in which each volume is devoted to the inscriptions of a dynasty like that of Asoka, the Guptas, the Vakatakas, and so on.

Besides the British Government, the governments of the princely states (like Mysore, Hyderabad, Travancore) also took steps to collect inscriptions in their respective states. Mysore was the leader in this regard. Lewis Rice published his first volume on Mysore inscriptions in 1879. Under his direction the first twelve volumes of the *Epigraphia Carnatica* (old) series were published between 1886 and 1905—really a stupendous task[2]. Those volumes contained nearly nine thousand inscriptions from nine districts of the Mysore state, presently the southern districts of the Karnataka state. The Travancore state (comprising the southern districts of present Kerala state) had its own publication entitled Travancore *Archaeological Series* (volumes 1–9 published during 1910–1947) fully devoted to the inscriptions of the state, numbering nearly a thousand. The Pudukkottai state published in 1929 the texts of most of the inscriptions (1130) in its jurisdiction in one volume followed by two volumes containing English translations of some 240 inscriptions. The *Tirumala-Tirupati Devasthanam Epigraphical series* (vols. 1–6, 1930–1938) is another remarkable epigraphical publication brought out by a religious institution. This series includes about 1000 inscriptions in Tamil (with translations) in the temples of Tirumala and Tirupati.

The Office of Epigraphist to Government of Madras was also regularly publishing annual reports on the epigraphical survey, containing English summaries of copper plates and stone inscriptions, and comments on the significant historical contents of the inscriptions. The

annual report was called as *Madras Epigraphical Report* from 1887 to 1921, then it was designated as *Annual Report on South Indian Epigraphy* and from 1945 onwards it is being called as *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy* in keeping with its expanded activities. The publication of the texts of the inscriptions in *South Indian Inscriptions, Epigraphia Indica, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* and some other volumes could not keep pace with the enormous collection of inscriptions listed in the annual reports. If the inscriptions copied from other parts of India by different agencies are added to the above collection, the total number of inscriptions collected from all over India till now would run to several thousands. The great Epigraphist D.C. Sircar estimated the figure to be about 90,000 (Sircar, 1977)[3]. He also indicated that nearly two-thirds of the total number belongs to the three southern linguistic regions, Tamil (35,000), Kannada (17,000) and Telugu (10,000). About forty to fifty per cent of the inscriptions recorded and copied till now by the Archaeological Survey of India and other institutions remain unpublished and there may still be a large number of inscriptions yet to be discovered and copied from various parts of the country. Naturally, therefore, we need a large team of epigraphists to read, edit and publish the remaining inscriptions. That means we need to pay attention to training more and more young epigraphists.

Let me briefly indicate the nature of problems that a student of Indian epigraphy has to face. As mentioned earlier, there are several scripts and languages in different parts of the country. Obviously linguistic skills and familiarity with more than one script are required of an aspiring epigraphist. Though we cannot expect one to master all the scripts and languages, a broad understanding of the entire field would be helpful to properly read and interpret the inscriptions of one's special area. Almost all the scripts being used now all over India, except those used for Urdu and Kashmiri and the scripts of European languages, have evolved from a parent script, namely the Brahmi script. The scripts used in Sri Lanka and in countries of Southeast Asia also evolved from the same parent script. Even ordinary people, who are not initiated in the epigraphic literature, can recognize the close relations of the different scripts if they observe and compare carefully the shapes in them (See Illustrations). Those common structural features and shapes among the Indian scripts are more striking if we observe them stage by stage over the centuries. At the same time, they differ to some extent in orthographic principles according to the languages associated with the different scripts.

The evolution of Indian scripts can be considered under some four or five chronological stages. The earliest of course is the Brahmi script of the Mauryan (Asokan) times. So far there is no archaeological evidence to clearly prove that the Brahmi script had existed before the time of Asoka. Again, the origin of that script and its derivation from some earlier script either within India or outside is explained differently by different scholars. Let us not enter into this controversy. The one certain thing, however, is that the Mauryan script is already a mature script devised for the writing of some Prakrit language (of Middle Indo-Aryan group). Almost simultaneously another script called Kharoshthi was also used to write Asokan inscriptions in the north west (now parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan). Though the script was confined to Gandhara in the beginning, later it spread over a wider area, comprising Afghanistan and Central Asia. The script however became defunct by the early fourth century BCE.

In the beginning the Brahmi script was used just for writing a non-literary language for administrative purposes and only later it seems to have been used for literary purposes. The Brahmi script of the Asokan inscriptions had letters for six vowel signs *(a, ā, i, u, ē, ō),* 32 consonants, 8 medial vowel diacriticals *(ā, i, ī, u, ū, ē, ō, ai),* and anusvara. The signs for *ṅa, ṛ, ṝ, au,* and *visarga* are not found. The shapes of the letters look formal with simple angular and circular features. The orthography is not fully standardized. In conjunct characters there is some inconsistency in the relative positioning of the component characters according to the phonetic principle.

During the second and first centuries BCE the script shows some evolution such as the development of rudimentary headmarks and equalization of vertical portions in some letters. But the changes are not so much as to differentiate it clearly from the Asokan Brahmi. There are two exceptions. One is the Brahmi script found at Bhattiprolu in Andhra Pradesh and the other is the script used in the Tamil country in the south. In Mauryan Brahmi the basic consonant form is always treated as with inherent ‘a’, that is, there is no pure or vowelless consonant form. A horizontal diacritical mark is added to the right side of the basic form to get the long ‘a’ medial. But in Bhattiprolu the Mauryan ‘ā’ (long) is treated as short ‘a’ medial and for long ‘a’ one more diacritical is added to the above horizontal mark slanting downwards. Consequently the basic consonant form is treated as without inherent ‘a’, that is as pure consonant. Though in Bhattiprolu the modified script is used for writing the Prakrit language, it is believed that modifica-

tions would have been made for writing a non-Prakrit language, that is for the local Dravidian language (Telugu in this case). This becomes clear in the case of the Tamil area, where the Brahmi script is used for writing the Tamil language. There too, the basic consonant form is treated as without the inherent 'a' and with the addition of horizontal diacritical strokes the short and long medials are obtained. This devise for getting pure consonant was necessary in Tamil as there is a large use of pure or vowelless consonants in word final position. The script has four additional characters, which were newly devised to indicate the phonemic sounds (l̲, ḷ, r̲, n̲) peculiar to Tamil and Malayalam (l̲ and r̲ common to Kannada and Telugu too). Conjunct forms are not used at all. In early Tamil the *varga* letters and sibilants are generally avoided but some of the *varga* (aspirates, soft sounds) letters, and the sibilants are used to write Prakrit names (mostly personal names). In view of these special features this regional variety is called Tamil Brahmi.

In the next stage, circa first century BCE to third century CE, much regional differentiation appears in the Brahmi script. This is the time of many new states, that of the Kushanas in the north-west with their Kshatrapa subordinates in Malwa and Konkan, that of the Satavahanas and their successors in the western and eastern Deccan and so on. Naturally the use of the script would have increased for making administrative records, giving birth to regional features. This is the stage when Sanskrit slowly started appearing in inscriptions, though still Prakrit was dominant. Conjunct forms became more frequent and complex. Forms of basic characters also underwent significant modification with markedly angular forms. Head marks became regular feature but differed from region to region. Vowel signs became elaborate. The letters for *au, ṅa, ḥ (visarga), halanta* (sentence final position or verse final position) became vogue. Calligraphic elaboration became another new feature in certain regions, like in the Ikshvaku inscriptions of the Andhra coast.

This trend is continued during the Gupta period (circa fourth to sixth centuries) with more elaboration. Sanskrit replaced the Prakrits as the sole administrative language, besides being the medium of the Classical *kavya* literature. Hence the orthography of the Late Brahmi script becomes standardized accordingly. (A. H. Dani prefers to call the Late Brahmi as proto-regional scripts). Several regional varieties of the script appeared. Generally the right arm of the letters became prolongated downwards. Head marks became more elaborate. In the Vakataka inscriptions of central India, the box-headed form became a peculiar

regional feature. In the south, rounded forms became more prominent and this roundish feature is continued in the subsequent centuries. This is attributed to the use of stylus for writing on palm leaves in the place of pen and ink used in the northern regions. The script used in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka regions was more or less same and in both the areas, in addition to Sanskrit, the local languages (Telugu and Kannada respectively) are found in inscriptions for the first time in the sixth century. In Tamil area the dominant inscriptional language was Tamil and the first regional script that evolved out of the Tamil Brahmi from the fifth century onwards is called *Vatteluttu* (literally meaning 'roundish script'). Another parallel script that appeared in the sixth century in the northern parts of Tamil Nadu is called *Pallava Grantha*, to write both Tamil and Sanskrit languages.

During the period from the 7th to the 10th centuries the regional scripts become quite conspicuous and get distinct names. The most popular script in the Gangetic valley was known as *Siddhamatrika* (also called Kutila) which at its later stage became Nagari or Devanagari. The letters of this script show angular features at lower right corner. Prominent wedges are found on the heads. There is more calligraphic elaboration. Some vowel signs become highly developed. During the same period in the north-west and Kashmir we get what is called Proto-*Sarada* script. In the south the *Telugu Kannada* script shows separate development with roundish features. In the bottom part of many letters of this script there develops a notch, which is a peculiar feature of this script in later centuries. In the Tamil region the Pallava Grantha branched out into Tamil and Grantha scripts, the Tamil to write the Tamil language and the Grantha script to write Sanskrit. The earlier Vatteluttu develops fully rounded forms for all letters and this script is also used to write the Tamil language.

By the 11th century most regional scripts reach the mature stage. Nagari became fully developed. In the east Proto-Bengali became a distinct script. And Gurmukhi (for Punjabi) evolved out of the Sarada script. In the extreme south, the Tamil script becomes dominant, the Vatteluttu being confined to parts of Kerala. From about the thirteenth century onwards the Malayalam develops out of the Grantha script in Kerala. Kannada and Telugu develop some distinct head marks, though for all practical purposes the two scripts look identical.

Indo-Muslim scripts start appearing in the late 12th century to write Arabic and Persian languages. Some three scripts were used according to the purpose—Kufic, Nashk and Nastaliq. Inscriptions most-

ly used the Persian language from the 14th century onwards, from the time of Khalji Sultanate. In the time of the Mughal state, when it was the sole administrative language, we get a good number of Persian inscriptions. But Arabic was continued to be used in the religious contexts. Indo-Muslim scripts were highly calligraphic scripts and so they were used to embellish ornamentation of doors, walls, etc.

As may be noted from the above summary of the development of scripts in India, Indian palaeography is a vast field. Though there were only a couple of scripts in the beginning, Brahmi and Kharoshthi, we get by evolution a number of scripts by the eleventh century, most of them being still in use in different regions of the country. It is explained that the evolutionary changes took place due to different writing techniques and also due to local cultural practices (A.H. Dani, 1986). Broadly speaking there were two writing techniques, that using pen and ink to write on birch bark or similar material in the north, and that using stylus to write on palm leaves, which is a practice followed in the south. While in the north the scripts developed conspicuous angular forms in course of time, in the south the scripts, both Telugu-Kannada and Tamil scripts developed roundish forms. Consequently the modern scripts look different from each other though they evolved out of the same parent script. The scripts also developed some special features according to the particular language for which the scripts were used.

The vastness of the Indian epigraphy, however, need not discourage enterprising students. The students may start with a small area and specialize in the script of that area. After that he can widen his horizon. Actually the earlier stages of a script are less complicated than the later stages. Now that most scripts are deciphered and their development is clearly known, one can start from the earlier stage, say the Brahmi stage and after getting familiar with the inscriptions of that stage, he can proceed to read later scripts gradually, century by century. There is any number of illustrations available in the published volumes (particularly in *Epigraphia Indica* and *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*) to learn by this process. By making he own tables of the letters that he comes across, it is easy to master the old scripts.

There is, of course, the language aspect to consider. According to the area of specialization, the scholar has to get some good knowledge of the language or languages used in the particular inscriptions. In the early stage, knowledge of Prakrit is essential for reading most old inscriptions in the north and the Deccan; in the extreme south knowledge of Tamil is necessary. From the first century onwards Sanskrit becomes

an important and widely used inscriptional language. Even in the south it is used along with the local languages, Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil in different contexts. In the case of post-Gupta Sanskrit inscriptions, it is generally observed that strict Grammatical rules are not followed in writing the Sanskrit inscriptions. It is usually dubbed as corrupt Sanskrit. Actually we have to consider them as locally understood Sanskrit language. That is, it is influenced by the vernacular languages of New Indo-Aryan group, according to the area. The purpose of the inscriptions is communication, not to write chaste Sanskrit. This is the case in the case of the southern languages too. Tamil, Kannada and Telugu inscriptions also show 'un-grammatical' writing generally. They actually reflect the current stage of the development of the concerned language. The aim of the epigraphist is not to look for chaste language in the inscriptions, but to produce faithfully the text as it is written in the original inscriptions, as generally most inscriptions use a documentary language that was used and understood by the people of the day in the particular region.

Finally, I wish to emphasize the difference between inscriptions and literary texts. As far as the literary manuscripts are concerned, generally we get more than one manuscript for the same text and therefore it is possible to arrive at the correct text after making a comparative study of the different manuscripts using methods of textual criticism. For inscriptions, with certain rare exceptions, there is generally only one version available for most inscriptions. Moreover since the inscribed stones are damaged in many cases due to long exposure to sun and rain and also due to human factors, good texts of the inscriptions can be obtained only after long and patient decipherment. The reliability of the texts thus made out depends upon the time and care spent on individual inscriptions.

Notes

1. See for a complete bibliography of the epigraphical publications, D.C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*, Delhi, 1965; Noboru Karashima, *History and Society in South India: The Cholas to Vijayanagar*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001.
2. These volumes have been taken up for revision and elaboration by the University of Mysore and more than ten volumes in the new series have been published.
3. Riccardo Garbini estimated the total to be around 60,000 after a meticulous counting. See his 'Software Development in Epigraphy: Some Preliminary Remarks', *Journal of Epigraphical Society of India*, vol. 19 (1993), pp. 63–79.

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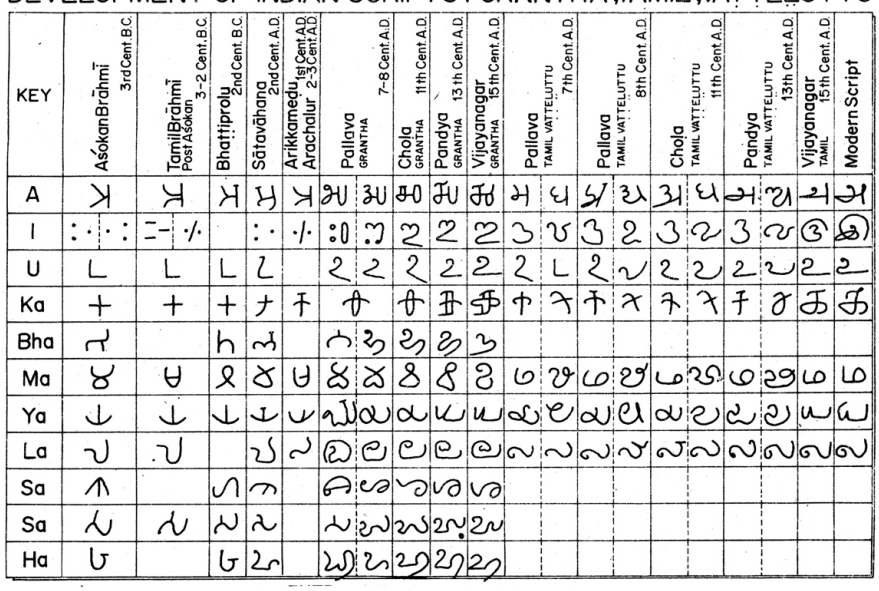
Illustrations

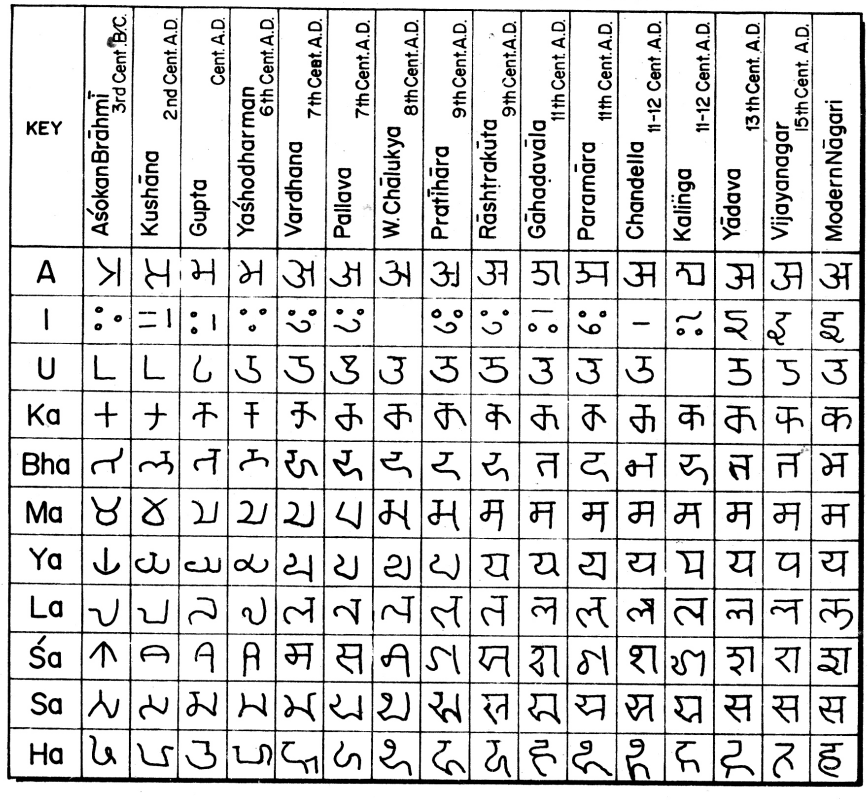
DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN SCRIPTS: GENERAL

KEY	Aśokan Brāhmī 3rd Cent B.C.	Southern Brāhmī 3-2 Cent.B.C.	Bhaṭṭiprolu 3-2 Cent.B.C.	Mahākshatrapa 1st Cent.B.C.	Kushāṇa 1-2 Cent.A.D.	Kshatrapa 2nd Cent.A.D.	Śātavāhana 2ndCent.A.D.	Amrāvatī and Jaggayyapeṭa 2-3 Cent.A.D.	Gupta 4 th Cent.A.D.	Kadamba 5-6 Cent.A.D.	W.Chālukya Nāgarī and Southern 6-7 Cent. A.D.	Pallava Nāgarī and Southern 7th Cent. A.D.	Rāshṭrakūṭa Nāgarī and Southern 7-9 Cent.A.D.	Palas 10-11 Cent.A.D.	Chandella 11-12 Cent.A.D.	Paramāras 13 th Cent.A.D.	Purushottama 15th Cent A.D.	Vijayanagar 15th Cent.A.D.	Modern Script
A	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅	𑀅
I	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇	𑀇
U	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉	𑀉
Ka	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓	𑀓
Bha	𑀪		𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪	𑀪
Ma	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫	𑀫
Ya	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬		𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬	𑀬
La	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮		𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮	𑀮
śa	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰			𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰	𑀰
Sa	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲	𑀲
Ha	𑀳		𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳	𑀳

DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN SCRIPTS : GRANTHA, TAMIL, VATTELUTTU



DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN SCRIPTS: NĀGARI



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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, lokavyvahara, 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 (Montrose,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 *punyaparinamana*' (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 perceptive. 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 form 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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