

Inscriptions As A Major Source For Constructing Ancient Indian History



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Abstract

Where the literary sources are less, inscriptions provide a lot of information about a particular period and time.¹ They are found engraved on rocks, pillars, stone tablets, metal plates, caves, walls of temples and monasteries etc and are couched in the language current at different periods and localities such as Sanskrit, Pali, mixed dialect or the languages of southern India like Tamil, Telegu, malaylam and Kanarese. The importance of these documents can hardly be over emphasised. They are extremely useful in fixing dates, and often regulate and supplement what we learnt from the other sources. For instance, in the absence of such epigraphic evidence the veil of oblivion would hang heavily even on rulers like Kharvela or Samudragupta. A good deal of information is derived from varied sources and the importance of them for constructing the history of India is never over emphasized. The wider study of Indian inscriptions is bound to give much needed stimulus to research in the realm of Social, religious, economic and political history as well as in the history of Sanskrit literature. It is almost entirely from the patient examination of the inscription that our knowledge of ancient history of India has been derived.

Epigraphy is, no doubt, a specialised branch of study concerned with the actual style of the script used, the language, the meaning of technical terms, the analysis of the information contained which entails the story of the period and of its kings, and a host of such other issues. At the same time, inscriptions are also the most direct, and, in many cases, individually identifiable messages from the past.

Keywords: Inscription, Epigraphy, Paleography, Seal, Brahmi and Kharosthi, Puja Sila, Bhavani, Katyayini, Mahasena, Bhojpatra, Patta, Patika, Phalaks

Introduction

Inscriptins as a historical source are available since 3rd Century B.C. They are written on plates, stones, clothes and various other writing materials. These inscriptions provide information about the particular event, dynasty, law and order, dates and other achievements of the rulers. Inscriptions represent the the earliest written forms of Indian languages and are evidence that these written forms were already well developed by the time the inscriptions were made. The archaeological survey of India has identified many inscriptions in Indian sub continent and these inscriptions are of immense value for constructing history of India. These inscriptions are valuable historical evidences of the existence and the activities of the early kings and empires, showing by their locations, the extant of their empire and providing dates of their ceremonies and events.

Sources of history of India are significant tools for tracing the lifestyle and culture of India since ages. India has a rich and colourful history and it is a treasure trove of earliest chronicle. Different parts of the subcontinent have different histories and legends. Historians discover the historical aspects of various regions of the country through diverse sources. Among the Archaeological sources, coins, inscriptions and monuments are important. The inscriptions provide us valuable information which could not be tampered or modified. Thus inscriptions are the most important sources for constructing the history of a particular region.

Inscriptions are more important than coins in historical reconstruction. The study of inscriptions is called 'epigraphy', and the study of old writing is called 'palaeography'. Inscriptions are writings carved on seals, stone pillars, rocks, copper plates, temple walls and bricks or images.

The vast epigraphic material available in India provides the most reliable data for studying history. Like coins, inscriptions are preserved in

various museums, but the majority of inscriptions in central India are engraved on the walls of the temples, forts and sometimes on the monastery walls and floor. The earliest inscriptions are found on the seals of Harappa, which, however, remain undeciphered. The oldest inscriptions deciphered so far are the Prakrit inscriptions, in Brahmi and in Kharosthi, of Asoka (third century B.C).

Where the literary sources are less, inscriptions provide a lot of information about a particular period and time. Many thousands of them, the earliest belonging to fourth and fifth century B.C have been unearthed and perhaps a large number still await the archaeologist's spade. They are found engraved on rocks, pillars, stone tablets, metal plates, caves, walls of temples and monasteries etc and are couched in the language current at different periods and localities such as Sanskrit, Pali, mixed dialect or the languages of southern India like Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam and Kanarese.² Some of them are of considerable literary merit too, being either in prose and verse or a combination of two. The majority of inscriptions are in the Brahmi script, written from left to right, but a good number is also incised in Kharosthi running like Arabic and Persian from right to left. Their decipherment which is a marvel of scholarship, reveals that their object is to record a donation, public or private, or to commemorate a great event, or the exploits of a conqueror. There are even Sanskrit plays³ and musical rules⁴ recorded on stone. The importance of these documents can hardly be over emphasised. They are extremely useful in fixing dates, and often regulate and supplement what we learnt from the other sources. For instance, in the absence of such epigraphic evidence the veil of oblivion would hang heavily even on rulers like Kharvela or Samudragupta,⁵ and our knowledge of the mediaeval Hindu dynasties would be altogether incomplete.

Many of inscriptions not only inform us about the peculiarities of religious cults with which they are associated, but also record the erection of shrines and construction of images of divinities to be enshrined in them. The so called Ghosundi inscription of the second century B.C refers to the erection of a puja-shila-prakara round the shrines of Samkarshana and Vasudeva, which presumably contained the images of these Gods. Many and various are the Gupta Epigraphic records which refer to the creation of shrines of such divinities as Bhavani, Katyayani, Siva, Swami Mahasena, Budha, Vishnu, Mahavir and others. Sometimes there are passages or epithets contained in them, which give us a fairly accurate description of these Gods and Goddesses.⁶

The Epigraphic records furnish us with interesting and significant materials for the study of Ancient and Pre Medieval period. The earliest writing material in ancient India was Burja (or Bhojpatra), the brick bark found in Himalayan forest in abundance. There is a mention of this material in Amarkosa.⁷ According to Kalidasa, Bhojpatra was used by damsels for writing love letters.⁸ Al-Beruni also mention Bhurja.⁹ The next important writing material

was paper. A fifth century A.D. document written on paper has been discovered from central Asia.¹⁰

Cotton cloth also served the purpose of writing material and the specific term for it were 'Pata', 'patika' or 'Karapasikapata'. Its earliest mention is found in Nasik inscription.¹¹ Wooden boards and Bamboo chips were also used. Writing boards are known as 'Phalakas' and bamboo Chips are known as 'Salakas'.¹² The Salakas also served as passport for Buddhist monks.

Writing on stone became popular because of its durability. Stone as a medium of writing has been used in the following form viz. rocks, pillars, slabs, pedestals, rims or lid of vessels or caskets, walls of temples, pavements, pillar column, caves etc. The contents of writing on stone include royal edict or proclamation, royal eulogy, Prashasti, treaty between kings, agreements, dedications, commemoration, donation, grants, poetical effusions,¹³ literary¹⁴ and religious.¹⁵

Stone Pillars are the earliest inscribed pillars of Ashoka. Stambhas may be classified as

1. Dhvajastambha (Flag staff)
2. Jayastambha (victory Staff)
3. Kiristambha (Fame Pillar)
4. Chhayastambha (Image Pillar)
5. yupa (Sacrificial Pillars)

Bricks were also used as material for writing. Many inscribed bricks have been found from different places. such as Erich in Bundelkhand. These bricks have Brahmi letters inscribed on them. Earthen wares and seals were also used a media of writing. Beside this metal is also very useful for inscribing. The Jatakas refer to use of Gold by rich merchants for preserving their family records.. According to Burnell gold was used for royal letters and land grants.¹⁶ The most important metal for writing an ancient India was Copper. Tamrapatra, Tamrasana, Tamrapatta, Sasanapatra, Danapatra etc. Inscriptions of ancient period are found inscribed on copper plates and land grants were invariably inscribed on copper plates. Fahren found many Buddhist monasteries in possession of copper grants.¹⁷ The inscriptions may be royal or personal. Royal records were issued by Kings or vassals, governors or ministers. They are divided into-

1. Sasanam (Writ, Edicts, instructions or also used in the sense of land grants)
2. Jayapatram (legal decision)
3. Ajnapatram-(Order)
4. Prajanapatram (proclamation)

Private records were prepared by writers of a well known place and in such records royal genealogy, year, month and days etc are mentioned. such documents are important for reconstruction of Political history.

**Epigraphic records may be grouped under the following categories-
Commercial**

The earliest specimen of this type are found on the Indus Valley seals which were used for stamping the bales of merchandise. These seals were used by the sea-faring traders engaged in foreign trade.¹⁸

Magical

Magical formulae continued to be written on metal, as well as on brich bark. Indus seals bear them.

Religious and Didactic

Examples of this type was Dhammalipi of Ashoka (RE-I and V). The Besnagar Garuda Pillar Inscription (describing the three paths leading to heaven). the Mandisor Stone inscription of Kumargupta-II.

Administrative

Ashokan inscription, Junagarh inscription of Rudradaman, Banskhera Copper plate of Harsha etc.

Eulogies

Hathigumpha inscription of Kharvela, Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta. Junagarh inscription og Rudradaman.

Votive or Dedivative

Piparvah Buddhist vase inscription, garuda pillar inscription of Heliodorous, Aihole inscription.

Donative

The land grants and other donations through seals or copper plates.

Commemorative

Rummindei pillar inscription. Eran inscription of Bhanugupta. Commemorative inscriptions of Rastrakutas, Chalukyas belong to this category.

Literary

The pieces of poetic compositions and dramatic works come under this category.

Genealogy History

The inscriptions provide important information about the genealogy of the ruling dynasty, like the Rabatak inscription of the Kushanas Empire.

A good deal of information is derived from varied sources and the importance of them for constructing the history of India is never over emphasized. The wider study of Indian inscriptions is bound to give much needed stimulus to research in the realm of Social, religious, economic and political history as well as in the history of Sanskrit literature. It is almost entirely from the patient examination of the inscription that our knowledge of ancient history of India has been derived. The epigraphs of Ashoka records the very words of the emperor as well as his thoughts and expression. The Gupta inscriptions deal with every aspect of Gupta history- wars, extant of empire, social and economic conditions, religious life and contemporary events. The use of copper plates became frequent in the early mediaeval period. In the copper plate grants name of the place, name and achievements of donor, name of the donee with the family details, description of the land donated, purpose of gift, religious stanzas etc are mentioned. Inscriptions provide us valuable information about the religion of the ruling house. almost all the inscriptions begin with auspicious symbols and prayer to god.

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identifiable messages from the past. These messages are, in most of the times, used as the evidences of the socio cultural and religious background of that era.

Aim of Study

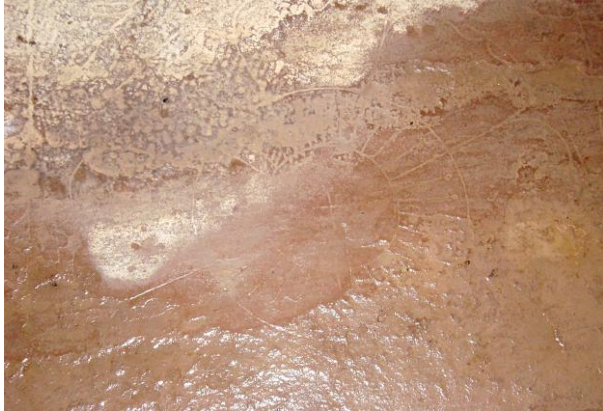
The study of inscriptions provide us authentic records of historical evidences. Many historical facts have been unearthed by these written documents. The aim of study is to provide the importance of inscription in the study of history. Inscriptions are valuable source of history as they could not be easily tampered or destroyed. Thus the study of inscription is very helpful for historians and students for constructing history.

Conclusion

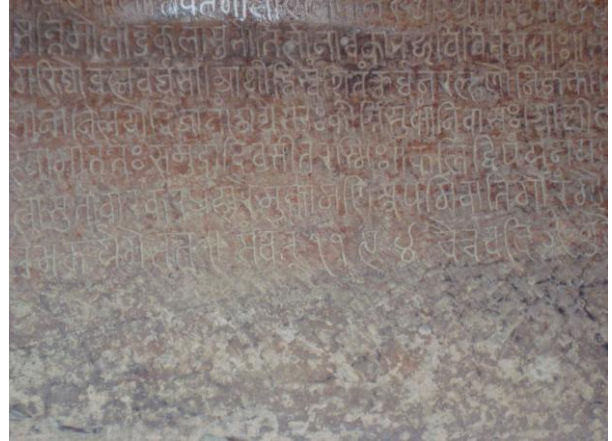
The inscriptions are authentic records for writing history. The Ashoka inscriptions are the first information provided to us about the propagation og Buddhism. The inscriptions proclaim Ashoka's belief in the Buddhist concept of Dhamma. and his efforts to develop Dhamma, throughout his kingdom. Similarly inscriptions provide us information about the communities, their religious beliefs and ideas, the symbols and monograms of various ruling families, the dates of the rulers and the extant of their empire. The inscriptions also provide us the relations of the rulers with their neighbouring states. Some of the major inscriptions are Hathigumpha inscription of Kharvela, Rabataka inscription of king Kanishka, Halmidi inscription, Chandella inscriptions, Chola inscriptions, Rannod inscription etc. Thus the study of inscription is valuable source of history for students and researchers.

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Symbol and diagram on the floor of a Hindu monastery at Surwaya M.P



Rannod Inscription.M.P



Inscribed pillar - kalinjar fort



Inscription on a temple wall at Kadvaaha M.P

