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**Paper: Ancient India**

**Topic: Epigraphy**

The study of inscriptions is known as epigraphy. An inscription is any writing that is engraved on

something like stone, wood, metal, ivory plaques, bronze statues, bricks, clay, shells, pottery etc.

Epigraphy includes deciphering the text of inscriptions and analysing the information they contain.

Oldest inscriptions in Indian Subcontinent are yet undeciphered i.e, Harappan script. Oldest

deciphered inscriptions belong to 4th Century B.C and are in Brahmi and Kharoshti scripts. These

include those of Ashoka which are in different languages and scripts but mostly in Prakrit language

and Brahmi script.

**Inscriptions As A Source Of History**

Compared with manuscripts of texts, inscriptions have the advantage of durability. They are usually

contemporaneous to the events they speak of and their information can be connected to a time and

place. Changes and additions made to them can usually be detected without great difficulty. The

text of inscriptions may be brief, but a large number of short inscriptions can often provide

important historical information. Compared to literary sources, which tend to give a theoretical

perspective, inscriptions often reflect what people were actually doing. And although epigraphs of

different categories usually follow a standard format, some of them do have the ability to surprise.

Inscriptions are a valuable source of information on political history. The geographical spread

of king’s inscriptions is often taken as indicating the area under his political control. But the

discovery of inscriptions depends on chance and not all the inscriptions inscribed during a king's

reign need necessarily be found. Furthermore, moveable inscriptions are not always found **in**

**situ**,i.e., in their original place.

The earliest royal inscriptions do not contain much genealogical material, but later ones

generally do. Their Prashastis give details about the history of dynasties and the reigns of kings. Of

course, there are problems. Royal inscriptions naturally tend to exaggerate the achievements of the

ruling king. Sometimes, confusion is created when a genealogy mentions kings with the same name,

or when different inscriptions contradict each other on particular details. Sometimes genealogists

skip names. This kind of skipping occurs, for instance, in the case of Skandgupta and Ramagupta,

who are ignored in Gupta genealogists because they did not come within the direct line of

succession of later rulers.

There are cases where inscriptions of different dynasties make conflicting claims. For instance, a

Gurjara-Pratihara inscription states that king Vatsaraja conquered all of Karnataka. However, the

contemporary Rashtrakuta king claims in his inscriptions to have defeated Vatsaraja and to have

ruled over the Karnataka area. Wherever possible, details of political events given in inscriptions

have to be cross-checked.

Inscriptions, especially those of early medieval period, have been used as a major source of

information on political structures and administrative and revenue systems. They can also shed light

on the history of settlement patterns, agrarian relations, forms of labour, and class and caste

structures. Analysing epigraphic evidence involves unravelling the technical vocabulary of

inscriptions- for instance, the designations of officials, fiscal terms, and land measures- the meaning

of which are not always clear.

There are very few ancient records of secular land transactions and records of land disputes, but

these take us straight to the heart of social and economic issues. For instance, an inscription of the

Chola king Rajaraja lll states that farmers of a certain village found the burden of arbitrary levies in

money and paddy and the demand of compulsory labour made on various pretexts by several

agencies so unbearable that they could no longer carry on cultivation. A meeting of the Brahmana

assembly and the leading men of the locality was held in the village temple. Decisions were taken,

fixing the dues the farmers were to give to the Brahmanas and royal tax collectors, and the labour

services that they were expected to perform.

Inscriptions provide dateable information on the history of religious sects, institutions, and

practices. Donative records help identify the sources of patronage enjoyed by ancient religions

establishments. They also give glimpses into sects and cults that were once important but did not

leave any literature of their own e.g., the Ajvika sect and the yaksha and naga cults. Inscriptions can

help identify and date sculptures and structures, and thus throw light on the history of iconography,

art, and architecture. They are also a rich source of information on historical geography. In fact, the

location of several ancient Buddhist monastic sites such as Kapilavastu has been fixed on the basis

of inscribed monastic seals.

Inscriptions reflect the history of languages and literature and a few refer to the performing

arts. For instance, the 7th Century Kudumiyamalai inscription gives the musical noted used in seven

classical ragas. Inscriptions from Tamil Nadu refer to the performance of various kinds of dances.

The pillars of the eastern and western gateways of the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram have label

inscriptions describing the dance poses of 108 sculpted figures carved on them, quoting verses from

Natyashastra of Bharata.

Inscriptions are material remains and have to be understood on relation to the larger contexts

in which they were found. They are also texts, connected with prevailing structures of power,

authority, and social status. Whether fragmentary or complete, whether consisting of one word or

hundreds of lines, an inscription has to be read and analysed carefully. Its contents can then be

compared with those of other inscriptions and with information from other kinds of sources.