

Subject: History

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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 III 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 notes 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 labels

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.