

The Inscriptions

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Epigraphy is an important source for constructing the political and cultural history of the ancient India. Generally, any historical information is acknowledged as true-blue when it is substantiated by an epigraphical record. So in the study of the history of literature, language and history, epigraphy has a vital role to play. So this chapter concerns itself with some of the fundamental features of epigraphy. These inscriptions are broadly divided into two categories viz., stone inscriptions and copper-plate inscriptions. The stone records are found literally in thousands in different parts of the country. The copper plates are naturally limited in number but quite a large number of them have been discovered in later periods. The copper-plate inscriptions main theme is to register the gift of land or other privileges mostly to individuals and in a few cases to temples or institutions. A majority of them are thus title deeds of land-grants made to the individual Brahmans or group of the Brahmans.

Key words: epigraphy, inscription, copper plate, deeds.

Introduction

Epigraphy is an important source for constructing the political and cultural history of the ancient India. Generally, any historical information is acknowledged as true-blue when it is substantiated by an epigraphical record. So in the study of the history of literature, language and history, epigraphy has a vital role to play. So this chapter concerns itself with some of the fundamental features of epigraphy.

The word epigraphy is derived from two Greek words, ‘epi’ which means ‘on or upon’ and ‘graphie’ meaning ‘to write’. Epigraphy may be defined as any descriptive and analytical study of the inscriptions. The word ‘Inscription’ is also most commonly used as a synonymous with epigraph. This word has been derived from a Latin word ‘Inscribere’ which also gives the meaning ‘to write upon.’ According to Dr. D. C. Sircar, “Inscription literally means only writing engraved on some object.”¹

The Encyclopedia Britanica states that “Inscriptions are the documents, incised on some hard permanent material in the form of letters or other conventional signs, for the purpose of conveying some information or preserving a record. They are, therefore, to be distinguished on the one hand from manuscripts or documents written on smoother surfaces.”²

J. F. Fleet has tried to present a summed up description of inscription, like this, “The inscription are notifications, very frequently of an official character and generally more or less of a public nature, which recite facts, simple or complex, with or without dates and were intended to be lasting records of the matters to which they refer.”³

In India, rocks as well as lithic, metallic, earthen or wooden pillars, and pots, bricks, sheets, ivory and other objects were generally used for incising inscriptions. Often writing in relief such as the legends on coins and seals, which are usually produced out of moulds or dies. The records pointed on cave walls or written in ink on wooden tablets are also regarded as inscriptions, although these writings are not actually engraved. Inscriptions may greatly vary in point of length sometimes on epigraphs contain only a mark or one single word or expression indicating the name of an individual. After considering all these definitions and descriptions above, two important characteristics of inscriptions are engraved or written on hard and long lasting materials but not on delicate paper like materials.

Nature of Epigraphy

An epigraphical study is primarily a study related with the letters and words. The nature of the subject is more literary and speaks about the rights and conditions of the days when it was written.

The earliest known system of writing is found on the seals used by the people of Indus Valley Civilization or Harappan Civilization dating to about circa 2600 – 1900 B.C. However, this script is not yet deciphered and hence the contents of these inscriptions are unknown.⁴ For the period between the fall of the Harappan Civilization and advent of the Mauryan Emperor Asoka (3rd century B.C.), nothing is known about

the system of writing, further, the knowledge of Brahmi script prior to the appearance of Asokan edicts. These edicts were engraved everywhere and meant to be read, understood and conveyed to everybody.

Leaving aside this, we begin to get a completely developed and decipherable script (i.e. Brahmi) from the period of the great Mouryan emperor Asoka, who can be credited with the fore runnership of a new tradition of writing inscriptions. The scope of epigraphical study is limited to the so called ancient and medieval period in history. It starts from the third century B.C. When the inscriptions first appeared in India and chronologically and it can be extended up to the end of seventeenth century A.D. In the context of India, the fortunes in history have changed after the European intervention. Hence the Pre -European period can be taken for epigraphical studies.⁵

The Dhamapuri Inscriptions have played a very important role in the construction of Thagadur Nadu history. Inscriptions also give us glimpses, regarding the social conditions of the ages to which they belong. Inscriptions also throw light on other social customs.

Inscriptions are also useful in understanding the economic life of the past. Agriculture was the primary occupation as disclosed by many records. Besides, inscriptions are very helpful for studying the development of Indian scripts and languages. Such studies can be undertaken on more detailed basis of different regions and various languages. And, particularly since early inscriptions for Dravidian languages like Tamil, Telugu and Kannada are available. The history of these languages could be traced for centuries and a systematic account given. Actually some work has been done in this direction by producing historical grammars of these languages based on a study of inscriptions. The epigraphic study of a large number of connected inscriptions that a reconstruction of not only the political and dynastic history but also of the social, religious, administrative, economic, educational and geographic conditions of a particular period or reign.

Types of inscriptions

Broadly speaking, there are two types of inscriptions, they are:

- a. Royal or Official Inscriptions.

b. Private or Individual Inscriptions.

On the basis of their contents, the inscriptions may be classified as below.

The first set of inscriptions belonging to Administrative type is found among the Chola, Pandiya and Vijaya nagara inscriptions. They were written with an intention to broadcast the orders issued by the king among the citizen.

Inscriptions dealing with the eulogy (Prasasti) form the most important type from the political point of view. Broadly, they are distinguished into sheer eulogy and mixed with other types.

The largest number of inscription belongs to donative type. This had been a very popular practice in ancient and medieval times. The record of any grant or donations made by the king or any authority or a person by engraving an inscription in which the details of the grant are also furnished. Some of the donations recorded in caves, temples, images, lands, villages, worshipping articles to the deity at a temple and monetary donations etc.

The Nigamas or guild has the power of making their coins and seals and use of writing for their commercial purposes through such commercial records on perishable materials could not survive for a long time.

Format of Inscriptions

These inscriptions are broadly divided into two categories viz., stone inscriptions and copper-plate inscriptions. As far as the format of an earliest set of inscriptions i.e the cave inscriptions is considered, they were most simple and unadorned. They were not elaborate and intricate. But the inscriptions of later period belong to a different category from that of the cave inscriptions. These are observed gradually more comprehensive and embellished. The majority of them are donative in character while some are secular in nature regarding the construction of a well, canal, bed and temples.

Type and Format of Inscriptions

On the basis of the contents, the inscriptions may be classified as below:

1. Administrative inscriptions

The first set of inscriptions belonging to this type is found in the temple inscription. They were written with an intention to broadcast the orders issued by the king among the citizen.

2. Eulogistic (Prasisti)

Inscriptions dealing with the Prasisti are the most important type in the political point of view. The first specimen of the Prasisti is found in the Thanjavur inscription of Rarajaraja I. The most important specimens of mixed eulogy are found in the Pandiya and Vijayanar inscriptions.

3. Donative

The largest number of inscription belongs to this type. This had been a very popular practice in ancient and medieval times to record any grant or donations made by the king or any authority or a person by engraving an inscription in which the details of the grant are also furnished. Some of the donations recorded are the donations of caves, images, lands, villages, worshiping articles to the deity at a temple and monetary donations etc.

4. Commercial

The periods of Indian history subsequent to the Indus valley civilization have not yielded so far specimens of commercial seals or any extensive records of commercial nature. The Nigamas and Guild is has the power of making their coins and seals and use of writing for their commercial purposes through such commercial records on perishable materials could not survive for a long time.

5. Commemorative

The inscriptions of this type record the events such as birth, any achievements a Saint or Hero and death of a king or a warrior.

The formats of an earliest set of inscriptions were most simple and unadorned. They were not elaborate and intricate. The central theme But the inscriptions of later period belong to a different category from that of the edicts of Ashoka. These are observed gradually more comprehensive and embellished. The majority of them are donative in character while some are secular in nature regarding the construction of a well, canal etc.

Conclusion

Ancient Indians developed cultural and trade contacts with south-east Asian countries like Java, Sumatra, Cambodia and Borneo. A large number of inscriptions found in these places which are very much akin to Indian epigraphs in respect of their

language and script reflect the expansion of Indian culture in these countries. Inscriptions also throw light on the weights and measures used in the ancient and medieval periods.

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