

Use of Epigraphy as Primary Source in Indian Historical Research

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ABSTRACT

Research of history is always based on the study various information sources and their corroborative analysis. Epigraphy is always considered as a reliable source of Indian history. Richard Salomon in his famous book *Indian Epigraphy* shows that Indian subcontinent is the land of epigraphic records. More than five thousand epigraphic records have been found in Indian subcontinent. These epigraphic records provide varied kind of historical information. The present essay attempt to discuss the method of using epigraphic records as historical sources and alsodiverse kind of information it supplies.

INTRODUCTION

The term epigraphy has derived from a Greek term *epigraphēin*, which actually means to write on. There is another English term inscription which is very close to epigraphy. The term inscription has derived from a Latin term *inscrebere*, which also means to write on. There are mainly two characteristics of any epigraphic records, firstly, this record should be inscribed and secondly, this record should be engraved on any hard object, like stone slab or copper plate. D.C. Sircar tries to define the study of epigraphy as the study of inscriptions and it literally means any writing engraved on hard object (Sircar: 1996, 1). So far more than five thousand inscriptions have been found in Indian subcontinent engraved on various objects like – cave, stone slabs, wooden panels, clay panels, pillars, images, bricks, ivory objects etc. although most of the Indian inscriptions were engraved on stone slabs.

The seals discovered in varioussites of Harappan civilization are considered as the earliest inscriptions of Indian subcontinent. These seals have been dated around 2500 BCE to 1700 BCE. But most of these seal inscription have not been deciphered yet. The earliest deciphered Indian inscriptions are Asokan edicts, which may be dated in the middle of 3rd century BCE. These edicts have been written in Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts and Prakrit language, although there are several Asokan edicts found in north western part of Indian subcontinent which were written in Aramaic and Greek script and language. Recently several pot inscriptions are found from Anuradhapur of Srilanka which may be dated earlier than Asokan edicts. These inscriptions have been dated in 4th century BCE through C14 technology.

Earliest Indian inscriptions are mostly written in various dialects of Prakrit. Around 1st century BCE, we can notice use of epigraphical hybrid Sanskrit in the inscription. In later period Sanskrit became the most used language in the epigraphic records. After 3rd century CE Sanskrit became the main epigraphic language in north Indian inscriptions. In south Indian inscriptions, especially in Jain inscriptionswe may notice use of Prakrit language up to fifth century CE. D.C. Sircar earlier had classified epigraphic records in two major categories on the basis of nature of information these records provide (Sircar: 1996, 2). These two categories are official records and unofficial records. Richard Salomon later offered a more detailed classification of the epigraphic records (Salomon: 1998, 110). Salomon has classified these epigraphic records in ten broad categories – 1. Royal donatives and Panegyric, 2. Land grant copperplates, 3. Private donatives, 4. Memorial inscriptions, 5. Label inscriptions, 6. Pilgrims' inscriptions, 7. Seal inscriptions, 8. Cultic inscriptions, 9. Literary inscriptions, 10. Miscellaneous inscriptions.

1. Royal Donatives and Panegyrics: These inscriptions were principally issued by the Kings for the purpose of donation or eulogising the achievements of the king. These records are usually found on the stone slabs or pillars. In Sanskrit language these epigraphs are known as prasastis. Asokan edicts are exceptional in character among these records. Asokan edicts are the only records where the King endeavoured to interact directly with the subjects. Here we can refer to two other Mauryan inscriptions found form Mahasthagarh and Sohgaoura where directives have been given to the local administration for taking necessary actions in the time of emergencies. Khavela'sHastigumpha inscription is another excellent example of this kind of inscriptions, where the king of Kalinga has provided his achievements of his every regnal year.Rudradamana's Junagarh inscription is the earliest Sanskrit prasasti, where mention has been

made of restoration of famous Sudarshana Lake. Samudragupta's Allahabad Prasasti or Yashodharman's Mandasore pillar inscription provide military achievements of Samudragupta or Yashodharman. Deoparaprasasti of Vijayasenatells us about the foundation of the temple of Pradyumnesvara.

2. Land Grant Copperplates: Inscriptions of this category is considered as the most informative ones. Copperplate charters record donation of lands. With the advent of agrahara system in the 4th century CE, this type of inscriptions became the most issued type of epigraphic records. These inscriptions were usually engraved on plates made of copper. Usually five to six inscribed plates were attached together with the help of ring made of bronze. These inscriptions were written in mixed format, i.e. partly in prose and partly in poetry. In agrahara system there was a practice of donating land to Brahmins, temples and monasteries. Copperplate charters record all detailed information regarding nature of donated land, size and price of the land, purpose of the donation, details about the donor and the donee. Most of these land grant copperplates are unearthed from north Bengal and south India. Among them the five Damodarapur copperplates, Faridpur, Anulia, Nalanda copperplates are worth of mentioning.

3. Private Donations: Private donative inscriptions record donations made by non – royal people and organizations. These records are normally found in religious places. Most fascinating private donative records are available in gateways and railings of the Sanchi stupa. The records found in the Sanchi stupa tell us about varied social perspectives of the visitors. Similar records are also found from Buddhist sites of Karle, Bhaja, Nasik, Ajanta. Records of donations made by guilds are also found. Mandashore inscription of Vandhuvarmana records donation made by a guild of the silk weavers.

4. Memorial Inscriptions: Memorial inscriptions are dedicated to dead persons. These inscriptions may be divided into four sub categories, i) Chayastambha or Yasthi – these are earliest memorial inscriptions. In these inscriptions the image of the dead person was engraved on a pillar. This type of inscriptions are mostly found from Andhra region; ii) Nisidhi – these are Jain memorial inscriptions, dedicated to particular Jain ascetic who performed ritualistic suicide. Most of these inscriptions are discovered from Sravanabelagola; iii) Hero stone – these memorial stones are dedicated to the persons who died in the battlefield. A huge number of hero stones are unearthed from the western and the central part of the subcontinent; iv) Sati stone – these are dedicated to women who performed the ritual of Sati. Eran pillar inscription of Bhanugupta is the earliest record of performing sati.

5. Label Inscriptions: Label inscriptions are engraved in the pedestal of the images or sculptural reliefs. This type of inscriptions first appeared in the sculptured reliefs of Bharhut stupa. The best examples of the label inscriptions are preserved in the statue galleries of Naneghat and Mat. The statue gallery of Naneghat belonged to the Satavahana rulers. Although the statues of this gallery are dilapidated, but the label inscriptions remain intact and from these we can fix the genealogy of the Satavahana rulers. The gallery of Mat belonged to the Kushana kings. Here the famous headless image of Kanishka was found, but the label inscription at the pedestal of the image helps us to identify the image.

6. Pilgrims' Inscriptions: This type of inscriptions is created by pilgrims. Pilgrims have a tendency to write down their names while travelling around and most of the sacred places are full of this type of inscriptions. A huge number of pilgrims' inscriptions have been found from Bhuli and Devaprayag. Similar inscriptions are also available in Siddheswar and Jageswar in Bihar.

7. Seal Inscriptions: Seal inscriptions are the earliest type of inscriptions available in Indian subcontinent. Inscriptions in seals and sealings found in different sites of Harappan civilization are yet to be deciphered. Later inscribed seals and sealings are found from Nalanda, Baishali, Bhita. These are belonged to the Gupta realm. From these seals and sealings we can collect various types of information regarding the administrative history of the Gupta phase.

8. Cultic Inscriptions: Cultic inscriptions are completely religious in nature. Very few inscriptions of this category are found in Indian Subcontinent. The Halayudha verse inscription from Mandhata and Cittapa verse inscription from Vidisha are two best examples of cultic inscriptions. Halayudha verse is dedicated to Siva and Cittapa verse is dedicated to Surya. It is further to refer that some verses from Bhagavadgita are engraved on the wall of the Vishvanath temple at Varanasi.

9. Literary Inscriptions: When a drama or a Kavya is engraved on an inscription that is termed as literary inscription. A very few inscriptions of this type have been found so far. The best preserved example of this type of inscriptions is the Parijatamanjari Natika inscription from Dhar. Lalitavigraharaja and Harakeli drama inscriptions found from Ajmer may be categorized in this group.

10. Miscellaneous Inscriptions: The inscriptions which cannot be categorized previous nine groups belong to this group. These inscriptions supply diverse type of information. The Jogimara and Sitabenga inscriptions tell us about affectionate relation between Devadonna and Sutanuka. The Sarpavandha inscriptions from Ujjayini were engraved for

the purpose of teaching Sanskrit grammar. The Badami inscription informs us about the fortification of the hill of the Badami.

Inscriptions are considered as a reliable source of Indian history. It has advantage of durability and it speaks about a certain place and time. Although inscriptions are regarded as very informative source of Indian history, but there information cannot be accepted without proper corroborative approach. Many of the inscriptions were written by court poets and naturally these are full of biased information. On the other hand certain dynastic inscriptions have made conflicting claims and this information cannot be incorporated without examined through other relevant sources (Singh: 2008,50). Inscriptions are to be analysed in larger context of their place of findings and they should be treated like other textual sources.

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