

Perceptions Through Inscriptions - Early Phase

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Inscription literally means any writing engraved on some object. In India, rocks as well as lithic, metallic, earthen or wooden pillars, tablets, plates and pots, as also bricks, shells, ivory, plaques and other objects 'were generally used for inscribing inscriptions. Often writing in relief, such as we find in the legends on coins and seals, which are usually produced out of moulds or dies, and also records painted on cave-walls or written in ink on wooden tablets are regarded as inscriptions, although these writings are not actually engraved¹. For writing an inscription, the knowledge of a script is the prime requirement and thus, it is necessary here to trace the antiquity and origin of writing in India.

ANTIQUITY : The development or progress of any civilization directly depends on two aspects- (1) acquiring knowledge and (2) handing it down to the posterity. It is a known fact that verbal transmission of knowledge keeps changing a bit each time it is transferred from one mouth to a new pair of ears, continuously distorting its original form, which is ultimately lost after a generation or two. Hence, the best method to preserve the knowledge is to record it in black and white and allow the next generation to make maximum use of it, make required amendments and changes under the light of new researches and finally pass it on to the next generation for further improvements. This is how the knowledge grows and a civilization develops generation after generation. This establishes the importance of script and writing. Our ancestors were well aware of this fact and, therefore, instead of human beings they held deities responsible for this prodigious invention, i.e. the art of writing.

The antiquity of script or writing will, probably, remain a debatable issue among the historians for ever, but our ancestors had no doubt in their minds about its supernatural creation. Not only India, but other ancient civilizations also believed in its divine origin; like, the ancient Egyptians attributed the creation of writing either to Thoth, the god who invented nearly all cultural elements, or to Isis. The Babylonian god of writing, Nebo, Marduk's son, was also the god of man's destiny. An ancient Jewish tradition considered Moses as the inventor of the script. Greek myths attributed writing to Hermes or to other gods². Similarly, the tradition of both the orthodox and the heterodox sects of India ascribes the invention of writing,

or at least of the chief script, to the creator Brahmā, and thereby claims it as a national invention of the remotest antiquity³.

ORIGIN : Archaeologically, when and how man started writing using a uniform script is quite uncertain and remains a debatable issue among the scholars, but it can be understood that the dawn of writing occurred when he was still in the Palaeolithic or Stone Age. Dated between two million and one million BC, the Palaeolithic man learnt to make lines and drawings in their dwelling places, i.e. caves, which we find spread all over the globe. Although we find various types of pictures drawn on the cave walls, but some among these do indicate that the Palaeolithic man has made an effort to convey his feelings through his drawings. Probably, this paved the way for the development of what we know as the pictographic script of the later ages⁴.

In India, after the Stone Age, the earliest evidence of writing is available on seals from the Indus Valley Civilization of 3rd millennium BC, but unfortunately in spite of many claims, the script still remains un-deciphered. Not a single link exists to cover the 2,000 years' gap between the Indus Valley script and the Indian writing, though the possibility of connection between the two scripts cannot be rejected categorically. A satisfactory answer to this problem will be obtained should strata bearing early Indian settlements be discovered, when their relationship to the Indus Valley Civilization would be proved. It is useless to discuss the whole problem until sites in the land of origin of the *R̥gveda* hymns have been sufficiently explored, excavated and studied. The whole of history of India prior to the middle of the seventh century BC is, indeed, still the province of archaeology⁵.

VEDIC INDIA : Whether Vedic people (c. 2nd millennium BC) had a script or not is again a controversial and debatable issue, which has always kept the archaeologists busy as they draw their conclusions on material evidences, but this can be understood that it could not have been possible to create and maintain such a vast literature (Vedic) without a script. Hirachandra Ojha for the first time drew attention towards the complex metres (*chandas*) of the *R̥gveda*, where nomenclature was fixed and classification made as per numbers of letters and ligatures. Secondly, each metre possessed several divisions and sub-divisions. Moreover, the forms of these metres were so complicated that a *Chandaśāstra* was required to be written in order to preserve their originality and purity. *R̥gveda* itself reveals the names of several

metres as- Gāyatrī, Anuṣṭubh Vṛhatī, Virāj, Triṣṭubh and Jagatī. Preservation and maintenance of such peculiarities of literature does not sound logical without the knowledge of writing⁶. We do not get the evidence simply because writing during the period was carried out on materials like birch-bark, wood, palm-leaves, clay, etc., which could not sustain the Indian weather conditions for long and perished.

Notably, we also do not get a single evidence of building from this age, but this does not mean that the Vedic people did not know how to make dwellings for their own protection and safety. Creators of such a vast and divine literature certainly could not have been so ignorant. We do not get material evidence because they utilized forest resources to meet their daily requirements and these got lost with the passage of time. Same is applicable on the writing base and script as well. Some scholars opine that it is a wrong notion that Vedic India was devoid of script or knowledge of writing. The *Ṛgveda* itself reveals two words, viz. *kṣura-* writing by inscribing and *bhrāja-* writing by painting, which confirms that even though the education of this period was based on audio-system (*śruti-paramparā*) between the teacher and taught, but writing was also known. Unfortunately, we do not get evidence because of the use of perishable materials for writing⁷. Fortunately, the great Mauryan Emperor Aśoka (274-237 BC) made innovation and introduced rocks or stones as the writing base that survived for our record.

SCRIPTS : Archaeologically, the next evidence of the script after the Indus Valley is available in the form of inscriptions issued by Aśoka written in *Kharoṣṭī*, Aramaic and Greek for the north-western province and in *Brāhmī* for the rest of his empire. While *Kharoṣṭī*, suitable for Prākṛta, remained confined only to north-west India and gradually disappeared with the increasing popularity of Sanskrit, *Brāhmī* remained the script of the Indian mass and continued for several centuries thereafter. *Brāhmī* is supposed to be the mother of not only all the regional scripts of India, but also those of most of the South Asian countries. Although it is difficult to trace the origin of this script, but it certainly must have taken centuries to acquire the uniformity and consistency we find in Aśokan epigraphs. The *Lalita-Vistara*, a life of Buddha, relates that the Buddha studied writing in his childhood (that is, in the first half of the sixth century BC)⁸. Placing it at the top in the list of sixty-four scripts in this text indicates its prominence. The Jaina works, the *Pannavaṇāsutta* and the *Samavāyāṅgasutta* also place this script at number one in their list of eighteen scripts⁹.

Although the rock edicts and pillar inscriptions of Aśoka are considered to be the earliest evidence of writing in India after the Indus Valley script, but a few evidences, viz. Rock Edict of Mahāsthāna, Copperplate of Sohaurā, Relic Casket Inscription of Piprahwā, Rock Edict of Barli and Bhaṭṭiprolu Inscription are highly disputed epigraphs as their contents or characteristic features of letters take them prior to Aśokan or rather Mauryan period, around Buddha's time. Some scholars accept these inscriptions as pre-Aśokan while others deny. According to Diringer: '...many different lines of evidence suggest a date between the eighth and the sixth century BC for the introduction of writing into 'Aryan' India, thus confirming the conclusion that the *Brāhmī* script was much later than the Indus Valley writing, and that the knowledge of writing flourished from the seventh-sixth century BC onwards'¹⁰. While studying the ancient and obscure scripts of India like *Brāhmī* and *Kharoṣṭī*, one should always keep in mind that besides the regional variations noticed in every period, the letters acquired different shapes also because of writing surfaces; e.g. a letter inscribed by a scribe on stone may differ in shape from that inscribed on a copperplate by the same scribe. Similarly, different writing instruments also played a role in giving different shapes to inscribed letters.

KHAROṢṬĪ : *Brāhmī* and *Kharoṣṭī*, are the two well-known ancient Indian scripts appearing for the first time in the inscriptions of Aśoka. In comparison to indigenous *Brāhmī*, written from left to right, the *Kharoṣṭī* script was derived from a foreign script, i.e. Aramaic and remained confined only to the north-western frontiers of the Indian subcontinent. Written from right to left, this script had limited dimensions, which restricted its natural growth and development during the succeeding ages. It is interesting to find that almost all the written materials found in this script are Buddhist in nature and are in local Prākṛta. Moreover, being an improvised script, it was not suited to Sanskrit phonetics and eventually no Sanskrit document written in this script could be found. Out of well-known fourteen rock edicts of Aśoka, only two viz. Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra edicts are inscribed in *Kharoṣṭī*. Taxila (Takṣaśilā) of the same region of North-West Indian subcontinent has yielded a number of coins, perhaps of the same period (3rd century BC). They are known as 'Negama Coins' simply because some of them bear the legends *Negama* in *Brāhmī* script and *Nekama* in *Kharoṣṭī*¹¹. *Kharoṣṭī* was also used by the Indo-Greeks, Scythians, Parthians and Kuṣāṇas in their coins and inscriptions. As against *Brāhmī*,

this script could not live long and died a natural death after five or six centuries and became obsolete after the 4th century AD¹².

BRĀHMĪ : The debates, disputes and controversies are inseparable parts of the study of ancient Indian history and will continue to go on, but the fact has to be accepted that no script can suddenly emerge in its developed form. Any script of the world, after inception, acquires and changes its shape several times before it becomes consistent, adopted by the society as a standard type and circulates among the common mass as a familiar script understood by all. The whole process consumes quite a bit of time. The inscriptions of Aśoka prove that the *Brāhmī* of the period was a fully developed script, was in vogue during his time and was understood by the masses of every nook and corner of his vast empire for whom he got these inscribed, in spite of the absence of super-fast communicating devices of modern age. Thus, the development and spread of *Brāhmī* certainly was not an overnight matter, but had several centuries of history behind it before it was accepted by the society as a standard script, became familiar to all and then spread widely to every part of the country through then available time-consuming non-digital communicating devices, i.e. people. No wonder that *Brāhmī* could have been the script of the Vedic people as well, might be in its primitive form.

LANGUAGE : As mentioned, the earliest script found on the Indus Valley seals is yet to be deciphered; and hence, the language has not been determined. After this, the earliest records belong to c. 3rd century BC in Aramaic found from the north-western region of India. However, if the Piprahwā Casket and Sohgaurā Copperplate are considered to be pre-Mauryan, the antiquity of *Brāhmī* writing is pushed back to the 5th-4th century BC. The Indo-Greeks and other foreign rulers issued their coins with Greek legends. A bilingual Greek and Aramaic inscription of the Mauryan king Aśoka is discovered in Afghanistan, which formed in ancient times a part of the *Uttarāpatha* division of Bhāratavarṣa¹³. The earliest evidences of epigraphic records of indigenous Indian rulers are found to be in Prākṛta, the main language of whole of India. Sanskrit appeared in the inscriptions of North India from the second half of the first century BC and gradually ousted Prākṛta in all parts of India. In North India, Prākṛta was completely replaced by Sanskrit by the end of 3rd century AD and in South India by the second half of the 4th century AD. The minor rock edicts of Aśoka from South India and at Kalsi exhibit the influence

of both the dialects, while the language used in those found from north-western province is closer to Sanskrit, like in Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra edicts. Interestingly, the Besnagar (Bhilsa or Vidisha District, Madhya Pradesh) Inscription of Heliodorus, who hailed from Taxila in the Rawalpindi District of West Pakistan and was an envoy of the Indo-Greek king Antialcidas (last quarter of the 2nd century BC) at the court of king Bhāgabhadra of Vidiśā exhibit some influence of Sanskrit and literary Prākṛta¹⁴.

The admixture of Prākṛta and Sanskrit in epigraphs continued after the Mauryan period as well as witnessed in the inscriptions of the Scythian, Parthian and Kuṣāṇa rulers or north-western India. It appears that Sanskrit was patronized at the courts of the foreign rulers of North-West Bhāratavarṣa whence its popularity spread gradually over other parts of the country. Essentially, the popularity of Sanskrit at the courts of the rulers either of foreign or indigenous extraction was due to the influence of grammarians. One of the earliest authors of works in Classical Sanskrit was Aśvaghoṣa who, according to tradition, lived in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, first at Pāṭaliputra in Bihar and later at the court of the Kuṣāṇa king Kaniṣka at Puruṣapura (Peshawar)¹⁵. This tendency of using both the languages for records continued till about the end of the 3rd century AD with Prākṛta gradually giving way to Sanskrit, which started dominating in the inscriptions. The Sanskrit gained its field in North India by the time of the rise of the Guptas in the 4th century AD as their inscriptions are found to be recorded in chaste Sanskrit. The celebrated dramatists and poets Bhāṣa and Kālidāsa flourished during the age.

STUDY : As far as the study of inscriptions is concerned, meticulous efforts made by the foreign and Indian scholars to decipher and interpret these, helped in the preparation of a glorious history of India. After the discovery of a large number of inscriptions belonging to different places and a vast period, many personal efforts took place to study them on various aspects. A systematic study started with the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal on 15th January 1784 in Calcutta (now Kolkata), with the inspirations of Sir William Jones. Charles Wilkinson, Radha Kant Sharma, Col. James Tod, Yati Gyan Chandra, Babington, Mill, Walter Elliot, Capt. Troyer, Vothen, James Prinsep, Charles Mellet, Wilford and many others contributed a lot in preparing the lists of the alphabets and reading and editing the inscriptions¹⁶. Stalwarts like Barnett, Kielhorn, Bhagwanlal Inderji, G.H.Ojha, R.G.Bhandarkar,

R.D.Banerjee, D.R.Bhandarkar, H.P.Shastri, V.Venkayya, N.G.Majumdar, R.Ramsastri and many others also devoted their lives to epigraphic studies.

IMPORTANCE : It is now universally acclaimed that the inscriptions hold the merit of being the most authentic source of reconstruction of the past, mainly for two reasons- (1) these were mostly inscribed by the kings themselves, their feudatories, officials or by respected individuals of the contemporary society and (2) unlike paper, palm-leaf, cloth, etc. there was a meagre scope of making any alterations, interpolations or amendments in the written documents once inscribed on the hard materials like stone or metal. Moreover, the scope of exaggeration was very little in these short descriptions. Inscriptions are inevitable for the reconstruction of ancient Indian history as our forefathers were not interested in sequentially penning down the events of their past from the historical point of view. They handed down a vast literature to us, which chiefly focussed on the spiritual elevation and betterment of the mankind as a whole. Historians have been working hard to extract history from such literature. Inscriptions, on the other hand, proved to be more compatible for reconstructing history; firstly, because these record what existed or occurred in the society, and secondly, very often these are found to be dated, which solved several problems posed by the literature or even archaeology, especially regarding the dates.

Since the study of ancient Indian history started, the most challenging and debatable issue before the scholars has been ascribing dates to the events, literary works and archaeological remains of ancient India. The dated inscriptions have helped them a lot from time to time not only in ascertaining dates for certain happenings, dynasties, etc. but these have also been of immense help for understanding the total social set-up of the period in which these were inscribed. It is difficult to write real history as we will never be able to know what events actually took place in ancient times, but we can certainly reconstruct the history with the help of informations gathered from inscriptions, literature and archaeological remains by making a comprehensive and comparative studies of all available evidences taken together.

NATURE : Regarding the nature of Indian inscriptions, these are broadly classified under two groups- (1) issued by the ruling authority and (2) issued by the citizens. The largest number of epigraphs of the second category record donations made in

favour of religious establishments or installations of images for worship. They are usually incised on the objects that were donated or installed, and are, as a rule, small. In some cases, however, they mention the king during whose reign the grant was made or the installation took place¹⁷. Eulogistic compositions, called *Praśastis*, were sometimes composed and engraved on stone tablets or pillars to commemorate public works, like the excavation of a tank or step-well or the construction of a temple by a royal or ordinary personage or a group of individuals. The ruler of the country is usually mentioned in such works composed on behalf of private persons or officials. Even private records, therefore, often offer valuable information for the reconstruction of political and cultural history as well as for other allied subjects such as topography¹⁸.

On the other hand, the inscriptions issued by the ruling authority chiefly contain royal orders, achievements of a king in a eulogistic *kāvya* (poetry), i.e. *praśasti*, grants in favour of learned brahmins, religious institutions or deserving individuals and officials, etc. The epigraphs recording royal grants of land were generally engraved on copperplates and there gradually developed a tendency to introduce in the copperplate grants an elaborate eulogy of the donor and his ancestors. Fairly detailed information about a king and his ancestors is often found in the elaborate *praśastis* on stone or copperplates, which are, therefore of inestimable value for the reconstruction of ancient Indian history, especially because most of the facts supplied by them are in many cases not known from any other source¹⁹.

CHARACTERISTICS : Although there was no hard and fast rule or a prescribed format, which the engraver followed while inscribing, but certain characteristics in Indian inscriptions can be noticed since ancient times, which repeatedly occur in most of these. At the beginning of an inscription generally and also at its end occasionally, there is an auspicious symbol or word or a passage in adoration to a deity. The word *siddham* and *svasti* at the beginning of inscriptions are commonly found, though *siddham* gradually came to be represented by a symbol found at the beginning of numerous inscriptions. Among other auspicious symbols, occasionally we have the *svastika*, the trident-on-wheel called *triratna*, the *śrīvatsa*, the tree-in-railing and certain unidentified symbols in early inscriptions. Generally, separation of words or their groups is not observed in inscriptions. This was, probably, due to the limited space the engraver had at his disposal. In certain cases, some letters are

found to be separated from others, but this was done without any system and probably according to the will of the scribe or engraver²⁰.

Often the end of an epigraph was indicated by the punctuation marks and occasionally the end of a sentence or section or the first or second half of a stanza was also likewise marked. At the end of a section, sometimes we have the representation of a lotus, a floral design, a circle and other symbols. In the upper part of a number of inscriptions, there are such representations as the *Śivaliṅga*, Nandin (Śiva's bull), a cow-with-calf, sun and moon, etc. Only in some cases an omission was indicated by a cross or *kākapāda* (or *haṁsapāda*) symbol and the omitted letter or letters were engraved in the margin. Letters wrongly engraved were occasionally erased by chiselling or the cancellation was indicated by one or more strokes. Often, the names of the author, the writer and the engraver of a record were mentioned. The dates of the epigraphs sometimes record the year (of the regnal reckoning of a ruler or of an era), season, month, day, fortnight, *tithi*, etc.²¹

MAURYAN INSCRIPTIONS : Besides a few controversial inscriptions mentioned earlier, the earliest evidences are unanimously regarded to be those of Aśoka, the only Mauryan ruler who got his instructions inscribed on rocks, pillars, caves and slabs for the first time. Interestingly, in the inscriptions of North India, the great Emperor has not mentioned his own name as 'Aśoka', but as *Devānāmapriya* or *Priyadarśīrājā*, which created a lot of confusion among the scholars. Even the genius like James Prinsep, who is also credited with the decipherment of ancient *Brāhmī* and *Kharoṣṭī* scripts, regarded this king to be Priyadarśī Tissa of Sri Lanka. The puzzle was solved with the discovery of Maski Rock Edict and other epigraphs from South India where the Emperor is mentioned as 'Devānāmapriya Aśoka'. In none of his inscriptions, Aśoka has given any era or date, but only the regnal year, like in the Lumbini Pillar Inscription he informs about his arrival at Lumbini in the 20th year of his coronation. Hence, ascertaining the exact date of a particular event is subjected to comparative studies. Aśoka's inscriptions are written in a very lucid style as if the king is directly interacting with his subject.

The inscriptions of Aśoka, for convenience, have been classified as Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, Cave Inscriptions, Pillar Edicts and Minor Pillar Edicts. Stone pillars of Chunar sandstone bearing inscriptions were specially prepared by Aśoka and installed at various locations, particularly at the public places where

maximum number of people could read and follow his instructions. A large number of finished and unfinished columns can still be seen in the quarry, some even bearing *Kharoṣṭī* letters. A theory came up that *Brāhmī* was developed by the scholars invited by Aśoka to his court. But this theory is merely a speculation as the Aśokan *Brāhmī* is a fully developed script with set features, read and understood by the common mass of his vast empire. It is devoid of long vowels while long ligatures served the purpose. This is because the language used by the Emperor was Pālī, a form of Prākṛta and the language of common people where long vowels were not required. However, these did exist during Aśoka's time and were used in Sanskrit.

It is interesting to note that the famous war of Kalinga, which proved to be the turning point in the life of Aśoka transforming him into a benevolent emperor, has been expunged from the set of his inscriptions engraved in the state of Orissa. This establishes the fact that the emperor, after the battle and embracement of Buddhism, was filled with grief and sympathy for the subject of this region and took great care not to remind the huge massacre of people in the fierce attack. The miseries and unfortunate outcome of the Kalinga war killing thousands of people are described in Aśoka's largest rock edict (13th) from Shahbazgarhi, which also informs about his declaration of refraining himself from further conquests but expecting good behaviour from the neighbouring countries. A few forest tribes involved in nefarious activities are also warned by the Emperor in this edict, which also mentions the names of several kingdoms and their ruling chiefs outside his empire, thus helping in fixing a historical chronology.

Another very interesting and significant information we derive from the inscriptions of Aśoka is that although the Emperor adopted Buddhism and did commendable job for its propagation in India and abroad, yet he is silent about the Eight-Fold Path, Middle Path and *Nirvāṇa* (salvation), the basic elements of Buddhist philosophy, in his inscriptions. Being a far-sighted ruler, Aśoka was well aware of the fact that if good habits are to be infused in his subjects, then he has to interact with them at par with their mental level, as high level philosophical thoughts and teachings would not be much effective. For this reason, the Emperor conceived his own 'Code of Conduct' for the common mass, which he called *Dhamma*. As known from the 5th Rock Edict, the emperor appointed *Dhamma-Mahāmātras* to

look after the welfare of people in their respective regions and motivate them to follow *Dhamma*, i.e. perform noble deeds as per instructions. Aśoka can also be credited with introducing the Five Year Plan in India as reflected from his 3rd Rock Edict, where we find that he assigned additional role to his officers like *Yuta* (Secretary), *Rājuka* (High Revenue Officer) and *Prādeśika* (Head of a State or Province) to go on tour every fifth year, besides attending to their normal duties for which they were appointed, and propagate *Dhamma* among the people so that they could become good citizens and there is no need to punish anybody. The 2nd Rock Edict reveals that Aśoka was not only concerned with the welfare and health of people but also of animals. He made arrangements for the treatment of both. For this, the medicinal plants were brought and planted aiming at curing humans and animals both, not only of his own empire, but also of neighbouring kingdoms to maintain harmonious relations. Some scholars even conjecture that both hospitals and veterinary clinics were established by him.

The 6th Rock Edict is important as it informs that Aśoka appointed *Prativedakas* (reporters) who were supposed to keep him informed about the problems of his subject round the clock. This shows that he strongly believed in the theory that 'King is the servant of his subject' and affected this change in the conventional routine of a king. The religious tolerance of this great Emperor is seen in the 7th Rock Edict where he made an appeal that a person belonging to any creed or sect is free to settle down at any place of his choice within his empire. Another new post created by Aśoka was that of *Strī-Dharmādhyakṣa* as known from his 12th Rock Edict, which aimed at dissemination of essence of religion among the ladies. Thus, from the informations gathered from the inscriptions of Aśoka, it can safely be inferred that his state of policy was of the kind of socio-religious policy and this laid emphasis on honouring the basic elements of human behaviour and religions, which are common and practical. Beside throwing ample light on the sincere efforts made by Aśoka for the welfare of his subject and propagation of *Dhamma*, these also reflect the psychology of an ambitious king who wants to ensure safety of his kingdom for long time to come by converting people's frame of mind so that the chances of any sort of revolt within his empire or attack from outside are minimized²².

ŚUNGA INSCRIPTIONS : Not many epigraphic records of the Śunga kings (187-

75 BC) have been recovered; hence, very little about them is known from inscriptions. However, there is no doubt that the reign of the Śuṅgas occupy a very important place in the history of ancient India as this dynasty revived the Brahmanical influence after its foundation by Puṣyamitra, who was responsible for the Mauryan dynasty to meet its end. It witnessed a revival in art and literature as well. The great grammarian Patañjali is believed to be a contemporary of Puṣyamitra. The Bharhut *Stūpa* is the most famous monument of this period. Agnimitra, son of Puṣyamitra is the hero of Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitram*. The Ayodhya Inscription informs about the two *Rājasūya-yajñas* (horse-sacrifices) performed by Puṣyamitra, which establishes him as a powerful king. The performance of two horse-sacrifices by him was probably meant as a proclamation of his double victory over the Greeks, and in any case it indicates that he was a powerful king and ruled over extensive dominions²³. The Besnagar Garuḍa Pillar Inscription reveals that the Greeks wanted to maintain friendly relations with the powerful Śuṅgas. It was inscribed by Heliodorus, the resident of Taxila and ambassador of the Greek king Antialcidas, who came to pay his visit at the court of Bhāgabhadra, identified as the fifth Śuṅga king. The Buddhist tradition is not complimentary to the Śuṅgas, probably because they were staunch *Brāhmaṇas* and also responsible for overthrowing Mauryans, the patrons of Buddhism. But erection of the famous *stūpa* at Bharhut during the reign of the Śuṅgas and the erection of two gateways under their patronage, as revealed by the Bharhut Inscription, establishes the fact that Śuṅgas followed the path of religious tolerance. Altogether ten Śuṅga kings from Puṣyamitra to Devabhūti ruled for a period of about 112 years.

KUṢĀṆA INSCRIPTIONS : The inscriptions of Kuṣāṇa rulers are interesting for the fact that they were probably recorded as propaganda device among the subject. The kings coming from the foreign lands were naturally keen to have firm grip on administration and also to win the heart of people by accomplishing some works of social welfare, which were known as *Iṣṭāpūrti*. The Kuṣāṇa kings thought themselves as scion of God and were aspirants to project themselves as worthy of worship. This is indicated by their epithet *Devaputra* in their contemporary inscriptions. It was for this reason that they set up one *Devakula* in Afghanistan at Surkhakotal and another at Mat near Mathura, from which their big size statues have been recovered. The contents of inscriptions are of much interest to know of prevailing

circumstances and relations between the masses and the ruling race. Although the Kuṣāṇa rulers were warriors and invaders, yet they did not interfere with the religious sentiments of people and maintained harmony in their vast empire. The inscription of the first year of Kaniṣka recovered at Rabatak, Afghanistan mentions those deities, which were popular in that region but the epigraphs in the Indian side of kingdom inform about the installation of Buddhist, Jaina, Hindu and folk gods and goddesses. Buddhism certainly enjoyed the royal patronage but other sects were also not discouraged. The Kuṣāṇa age is particularly known for the emergence of the deities of different sects and their mass-scale worship. A tall Pillar Inscription recovered from Ishapur in Mathura District informs about the performance of Vedic *yajña* for twelve days (*dvādaśrātra*) by a *Brāhmaṇa* of Bhāradvāja-*gotra* named Droṇala during the first year of the reign of Vāsiṣka. An important factor to be noted is that all the Kuṣāṇa rulers have used the Kaniṣka Era, which has generally been accepted by the scholars as AD 78. Another point to be noted is that in the Brahmanical records or events of the period, the language used is generally Sanskrit, while the other sects used hybrid Sanskrit or Prākṛta for their documents. However, the script in the northern India remained the same, i.e. *Brāhmī*, irrespective of the religion, creed or sect.

The Rabatak Inscription of the first year of the reign of Kaniṣka was recovered in 1993 from Pul-i-Khumri in Baghlan area of Kataghan near Surkhakotal in North Afghanistan, which is inscribed in Greek script and Bactrian (Middle Iranian language) called Bāhlika *Bhāṣā* in Indian texts. This extremely important inscription opened several knots of Kuṣāṇa genealogy as it clearly states that the name of the father of Kaniṣka was Vimakadphises, grandfather was Sadaśkana or Sadakṣaṇa, also called Takhtu and great-grandfather was Kujulakadphises. We are further informed that Kaniṣka ordered for preparing the images of some gods like Nanā, Ommā, Ahuramazdā, Mazduānā, Srosda, Komāro (Kumāra), Māsena (Mahāsena), Vizāgo (Viśākha), Narasāo and Miira (Mihira or Sūrya). At the same time, he also placed order for the statues of his three predecessors and his own. The idea must have been to promote the worship of Kuṣāṇa kings along with the images of deities by the people. The sanctuary in which the statues were installed was dedicated to Nanā. The epigraph also furnishes the details, which confirm that the Kuṣāṇa Empire was much vaster than conjectured by historians before 1993. It also informs that

Kaniṣka introduced a new era replacing the earlier Ārya era. The other change was that the Greek language was replaced by the Āryan or Bactrian language. India has been mentioned as 'Indio' in the epigraph.

Another important aspect of the society of ancient India was the existence of corpus fund and banking system. A corpus or endowment fund is set up for a noble cause and the interest of the same is used for running an organization. An inscription of Huiṣka of the year 24 of Kuṣāṇa period informs that a charitable trust (*Puṇyaśālā*) was established for the welfare of subjects. It is clearly stated here that out of the return of the interest of 1100 coins deposited with a guild (bank), the *Brāhmaṇas* were to be fed on each 14th day of *Śukla-pakṣa*. Besides, the poor and needy persons could also get eatables, green vegetables, salt, etc., which were kept ready on the date of *Puṇyaśālā*. Another important inscription of the first year of Vāsiṣka recorded on the pedestal of a Buddha image mentions Him as *Amitābha* Buddha. Before the discovery of this inscription in 1977, the scholars viewed that the Buddhist pantheon evolved in Central Asia after the 4th century AD. But with this inscription coming to light, they were forced to change their opinion that beside Buddha, the Buddhist pantheon also emerged in India and not outside, as this 2000 years old document gives the name of *Amitābha* Buddha. It is a fact that in spite of being foreigners, the Kuṣāṇas adopted and became a part of Indian Culture and contributed a lot in its development. This is also corroborated by the emergence of the two great schools of sculptural art, which flourished under their reign, viz. Mathurā and Gandhāra²⁴.

GUPTA INSCRIPTIONS : The term 'Golden Age' ascribed to the Gupta period (270-525 AD) is justified by the discovery of Bayana Hoard from Bharatpur District of Rajasthan containing a large number of gold coins of almost all the Gupta emperors and it is the biggest treasure-trove found till date. Although eighteen kings adorned the throne of the vast empire, but six of them are significant, viz. Śrīgupta, the founder; Candragupta-I, who married the Licchavī princess Kumāradevī and converted a small territory into a big Kingdom; Samudragupta, who expanded the same as Empire with the valour of his arms; Chandragupta-II, who consolidated the empire and brought peace and prosperity all over with his administrative skill; Kumāragupta-I, who exploited the peaceful environment handed over to him by his predecessor and promoted all types of performing and

visual arts, crafts, literature, etc.; and Skandagupta, who is especially appreciated for his bravery and military skill as he spent his whole life in successfully protecting the empire from outer attacks, keeping it intact and at the same time looking after the welfare of his subjects. The vast Gupta Empire after him speedily deteriorated and ultimately vanished due to weak successors.

By the Gupta period, the *Kharoṣṭī* script was practically out of use in northern India and *Brāhmī* was in vogue as Sanskrit gained ground and Prākṛta became obsolete. Thus, all the inscriptions of Gupta period are written in Sanskrit language and *Brāhmī* script. The script was continuously undergoing transformation after the Aśokan period. Ornamentation already started during the Śuṅga-Kuṣāṇa phase and the beautiful calligraphy in Gupta inscriptions bespeaks the conducive environment provided by the great emperors for the growth of art and literature. While previous dynasties used hybrid form of Sanskrit, the Gupta rulers used chaste Sanskrit and both prose and poetic language can be witnessed in their inscriptions. *Brāhmī*, with certain changes, acquired the name of *Siddhamatṛkā* in the post-Gupta era, which later came to be known as *Nāgarī* and finally it transformed into *Devanāgarī*, which we are familiar with today. The mystical *Śaṅkha-lipi*, profusely ornamented form of *Brāhmī*, also came in use during the period but was discontinued after the fall of Gupta Empire.

A unique feature of the inscriptions of the Gupta period is that most of these are dated, which often proved helpful in solving several knotty problems posed by literature and archaeology. The names of the kings appear in these with long epithets to denote their power and command. In addition to presenting the genealogy, a distinguishing feature of the Gupta inscriptions is that these also mention the names of ladies (queens), which was never done by any dynasty before. Women were held in high esteem during the period, which is also corroborated by the coins portraying the king and queen both along with their names. While stone, copperplates and coins record the events of the period, the famous rust-free Iron Pillar bearing inscription at Mehrauli, Delhi also reflects the advanced technology of metallurgy that the Guptas possessed. Some of the old epigraphic records mention two different years of the reign of the same king and this practice seems to have been followed by the Gupta emperors also. This can be seen in the Mathura Inscription of Candragupta-II in which beside the Gupta Era, his year of accession also occurs.

This was 61 in the family counting and year 5 of his own rule. This epigraph on the *Trīsūla* Pillar is a specimen of old Kuṣāṇa type palaeography in the Gupta reign. The contents are also significant for the study of Śaiva sects in the Mathura region. An interesting inscription from Mandasaura establishes that advertising for selling products was also practiced in ancient India. It mentions that a lady, howsoever beautiful she may be and wear ornaments, chew betel, but remains devoid of grace unless she wears the garments prepared by the weavers of Mandasaura. This inscription is recorded in the year 493 and 529 of *Mālava-saṁvat*, which is same as *Vikram-saṁvat* of 57 BC. This is also known as *Kṛta-saṁvat*. The first date falls in the reign of Kumāraguta-I and the second date belongs to his successors.

The famous Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta is responsible for establishing him as one of the all-time great emperors of ancient India. This inscription is recorded in *Brāhmī* script and the language is chaste Sanskrit in *campū* form, i.e. both prose and verse have been used. It is a long epigraph of thirty-two lines containing just three sentences. Fleet's idea was that it was inscribed posthumously, but important point is that the *Aśvamedha-yajña* performed by Samudragupta is not mentioned here, which means that it was prepared during his lifetime. This eulogy (*praśasti*) of Samudragupta is of immense importance for the reconstruction of history of the Gupta period as it mentions the names of all north and south Indian kings, who were defeated during Samudragupta's expedition. The names of the provinces of north are not given as people were already acquainted with, while those of south are given along with the names of respective rulers. This expedition of Samudragupta is called *Digvijaya* in the epigraph and he applied different policies, like *Dharma-vijaya*, *Lobha-vijaya* or *Asura-vijaya* to overcome or defeat the kings of various regions as per requirement of the empire. The importance of epigraphic records can be understood from one example. Rāmagupta, the sixth Gupta king was not accepted as a Gupta emperor at all by the historians until the three figures of Jaina *Tīrthaṅkaras* were unearthed from Vidisha where the inscriptions record him as *Mahārājadhīrāja Śrī Rāmagupta*.

The Gupta gold coins are not just coins, but these are the authentic source of understanding the Gupta period society, as these also let us know about the garments, hairstyles, weapons, ornaments, musical instruments, metallurgy, etc. beside the faith and interests of the emperors. While the portraits on the coins of previous

Kuṣāṇas are static, those on Guptas are full of movement, which reflects the busy and dynamic society engaged in various activities. Some historians interpret the word *divam* found on the Gupta coins as posthumous, but actually it denotes the good deeds of the emperors, which raised them to the position of divinity among the common people. Notably, the figures of the Gupta rulers on their coins do not resemble with each other and this suggests that the artists took precaution in projecting the exact effigy of the ruler, thus confirming that the art of portraiture had already developed during the period. Gupta period coins are significant for various reasons as on one hand these reflect the prosperity and flourishing trade and on the other one can view the social pattern of that approach. These coins may or may not have functioned as currency of the age as the variety available suggest the aptitude of the ruler and also an occasion on which these were issued. While their trade and commercial utility cannot be denied in the urban centres, the rural gentry generally depended on the barter-system²⁵.

CONCLUSION : Thus, the study of inscriptions has a special significance for the ancient Indian history. No doubt India contributed to the civilization of the world in all periods of history; but her more significant contributions to world culture were made in the early period. Unfortunately, unlike Greece, Rome and China, ancient India has no history, because the Indians of antiquity did not care to leave written accounts of all their achievements. Ancient India did not produce a Herodotus, Thucydides or Tacitus to leave for posterity a genuine and comprehensive history of the achievements of her sons. Therefore, the information gathered from various sources, such as the literary, epigraphic, numismatic, artistic, archaeological and monumental records, has to be utilized to reconstruct this lost history of the most glorious days of India. Of all such sources for the reconstruction of early Indian history, epigraphic records are the most important, for they provided material for the major part of what we now know about the achievements of the Indians of old²⁶. Although the study of ancient and obscure scripts and inscriptions is regarded to be a dry subject, but this brief journey through the early epigraphic records of India does establish that it not only makes an interesting study but it is also a necessity to make comprehensive study of the subject for closely viewing, understanding, experiencing and appreciating our glorious past and apply this knowledge to make our future better.

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