

Importance of Inscriptions in the Reconstruction of History

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Epigraphs have been found on rocks pillars, caves, stone-statues, stone-slabs, copper plates, bronze-statues, coins, seals etc. It is because they were written on long lasting materials that they have survived. Those inscriptions which were written on perishable material have been lost for ever. The earliest epigraphs in India are in Harappan script, which despite many attempts and some claims, still remains undeciphered and as such nothing can be said about their contents, though some letters might have been used as prefixes or suffixes, and the evidence of a sherd from Kalibangan, an important Harappan site in Rajasthan, suggests that the direction of writing was from right to left.

After Harappan script the earliest Indian script is Brāhmī. This was extensively used in India and from this Devanāgarī has evolved. The credit for deciphering early Brāhmī goes to James Prinsep in whose memory this lecture is being delivered. He observed that the small inscriptions on Sanchi railings had the two letters common at the end. He guessed the preceeding letters should be names and these two common letters should be '*dānam*', which meaning 'gift' of because the most common word for gift in Sanskrit and also Prākṛt is *dāna*, so he read these letters as *dānam*. He could rightly guess not only the two letters *d* and *n* but also application of *ā* - *mātrā* to the letters as also that of *anusvāra*. Later, with the help of Indo-Greek coins bearing the names and titles of kings in Greek on one side and Brāhmī on other side, he was able to identify all the alphabets of Brāhmī, the way *mātrās* were added to the letters and the conjoint letters written. But for Prinsep's decipherment the early Brāhmī would have, like Harappan script, remained a sealed book.

In this lecture we would briefly discuss the importance of a few royal inscriptions - some inscriptions of Aśoka, the Hathigumphā inscription of Khāravela, the Nasik inscription detailing achievements of Gautamīputra Sātakarṇi, the Junagarh inscription of Rudradāman, the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, the Mehrauli Pillar Inscription of Candragupta, the Mandasor Inscription of Kumāragupta and the Junagarh Inscription of Skandagupta.

Aśoka whose rule may be placed between 272 and 232 B.C. has left us a number

of inscriptions. In the Thirteenth Rock Edict he mentioned his conquest of Kalinga in which one lakh people died, one and a half lakh people were made captive and many others died afterwards. Instead of becoming happy over the victory, he became repentant over the bloodshed it caused and made a promise never to wage war in future. He thought of conquering the heart of the people by doing works of public welfare, such as planting trees, digging wells, and making provision for medical treatment for men and animals. He exhorted people to look after parents, respect teachers, give charity to Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas, and be kind to slaves and servants. He instructed his officials to tour and look after the welfare of the people and their material and moral upliftment. He infact created a new cadre of ministers called *Dharma-mahāmātras* for this purpose.

The Twelfth Rock Edict of Aśoka gives an idea how much Aśoka was concerned about maintaining religious harmony. He emphasizes on promotion of the essentials (*Sāraṇaḍhi*) and one should guard his speech and should not without proper occasion praise one's own sect and blame other sects. By honouring other sects one honours his own sect and by blaming other sects, harms his own sect. Concord alone is good (*samavāya eva sādhu*). People should listen to the tenets of different religions as all of them contain noble ideas. Rock Edict XIII conveys that he made provisions of conveying the message of *dhamma* not only in his own kingdom but also in the territories of Antiochus Theos of Syria, Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt, Antigonos Gonatus of Macedon, Megas of Cyrene and Alexander of Epirus. It is known that they all were alive in 255 B.C. This helps in fixing the date of the Rock Edict, XIII, and is the most important evidence for the date of Aśoka.

We now discuss the Hathigumphā inscription of King Khāravela of Kalinga. The epigraph begins with salutations to the Arhats and Siddhas indicating that Khāravela was a Jaina. It talks of his family, his early education, his serving as *yūvarāja* for nine years, and consecration as king in his 25th year. The epigraph records the achievements of Khāravela, year by year, from the first to the thirteenth year. In the first year he got repaired the ramparts and gateways which had been damaged by the cyclone. In the second year he sent army against king Sātakarnī. In the third year, well versed in music as he was, he arranged dance and musicshows for the recreation of his subjects. In the fifth year he completed the canal which had been inaugurated by a Nanda king. In the eighth year he attacked Gorathagiri, because of which the *yavana* king Dimita (i.e. Demetrius) fled to Mathura. In the twelfth year he made the Magadha king Bahasatimitra bow at his feet and

brought back to Kalinga a Jaina image which had been taken from there. It will be seen that the inscription refers to three kings as contemporaries of Khāravela, viz. Bahasatimitra, Demetrius and Sātakarṇī. So if the date of one is fixed the others have to be placed in the same period. It is generally believed that Bahasatimitra should be identified with the king of that name known from Pabhosa inscription of c. 1st century B.C. (and should not be identified with Puṣyamitra Śuṅga as proposed by K.P. Jayaswal), Demetrius seems to be the second king of that name (rather than Demetrius I who flourished in the second century B.C.) and Sātakarṇī is identified with Sātakarṇī I of the Sātavāhana dynasty. This plank of contemporaneity of these kings in c. 1st century B.C., is of great help in dating other kings in relation to them.

The Nasik inscription of the time of Vāsiṣṭhīputra Pulumāvī gives valuable information about his father, Gautamīputra Sātakarṇī a charming personality, of strong physique, learned, religious-minded, skilled in martial arts and devoted to his mother. He is credited with destroying the Kṣaharāta family, and defeating the Śakas, Yavanas and the Parthians. The king of Kṣaharāta family was Nahapāna. He is the last known king of his family which suggests that the rule of his family ended with him. It is significant that a large number of Nahapāna's coins have been restruck by Gautamīputra Sātakarṇī, which indicates that Gautamīputra after killing Nahapāna captured his treasury and restruck his coins. Thus epigraphic and numismatic source complement each other.

The Junagarh inscription of Rudradāman dated Śaka 78 (= 150 A.D.) is the first *praśasti* of a king in Sanskrit. It may be pointed out that the inscriptions of Aśoka, the Hathigumpha inscription of Khāravela and the Nasik inscription dealing Gautamīputra Sātakarṇī's achievements were all in Prākṛta. In fact, all epigraphs before first century B.C. are in Prākṛta. The epigraph gives genealogy from Yasāmatika to Rudradāman, early education of Rudradāman, his taste for good poetry and music, his far reaching conquests and his many noble qualities. The area mentioned under his rule includes some territories which the Nasik inscription of Pulumāvī includes within the kingdom of his father, and which therefore were conquered from the Sātavāhanas. The inscription says Rudradāman defeated powerful Yaudheyas, who were *avidheya* (difficult to be managed). He is said to have defeated twice Sātakarṇī, the lord of Deccan (which is expressed as *Dakṣiṇāpathapatesātakarṇer - dvirapī nirvyājama - vajilyavajitya*), but did not kill him because of non-distant (*avidūra*) relationship. From

a Kanheri inscription, it appears that Rudradāman's daughter was married to Vāsiṣṭhīputra Sri-Sātakarṇī. Though himself a Śaka, outside the pale of four *varṇas*, the epigraph says he was shelter for all the *varṇas*, was garlanded in *svayaṁvaras* by princesses (*narendra - kanyā - prāpta - mālya dāmnā*) The inscription throws light on the history of the Sudarśana dam. It says the dam was got constructed by governor Vaiśya Puṣyagupta during the rule of Candragupta Maurya, and canals were dug from it by governor *yavanarāja* Tuśāspha during the reign of Aśoka Maurya. Candragupta Maurya ruled in the last quarter of the fourth century B.C. and the Junagarh inscription is dated 150 A.D., there being a gap of about 450 years between the two. Perhaps, there were records of it in the provincial headquarters. The dam burst during Rudradāman's time and his governor, Parthian Suviśākṣa repaired it in record time and without levying any taxes for it. It is significant that Aśoka chose Tuśāspha, a foreigner, probably an Iranian, as the name shows, for governing Surāṣṭra, and Śaka king chose a Parthian for the same office.

The Prayāga *praśasti* was composed by Hariṣeṇa, a *sāndhivigrahika*, *mahādaṇḍanāyaka*, *kumārāmātya* and *khādyatapakika*. The *praśasti* is known for the chaste and elegant Sanskrit as also for compact record of Samudragupta's achievements in different fields and as a document of historical geography. The fourth verse refers to the selection of Samudragupta by his father in full Assembly. This made the members happy, but the faces of princes who were claimants to the throne became pale (*mlāna*). The king charged with emotion told Samudragupta 'to rule the earth' (*pāhyevamurvīm*). Besides having a capable prince, he had the advantage of being born of the Licchavi princess, Kumāradevī, as it was because of her marriage to Candragupta I that Gupta-Licchavi kingdoms were amalgamated. The epigraph says in musical skill (*gāndharvalalita*) he outclassed Tumburu and Nārada. He is said to have ended the rivalry between Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī. His poetry was inspiration to, poets, and he earned by his works the title 'king of poets' (*kavirāja*). His love for music is fully corroborated by his coin - type showing him in scanty dress playing on *vīṇā*.

The Prayāga *praśasti* mentions his conquests of nine kings of Āryāvarta and twelve kings of Dakṣiṇāpatha. What is significant is that the names of all these kings have been given and in the case of Dakṣiṇāpatha also their territories. Not only that, it has also been stated that the Āryāvarta kings were completely uprooted (*prasabhoddharāṇa*), while the captured kings of Dakṣiṇāpatha were freed and reinstated

after they accepted his suzerainty. Samudragupta did so as he realized that it would be difficult to have efficient direct control. Thus he adopted the policy of *asura-vijaya* in the case of the Āryāvarta kings, and that of *dharma-vijaya* in the case of Dakṣiṇāpatha kings. Then are mentioned some tribal republics, frontier kings and also foreign powers and the policy adopted towards them. It appears from the epigraph that being impressed by the might of the Gupta ruler, these powers voluntarily entered into subordinate alliance with him and saved themselves from his wrath. The clear and categorical mention of kings and powers makes it different from vague statements in some epigraphs, and therefore more authentic than such other ones.

The inscription also gives idea of the divinity of king. It says that he was man only in performing worldly deeds (like *avatāra*), he was god on the earth. It compares him with Kubera, Varuṇa, Indra and Yama, and mentions him as one who is there for the upliftment of good men and destruction of the wicked and is *acintya Puruṣa*. The non-mention of the performance of *aśvamedha* in the epigraph, which is attested to by epigraphs of his successors and his *aśvamedha* - type of coins, show that it was performed after the engraving of the epigraph. The epigraph was written during his life-time, and not after his death as supposed by Fleet, who mistakenly interpreted the text to mean Samudragupta had gone to heaven, whereas the correct interpretation shows that it refers to his fame going to heaven.

The Mehrauli Pillar inscription of Candragupta is in Gupta script. About Candragupta it is stated that he was dead. He defeated confederation of kings in Bengal and crossing Sindhu conquered Vāhlikas the southern sea was fragrant with his prowess, he ruled for long time, was a Vaiṣṇava and erected flag staff for Viṣṇu or Viṣṇupada. Candragupta has been variously identified with Candragupta Maurya, Candragupta-Kaṇiṣka, Nāga Sadācandra or Candrāmśa, Candravarman of the Susuma inscription, Candragupta I, Candragupta II, Samudragupta, a king of Khaḍga dynasty. It is unbelievable that a Gupta king would have engraved a *praśasti* for Candragupta Maurya. The name Candragupta-Kaṇiṣka is met within only one text, in others it is only Kaṇiṣka, Kaṇiṣka's rule began in the first century C.E., but the inscription was recorded in the Gupta period. The conquests of Samudragupta clearly show that his father's kingdom was relatively small. Sadācandra, Candrāmśa, Candravarman of Susuma inscription were too small to be identified with king Candragupta. As regards Samudragupta, even though he was a great conqueror his name was not Candragupta and on that account should be ruled out. The most plausible identification is Candragupta II. The conquests mentioned in the Mehrauli

inscription is the extension of the territory under Samudragupta. His epithet *paramabhāgavata* shows that he was a devout Vaiṣṇava, which is also corroborated by his *cakra-vikrama* type of coins in which he is shown receiving *prasāda* from *cakra-puruṣa* in human form.

The Mandasor inscription of Kumāragupta describes the earth ruled by him as whose pendulous marriage-string is the verge of the four oceans; whose large breasts are (the mountains) Sumeru and Kailāsa, (and) whose laughter is the fullblown flowers showered forth from the borders or the wood.

Catus-samudr-ān[t]a - vilola mekhalām

Sumeru-Kailāsa-br̥hat-payodharām |

Van-ānta-vānta-sphuṭa-puṣpa-hāsinīm

Kumāragupte pṛthivīm praśāsati ||

The epigraph mentions the migration of a silk-weavers guild from Lāṭa to Mandasor. The surroundings in Lāṭa have been praised as with trees bowed with the weight of flowers, with temples, assembly halls and monasteries (*kusuma-bharantataruvara - devakula - sabhā vihāra*). It is not stated as to why the guild decided to migrate *en masse*. But it appears that due to some reasons the most profitable trade with Rome suffered a set back. Indian cloth was quite popular in Rome and ladies wearing dress made of it, in seven - folds, still faced criticism for revealing their body parts. Pliny, the Roman senator, warned that if Romans go on buying costly luxury items from India, it (Rome) will one day turn pauper. The guild felt it would be better to tap inland market. The guild continued to flourish and built a magnificent sun temple in 436 C.E., and 36 years after, when it was damaged they repaired it as well. The guild claims that women, though young, beautiful and decked with ornaments did not deem themselves attractive enough to visit their lovers unless they wore dress made of its manufactured cloth.

The Junagarh inscription of Skandagupta praises Skandagupta for his noble qualities and his defeat of the *Nāgas* and *mlecchas* (i.e. Hūṇas). It tells us that Skandagupta after appointing the governors in all the provinces pondered for several days regarding the appointment of governor for the province of Surāṣṭra. He thought who is intelligent, modest, wise, truthful, straightforward, loyal, honest, capable both in the acquisition of wealth and also in the preservation of it, when acquired, and further

in causing the increase of it, when protected, (and able) to dispense it on worthy objects, when it has been increased.

*Nyāyārjane = rthasya ca kaḥ samarthah
syād = arjitasya = āpy = atha rakṣaṇe ca ।
Gopāyitasya = āpi [ca] vṛddhi - hetau
vṛddhasya pātra - pratipādanāya ॥*

Skandagupta found these qualities in Paṇḍadatta and appointed him as governor and became relieved. Paṇḍadatta after scanning the merits of eligible officials for the office of head of Girinagara city, appointed his won son, Cakrapālita, in that office. The Sudarśana dam, which had been damaged and repaired during the reign of Rudradāman in 150 C.E. got burst again in the reign of Skandagupta and in 455 C.E. was repaired by Cakrapālita who also got a temple of Viṣṇu built and enshrined his image.

There are many other *praśastis* but I would, for lack of time, not discuss them. But before I close I may discuss a few other aspects on inscriptions. In some cases there is difference of opinion regarding the interpretations of the evidence. In his Mandasor inscription of 532 C.E., Yaśodharman is stated to have defeated the Hūṇa tyrant, Mihirakula and also conquered regions upto Brahmaputra, and his territories included areas which were not under the Guptas, But there is evidence to show that Gupta rule continued in parts of Magadha and Bengal even in 543 and after. So either the Mandasor inscription gives exaggerated account of Yaśodharman's achievements or the Guptas accepted his suzerainty for a while and again became independent. Several Cālukya kings claim victory over their contemporary Pallava kings while the Pallava kings do the same in respect of their contemporary Cālukya kings. It becomes difficult to decide who conquered whom, and even whether the war at all took place. But the finding of an inscription of Cālukya Vikramāditya on a temple at Kāñcī, the capital of the Pallavas is a definite evidence that he had captured the Pallava city. Similarly, the inscription of Pallava Narasimhavarman on a rock in the Cālukya capital Badamī may be taken as a positive proof of the victory of the Pallava ruler over Cālukya king. These conclusions have to be accepted as nobody can say that the temple or the rock has been transported from outside; they certainly existed there, where they presently are. This cannot be said about pillars bearing inscriptions, as in a few cases there are definite evidences for their having been transported from one place to another. It is well known

that Firuz Shah Tughlaq brought two pillars to Delhi, one from Topra and another from Meerut.

We have sealings of the Imperial Gupta kings, Maukharī kings, Kāmarūpa king Bhāskaravarman, Puṣpabhūti king, Harṣavardhana and many other kings of different dynasties from Nalanda, a great centre of religion and learning. While Nalanda would have been within the kingdom of the Guptas and Harṣa, it does not seem to form part of the territories of Bhāskaravarman. Kings of different dynasties corresponded with this great Centre of learning and hence their seals have been found there. They cannot necessarily be taken as proof of its being within their kingdom.

Samudragupta and his grandson Kumāragupta I issued *Aśvamedha* and *Vīṇavādaka* types of coins while in the case of Samudragupta, there is epigraphic corroboration for his performance of *aśvamedha* and musical talent, there is no such corroboration in the case of Kumāragupta. So while it is possible that Kumāragupta also performed *aśvamedha* and he too was a good *vīṇā* player, it could as well be argued that he merely imitated the coins of his grandfather, and neither performed *aśvamedha*, nor was he a *vīṇā* player.

From the language and script of the inscriptions it can be understood in which area and in which period which language and script was in use. Aśoka's inscriptions from Kalsi in the north to Mysore area in the south and from Surāṣṭra in the west to Magadha in the east have been written in Prākṛta language and in Brāhmī script. The Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra rock edicts of Aśoka, both now in Pakistan, are in Prākṛta language and Kharoṣṭī script. Kharoṣṭī was confined to north western India, and its use was discontinued in India from about 300 C.E., though it continued to be used for some time more in Central Asia. The Shar - I - Kuna Minor Rock Edict (Kandhara) is in Greek and Aramaic scripts. Obviously, in that area people were more conversant with these scripts in Aśoka's time. But it is Brāhmī which has been most extensively used in ancient India, and in its evolved form, Devanāgarī, is still in use. It has been possible to read and interpret Brāhmī inscriptions because the key for decipherment of letters was discovered by James Prinsep. As Champollion is known for deciphering Hieroglyphic script of Egypt, and as Rawlinson for early Persian and Babylonian scripts, Prinsep is known for decipherment of early Brāhmī script. I pay homage to his memory.

