

# Indian Epigraphy and its influence on Cambodia

បារាំង និងឥទ្ធិពលឥណ្ឌាទៅលើប្រទេសកម្ពុជា

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ដោយ បណ្ឌិត សុភាព ហ៊ុនធីយ៉ា

Dr. D.C. Sircar writes "Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions, and 'inscription' 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 used for incising inscriptions."<sup>1</sup> By and large, it is considered all over the world that, the inscriptions are the most authentic sources in reconstructing the history of the past. India is very rich in the domain of epigraphy and especially south India excels the north.

Southern India was ruled by the Kadamba, Cālukya of both Bādāmi and Kalyāṇa, Gaṅga kings from Talakāṇḍu, Rāṣṭrakūṭa and Hoysala in Kārṇāṭaka while Tāmīl-nāḍu was under the sway of Pallava, Cola and Pāṇḍya rulers. They ruled between the fourth and the twelfth centuries. There were constant military interactions between them. While Kadamba, Cālukya kings of Bādāmi, and Gaṅga kings fought with Pallava of Kāñci, their successors Rāṣṭrakūṭa, Cālukya of Kalyāṇa and Hoysala kings had to face military hostilities of Coḷa of Tāñjāvūr. Finally, the last Coḷa monarch was overthrown by Hoysala king Someśvara. The aim of this article is not to deal with the political history of these dynasties but to examine the script of their inscriptions, their style of calligraphy and to a certain extent the style of texts too.

It is well proved by the scholars of yore that India owes its writing to Aśokan Brāhmī script. In the 3rd century B.C. King Aśoka after embracing Buddhism, to promulgate its ideals, issued the edicts and had them engraved on stones, rocks all over India for the sake of educating common people. He sent missionaries outside India. As a result Buddhism spread and flourished outside India too. Along with Buddhism, the art of writing also went abroad.

North Indian languages belong to the Indo-Aryan group while the South Indian languages are called Dravidian. North Indian languages are derived from Sanskrit while the origin of the South Indian languages is still discussed. Irrespective of the language of inscriptions, the script used to be common, that is Brāhmī script. The scripts of all Indian languages are derived from the same Brāhmī script of Aśokan edicts. Historians have not yet been able to discover what kind of writing was existing in India prior to the edicts of Aśoka. What must have been the origin of Brāhmī is also a subject of discussion but without conclusion. It is a well established fact that Brāhmī script is at the

origin of Indian scripts. Starting from this Brāhmī in the 3rd century B.C. how the art of epigraphy developed in the south and its influence on Cambodian inscriptions is the main theme of this article.

In the beginning, for the better functioning of the realm, the society was divided into four classes called *varṇa*. This division was effected with respect to the profession that they were exercising. If the intellectual activities were reserved to the class of brāhmins, protection of the society was the responsibility of the ruling class called *kṣatriya*, and financing all these activities was the duty of the merchant class named *vaiśya*. Finally comes the class of *śūdra* who were in the service of all the above mentioned three classes. Gradually the rules became rigid and pertaining to any class became hereditary i.e. the son of a brāhmin will be brāhmin, the son of a *kṣatriya* became *kṣatriya* and so on. However, one could exercise others' professions too. In history there are plenty of documents which mention brāhmins leading the army to the battlefields as army chiefs. Similarly, non-brāhmins as authors of literary works are also innumerable. Amongst such writers were the poets who drafted the texts of epigraphs in excellent poetry. This evidence of epigraphical poetry goes to prove that the intellectual activities were not monopolised by the brāhmin class. This statement needs more clarification.

The study of Veda and its allied subjects was the special privilege of the brāhmins but, however, the study of literature was not forbidden to others. Bilhaṇa, who came all the way from Kāśmīr to Kārṇāṭaka to the court of Cālukya King Vikramāditya VI, mentions in his *Vikramāṅkadevacarita* that the subjects of King Vikramāditya were so cultured that even women were well-versed in *prākṛta*. This statement is not baseless because in many inscriptions some verses are composed in *prākṛta*. The alphabetisation was allowed to the other classes of people too and for their information sake charts were engraved on stone stelae. Besides, other materials such as copper plates, silver plates, rarely golden plates and sometime wooden slabs were also used for engraving charts.

As temples were playing the role of banks, libraries, art centres and archives, by and large inscriptions were preserved there. They were the first places for the preservation of inscriptions. A second place, sometimes, was on the bank of tanks to commemorate the event of its excavation. Stone slabs containing other events were installed by

By going through the texts of these inscriptions, the reader realises that most of the composers of these charts were non-brāhmins but, nonetheless, their works are on a par with any Sanskrit or local literary pieces. Some of the poets of these inscriptions were so skillful and talented that often they excelled even the great poets. That is the reason why the “epigraphic poems” are classified as *alpakāvya* or small poetical work. Names like Kalideva paṇḍita,<sup>5</sup> Abhinava Pampa,<sup>6</sup> Kalya,<sup>7</sup> Subba,<sup>8</sup> Mēvaṇa,<sup>9</sup> Madhura,<sup>10</sup> etc. were non-brāhmins but their poetry is more than excellent. Special mention may be made of Kalya, the author of Haralahalli inscription.<sup>11</sup>

Now comes the question “why the inscriptions were formed of double components?” The reason is that the poetry is more elegant than the prose though the latter is easier to understand than the former. To eulogise the kings, generous benefactors etc., poetry suits better than prose. Besides, South Indian languages are influenced by Sanskrit and have largely borrowed Sanskrit words. So the compositions with these loan words appear more refined and savoury than if they were written merely in the local language.

Also we should bear in mind that Sanskrit is a very rich language and the same word may convey different meanings. This characteristic of Sanskrit vocabulary comes handy when punning and enhances the beauty of the poetry. Sanskrit words are so commonly used in Indian languages that sometimes, in local contexts, meanings have been changed, e.g. “*ājānubāhu*” in Sanskrit means “he who has long hands going down to the knees;” but in Kannaḍa “*ājānubāhu*” means “he who has strong arms, a man who possesses a tall and strong body.” Owing to this change in the connotation of words, Sanskrit was amply employed in local inscriptions.

A more noteworthy point is that the texts of these inscriptions could be set to tunes and sung, because of their composition in poetry. It is well known from antiquity that the music is more impressive of devotion than reading a simple text in prose. Texts were set to music because singing was the best vehicle to awaken patriotism, respect towards monarchy and devotion to the Almighty. Prose can be read by all. But poetry and its tunes linger longer in the minds of listeners. Also singing the texts helps the spread of expressions. That may be the reason why many a times the same expressions are found in a number of inscriptions though the composers belonged to different centuries, living in different parts of the empire.

To cite an example : the ruling king is told to be superior to the *kalpavṛkṣa* wish-granting tree, the *kāmadhenu* wish-granting cow and the *sparsāmaṇi* or *puruṣaśīlā* philosophers’ stone. The king is superior to these animate and inanimate things because with them wishes are realised on request, whereas the king invites, honours the deserving

subjects and gives grants to needy persons.<sup>12</sup> Owing to this great difference the king belongs to a superior class whereas the other three belong to flora and fauna species. This same expression of highlighting the qualities of kings occurs in many inscriptions in Kannaḍa, in different regions of Karnāṭaka during different periods.

In Cambodia, earlier charts were issued entirely in Sanskrit following the same pattern as in Indian charts. Gradually, there occurred a change and bilingual charts began to be issued. Like in Karnāṭaka, the first part, i.e. a *praśasti* in an eloquent Sanskrit poetry and the purport, date and details of the donation are in the local language, i.e. Khmer. With regard to the style of texts of inscriptions and their palaeography etc., I have nothing more to say than what my predecessors, great stalwarts of yore, R.C. Majumdar and D.C. Sircar, have already written exhaustively on the topic. However, I shall quote a few remarks made by R.C. Majumdar in his book *Inscriptions of Kambuja* in The Asiatic Society Monograph Series, Vol. VIII, (The Asiatic Society, 1, Park Street, Calcutta -16, 1953): “It will suffice here to state that Indian scripts were adopted in Cambodia, but they were developed, on the soil and underwent modifications very much in the same way as in different parts of India.” Further he adds: “Another peculiarity which is fairly constant is the substitution of ṇ for ṁ.”<sup>13</sup> He continues: “These inscriptions prove how thoroughly Indian culture and civilisation, in all its aspects, was imbibed in Kambuja.”<sup>14</sup>

There is an interesting article on “Cambodian Inscriptions” in *Viśvakośa* in Kannaḍa (Mysore University, 1973, vol. III, p. 541). Here the author of the S. Bhattachar S. V. S. writes: “Inscriptions issued between the middle of the sixth century and eighth century in style and script can be compared with the texts of those of Pallava and Bādāmi Cālukya inscriptions, for example Kedei Ang Chumnik inscriptions.”<sup>15</sup> It is really regrettable that no Indian epigraphist has shown so far an inclination to go deeper into this subject.

I have a strong feeling that there is a close affinity between Cambodian scripts and inscriptions from Karnāṭaka. Though the script was common during the regnal period of Pallava-s in Tamilnāḍu and Cālukya-s in Bādāmi, in subsequent centuries scripts underwent changes in both the regions. Karnāṭaka maintained the system of writing one below the other one when a letter is doubled or a consonant is found between another consonant and a vowel. For example *candra* ಚಂದ್ರ “the moon.” In Tamil all the letters are written one by the side of the other whereas in modern Kannaḍa, like in the old tradition, the sign for *r* ೞ is written below *d* ದ. Thus we have *dra* ದ್ರ. In the inscriptions *Candra* is written *ndra* ನ್ದ್ರ. Later on not only *n* but all nasal sounds were replaced by an *anusvāra* when they occurred before a consonant.

With regard to the reckoning of the Śaka era

the side of the main one if the lake was much frequented by the inhabitants of other agglomerations, pilgrims and travellers of all kinds. By and large, water pools were serving the purpose of best resting places for voyagers. A third place where inscriptions are found, is cemeteries or burning grounds. When a hero was killed on a battlefield, it was customary that his wife or wives commit the rite of *sati*. Many a times memorial stones were set up with a text and an illustration of the war scene exalting the heroism of the warrior, his wife or wives following him on his funeral pyre by performing the rite of *sati*. Often, we see on stone stelae, one or many female figures with their right hand raised and fingers pointing to the sky. Such memorial stones of *sati* are also countless in Karnāṭaka.

In the domain of epigraphy, India is the fifth country in the world. Aśoka's royal edicts are written in Brāhmī script and the language is *prākṛta*. These royal edicts are found all over India. In the course of time, every region began to develop its script, keeping Brāhmī as the starting point. In the south, whether it is Kadamba, Pallava, Gaṅga or Cālukya of Bādāmi period, the script was almost alike with a few variations in its incising and ornamentation.

The intention of issuing royal edicts or charts and having them engraved was to educate the public, keep the people acquainted with current matters, events, actions of great merits etc. in the language and the script of that kingdom. Aśoka's edicts are in Brāhmī script and in *prākṛta* language because they were common to the whole of India then. With regard to later inscriptions i.e. royal charts, issued after Aśoka, they were in Sanskrit. Because by now, Sanskrit was more popular than Prākṛta and became an elegant tool to express beautiful ideas. To cite a couple of examples: the Tālagunda inscription and Pulikeśin II's inscription at Aihole.<sup>2</sup> The whole texts of these epigraphs, from the beginning to the end, are in high class Sanskrit poetry. Especially the second inscription, better known as Ravikīrti's inscription from Aihole, starts with a homage to Jina and then switches over to the eulogy of the dynasty of the ruling monarchs.

Though the main point of the chart is that Ravikīrti, "the poet composer of the text of the chart" founded the temple of the Jaina prophet, on which the inscription was engraved, he uses the occasion to furnish an eulogistic account (*praśasti*) of the history of the Cālukya family, and especially of the exploits of Pulikeśin II.<sup>3</sup> The date of the inscription is Śaka 556, which corresponds to A.D. 634-635.

In the course of centuries, i. e. after Pulikeśin II, there came a change in the practice of issuing royal charts only and entirely in Sanskrit. By the eighth century poetical works in Kannaḍa began to appear and these earlier literary works were written on the model of Sanskrit poetry. Similarly, epigraphic texts of charts also took a different shape.

Sanskrit poetry, in Karnāṭaka was replaced by equally beautiful *kāvya* in Kannaḍa.

The body of the charts used to be composed of the following parts. When it is a grant made in favour of a temple or an excavation of a tank, the chart starts with a salutation to Śiva followed by a prayer to the selected deity of the donor. Then the text explains the purpose of the grant, after relating events that followed the construction of the worlds by the Almighty, the place of Bhārata (India) and the location of the Karnāṭaka empire in the country. Then comes the exact location of that particular monument in the empire. After the geographical account the text proceeds to relate the history of the ruling family highlighting the great exploits of the ruling monarch, the philanthropist's magnanimity etc. The first part of the text is composed in beautiful contemporaneous Kannaḍa poetry interlaced with Sanskrit verses, citations from Vedas, Purāṇa-s (mythologies) and allied texts. Further the text proceeds to specify the auspicious date when that particular pious act was performed.

By and large, after the date, the text, in prose, gives the details of the donation. If it is a field, then its four limits, workers in the fields and the revenue shares are mentioned. If it is about the maintenance of the temple, then it enumerates different *ācārya*-s or officials and their specific duties in the service of the temple. Special mention is made of *devadāsī* and *devadāsa* i.e. female and male servants, viz. dancers, musicians and other servants such as gardeners and persons in charge of plucking flowers, fasten them as garlands and bouquets for the deity's decoration, cooks to prepare food for offerings to the god, persons to help the main cook, person in charge of supplying fire-wood to the kitchens etc., who were employed in different services of the temple. In brief, the temple was a centre for employment, and these employees were all called *devadāsī* and *devadāsa* meaning servants of god and not slaves.<sup>4</sup> The inscription ends with benedictory and imprecatory verses in Sanskrit, showing merits and demerits of respecting or disrespecting the clauses of the grant.

At the end come the names of the composer of the chart, the reader of it. There were persons specialised in reading texts and they were called *oduvavaru* in Kannaḍa and *voduvarin* in Tamil. Sometimes the person who composed the text was a reader too. The writer was a person whose duty was to write the text on stone slabs either with chalk or ink. There are examples that many a times, the poet himself used to be the composer, reader and writer of the text on the stela. Then the inscription ends with the name of the professional stone sculptor-engraver, who would incise the letters as they were traced on the stone to make the chart literally *aṅśara* i.e. never vanishing. Often, it is noticed that the *kalkuṭṭiga* stone sculptor used to be the main architect of temples too. In that case he was called *sūtradhāra* i.e. he holds *sūtra* the thick thread or the fine cord.

Karnāṭaka was the first to introduce it. “The earliest epigraphic records that connect this era explicitly with the Śakas belong to the Cālukyas of Badāmi.”<sup>16</sup> Sircar further writes: “During the age of Cālukyas, the use of the era spread, apparently from the said region, to the lands beyond the bay of Bengal, the earliest inscriptions of Indo-China and Indonesia dated in this era belong to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.”<sup>17</sup>

With regard to numerals the first four numbers are written 1 ०, 2 २, 3 ३, 4 ४. These numerical figures are still in use in Karnāṭaka.

Cambodian inscriptions are also comprised of all these features. Almost all the inscriptions are dated in Śaka years. The first four numbers are the same as in Kannaḍa. When a letter is doubled the syllable without vowel is written below the main consonant like in Kannaḍa. This can be seen even in modern Cambodian writings. Many expressions that are found in Kannaḍa inscriptions appear also in Cambodian inscriptions. The Khmer parts of the inscriptions are full of Sanskrit words, which is again a feature of Kannaḍa inscriptions also.

Even the imprecatory verses have been borrowed but given a Cambodian touch. For example:

*svadattāṃ paradattāṃ vā yo hareta vasundharām /  
ṣaṣṭiṃ varṣasahasrāṇi viṣṭāyāṃ jāyate krimiḥ //*

This verse means that one who steals the land either given

by himself or by others becomes a worm in excrements for sixty thousand years. Almost all the endowments end with this verse. The same verse with a slight variation occurs in Kedei Ang Temple inscription dated Śaka 550 or 551 - 621 A.D. (R.C. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Kambuja* p. 31-33, verse No. 4 on page 32.)

*svadattāṃ paradattāṃ vā yo hareta vasundharām /  
śvaviṣṭāyāṃ krimiḥ bhūtvā pitribhiḥ saha pacyate //*

The meaning of the first sentence is the same but in the second half it gives the sense of “by becoming a worm in dog’s excrements, he is cooked (i.e. he ripens his bad karman) with his forefathers.”<sup>18</sup>

All these above mentioned factors make me to think that the Khmer poets who drafted the texts of Cambodian inscriptions in beautiful poetry were very much influenced by Sanskrit literature, Indian culture mainly that of the South and perhaps specially of Karnāṭaka. Like in India for the beauty of the texts, for the eulogy (*praśasti*) of rulers and donors Sanskrit poetry was used, but the religious endowments were described in the local language, that is Khmer.

True, the Indian influence is seen in the texts of inscriptions, on Khmer temples, but the Cambodians have developed their own style of art as per their *pensées*, their tastes, and mode of communication. Their monuments and inscriptions are not the ditto copies of Indian culture. They reflect Indianised Cambodian culture.



1. D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*, Motilala Banarsidass, Delhi, 1965, p.1.
2. *Epigraphia Indica* (E I) Vol. VI, ed. by Keilhorn, p.1ff.
3. Ibid p.2.
4. Coedès has translated the word “devadāsi” as slave.
5. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. XVIII, No. 163.
6. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. XVIII, No. 135.
7. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. XVIII, No. 296.
8. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. XVIII, No. 133.
9. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. XVIII, No. 244.
10. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. IV No. 267.
11. Ibid, No. 296.
12. Ibid, No. 131, also in Vasundhara Filliozat, *The Temple of*

- Muktesvara at Cauḍadānapura*, IGNCa, New-Delhi, 1995, Inscription No. 1, p.29, verse 29.
13. R. C. Majumdar, Ibid, introduction, p. XV.
14. R. C. Majumdar, Ibid, introduction, p. XVII.
15. R. C. Majumdar, Ibid, No. 26 and No. 30.
16. D. C. Sircar, Ibid, p.259.
17. D. C. Sircar, Ibid, p.264.
18. This verse occurs in one of the Gupta inscriptions dated 165 A.D. See *Corpus inscription indicarum*, Vol. III, New Series ed. by Govinda Swamirao Gai, *Archaeological Survey of India*, New Delhi, 1981, ins. No. 40. p.342-345.