# Research Article

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### EPIGRAPHY: A SOURCE OF KERALA HISTORY

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#### Abstract

*Epigraphy forms an important source for the study of Kerala history especially the history of medieval Kerala. Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions. Inscriptions are important sources for the study of other parts also. Inscription means writing engraved on any object, rock, stone blocks, metallic plates, pillars, etc. used for inscribing information. Inscriptions are also seen on pots, bricks, tablets, shells, ivory etc. on hard objects inscriptions are incised. in certain inscriptions words are not engraved but embossed by scooping out the space around them.1*

*In the history of world civilizations we hear about great epigraphists like Champollion and jamesprincep. Champollion is famous for decipherment of hieroglyphics from the Rosetta stone, James prince is known in the history of epigraphy for the decipherment of edicts of Asoka. South Indian inscriptions are mainly on temples, collection of revenue, land grants etc. This is the case of Kerala inscriptions also. Sometimes inscriptions will have eulogistic compositions prefaced to them. They are called prasastis, butprasasti is not seen Kerala inscriptions. If the inscribed information is in the form of an advice or extortion it is called edicts. E.g. Edicts of Asoka.*

*Epigraphy mentioning grants of land were mainly on copperplates. Unlike the stone inscriptions, the copper plate inscriptions were to handle and easily portable. Most often thamrasasna or copper inscriptions were indented to private custody. but stone engravements were generally set up in public places for general information2 , temples bear stone inscriptions.*

*The inscriptions vary in length; sometimes inscriptions would record installation of the images by devotees or the fall of a hero in the battle etc. Sometimes inscriptions embodied even a kavya or drama.*

A page of the copper plate inscription usually will be in the size of the long sack, 30 cm long and double the width of a small scale. Information will be engraved on them3.if the inscriptions and long there will be number of plates like these. These plates would be strung together through the slit on the leftern most side of the plates. Generally there will be royal seal on royal inscriptions. These inscriptions would be kept in safe and secure place.

North Indian inscriptions are mainly in the brahmi script. There is brahmi script in south Indian inscriptions 4.kerala inscriptions of medieval period are in vattelluthu. This is a script used for writing old Malayalam.

What are inscribed on the inscription would be contemporary events. the intention of the inscription is not generally the preservation of historical material but the documentation of incidents, grants etc. but this inscriptional material forms an important source of history.thy must be seen in the light of contemporary events. Sometimes inscriptions do not give direct evidences but facts can be called out from the information seen in the in the inscriptions. Epigraphic records may be broadly classified in to two groups-those engraved on behalf of ruling authorities and those inscribed on behalf of private individuals and organizations. The epigraphs recording royal grants of land were generally engraved on copper plates.

Epigraphy devolved in India by 18 thcentury. It was European scholars in India to have a firsthand knowledge about intellectual achievements of India. Thus Charles Wilkins, will iwmjones,james prince and like scholars came to India. In their search for Indian antiquity, they tried to read inscriptions. The foundation of the royal Asiatic society of Bengal gave great encouragement to the study of inscriptions. Collin Mackency collected transcripts of stone and palm leaves from the old Madras presidency

.This was the first major step in the development of south Indian epigraphy. The Mackency s collection gave a primary idea of the inscriptional wealth of south India. A.Burnell studied south Indian inscriptions. He studied vatteluthu and deciphered many a inscription. these European scholars trying to establish that this system of writing was

borrowed from Europe. But it was not so, it was only because of their superiority complex that they thought so. vattelluthu is an indigenous system of writing.

Hultz deciphered many a south Indian inscription. He collected and edited the inscriptions under the title south Indian inscriptions. It was followed by the great services of T.A.GopinathaRao to Kerala historiography. It was with the publication of the Travancore Archaeological series by Gopinatha Rao, that the study of Kerala epigraphy received a new direction P. Sundaram Pillai wrote a book mainly based on inscriptions5.Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, MGS.Narayananan, M.R.Raghavavarier, Maheswaram Nair and like scholars have made invaluable contribution to the Kerala epigraphy.

The name of gopinatharao is ever memorable in the historiography of Kerala. He collected, deciphered and edited many an inscription of Kerala. This edited work, Travancore Archaeological series in 10 volumes has been the monumental work on Kerala epigraphy6.In 1902 Gopinatha Rao was appointed as superintendent of the department of archaeology, Travancore. Through painstaking field work, he could faint out a number of inscriptions from various parts of south India. he had a good knowledge of the Brahmin script and vattelluthu. But it was with Gopinatharao, pookilkelunair, Bernel had deciphered the Kerala inscriptions. But it was with Gopinatharao and Ellamkulam that Kerala epigraphy had its real development. The premature death of gopinatharao in 1918 was a great lose to the intellectual world .what K. P. Padmanabhamenon did for Kerala History, Gopinatharao did Kerala epigraphy7.

Elamkulamkunjanpillai made an intense study and research on Kerala inscriptions. He was a multi linguist and also knew how to calculate the date of the records out of the Astronomical data presented in them. Elamkulam had a fundamental grasp of many an aspect of these inscriptions8. Elamkulam not only deciphered and translated inscription but also interpreted them Elamkulam used linguistic and palaeographic data from the inscriptions to arrive at conclusions with regard to kings and their chronology. Though a study of inscriptions, Elamkulamkunjanpillai could re-

examine many theories of earlier writers. The advent of Elamkulamkunjanpillai brought about revolutionary changes in the study of history of Kerala. He could construct the political and social history of Kerala during the period between 9 and 16 centuries in outline. He used the knowledge from inscription as the key to open many a mysteries in Kerala history9.

M.G.S. Narayanan found out and deciphered many an inscription of Kerala. He re-examined certain theories of Kunjanpillai. He affected corrections in the details of the chronology of the perumalas of mahodayapuram. M.G.S reinterpreted the theories on the hundred organizations and *salais* in the light of inscriptions. He integrated the evidence from inscriptions with those from tradition. With the help of the inscriptions from kolathnadu, M.G.S established the historical value mooshakavamsa kavya.10 The greatest contribution of M.G.S to Kerala epigraphy is *the index to cera inscriptions*.11

M.G.S studied epigraphy in order to examine the authenticity of the records and reconstruct Kerala history .In this sense he was a consumer of epigraphy.12 M.G.S has deciphered many an inscriptions.

M.R .Raghavavarier is the most outstanding epigraphist in Kerala today. As an epigraphist he has worked close cooperation with M.G.S. He also was a multilinguist and masterly over ancient. The vatteluthu, kolezhuthu and brahmi. M.R .Raghavavarier has deciphered a number of inscriptions. Among them are chembra,thiruvattur,ezhimala etc. varier is of the opinion that the writing of history with the help of inscriptions is dependent on the historiography of the age in which it is written. When inscriptions are used as a source for history inferences can be made. Raghavavarier has effectively used these references in historical writings. The teacher of raghavavarier in epigraphy is

K.G.Krishnan.

During the period of colonialism scholars took interest in the inscriptions as a source of history. The services of George Mathan and Herman Gundert are important in this respect. As noted before inscriptions are among the most important sources of Kerala

history. Sometimes we will get many a fact and pointer to truth from inscriptions which have no outward connection with the topic of study. Many an inscription like the thirunnelli inscription contains words and usages that throw light into the aspects of contemporary society. Facts derived from the inscriptions are to be supplemented by the evidence from other contemporary sources also.

Inscriptions are very important as a source for the history of ancient and medieval Kerala. They supply valuable clues to the reconstruction of dynastic history of various kingdoms. They throw light on the political, social and cultural life of the people through the ages. It helps to analyse many a factor related with land relation, management of the temples, local assemblies etc.

Certain inscriptions are directly related with trade and trading centres in medieval Kerala. We can discern many a fact regarding the socio-economic history of certain period seemingly sources.13

Inscriptions of Kerala are very small in number. Of this bulk of this are temple inscriptions. They give a direct and indirect information about the contemporary society. The affairs of the temples cannot be suited without relation with the society. That is the micro aspect can study only in the background of a macro history. It is to be noted that the temple is the centre of life and culture of Kerala. During this period the traders and chieftains made liberal donations to the temples. Sometimes they would get them inscribed. Among other things it was part of the devices for social recognition. Giving food or shelter to the Brahmins also was considered to be the act of piety.

Sometimes from simple inscriptions we will get many a fact and pointers to the truth. Classical example is to this that of tharisapalli copper plate .Words and phrases in the inscriptions are to be analysed to get the real and literal meaning.

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