

13. Management of Epigraphical Heritage as Gleaned from Medieval Inscriptions

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Abstract

Archaeological materials, inscriptions, literature, art and architecture provide valuable information to write a coherent history of India. It is no exaggeration to say that nearly 2500 years of Indian history is mostly reconstructed with the help of the written source material, namely, the epigraphs. The epigraphs are found abundantly from the Mauryan times. They were copied and re-issued in the later periods. The famous Allahabad stone pillar, which has the inscription of Samudragupta, has an earlier inscription of Asoka of 3rd century BCE. Due to climatic conditions and shifting in the later period, this stone column was damaged. This pillar has the inscriptions of Asoka, Samudragupta's inscription of 4th century CE and Jahangir's inscription of the 17th century. The art of preserving the heritage property also has a long history. Inscriptions provide glimpses into the history of preservation and conservation of epigraphical records. The importance of re-engraving of old inscriptions on the temple walls at the time of renovation as a means of preserving the earlier records has been narrated in several inscriptions of Tamil Nadu. The Pallankovil copper plates of the Pallava king Simhavarman of 6th century CE is a copy of the original record, re-written in the late characters in the 8th century. We have no information on the original copy of this copper plate. It is possible that the original plates were destroyed either knowingly or unknowingly, and again it was re-engraved in the succeeding period. Similarly, inscribing on the old inscriptional surface is not uncommon in India. This paper focuses on the management of epigraphical records as referred to in the medieval inscriptions of Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Tamil Inscriptions; Epigraphical Heritage; Traditional Record Management; Epigraphy

Introduction

The art of preservation of epigraphical records as well as dilapidated temples and structures and broken sculptures is not new to the Indian cultural tradition. The tradition of conservation of heritage started at least from the post-Asokan period. In Tamil Nadu, most of the temples of the pre-Pallava period were made of perishable materials such as bricks, mortar, wood, clay and metal, as indicated by the inscription of Mahendravarman I of the Pallava dynasty. There is a reference in the Saṅgam literature about the construction of 70 temples by Ko-Chengannan, a Chola king on either side of the banks of river Kaveri in the Chola country for the deity Gauri (Parvathi), gods and goddesses (EI 15: 47)¹. None of these temples is in existence in their original condition and they were perhaps modified in the later period. Originally, these temples were mostly built with the perishable materials.

The early Pandya and the Pallava rulers, after the 4th or 5th century CE, introduced a new form of temple architecture known as rock-cut temples structural temples in stone, which were unknown previously in the Tamil country. An inscription of Mahendravarman I at Mandagapattu records that the king Vichitrachitta (Mahendravarman I) scooped the temple *Lakshitayatana* for the Gods Brahma, Isvara and Viṣṇu without the use of bricks, timber, metal and mortar (EI XVII: 17). Around 4th or 5th century CE in Tamil Nadu, the medium of perishable materials for constructing temples were replaced by stone materials in some contexts to create long-lasting temples. These temples were also maintained, and regular repairs were also undertaken in the succeeding periods. This practice of preserving the temples as well as sculptures and inscriptional records was followed by rulers throughout the historical period.

Historically inscriptions on stone and copper plates were the means of creating lasting records as against recording them in

1. The Anbil copper Plates, Verse. No.13. *Epigraphia Indica* (here after *EI*) Vol. 15, p.47. Bakthi saints Thirumangai Azhwar and Appar record about the construction of temples along the banks of the river Kaveri by this king, in their poems.

perishable palm leaves. Temples in the medieval period indeed played a vital role in the village administration and they served as platforms for managing local affairs of the people as well as the state. The temples as ideological centres linked the people, kings and the state through which the state could control the local bodies and the people. The state took several welfare measures through these religious institutions. The oral orders of the kings and all transactions related to village and temple were finally engraved on the walls of the temple as a permanent record-keeping procedure. Hence, the preservation and conservation of religious edifices and the inscriptional records undoubtedly were the prime duty of the state as well as officers and the people and more particularly the local community. Quite a number of inscriptions in Tamil Nadu focus on the preservation of temples, but old inscriptional records were defaced as well. Most of the brick temples were replaced with the stone materials during the medieval period. Whenever the inscriptions were defaced or damaged, they were again re-engraved permanently on the base of the *vimana* of the temple. This reveals the care provided for the preservation of the old documents as part of the record keeping practices.

A stone slab inscription of Pallava king Nripatuṅgavarman dated to 24th regnal year (893 CE) engraved at Tirukkodikkaval was damaged according to a later inscription, which says '*munivāsagam veṭṭikkidanta tanikkallāl ubaiyōgam illāmaiyl*'. This old inscription (*paḷaṅkarpadi*) was again re-engraved with the details of donation. During the reign of Rajakesarivarman, of the Chola period, the defaced stone slab inscription was re-engraved again on the wall of the *vimana* of the Tirukkodisvara temple at Tirukkodikkaval (SII XII, 78). Another inscription from the same village records the re-engraving of another old, defaced stone-slab inscription by the king Maranjandaiyan, the Pandya king in his 4th regnal year (866 CE). It mentions that the original stone slab on which the inscription had been engraved was damaged and therefore had to be replaced (SII XIV, 3). The content of the old inscription was re-engraved on the wall of the *vimana* of Tirukkodikkaval temple (SII XII, 78).

During the time of Varaguṇa Maharaja, the Pandya king, the temple authorities found another isolated stone with a defaced inscription within the temple complex. In order to preserve the old record, they re-engraved the inscription once again to keep the charity forever on the wall of the *vimana* of the temple at Tirukkodikkaval (SII XIV, 4). Collectively, the available evidence points that the temple of Tirukkodikkaval was once a brick structure, and during the time of Pandyas, the brick temple was converted into a stone edifice. The inscriptions on the loose stone slabs of the brick temples were defaced and these records were again engraved on the stone walls of the *vimana* in order to preserve the records as well as the charities of the early period.

The practice of preserving old records was continued by the Cholas in the medieval period. An interesting information from Tiruvidaimarudur of Thanjavur district refers to the order of the king for the preservation of old records (SII III, 124). The inscriptions belong to the 4th regnal year of Rajaraja I, corresponding to 989 CE, and refers to the assembly of the village, the trustees and other officers of the temple; they assembled in the theatre hall of the temple and examined the assets offered as gifts, which were mostly gold. During this examination, they found some of the stone inscriptions bearing the details of the gifts being placed in the underground cellars. They immediately issued an order to the temple authorities to recover all the stone slabs from the underground chamber and made fresh copies of them. Further, the king ordered re-engraving all the old inscriptions on the walls of renovated temple permanently. The old inscriptions are dated from the time of the Pallava king Nandivarman III onwards.

In addition to the new temples built by Rajaraja I, many temples were also renovated during his period. An inscription of Rajaraja I from Kurralam near Tirunelveli in Pandya maṇḍalam is an interesting example. It records that the temple of Kurralanathar had become dilapidated, and king Rajaraja I ordered to renovate the entire temple. While pulling down the stones of the old temple, it was noticed that the inscriptions were written in *Vatteluttu* script. Then king Rajaraja I ordered that the *Vatteluttu* inscriptions be re-inscribed again

on the walls of the newly renovated temple in Tamil script (ARE 455 of 1917). It shows that the king and the people of those days realised the importance of preserving the documents, which is nothing but a kind of preservation as undertaken in the modern archival study.

Siddalingamadam is a small village in Tirukkivilur taluk of Villupuram district in Tamil Nadu. The Siva temple in the village was renovated during the reign of the Chola king Kulottunga I. The architect of the temple noticed inscriptions on the walls of the old temple and ordered the temple authorities to re-engrave all the inscriptions. This kind of preservation activities was adopted by almost all the dynasties in Tamil Nadu to preserve the defaced inscriptional records. An inscription from Tiruvallam in Vellore district refers to the re-engraving of Rastrakuta king Krishna III's inscription of 9th century CE. Nearly two centuries later, it was once again re-engraved by Kulottunga I, the Chola king (ARE 24 of 1910).

The royal throne, local bodies and the temple authorities were responsible for looking into the matter of preserving the living temples as well as the inscriptional records in the villages in the medieval period. Kings, queens and the individual officials in the medieval period of Tamil Nadu encouraged the protection of temples periodically by the way of *kumbabishegam*. Sembiyan Mahadevi, Loga Mahadevi and other Chola queens took keen interest to replace many of the brick temples with stone structures. Particularly, Sembiyan Mahadevi, the queen of Ghandradhitya and mother of Uttama Chola, made immense contribution. Many temples in the Chola region from the time of Madhurandhagan Ghandradhitya to Rajendra I were converted by her into stone temples.

They also newly installed and consecrated images of many gods and goddesses in the temples. Many temples such as Kailasanatha temple at Sembiyan Mahadevi, Umamahesvarar temple at Konerirajapuram, Tirukkurangaduthurai temple at Aduthurai, Tirukkodisvarar temple at Kuttalam, Agasthisvara temple at Ananagur, Achalesvara temple at Tiruvarur, Maranatha's temple at Mayiladuthurai, Sivalokam Udaiyar temple at Tiruvakkarai, Virudagirisvara temple at Vriddachalam and Masilamanisvara temple at Tirumullaivayil near Chennai have been

converted into stone structures (*karrali*) by the queen Sembiyan Mahadevi I.

The inscription of Kulottunga III at Sivalayam records an interesting information regarding the reconstruction of the temple as the original stone slabs bearing inscriptions were in a worn-out condition. The entire walls were pulled down and the old inscriptions were re-engraved on the walls of the renovated temples (ARE 47 of 1913). Another inscription from Munnur in Villupuram taluk and the same district records that the *Tānattār* and the *Urār* of several villages noticed the stone inscriptions in the temples of Avur Kurram in Nittavinotha valanadu were purposefully destroyed and the matter was informed to the local chief Udaya Perumal Chola konar. These inscriptions are important since they recorded tax-free land donations to several temples. Due to destruction, the day-to-day *pūja* activities were affected in these temples, and hence, the officials took care to re-engrave all the inscriptions as they existed in the original documents of the concerned temples. They were re-engraved again on the walls of temples according to the order of that official. It shows that the local authorities took responsibility for the preservation of epigraphic documents (SII VIII, 207).

The state and the local bodies frequently renovated the temples and conducted *kumbābīshēgam* (consecration). There are several inscriptions referring to the natural calamities that affected temples as well as the village settlements. An inscription from Tirumalapāḍi dated to the reign of Rajaraja III (1223 CE) refers to the destruction of an entire village and the temple by sudden floods in the Kaveri river. Edirili Perumal Muvendavelan, an official from the Chola officialdom, rushed to the spot and saved the people from the flood and ordered the local authorities to replace the entire temple complex on an elevated area and constructed additional shrines and *mandapa* (Thiyagarajan 2017). Another inscription refers to the provision of land near the bank of Kollidam River for forming a grove of trees to stop the flow of water in the river (ARE 79 of 1920). Evidence for these kinds of philanthropic activities could be seen in several inscriptions of South India and they convey the efforts to preserve our heritage in the Chola period.

The preservation of temple properties continued during the Vijayanagara period too. The temple in Srirangam was frequently affected by heavy floods. An inscription of Sadasivaraya dated in Saka 1467, corresponding to 1546 CE, records a heavy flood, which affected the city as well as the temple of Srirangam. Nalantigal Narayana Jiyar of the temple ordered the local authorities to raise the bunds on the banks of Kaveri and planted reed (*Cyprus rotundas*) on the northern bank to control the water flow in the river. He also removed the mud and sand on the southern bank channel Chindamanai, which was dug during the Chola period to divert the heavy flood in the river Kaveri (EI XXIX: 70 ff). Water-controlling device (*yantra*) was also been installed on the bank of the river near Anaikattan Karai. This inscription is a significant one since it records a water-controlling device in the Chola period.

Discussion

As stated above, the preservation of historical documents, renovation of temple complexes and preservation of heritage monuments were given importance by the state and the society of the medieval period. The age-old practice of preserving the inscriptional wealth and the historical monuments in the modern parlance may be treated as conservation. Sincere and devotional approach was taken by the state as well as the local officials to preserve historical documentation, be they in the form of stone or perishable materials. Palm leaf or *bhurja patra* manuscripts are another kind of writing materials used in India. They were periodically recopied, maintained and preserved.

The Velvikkudi copper plate clearly indicates that the documents were preserved for several generations. It is believed that the Chola king Rajaraja I recovered the age-old Devaram hymns written on palm-leaf manuscripts from the store house of Chidambaram temple and earned the title ‘Tirumuraikaṇḍa Cholan’. The copper plate inscriptions have also been rewritten for the purpose of preservation. For instance, the Pallankovil copper plates of the Pallava king Simha Vishṇu of 550 CE are a copy datable to the 8th century CE. The palaeography of the charter clearly indicates that this copper plate was again rewritten around the 8th century CE.

This kind of preservation of heritage monuments and inscriptional wealth was continued by temple trustees and district collectors till the 20th century. Many temple authorities and district collectors took interest to preserve the monuments as well as historical documents. Before undertaking conservation and renovation, the concerned temple authorities wrote letters to the Archaeology Departments to seek their help for copying inscriptions.

From the inception of epigraphy branch of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in 1887, the officers copied inscriptions every year and the text appeared in the *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*. Estampages have been prepared *in situ* and photographs of the same have been documented. The estampages of the inscriptions nearly as old as 135 years are being preserved in the Mysore office, systematically numbered and arranged year-wise. This is a traditional way of preservation was introduced by the first epigraphist of ASI, Dr. E. Hultzsch, who did a commendable job.

From the reports, it is known that the epigraphists toured every year at the invitation of the temple authorities as well as district collectors and copied the inscriptions covering the neighbouring areas. At the same time, they also reported the pathetic conditions of many of the temples, which were demolished without taking any care of sculptures and inscriptions of the medieval period. Such information is reported in the introductory notes of the Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy.

For instance, the district collector of Thanjavur district wrote a letter to the authorities of Tiruviḍaimarudūr temple and stopped the renovation and demolition work and made arrangements to copy all the inscriptions in the temple. However, there are references on the destruction of monuments without informing the concerned officials. Many such instances were reported in the Annual reports of the ASI. The Government Epigraphist of the ASI, when visited the village of Alagapputtur in Kumbakonam taluk, witnessed the pathetic condition of the temple. The temple was completely pulled down except the *adhistana*. Beautiful sculptures and all historical inscriptions were destroyed during the renovation work. Though the collector as well as

the temple trustees wrote a formal letter to the government, before the arrival of the concerned staff, the entire temple was demolished without following the preservation and conservation methods. Innumerable inscriptions and beautiful sculptures and temple components have been lost as the temple authorities did not know their heritage value. After the independence of India, the destruction of the heritage resources in the temples became more common in the name of *kumbābishēgam* or renovation. This was due to lack of policies and awareness on conservation at various levels.

Several inscriptions on the temple walls in Tamil Nadu have been destroyed due to white washing, chemical paintings and other kinds of treatments. The pioneer epigraphist of India, Dr. E. Hultzsch, visited Viriñchipuram temple in Vellore district in 1887 to copy a few inscriptions on the walls of the temple. He found that all the inscriptions were covered with thick *sunnam* (lime wash), which affected the visibility of the inscriptions. He scraped the entire white wash of the wall and copied all the inscriptions. But the temple authorities allowed him with the condition that after copying the inscriptions, he should put back *sunnam* (lime wash) again on the same wall (ARE 1887: 3). At present, the government of Tamil Nadu, on the advice of Archaeology Department, sent notifications to the temple authorities to ban white washing and painting on the stone structures of the temples. A recent notification of the Hindu Religious Endowment Department says that before making any conservation work in the temple, a committee consisting of officers of traditional conservation, archaeologists and epigraphists would visit the temple and on the basis of their recommendations, they would move further for conservation.

Since such codes of conservation were not framed and disseminated earlier, some of the inscriptions and structures have been lost. It is heartening to note that now initiatives are taken for the conservation of valuable historical resources. However, more concentrated efforts have to be undertaken to prevent further destruction of our heritage. To preserve our heritage, serious measures should be adopted by the government as well as the temple authorities, district authorities and local bodies. These stakeholders, the local people and

the administrators should be taught about the importance of heritage periodically with the support of experts so that they can become guardians of their own heritage. The village people should be educated about the importance of their heritage monuments and local history. Conducting heritage walk programmes in the remote places with historical temples with a focus on the common folk is very important. Creation of heritage clubs in the villages would also prove worthy in saving our heritage. The government should also initiate public awareness programmes at the village level. Many inscriptions on the temple walls now have disappeared due to vandalism or natural phenomena. Hence digitisation of all the inscriptional estampages, which are housed in the ASI office in Mysore, is needed. Both state and the centre have to think over this matter and steps had be taken to preserve the estampages through modern scientific preservation and digitization methods.

References

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