Indian Epigraphy and its influence on Cambodia

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Dr. D.C. Sirar 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.” 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 Kadambara, Cālukya of both Badami and Kālīgada, Gaṅga kings from Talakādu, Rāṣṭrakūta and Hoysala in Karnāṭaka while Tamiltakku was under the sway of Pallava, Cola and Pāṇḍava rulers. They ruled between the fourth and the twelfth centuries. There were constant military interactions between them. While Kadambara, Cālukya kings of Badami, and Gaṅga kings fought with Pallava of Kāśi, their successors Rāṣṭrakūta, Cālukya of Kālīgada and Hoysala kings had to face military hostilities of Cola of Pāṇḍava. Finally, the last Cola 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 Asokan Brāhma script. In the 3rd century B.C. King Asoka 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 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 Brāhma script. The scripts of all Indian languages are derived from the same Brāhma script of Asokan edicts. Historians have not yet been able to discover what kind of writing was existing in India prior to the edicts of Asoka. What must have been the origin of Brāhma is also a subject of discussion but without conclusion. It is a well established fact that Brāhma script is at the origin of Indian scripts. Starting from this Brāhma 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 brāhmīns, 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 vaśya. 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 brāhim will be a brāhim, 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 brāhmīns leading the army to the battlefields as army chiefs. Similarly, non-brāhmīns as authors of literary works are also innumerable. Amongst such writers were the poets who drafted the texts of epigrams in excellent poetry. This evidence of epigraphical poetry goes to prove that the intellectual activities were not monopolised by the brāhin class. This statement needs more clarification.

The study of Veda and its allied subjects was the special privilege of the brāhmīns but, however, the study of literature was not forbidden to others. Bhāga, who came all the way from Kāśi to Karnāṭaka to the court of Cālukya King Vikramaditya VI, mentions in his Vikramadityakavacarita that the subjects of King Vikramaditya 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 stelas. 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-brāhmīns but, nonetheless, their works are on a par with any Sanskrit or local literary pieces. Some of the poets of these inscriptions were so skilful and talented that often they excelled even the great poets. That is the reason why the “epigraphic poems” are classified as alpaśāvyay or small poetical work. Names like Kaldeva paṇḍita,10 Abhinava Pampa,11 Kalya,12 Subba,13 Mēvaṅga,14 Madhura,15 etc., were non-brāhmīns but their poetry is more than excellent. Special mention may be made of Kalya, the author of Haralahalli inscription.11

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. “ājāntubhāyu” in Sanskrit means “he who has long hands going down to the knees,” but in Kannada “ājāntubhāyu” 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 kāmadvīma wish-granting cow and the paścaṇmara or puruṣāṇa 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.12 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 Kannada, in different regions of Karnātaka 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 Karnātaka, the first part, i.e. a prāsasti 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 paleography 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 n for m.” He continues: “These inscriptions prove how thoroughly Indian culture and civilisation, in all its aspects, was imbibed in Kambuja.”

There is an interesting article on “Cambodian Inscriptions” in Vīśvakosā in Kannada (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 Kedī Ang Chumnik inscriptions.” 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 Karnātaka. Though the script was common during the regnal period of Pallava-s in Tamilnādu and Cālukya-s in Bādāmi, in subsequent centuries scripts underwent changes in both the regions. Karnātaka 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 छ्र in the Tamil all the letters are written one by the side of the other whereas in modern Kannada, like in the old tradition, the sign for r is written below छ्र. Thus we have dru छ्र. In the inscriptions Candra is written ndra छ्र. 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 stelas, 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 Kannātaka.

In the domain of epigraphy, India is the fifth country in the world. Aśokan 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 Bādami 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. Aśokan 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 Tālangunda inscription and Pulikēśin II's inscription at Aihole.7 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 Rāvikirti'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 Rāvikirti, "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 (prāśasti) of the history of the Cālukya family, and especially of the exploits of Pulikēśin II.3 The date of the inscription is Śaka 556, which corresponds to A.D. 634-635.

In the course of centuries, i. e. after Pulikēśin II, there came a change in the practice of issuing royal charts only and entirely in Sanskrit. By the eighth century poetical works in Kannāda 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 Kannātaka was replaced by equally beautiful kāvya in Kannāda.

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 Kannātaka 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 Kannāda poetry interlaced with Sanskrit verses, citations from Veda-s, 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 kārya-s or officials and their specific duties in the service of the temple. Special mention is made of devadāsi 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 stoves 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 devadāsi and devadāsa meaning servants of god and not slaves.4 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 Kannāda and voduvarin 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 akṣara i.e. never vanishing. Often, it is noticed that the kalukīṇa stone sculptor used to be the main architect of temples too. In that case he was called sūtraṇika i.e. he holds sūtra the thick thread or the fine cord.
Karnataka was the first to introduce it. "The earliest epigraphic records that connect this era explicitly with the Śākas belong to the Cālukyas of Badami." 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 7th and 8th century A.D."

With regard to numerals the first four numbers are written १, २, ३, ४, ५. These numerical figures are still in use in Karnataka.

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 Kannada. When a letter is doubled the syllable without vowel is written below the main consonant like in Kannada. This can be seen even in modern Cambodian writings. Many expressions that are found in Kannada inscriptions appear also in Cambodian inscriptions. The Khmer parts of the inscriptions are full of Sanskrit words, which is again a feature of Kannada inscriptions also.

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

svadattān paraḍattān iyo hariya vasundharāṁ / ṣaṭṭāṁ varṣasahasrāṁ viṣṭāyaṁ jāyate kriyāih #

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 Kedel Ang Temple inscription dated Śaka 550 or 551 - 621 A.D. (R.C. Majumdar, Inscriptions of Kamboja p. 31-33, verse No. 4 on page 32.)

svadattān paraḍattān iyo hariya vasundharāṁ / svavīṣṭāyaṁ kriyāṁ bhūvā pūribbhiḥ saha pacayate #

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."

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 Karnataka. Like in India for the beauty of the texts, for the eulogy (prāsasti) 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 penseés, their tastes, and mode of communication. Their monuments and inscriptions are not the ditto copies of Indian culture. They reflect Indianised Cambodian culture.

3. Ibid p.2.
4. Cordès has translated the word "devadātī" as slave.
11. Ibid, No. 296.
12. Ibid, No. 131, also in Vasundhara Filiozat, The Temple of

Malhesvarar et Cauḍātānapura, 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.