

Epigraphy and writing of Odishan History

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Abstract

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Odisha is one of the largest epigraphical records in India after the state Tamil Nadu. There are huge numbers of inscriptions found in Odisha. The inscriptions are in varied script. From those inscriptions it has clear that the evolution in script can be easily studied here. Though there is availability of written records particularly the epigraphic in Odisha it has not used in history writing because of lack of knowledge in palaeography. Because of variation it has clearly indicate that the script was influencing the language it nearby. Through the inscriptional study the history of Odisha can be written. In this paper we will focus the importance of epigraphic study and the study made by various scholars has been made.

Keywords: *epigraph, inscription, palaeography, copper plates.*

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INTRODUCTION

The study of inscription is called epigraphy and Odisha is rich in inscription. They are the store house of knowledge in the fields of human life and culture. The study of inscriptions is one of the most important sources of information for reconstructing the history of ancient and early medieval Odisha. Inscriptions are permanent documents, recording of the life and happenings of their times with special reference to the king and his relationship with people. But to study and understand these inscriptions which differ from area to area and age to age in the type of script and language used, knowledge of palaeography is essential. Palaeography being the subject dealing with scripts, a study of this reveals how scripts came into being, developed and changed during centuries. Within epigraphy, palaeography comes in, as the most important limbs. The age of inscriptions, the growth of language, the literary beauty of the language, all these are next in importance.

The study of epigraphy is a matter of vital importance. The inscriptions throw light on the life of sovereigns and the people over whom they ruled. Important incidents are recorded in them. Sometimes they supply or strengthen a weak link in accounts of dynasties known to us from other literary sources. They help us to locate the sites of ancient places by the geographical material recorded in them. They introduce us to institution prevailing in the country at the time of their record. They supply us with a complete list of the

designation of officers of state to whom different functions were allocated. The prosperity of the country by trade and privileges of merchants guilds are herein pictured. The religious faith, tolerations or bigotry, endowments and charities for temples, monasteries are found recorded in the inscriptions. Maintenance of charitable institutions, hospitals and schools are also found mentioned.

The inscriptions on stones and copperplates issued in Odisha by kings, subordinate rulers and their officers of different ranks for exceed in number. Odisha is the second state in India after Tamil Nadu, which had yielded the largest number of epigraphs. The peculiarity of Odishan inscriptions lies not only in the largeness of their quantum but also in the variety of the language, contents and scripts. The importance of the inscriptions as a useful source of information for the reconstruction of Odishan history is easily conceivable when it is borne in mind that in case of Odisha we hardly come across a regular historical chronicle of the type of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*. Thus inscriptions constitute the backbone as well as the store house of information regarding various facets of the life of the people of Odisha. Epigraphy as a source to reconstruct the history and culture of Odisha.

The study Odishan inscriptions was unknown prior to the British conquest of Odisha though it started in other parts of the subcontinent particularly with the foundation of the *Asiatic Society* in Calcutta in 1784.

Although the foundation of the study was laid by Charles Wilkins in the eight decade of the 18th century, it was James Prinsep whose genius and hard work made it possible to think today the present highly developed state of this discipline and the historical information derived from it.

James Prinsep's [1] major contribution towards the study of Odishan epigraphy was his attempt to reach the famous Hatigumpha and other inscriptions of early Brahmi characters in the Udayagiri-Khandagiri hills at Bhubaneswar and subsequently the Asokan Edicts at Dhauri. The Asokan inscriptions from different parts of the Indian subcontinent including that from Odisha were published first in a volume by Alexander Cunningham [2]. With the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India, interesting development in the field of collection of epigraphic records and their decipherment began. Alexander Cunningham first as the Archaeological Surveyor to the Government of India prepared a large number of Archaeological reports containing notices of hundred of inscriptions particularly of South Indian regions which also included a large number of Odishan inscriptions. Besides the publication of Indian Antiquity by J. Burgess from Bombay in 1872 gave an impetus to the epigraphic study because it attracted several competent writers who contributed valuable writings on the whole range of Indian epigraphy. A good number of inscriptions of the ancient Odishan royal families especially those of early Eastern Gangas of Kalinganagara(modern Mukhalingam in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh) were published in the volumes of this journal by the European scholars. In the year 1888, J. Burgess, the then Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, started an official journal entitled, *Epigraphia Indica*, intended specifically for the publication of inscriptions. Orissan inscriptions edited by the European as well as Indian scholars appeared regularly in the pages of journal since then. E. Hultzsch³ who was the epigraphist to the Madras Presidency since 1896, published edition of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol.I, *Inscriptions of Asoka*, Vol.I in 1925, subsequent to that Alexander Cunningham's volume, in which all the Asokan inscriptions discovered till then were ably edited.

The credit for the decipherment of numerous Odishan epigraphic records in due to the initiative of scholars like A.Cunningham [4], E.Hultzsch [5], J.F. Fleet [6], L.D. Bennett [7], Sten Konow [8], R. Subramanyam [9], M. Venkataramayya [10], R.K.Ghoshal [11], R.C.Majumdar [12], M.M. Chakravarty [13], N.N.Vasu [14], R.D. Banarji [15], R.G. Basak [16], D.C. Sircar [17], V.V. Mirachi [18] and several other who have left indelible mark in the pages of the history of the Odishan epigraphic study. Among the Indian scholars, the contribution of H.P.Satri, N.N. Vasu, R.D. Banarji and D.C Sircar are conspicuous while V.Rangacharya and Ray Bahadur, H.

Krishna Satri were good dealing with the numerous Odishan inscriptions in Telugu and Sanskrit languages, discovered in Andhra and Ganjam regions of the then Madras Presidency.

The study of inscriptions formed the major and most important item of the archaeologist's work till the beginning of the 20th century. Discovery of Odishan inscriptions was more frequent in this and the subsequent periods, particularly in the Southern regions. It was due to the sincere endeavour of the foreign as well as the Indian scholars, these inscriptions were included in the ten volumes of South Indian Inscriptions by E. Hultsch, H. Krishna Satri, and Ray Bahadur, V. Venkkaya and Inscriptions of Madras Presidency, collected 1915 were prepared in three volumes by V. Rangacharya which were published in 1919. Moreover, Hultsch published notices of inscriptions of his own collection as well as his associates like H. Krishna Satri and V. Venkkaya in *Annual Reports* since 1887 which was known as *Annual Report on South Indian Epigraphy* but, subsequently, since 1945-46, renamed as *Annual Report on Indian Epigraphy*. Thus within a period about half a century, nearly 25000 inscriptions on temple walls and other monuments and nearly 500 copper plate charters were collected and reviewed and of which again, the Odishan inscriptions exceeded 1500 including copper plate records.

It was until the third decade of the 20th century that scholars from Odisha did participate in the study of inscriptions. Some time during July 1937, it was resolved under the patronage of the then Maharaja of Paralakhemundi, Sri Krishna Chandra Gajapati Narayan Dev, to establish the Odishan Academy and bring out a quarterly research journal through it. Several renowned personalities and then zamindars such as Raja Bahadur Rajendra Narayan Deo of Kanika (now under Cuttack district), Rai Bahadur Govinda Chandra Praharaj, Sri Govinda Chandra Thataraja of Bissamakatak(under Rayagada district), Pandit Nilakantha Dash including some English high officials of the British Raj posted in Odisha, were patrons and vice-patrons of the Academy. The honorary members and office bearer for the Academy were, among others, the eminent archaeologists, historian and literature like Padmasree Paramanda Acharya, Pandit Binayak Mishra, Pandit Kedarnath Mahapatra, Prof. Ghanashyam Dash, Rai Sahib Artta Ballav Mahanty, padmasree Satyanarayan Rajaguru and many others. The journal was enriched within a short span of three years (1937-40), with the contribution of valuable research papers by these learned personalities of Odisha along with renowned academicians and historians from all over India. Odishan scholars especially, Sri Satyanarayana Rajguru, Binayak Mishra, Paramananda Acharya, Kedarnath Mahapatra did contribute valuable research articles on epigraphic materials then available to them and other similar articles on archaeology which have remained so far to be the original ones and on which no

further research work is known to have been attempted by scholars of the subsequent times. Unfortunately the journal ceased to be published towards the end of 1940, due mainly to the political unrest in the country.

In 1945-46, another academic organisation under the name of the Kalinga Historical Research Society was established under the patronage of the then Maharaja of Patna State (now under Bolangir district) Sri Rajendra Narayan Singha Deo and the Maharaja of Kalahandi, Sri P.K. Deo. The publication of the Journal of the Kalinga Historical Research from the said Society enabled several renowned scholars from Odisha as well as from other states of the country to contribute writings on epigraphical antiquities. Unfortunately, this research organisations and its journal also could not survive for long.

But, with the establishment of the Odishan state Museum by the Government of Odisha sometime during 1948, an official journal Orissa Historical Research Journal was started for publication of research article on epigraphy along with other valuable writings on history and culture of Odisha, since 1958. The period onwards was characterised by the collection, decipherment, editing and publication of large number of Odishan inscriptions and works on various aspects of history based on inscriptions, particularly by Odishan scholars in journal such as Journal of Andhra Historical Research Society, Journal of Kalinga Historical Research Society, Journal of Orissa and Bihar Research Society, Indian Historical Quarterly, Indian Culture, Orissa Historical Research Journals etc. Thus Pandit Binayak Misra published his *dinasties of Medieval Orissa* (Calcutta, 1933), based on the epigraphic records then available to him. He also edited the inscriptions of the Bhaumakaras dynasty of Odisha, discovered till then, most of which were his own collection, in his book entitled *Orissa under the Bhauma Kings* (Calcutta, 1934). This book, the first of its kind, has so far remained a source book based on the few epigraphs of the dynasty dealing with the chronology and other aspects of history and culture of the region and period. Among the other Odishan scholars who were attracted towards the study of epigraphy during this period, mention may be made of Sri Tarini Charan Rath, Padmasree Satyanaryana Rajaguru, Prof. Krishna Chandra Panigrahi, Pandit Kedarnath Mahapatra, Prof. Navin Kumar Sahu and others whom Pandit Rajaguru appeared to be more successful and whose contributions to the study of inscriptions are very often referred to by scholars and historians.

Satynarayan Rajaguru another scholar a great epigraphist and polyglot produced a research article in amazing abundance. He was proficient in Sanskrit, Telugu, Odia and English. His involvement in historical research had a long duration of more than half a century. He has a number of publication to his credit which shows 'epigraphy' as the main forte. These

are: (1) *Inscriptions of Orissa*, Vol.I No.2 (1958), Vol.II (1960); Vol.III, No.1(1960); Vol.III No.2 (1961), Vol.IV (1966), Vol.V. (NA); (2) *The Gangas of Kalinga*, Vol.I and Vol.II (1932); (3) *History of Gangas Vol.I and II* (1968, 1972); (4) *An Autobiography in Odia*. He made original study on medieval Inscriptions in Odisha and several votive inscriptions found at Simhanchalam and Puri. He finally decided the date of beginning of Bhauma era and the Ganga era. (*The Bhauma Samvat* in OHRJ XII, 2, 1964 and JKHS, I, No. 4, 1947). He also settled the controversy over the prevalence of Gupta rule in Kalinga, (OHRJ, I, 2, 1952). After retirement from the State Museum service as curator of Epigraphy Rajguru was awarded a fellowship by the Sri Jagannath Sanskrit University at Puri to decipher the votive Inscriptions found in the Puri temple and adjoining monuments. The learned epigraphist published volume I (P.K. Mishra, ed. *Comprehensive History and Culture of Orissa, vol.I, pt.I, Delhi, 1997, p.4*) and the next volume is yet to be published. Due to the deplastering of the Jagannath Temple a number of votive and other inscriptions came to limelight. Their contents provide new information with regard to the construction of the temple, the land grants for its maintenance and the rituals.

Apart from making original contributions to Odishan historiography, Rajaguru could supply plethora of primary sources for the Odia scholars. As a participant in the odia movement of Ganjam in 1924 till his death in 1997, the learned scholar remained ever busy in writing research articles which were published in various journals. He wrote in a very simple style. His literary presentation was free from linguistic jargon. As objective scholar, he added new credibility to Odishan historiography. Though he disputed the academic view points of many scholarly giants like Dines Chandra Sircar, finally by his impeccable logic and truthful research work, he succeeded in winning the debate on controversial issues. The Autobiography¹⁹ presents an eye witness account of Odishan during 1920 to 1995 in great details. Among the three historians who were awarded 'Padmashree' for their scholarly contributions, Rajguru appears to be a more prolific writer on inscriptions. (other two historians are Paramananda Acharya and Krushna Chandra Panigrahi). Without his epigraphic studies, the Telugu sources of Odishan history would have remained in dark. His epigraphic studies threw light on the history of the Eastern Gangas and the Imperial Gangas, besides many minor dynasties like the Nalas, Matharas, Vighras etc who would, otherwise, have remained unknown. No scholar has enriched the historiography of Medieval Odisha more than Rajguru. His proficiency in several languages was an advantage and his scholarly humility and dedication to research have no comparison. He may rightly be regarded as the path finder in the trackless region of the boundless field of epigraphic research whose works soon surpassed other Odishan scholars of his time. It was his sheet devotion towards the study of epigraphic

antiquities, without having any formal training or academic qualification in the subject, which made him distinguished epigraphist. He was a sound scholar in Sanskrit and Telugu and regarded to be an expert during his time in the field of decipherment and interpretation of Telugu inscriptions. His *Inscriptions of Orissa* series, particularly, vol.III in two parts and Vol.V in three parts dealing mostly with Telugu epigraphs of the Imperial Ganga rulers of Orissa bear ample proof of his remarkable capacity of presenting the inexhaustible epigraphic materials of dynasty found in the renowned temples of the South Indian regions and Odisha. The numerous copper plate charters including several stone inscriptions, ranging from the early period down to the end of the Suryavamsin Gajapati rule, which form the landmark in the Odishan history and many of which the discovery goes solely to his credit shows the flair he had for collecting such valuable antiquities. The pages of *Orissan Historical Research Journal*, *Journal of Kalinga Historical Research Society* of which he was one of the founder members were enriched by his learned articles on Odishan inscriptions. He was honoured by the Berhampur University with an Honorary D.Litt degree and the Odia Sahitya Akademi conferred upon him the distinction of a great litterateur. His death in 1997 created a void that can be filled up too soon.

After his retirement of Rajaguru, the post of Epigraphist was filled up by Snigdha Tripathy. She had her training under Rajaguru as an Assistant Epigraphist. The project on 'Inscriptions of Orissa' devolved upon Tripathy for completion. She edited and published the *Inscriptions of Orissa*, Vol.VI [7] which contains 49 Copper Plate Inscriptions issued by the Bhanja of Khijjing mandal, and few other places. She added a long introduction to discuss the origin of the Bhanjas and the academic controversy among scholars. She has discussed the significance of the Asanpat Inscription of Santrubhanja and its historical contents. In her opinion the Bhanjas were originally an aboriginal tribe who underwent acculturation to elevate their social status to the rank of the Khyatriyas. The Bhanja royal insignia of peacock has also drawn her into an analytical discussion. This book is of great value to reconstruct the history of Bhanja dynasty irrespective of whether they ruled over Khijjinga or Khinjali. Besides the above, she has published at least 35 papers on Inscriptions and 13 papers on numismatics and other allied subjects. She also writes regularly research based Odia articles to popularise history. But epigraphic studies remains her main forte because she thinks that Inscription is the best sources on which reconstruction of the lost history of India as whole and Odisha in particular is possible. Epigraphic studies offer serious challenge to Indologists whose number is gradually declining. She delves into inscriptional information to reveal something significant and sensational. She feels that the lack of knowledge in Sanskrit, Prakrit and other regional languages make the subject more difficult for a scholar

to achieve success in Epigraphy. That there are still some undeciphered Inscriptions in Odisha makes her unhappy. She also laments over imperfectly deciphered Inscriptions which pose a threat to authentic history. Her aim to re-edit the Inscriptions is with a view to bring out new information as far as possible so that Odishan history could be revised and rewritten. She enabled a revision of the genealogy and chronology of the Matharas of Kalinga, Sailodbhavas of Kongoda and the Bhauma-Karas of Tosali (OHRJ,XLI). Her study of Inscriptions has also led to the reconstruction of economic history of ancient and medieval periods. She has brought forth new source materials for writing the dynastic history of Odisha.

In the opinion of Tripathy, a historian should reconstruct history with a meaningful purpose. She also thorough knowledge of source materials. Originality, clarity of thought and sound judgement are the hall marks of a true historian, she writes (Questionnaire). As a member of many learned Associations like the Epigraphical Society, Numismatic Society of India, Place-name society of India, All India Museum Association and consultant for the Archaeological Survey of India, Tripathy finds opportunity to interact with large number of scholars which has broadened her outlook. She attends national and international conferences regularly to keep herself abreast with new findings in Indology and encourages an open mind in academic matters. Among the present generation of historians in Odisha, she is a front runner from all considerations and has the potentially to enrich Odishan historiography further.

Although books on the origin and development of regional scripts like A.C. Burnell's *Elements of South Indian Paleography (from 4th to 14th Century AD)*, 1874; R.D. Banerji's *Origin of the Bengali Script* (1919) appeared since the last part of 19th century, there was no specific work on the origin and development of Odia script until 1962 when Prof. K.B. Tripathy first published his valuable book entitled *The Evolution of Oriya Language and Script*. Since then no further development in this field of study has been made. Pandit S.N. Rajguru, however, wrote a few pages in Odia, on the origin and development of Odia script, but it does not fulfil the need of a systematic and thorough period wise study of the palaeography of this regional script based on fresh and scientific research. It is now indeed heartening to know that a few young scholars have taken initiative towards the study of palaeography of Odishan Inscriptions. The result has been the recent publication of the books on *Numerals in Orissan Inscription* and *Palaeography of Orissa*[20]. Further, one more book on the *Palaeography of Orissan Inscriptions*²¹ by another young scholar have taken initiative towards the study of palaeography of Odishan inscriptions.

Apart from knowing the palaeography or to decipher the ancient scripts, the study of epigraphic records requires mastery over ancient languages mainly Sanskrit and Prakrit. But this is rarely noticed among the present day students of history and similar is the case with the students of Sanskrit who do not have knowledge in ancient history of our country²². What is essential for epigraphical study is a sound combination of linguistic, palaeographic and historical background in order to interpret an inscription in a correct and rational manner. Early Indian Inscriptions in general and that of the Odishan in particular are almost exclusively in Sanskrit languages (Including Prakrit) and consequently, for understanding them a sound knowledge of Sanskrit is highly essential. Sanskrit continued to be used greatly even after regional languages came to be employed in the epigraphic records and therefore a sound knowledge in Sanskrit, even good acquaintance with palaeography is of little use as it inscriptions. Moreover, honesty and integrity are also important requirements for the study in this subject as we are not supposed to read and interpret anything we like when a passage is difficult to decipher.

The study of epigraphy is no longer popular among the scholars in Odisha in present time. Even scholars from foreign countries working in the field of archaeology or any of the Indological studies, no longer take interest in Indian inscriptions, though the study of epigraphy and numismatics were the major and most important part of an archaeologist's work in our country as whole till at least the fifth decade of the 20th century. Serious students of the present times do not take interest towards this difficult field of study for the conducting research mainly because this needs diligence, sincerity and in-depth study of linguistics and also because they are attracted by another easier avenues of life. Perhaps due to these reasons, these are very few successful epigraphists in our country as whole and Odisha is no exception to this.

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