

## Recent Trends in Epigraphical Studies in India

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### Abstract:

*Inscriptions on stones or copper-plates, which occur in substantial numbers, are the basic source-material for the ancient and medieval history of India, as much of India lacks history books compiled in these periods. For pre-modern village studies as well, therefore, we have to depend on inscriptions. This paper explains how the remains of inscriptions can be used for village studies by referring to my examination of inscriptions of the Chola period (10th to 13th centuries). Through their examination attempted to clarify the changes that occurred in the landholding system in the middle Chola period, and the great social change and upheaval that these represented. Many interesting and important features of ancient and medieval villages can be known from inscriptions, including information on village types, cultivation practices, taxes on villages, and the people who lived in the villages.*

**Keywords:** Pre-modern village studies, Inscriptions, South Indian history, The Chola state, Landholdings

### Introduction:

Inscriptions usually refer to the reigning king with his regnal year or the year of an era, such as the Saka era, on the basis of which we can reconstruct the political history of the period to a certain extent. Moreover, as the contents of inscriptions, especially of Tamil inscriptions, are various, with many different matters being recorded, we can also learn about the socio-economic conditions of the period from them. Inscriptions engraved on temple walls mostly record grants of money, cows, land, state revenue as tax, etc., made to that temple for conducting daily worship, festivals and repairs therein. Matters are often recorded in full length; if we consider, for example, land grants, the inscriptions often go into such detail as to inform us how the granter acquired the land, who should cultivate the land, what should be cultivated, what sort of taxes the temple should pay or be exempted from, etc., in addition to the extent and location of the land as defined by four boundaries.

A remarkable trend revealed by this table is the decrease, with the passage of time, in the Brahmana assemblies and individuals transacting land (except for Period III), and, in their place, the striking increase in non-Brahmana individuals who transacted land. We shall discuss this point later, but the important thing to note here is the contrast between Brahmana individuals (27.8%) and non-Brahmana individuals (1.5%), and also between non-

Brahmana assemblies (12%) and non-Brahmana individuals (1.5%) in Period I, which seems to indicate that non-Brahmanas, who lived in *ūr*-type villages, did not possess land individually in this period. Though not stated earlier, in some of the *brahmadēya* villages the land was held by the *sabhā* in common and not individually. Even in *brahmadēya* villages where most of the land was held individually, a part of the land was held in common, and there were many instances of such common land being disposed of by the *sabhā*'s charity. This accounts for the high percentage of transactions by Brahmana assemblies. At any rate, this analysis endorses as well as allows us to generalize the findings of the comparative study given above. Herein lies the importance of statistical study of inscriptions.

### Individual Landholdings in the Later Chola Period

Next, I shall briefly examine the late-Chola period inscriptions to point to changes in the landholding system. On the wall of the Tiruvanaikka temple in Jambukesvaram, close to Tiruchirappalli, many inscriptions have survived from the time of Rajaraja III and Rajendra III in the 13th century, which record the sale/donation of land to this islet temple.<sup>16</sup> The lands were scattered across several villages not far from the Kaveri river on its northern bank, and were sold or donated by people who had *kāṇi* right<sup>17</sup> to the village land. Four inscriptions record four such sales of dry land at Isanaikkurai

village to the Tiruvanaikka temple, one by an individual (*uḍaiyāṇ*) and his brother, two by two separate individuals (*uḍaiyāṇ/araiyaṇ*), and one by the *ūr* of the village. Though some of the land in this village was owned by the *ūr*, other lands were held and transacted by individuals whose names are given in the inscriptions along with their titles, such as *uḍaiyāṇ* (literally, possessor) and *araiyaṇ* (literally, king); in contrast, the transactions recorded in the early-period inscriptions were made by the *ūr* and have no reference to individual names.

#### Village, 'naḍu' and the Formation of 'jatis'

We shall now proceed to examine the relation between the village and the locality (*nāḍu*), which includes a number of villages. Royal orders to a locality were usually addressed to *nāṭṭār* (representatives of *anāḍu*), to *kiḷavar* of *brahmadēyas* (leading landholders of *brahmadēyas*), to *ūrgaḷilār* (representatives of *ūr*-type villages) and to *nagaraṅgaḷilār* (representatives of towns), from which we can understand the importance of the locality called *nāḍu* in state administration. *Nāḍu* was the basic areal (supra-village-level) unit where agrarian production and reproduction were carried out in ancient and medieval Tamil Nadu, hence it had importance in administration. There are various inscriptions which attest to its importance. Here, I quote a Pandyan inscription as an example.

An Agattiyampalli inscription (*SII*, 17, 549: Tj, 1299 CE) records a land grant to a temple and its tax remission made by *nāṭṭavar* (same as *nāṭṭār*) of Kunrur-nadu for the health of the king. Taxes consisting of *kaḍama* and *kuḍimai*, including *nelkaḍamai*, *kāśu-kaḍamai*, *kuḍimai*, *mēr-pāḍikāval*, *āyavargam*, *nāṭṭuvari* and *ūrvari*, were to be borne by the *nāṭṭavar*, who seem to have tried to show their fidelity to the new Pandyan ruler<sup>21</sup> by this charitable deed. The study of the issue of *jāti* based on inscriptions. Of course the area of a *jāti* group exceeds a village, and in this connection, an inscription which defines the area of the Palli people who frequently appear in the 12th and 13th century inscriptions in Tiruchirapalli, South and North Arcot, and Chingleput districts. An Aduturai inscription (*ARE* 1913-35: Tp, 1315 CE) records a resolution made by the Palli people in their assembly.

#### Conclusion

The Palli people described here composed the bowmen (archery) regiment of the Chola army, and this regiment seems to have recovered the images by attacking the Hoysala capital under the command of Vikramachola. The area of their habitation as defined in this inscription covered a hilly and dry area extending roughly 100 kilometres from north to south and 80 kilometres from east to west, in Tiruchirapalli and South Arcot districts. During the 13th century many of the ex-hill tribes seem to have descended to the plains and became agriculturists, acquiring land. We have many more inscriptions recording the activities of some of these ex-hill tribes, including Pallis, Surudimans and Malaiyamans, who increased their strength during the 12th and 13th centuries. Some members of their families grew into local. Without going into a detailed discussion of the issue here, it may also be noted that there are many inscriptions recording the activities of supra-local assemblies called *chitramēli-periyānāḍu* of agriculturists, *valaṅgai* (right hand) and *iḍaṅgai* (left hand) of lower *jāti* people composed of artisans and others, *ainūruvar* of merchants, etc., and revealing the names of their composing groups. For village studies, such pieces of information on a locality like *nāḍu*, which functioned as the areal production unit, and on *jātis*, which increased their number during the 13th and 14th centuries, are indispensable.

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