

# Artistic Elements in Ancient Sanskrit Inscriptions- An Overview

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## **ABSTRACT**

The art of artistic writing, in other words in a broad sense we may mean it as 'Calligraphy' which is defined as 'Beautiful Handwriting'. As we understand calligraphy is a word which is normally associated with Arabic and Persian inscriptions. Among the earlier scholars it is only Dr. Shivaramamurty in his monumental work "Indian Epigraphy and South Indian Scripts"<sup>1</sup> has written very briefly about the scribe and ornamental writing in the introduction.

Art and its idioms always attracted man. He not only appreciated the various art forms, but also allowed his ingenuity to play a great creative role in generating great artistic expressions as we see in many artforms, and art of writing is not an exception to it. The writer or engraver closely followed his artistic institution while creating ornamental forms.

I could cull out beautiful inscriptions of different periods, though most of the inscriptions selected fell in the time brackets of 6th to 8th centuries, and as we know it is a period where in abundance inscriptions in Kutila or Siddhamatrika script and shell character inscriptions are available which are highly ornamental in nature. When I started examining the inscriptions, I found beautiful inscriptions even early period. As mentioned above, in the beginning epigraphists were more seriously concerned about the texts of the inscriptions, paleographical and orthographical aspects, than the ornamentation or aesthetical aspects of the inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> A close examination of early inscriptions and inscriptions of subsequent periods, especially engraved in Brāhmi characters and its derivatives reveal subtle presence of artistic value in them. What I would like

to convey or draw the attention of the scholars is that all along the paleographical development there was an underlying element of artistic writing. I think we have to slightly modify our perception in appreciating especially early inscriptions. In the whole gamut of inscriptions which fall in different periods of space and time, there can be two categories and those inscriptions which are beautiful and not so beautiful or aesthetically appealing. Inscriptions can be beautiful to look at, but need not be always having ornamentation. Yet times, even a simple inscription uniformly engraved, with due attention given to each limb of the letter with proper alignment and space is also most appealing, though bereft of flourishes. For instance, even Rummendei Pillar inscription of Asoka<sup>3</sup>, though very simple, is beautiful, because of factors like choosing a well-polished pillar, and utmost care taken to engrave the letters uniformly, and it naturally looks beautiful. So, irrespective of the period to which the inscription belonged, the scribe who writes the inscription is very important, who imparts beauty to the inscriptions. Appreciating an inscription sometimes is more subjective and it depends on the individual how he perceives.<sup>4</sup> So, what I would like to mention is all along the paleographical development there is subtle element called 'beauty' which can be seen in some of the inscriptions at all periods and regions.

In early writing the scribe occupied a very prominent place. Ornamental letters were often written with the greater care and dexterity by the scribes. It is seen that expert craftsmen undertook the task of inscribing. Persons with extraordinary ability were chosen to work in the palace and there were special officers under the king known as *rajalekhakas*. The earliest of *lekhakas* in the royal services is known to us from an inscription is Chapad. He is styled *lipikara* and was responsible for the Brahmagiri and Siddhapura version of Asoka's edicts.<sup>5</sup>

The *lipikaras*, were sometimes really very skillful at their work and naturally took great pride in their execution. One Suksmasiva from the Gauda country, engraver of the Apsad inscription of "Adityasena", describes his letters as beautiful (*vikatakshara*).<sup>6</sup> A scribe from Vijayavada who engraved a charter of the

Eastern Chalukya king Narendramrigaraja is styled "Aksharalalitacharya" letters clear and distinct are compared to pearls and gems in all Indian languages<sup>7</sup>. A scribe Mahidhara compares the letters of an inscription engraved by him to the stars in the sky. Thus, there are many inscriptions, which also eulogises the scribes who are responsible for engraving inscriptions.

One important factor which acted as a catalyst in the evolution of Brahmi Script or in other words we can say the paradigm shift that took place in the evolution of the letters is due to the introduction of new technique i.e. pen technique, which gave altogether gave a different look to the letters. Of course, which was done without modifying the core body of the letters. So in the process of evolution ultimately lead to ornamental writing, i.e. the slight appearance of head marks, equalization of the limbs of letters, angularity and lengthening of the verticals, all these are no doubt important aspects connected with the evolution of the script Le Paleographical development. But, these are the factors which paved the way for making the letter more beautiful, and subsequently with the evolution of vowel signs, it gave further scope for ornamentation of the letters. One of the inscriptions where all the above mentioned features are seen is the Mathura inscription of Sodasa of 1st century B.C.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps, it may be said this became a trend setter as far as the North Indian inscriptions are concerned. Subsequently, the Kshatrapas and Kushanas followed style of writing with some modifications and produced beautiful inscriptions, though not with high ornamentation. Among the large number of Gupta inscriptions, particular mention may be made of Mahrauli pillar inscription of Chandra, which is beautifully engraved in monumental style on the iron pillar. Similarly, Bhilsad and Karmadanda inscriptions too are stylistically engraved and are beautiful.

The post Gupta period, witnessed phenomenal changes as far as the art of writing is concerned, particularly beginning from 6th century AD. to 8th century AD i.e. with the emergence of Siddhamatrika or Kutila script. It is in this script the scribes/engravers revealed their ingenuity and gave free vent to their

creativity, which manifested in various forms, particularly vowel signs which are replete with florid designs. Ornamentation was its acme with various floral designs bursting forth from the top of the limbs of the letters. As seen in the Banskhera copper-plate inscription and in other copper-plate charters of the king Harsha<sup>9</sup>. This trend continued in subsequent periods also with lesser degree of ornamentation. The slow emergence of different types of head marks on the letters, especially in the early period forms the genesis for the development of ornamentation. Even the box headed and nail-headed characters are stylistically more appealing in their own way, though bereft of ornamentation.

The shell character inscriptions, though predominantly has the shell features in the form of writing, the engraver/writer took utmost liberty to give his dexterous hand to move with high fluidity and allowed the letters to take its own forms which are artistically and aesthetically more appealing and we see creativity saw no bounds in forming the letters. As we are aware, large number of inscriptions have come from North India, especially from Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh which are highly ornamental in nature.

Further, in North India, especially we see the progression of Siddhamatrika into early Nagari characters. There are a large number of elegantly carved beautiful inscriptions in early Nāgari, though bereft of much ornamentation are very beautiful.

In South India, the early Brahmi inscriptions of Satavahana, especially of later Satavanas are very elegant and beautiful. Sannati inscription of Gautamiputra Satakarni is most exquisitely engraved below the sculptured panel.<sup>10</sup> We may note that the uniformity in engraving and lengthening of the verticals have imparted beauty to the writing. Their successors, the Ikshvakus continued the same tradition of engraving beautiful inscriptions, with their typical style of writing, characterized by long verticals which imparted altogether different look. With long strokes and gentle curve the inscriptions are strikingly beautiful.

The Kadambas of Banavasi have left for us beautiful inscriptions. Particularly, their Box-headed character inscriptions, which are different from that of Box headed characters which are seen on those of Vakataka Charters. They are unique for their execution and they form a class by themselves.

Further, in the South which draws our utmost attention are the inscriptions of the Pallavas written in Siddhamatrika characters found in the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipurani I may not be wrong, if I say that they are the best specimens of ornamental writing of highest order. The engraver has displayed his best artistic skill in engraving the inscriptions.

I would like to mention here that some of the Hoysala inscriptions are the best specimens of Kannada calligraphy replete with lots of flourishes and ornamentation. They can be best seen in the inscriptions from Belur.

**Sum up-** To sum up my article I wish to state that we have to change our perceptions little and see that there are beautiful inscriptions even in the early phase, and note that all along the evolution of Brahmi script with prominent paleographical changes taking at different point of time there was always a subtle presence of artistic element in inscriptions irrespective of the period to which they belong. Earlier we used to appreciate aesthetic or artistic value in inscriptions in rare and isolated instances. Hence, I feel an attempt should be made to bring together all the inscriptions which have some striking artistic elements in them, so that they could be categorised from the point of view of different regions and periods, they can also be closely studied exclusively from the point of artistry, and also take a holistic view, and appreciate better our rich legacy of artistic tradition in writing.

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