

EPIGRAPHICAL STUDIES IN INDIA (ARABIC & PERSIAN INSCRIPTIONS)

Introduction

The Epigraphy Branch of Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of the Archaeological Survey of India with its headquarters at Nagpur since 1958. This Branch is responsible for copying, editing and publication of Arabic and Persian inscriptions throughout the country to shed light on historical and cultural heritage of the country.

During the last four decades over 10,000 inscriptions have been copied from different parts of the country and duly accessioned, deciphered and listed in the Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy (ARE) since 1952-53 onwards, under a separate Appendix with an exhaustive introduction. Among the Indian states, Uttar Pradesh has yielded the largest number of Perso-Arabic epigraphs (i.e. 2175), constituting 21.4 % of the aggregate, number-wise followed by Maharashtra (over 14%), Gujarat (over 9%), Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh (about 9%), Rajasthan (about 8%), Karnataka (7%), West Bengal (4%), Bihar, and Jammu & Kashmir (about 4% each), Tamil Nadu (2.55%), Haryana (2%), Delhi (about 2%). About 2,000 Perso-Arabic inscriptions have been published so far in *Epigraphia Indo-Moslemica* (EIM) and *Epigraphia Indica-Arabic and Persian Supplement* (EIAPS) from 1907-08 to 1977.

Beginnings

The study of Perso-Arabic inscriptions in India practically started with the establishment of Asiatic Society of Bengal by Sir William Jones at Calcutta in 1784. The setting up of the department of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861, headed by A. Cunningham as the Archaeological Surveyor, intensified the activities in the field of research and exploration including Indo-Muslim epigraphy.

The first works on Perso-Arabic inscriptions on Islamic monuments were: *Sairu'l Manazil* by Mirza Sangin Beg (before 1820) and *Atharu's Sanadid* by Sayyid Ahmad Khan (Kanpur, 1846). Among European and British orientalist who brought to light Perso-Arabic epigraphs were: H. Cousens, A. Fuhrer, Edmond Smith and H. Blochmann, Asstt. Prof. and Principal of Calcutta Madrasa who published them in the *Journal & Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (JASB)- a precursor of *Epigraphia Indica* (EI) (1.892). In 1894 (EI, vol. II) two articles on Perso-Arabic inscriptions from Delhi were published by Dr. Paul Horn of Strasburg University.

The first major published study of Perso-Arabic inscriptions of particular site was: *Gaur-Its Ruins & Inscriptions* (London, 1878), by R. H. Ravenshaw; *Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains and Inscriptions* (Lahore, 1896), and *Agra : Historical & Descriptive* (Calcutta, 1896), both by Sayyid Mohammad Latif, and M. A. Chaghtai's, *Muslim Monuments of Ahmedabad Through Their Inscriptions* (Poona, 1942).

Among the periodicals, mention may be made of *Asiatic Researches* (Calcutta), *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Calcutta), *Indian Antiquary* (Bombay) and *Journal of Bihar Research Society* (Patna) that provided sufficient coverage to Indo-Muslim epigraphy. Among the prominent individual scholars who performed pioneer work on Indo-Islamic epigraphy, mention may be made of Maulavi Bashirud Din Ahmad who painstakingly wrote *Waqi'at-i-Daru'l Hukumat*, Dehli (Agra, 1919); Syed Asghar Ali Bilgrami who authored *Ma'athir-i-Dakan* (Hyderabad, 1925) in Urdu and *Landmarks of the Deccan*

(Hyderabad, 1927) in English, and Ali Asghar Hikmat placed before us his work in Persian, *Naqsh-i-Parsi bar Ahjar-i-Hind* (2nd ed., Shahryur 1337) (1958, Tehran).

Epigraphia Indica was started in 1892 with a view to primarily dealing with the epigraphical material pertaining to ancient Indian History. Since the Perso-Arabic epigraphs were available in large number, it was deemed necessary to publish them in a separate biennial journal named *Epigraphia Indo-Moslemica*.

It was Sir E. Denison Ross, the famous British orientalist and Principal of Calcutta Madrasa who edited the first issue of *Epigraphia Indo-Moslemica* (EIM), 1907-08, Dr. J. Horowitz, Professor of Arabic in Anglo-Oriental College, Aligarh, edited the two subsequent issues of *EIM* 1909-10 and 1911-12. Afterwards, Dr. Ghulam Yazdani, Director of the Archaeology Department in the Nizam's Dominions at Hyderabad and Honorary Muslim Epigraphist to the Government of India, edited 15 issues of *EIM* 1913-14 onward to 1939-40.

A full time post of Assistant Superintendent for Arabic and Persian Inscriptions was created by the Government of India in 1946 and the next issue of *EIM* 1949-50 was edited by Maulavi M. Ashraf Husain who had joined the said post in 1949.

Dr. Ziyauddin Ahmad Desai succeeded Maulavi Ashraf Husain in 1953. He started editing the Perso-Arabic section under a separate Appendix of *Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy*-1952-53 onwards, so also the prestigious biennial *Epigraphia Indica-Arabic and Persian Supplement* (EIAPS), 1951 and 1952, onwards, in continuation to *Epigraphia Indo-Moslemica* (EIM). This epigraphic journal became an annual publication since the issue of 1961.

Period and Language

Indian Islamic inscriptions date from the last decade of the 12th century AD (to be exact AH 587) 1192 AD when Muhammad Ghauri conquered Delhi and established his kingdom there), with the exception of about a dozen, bearing earlier dates, found in Haryana, Gujarat and Kerala. Perso-Arabic epigraphs are usually found on sectarian buildings like mosques and tombs or secular edifices like forts, palaces, gateways, tanks, wells, gardens, bridges, sarais and the like.

Certain movable objects like arms, seals, signets, vases, utensils and tombs account for majority of inscriptions, next followed by forts.

The language of the records of the early period of the Delhi Sultanate is Arabic. Majority of epigraphical records is in Persian in view of the fact that Persian had been the state or official language right from the beginning of the Muslim rule, i.e. 1206 AD upto 1857 AD, spanning six centuries and a half. Persian played an important role in the educational and cultural life of the various regions of the sub-continent in varying degrees depending upon local factors.

Apart from Arabic, Persian and Urdu inscriptions, there are bilingual inscriptions, i.e. Arabic with regional languages like Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil and Malayalam and Persian with the provincial languages like Kannada, Telugu, Oriya, Tamil, Gujarati and Marathi. Besides these regional or provincial languages with Persian and Arabic, mention may be made of other bilingual inscriptions like Arabic with Sanskrit or local dialect, or Persian with local dialect, Sanskrit, Hindi, English, Portuguese and Armenian and Hebrew are trilingual (Arabic, Persian and Bangala; Persian, Kannada and English; Persian, Marathi

and Kannada, and Persian, Armenian and Hebrew) and quadrilingual records as well (Arabic, Urdu, Hindi and English, and Persian, Marathi, Telugu and English).

Importance of the epigraphs

Majority of the Perso-Arabic inscriptions are dated in Hijri year. Individual towns with large number of Perso-Arabic epigraphs include Delhi, Agra, Jaunpur, Ahmedabad, Gulbarga, Hyderabad, and Nagaur. These epigraphs frequently fill up lacuna or unconfirmed gaps in our knowledge of India's past. Being strictly contemporary and perfectly genuine records, they constitute first hand source-material and provide valuable and definite data for the varied aspects of the history of different periods in different regions.

They correct incongruity or misstatements, supply correct dates of events about which information from other sources is available but is confusing or vague, corroborate or contradict statements of historians or supply details left out by them and supply correct spellings of names and places. They provide much more data for the local history and political status of a particular region at a given time.

These inscriptions constitute the most primary and contemporary source for the exact date of monuments of various description and provide much needed definite time-factor and sure chronology, thus forming a sound and secure base for evaluation of the monuments in the context of art and architecture and thereby bring out concept of the origin and development of monumental styles.

There are inscriptions which give information about the relations between different communities and also instances of religious toleration. These inscriptions again furnish in some cases, the history of repairs, extension or addition to monuments. Of greater importance is the information supplied by these inscriptions on other aspects of contemporary life including administration, levy or remission of unlawful duties or imposts of different nature, prohibiting undesirable practices etc. Another art form of Indian Islamic monumental art, best served by Perso-Arabic inscriptions, is calligraphy. Islamic world has long regarded calligraphy as the highest form of artistic expression. Calligraphic inscriptions constitute the most important decorative element in Indian Islamic Architecture which attained a high level of perfection in Qutb Minar at Delhi, Adina Mosque at Pandua (in Bengal), Atala Mosque at Jaunpur, Jami Mosques at Ahmedabad, Golconda and Hyderabad, Akbar's tomb at Sikandra, Ibrahim Rauda at Bijapur and Taj Mahal at Agra.

Calligraphers

With the help of these epigraphs, we can prepare a list of calligraphers, region-wise and period-wise, whose beautiful calligraphy adorns so many buildings in the width and breadth of the country. Scripts employed in the Perso-Arabic epigraphs include Kufi, Naskh, Thulth and Nastaliq.

The last mentioned was the preferred script of the Mughals. Inscriptions of earlier dates are in Arabic and in Kufi characters. Persian is found employed since the end of the 13th century and with regularity under the Khaljis. Bengal and Kerala are dominant in Arabic inscriptions.

Urdu made appearance in epigraphs in the middle of 18th century. Bengal and Gujarat developed individuality of their own in script or calligraphy. Among the Muslims the representation of living beings or human forms was forbidden by religious injunction. Thus, Muslim in India and elsewhere took recourse to execution of geometrical and arabesque patterns on the one hand and ornamental writing on the other. The importance laid on

making beautiful and decorative copies of the holy Quran as an ardent expression of faith fostered the much valued art of calligraphy. Perso-Arabic inscriptions have two-fold importance, historical and calligraphical. The Muslim rulers and their noblemen greatly contributed to the development of the calligraphical art. Some inscriptions furnish pictorial form of Tughra in which the text is written in such a way as to form the outline of a lion or bird.

Important dynasties

The Perso-Arabic inscriptions found in India cover a vast canvas. Almost all parts of the country and almost all dynasties, major and minor, provincial and regional are represented. Among them, prominent dynasties are the Mamluks, Khaljis, Tughluqs, Sayyids, Lodis, Mughals; Sultans of Bengal, Gujarat, Kashmir, Malwa and Mysore; Bahmanis, Faruqis of Khandesh, Sharqis of Jaunpur, Adil Shahis, Nizam Shahis, Qutb Shahis, Asaf Jahis; Nawabs of Arcot, Awadh, Murshidabad and Karnatak; Bhonslas of Nagpur, Gaikwads of Baroda, Holkars of Indore, Marathas of Tanjore, Sindhiyas of Gwalior and the Rohillas.

Subject of the epigraphs

The subjects contained in all these epigraphs including the miscellaneous ones are of varied nature, supplied to us piecemeal but collectively reflecting multi-dimensional aspects of history and culture, language and literature, arts and architecture. Apart from all other literary Persian sources available in India, Persian epigraphical data is no doubt piecemeal but quite vast and varied in giving multifarious information that can be utilised as an important source-material for the study of Indo-Persian literature.

Persian epigraphs

From the 13th century onward, Persian came to be employed as the medium of epigraphic texts along with Arabic but in the next century (14th), Persian gained wider currency for this purpose. It gradually replaced Arabic as the epigraphic medium under the Mughals and almost completely substituted Arabic in historical epigraphs. These epigraphs tend to show to what extent and degrees, the usage of Persian language and literature has been practiced in different parts of India at different periods, under various central, provincial and regional dynasties. As a part of cultural study under Persian language and literature, a list of composers can also be classified. In a good number of cases, the composers of the metrical epigraphs are indicated in the text and as a result these poets can be assigned to pre-Mughal periods on one hand, and on the other, to different provincial kingdoms and minor principalities. Interestingly, we also come across epigraphical texts composed by rulers like Adil Shahi king Ali II (1656-71), Mughal king Bahadur Shah II (1837-57) and Nawwab of Awadh Wajid Ali Shah (1848-56).

A vast majority of these poets mentioned in epigraphs are unknown from available sources. It is particularly these metrical records which are of value as specimens of Indo-Persian literature. Of these, those of the Sultanate period, covering approximately 12th to 15th centuries (7th -9th cent. H.) are particularly valuable. Another cultural aspect that can be culled out from these epigraphs is the preparation of a long list of Iranian and Afghan settlers in different parts of India, belonging to different vocations in life who came from different parts of Iran and Afghanistan and from elsewhere. The places, to quote a few, where this phenomenon occurred are : Cambay in the 12th to 14th centuries, Karad (Maharashtra) in the 16th century, Hyderabad in the 17th century, Lucknow, Allahabad, Kashmir etc. in the subsequent period. This information is quite useful for some aspects of

sociological and cultural studies, giving an insight into composition of present ethnic groups of local population in the country and pattern of their professions.

Information on relation with other countries

The names of a good number of foreign places and countries in these epigraphs tend to show some cultural relations with the Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey, Yemen, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan etc. For the evaluation of ethnic composition in different regions of India, the study of various communities, both indigenous and foreign, is also important.

Some of the names as gleaned from epigraphs include: Afghan, Amlani, Arab, Baluch, Lodi, Mughal, Turani, Bara Imamiyya, Bohra, Brahmin, Chauhan, Gahlot, Gaur, Hindu, Jain, Koshti, Koli, Kayasth, Portuguese, Rajput, Rathor, Srivastava, Sayyid and Tawaif (dancing girls). Regarding various cities and towns in India, different epithets find mention in a good number of epigraphs.

They are also important for the cultural history of such places. These epithets denote time-flavour regarding the names of such places and tend to show the spirit that was prevailing during the Muslim period, particularly under the Mughals. Some of the epithets found in epigraphs and other Persian sources are: Akbarabad (Agra), Shahjahanabad (Delhi), Muhamadabad (Bidar), Alamgirpur (Vidisha), Azimabad (Patna), Daruz Zafar (Bijapur), Khidrabad (Chittorgarh), Darulkhair (Ajmer), Fathabad (Chanqeri), Jahangimagar (Dhaka), Gulshanabad (Nasik), Mubarakabad (Miraj), Jannatpur (Jalna) etc. It is the epigraphs which owe to the existence of multifarious monuments religious and secular, bringing to light a good deal of building and centres of building activities and illustrating how rulers, officials and private rich persons were interested in the welfare of the general public.