SANACOR08T(SECTION-A)

Study Materials

Importance of Indian Inscriptions in the reconstruction of Ancient Indian History and Culture

Political and dynastic history

Inscriptions constitute the principal source for the history of pre-Islamic India, providing a large majority of the total information available; and that, were it not for inscriptions, we would not know even the most basic rudiments of the dynastic chronology of India before A.D. 1000. But the reconstruction of history from primarily epigraphic and other archaeological sources, as opposed to literary ones, involves many special problems and requires the development and application of appropriate analytic techniques. The main problem is that most inscriptions are not essentially historical documents but rather donative or panegyric records which may incidentally record some amount of historical information. Thus the standards of objectivity, precision, and comprehensiveness that guide modern historical thought are completely absent in these sources, and the modern scholar must exercise cautious critical judgment in evaluating them.

Chronology and genealogy inevitably, the picture of the dynastic history of ancient and medieval India to be drawn from epigraphic and other sources is not only incomplete but also replete with uncertainties. For several of the earlier dynasties, such as the Surigas, we have only the most meager epigraphic fragments, which must be combined with whatever supplementary evidence may be gleaned from literary sources to reconstruct a rough chronological and historical sequence. But for many later dynasties, especially in the medieval period, the picture is much brighter; in the case of such dynasties as the Rastrakutas, for instance, where epigraphic remains are relatively abundant, we can reconstruct a reasonably detailed account of their history, chronology, and geography. The difference between the earlier and later periods lies not only in the amounts of epigraphic material available but also in their contents. Thus in the early period we find such extraordinarily vague formulations as a dating merely "during the reign of the Surigas" whereas in medieval inscriptions the dating formulae and historical situation are often detailed and explicit. As an ideal example, in the inscriptions of the Eastern Calukyas the genealogical introduction not only includes the usual eulogistic description of the forefathers of the current king but also states the number of years of their rule enabling historians to reconstruct that dynasty's chronology with particular precision.

In most cases, of course, the situation lies somewhere between these two extremes. More typically, for dynasties for which we have a reasonable number of records dated in a continuous era, we can reconstruct a dynastic chronology with reasonable accuracy. The main problem is usually that for determining the earliest and latest dates of any particular ruler we are at the mercy of chance finds of dated inscriptions, and the precise date of transition of rule can be known only in such cases as we are fortunate enough to have records of two kings dated in the same or at least in successive

years. Otherwise, we can only estimate these dates based on the range of attested dates for each king. The result of this situation is that for many of the better-represented dynasties of the medieval period, for example, the Rastrakutas or the Gurjara-Pratlharas, we can usually date each king at least within a range of a few years, and frequently to the year.

But we are less well informed with regard to earlier, less abundantly attested dynasties or to those which dated their records in regnal years only. The chronology of the Palas, for example, is considerably less certain than that of the contemporary Rastrakutas, not because of any scarcity of materials but because their records are dated only in regnal years. Regnally dated records require some type of historical synchronization which can provide absolute chronological "anchor points." These are typically provided (if at all) by reference to historical personages or events known from other sources, the classic case being the absolute dating of Asoka's regnally dated inscriptions provided by chronological correlation with the known dates of the five Hellenistic kings referred to in his rock edict XIII, which enabled historians to definitively fix Asoka's reign at around the middle of the third century B.C. With regard to the genealogy of the various dynasties too, the state of our understanding varies considerably. In general, the succession of rulers can be determined from genealogical accounts in the inscriptions themselves, especially from the early medieval period onward, when it became customary to provide a quasi-historical preface to inscriptions. But the record is often less clear, especially in earlier inscriptions which lack full genealogical accounts. In such cases, the recurrence of the same name in different generations can be troublesome, as in the case, for example, of the Kusanas or the Guptas, where the repetitions of the names Kaniska and Kumaragupta respectively, have caused no end of frustration to modern historians.

Equally troublesome is the practice, especially in later inscriptions, of referring to the same king by two or even more different names in different records, which sometimes produces serious or even insoluble genealogical problems; see, for example, the problems of Gurjara-Pratlhara genealogy discussed in R. C. Majumdar, ed., The Age of Imperial Kanauj . Finally, there is the problem of inconsistencies between the genealogies of a particular dynasty as given in different inscriptions, or between genealogies as preserved in inscriptions and in noninscriptional sources such as literature. To choose a well-known example, Skandagupta, an important late ruler of the imperial Guptas, is well known from several inscriptions from the time of his own rule but is not mentioned in the genealogies of the Gupta kings who succeeded him. The explanation here, as in most such cases, is that he was not succeeded by his own descendants but by his brother and/or the latter's son(s).

As emphasized by Henige , the lineages given in inscriptions are typically genealogies, not king-lists. The result is that when, as is very commonly the case in ancient India , the throne did not pass directly from father to son in every generation but rather from brother to brother or nephew to uncle, the strictly genealogical lists of the later kings would pass over one or more of their predecessors on the throne. This phenomenon of "collateral suppression" creates many problems in the reconstruction of royal genealogies, especially when the inscriptional material is scanty, and it has led, as convincingly demonstrated by Henige, to many cases of inaccurate or downright imaginary dynastic reconstructions by insufficiently critical historians. In this respect and in others as well, the strong cautions urged by Henige against "latter-day 'dynasty building'" , "a maximum of inference based on a minimum of satisfactory data" , and "epigraphic legerdemain" should be heeded by epigraphists and historians. Given the usual shortage of data, there is always a temptation to indulge in the construction of more detailed dynastic genealogies than is justified by

the materials. But scholars must avoid such temptation and understand and work within the limits imposed by epigraphic information; they must, in Henige's words, "recognize the inherent limitations of their materials" .

Geographical and historical data Such cautions are equally applicable to descriptions of the geographical extent of the Indian dynasties. The central territories and extent of the various kingdoms attested in inscriptions are generally deduced on the grounds of the fmdspots of the inscriptions themselves and claims of territories and conquests made in the inscriptions. The first method has two main limitations.

First, the geographical record preserved by inscriptions, like their chronological record, is necessarily incomplete, providing merely random spots in a larger field; and also as in the case of chronological reconstruction, it is only in such cases (which are the minority) where we have a reasonably large number of records for a particular ruler that we can determine anything like a clear picture of the extent of his realm.

Second, it cannot always be assumed that the findspots of inscriptions are their original location, particularly in the case of copper plates, which were sometimes removed from their original location by grantees who migrated to a different region. Thus a single instance of a portable inscription found outside the known limits of a ruler's realm should not be automatically accepted as evidence of his vast conquests, but a consistent pattern of this may be historically. The territorial and military claims put forth in the inscriptions themselves are even more problematic. That many rulers (or rather their court poets), especially in medieval times, shamelessly exaggerated the territorial extent of their empires or spheres of influence is well established. The question is how to distinguish fact, or at least a core of fact, from the conventional bombast and rhetorical exaggeration of the prasasti style. A classic contrast is provided by the claims of digvijaya or conquest of the whole world (i.e., of India) made on behalf of Samudragupta in the Allahabad pillar inscription and of the Aulikara ruler Yasodharman in the Mandasor pillar inscription. In the case of the former, the extensive and detailed list of kings and territories in the south, west, and north of India whose conquest or submission Samudragupta claimed lends a semblance of credence, so that historians generally accept that he did in fact rule over or at least raid the places in question, despite the absence of any corroborative evidence. In Yasodharman', on the other hand, the claims of sovereignty from the Lauhitya (Brahmaputra) River in the east to the ocean in the west and from the Mahendra Mountain in the south to the Himalayas in the north are obviously formulaic, and no historian would be willing to credit Yasodharman with anything like a pan-Indian empire. Thus the rule of thumb followed by most historians with regard to such claims is that the more specific and nonformulaic they are, the more likely they are to be historically justified; in Sircar's words, "Vague claims are generally less reliable than definite statements involving the mention of the personal names of adversaries" . Especially in later inscriptions, such grandiose and obviously spurious claims to vast territories become almost routine, even to the extent that poetic considerations overrule historical plausibility; thus in the Khajuraho inscription the Candella king Yasovarman is described as kosalah kosalanam nasyatkasmlravirah sithilitamithilah kalavan malavdnam, "who seized the treasuries of Kosala, who destroyed the heroes of Kashmir, who weakened Mithila, and was like Death to Malwa." Here, in Sircar's words, "It seems that the lure of alliteration... carried the poet far away from historical accuracy" .9 Moreover, even those boasts of victory which are based on historical fact are almost invariably couched in highly rhetorical style in which mundane details of time, place, and military

strategy are rarely specified. Given this situation, historians will naturally wish to evaluate the claims put forth in the inscriptions in the light of corroborative evidence, whether in the form of material from other inscriptions or from literary or other alternative sources. For instance, Pulakesin IPs claims in the Aihole inscription of a victory over Harsa finds explicit corroboration in the testimony of the Chinese pilgrim Hsiian Tsang, and hence can be considered reliable. Corroboration from other inscriptions is often harder to establish, due not only to the general problems of the historical evaluation already alluded to but also to the tendency of the poets to gloss over, distort, or simply ignore their patrons' military defeats . In some cases, however, such corroboration can be established, for example, in the case of Gurjara-Pratlhara Nagabhata's victory over his Pala enemy referred to in the Gwalior prasasti which is confirmed by similar statements in the separate records of three of Nagabhata's subordinate allies: " The combined testimony of the four different records, coming from four different sources,. .. leave no doubt that Nagabhata scored a great victory over his Pala rival Dharmapala.The Pala records," on the other hand, not untypically "make no reference to this struggle." Occasionally we do find cases where a conflict is reported from both sides, and here we are faced with special problems of analysis. For instance, the same GurjaraPratThara King Nagabhata's war with Indra, the Rastrakuta king of Gujarat, seems to be alluded to in inscriptions in which victory is claimed by both sides; in such a case, if no further determination is possible, "It may be concluded.. . that no party gained a decisive victory." A similar problem has been raised by the recent discovery of the earliest inscription of the imperial Gurjara-Pratlharas in which King Vatsaraja's forces are said to have conquered all of Karnataka , while his contemporary in that region, the Rastrakuta king Dhruva, explicitly claims in his inscriptions to have defeated Vatsaraja. Here the editors comment, "These claims and counterclaims of victory are, more or less, a conventional part of epigraphic poetry and may indicate either the uncertain nature of the outcome of the battles ... or may pertain to different battles in which the results were successively reversed and for which we do not have tangible evidence. Such conflicting claims, in other words, can be settled or reconciled, if at all, only when other evidence, for example, the locations of subsequent inscriptions of the rulers concerned, provide clear corroboration of the claims of one or the other of them. Such, in short, are some of the typical problems which confront the historian in attempting to evaluate the highly rhetorical, subjective, and often intentionally vague statements of eulogistic inscriptions. The results, not surprisingly, are more often than not less than entirely satisfactory. For the earlier periods of Indian history we often have little more than the vaguest outlines of events and chronologies. In the classical and medieval periods we are somewhat better off, but even here we have, with rare exceptions, only the bare outlines of chronology and events and relatively little in the way of details to flesh out the skeleton of history. There will always be many uncertainties, and any historical study based on epigraphic sources will inevitably be filled with qualifications like "probably," "possibly," and "it would appear that." Indeed, any such study that is not provided with such stipulations should be viewed with suspicion.