

Dr. R. Nagaswamy's Impact on Tamil Epigraphy: A Legacy of Scholarly Contributions

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Abstract- *Dr. Ramachandran Nagaswamy, a distinguished Archaeologist, epigraphist, and historian, has left an indelible mark on the study of Tamil epigraphy. Having earned his Master's degree in Sanskrit language and literature from Madras University and a Ph.D. in Indian Arts from Poona, Dr. Nagaswamy's expertise spans a wide range of disciplines, including Art, Archaeology, Architecture, Literature, Epigraphy, Paleography, Numismatics, Temple rituals and philosophy, Ancient law and society, Music, Dance, and South Asian Art.*

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While some of his later works may have sparked controversy among Tamil scholars, the magnitude of Dr. Nagaswamy's contributions to Tamil Arts, epigraphy, and Archaeology remains substantial. This article aims to explore and highlight the key contributions made by Dr. R. Nagaswamy in the realm of Tamil epigraphy, showcasing his enduring legacy in the field.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dr. Ramachandran Nagaswamy, a distinguished Archaeologist, epigraphist, and historian, has left an indelible mark on the study of Tamil epigraphy. Having earned his Master's degree in Sanskrit language and literature from Madras University and a Ph.D. in Indian Arts from Poona, Dr. Nagaswamy's expertise spans a wide range of disciplines, including Art, Archaeology, Architecture, Literature, Epigraphy, Paleography, Numismatics, Temple rituals and philosophy, Ancient law and society, Music, Dance, and South Asian Art.

His professional journey includes serving as the Curator for Art and Archaeology at the Madras Museum from 1959 to 1963, followed by a role as the Assistant Special Officer at the Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology from 1963 to 1965. Notably, he went on to become the inaugural Director of Archaeology for the State, holding this esteemed position from 1966 to 1988.

Post-retirement, Dr. Nagaswamy continued his scholarly pursuits by leading the Epigraphy Program at EFEO in Pondicherry. Additionally, he served as a Consultant for the Government of India, contributing to the Documentation of Cultural Property Tanjavur

II. UNVEILING DR. R. NAGASAMY'S REMARKABLE CONTRIBUTIONS TO TAMIL EPIGRAPHY

Epigraphy, a pivotal subset of archaeology, stands as a paramount source for understanding and documenting history. In the Indian context, it predominantly refers to inscriptions on ancient monuments such as caves, rock-cut temples, and structural temples. Tamil inscriptions hold a substantial share, constituting over 45% of the total inscriptions in the Indian subcontinent, as reported by the Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department. This article delves into the significant contributions of Dr. R. Nagaswamy to the field of Tamil epigraphy.

As we all know in the Indian subcontinent Tamil inscription occupies the highest volume, that of almost more than 45% of total inscriptions which stated clearly in the report of Tamil Nadu archaeology department. It has been estimated with a fair degree of accuracy that the inscriptions written in Tamil occupy the first position in volume, amounting nearly twenty thousand, followed by those in Kannada (10,600), Sanskrit (7,500) and Telugu (4,500). Inscriptions in the Tamil language are noticed from the third century BCE onwards.¹

It is an immense and quite huge process to document, interpret and publish those inscriptions, which is not an ordinary task. Dr. R. Nagasamy is one of the notable people in this field of Tamil epigraphy whose contribution made even ordinary people and students access the ancient Tamil inscriptional sources. This article deals with the contributions of Dr. R. Nagasamy in the field of Tamil epigraphy.

III. FROM TAMIL-BRAHMI TO TAMILI

The terminology associated with historical and cultural factors plays a crucial role, often intertwined with political and cultural considerations. In the multicultural and multilingual landscape of India, the coining of terms relating to historical and cultural aspects requires careful consideration. Driven by the diverse ethnic and cultural population, historical debates emerged regarding the origin of scripts in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in the field of Indian epigraphy.

Terminologies are the most important factors which are many times deeply related to political and cultural factors. In a country like India where there is a vast diverse ethnic and cultural population, it is a great deal to deal to coin and term certain historical and cultural factors and that too the terminology should affect the cultural norms of the population. As we all know India has multicultural and lingual faces. While writing the history of this subcontinent one should be extremely careful in the intersecting areas where the fusion of northern and southern culture occurs.

Indian Epigraphy is one such field, there was a long time conflict between the scholars in writing the history, the origin of writing script in this subcontinent to subject to various debates and scrutiny since the colonial period, majorly two schools based on linguistic background emerged prevalently, one supports the southern origin of the script and another school supports the northern origin of the script and by naturally these two schools falls on two linguistic paradigms which the northern origin goes with the Indo Aryan linguistic oriented and the southern origin goes with the Tamilic family.

This historical debate and scholarly conflicts on the origin of scripts are reflected in the terminology too.

The script which both schools of thought defending is the script which today referred to as the Brahmi, which is the mother script of all Indian scripts written today. This script is used all over this subcontinent except the northwestern region but the thing that makes the conflict here is the languages. This ancient script was used to write Tamil inscriptions down south and the same scripts with certain modifications and additional features were used in the Northern inscriptions to inscribe Prakrit, the then lingo of Franca. And later the same script was used to write the hybrid Sanskrit in the second century A.D.

Even though the script was deciphered in 1837 by the combined effort of Christian Lassen and James Prinsep, initially it was called Dhamma lipi, lath, Asokan lipi, and Mauryan lipi based on the nature of inscription like content, object, language, and dynasty name. Only in 1885, the script was termed Brahmi by a French scholar Terrain de lacouperie based on a comparison of Jainist and Buddhist literature with Chinese sources². But, there is no straight reference that the script which now they term Brahmi was originally called Brahmi at that time³. Automatically this leads to the growth of other opinions.

Dr. Nagaswamy is one of the Pioneers in the state department of Archaeology who matched the southern variety of script with the name found in the list, which was also cited by Terrain de Lacouperie to term Brahmi, which Nagaswamy points out that the list also contains the name Damili parallel. He also further states that the script Damili has coexisted with Brahmi, which mentions the southern variety of the script used to write Tamil inscriptions. He stated that we can call this script Tamili⁴ instead of Tamil-Brahmi.

Even though earlier itself many Tamil scholars advocated to replace the term Tamil – Brahmi with Tamili but, only after Nagaswamy and Natanakasinaathan's works, became very prominent which strongly advocated that the term Tamili is the proper terminology to coin the ancient script. It was a milestone in the history of Tamil epigraphy where the usage of the term Tamili to identify the unique variety of ancient script used in Tamil inscription.

- Epigraphy works of Dr. Nagaswamy:

There are many notable works by Dr. Nagaswamy in the field of Tamil epigraphy and they are listed below, one of them is an important work Kalvettiyal, which is especially for the general public and epigraphy students who are starting from scratch. Dr. Nagaswamy contributed six essays for the book “Kalvettiyal” (Epigraphy) published by the state department of Archaeology re-published in 2010. In which he clearly explains the following,

- Paleography of Tamil Inscriptions
- Tamil inscriptions and paleography
- Tamil script
- Vatteluthu
- Nadukal (hero stones)

This stands as a great introductory work to understand the Tamil Epigraphy. He also provided various re-reading for twenty Tamil inscriptions with proper meaning. And other famous epigraphy works as follows,

1. Thiruttani and Velancheri copper plate – a book in English released in 1979, published Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology.

This book consists of original texts of the newly found copper plates of Pallava Aparajitha varman and Parantaka cholan are published both in Nagari and Tamil characters. The book also gives detailed English translations of the text and analyses the historical background provided by the texts. The grants refer to the land grants made to the famous temple of Subrahmanya on the top of the hill at Thiruttani and entrusting the administration of the donation with the village assemblies of Meliruncheru and Sarvapalli by the monarchs. Both the records are Royal grants and give for the first time the early history of this famous temple.

2. Tamil Coins - a study, a book in English released in 1981, published by Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology.

The work deals with coins dispensed by different dynasties of Tamil Nadu, with special reference to the Cheras, the Cholas, the Pandyas, Pallavas, and others from the beginning to the very end of their rule. The most important part of this book is the chapter devoted to the bilingual coins of the Satavahanas. The newly found "Certain coins" are also comprised in this book.

Tamil currency in the 14th century followed by coins of Vijayanagar rulers, Nayaks of Madurai, and Tanjore, and also the Banas are studied regarding the actual issues and inscriptions. The value of the currency as echoed in sales and taxation recorded in epigraphs are given in detail. The French, Dutch and Danish coins are also drawn in the supplements.

IV. EDITED WORKS

1. தர்மபுரி கல்வெட்டுகள் (Darmapuri kalvettukal) edited work in the Tamil language released in 1975.

This book is one of the most important releases in the field of Tamil Epigraphy, which deals with the inscriptions mounted in the “Takadur” region (that is present Dharmapuri). This region consists of hero stones of Pallavas and Ganga times.

2. செங்கம் நடுகற்கள் (Chengam Nadukarkal) Tamil/ 1972. Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology.

Includes original readings of several hero-stone inscriptions copied for the first time from Chengam Taluk of North Arcot district, with location and historical summary to each

3. Kalvettu Karuttarangu - Seminar on Inscriptions;1966, edited work released in both English and Tamil in 1968. Published by Books India Pvt. Limited.

Collection of forty papers presented in a seminar on Epigraphy including the famous work of Dr. Iravadham Mahadevan's "corpus of Tamil Brahmi inscriptions" and "the musical inscription at Kudimiyamalai", "the bilingual coin of the Satavahana", etc.

- நன்னிலம் கல்வெட்டுகள் (Nannilam kalvettukkal), a work in Tamil released in 1979.

V. EPIGRAPHY COURSE IN STATE ARCHAEOLOGY DEPARTMENT

Dr. Nagaswamy was mainly contributory in developing the State department of archaeology in all features of Archaeological activity and started as many as twelve regional museums including a Prehistoric

museum at Poondi, an Islamic museum at North Arcot, as well several District museums and site museums. He started an Institute of Epigraphy under the Tamilnadu State Department of Archaeology to train students in PG diploma in Epigraphy and Art⁵.

During the tenure of Dr. Nagaswamy as the director of the Tamil Nadu State Archaeology department, he brought a new insight towards Tamil epigraphy. He started a new one-year post-graduate diploma course in epigraphy in the year 1974⁶, to train the postgraduate students of Tamil, History, and Sanskrit disciplines to read and interpret the inscriptions, yearly eight students from the different background were trained by authenticated epigraphist and archaeologist and so far more than 256 students were successfully trained⁷ and now the course have been modified in multi-disciplinary aspects has a two-year Postgraduate diploma course.

Notably, most of the remote ancient Tamil, Vatteluthu, and Tamil inscriptions located in hilly and forest region, especially the Nadukal (hero stones) in and around the Dharmapuri region are discovered by the student trained here.

VI. FORERUNNER OF ARTS

Dr. Nagaswamy's thirst for art can be seen through his website Tamil Arts Academy (<http://www.tamilartsacademy.com>). The website has digital versions of his works and articles and also provides us lots of information about History, architecture, arts, dance, literature, etc. he was the man who works greatly in the field of archaeology and his vision to educate the youth to conserve the monuments and to educate the common population to read old epigraphy was the remarkable one in his career.

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