

# BRAHMI INSCRIPTIONS OF TAMIL NADU— AN HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT

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Tamil inscriptions discovered mainly in the southern districts of Madurai, Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram, known as the Pandyanadu, have rightly assumed importance in any discussion relating to the early history of Tamil Nadu. These inscriptions, which came to light in the early twenties of this century, were till recently very vague and undefined. Great efforts were made by early doyens of epigraphy like H. Krishna Sastri, K. V. Subramania Iyer and Gopinatha Rao who did considerable pioneering work in the field and identified many words and read them with the help of the known Asokan and the Bhattiprolu Brahmi inscriptions. Yet some peculiar letters and word-formations presented a hurdle to their satisfactory reading. K. V. Subramania Iyer with his admirable insight could recognise the language of these inscriptions as Tamil written in an adapted Brahmi-script. Yet, many letters remained unidentified and hence the readings of word-formations were consequently fragmentary and incomplete. But, in recent years, considerable improvement in their reading, done especially by Iravatham Mahadevan<sup>1</sup>, has enabled the scholars to identify clear Tamil words. Meaningful sentences, giving the names of persons, places, gifts etc., have come to light. These inscriptions, about 75 in all, form the earliest corpus of Tamil inscriptions available and are datable to a period ranging between 200 B. C. and 300 A. D. A comparative study of these inscriptions, their scripts, as well as their content, with similar and well-dated epigraphs of Asokan times and the Buddhist sites at Bhattiprolu in Andhra enables us to arrive at this time bracket. In Tamil Nadu itself potsherds with engravings in this script have been found in well-dated strata in the Arikamedu excavations. Many more similar inscribed

sherds have been found in the excavations at Alagarai, Uraiyūr (Trichy District), Koṟkai (in Tirunelveli District) etc. thus confirming the same chronological horizon for these inscriptions. (T. V. Mahalingam, *Inscribed Potsherds from Alagarai and Uraiyur.*)

These inscriptions are fragmentary and their language is colloquial Tamil with an admixture of Prakrit words. These record the donations or gifts made to the Jain monks who resorted to the natural caverns and cliffs for their severe penance. The donors were mostly merchants (probably some of them Jains) though kings, chieftains and the common folk were also there. The gifts were in the form of cutting or carving the smooth stone beds for the monks to lie on or cutting a drip-ledge (*tāra-ani*) in the face of the rock so as to prevent rain water from entering into the interior of the cave or putting up a country roof of palm leaves (*kūrai*) in front of the cave to protect it from sunlight. Most of the caverns face east as in the morning direct sunlight would splash in the interior of the cave. In a recently discovered inscription at Ariṭṭapaṭṭi, the cave is called *Mulakai*.

Apart from their linguistic interest these inscriptions, present much valuable material for the early history of Tamil Nādu. We get in them the names of kings, chieftains, dynasties, personal names and titles, village and town names, the articles donated by the various classes in society, etc. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the significance of the data furnished by these inscriptions under various heads, mentioned above.

### I. Dynastic Names:

1. *Caḷivan*: This is mentioned as a prefix for the name Atanaṅ in the newly discovered inscription at Ariṭṭapaṭṭi<sup>2</sup>. *Caḷivan* is to be taken as another form of *Caḷiyan* by which name the Pāṇḍyas are known in the Sangam literature and also later. *Caḷiyan* is also used in the name Neṭunḷaḷiyan, occurring in the Māṅkulam inscription.

*Valūti*, *Kaṭalan* and *Paṇavan*: All these terms occur as prefixes for Neṭunḷaḷiyan. They are alternative names for the Pandya dynasty (Nagaswamy *Kalveḷḷiyal* P. 53).

### II. Kings:

*Neṭunḷaḷiyan*: Mentioned in the Māṅkulam inscription. It records his donation to the monastery (*Pāḷi*) at Māṅkulam. Another donation to the same monastery by Caṭikan the father of Iḷam Caṭikan, the brother-in-law (*Sāṭakan*) of Neṭunḷaḷiyan is also recorded.

This would show that the Pāṇḍyan King and his relatives extended their patronage to the Jain monks. Since the inscription is datable to the 3rd century B. C., it is felt that Neṭunḷaḷiyan of this inscription might be earlier than Talaiyalaṅkānattu Neṭunḷaḷiyan and Āriyappaṭai Kaṭanda Neṭunḷaḷiyan<sup>3</sup> of Sangam fame (Mahadevan).

2. *Cēra King*: The Pukaḷūr inscription mentions the Cera kings Iḷankaṭuṅkō, son of Peruṅkaṭuṅkōn, the son of king Ātan Cellirumporai. The first mentioned king donated a cave at Pukaḷūr to a Jain monk after he became the heir-apparent. When we bear in mind that the same Cera kings have been mentioned in the Sangam poem *Patirruppattu*, we will be excited to see contemporary inscriptional evidence with all its implications on chronology and geneology (56 and 57).<sup>3a</sup>

### III. Chieftains and Officers :

1. *Ataṅ*: Probably the name of a family line used as a suffix in the name Peratan of Pākkanūr in Kongar Puliyāṅgulam inscription.

Occurs in the name of the Cera King Ātan-Cel-Irumporai (Pukaḷūr 56); occurs as suffix in the name Ātan Cāttan at Kunnakkuḍi (69), occurs as a personal name of a goldsmith and also a cloth merchant at Alagarkōil. (30, 35, and 43)

2. *Ātanān Calivan Velivan*: Donated the Cave at Ariṭṭāpaṭṭi.

3. *Antai Cēndan* (?) mentioned in Mettupatti inscription.

4. *Kaṇiman* the Chieftain who took Tēnūr mentioned in the inscription at Māmandur. (71)

5. *Peru Paraṅan*, the chieftain of Erukkaṭṭuru mentioned in the inscription Pillaiyarpaṭṭi. (75)

6. *Kēran-Ōri*, probably a member of the Ori clan mentioned in Pukaḷūr inscription. (59)

7. *Pittan*: Probably an officer under the Cēra (Pukaḷūr) at Nalliyūr.

8. *Tinnan Eṭiran Cēndan*: Probably a chieftain or king mentioned in the Āndipatti coins.

### IV. Monks :

1. *Kaṇiyananta Āsiriya*: Occupied the monastery at Māṅkulam (1 and 2) Neṭuṅceliyan and his brother-in-law gave gifts to his monastery.

2. *Kuvuṭi Iten*—mentioned in Sittannavasal as a monk who was born in Kumuḷūr in Eruminātu. (27)

3. *Ariti* of Eḷaiyur had its monastery at Karunkālakkuḍi. (28)

4. *Kāsapan*, the monk mentioned at Alagarkoil. (41)

5. *Nātan* living in the dormitory at Kuṇṭattūr. (55)

6. *Cenkāyapan*—a Jaina Monk (*amaṅṅan*) from Yaṅṅūr, who lived in the cave at Pukaḷūr. The Cera King Iḷankaṭuṅko caused the beds to be cut. (56 and 60)

7. *Cenkāyipan*—occupied cave at Tiruchi. (68)

8. *Cantirananti*—his place of penance at Tirunātankunṅu where he died observing fifty-seven days of fasting. (76)

9. a nun of Sapamita..... (Alag. 36)

10. *Ven-Kasipan* donated a bed at Marukaltalai. (29)

## V. Merchants & Guilds:

Majority of the donors of these caves were merchants and tradesman. Trade guilds called *Nigamam* were also active in the region. Even in the medieval times large sections of trading classes patronised Jainism.

1. *Vel-arai-nikamatōr*: The mercantile guild of Velarai donated a bed at Mānkulam. The Village of Vellaripaṭṭi which is very near Mānkulam in Melur Taluk is probably mentioned here as Velarai. (Mank. 6)

The same merchant guild caused a lattice to be given (Mank. 3).

2. *Viyakan kanatikan*, the salt merchant (*Uppu-vāṇikan*) donated a stone-bed in the Alagarkoil cave. (34)

3. *Netumalan*, the sugar merchant (*paṇita-vāṇikan*) gave some gift. (37)

4. *Elacacantan*, the iron-monger gave some gift. (38)

5. *Elava Atan*, a cloth merchant (*aruvai-vāṇikan*) of Venpali gave some gift. (43)

6. *Attī*, a gold merchant (*pon-vāṇikan*) from Karūr gave a bed at Pukaḷūr (66)

7. *Tevan cāttan*, a merchant in precious (*Maṇiy-vaṇṇakan*) stones made seven beds (72)

8. *Kalitika Antai*, a Merchant-prince of Vel-arai (Mānk. 3)

## VI. Place-Names:

1. *Velarai*—Probably Vellaripaṭṭi near Mānkulam in Melur Taluk. A merchant-guild flourished here (see note V. 1. also)

2. *Toṇḍi*: Iḷavan a devotee from here (12) gave a gift to Kilavelavu cave—probably the famous Toṇḍi, the port on the east coast (9)

3. *Pākkonūr*—Peratan Pittan of this village thatched a canopy at Konkar—puliyaṅulam. Perhaps identifiable with the present village of Paganūr (12)

4. *Petalai*—Mentioned in the inscription at Vikkiramangalam (14)

5. *Patinur*—Mentioned in the Meṭṭuppaṭṭi inscription (23)

6. *Cirupāvil*—Mentioned in the Cittannavāsai inscription.

7. *Kumulūr*—In Eruminatu, Cittannavāsai inscription.

8. *Elaiyūr*—The monk Ariti was from this village (28)

9. *Matirai*—Common form for Madurai (Alag. 31)<sup>4</sup>

10. *Vēnpal*. A cloth merchant of this place mentioned in the inscription (43).

11. *Erukkaḷṭūr*—Pololaiyan of this place was from Ceylon (51).

12. *Iḷam*—Ceylon; householder from this place gave a gift at Tirpparāṅkuṅgam (51).

13. *Vintaiyur*: A Ceylonese (Caiyaḷan) at this place gave a gift to cave at Muttuppaṭṭi (52).

14. *Nākapērūr*—Mentioned in the same place; probably it is an old name of the present village of Nagamalai very near Muttupatti (53)
15. *Yarrur*—A Jain monk of this place Cenkeyapan lived in the cave at Pukaḷūr. The Cera King gave gifts to this. This may be identified with the present Ārūr near Salem which is not far away from Pukaḷūr (56-60).
16. *Nalliyūr*—Kīran and Ōri of this place are mentioned in Pukaḷūr inscription (58-59). Probably it is the Nallur of the Kōsars<sup>5</sup>.
17. *Karūr*: A gold-merchant from Karūr gave a bed at Pukaḷūr (66).
18. *Tenūr*: This was captured by the hill-chieftain Kaniman (Māmandur 71).
19. *Erukkāṭṭūr*: The chieftain of this place was Perumparaṇan whose gift is recorded in Pillaiyarpatti (76).
20. *Nelveli*: Atanan of this place gave a gift to the Ariṭṭapaṭṭi Cave.
21. *Erumi-nātu*: This is mentioned in Cīttannavasal inscription (27). This reference is to the territorial division *Naṭu* is interesting.

#### VII. Personal Names :-

Besides the names of kings, chieftains, monks and merchants, we get a few more personal names which are given here:

1. *Caṭikan*, the father of Ilaṅcaṭika and brother-in-law of Neṭuñceḷiyān (2).
2. *Cantaritan*:- gave a bed at Māṅkulam (5)
3. *Ariṭan*:- gave a bed at Tiruvātavūr (7)
4. *Ilavan*:- a devotee for Toṇḍi (9)
5. *Upparuvan*:- a lay devotee (10)
6. *Ceruātan*:- gave plaited fronds for the canopy (11)
7. *Antai-pikan* (13)
8. *Kuviren of Petalai* (14)
9. *Cenkuviran* (15)
10. *Kuviratan* (16)
11. *Chatan* (17) also in Arikamedu No. 9
12. *Mutikularan* (AKM, No. 15).
13. *Yaduvolabhuta* (AKM No. 20).
14. *Iravi* and his son *Kasi-nakan* and *Kaniy-nantan* and their gifts (32) *Iravi* was used by the Ceras as the prefix in later times.
15. *Antuvan*:- Donor in Tirupparaṅkuṇṇam insc. (48) Name familiar to the Sangam literature.

*Assessment*:- The foregoing analysis would go to show the historical value of the inscriptions. *Firstly*, they represent the earliest body of epigraphical evidence available in the Tamil Country even as the Asokan edicts are to the rest of our country. It is a well known fact that Asokan inscriptions are found only up to the Mysore

country and none has been found in Tamil Nadu or Kerala. But the provenance of these inscriptions in more or less the same script (with certain modifications or adaptations to suit the genius of the Tamil language) and also closely following it in point of time is indeed significant. They certainly go to underline the scriptal unity of the Indian subcontinent in spite of the linguistic diversities. It is interesting to note in this connection that the same trend is seen in Sri Lanka also, where Brahmi came to be adopted to Prakrit. South India was thus linked to the rest of the country by scriptal tie. Moreover, Prakrit terms were freely mixed in the local language. It was perhaps the most powerful and popular tongue that was widespread in the entire subcontinent and Sri Lanka, much earlier than Asokan times. Here again, the Tamil country partook in the great movement. The use of a number of Prakrit words in the Brahmi inscriptions attest to the popularity of the language. Tamil people were familiar with the words long before the advent of the Brahmi script. Their familiarity with the Prakrit language should be traced to the pre-Asokan times when Brahmanical tenets had arrived.<sup>6</sup> That Prakrit language was well absorbed and assimilated is well reflected in these early inscriptions. *Secondly*, the Brahmi inscriptions were widespread in the different parts of the Tamil country. We can no longer dismiss them as the script adopted by a few Jainas who were learning the local language. The uniformity of the script available in Tirunelveli, Madurai, Tiruchi, South Arcot and Chingleput shows that it was well established and well understood over distant places. They were no longer confined to the Jain or Buddhist establishments alone. They are found used by the common folk on the pots and vessels as found in the recent excavations at Korkai, Uraiyūr, Aḷagarai and not to speak of Arikamedu near Pondicherry, the well-known site having the inscribed pot sherds in abundance. They have also been found in the coins recently discovered at Andipatti in North Arcot District. What do all these indicate? They certainly indicate a stage when this script was commonly understood and used in the day-to-day transactions. It was not the script of the elite alone, it was the script of average lettered man to whom the inscriptions were addressed. Potters have used it to write their names on the vessels. King Neduñceḷiyan has used the script for recording his donation at Mañkulam near Madurai. The Cēra heir-apparent has recorded his donation in the same script at Pukāḷūr near Tiruchi; again, the chieftain who took Tenur wrote his donation in the script in Mamandūr near Kāñchi (Chingleput Dist). Thus, it can be seen that in, point of space, it was widespread from Kāñchi to Tirunelveli. In fact, it is found even beyond the sea in a big way in Sri Lanka<sup>7</sup>. Again, from the point of view of social strata, it was popular with the prince as well as the potter.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the usage of certain letters like  $l \dot{l} r$  and  $nā$  to suit peculiar phonetic values

in the Tamil language would again show that the script had been consciously adapted and absorbed into the local matrix as could be done not by strangers but the local elite. If this script had been only for the outsiders for their own consumption, they would have carried on with the script with which they were already familiar as in other parts of India. But only people with deep insight into the linguistic or phonetic values of Tamil could have devised or evolved the letters to express the special sound values of the Tamil language not found in the contemporary scripts elsewhere. *Thirdly*, the provenance of the inscriptions has to be viewed in a larger perspective of the process of acculturation or cultural evolution. This aspect has been discussed admirably by Clarence Maloney<sup>9</sup>. He has shown how it was during the Sangam Age (first three centuries A. D.) that South India was moving beyond the subsistence economy and entering a new phase marked by growth in trade, formalized religion, structured society, permanent buildings and writing. The well-developed literary forms of this Sangam period, according to him, had their roots in the earlier writings of Brahmi inscriptions of 3rd and 2nd centuries B. C.<sup>10</sup>. "Here archaeology and epigraphy provide evidence antedating the literary sources by at least three centuries and show something of the process of acculturation and development of civilization". This is a very significant point to be noted in evaluating the importance of the Brahmi inscriptions. He has brought out strong evidence based on archaeological and literary sources to show how the adoption of script at that stage was natural and in keeping with the general process of acculturation. *Fourthly*, the naive belief that the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions stand in isolation and are unconnected to the later Tamil *Vatteļuttu* script is no longer true. The recent discovery of a number of hero-stone inscriptions in North Arcot, South Arcot, Salem and Dharmapuri Districts clearly datable to 5th or 6th century A. D. have shown that they are derivations of the Brahmi.<sup>11</sup> There is no break in the development or evolution of Brahmi into the later stages. This clearly shows the continuity of the scriptal heritage. *Fifthly*, colloquialism used in these inscriptions has been taken by some as their besetting sin and therefore according to them they do not mean any stage in the linguistic or literary evolution of Tamil<sup>12</sup>. Nothing can be more unhistorical than this. Inscriptions are the only contemporary evidence which have come down to us without interpolation unlike literary works which were copied and recopied down the ages. The importance of the inscriptions in linguistic studies is now widely recognised and cannot be over-estimated. As Prof. T. P. Meenakshisundaram has rightly observed, "in inscriptional records, we have more of the colloquial language as it was current in the varying ages to which the records belong"<sup>13</sup>. Colloquialisms and even scriptal errors underline the fact that the commonfolk were using the script

to convey their ideas in their own colloquial manner. In fact, it is through inscriptions that scholars are able to see dynamic changes that have occurred in the script as well as in the phonetic values. From century to century the evolution is discernible more in the inscriptions than in standardised literature. Not only that, even the regional variations are reflected in the inscriptions. All these facts have to be borne in mind while evaluating Tamil Brahmi which can indeed be termed as the progenitor of the Tamil script. *Last* but not least are the contents of the inscriptions which are no less valuable than their form. They have already been analysed in their various subject headings above. They throw useful light on the place-names, names of chieftain, kings, social and economic institutions like guilds, trades men and also religious sects and their practices and provide interesting data comparable to the data available in the Sangam literature and other sources elsewhere like the Asōkan, the Sātavāhana and Sri Lanka inscriptions. Let us look into them more closely and make the following general observations.

1. **Kings:** Taking the kings' names first, it is indeed significant to see the Pāndyan King Neṭuñceḷiyan issuing a record of his donation to the Jain monk at Mānkulam. Similarly, the Pukaḷūr inscription records a grant to a Jain monk by the Cēra heir-apparent Iḷaṅ Kaṭuṅkō. These two would be the two earliest royal documents available in the Tamil country in their original contemporary script. Hence, they are very important in their general pattern, language, form and script. They may also indicate *prima facie* that the script used was also the official script of the times. The importance of the Pukaḷūr inscriptions for the Cēra genealogy and the genealogy found in *Patirruppattu* has already been commented upon in detail by Mahadevan and the same need not be repeated here. One difference between the Mānkulam royal grant and the Pukaḷūr one may, however, be pointed out here. While the former does not mention the regnal year (as later inscriptions do), the latter specifically says that the grant was given by him on becoming the heir-apparent. Moreover, the Pukaḷūr inscription mentions the father (Peruṅkaṭuṅkōn) and the grandfather (Ātan Cel-Irumporai) of the donor in a manner very much reminiscent of the later royal copper plate grants, giving the genealogy of the donor. Hence, we can say that the Pukaḷūr inscription is nearer to the standard pattern of royal grants, which is in the true Indian tradition found in different parts of our country (Also compare the royal grants of the early Sātavāhana kings).

2. **Dynastic Names:** The occurrence of the various dynastic names in the inscriptions is also very interesting. The use of several names like *Valuti*, *Ceḷiyan*, *Katalan*, *Panavan* to denote the Pāndyas clearly shows how deep-rooted their knowledge was about the Tamil tradition



regarding the Pāṇḍyas. Beginners in and strangers to a language could never use such telling and rare prefixes for the Pāṇḍyas. Similar synonyms have been used such as 'Tana' (55) for *sthana* and *Irukkai*; *Caiyaḷam* and *Ilam* for Sri Lanka (52).

3. Jainism: In the history of Jainism in Tamilnadu, these inscriptions have thrown new light, almost unknown to literature. The provenance of these inscriptions in remote villages and hills show the penetration of Jain faith into the interior places, right into the heart of the Tamil Country. Places like Alagarmalai, Tirupparankunram, Tiruvātavūr, and Kuṇṇakkuṭi are known to us from literature only as centres of Vaisnavism or Saivism. Tamil literature does not speak a word about the Jain settlements and monasteries that were once there. It is through these inscriptions that we come to know that Jainism had considerable hold on the people, and was patronised by kings, traders and the common folk. The names of the Jain monks listed in the paper above are unknown to literature. Names like Ariṭṭan (of Ānaimalai), recall well-known names like Mahā Ariṭṭan (of Sri Lanka fame), Hariti, etc. Similarly, the names like Cenkaḷayan (at Pukaḷūr) and Venkaḷayan (at Marugāltalai) 'would seem to denote the denominational *white* and *red* sects of the Jains, so well known in later days' (K. V. Soundara Rajan). Further, the Jains were organised in *Sangas* having groups called *ganas*. The word *Kaṇi* occurring in the Māṅkulam inscription obviously stands for the *Gana* (Nagaswamy). Can *kaṇiy-nanta-āsiriyaṛ* be taken as the guru of *Nandi-gaṇa* which was one of the well-known Jain *gaṇas*? Sambandar, the *Tāvāram* hymnodist, refers to the existence of various such Jain *ganas* around Ānaimalai in his *Padikam* on Madurai. I feel that Tamilnadu like Kalinga and Karnāṭaka was more sympathetic to Jainism than Buddhism throughout its history. Even the Sangam literature is rather silent on Buddhism.

4. Language:- Again, the vocabulary of the Tamil words used and the subtle differences in the words like *Arutta* and *aruppiṭṭu* (56), *Ceita* and *Ceiṭṭa* and *Paṇvitta* (71, 72) *kuṭutta* and *Kuṭuppiṭṭu* etc. would again point to the fact that the authors were well rooted in Tamil traditions. The use of a number of Prakrit words like *Dhammam*, *adhittānam* *Nigammom*, *Upacaka*, *nicitikaḷi* etc. along with such pure Tamil words like *irukkai*, *urai*, *Uppu*, (salt) *Aruvai-vaṇikas* *Makan*, *aimpaṭṭiṭṭu* etc. would clearly show a stage when Prakrit and Tamil had already been well fused and assimilated and that the authors were strangers to neither of them. Examples of Prakrit words well assimilated into the Tamil form can be cited here. *Nigama* the Prakrit word for 'guild' and the members of the guild are Tamilised into *Nigamattōr* (6). *Suta* for son is adapted as *Sutan* (3) *Kuṭumbika* as *Kuṭumpikan* (51). All these would go to show clearly that the authors were the sons of the soil who had integrated the

Prakrit language well into their system by the necessary adaptation. It is interesting to compare the words used for various traders in these inscriptions with those found in the Sātavāhana Brahmi inscriptions. *Tila-Piṣṭakas* (oil monger) *Swarnakūras* (goldsmith), *Maṇikāras* (dealers in provision stores) and *Kumbakaras* (potters), are used in the Sātavāhana inscriptions. But in the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions, *Kuluva-Vanikan*, *Pon-vanikan* *Aruvai-vanikan* etc. have been used. This again shows that they were well-versed in the Tamil language. Thus we can envisage two stages in this process of adaptation and assimilation. (1) Absorption of Prakrit words into the Tamil matrix. The beginning of this process is shrouded in antiquity. All we can say is that it was part of the sub-continental spread of Prakrit which must have started a long time before Asoka. The language of the Brahmi inscriptions of Tamilnādu represents a well-integrated stage. Prakrit words have been very convincingly and satisfactorily adapted to the Tamil form and genius as has been shown above. (2) The second and the later movement was the adoption of the Brahmi script in the wake of its spread all over India and Sri Lanka under the imperial patronage of Asoka (3rd Century B. C.). Tamilnadu was no exception to this new wave. Brahmi script was adapted to suit the peculiarities of the Tamil phonetics. Letters like *ḷa*, *ḷ*, *r* and *na*, hitherto unknown to the Brahmi, were introduced in Tamil inscriptions to express the peculiar sound-values. The adaptation could have been done not by strangers or beginners in a language but by the Tamil elite well nurtured in that language who were also already familiar with the Prakrit language (which had an earlier advent).

The free use of Prakrit words in the inscriptions should not therefore mislead us to think that the authors were immigrants, or strangers. As pointed out earlier, Prakrit words had already become part of the day to day spoken Tamil language. Only the Brahmi script was new and it was used to express the existing assimilated language. This will lead us to the inevitable conclusion that the language of the Brahmi inscriptions was well understood by the average lettered people of Tamilnadu, to whom they were indeed addressed.

Once this script was adapted to the Tamil language, it had its own further evolution in subsequent times. Scholars have shown how the *Vatteluttu* inscriptions found in the recently discovered hero stones of Tamilnādu are a logical evolution of the Brahmi inscriptions<sup>14</sup>. This will again prove that the Brahmi inscriptions do not stand in isolation but had a continuous currency and evolution.

The comparison of the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions with the data obtained in the ancient Tamil Grammar *Tolkāppiyam* is absolutely relevant and it throws many interesting problems which have been discussed by scholars and which need not be repeated here again.

Suffice it to say that the study has convincingly shown that the earlier ones among these inscriptions are anterior to the *Tolkāppiyam*<sup>15</sup> and the later ones overlap with it. As such, they are helpful in building reliable land-marks in the scriptal and linguistic evolution.

5. **Sri Lanka Inspiration:-** The location and distribution of these inscriptions also have an interesting story to tell. All the earlier inscriptions are concentrated in the Pandyan Country (e. g. Mānkulam, Meṭṭupaṭṭi, Vikkiramamankalam, Karunkālakkudi, Kilavaḷavu, Kongar — Puliyangulam, Cittanavāsal, Tiruvātavūr etc.) Whereas the late ones are both found in Tondaimandalam (e. g. Mamandūr and Tirunātarkunṇu). Those found at Erode (Araccālūr) and Tiruchirāppalli (Pukaḷūr) are also of the later group. The available limited evidence shows that the earlier varieties are not found to the west or south of Tiruchirappalli. This may indicate that the Madurai region was the epi-centre in the Tamil country for the spread of this script whereas the Tondaimandalam region was the peripheral area. From where did Madurai receive this impact? When we see the high concentration of exactly similar Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka, we have to trace the impact to Sri Lanka which, in all probability, received the Prakrit and Brahmi influences through the sea route (from Gujarat or Kalinga)<sup>16</sup>. The mention of the donation by a householder from Sri Lanka (*Ilakkutumbikan*) to the monastery at Tirupparaṅkunṇam and yet another from Sri Lanka mentioned in the Muttupatti inscription would add credibility to this assumption that influences from Sri Lanka had played a vital role in the spread of these inscriptions to the Pandyan territory. Moreover, as pointed out by J. Sundaram,<sup>17</sup> there is similarity between the caves in Sri Lanka and the Tamil country in that we find the inscriptions in brows of caves only in these regions. All these factors undoubtedly link up the Brahmi inscriptions of Pandyanadu with those of Sri Lanka, which in all probability served as the source of inspiration for the former.

Tamil Brahmi inscriptions also show closeness to the Bhaṭṭiprōlu southern script variety, but they cannot be directly linked because of the seeming gap in the intervening area. As pointed out earlier, the northern portions of Tamilnadu i. e. Tondaimandalam and even Chōlamandalam up to Tiruchi have not so far yielded Brahmi inscriptions of the early period, comparable to Bhaṭṭiprōlu. Their presence only in the southern extreme would show that the impact was probably from their neighbouring island of Sri Lanka. This problem needs greater attention and the Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka have to be compared in detail with those of Tamilnadu and studied in depth to get more precise information.

6. Thus, the Brahmi inscriptions found in the cave resorts in different parts of Tamilnadu and also increasingly found in pot-

sherds in several excavations form an important source material for the early history of Tamilnadu, throwing invaluable light on the evolution of the Tamil script, language, state of Jainism, and other varied aspects of the social, political and economic life of the Tamils. Especially, when we know that the earlier ones among them may well go back to the pre-Sangam times and many were co-eval with the Sangam literature, their value is enhanced. The spectrum of Tamil society, its language, and its script that is pictured in its true historical setting in these inscriptions has to be studied with all the care it deserves.

7. There is every likelihood of many more cave-inscriptions coming to light. The inscriptions of the excavated potsherds are also on the increase. All these are opening up a new vista in our field of enquiry. Somehow, the early coins of Tamilnādu are eluding us. Except for the Āndipatti hoard of coins, and the Sātavāhana bilingual coin the early Pāṇḍyan and the early Chōla coins are without any script<sup>18</sup>. But there is every possibility of finding coins bearing Tamil Brahmi inscriptions sooner or later. This will add a new dimension to the problem.

### NOTES

1. I. Mahadevan, *Corpus of Tamil Inscriptions* (Madras, 1968)
2. K. V. Raman and Y. Subbarayalu, *A New Tamil Brahmi Inscr. at Arittapatti, Journal of Indian History*, (August 1971) Also K. V. Raman, *Some Aspects of Pandyan History*, (Madras 1971) for a revised reading.
3. R. Nagaswamy, *Kalvetiyal* P. 53.
- 3a. Numbers in brackets are the inscriptional numbers given in I. Mahadevan's *Corpus, op. cit.*
4. This form occurs in later inscriptions also. This was the common form and not an error as has been taken by a writer (*J. I. H.* LI, pt. II).
5. I. Mahadevan reads it as Nalliyur but Nagaswamy reads it as Nalpiyur (*Kalvetiyal* P. 69.)
6. For the pre-Asokan times, we have the evidence of the *Artha-Śāstra* which speaks about Dakshinapatha abounding in a variety of trade articles and particularly the pearls from the Tambraparani river in the Pandyan country (*Pāṇḍyakavāta*) and cotton fabrics from Madurai. (K. A. N. Sastri. *A History of South India*, P. 84).
7. W. S. Karunaratne, as quoted by Clarence Maloney *Archaeology in South India*.
8. K. V. Soundara Rajan draws a line between the cave inscriptions and the pot inscriptions. He holds that the former may

represent an earlier stage and the latter a stage when the script became popular and spread to the common folk. (*Journal of Kerala Studies I, No. 2 & 3, P. No. 144. ff.*)

9. Clarence Maloney, *Archaeology in South India, Accomplishment and prospects.*
10. The same trend of urbanisation, opening up of trade, introduction of script are also to be in the Sātavāhana Country in the last Centuries B. C. Their inscriptions are full of references to trade guilds, traders, urban centres like Pratiṣṭhāna, Amaravati etc.
11. R. Nagaswamy, *op. cit.* P. 27.
12. *J. I. H. op. cit.* P. 309, This writer applying the modern forms of certain words call many of the older forms found in inscriptions as 'errors' and 'mistakes' which is indeed very unscientific.
13. T. P. Meenakshisundaram, *A History of the Tamil Language*, (Poona 1966) P. 7.
14. R. Nagaswamy, *op. cit.*
15. Sa. Ganesan, *Seminar on Inscriptions* pp. 54—55.  
This has been generally accepted by many other scholars too. One scholar however does not want to face the issue but simply says 'any comparative study of these epigraphs and *Tolkāppiyam* will take us nowhere' *J. I. H. Aug. 73. p. 309.*
16. For a discussion of the sea route influences see (Clarence Maloney) *Beginnings of Civilization in S. India.*
17. *Seminar on inscriptions, Op. cit. p. 76.*
18. This is indeed surprising especially when we see even the early Sātavāhana Kings like Satakarni I (175 - B. C.) issuing coins with their names, The coins of Gautamiputra Satakarni (1st century A. D.) run into thousands (M. Rama Rao, *Studies in the Early History of Andhradesa*, Madras 1971 p. 30 & 37.)