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The Emergence of Epigraphical Studies in Malayalam: The Role of V. R. Parameswaran Pillai

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Introduction

Epigraphy has long been recognized as a foundational source for reconstructing the political, social, economic and cultural history of Keralam. Inscriptions on both, stone and copper plates, preserved crucial information on chronology, administration, land grants, religious institutions, linguistic changes etc. For a long period, the study of these records was largely conducted in Tamil and English, which restricted wider regional engagement with inscriptions. The gradual emergence of epigraphical studies in Malayalam therefore represents an important shift in the historiography of epigraphy in Keralam.

Within this developing intellectual context, V. R. Parameswaran Pillai occupies a significant place for his efforts to analyse and present inscriptions in the Malayalam language. He combined the careful reading of the scripts with the study of dating methods and historical interpretations. Rather than merely producing inscriptional texts, Parameswaran Pillai examined them as historical sources that required critical analysis. His medium of studies also helped to develop the writing of history and epigraphy in Malayalam. This paper examines his contribution to the development of Malayalam epigraphy and evaluates its methodological and historiographical significance in the study of the history of Keralam.

This study adopted a multidisciplinary and source-based approach to examine the emergence of epigraphical studies in Malayalam, with particular reference to V. R. Parameswaran Pillai. It examined epigraphy not merely as a technical discipline concerned with reading and deciphering inscriptions but also as a historical practice shaped by language, institutional contexts, and historiographical concerns.

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The study employs a close textual analysis of Parameswaran Pillai's published works, (including his inscriptional articles in Malayalam periodicals), *Prācīna Likhitaṅgaḷ* (1963), and *Śilālikhitā Vijñānīyam* (1978). These texts are examined for their methods of transcription, translation, classification, and interpretation of inscriptions. Particular attention is paid to how palaeography, chronology, and administrative terminology are handled within the Malayalam language.

Comparative analysis forms an important component of the methodology. Parameswaran Pillai's work is situated alongside earlier epigraphical publications such as the *Travancore Archaeological Series*, *Kerala Society Papers*, and the *Rama Varma Research Institute Bulletin* in order to identify shifts in language, audience, and analytical depth. This comparison helps to highlight changes in scholarly practice rather than to rank individual scholars.

Epigraphical Studies in Kerala – in the early Decades of 20th Century C.E.

Epigraphical studies in Keralam received a significant impetus in the early twentieth century with the publication of the *Travancore Archaeological Series* (TAS) by the Travancore Archaeological Department. Edited by the scholars such as T. A. Gopinatha Rao[1], K. V. Subramanya Aiyar[2], and A. S. Ramanatha Ayyar[3] etc., these series brought to light inscriptions discovered from the different parts of Travancore and its surrounding regions.[4] During that time, Travancore Archeological Series and other journals such as *Kerala Society Papers* (KSP)[5] and *Rama Varma Research Institute Bulletin*[6] were the main platforms for epigraphical research in Keralam. Through these publications, a substantial number of inscriptions was collected, transcribed, and made available for scholarly use.[7]

Early epigraphical studies in Keralam were largely documentary in nature. The primary objective was the discovery and publication of inscriptions rather than the construction of a systematic or comprehensive history of Keralam. A defining feature of this period was its linguistic orientation: epigraphical studies were published almost in English and Tamil, reflecting both colonial academic conventions and the restricted audience to which such research was addressed. Despite being the

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regional language Malayalam remained absent as a medium of inscriptional analysis in Keralam.

The absence of Malayalam as a medium of inscriptional analysis suggested that epigraphy had not yet been integrated into the broader intellectual life of the region. Consequently, discussions and debates on inscriptions remained restricted in scope, reinforcing the gap between epigraphical research and the Malayalam-reading public during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Within this intellectual and linguistic context that the emergence of epigraphical studies in Malayalam acquired particular significance. The use of Malayalam for inscriptional interpretation represented not merely as a change in the language but as a shift in the scholarly orientation, expanding the epigraphical knowledge and encouraging regional historical writing.

Emergence of Epigraphical Studies in Malayalam

Epigraphical studies in Keralam began to move in a new direction from the 1930s onward. Malayalam periodicals such as *Mathrubhumi weekly*[8] and *Mahila*[9] started to publish articles related to inscriptions. It was a changing dynamic in the dissemination of epigraphical knowledge outside the specialist circles. By the 1950s, the number of epigraphical writings appearing in Malayalam journals had increased considerably. A review of earlier phases of epigraphical research articles revealed a consistent pattern: while the texts of inscriptions were usually presented in Tamil, explanatory notes and interpretations were largely provided in English. In contrast, from the 1950s onward, inscriptional studies in which both the texts and their exegetical discussions were presented entirely in Malayalam. This development was reflected not only in the publication of inscriptional texts but also in attempts to present and explain them in Malayalam. V. R. Parameswaran Pillai was an important contributor to this development.

The Role of V.R. Parameswaran Pillai

By the mid-twentieth century, the emergence of epigraphical studies in Malayalam attracted a wider range of scholars to the field. In this regard, V. R. Parameswaran

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Pillai – an eminent Malayalam scholar, epigraphist, and Pandit Assistant of Travancore Archaeological Department, - is one of the most notable figures in the historiography of the epigraphy in Malyalam. Being among the first researchers to study the inscriptions of Keralam in Malayalam, he marked a new era in the field. Unlike his predecessors, who mostly used to inscribe the texts and explanations of inscriptions in two different languages, Parameswaran Pillai paid great attention to the description and interpretation of the inscriptions in the regional language.

The engagement of Parameswaran Pillai with epigraphical studies in Malayalam is one of the most important episodes in the intellectual history of the epigraphy in Keralam. Parameswaran Pillai's earliest epigraphic study demonstrated his attention to methodological and linguistic aspects of epigraphical research. Parameswaran Pillai began his epigraphical studies in Malayalam by bringing out an inscription that was hitherto unknown and placed on the inner side of the gopura of the temple at Śucīndram. The inscription, containing a mention of Rāmarāya Vitthala, a ruler of the Vijayanagara Empire, was not only important for its historical content but also for its presentation.[10] His approach highlighted the importance of regional accessibility and indicate an emerging confidence in Malayalam as a scholarly medium capable of handling complex historical material.

After his first publication, Parameswaran Pillai's interest in epigraphy broadened into inscriptions of national importance, especially those dealing with Aśoka. Several of his articles dealing with Aśoka inscriptions were published in the Mathrubhumi weekly. There are two important aspects to be noted in regard to these publications. First, his work demonstrated an effort to make specialised epigraphical research accessible to a wider readership. Second, it reflected his view that inscriptions from regions beyond Kerala could also be discussed in Malayalam without compromising analytical precision. Among these writings, a particularly significant one was an article he wrote in the Malayalam magazine, *Mahila* about an inscription that refers to Queen of Aśoka. The choice of publication venue suggested an effort to reach readers beyond the conventional male-dominated scholarly circles and extend the social reach of epigraphical knowledge. Parameswaran Pillai's early writings went beyond translating inscriptional texts. He situated the records within their historical

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and cultural contexts and showed how epigraphical evidences could contribute to an understanding of wider political and social developments.

The entry of Parameswaran Pillai into the epigraphy was shaped by his training in ancient scripts under Kavimani Desavinayaka Pillai.[11] Parameswaran Pillai learned to read, write and analyse Vattezhuthu, Kolezhuthu and other ancient scripts found in the inscriptions of Keralam with the help of him . This knowledge empowered him to examine the inscriptions *in situ* rather than depend solely on estampages, photos or secondary interpretations. His later publications reflected this expertise through their careful examination of scripts, orthographic variations and linguistic features. Unlike many earlier scholars who treated inscriptions mainly as sources of historical information, Parameswaran Pillai examined them as textual records whose scripts, language and physical characteristics were essential to their interpretation.

A significant milestone in Parameswaran Pillai's scholarly career was the publication of *Prācīna Likhitaṅgaḷ* in 1963[12]. The work presented a systematic collection of the inscriptions of Keralam in Malayalam. Rather than arranging them solely by chronology or geographical location, Parameswaran Pillai classified the inscriptions under the categories such as memorial, religious and educational inscriptions. This thematic arrangement enabled inscriptions to be examined in relation to their content and historical significance. It reflected Parameswaran Pillai's approach to inscriptions as social documents that could be studied according to their function and historical context, rather than merely as dated artefacts. His discussions included in the volume also considered the script, language, historical background and significance of the inscriptions.

A distinctive feature of *Prācīna Likhitaṅgaḷ* was the inclusion of samples of early scripts for illustrative and educational purposes. By presenting scripts alongside textual explanations, Parameswaran Pillai helped readers to understand palaeographical features and familiarise themselves with the scripts used in early inscriptions. The volume also included several previously unpublished inscriptions, adding new primary material to epigraphical research. The texts of the inscriptions, interpretations and annotations were presented entirely in Malayalam. This choice reflected Parameswaran Pillai's effort to establish the regional language as a

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suitable medium for epigraphical research and make epigraphical studies accessible to Malayalam readers. At a time when Malayalam was not widely regarded as a suitable medium for specialised subjects, Parameswaran Pillai demonstrated its capacity to communicate complex epigraphical arguments with clarity and precision.

The significance of *Prācīna Likhitaṅgaḷ* expanded beyond its contents to its contribution to the development of epigraphical research in Keralam. By presenting inscriptions and their interpretations in Malayalam language, Parameswaran Pillai made epigraphical studies accessible to a wider readership, including those unfamiliar with English, Tamil or Sanskrit. This approach helped to develop a regional historical consciousness based on primary sources.

Parameswaran Pillai's contributions did not end with the publication of *Prācīna Likhitaṅgaḷ*. In 1978, he published another major work, *Śilālikhitā Vijñānīyam*[13], which further consolidated his position as a central figure in Malayalam epigraphical studies. The Kerala Bhasha Institute commissioned this book in response to the introduction of epigraphy as a subject in university curriculum. The book was intended primarily as an introductory textbook to help students to learn epigraphy as an academic discipline. This publication also reflected the growing recognition of epigraphy as a formal subject of study in the higher education of Keralam and of Malayalam as a suitable medium for teaching this discipline.

Śilālikhitā Vijñānīyam offers a comprehensive study of Indian epigraphy. it covered historical development of Indian epigraphy, types of inscriptions, the formal structure and contents of inscriptions, dating method, palaeographical analysis and the principal methods employed in their study. Although the book covered a wider geographical area, it retained a strong focus on regional concerns. The book contained two appendices. Appendix I presented Malayalam versions of selected inscriptions from Keralam. It reinforced Parameswaran Pillai's consistent commitment to linguistic accessibility.

Another notable feature of *Śilālikhitā Vijñānīyam* is Appendix II. it contained a glossary of terms commonly used in inscriptions. This glossary helped students and researchers understand the technical terms used in the inscriptions. Epigraphists

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often used technical terms related to administration, land measurement, taxation, religious endowments and social hierarchy that were not easily understood without a proper explanation. By compiling a glossary in Malayalam, Parameswaran Pillai provided a useful tool for epigraphical research and reduced the need to consult scattered reference works. This effort reflected his understanding of the basic resources needed for the epigraphical research and his commitment to supporting further research in the field.

Conclusion

Taken together, the works of Parameswaran Pillai reflected a broader effort to develop epigraphical studies in Malayalam. His contribution went beyond the study of individual inscriptions to include the preparation of resources that supported the continued growth of the discipline. This involved training in scripts, publication of primary sources, methodological explanation, pedagogical writing, and the creation of reference tools. His career thus bridges the gap between early documentary epigraphy and a more mature, methodologically self-conscious historiography.

In assessing Parameswaran Pillai's place in the history of the epigraphy in Keralam, it is important to recognise both the continuity and the departure represented by his work. He built upon earlier efforts of inscription's collection and publication carried out under institutional frameworks such as the Travancore Archaeological Department. At the same time, he departed from earlier linguistic and methodological conventions by insisting on Malayalam as the primary medium of analysis and instruction. This effort brought practical changes to the readership, research methods and teaching of epigraphy in Keralam.

Ultimately, Parameswaran Pillai's work marked an important phase in the development of epigraphical studies in Keralam. By integrating systematic epigraphic methods with the use of Malayalam, he ensured that inscriptions could function not only as archival records but also as living historical sources within the cultural and intellectual life of Keralam. His work provided a foundation for later scholars to study inscriptions in Malayalam while maintaining academic standards and strengthening the regional basis of epigraphical research in Keralam.

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Endnotes:

1. T. A. Gopinatha Rao (1872–1919) was born into a Marathi Brahmin family in 1872 and obtained his M.A. in Chemistry from Trichy College in 1899. He joined the Travancore Archaeological Department in 1902, marking the beginning of his distinguished career in archaeology and epigraphy.

2. K.V. Subramanya Aiyar was a prominent Indian epigraphist and historian who made significant contributions to the study of South Indian inscriptions and epigraphy. He served as the Government Epigraphist from 1919 to 1924

3. A.S. Ramanatha Ayyar was a great epigraphist who followed in the footsteps of Gopinatha Rao and Subrahmanya Aiyar. He served as the Government Epigraphist from 1924 to 1934.

4. T A Gopinatha Rao edited the first two volumes of TAS. KV Subramanya Aiyer was the editor of the next two volumes and the next three volumes were edited by A S Ramanatha Iyer.

5. The Kerala Society was established on September 26th, 1927, with its headquarters at Thiruvananthapuram. Regular meetings of the 'Kerala Society' were held with the participation of renowned academics. The research papers given at the meetings were later published in 'Kerala Society Papers', the society's publication. It was formed on the model of the 'Journal of Royal Asiatic Society'.

6. The Rama Varma Research Institute Bulletin debuted in 1930 with its initial edition. Fifteen volumes in total were released, with the final one appearing in 1948. Scholars like K. R. Pisharody, A. Govinda Varrier, V. K. R. Menon, Anujan Achan, and others were among the distinguished contributors to the volumes of the Rama Varma Research Institute Bulletin.

7. Sahira M.K., "Epigraphical Studies in Kerala: Early Attempts", In Proceedings of the South Indian History Congress 42, South Indian History Congress, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, 2024. http://journal.southindianhistorycongress.org/show_article.php?atl_id=NDY5

8. *Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly*, first published on 18 January 1932, became an important platform for Malayalam literature and intellectual discussion. It published literary works, articles and critical writings and contributed to the dissemination of ideas among Malayalam readers. Its role as a Malayalam-language periodical also provided a space for scholarly discussions beyond specialised academic circles.

9. *Mahila* was a Malayalam periodical established in 1921. Owned and edited by B. Bhagirathy Amma, it was published initially from Thiruvananthapuram and later from Thiruvalla and Chengannur. It formed part of the early development of Malayalam periodicals and contributed to the expansion of print culture in the region.

10. V.R. Parameswaran Pillai, *Aa Ezhupathu Varshangal*, (Mal.), P. Kamalamma, Poojappura, Thiruvananthapuram, 1974. p. 56.

11. *Ibid*.

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12. V.R. Parameswaran Pillai, *Prajeenalighithangal*, (Mal.), National Book Stall, Kottayam, 1963.

13. ……., *Śilālikhitā Vijñānīyam,* (Mal.) Kerala Language Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 1978.

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