Our nation is privileged with an ample of epigraphical wealth strewn over the whole of its territory. It is well known that among all the sources available for knowing about the history of ancient India, epigraphy or the study of inscriptions is the most important and most acceptable one. The remaining sources like archaeological artifacts, monuments, numismatics and literary works etc. are only of a supplementary nature, amplifying the information supplied by inscriptions. Inscriptions may be generally defined as the documents, incised on some hard permanent material like stones or copper plates etc., in the form of letters or other conventional signs for the purpose of conveying some information or preserving a record. A good extent of the accurate information which is currently available with respect to ancient India is undoubtedly derived from these inscriptions by studying them scrupulously.

Till today a large number of inscriptions have been discovered and deciphered since the second half of the eighteenth century A.D. not only in all parts of the Indian subcontinent but also in the adjoining countries like Ceylon, Nepal, Cambodia, Java, Borneo etc. wherever the Indian culture had been disseminated. In India, the writing
of inscriptions has a long history. Inscriptions first incarnated in the third century B.C. It is the great Mauryan emperor Asoka, who struck upon the novel idea of writing inscriptions to record the thoughts and notions which he wanted to promulgate among his citizens. Thus the earliest epigraphical records found in India are the rock and pillar edicts of the king Asoka, of course leaving aside the writings discovered in the Sindhu-valley region, final conclusions of the decipherment of which are yet to be arrived at. Thenforth, the tradition of writing inscriptions, set by king Asoka, went on and lasted till the end of the so called medieval period in history.

After Asoka, the subsequent generations of rulers continued the practice of writing inscriptions to record, time and again their own glorification and also their meritorious deeds and other achievements. Their subordinate officers and other dignitaries also conformed to the custom of their masters and augmented the inscriptional literature by setting up stone inscriptions and issuing copper plates etc. recording various events in their respective times. Though the approach, the objective and the contents went on changing from time to time, it is these inscriptions that acquaint us with various aspects of life in ancient times. The present thesis embodies an endeavour to explore the Sanskrit epigraphs in order to appraise them on their literary aspect.
Nature, Scope and Importance of the research work:

Nature:

On one side, the help of these inscriptions for knowing about the political and cultural history of ancient India is indispensable; on the other side they hold a considerable literary significance. An aesthetic pleasure can indeed be derived from these inscriptions. Some of them are arrant kavyas written on epigraphic materials. In the present research work an attempt has been made to study Sanskrit inscriptions of India on the literary point of view.

Here the term ‘literary’, focally embraces in it the study of the texts of Sanskrit inscriptions or the major Sanskrit portions of bilingual or multilingual inscriptions with an idea to spotlight on the various aspects of poetics such as vṛtta (metre), alankāra (figures of speech), gunā (quality), doṣā (flaw) riṭi (style), Dhvani (suggestion) rasa (sentiment) etc. And this sort of study allows us to classify them according to the traditional classification as delineated in Sanskrit rhetorical works.

Inscriptions were issued by the kings, queens, ministers, officers and rarely common men generally to record some pious donations of a village or land etc. or some event like the building of a temple, pond and the like. Utterly in such cases it is therefore vain to foresee any literary exquisiteness in the drafts of the inscriptional
records. But when a well-versed poet employs himself to write an inscription, he follows a certain set pattern which generally contains the genealogy of the king, his exploits and other details. It is here that the poets get opportunities to exhibit their literary skill in composition. The prose or poetry commencing with invocatory verses give ample scope for the poet. This results in the composition of excellent specimens of Sanskrit kāvya on the epigraphical materials. A number of Sanskrit inscriptions found so far in India are masterpieces of poetry and prose. An aesthetic pleasure can indeed be felt from such inscriptions.

For example, the Junagadh rock inscription\(^1\) of Saka Rudradaman, the Allahabad pillar inscription\(^2\) of Samudragupta, Mandasore stone inscription\(^3\) of Kumaragupta and Bandhuvarman, Aiholé prasāti \(^4\) of Pulakesin II, Kasākudā copper plate inscription\(^5\) of Nandivarman II etc. are famous for their poetic elegance which are artistically finished in every respect and place their authors in close proximity to the celebrated classical Sanskrit poets like Kālidāsa, Bharavi, Bana etc. There are even certain inscriptions like the Hanumakonda inscription\(^6\) of the period of Pratāparudra II, the purport of which is purely literary.

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1. Epigraphia Indica Vol. VIII, p. 42
5. South Indian Inscriptions Vol. II, No. 73, p. 350
Scope:

During the periods of many imperial dynasties like the Guptas, the Pākas, the Pratiṣṭhāras, the Paramāras, the Malavas, the Kalacuris, the Śilaharas, the Gurjāras, the Vakaṭakas, etc. in the North India and the Pallavas, the Kadambas, the Calukyas, the Raṣṭrakutas, the Paṇḍyas, the Colās, the Kakatiyas, the Gānas, the Vijayanagara rulers, etc. in South India, a large number of inscriptions are written in Sanskrit. Thus there is a large scope for the literary analysis of these Sanskrit epigraphs.

These epigraphs are discovered, deciphered and edited by many great stalwarts of epigraphy like G. Buhler, J. S. Burgess, E. Hultsch, F. Kielhorn, J. F. Fleet, C. Mackenzie, Sir Walter Elliot, B. L. Rice, V. Venkayya, H. Krishna Shastri, Bhagavanlal Indrajit, R. G. Bhandarkar, B. C. Chabra, D. C. Sircar, Bhau Daji, V. V. Mirashi, Dr. P. B. Desai, Dr. Shrinivas Ritti, Dr. K. V. Ramesh and many others. And these have been published in the famous epigraphical journals such as Indian Antiquary, Epigraphia Indica, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, South Indian Inscriptions and in many other volumes.

As mentioned in the title of the present thesis, the term ‘select’ indicates that only those inscriptions which are endowed with considerable literary merit are enrolled in the study. And on the other hand, a number of
inscriptions pertaining to a same dynasty were stereotyped, possessing a same traditional prasàsti (eulogy) portion sometimes with minuscule differences. In such cases only one standard text of the prasàsti will be subjected to the literary investigation.

**Importance**

A meticulous analysis of these Sanskrit epigraphs reveals that they wait on not only as sources of information about the political, economic, social and cultural conditions of their respective times, but also unmask the standard and style of this great language. The Sanskrit inscriptions are important in connection with Sanskrit literature as illustrating both the early history of Indian writing and the state of the language at that time.

Among the inscriptions which are written in poetic chic, a few have been studied painstakingly on their literary point of view by some renowned foreign as well as Indian scholars. But a comprehensive and assiduous study of Sanskrit inscriptions of India, on their rhetoric point of view has not yet been attempted. So the prime importance of the present research work lies in the elicitation and accentuation of the literary merits of the Sanskrit inscriptions of India.

Till my post graduation I did not know anything about the inscriptions. But the swerving point in my academic career was, when my beloved professor Dr. K. B. Archak
introduced me to Dr. Shrinivas Ritti, a great epigraphist and historian of international fame. I was greatly privileged to work with him in some voluminous epigraphical projects. During this, I had a great opportunity to go through the texts of inscriptions, especially Sanskrit epigraphs which were a focus for me.

Later, as suggested by my teachers, I completed the course of Diploma in epigraphy at Karnatak University Dharwad. And this helped me a lot in getting acquainted with many aspects of epigraphy. Dr. Ritti suggested me to research on Sanskrit inscriptions on their literary point of view, which was less attempted hitherto. Then, I fulfilled my M.Phil course taking the Sanskrit inscriptions of Karnataka from fourth to tenth century A.D., for literary analysis.

Inspired by this, I cherished to study the literary value of the Sanskrit inscriptions of India, for the Ph.D course. As suggested by my teachers I took in selected Sanskrit epigraphs of India, as the analysis of all the Sanskrit epigraphs will be a long row to hoe.

I render my deep sense of gratitude to Dr. Shrinivas Ritti who has been guiding and encouraging me in my research activities. I am immensely grateful to my research guide Dr. K. B. Archak, Associate Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Karnatak University, Dharwad, for his inspiring guidance and support.
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Keyur R. Karagudari