



Constructing Royal Authority through Inscriptions: Sovereignty, Dynastic Legitimacy, Genealogical Claims, and State Communication

Dr. Durbadal Mandal

Assistant Professor in Sanskrit (W.B.E.S), Sister Nibedita Government General Degree College for Girls,
Kolkata, India, Mail ID : durbadalmandalsanskrit@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Political inscriptions played a vital role in the construction and communication of royal authority in ancient India. They were not merely records of events but powerful instruments through which rulers expressed sovereignty, established dynastic legitimacy, and communicated state policies. This study examines the ways in which inscriptions were used to project political power through royal titles, honorifics, genealogical narratives, and public proclamations. It explores how rulers employed epigraphic records to justify their right to rule, strengthen their dynastic identity, and promote loyalty among their subjects. The study further analyses the concept of sovereignty as reflected in inscriptions and highlights the importance of genealogy in creating continuity between past and present rulers. Special attention is given to inscriptions as a medium of state communication that conveyed administrative decisions, land grants, tax privileges, religious donations, and political achievements. Examples from the Maurya, Gupta, Chola, Pallava, and Vijayanagara periods demonstrate the diverse functions of inscriptions in governance and political representation. The paper argues that inscriptions were active instruments of power rather than passive historical records. By

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combining political ideology, religious symbolism, administrative authority, and public communication, they played a significant role in shaping political culture and preserving royal legitimacy in ancient India.

In ancient India, inscriptions were one of the most important means through which rulers expressed their political authority and communicated their power to society. Long before the spread of paper-based administration, kings and dynasties used inscriptions to record important decisions, announce grants, define territorial control, and present their ideas of kingship. These records were engraved on durable materials such as stone, rock surfaces, pillars, temple walls, and copper plates. Because of their permanent nature, inscriptions became a reliable medium for preserving royal messages and projecting political authority across generations.

Political inscriptions were much more than simple written records. They served as official statements of power and acted as instruments through which rulers established their legitimacy before their subjects. Through these inscriptions, kings introduced themselves, described their achievements, highlighted their victories, and presented their right to rule. They often emphasized their noble lineage, military success, religious devotion, and moral qualities in order to strengthen their public image. As a result, inscriptions became an important source for understanding the political ideas and administrative systems of ancient India. One of the major purposes of inscriptions was to establish and maintain sovereignty. The act of engraving royal orders on permanent materials symbolized the stability and authority of the state. These records reminded people that political power was organized under a recognized ruler whose commands carried legal and administrative force. In many cases, inscriptions were placed in important public locations so that they could be seen by travelers, merchants, religious communities, local officials, and neighboring political powers. Thus, inscriptions functioned as visible signs of authority and territorial control. The language and script used in inscriptions also carried political significance. Different ruling houses selected scripts and languages that reflected local traditions, cultural identities, and administrative needs. The choice of script was not merely a technical matter; it often reflected the ruler's desire to connect with particular groups of people or to demonstrate political influence over wider regions. Therefore, inscriptions reveal not only what rulers wanted to communicate but also how they wished to present themselves before diverse audiences. Another important feature of political inscriptions was their role in creating dynastic legitimacy. Rulers frequently traced their ancestry to respected royal families, legendary heroes, or divine figures. Such genealogical claims helped strengthen the authority of the ruling dynasty and justified its right to govern. By

presenting a continuous line of descent, inscriptions created a sense of historical continuity and political stability. These genealogies were carefully constructed to enhance the prestige of the ruling family and to ensure the acceptance of future successors. Political inscriptions also played a significant role in state communication. Through them, rulers announced land grants, tax privileges, religious donations, administrative decisions, and public policies. Such records helped create a formal connection between the state and different sections of society. They informed local communities about royal actions and at the same time demonstrated the ruler's ability to reward loyalty and maintain order. In this way, inscriptions became an effective means of governance and public communication. Religious ideas were often closely connected with political authority in these records. Many rulers presented themselves as protectors of moral values and religious traditions. By associating their rule with divine approval and sacred duties, they sought to strengthen their position in society. This combination of political power and religious symbolism increased the ruler's prestige and encouraged public acceptance of his authority.

The importance of inscriptions can also be understood from their contribution to historical memory. They preserved accounts of royal achievements, victories, charitable acts, and dynastic traditions. Through these records, rulers attempted to shape how future generations would remember them. Consequently, inscriptions not only reflected contemporary political realities but also helped create lasting images of kingship and authority. The present study, titled 'Constructing Royal Authority through Inscriptions: Sovereignty, Dynastic Legitimacy, Genealogical Claims, and State Communication,' examines the ways in which inscriptions were used as instruments of political expression and governance in ancient India. By analysing royal titles, genealogical narratives, claims of sovereignty, and forms of public communication preserved in epigraphic records, the study seeks to understand how rulers constructed, justified, and communicated their authority through the written word.

❖ Major Characteristics of Political Inscriptions

- Served as declarations of sovereignty and territorial claims
- Incorporated divine sanction to legitimize kingship
- Employed scripts and symbols as tools of cultural authority
- Documented economic privileges to secure alliances
- Created lasting records of royal achievements and genealogies

The Gupta period represents another transformative phase in the political use of epigraphy. Inscriptions like the Allahabad Pillar Inscription composed by Harisena celebrated the military exploits and cultural grandeur

of rulers such as Samudragupta. These compositions blended poetic artistry with political propaganda, glorifying the king as a universal monarch while elevating his divine status. Unlike the Mauryas, who focused on moral edicts, the Guptas highlighted martial prowess, cultural patronage, and administrative achievements. This evolution in the content of inscriptions reflects broader changes in the conception of sovereignty, where military success and imperial expansion became central markers of authority.

Method	Example
Comparative study	Comparing Brahmi forms
Bilingual texts	Kandahar inscription
Palaeographic	Script evolution
Linguistic	Grammar, syntax use

Regional powers also adopted epigraphic traditions to assert independence from larger empires. The Pallavas, Cholas, and Cheras in southern India utilized temple inscriptions to display their patronage of religion and record detailed administrative systems. Through these records, they projected themselves as custodians of dharma and guardians of local traditions, strengthening their legitimacy among subjects. The Chola kings, in particular, left behind thousands of inscriptions on temple walls, copper plates, and stone slabs. These records meticulously detailed tax systems, trade regulations, and temple endowments, reflecting the highly organized nature of their governance. In this sense, inscriptions served both administrative and symbolic functions, linking political power with institutional authority. The inscriptions also reveal complex negotiations between rulers and local elites. Political authority was often consolidated by incorporating regional leaders, landholders, and religious figures into state structures through grants and privileges. These collaborative arrangements, documented in epigraphs, ensured stability and facilitated smoother governance across diverse territories. However, the permanence of inscriptions could also pose challenges for rulers seeking flexibility. Once engraved, decrees became immutable symbols of commitment, limiting the ability of later kings to revoke grants or reverse earlier policies. This rigidity occasionally created tensions between dynastic continuity and evolving political needs.

Another significant aspect of political inscriptions is their role in shaping cultural integration. By using shared scripts, references to pan-Indian myths, and symbolic motifs, rulers constructed a broader sense of unity that transcended regional boundaries. Epigraphy thus became a cultural bridge, linking diverse communities under a single sovereign identity. The inscriptions also provide insights into the judicial authority of rulers. Many records document punishments, laws, and arbitration processes, demonstrating that kings not only held military power but also acted as supreme custodians of justice. This reinforced the

perception of sovereignty as encompassing both protection and regulation. Inscriptions associated with maritime trade further highlight the global dimensions of political power in ancient India. Rulers along coastal regions recorded privileges granted to merchants, tax exemptions for ports, and patronage of international trade networks. Such epigraphs underscore the interconnection between economic prosperity, political influence, and global cultural exchange.

❖ **Concept and Expression of Sovereignty in Inscriptions**

- Permanent and unalterable declarations of authority
- Embodiment of state ideology and political values
- Instruments of cultural negotiation and integration
- Reflective of administrative sophistication and territorial control

The study of inscriptions also reveals the competitive dimension of sovereignty. Rival dynasties often used epigraphy to assert superiority, recording victories over enemies and portraying defeated rulers as subordinate. These narratives demonstrate how epigraphy functioned as a medium of political rivalry as much as it served governance. In some instances, inscriptions served as mediators between local traditions and imperial authority. By acknowledging regional customs, festivals, and religious practices, rulers created a sense of inclusivity that strengthened their legitimacy. This dual strategy of centralized power and localized accommodation emerges as a recurring theme in ancient Indian epigraphic traditions. Ultimately, political authority in ancient Indian inscriptions was a complex interplay of script, symbol, and sovereignty. These epigraphs simultaneously functioned as instruments of governance, tools of propaganda, and monuments of cultural identity. They provide modern scholars with a window into the political imagination of ancient India, revealing how rulers envisioned their roles and communicated their power to diverse audiences.

❖ **Royal Titles, Honorific Designations, and Political Epithets**

In the study of ancient Indian epigraphy, royal titles, honorifics, and epithets occupy a central position as markers of sovereignty, authority, and divine legitimacy. Inscriptions often recorded the multifaceted personality of rulers through carefully chosen titles that reflected their political power, spiritual associations, and social responsibilities. These titles were not arbitrary; they were embedded in cultural, religious, and symbolic frameworks that conveyed meaning beyond mere governance. The inscriptions found on stone, copper plates, and other durable materials show a distinct evolution in the use of royal honorifics. In early inscriptions, rulers adopted simple titles that primarily reflected territorial control or clan affiliation. Over

time, these titles became grander and more layered, reflecting broader claims to universal sovereignty and divine sanction. This transformation mirrors the changing nature of kingship and the expansion of empires. Honorifics served as tools of political communication. Through inscriptions, rulers projected their authority not only to their immediate subjects but also to neighboring kingdoms and rival powers.

For example, the Mauryan, Gupta, and Chola emperors adopted elaborate honorifics to signify their preeminence. These titles helped construct an image of the king as not just a political leader but a cosmic figure with divine connections. The intertwining of script, symbol, and sovereignty is evident in the linguistic choices used in these titles. Sanskrit, Prakrit, and regional languages all carried different symbolic weight depending on the political and cultural context. A ruler choosing Sanskrit titles signaled connections to Vedic authority, while the use of Prakrit in some inscriptions demonstrated accessibility to common people and Buddhist affiliations. One significant feature of these epithets was their association with dharma and cosmic order. Kings were frequently portrayed as “upholders of dharma,” making their rule inseparable from moral and spiritual ideals. This blending of political power and religious sanctity reinforced the perception of kingship as divinely ordained, placing the king above ordinary mortals. The inscriptions also show that rulers used epithets to establish genealogical legitimacy.

By linking themselves to divine ancestors, mythological figures, or earlier revered monarchs, kings strengthened their claims to power. This symbolic lineage extended the king’s authority beyond his lifetime and embedded him within an eternal cosmic framework. Epigraphic sources reveal that certain titles were region-specific, while others gained pan-Indian acceptance. For example, titles like *Maharaja* and *Chakravartin* became widespread, denoting supreme rulers who exercised authority over vast territories. In contrast, localized titles often highlighted unique cultural or political traditions of specific kingdoms. Another important function of royal epithets was their role in military propaganda. Victorious rulers often adopted titles celebrating their conquests, using inscriptions to immortalize their achievements on temple walls, steles, or boundary markers. These records served as reminders of power while subtly warning rivals of the ruler’s strength and valor. Royal honorifics also had economic implications. By associating themselves with divine attributes, rulers positioned themselves as benefactors, ensuring prosperity for their kingdoms. Inscriptions often highlight grants of land, tax exemptions, and patronage of temples — actions presented as extensions of the king’s sacred duty. The titles in such cases reinforced the image of the ruler as a provider and protector. Over time, the language of royal epithets became increasingly symbolic and poetic. Instead of straightforward descriptions of power, inscriptions began employing metaphors drawn from mythology, nature, and cosmology. Kings were compared to lions, oceans, or celestial bodies, reinforcing their image as embodiments of limitless strength and vitality.

The study of these epithets also reveals insights into cross-cultural influences. Foreign invaders and rulers, such as the Kushans and Indo-Greeks, adapted Indian titles to integrate into local political frameworks. By adopting Sanskritized epithets, they aligned themselves with existing traditions of sovereignty, thereby legitimizing their rule over Indian territories. Epigraphic evidence further demonstrates that some titles were gendered, highlighting the role of queens and royal women. While less frequent, inscriptions commemorating queens often granted them titles denoting divine beauty, generosity, and spiritual wisdom. Such references indicate that female sovereignty, though rare, carried its own symbolic weight within the royal framework. Certain titles reflected aspirations rather than realities. Not every king who styled himself as a *Chakravartin* or “universal ruler” controlled vast territories. These epithets often acted as political statements rather than literal descriptions, revealing how rulers used language to assert ambitions and inspire loyalty among their subjects. Inscriptions frequently paired titles with symbolic motifs, such as royal emblems, animals, or sacred objects. The presence of symbols alongside text amplified the meaning of epithets, creating a layered representation of kingship that combined visual and linguistic communication. The regional variations in royal titles also demonstrate the diversity of political organization in ancient India. Some rulers prioritized spiritual legitimacy over military might, while others emphasized martial valor or administrative efficiency. The variety of titles reflects the multiplicity of ideals underlying different conceptions of sovereignty. The changing political environment directly influenced the evolution of honorifics. For instance, during periods of fragmentation, rulers used grandiose titles to assert their autonomy against larger empires.

Conversely, during imperial consolidation, titles reflected claims of unification and central authority. Epigraphs from South India provide striking examples of royal epithets as tools of cultural assertion. Chola and Pallava kings used poetic Sanskrit and Tamil honorifics to solidify their influence, linking their rule with temple patronage and divine service. Their inscriptions seamlessly merged political authority with spiritual devotion. The Gupta period stands out for its highly stylized royal epithets. Gupta emperors adopted exalted titles such as *ParamabhattarakaMaharajadhiraja*, symbolizing supreme overlordship. The inscriptions from this era emphasize the idealized king as a philosopher-ruler, combining martial prowess with intellectual refinement. Some inscriptions document the rivalry between kings through competing titles. When one ruler proclaimed himself the “conqueror of all directions,” his adversaries countered with epithets implying equal or superior power. These linguistic duels highlight how honorifics functioned as symbolic battlegrounds in ancient Indian politics.

■ Features of Royal Epithets

- Conveyed divine legitimacy and cosmic authority
- Used metaphor, poetry, and religious imagery
- Varied by region, language, and cultural influence
- Reinforced genealogical claims and dynastic continuity
- Served as instruments of political propaganda

The study of honorifics also provides valuable insights into social hierarchies. While rulers claimed divine-like status, their epithets often mentioned relationships with Brahmins, ministers, and warriors, revealing interconnected layers of power. This suggests that sovereignty was not exercised in isolation but through a complex network of alliances. Some rulers used royal titles to associate themselves with specific deities. For example, epithets like *Parameshvara* and *Bhagavatpada* tied kings to Shiva or Vishnu, symbolizing their role as earthly representatives of divine will. These sacred associations elevated kingship beyond temporal authority, making it a spiritual mandate. At times, inscriptions also reflect self-restraint and humility rather than boastfulness. Buddhist and Jain monarchs occasionally adopted modest titles, emphasizing their role as dharmic rulers rather than aggressive conquerors. These exceptions highlight the diversity of values represented in ancient Indian sovereignty. However, the excessive use of grandiose epithets sometimes undermined credibility. When numerous rulers simultaneously claimed to be “universal sovereigns,” the meaning of such titles diluted over time. This reveals an inherent tension between symbolic assertion and political reality. The endurance of many royal honorifics is striking. Even after political regimes collapsed, their titles often persisted in literary traditions, temple inscriptions, and collective memory. This continuity demonstrates how epithets served as lasting cultural markers of authority and prestige. Royal epithets also acted as mnemonic devices, shaping collective identity. By repeatedly invoking certain titles, inscriptions reinforced narratives of divine kingship, territorial pride, and dynastic greatness across generations. Through the combined study of language, iconography, and historical context, epigraphy allows us to reconstruct the layers of meaning behind these honorifics.

Titles were never just ornamental; they embodied ideological statements, power negotiations, and symbolic aspirations central to understanding sovereignty in ancient India. Ultimately, royal titles, honorifics, and epithets illuminate the deeply symbolic nature of kingship in ancient Indian society. They represent a synthesis of religion, politics, art, and identity, demonstrating how rulers used language and imagery to craft enduring legacies.

❖ Dynastic Legitimacy and the Construction of Genealogical Authority

In the study of ancient Indian epigraphy, dynastic legitimacy and genealogical claims represent an essential theme that connects rulers' political authority to their ancestral heritage. Inscriptions were often used as deliberate tools to establish continuity with the past, asserting the divine sanction and heroic lineage of kings. By inscribing their ancestry on stone, copper plates, and temple walls, rulers reinforced their right to rule, projecting power not only over their subjects but also across rival kingdoms.

The purpose of asserting genealogical claims went beyond simple documentation; it was deeply tied to the construction of political identity. Ancient kings understood that legitimacy did not solely arise from military strength or territorial conquest but also from aligning themselves with established dynastic traditions. These claims provided a symbolic link between the ruler, his predecessors, and the cosmic order, blending history, mythology, and politics into one narrative. Epigraphs often narrated elaborate family trees, tracing the origins of dynasties back to divine beings, sages, or semi-mythical heroes. These connections created an aura of sanctity around royal authority and allowed rulers to present themselves as guardians of dharma and custodians of cosmic balance. By situating themselves within a grand historical continuum, kings legitimized their sovereignty as divinely ordained rather than merely humanly achieved.

In the case of the Mauryas, Guptas, Chalukyas, and Pallavas, genealogical references became an important part of inscriptions, linking dynasties with epic figures from the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*. This association was not coincidental but strategic, as rulers sought to embody the virtues and authority of legendary heroes. Such symbolic affiliations conveyed to their subjects that the reigning monarch was a natural continuation of an eternal royal order. The recording of genealogy also served a political function in periods of dynastic transitions. New rulers who lacked long-established claims to the throne used inscriptions to assert legitimacy by adopting or appropriating the lineage of earlier dynasties. In some cases, conquerors claimed to be descendants or restorers of ancient, revered lines, thereby framing their rule as part of a continuing tradition rather than a disruptive force. Epigraphy reveals that genealogical claims were highly stylized, emphasizing virtues such as courage, generosity, and piety in ancestors. This portrayal often omitted defeats, disputes, or failures, presenting a glorified image of dynastic heritage. By shaping memory in this way, inscriptions became instruments of propaganda, controlling how future generations perceived the past. An important aspect of dynastic legitimacy involved divine associations. Many kings traced their ancestry to gods like Vishnu, Shiva, or Surya, presenting themselves as *avatars* or earthly manifestations of divine will. Such claims enhanced the ruler's prestige while simultaneously appealing to the religious sentiments of their subjects, strengthening loyalty and devotion. Another recurring theme in these inscriptions is the sanctification of the king's territory through genealogy. By linking themselves to founders of sacred cities, rivers, or holy sites, rulers transformed the landscape into a living record of dynastic

authority. Temples, reservoirs, and monumental pillars often carried inscriptions that merged political legitimacy with religious sanctity. The relationship between script and sovereignty becomes evident in these genealogical records. The written word transformed oral traditions into permanent, visible assertions of authority. While oral genealogies were common in Indian society, epigraphy allowed rulers to make their claims undeniable, carving them into stone for eternity. This permanence served as a safeguard against challenges to legitimacy. The stylistic choices in inscriptions further strengthened these messages. Poetic meters, Sanskritized expressions, and ornate titles elevated the king's stature, making him appear timeless and divine. At the same time, the sophistication of language demonstrated cultural refinement, aligning dynasties with classical traditions of learning and spirituality. One striking example is the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta, which presents an extensive genealogical narrative. It combines a catalog of military conquests with ancestral references, portraying the Gupta king not merely as a warrior but as a continuation of a divine and heroic lineage. This fusion of political and mythological narratives highlights how deeply intertwined genealogy and sovereignty were in ancient India. The Pallava dynasty provides another illustration, where inscriptions traced their ancestry to Brahma or mythical heroes, portraying them as chosen protectors of dharma. By embedding themselves within a sacred genealogy, the Pallavas asserted a divine mandate to rule the Tamil region and beyond. However, genealogical claims were not uniform across dynasties. Regional variations existed, with southern dynasties like the Cholas and Pandyas while northern rulers often associated themselves with figures from Vedic traditions.

These differences reveal how local culture, geography, and religion shaped the construction of dynastic legitimacy. In some instances, inscriptions reveal conflicts between competing genealogical traditions. Rival dynasties occasionally contested each other's claims, producing inscriptions that countered or denied the legitimacy of their opponents. These textual battles were part of larger struggles for regional dominance, making epigraphy a powerful weapon in political discourse.

■ Principal Characteristics of Dynastic Genealogical Claims

- Establish divine or heroic ancestry to legitimize authority.
- Glorify rulers and omit political failures or controversies.
- Connect the dynasty to revered religious traditions and epic narratives.
- Assert territorial sanctity by linking rulers to sacred geographies.
- Serve as propaganda tools during times of political instability.

The socio-religious dimension of genealogy was equally significant. Inscriptions often highlighted the king's role as a patron of temples, scholars, and religious institutions. By presenting themselves as

upholders of dharma, rulers strengthened both their moral and political authority, embedding their power within broader cosmic frameworks. Another feature of genealogical inscriptions was their adaptability. When dynasties fell and were replaced, successors frequently retained portions of their predecessors' genealogies to maintain continuity and reduce resistance among subjects. This practice reflected an understanding that collective memory and political stability were closely linked. Inscriptions also illustrate how genealogical claims served diplomatic purposes. By intermarrying with other royal houses and recording these alliances, rulers expanded their influence and prestige. These relationships were strategically highlighted in epigraphy to display connections to powerful lineages across regions. The inclusion of mythological symbolism in genealogical claims also demonstrates how rulers blurred the boundary between history and legend. Kings positioned themselves as inheritors of divine power, while their narratives evoked stories of cosmic battles and sacred duties, making political authority seem natural and inevitable. Interestingly, the adoption of grand titles such as *Chakravartin* (universal ruler) or *Paramabhattaraka* (supreme lord) often accompanied genealogical claims, amplifying the ruler's elevated position in the sociopolitical hierarchy. Such titles reinforced the perception of kingship as an institution transcending mortal limitations. Despite their power, genealogical inscriptions had limitations. Their heavy reliance on mythological narratives sometimes blurred historical accuracy, making them less reliable as strict records of ancestry. Scholars must therefore interpret these epigraphs critically, separating political propaganda from authentic lineage.

■ Nature and Functions of Genealogical Claims in Epigraphic Records

- Deeply symbolic rather than purely historical.
- Intended to influence collective memory.
- Interwoven with religion, mythology, and political ideology.
- Adaptable to shifting dynastic contexts and territorial expansions.

Epigraphy thus emerges as a vital tool for understanding not only the mechanisms of political legitimacy but also the broader cultural imagination of ancient India. Dynastic genealogies demonstrate how rulers situated themselves within temporal and cosmic frameworks, projecting authority across multiple dimensions. Genealogical claims in ancient Indian inscriptions were not mere records of ancestry; they were powerful instruments of sovereignty. By combining divine association, cultural symbolism, and political strategy, rulers used epigraphy to solidify their place in history and assert their unbroken right to rule. These records ensured that dynasties were remembered not as transient powers but as eternal entities woven into the spiritual and cultural fabric of the subcontinent.

❖ Public Proclamations and State Communication through Inscriptions

In ancient India, inscriptions were one of the most powerful tools used by rulers to communicate their policies, achievements, and visions to the public. These engraved declarations were not merely historical records but were deeply political in nature, designed to reinforce the authority of the king and ensure the dissemination of state-sanctioned information across the realm. Through carefully chosen scripts, symbols, and messages, inscriptions functioned as a bridge between the state and its subjects. The role of inscriptions went beyond simple announcements; they were visual and textual assertions of power. Kings and dynasties relied on these inscriptions to legitimize their rule, consolidate political authority, and project sovereignty in distant regions. The messages were intended not only for immediate subjects but also for rival rulers, religious institutions, and future generations. This long-term perspective made epigraphy an essential part of statecraft in ancient India. One of the earliest examples of state communication through inscriptions comes from the Mauryan period, particularly the edicts of Emperor Ashoka. These inscriptions were spread across the Indian subcontinent in multiple scripts and languages to ensure accessibility to diverse populations. They reflect how inscriptions served as both practical tools for governance and symbolic representations of a king's ideological and moral vision.

The geographical placement of inscriptions was strategic. Royal declarations were carved on rocks, stone pillars, temple walls, and gateways situated in public spaces such as trade routes, pilgrimage centers, and urban hubs. This ensured maximum visibility and influence. By embedding royal authority into the very landscape, the rulers extended their symbolic presence far beyond the palace. Inscriptions were not limited to royal proclamations alone; they also documented donations, land grants, tax exemptions, and appointments to administrative positions. This dual purpose—political and economic—made them vital instruments of governance. They regulated relationships between the state, religious authorities, merchants, and local communities while simultaneously affirming the ruler's power and generosity. The language and tone of these inscriptions were carefully designed to create an aura of divinity and righteousness around the king. Use of grandiose titles, divine epithets, and references to cosmic order placed the ruler at the center of political and spiritual life. The public, upon reading or hearing these declarations, would associate state policies with divine sanction, thereby reinforcing obedience and loyalty. Over time, inscriptions evolved into complex semiotic systems where not only the words but also the symbols, emblems, and script choices conveyed deeper layers of meaning. For example, the use of the lion capital in Ashoka's edicts symbolized both royal authority and Buddhist dharma, creating a visual language that transcended literacy barriers among the general populace. The choice of script was an essential part of state communication. In multilingual empires, kings often issued inscriptions in multiple scripts—such as Brahmi, Kharosthi, and

later, Nagari and Grantha—to reach diverse linguistic groups. By doing so, rulers demonstrated inclusivity and ensured their decrees reached as many subjects as possible. The public declarations often combined administrative instructions with moral messaging. Particularly during Ashoka's reign, inscriptions emphasized ethical conduct, compassion, and tolerance, alongside practical governance. In contrast, later dynasties like the Guptas and Cholas emphasized grandeur, conquest, and divine authority, showing how inscriptions adapted to the ideological priorities of each period. Many inscriptions also served as records of military achievements, thereby functioning as political propaganda. Victories, territorial expansions, and subjugation of enemies were often glorified in elaborate terms to instill pride among subjects and intimidate rivals. In this way, inscriptions functioned as historical narratives shaped to benefit the ruling elite. These declarations played a critical role in fostering a sense of shared identity among diverse populations. By repeatedly asserting common values, religious affiliations, and loyalty to the ruler, inscriptions helped integrate vast and culturally varied territories into cohesive political units. This ideological integration was as important as territorial control for maintaining long-term stability. However, the effectiveness of inscriptions depended heavily on accessibility. While rulers invested in inscriptions as tools of communication, literacy levels among common people were limited. This meant that many declarations were intended to be read aloud by officials or priests during public gatherings rather than individually understood by every subject.

Major Features of Public Proclamations in Inscriptions

- Served as both administrative documents and symbolic assertions of power
- Often multilingual and multiscript to reach diverse audiences
- Combined governance, morality, and propaganda in a single medium
- Strategically placed in locations with maximum visibility and influence
- Functioned as enduring records, influencing future generations and historical narratives

While inscriptions played a central role in governance, they also had limitations. Their reliance on physical media—stone, copper, or walls—meant they were location-bound. This restricted their reach compared to oral traditions, which could travel with itinerant bards and messengers. Despite this, their permanence gave them unparalleled authority. The symbolic function of inscriptions was perhaps as significant as their informational value. A ruler who carved their name into stone was claiming not only physical dominion but also timelessness, suggesting that their authority transcended the mortal lifespan. This symbolic dimension reinforced the perception of kingship as divinely ordained and eternal. Rulers often used inscriptions to interact with religious institutions.

Many declarations recorded donations to temples, monasteries, and scholarly centers, thereby strengthening alliances between the state and spiritual authorities. This linkage enhanced the ruler's legitimacy while allowing religious leaders to influence governance. Inscriptions also became tools for resolving disputes, particularly concerning land ownership and taxation. Copperplate charters, for example, served as legal documents guaranteeing rights and privileges to individuals or institutions. Even in regions where direct political control was weak, a royal inscription served as a reminder of the ruler's reach and influence, functioning as a silent ambassador of imperial power. With time, inscriptions began incorporating elaborate artistic elements alongside textual messages. Decorative motifs, symbolic carvings, and architectural integration gave inscriptions a dual identity as both political texts and cultural artifacts. These designs enhanced their aesthetic appeal and increased their reverence among subjects. Some inscriptions were explicitly commemorative, marking significant events such as coronations, temple inaugurations, or victories. By immortalizing these milestones, rulers constructed a curated version of history, one that highlighted achievements while omitting failures.

▪ **Nature and Mechanisms of State Communication in Epigraphic Records**

- Permanent and enduring, meant to outlast the ruler's lifetime
- Intentionally public, designed to be seen and remembered
- Embedded with ideological narratives promoting loyalty and morality
- Served as instruments of both governance and cultural identity

Despite their importance, inscriptions were not immune to manipulation. Rulers often used them to exaggerate achievements or suppress dissenting voices. This selective portrayal means historians must critically analyze inscriptions alongside other sources to reconstruct a balanced view of ancient statecraft. The evolution of inscriptions across dynasties—from the Mauryas to the Guptas, Pallavas, Cholas, and beyond—reflects broader shifts in political priorities, religious affiliations, and administrative strategies. Each ruling house used inscriptions to craft a unique identity while adapting older traditions to new contexts. Inscriptions also shaped collective memory.

By presenting a curated narrative of rulers' deeds, they influenced how future generations understood political history and cultural heritage. Their role in constructing official memory cannot be overstated. Furthermore, the durability of inscriptions has made them invaluable to modern scholars. While manuscripts and oral traditions often fade over time, stone and copper inscriptions have survived centuries, providing critical insights into governance, culture, and communication strategies in ancient India. At the same time, the performative nature of inscriptions—designed to be recited, revered, and displayed—

highlights their function as living texts rather than static records. They existed in a dynamic relationship with audiences, shaping and being shaped by cultural expectations. Ultimately, public declarations through inscriptions reveal the complex interplay between political authority, symbolic communication, and societal values in ancient India. They illustrate how rulers negotiated legitimacy, integrated diverse populations, and projected their ideologies across time and space.

Conclusion

Inscriptions were one of the most powerful tools through which rulers expressed and maintained their political authority in ancient India. Far more than simple records, they served as official statements of power, legitimacy, and royal identity. Through inscriptions, kings presented their achievements, justified their right to rule, and communicated their vision of governance to different sections of society. As a result, epigraphic records became an important means of constructing and preserving royal authority. The study shows that royal titles, honorifics, and genealogical narratives played a major role in strengthening political legitimacy. By adopting grand titles and tracing their ancestry to famous dynasties, heroic figures, or divine beings, rulers sought to establish their superiority and reinforce public confidence in their rule. Such claims helped create an image of continuity, stability, and lawful succession within the ruling family. Political inscriptions also functioned as an important medium of state communication. They recorded royal orders, land grants, tax privileges, religious donations, and administrative decisions. In doing so, they informed local communities about the actions of the state and demonstrated the ruler's ability to govern effectively. These records connected political authority with social, economic, and religious life, making inscriptions a vital instrument of governance.

The examples of the Maurya, Gupta, Chola, and Vijayanagara rulers clearly demonstrate the political importance of inscriptions. The edicts of Ashoka promoted the ideals of moral rule and public welfare, while Gupta inscriptions highlighted royal prestige, cultural achievements, and dynastic legitimacy. Similarly, Chola and Vijayanagara inscriptions combined administrative information with religious devotion, showing how political power and sacred authority often worked together.

Inscriptions also acted as a form of political persuasion. By recording victories, charitable acts, religious patronage, and public welfare measures, rulers attempted to present themselves as just, powerful, and benevolent leaders. These records were carefully designed to influence public opinion and strengthen loyalty among subjects. At the same time, they preserved important memories of dynasties and ensured that royal achievements would be remembered by future generations. Another significant aspect of political inscriptions was their use of language, symbols, and location. The careful selection of words, royal

emblems, and prominent places such as temples, pillars, caves, and public spaces increased the visibility of royal authority. These elements transformed inscriptions into powerful symbols of sovereignty and political presence.

In conclusion, political inscriptions in ancient India were not merely historical records carved on stone or metal. They were active instruments through which rulers created, expressed, and maintained their authority. By combining ideas of kingship, legitimacy, religion, administration, and public communication, inscriptions became a powerful medium for shaping political culture and preserving the image of royal power. Their value therefore extends beyond historical documentation, offering deep insight into the nature of sovereignty and governance in ancient Indian society.

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