

# The Epigraphist of Epic Proportions

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**W**hen Bhumi Puja was done and the foundation stone laid for the new Parliament House in December, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proclaimed with pride, that India was the mother of democracy. He was referring to the celebrated inscriptions on the walls of the Sundara Varadaraja Perumal temple at Uttaramerur village near Chennai. It was, way back towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rai Bahadur V. Venkayya, the First Indian Epigraphist and Historian, who discovered these distinct cultural treasures and political



Valaiyattur Venkayya

philosophy of the ancient and medieval Tamil country.

V. Venkayya was a Tamilian, born on July 1, 1864 in the village of Valaiyattur, near Arani in North Arcot district. Dr. N. Ramesan's book on Sri Appayya Dikshithar, published by Srimad Appayya Dikshitendra Granthavali Prakasana Samithi, 1972, informs that Sri Venkayya, son of Brahmasri Appa Sitaramayya was the illustrious, direct descendent of the Advaita philosopher [AD. 1520- 1592]. Venkayya had his formal schooling at Chittoor and his collegiate education at Madras Christian College, located at that time in North Madras. On graduating with distinction in Physics, Venkayya entered the teaching faculty by accepting the offer of a high school teacher at a Missionary School in the temple town of Kanchipuram. Enchanted by its architectural beauty and historicity, during the December holidays of 1886, he decided to visit the rock cut shrines at Mamallapuram. There he met the German Indologist, Dr. E. Hultzsch whose work of collecting South Indian inscriptions had just commenced. He had been appointed as Epigraphist to the

Government, Archeological Survey of India [A.S.I.] in November of that year. Much impressed by Venkayya's flair for languages and intellectual acumen, Dr. Hultzsch wanted the ebullient youngster to become his assistant. On 30<sup>th</sup> April, after completion of the academic year, Venkayya joined Hultzsch as his First Assistant. Hardly a fortnight after Venkayya joined the Epigraphy Department, when on 16<sup>th</sup> May, Hultzsch was examined by the Public Service Commission about his 'One Native Assistant', he promptly replied, "He is a B.A. of the Madras University, Mr. V. Venkayya; he is a good Tamil student, and I am



Dr. Hultzsch

thoroughly satisfied with the progress he is making." Venkayya combined duty with study of Indian History. He secured the Madras University First Rank in M.A. History and bagged the coveted Norton Prize. Thereafter, the world of epigraphy saw the advent of an avatar to unfurl and uphold India's pristine past.

In the year 1898, Venkayya copied 71 inscriptions from the Vaikunta Perumal temple in the hamlet of Uttaramerur. They suggest that the village assembly also had a judicial function. Ten of these epigraphs record transactions pertaining to the Vairamega tataka [tank] in the village. These were indicted in the reign of Dantivarman Pallava ruler of Kanchi who had the *biruda* [surname] 'Vairamega'. The tank was maintained by a committee of the village assembly. The famous inscriptions about the rural assembly, the sabha, its constitution, functions, and electoral rules awed historians. Voting had been a right in this Tamil land. Self-governance was the norm at the grassroot level. Rule of law prevailed, and all had to abide by the prescribed code of conduct. The secret ballot system practised had the name, *kudam-olai Thittam*.

Purity in public life was upheld. Severe retribution awaited wrongdoers. The elaborate text given by Venkayya created a tidal wave that smashed the notion of democracy as a Western invention. T.N. Seshan attributed the success of his electoral reforms to Kanchi Mahaswami who suggested that he visit Uttaramerur. In *Deivathin Kural*, Vol-IV, more than a hundred pages of matter are found on Uttaramerur inscriptions.

Venkayya's publication in the Annual Report of A.S.I., 1904, on the two inscriptions of Parantaka – I, at Uttaramerur came after his initial account of *The Village Administration in Southern India in the First Half the 10th century A.D.*, published in his 1899 Madras Epigraphical Report [M.E.R.], when Dr. Hultzsch was on furlough. Thereafter, centered on these two documents, sprouted several studies on village administration and political life. There is no study of South Indian institutions which is not based on these records, for where else can historians go in quest of a better comparative appraisal? Venkayya made the people understand that temple inscriptions are a lot more than just write ups on religious matters.

Venkayya's strength lay in marshalling facts. He was a historian of integrity with scholarly thoroughness. He found that as many as 190 inscriptions collected throughout the entire Tamil country suggested rural administration of the same character as at Uttaramerur. Inscriptions are the primary source of early Indian history and are universally recognised. Those inscriptions published in Annual Reports of the A.S.I. on South Indian epigraphy, the Madras Epigraphical Reports [M.E.R.], and the series on South Indian Inscriptions [S.S.I.], Volumes I-V, are used for the study of Indian History. These inscriptions were edited by scholars like E. Hultzsch, V. Venkayya and H. Krishna Sastri.

Venkayya was the chosen one to enter the sanctum sanctorum of temples. Dr. Hultzsch in his M.E.R., Feb 1890, wrote on the primitive conditions endured by his assistant in the ancient Bilvanothesvara temple at Tiruvallam, North Arcot district: "As I was not allowed to enter the temple [being a European], the task of copying devolved on my Brahmin assistant Mr. V. Venkayya, M.A. He had to work

under considerable difficulties. The interior of the temple was almost dark, and the inscriptions were covered with lamp-oil and soot. Many of them had to be deciphered at lamp-light, before mechanical copies could be made, as the lines are irregular and the writing runs into every nook and corner of the original building." Venkayya, had to crouch in unnatural positions to copy inscriptions. During summer storms, when rain fell in torrents outside and violent gusts of wind rattled along desolate



Tamil Inscriptions

temple tops, inside the dingy *garbha griha* was V. Venkayya. He struggled in front of the fiercely agitated flickering flame of the oil lamp, against the dark shadows cast to copy the inscriptions. The stench of dereliction and neglect was heavier than all other tribulations.

The important sources of early history of the Tamil country from stone and copper plate edicts in Tamil and Sanskrit at Mamallapuram and other parts of the Madras Presidency were published in the first Volume of *South Indian Inscriptions* [S.I.I.] by the A.S.I. in 1890. Highlighting the huge challenge of giving translations in Tamil that caused some delay and acknowledging the enormity of the work accomplished by Venkayya, Dr. Hultzsch wrote in its introduction: "For the Tamil inscriptions I was fortunate enough to have an able and efficient helpmate in my assistant, Mr. V. Venkayya, a Tamil Brahmin, who promises to do excellent work in the field of South Indian Epigraphy". The Dharmaraja Ratham had an inscription in non-florid form that went unnoticed. G. Jouveau-Dubreuil in his book on Pallava Antiquities, 1916, observes: "The letters are not cut deep enough and

so the inscription remained unperceived for a long time. It was discovered by V. Venkayya. This inscription is placed just above the entrance to the sanctuary and gives the temple the name of Atyantakama-Pallavesvara."

Though the place is associated with the Pallavas, since it acquired its name from Narasimhavarman-I, whose *biruda* was Mahamalla, the great wrestler [on whom Kalki Krishnamurthi based his historic novel, *Sivagamiyin Sabatham*], Chola inscriptions too surfaced at the shore temple of Jalasayanadeva. One of them mentions Rajaraja-I's conquest of Ceylon. We are amused to know from Dr. Hultzsch that in those days, 'Mahabalipuram could be reached from Madras by boat on the Buckingham Canal, or from Chingleput Junction by bullock cart via Tirukkalukunram'. The duo, Hultzsch and Venkayya worked in a century when transport and accommodation were primitive. Their journey was a rocky ride; both exciting and scary, involving staying at unhealthy places. Electricity and technology were unheard of. While S.I.I., Vol-I is on Mamallapuram, S.I.I., Vol-II is all about the Tanjore Temple. The very

mention of these two places is bound to trigger memories of the two great early epigraphists-Hultzsch and Venkayya. Their works made them prominent as the exponents of Pallava and Chola art and history.

The history of the Tamil country as culled out from inscribed stone and metal does not get us beyond the period of the Pallavas who reigned at Kanchi. That is why Vol-I of S.I.I. starts with epigraphs at Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram. The Sage of Kanchi, Mahaperiyavar, always used to say it is important to learn both Tamil and Sanskrit. It was possible for Hultzsch to include the Sanskrit and Tamil inscriptions, of the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram in the Volume, thanks to Venkayya's proficiency in both the tongues. From then on compliments gushed forth from the expert master to the exalted disciple. The academia devoured their scholarly, intensive reporting. The Director General of Archaeology, Dr. Burgess at the time was keen that 'the works might be expedited. Scholars who may see this report will naturally be eager for the materials, it describes'. [M.E.R., Nov. 1888]. Apart from their work

on South Indian Inscriptions, Hultzsch and Venkayya wrote extensive articles on important inscriptions in the flagship journal devoted to Indian Epigraphy, *Epigraphia Indica* [E.I.].

Kanchi of antiquarian interest in Southern India had a claim to detailed study. To unearth inscriptions, both physical efforts and intellectual attainments are required. Speaking on Kailasanatha temple inscriptions, Hultzsch said: "One of these runs around the outside of the Central Shrine and consists of twelve Sanskrit verses. By temporary removal of some slabs, my assistant succeeded in preparing facsimiles of the greater part of the first verse and a few additional letters at the beginning of the second verse." It was all about the mythical and historical pedigree of Rajasimha Pallavesvara, well known as Narasimha-II. In an inscription in the temple, the Pallava king is compared to the god Guha. Another inscription found was about Parantaka-I or Madurai Konda Ko Parakesarivarman who covered the Siva temple at Vyaghra-graha with gold. Hultzsch complimented Venkayya for clarification of the place: "As

discovered by my assistant V.Venkayya M.A., Vyaghraha is the Sanskrit equivalent of Puliur, 'the tiger village', one of the names for Chidambaram." Identifying the names of places and kings posed challenges. A slew of names were discovered by Venkayya to be the *birudas* of Pallava king Rajasimha of Kanchi. A rock cut cave at Trichinopoly and at Vallam, the name of a king, Gunabara, was found. Venkayya clarified to a perplexed Hultzsch, that the king was Mahendravarman-I.

Writing on the Ekambaranatha temple, Hultzsch said, "My First Assistant has here, in addition to the four inscriptions copied in 1890, discovered number of historically important inscriptions of Chola and other kings. Among them is a Tamil version of the Sanskrit inscription of the Kakatiya King Ganapati. While copying these inscriptions my Assistant came to know that an act of modern vandalism is about to be perpetrated within the precincts of that ancient temple." [M.E.R., Aug 1893]. Hultzsch and Venkayya dreaded indiscriminate, misdirected temple renovations. Hultzsch cautioned : "I would however, suggest that a responsible

Hindu officer of the Public Works Department might be deputed to the Ekanthanatha temple and might be ordered to superintend the removal of stones which could be numbered before they are taken out and arranged in their original order." His valuable suggestion seems imperative and relevant even to this day. Temples are the lifeline of our civilisation.

Venkayya considered the Tanjore temple inscriptions important for the history of Tamil philology. The temple was named Srirajarajeswara after Rajaraja-I was conferred the *biruda* by the temple authorities at Chidambaram in his 19th regnal year. Vincent Smith in his introduction to S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar's book on Ancient India [1911], observed: "The lands under cultivation were carefully surveyed and holdings registered at least a century before the famous Doomsday record of William the Conqueror". Land revenue was payable in paddy/gold. We get to know the standard weights and measures used in those times. Paddy was measured in 'marakkal'. The wall on the Central Shrine of the Big Temple details the wages for all occupations. Oduvars of

Tiruvaimozhi, Vedic teachers were paid; students received stipends. Gold kasu weighing 28 troy grains was the unit of currency in the Chola era. Venkayya claims Rajaraja-I to be the first monarch in Southern India to record military achievements in every one of his inscriptions. Part-IV of S.S.I., Vol-II was edited and translated by Venkayya when death was at his heels. It contained the hitherto unpublished Tamil inscriptions of Rajaraja, Rajendra Chola and others in the Tanjore temple. Inscriptions played a major role in Chola statesmanship. After the completion of this mission, Venkayya was freed from his mortal coil. Dr. Whitney Cox, currently Associate Professor at University of Chicago, fascinated by the works of Hultzs and V.Venkayya researched on Kulottunga Chola!

Hultzs was jubilant when Venkayya discovered one of Vikrama-Choladeva's inscriptions at the Tanjore temple. He declared: "This is a valuable find because the only Chola Kings of whom inscriptions had been hitherto copied at Tanjore, were Rajaraja, Rajendra- Chola and Kulottunga-I."

By dint of hard work, Venkayya acquired credit for himself and

credit for all Indians. Hultzs was large hearted enough to admit and admire his assistant's works. He reported: "Most of the inscriptions in Srirangam and Jambukeswara temples were recorded by my assistant, Mr. V. Venkayya, since I was not allowed inside the inner *prakaras*". In his article on Ranganatha inscriptions of Sundara Pandya [E.I., Vol-III], he said: "This inscription was discovered by my First Assistant Mr. V. Venkayya, M.A., on the east wall of the sacred *prakara* of the temple of Ranganatha [Vishnu] on the island of Srirangam in Trichinopoly taluka.....The inscription belongs to the time of Sundara Pandya who resided at Madura." Hultzs continues to tell us: "The only inscription of Prataparudra, of which I have a copy at hand, is a fragment discovered by my First Assistant, Mr. V. Venkayya, on the west wall of the second *prakara* of the Jambukeswara temple near Trichinopoly. It is written in Grantha character, but in Telugu language." Venkayya and Krishna Sastri took guidance from Prof. Gurazada Venkata Apparao, the research Professor in Telugu, at Maharaja College of Vizaiyanagaram in 1887-88.

Venkayya deciphered old Telugu scripts; notable among them being the Ranastipundi grant of Vimaladitya. The Eastern Chalukya King was the son-in-law of Rajaraja-I. Venkayya resolved the puzzle of Vimaladitya's accession. He stated that Vimaladitya must have been a captive in the Chola capital for four years. During the period, having got married to Kundavi, the Chola Emperor's daughter, he must have returned to his dominions and commenced rule. The Tamil theatre proprietor, T.K. Shanmugam known for historical productions, took up this cue for staging *Rajaraja Chozhan* in the mid 1950s. The scene where the Chola Princess would climb down the steps in the prison cell to visit Vimaladitya was a sensational hit.

Venkayya succeeded Dr. Hultzsch as the Epigraphist to the Government of Madras, when the latter resigned from the post in 1903 and returned back home. John Marshall was then the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India [A.S.I.]. The Epigraphy Department remained as a branch of the A.S.I. This set up frustrated both Dr. Hultzsch and Dr. Sten Konow. Without epigraphical analyses, archeological findings

would be mere exhibits, not historical artifacts. Dr. Sten Konow resigned his high position as the Imperial Government Epigraphist at Simla in 1906. By now Venkayya was a national figure. Marshall pleaded with him to accept the offer of the Government Epigraphist. Ramananda Chatterji, Father of Indian Journalism, and the founder of *The Modern Review*, a monthly edition, candidly commented: "The reason of this favour to a dark-skinned scholar is not far to seek. Mr. Venkayya was then the only man in the whole of India who could carry on the printing of South Indian Inscriptions."

At a time when the English educated Indian psyche was slowly losing grip with its glorious traditions and legacies, V. Venkayya and U.V. Swaminatha Aiyer revived it. The former was collecting inscriptions from ancient temples, while the latter was gathering age-old Tamil manuscripts on hymns sung in praise of them. Both the written records were scattered all over the Tamil country through many centuries. Tremendous effort was required in their collection and publication, for which the two stalwarts dedicated themselves. Venkayya's epigraphical reports

greatly interested the Tamil Pandit. Stone inscriptions apart, temples had copper plate records in their custody. 'Moovar Ula', is about the poems in praise of three Chola Kings by Ottakoothar. 'Tamil thatha', researching on them, solicited Venkayya's guidance and the Report on copper plates discovered in the Vataranyesvara temple at Tiruvalangadu that gave the Chola genealogy. The Tamil renaissance brought about by these two erudite scholars heralded the national resurgence. Without them the Tamil country's history and literary treasures would have been lost forever.

Several inscriptions from the Cuddapah district contain information of a dynasty of Cholas, which had not been noticed. They seem to have been independent sovereigns, and their inscriptions are anterior to 8th century A.D. Venkayya pointed out that the region south west of Dhanyakataka, the old name of Amaravati, in the Kistna District, there is still South of Kurnool a wild forest that conforms to the description given by Hiuen Tsiang, which the Chinese traveller calls as 'Chu-li ye'. It was in the scheme of working of Venkayya, that he would personally

visit and inspect the spots mentioned in inscriptions, travelogues and literary texts before ascertaining facts for establishing his results. The Journal of Indian Antiquary brought forth Venkayya's serialised miniature monograph on: "Ancient history of Nellore District" between Oct 1908 and Jan 1909. Venkayya with the available evidence cleared the much doubted history of the region by concluding that "more than a century before the Cholas of the Tamil country became dominant in Southern India, there was a Chola kingdom, comprising of the southern portion of Kurnool, and the northern part of Cuddapah". In his epigraphical Report for July 1906, Venkayya gave an account of Kongu Ceras from his inspection of rock cut caves at the Namakkal hill in Salem district. He informs that the region was ruled by chiefs bearing the name Adigaman, who had his capital at Tagadur, now Darmapuri. The later Adigamans were feudatories of the Cholas.

Pandya history gained new insights from Venkayya's Report on Velvikudi grant in Vatteluttu. Venkayya fixed the date of the grant of Pandya Jatila Parantaka

Nedunjadaiyan as 769 A.D. which is important for Pandya chronology. Venkayya's two reports, on Velvikudi grant and Madras Museum plates of Jatilavarman, together furnish a genealogy of the Pandyas. Lot of references from Tamil literature like *Madurai Kanji*, *Sthalapuranam* and *Periyapuranam* are drawn to establish the tradition about the deluge that swept the Pandya kingdom and the history of Kalabhara occupation of Pandya country. Venkayya noticed that the name, Kadungon, mentioned as the last of the Pandya king of the First Sangam occurs in the Velvikudi inscription as the designation of the first Pandya king after the Kalabhara interregnum.

Numerous articles by Venkayya were published in the Annual Magazines of his alma mater, The Madras Christian College. One such was on 'Date of Manikkavasagar' in Dec 1904 issue. Venkayya found a provision made for reciting Manikkavasagar's Tiruchazal in one of Vikrama Chola's inscriptions. The date of this king's accession is A.D.1118. Venkayya, examined all facets of Tamil history and literature. He concluded: "Historically, Manikkavasagar was a contemporary of King Varaguna

Pandya whose name is quoted in his works; and this king was probably the same prince who ascended the throne in the year 862-63. Moreover, in the legends of his life, our great saint is said to have been the prime minister of Arimardhana Pandya. He has not been identified. But he appears as the 61st or 63rd in the list of the 74 monarchs who reigned in Madura before the overthrowing of their power by the Cholas. This took place under the reign of Rajendra Chola, towards the middle of the 11th century; and if we assign as usual, 20 years to each of the 10 or 12 kings who reigned between Arimardhana and Kun Pandya, the last independent sovereign, we find Manikkavasagar must have lived at the beginning of the 9th century."

Venkayya endeavoured in his reports to present a continuous narrative of the principal dynasties of the region and produce a true picture of the people and their kings. The *Madras Museum Plates of Jatilavarman* penned by Venkayya in the research journal, *Indian Antiquary*, Mar 1893, was acclaimed by Prof. Vincent Smith in his book on *The Early History of India* [1904], while enumerating the three prominent

kingdoms of the South: "In this article Mr. V. Venkayya has collected most of the notices of the Pandya kingdom."

In 1906, the title of Rai Bahadur was conferred on Venkayya in recognition of his yeoman services in South Indian history.

A true visionary, Venkayya sensed the importance of harnessing water resources for economic resurgence and social progress. Village tanks and irrigation channels are frequently referred to in the description of boundaries and they appear to be built by kings, and philanthropists. It had already been noticed that the Vairamegam tank at Uttaramerur was maintained by the Tank Committee of the Village Assembly. Venkayya credits the Pallava King Mahendravarman-I of Conjeeveram with the construction of the first reservoir in Southern India at Mahendravadi. His great-grandson, Paramesvaravarman constructed the Parameswara-tataka, the information of which is provided by Kuram copper-plate. The Kasakudi copper-plates of the Pallava Nandivarman, mentions Tiraiyaneri [Tenneri], east of Conjeeveram. Venkayya lauds the Chola King Karikala as the earliest South-

Indian ruler who realised the necessity of building facilities for irrigation when agriculture was the prime industry of the region. In his research paper on 'Irrigation in ancient times in Southern India', published in A.S.I. Report of 1903-04, Venkayya gives a long list of all tanks mentioned in later Chola, Pandya and Vijayanagara inscriptions discovered in the Tamil country. In the Tamil and Telugu speaking regions, the *Upiliyans* and the *Uparas* respectively were a caste of tank-diggers and earth-workers. Venkayya's command over classic Tamil literature is astounding and his works had wide currency and popularity among scholars in Europe and South East Asia. His diligent research works are unequivocally, internationally accepted.

In ancient India there were no historians. Therefore, Venkayya regarded epigraphical evidence as the most authentic source in the reconstruction of the bygone periods. Thanks to his tremendous efforts, several historically significant epigraphs on stones and metals were moved to the Government Central Museum at Madras. Scholars were confident when meandering down memory

lane that they were on firmer ground of solid facts with Venkayya's reports and research articles. Inscriptions not only retain the nature of writing to keep a record of its own development, but they also communicate the socio-political ideas, thereby providing an opportunity to study the phenomena of diffusion of culture and civilisation. The related discipline, paleography concerns with study of scribal styles that helps in the dating of epigraphs.

The earliest lithic records in the Tamil country throwing valuable light on the origin and development of Tamil Vattezhuthu alphabets were first noticed by V. Venkayya in the Kazhugumali hill region, Mangulam/Manakulam village near Madurai. They belonged to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., inscribed during the Sangam age of Pandya King Neduncheliazhan. Venkayya found them to resemble the Brahmi script of Asokan edicts and also using hitherto unknown archaic

characters and orthographic conventions. It was the first find of Tamil Brahmi scripts.

Venkayya's explorations were offbeat from the usual triad of North India, Buddhists and Moghuls. The Tamil region remained unknown with the sands of time piling over it. The savant from the Tamil country, unravelled the potential of epigraphical records and restored the cultural heritage of the land. The world of epigraphy saw a great meteor rise and pass, leaving an unmatched career as a splendid memory. He is the Polestar for all research scholars. After having laboured indefatigably for twenty five years, he died in harness on Nov 21, 1912. "From first to last, his life in the Archaeological Department was one of assiduous labour and devotion to duty, and his work throughout was characterised by sound scholarship," was the fitting tribute paid to the esteemed titan by John. H. Marshall. ●

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