

JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF SANSKRIT

Two-day National Seminar

On

LITERATURE AND INSCRIPTIONS: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Concept Note

Literature and inscriptions are steeped in the world of words; while literature creates this world of words both orally and in writing, inscriptions deal only with written words. In a country like India where literacy has not taken its roots in every section of the society (especially in the remote past), the written words in inscriptions are often meant to be heard and/or recited and may actually have been read by a small minority. As this Seminar delves into the texts and contexts of literary texts and inscriptions, the historical background and perspectives of these works assume a special significance in this kind of an enquiry. Inscriptions of pre-modern times are often associated with courtly and elite cultures and therefore provide the bed-rock for the study of ancient history. The literary texts may or may not refer to actual historical events but never be divorced from their respective historical, social, political and cultural contexts. Thus literary texts and inscriptions—with marked distinctiveness as literary creations--- are invaluable two sources both for constructing and understanding of the ancient past of India in a comprehensive manner. The processes of dealing with these two are different and scholars engaged in the reading of these two sources require the skills of reading epigraphs and manuscripts and also expertise in the languages of these literary creations, may it be classical (*marga*) or indigenous/ regional (*desi*). Here an attempt will be made to bring together both these traditions and understanding the contexts of these texts. Using the texts in an innovative manner for possible readings of the different facets of the life of the people is a prime concern of this seminar. This may include an attempt to delve into the mental worlds of the creators of texts and their projects, their patrons and their audiences. In sum, the seminar wishes to study literary cultures in their historical contexts which were not innate but dynamic. Keeping in mind the issue of veracity of sources for historical reconstruction this theme seeks to identify the ways in which both literature and epigraphs have been used and may be used in interpreting historical traditions and facts.

Our discussions in these two days would focus broadly on the sub themes like:

Literature-Text and Context: Literature of various categories like epics, poetries, dramas, normative literature, travel literature and so on may be used in interpretation and reinterpretation of historical facts and situations. The transmission of knowledge of such literature and its

mobility in the different cultural spheres may be read directly and also by attempting to read between lines. The transmission of literary texts through the oral medium and its imitation to show the awareness of the previously composed literature is another aspect which this seminar would attempt to look at. Understanding of the historical geography of a region and its political geography is also based on readings from different genres of literature. These may also be explored to develop a better understanding of the present knowledge. The use of the Sangam literature in developing the knowledge base of the ecological ambience or backdrop of the *akam* and *puram* poems can be a methodological approach, whereas the use of Puranic literature in reading the geographical aspects and religio-cultural experiences can be another dimension of looking at the texts. What we would like to communicate through this is the fact that these texts may be read and interpreted in various ways and the use of such literature depends on the perception, consciousness and understanding of the scholar.

Re-reading Epigraphs and situating them in the Historical Frame: Fresh approaches to the reading of inscriptions and their use in reconstruction of history is our prime concern. Innovative interpretative skills and more and more use of multiple sources in strengthening the reading and interpretation of the data acquired from epigraphic sources will be appreciated in this sub theme. Different types of inscriptions may be dealt here under this sub theme. A comprehensive reading of epigraphs and understanding of text of the inscription enrich our present state of knowledge and their analysis help in forming historical positions and support already formulated theories, at times also help in constructing new theories. A special attention may be paid to the *prasastis* which, among different types of inscriptions, were marked with an ornate style and content to appear as *kavyas*.

Literary Inscriptions- Text and Context: There are some literary inscriptions which form an exclusive source material as they can be placed in the interface between the literary sources and epigraphic records. Dramas and Poetries engraved on stone are such specimens. The desire to record literary creations on stone, the literary value of these inscribed literary records vis –a-vis their literary counterpart. It requires adequate attention and a proper understanding of the historical context of these inscriptions. Such inscriptions also provide a better understanding of the contemporary audience and also the literary trend prevalent in a given time bracket. The engraving of poetry on stone may also be given due attention and an analysis of the issue of achieving a temporary permanence through this act of inscribing the text on stone may also be taken up here.

This Two-Days Seminar conference aims at bringing together scholars who were deeply involved and directly engaged with literary texts and / or inscriptions. Inscriptions have often been quoted as official documents but here an attempt will be made to look beyond the dynastic framework and donative or panegyric character situating them in a broader historical framework. Various sources such as popular literary traditions, art and oral resources are seen as suspect because of their location in the popular domain but these when taken in their proper context and in comparative study with contemporary sources provide data of immense importance. Rather than

engaging in critiquing such notions of authenticity we would like to undertake analyses of multiple sources in understanding their implications. This is a step forward in making a multi-disciplinary approach towards literature, archaeology, history, culture and religious studies.