

## **Use of Pali Epigraphy (Plate of Gold and Inscription) for Dhamma Communications in Sri Lanka**

**Ven. Dothaluoya Narada<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

The dissemination of Buddhism in Sri Lanka has been facilitated through a variety of communication media, including oral traditions, canonical literature, commentaries, chronicles, manuscripts, inscriptions, and visual representations. Among these, epigraphy occupies a significant place as a durable medium through which religious, social, and cultural information was transmitted across generations. The term "epigraphy" refers to the study of inscriptions engraved on permanent materials such as stone, metal, clay, and wood. In Sri Lanka, the tradition of inscription writing emerged prominently following the introduction of Buddhism in the third century BCE through the mission of Mahinda Thera.

Although the majority of Sri Lankan inscriptions are composed in Sinhala, Tamil, and Sanskrit, a limited but important corpus of inscriptions written in Pali has survived. These inscriptions include gold plate inscriptions, stone inscriptions, and dedicatory records associated with Buddhist monuments and monasteries. Since Pali is the canonical language of Theravāda Buddhism, the use of Pali in inscriptions reflects an intentional effort to preserve and communicate Buddhist teachings. Despite their importance, the role of Pali epigraphy as a medium of Dhamma communication has received comparatively little scholarly attention. Therefore, this study investigates how Pali inscriptions were utilized to communicate Buddhist doctrine, devotional practices, and ethical values in Sri Lanka.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative historical and epigraphical research methodology. Primary data were obtained from published editions of Sri Lankan inscriptions, archaeological reports, and inscriptional compilations, particularly those documenting Pali inscriptions discovered at Seruwavila, Mihintale, Medirigiriya, Horawala, Polonnaruwa, and Nākolagane. Secondary data were collected from scholarly books, journal articles, and studies relating to Pali literature, Buddhist communication, and Sri Lankan epigraphy.

The research employs textual analysis to examine the linguistic and doctrinal content of selected inscriptions. Comparative analysis was also

<sup>1</sup> Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. dothaluoyanarada2000@gmail.com

conducted by comparing inscriptional passages with parallel texts preserved in the Pali Canon and Buddhist commentarial literature. Through this approach, the study identifies the principal Dhamma messages embedded within the inscriptions and evaluates their communicative functions.

## Results

The study found that Pali inscriptions in Sri Lanka communicated Buddhist teachings through references to the Buddha's virtues, the doctrine of Dependent Origination, and records of meritorious donations. Although they promoted devotion, doctrinal understanding, and ethical conduct, Pali inscriptions functioned as a supplementary rather than dominant medium of Dhamma communication

## Discussion

In addition to canonical texts, commentaries, sub-commentaries, annotations, glossaries, and lexicons composed in the Pali language, inscriptions written in Pali can also be identified. Generally, writings, engravings, or records inscribed on a particular surface are referred to as epigraphy or inscriptions. Stone inscriptions (*Sellipi*) constitute an important category within epigraphic sources. Among the inscriptions discovered in Sri Lanka, stone inscriptions represent the largest proportion. According to T. G. Kulatunga, the tradition of engraving stone inscriptions in Sri Lanka commenced after the establishment of Buddhism and the monastic order on the island by Mahinda Thera during the third century BCE. Within this broader epigraphic tradition, several Pali inscriptions can also be identified. These include the Seruwavila gold Plaque, the Mihintale Kanthaka Cetiya gold Plaque, the Matugama Horawala Buddha image Plaque, the Polonnaruwa Potgul Vihara stone inscription, the Nakolagane Rajamaha Vihara Pali inscription, and the Polonnaruwa Lankatilaka Vihara inscriptions, Pāli texts in the Galvihara Katikāvata

One of the most significant findings is the frequent appearance of the Nine Virtues of the Buddha (Navārahādi Buddha Guṇa) on gold plaques. The Seruwavila and Medirigiriya gold plaques preserve portions of the formula beginning with "Iti pi so Bhagavā Arahaṇ Sammāsambuddho." These references demonstrate the use of inscriptions to cultivate faith (*saddhā*) among devotees. By publicly displaying the qualities of the Buddha, these inscriptions reinforced Buddhist devotion and encouraged religious commitment (Hettiarachchi, 2017: 49-72).

A second major finding concerns the appearance of the doctrinal stanza "Ye Dhammā Hetuppabhavā" in inscriptions from Mihintale and Horawala. This

verse, associated with the teaching delivered by Assaji Thera, summarizes the doctrine of dependent origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), one of the fundamental philosophical teachings of Buddhism. The presence of this stanza indicates that inscriptions were employed not only for devotional purposes but also for communicating sophisticated doctrinal concepts. Through concise and memorable formulations, Buddhist philosophical principles were transmitted to a wider audience.

Another important finding emerges from the *Nākolagane* Pali inscription, which records the donation of a cave monastery by a monk named *Buddharakkhita*. The inscription reflects Buddhist ideals of generosity (*dāna*), merit-making, and spiritual aspiration. By recording such acts permanently, inscriptions encouraged the public to engage in similar meritorious activities and reinforced ethical values central to Buddhist practice (Jinarathana and Hettiarachchi, 2016: 169-171).

The findings further suggest that Pali inscriptions functioned as symbolic representations of Buddhist authority. Their use of the sacred language of Theravāda Buddhism enhanced the religious legitimacy of the messages they conveyed. Moreover, Epigraphic records placed in monasteries, stupas, and pilgrimage centers provided continuous access to Buddhist teachings for monastic and lay communities alike.

However, compared with the extensive use of epigraphy for religious communication in ancient India, particularly during the reign of Ashoka, Sri Lanka appears to have relied less heavily on epigraphy as a medium of Dhamma propagation. The existence of a strong literary tradition, including the preservation of the *Tiṭṭaka*, Sinhala commentaries, and later Pali scholarly works, may have reduced the necessity of extensive inscriptional communication.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Pali epigraphy constituted a meaningful, though limited, medium of Dhamma communication in Sri Lanka. Through gold plaques and stone inscriptions, Buddhist teachings were transmitted in forms that emphasized devotion, doctrinal understanding, ethical conduct, and religious merit. The inclusion of the Nine Virtues of the Buddha, the "*Ye Dhammā Hetuppabhavā*" stanza, and records of meritorious donations illustrates how inscriptions functioned as tools of religious instruction and spiritual inspiration.

Although the number of surviving Pali inscriptions is relatively small, their content reveals important dimensions of Buddhist communication in Sri Lankan history. These inscriptions served not merely as historical records but as enduring vehicles for the preservation and dissemination of Buddhist thought.

Future research integrating epigraphical, archaeological, and communication studies perspectives may further illuminate the role of inscriptions in shaping Buddhist religious culture and public memory in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords** - Dhamma Communication, Gold Plate, Pali Epigraphy, Pali Language, Sri Lanka

## References

- Allan R, Bomhard. (2018). *An Introductory Grammar of the Pāli Language*. SC USA: Charleston Buddhist Fellowship Charleston.
- Anuruddha Thera, Kakkapalliye. (2013), *A Guide to the Study of PĀLI The Language of Theravāda Buddhism*, The University of Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies.
- Amaravamsa Thera, Kotmale. (2017). *Lakdiva Sellipi* (Inscriptions of Sri Lanka). Maradana: S Godage & Brothers (Pvt) Ltd.
- Buddhadatta Sthavira, Polwatte. (1924). *Kalyāṇi Inscription of King Dhammaceti, 1478A.D.* Colombo: Sri Bharatiya Press.
- Paranavitana S. (1933). *Epigraphia Zeylanica vol iii*. London: Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Oxford University.
- Jinatarana Thera, Kalegama, & Hettiarachchi, Karunasena. (2016). *A Study of the Pāli Inscription Discovered at Nakolagane Raja Maha Vihāra*, Ancient Ceylon, Journal of the Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka.
- Hettiarachchi, Karunasena. (2017). *Gold Plate Inscriptions of Sri Lanka, the journal of archaeology and heritage studies*. Department of Archaeology and Heritage Management, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka.
- Mahāvamsa* (Sinhala Translation). (2004). Nēdimāla: Buddhist Cultural Centre.
- Mahāvagga Pāli*. (2005). *Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series*. Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre.
- Vanarathana Thera, Kamburupitiya. (1963). *Pāli Inscriptions of Sri Lanka*. Māgadhi Academic Journal, Inaugural Issue. Vidyodaya University.
- Paranavithana, S. (2001). *Inscriptions of Ceylon Vol. II. Part II*. Archaeological Survey of Ceylon.
- Samyutta Nikāya*. (2005). *Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series*. Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre.