

AN INTERPRETATIVE STUDY OF THE CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF RAJASTHAN'S ROCK EDICTS

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Abstract

Rajasthan is endowed with an abundant storehouse of the rock edicts and inscriptions, which are the main epigraphic documents to comprehend the cultural, religious, and socio-political aspects of the ancient Indian civilization. This paper seeks to explain the cultural aspects in the key rock edicts located in Rajasthan and they include the Bairat-Bhabru edict, Ghosundi-Hathibada inscriptions, Badli inscription, BarnalaYupastambha, and Basantgarh inscription. The research design is a qualitative interpretative one with the use of the content analysis of epigraphic texts and secondary archaeological information provided by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), EpigraphiaIndica, and peer-reviewed publications published between 1925 and 2024. The hypothesis is that the rock edicts in Rajasthan show multidimensional culture including religious pluralism, political authority, linguistic diversity and socio-ethical governance. The results indicate six prevailing cultural aspects Buddhist propagation, Vaishnava devotion, Jain religious identity, administrative governance, linguistic-script development and ritual-sacrificial traditions that are unevenly spread among inscription locations and historical period. It is concluded that the rock edicts of Rajasthan represent a precious material cultural archive that records the shift of the region between the Vedic ritualism towards Buddhist-Jain heterodoxy to medieval Hindu revivalism that would provide critical insights to understanding the contemporary heritage material.

Keywords: *Rock Edicts¹, Cultural Dimensions², Rajasthan Inscriptions³, Ashokan Edicts⁴, Epigraphic Interpretation⁵*

1. Introduction

One of the most reliable and authentic documents that help to rebuild the history, culture, and the system of governance in the ancient kingdoms of India is rock edicts and inscriptions (Chakrabarti, 2011). In contrast with the process of alteration of literary and oral material during the process of transmission, epigraphic records etched on the surface of stones and rocks give a first hand record of royal proclamations, religious ideologies, social practices and administrative systems of their respective eras (Salomon, 1998). Due to its strategic location at the intersection of major ancient trade routes the Uttarapatha and Dakshinapath, Rajasthan became an important location of delivery of imperial messages and religious ideologies since the Mauryan period (Lahiri, 1992). The Bairat-Bhabru edict in the Jaipur district contains some of the most culturally significant rock edicts in India, including the only Ashokan edict to refer to the Buddhist Sangha and suggest certain canonical texts to study, establishing that emperor Ashoka personally believed in Buddhism (Vashisth, 2017). The earliest known Vaishnava Bhagavata inscriptions in the Brahmo script, of the first century bce, are the Ghosundi-Hathibada

inscriptions near Chittorgarh, where King Sarvatata built a worship enclosure of deities Samkarshana and Vasudeva (Bhandarkar, 1920). It is also believed that the Badli inscription of Ajmer written in the Brahmi script is the first reference of epigraphs of Jain religious identity in Rajasthan (Sharma and Sharma, 2003). Subsequent inscriptions like the BarnalaYupastambha (227 CE) and the Basantgarh inscription of Sirohi record Vedic sacrificial practices and medieval feudal government respectively (Meena, 2008).

The current scholarship is largely devoted to these epigraphic inscriptions through the prism of linguistic-palaeographic approach, as opposed to the cultural-interpretative one, even though the epigraphic tradition is rich. The cultural aspects such as religious pluralism, ethnic identity, political communication and ritual practices contained in these edicts are under researched (Singh, 2008). This research fills this gap by using an interpretative method to discuss the cultural issues manifested in the major rock edicts in Rajasthan. The paper intends to calculate a comprehensive picture of the way these inscriptions operated as cultural expression tool, propagation of religion, and socio-political legitimation in various historical timelines by integrating the epigraphic data with archaeological data. The results are relevant to the study of heritage, epigraphy and cultural historiography in regards to the Indian subcontinent.

2. Literature Review

The historical research of the rock edicts in Rajasthan started with the efforts of the British colonial archeologists. In 1840, (Bijak-ki-Pahari hill) Captain Thomas Seymour Burt had found the Calcutta-Bairat rock edict that was later rediscovered as an Ashokan inscription and transferred to the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Cunningham, 1871). The archaeological value of the Bairat region was created by the systematic surveys by Alexander Cunningham in the 1860s which placed the region in the larger context of the Mauryan centres of the era (Sahni, 1937). The epigraphic readings of Hultzsch (1925) contain the first general collection of Ashokan inscriptions in the corpus *Inscriptionum Indicarum* with the variants of Bairat and his readings have been longstanding basic references. These edicts were further advanced in terms of their cultural importance by Sircar (2000) who opined that the Ashokan inscriptions were not only tools of administration but also tools of cultural persuasion whose main goal was to spread Dhamma among the various socio-ethnic groups.

The Ghosundi-Hathibada inscriptions were first the subject of academic study when D. R. Bhandarkar (1920) published the Hathibada Brahmi inscription and reconstructed the inscription as a fragment of text to uncover Vaishnava devotional material. Falk (2006) later made an analysis of the matrilineal references to the inscription and placed it in the context of the larger Bhagavata movement. Colas (2008) placed these inscriptions as being vital pieces of evidence of pre-Gupta Hindu devotional infrastructure which showed how the institutions of Vaishnavism were institutionalized with the aid of royal patronage. Vemsani (2016) also asserted that Ghosundi-Hathibada records are the first epigraphic connection to Krishna-Balarama cult and state-sponsored religious buildings, and are essential in terms of the evolution of Hinduism centered on temples.

As to the larger epigraphic environment of Rajasthan, Hooja (2006) provided a historical record of inscriptions of various periods and areas in detail, whereas Meena (2008) created a comprehensive list of ASI-protected monuments containing epigraphic sites. A subtle geo-cultural explanation of the Bairat inscriptions was presented by Vashisth (2017), who showed that the choice of locations where the edicts were put up was not random and Ashoka has found places that were well-known urban centres, trade routes and religious institutions. Ray (2017) has explored the interaction of Buddhism and archaeology in South Asia by observing how the practice of Buddhism was culturally adopted in the territory that was traditionally linked to the Vedic and Jain traditions, such as the Rajasthani sites of Bairat and Rairh. More recently, Rai (2022) explored how landscape influenced the cultural meaning of the Bairat inscription claiming that the physical context of edicts is a constituent part of the context of interpretation. Taken together, the available literature identifies the epigraphic

importance of the rock edicts in Rajasthan along with the necessity of a synthesized approach to cultural-interpretative framework that is the ultimate goal of this paper.

3. Objectives

1. To identify and classify the dominant cultural dimensions reflected in the major rock edicts of Rajasthan across different historical periods (3rd century BCE to 7th century CE).
2. To interpretively analyse the thematic interrelationships among religious, linguistic, administrative, and ritual-cultural elements embedded in these inscriptions and assess their significance for understanding Rajasthan's cultural heritage.

4. Methodology

The research is based on the principles of the historical-epigraphic analysis and the chosen research design is the qualitative interpretative one. The interpretative method was considered suitable since the study is about interpretation of the subjective cultural meanings that are inscribed on ancient rock edicts that cannot be measured statistically between the subject but through contextual analysis. A total of six major rock edict sites of Rajasthan are being used as the sample based on the purposive sampling of these sites in accordance with their historical importance, cultural richness, and accessibility to verified epigraphic data: (i) Bairat-Bhabru (Jaipur), (ii) Ghosundi (Chittorgarh), (iii) Hathibada (Chittorgarh), (iv) Badli (Ajmer), (v) BarnalaYupastambha (Kota region) and (vi) Basantgarh. The thematic method of analysis is the main analytical instrument that will be used in this research because the main method of analysis will be qualitative content analysis of epigraphic texts based on a thematic framework that will be developed in this study. The textual content of the edicts published in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* (Hultzsch, 1925), *Epigraphia Indica* (Bhandarkar, 1920) and in ASI archaeological reports (Sahni, 1937) was coded into six dimensions, pre-identified, such as Buddhist propagation, Vaishnava deity, Jain identity, administrative government, linguistic-script variety, and ritual-sacrificial tradition. The triangulation of data was done by comparing epigraphic texts to secondary archaeological sources on the ASI excavations, published reviews of peer-reviewed journals and authoritative historical monographs published between 1925 and 2024. The analysis was done in an iterative manner that involved reading, coding, categorizing, and interpreting data in historical and geographical context of each edict site.

5. Results

Table 1: Geographic and Chronological Profile of Selected Rock Edicts of Rajasthan

Edict Site	District	Period	Script	Language	Discovered By
Bairat-Bhabru (MRE III)	Jaipur	3rd century BCE	Brahmi	Prakrit	Captain T. S. Burt (1840)
Ghosundi Inscription	Chittorgarh	1st century BCE	Brahmi	Sanskrit	D. R. Bhandarkar (1904)
Hathibada Inscription	Chittorgarh	1st century BCE	Brahmi	Sanskrit	ASI Survey (early 20th C)
Badli Inscription	Ajmer	3rd century BCE	Brahmi	Prakrit	British Archaeological Survey
BarnalaYupastambha	Kota region	227 CE	Brahmi	Sanskrit	ASI Explorations
Basantgarh Inscription	Sirohi	7th century CE	Nagari	Sanskrit	ASI Explorations

Table 1 indicates the geographic, chronological and palaeographic profile of the six chosen rock edict sites. The inscriptions show that the inscriptions of Rajasthan run over a period of one millennium that is between the third century BCE to the seventh century CE. The earliest inscriptions on Bairat and Badli use Brahmi script and Prakrit language, which is a standardization of epigraphic communication in the Mauryan period. The change in the Sanskrit inscriptions in Ghosundi-Hathibada and the subsequent inscriptions indicates that there is a massive linguistic shift that is linked to the emergence of Brhmanical traditions (Hultzsch, 1925; Salomon, 1998).

Table 2: Cultural Dimensions Identified in Each Rock Edict Site

Edict Site	Buddhist Propagation	Vaishnava Devotion	Jain Identity	Administrative Governance	Linguistic Diversity	Ritual Tradition
Bairat-Bhabru	Present	Absent	Absent	Present	Present	Absent
Ghosundi	Absent	Present	Absent	Absent	Present	Present
Hathibada	Absent	Present	Absent	Absent	Present	Present
Badli	Absent	Absent	Present	Absent	Present	Absent
BarnalaYupastambha	Absent	Absent	Absent	Present	Present	Present
Basantgarh	Absent	Absent	Absent	Present	Present	Absent

Table 2 is a mapping of the six cultural dimensions at the chosen edict sites through content coding presence-absence analysis. The findings demonstrate that the linguistic diversity is the only dimension that is present as a universal core of all six sites which means that script and language were the key aspects of epigraphic cultural expression. There are regional and temporal variations in religious patrons as religious aspects are focused on sectarianism Buddhist themes are only found at Bairat, Vaishnava themes at GhosundiHathibada, and Jain identity at Badli (Vashisth, 2017; Colas, 2008).

Table 3: Thematic Content Analysis of the Bairat-Bhabru Rock Edict

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence	Percentage of Total Content
Devotion to Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha	5 references	33.3%
Recommendation of Buddhist scriptures	4 references	26.7%
Address to monastic community	3 references	20.0%
Assertion of royal Buddhist identity	2 references	13.3%
Directive for public reading of Dhamma	1 reference	6.7%
Total	15 references	100%

The content of the Bairat-Bhabru edict is given in Table 3 in thematic breakdown. The most pronounced theme is the worship of Buddhist triad Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha including 33.3% of all references to content. The second most noticeable theme is scriptural propagation as the recommendation of certain Buddhist canonical texts makes 26.7 percent. This evidence supports the idea that the Bairat edict was more of a tool of religious communication, not administration, which suggests the view of Sircar (2000) that Ashoka used edicts in a cultural change.

Table 4: Religious and Cultural Themes in Ghosundi-Hathibada Inscriptions

Cultural Element	Ghosundi Fragment	Hathibada Fragment	Combined Interpretation
Deity worship (Samkarshana-Vasudeva)	Present	Present	Central Vaishnava devotion
Construction of worship enclosure (Puja-shila-prakara)	Present	Present	Institutionalized temple worship
AshvamedhaYajna reference	Present	Fragmentary	Vedic ritual continuity
Royal patronage (King Sarvatata)	Present	Present	State-sponsored religious practice
Matrilineal lineage reference (Parasaragotra)	Present	Present	Kinship-cultural identity

Table 4 compares the themes of culture entrenched in the Ghosundi-Hathibada inscriptions. In both passages the names of the gods Samkarshana and Vasudeva are constantly mentioned, which verifies the central role of VaishnavaBhagavata worship. The reference of the AshvamedhaYajna and the Bhagavata worship means that there was a syncretic culture in which Vedic ritualism existed side by side with the early devotional cults. The mention of matrilineal identification in the form of the Parasaragotra indicates the existence of culturally internalized rules of kinship by which self-presentation by the royalty was based (Bhandarkar, 1920; Falk, 2006).

Table 5: Script and Language Distribution across Rajasthan's Rock Edicts (3rd c. BCE – 7th c. CE)

Period	Script Used	Language	Representative Edict(s)	Cultural Implication
3rd century BCE	Brahmi	Prakrit	Bairat-Bhabru, Badli	Imperial Mauryan standardization
1st century BCE	Brahmi	Sanskrit	Ghosundi, Hathibada	Rise of Brahmanical Sanskrit tradition
3rd century CE	Brahmi (evolved)	Sanskrit	BarnalaYupastambha	Continuation of Vedic ritual culture
7th century CE	Early Nagari	Sanskrit	Basantgarh	Transition to medieval regional scripts

Table 5 follows the development of script and language throughout the chronological period of the rock edicts of Rajasthan. The evidence shows that there was a definite shift in language between Prakrit and Sanskrit in the third to first century BCE, which is associated with the fall of the Mauryan imperial power and the rise of a new culture, the hegemony of the Brahmanical. The palaeographic development in the seventh century CE mentioned in the transition of Brahmi to early Nagari script can be taken as an extension of the palaeographic development that has been recorded throughout north India (Salomon, 1998; Singh, 2008).

Table 6: Comparative Summary of Cultural Dimensions by Historical Period

Cultural Dimension	Mauryan Period (3rd c. BCE)	Post-Mauryan Period (1st c. BCE)	Early Medieval (3rd–7th c. CE)
Buddhist Propagation	Dominant (Bairat)	Absent	Absent
Vaishnava Devotion	Absent	Dominant (Ghosundi-Hathibada)	Minimal

Jain Identity	Present (Badli)	Absent	Absent
Administrative Governance	Present	Absent	Dominant (Basantgarh)
Ritual-Sacrificial Tradition	Absent	Present	Present (Barnala)
Linguistic Diversity	High (Prakrit-Brahmi)	Moderate (Sanskrit-Brahmi)	Evolving (Sanskrit-Nagari)

Table 6 summarizes the trends in the distribution of cultural dimensions in three major historical time frames. The Mauryan era is defined by the predominance of Buddhism spread and the Jain identity, which represents the heterodox all-religious situation in third-century BCE Rajasthan. The post-Mauryan period demonstrates a marked shift towards Vaishnava devotion and Vedic ritualism and the early medieval period is characterized by the themes of administrative governance and the development of regional scripts. This time scale substantiates the assumption that the rock edicts of Rajasthan record the existence of a multi-layered cultural shift towards the heterodox religious growth to Brahmanical solidarity (Hooja, 2006; Ray, 2017).

6. Discussion

The research results of this paper show that the rock edicts of Rajasthan form a cross-dimensional cultural repository that indicates the changing religious, linguistic, administrative, and ritual environment of the area in a period of about one thousand years. The discussion concurs the findings with the two objectives mentioned above, which include the identification of cultural dimensions and how they relate to each other, as the six dimensions were found across the chosen edict locations (Table 2 and Table 6). The Buddhist propagation aspect, which was only limited to the Bairat-Bhabru location, authenticates the uniqueness of the Ashoka in the interaction with the Rajasthan as a border region in Dhamma propagation. The thematic content analysis of the Bairat edict (Table 3) shows that more than 80 percent of the content of the inscriptions is related directly to Buddhist religious communication, such as veneration of the Buddha-Dhamma-Sangha triad and advising the canonical study. This result confirms the argument of Vashisth (2017) according to which Bairat could have been chosen wisely, as it was the capital city of the ancient MatsyaMahajanapada and a place where Buddhist monasteries had been active. The culturally unique trajectory is the Vaishnava devotional one that is manifested at Ghosundi-Hathibada (Table 4). These two-fold focuses of an inscription on Bhagavata veneration and Vedic sacrificial cult (Ashvamedha) point to a syncretic culture where new religious tendencies were not replacements of the traditional ritual forms but existed alongside them. This observation builds on this finding by Colas (2008) regarding pre-Gupta devotional infrastructure by furnishing a site-specific data regarding how royal patronage enabled the institutionalization of Vaishnava worship by creating special architectural enclosures.

Concerning the second goal the interpretive analysis of thematic interrelationships the data show that there are considerable interrelationships among dimensions. The linguistic-script analysis (Table 5) indicates that language was a cultural marker which generated and propagated the existing religious-political order. The Prakrit inscriptions of the Mauryan period was consistent with the policy of Ashoka that had to preach in local languages that could be understood by the general population but the shift to Sanskrit in the post-Mauryan inscriptions indicated the establishment of the Brahmanical-cultural control once again (Salomon, 1998). The aspect of Jain as manifested in the Badli inscription shows that the religious landscape of Rajasthan at the time of the Mauryan was able to accommodate several heterodox traditions within it at the same time. The comparative periodization (Table 6) demonstrates a certain pattern of cultural shift: the landscape of the third-century BCE with its religious pluralism (Buddhist, Jain) gave place to the landscape of the first-century BCE which was Brahmanical revival (Vaishnava) which in its turn transferred into the administratively oriented

inscriptions of the early medieval period. This path is consistent with the larger narratives of historiography of the post-Mauryan religious change in north India as argued by Ray (2017).

The administrative governing aspect visible in the Barnala and Basantgarh inscriptions is the fact that subsequent edicts carved in rock were more utilized as political legitimation means than communication in religion. The allusions to feudal government and the local authority in the Basantgarh inscription are indicators of the decentralized political system of early medieval Rajasthan (Meena, 2008). The sacrificial aspect that is seen in the AshvamedhaYajna at Ghosundi and the Yupastambha sacrificial pillar of Barnala shows that Vedic ritual cultures existed even centuries later and they were regarded as cultural dimensions which made the different eras interconnected through the commonness of the rituals. All these related results help to conclude that the rock edicts of Rajasthan cannot be viewed in terms of one particular disciplinary approach, but it needs a more comprehensive cultural-interpretative approach that acknowledges the multifaceted interaction between religion, language, politics, and ritual in the creation of meaning and meaning.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that the rock edicts of Rajasthan represent a rich multi-dimensional cultural tradition that records the active cultural transformation of the area between the third century BCE and the seventh century CE. The study determined the six main categories of cultural dimensions Buddhist propagation, Vaishnava devotion, Jain identity, administrative governance, linguistic-script diversity, and ritual-sacrificial tradition and determined their distribution during the historical periods through interpretation of six significant edict sites. These results prove the hypothesis that these edicts were the tools of cultural expression that were a reflection of the existing religious, political, and social order of their epochs. The research benefits the heritage literature by suggesting a hybrid cultural-interpretative model of epigraphic analysis that could be used in the study of inscriptions in South Asia. The research ought to be extended to more inscription sites in the state of Rajasthan in the future and also use digital epigraphic technologies in the analysis of text.

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