
History of the Kalabhra: Epigraphic Evidences of a Transitional Phase in South India

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Abstract: *The study of the Kalabhras through epigraphic records uncovers a crucial transitional period in South Indian history, traditionally spanning the 3rd to 7th centuries CE. Once dismissed as a “dark age,” this era, as revealed by inscriptions such as the Velvikkudi Copper Plates and the Kuram Grants, was marked by profound socio-political, cultural, and religious transformations. The Kalabhras, succeeding dynasties like the Cholas, Pandyas and Pallavas challenged Brahmanical orthodoxy, fostering heterodox religious traditions. Their governance, characterised by decentralised power structures and alliances with local chieftains, introduced novel administrative practices, influencing regional powers in South India. Inscriptions demonstrate how post-Kalabhra dynasties portrayed their rule as a restoration of social and religious order, seeking to delegitimise the Kalabhras. The epigraphic evidences from Pulankurichi to Kongu Nadu inscriptions, taken into consideration for the present study suggests that Kalabhra influence persisted through integration into South Indian society, challenging the earlier narratives as cruel and destroyers of traditional social structure. This study locates the pertinence of Kalabhra period, revealing their significant albeit contested, role in shaping early medieval South India. By analysing a wide array of epigraphic evidence, the research repositions the Kalabhras within a refined comprehension of historical framework, exploring their contributions to cultural diversity and regional political equations.*

Keywords: Kalabhras, Epigraphy, Cholas, Pandyas, Pallavas, Pulankurichi, Velvikkudi

Introduction

The study of inscriptions on the Kalabhras in South India offers essential insights into an era often framed as mysterious, yet increasingly understood through epigraphic evidence. Although the legacy of Kalabhras was once shrouded in ambiguity due to the sparse and fragmented nature of early historical records, an examination of selected inscriptions and copper plate grants reveals a clearer understanding of their role and influence. This exploration emphasizes the necessity of epigraphy to illuminate periods that textual records may neglect or portray ambiguously. Kalabhra related inscriptions serve as a foundation to reconstruct this transitional phase in the early history of South

India, a time that witnessed shifts in political power, societal structures, and cultural developments. Inscriptions have long been instrumental in understanding the socio-political milieu of South India from ancient to early medieval periods. They provide a glimpse into the administrative practices, religious affiliations, and conflicts that shaped the region. For Kalabhras, who ruled parts of the South Indian region roughly between the 3rd and 7th centuries CE, the primary sources include inscriptions and copper plate grants issued by contemporary and succeeding dynasties. These records give invaluable evidence of interactions with Kalabhras established dynasties, their governance, and the socio-political climate of the time. The Inscriptions issued by various South Indian ruling powers detail the confrontations with Kalabhras. These documents contain implicit clues about their political reach, conflicts, and administrative measures.

Epigraphy in South India has been instrumental in reconstructing periods where textual records are sparse or fragmentary. The contributions of scholars such as B.L. Rice, H. Krishna Sastri, and Eugene Hultzsch have laid the groundwork for understanding inscriptions as critical sources of historical evidence. Through series like *Epigraphia Indica*, *Indian Antiquary*, and *South Indian Inscriptions*, these scholars catalogued and translated inscriptions that span various dynasties, helping to clarify the narrative surrounding the Kalabhras. These records offered insights into how the Kalabhras temporarily upended existing social structures, thereby establishing themselves as significant players in the regional power dynamics of Early medieval South India.

The Halmidi Inscription

The Halmidi inscription, regarded as the earliest known Kannada-language epigraph, is an invaluable artefact that sheds light on the linguistic and political history of ancient Karnataka (Figure 1). Written in the Kadamba script, it was discovered in 1936 by Dr. M. H. Krishna, then Director of Archaeology of the princely State of Mysore, in Halmidi village in the Hassan district. The inscription, written in pre-old Kannada (*Puruvada-hala Kannada*), marks an early stage in the evolution of the language, preceding Old Kannada and later forms. This linguistic phase is particularly significant, as the inscription is the earliest evidence of Kannada's use as an administrative language (Krishna1936: 73). Its text, composed in verse form, reflects a sophisticated understanding of linguistic structure and is celebrated for its literary qualities.

The dating of the inscription has been a subject of considerable scholarly debate. Dr. Krishna originally dated it to approximately 450 CE based on palaeographic grounds. Other scholars have proposed dates ranging from 450 to 500 CE, with some extending the timeframe to the late 6th century CE. D.C. Sircar, for instance, suggested it belongs to the end of the 6th century (Sircar 1965: 48). K.V. Ramesh, however, argued that the script's "unsettled and uncultivated" appearance may give the illusion of a later date but contended it more likely originates from the mid-5th century. Adding complexity

to the debate, G.S. Gai contested its identification with the Kadamba dynasty of Kakusthavarman, instead attributing the inscription to Kakustha of the Bhaṭṭāri family, as explicitly mentioned in its text. Gai highlighted the absence of key Kadamba epithets like Mānavya-gōtra and Dharma-maharājā, which are hallmarks of Kadamba records (Gai 1992:300). These divergent views illustrate the challenges of dating undated inscriptions and underscore the importance of corroborative evidence in historical reconstruction.



Figure 1: Halmidi Stone Inscription of the Kadamba King Kakustha (Source: Annual Report of the Mysore Archaeological Department - 1936)

The Halmidi inscription also provides important insights into regional conflicts and interactions. It refers to Kadamba King Kahuttan, described as an adversary of the Kalabhras, a significant but enigmatic power in early South Indian history often associated with political disruptions. This reference situates the Kadambas within a broader regional context and hints at the political dynamics of the time. An additional dimension to this narrative is the association of the Kadambas mentioned in the

inscription with a branch of the Cholas. It is suggested that a lineage of Chola Kadambas had been ruling in south-western Karnataka since the Sangam era. King Kahuttan, identified as a ruler of this Chola Kadamba branch, is believed to have reigned around 800–750 BCE, predating the Kadamba dynasty founded by Mayurasharman around 500 BCE (Ramesh 1984:58). This distinction is critical, as it highlights the existence of multiple dynastic lineages that shared the Kadamba name but operated in different historical and geographical contexts.

Pulankurichi Inscriptions

The earliest known inscription relating to Kalabhras is the Pulankurichi inscription attributed to chieftain Chendan Kurran dated later half of third century CE, is modified date around 450-500 CE (Subbarayalu 2012:29). The Pulankurichi inscriptions in three sections has also sketch of trident on lotus and a battle axe indicating perhaps the royal emblem. The chief donor was a person described as *Kadal-akaperum-padaittalavian* obviously a captain of a big naval force during the year 192 of Tamil Era going after the name of the founder king Chendan Kurran, who is regarded as belonging to Kalabhra family (Sarma 1987:16). It provides critical evidence of the Kalabhra presence in Southern region of peninsular India, illustrating their widespread influence across Tamilakam. Kalabhras interlude into the Pandya country causing a break in the rule of the ancient Pandyas, who are mentioned in the Tamil anthology and few Brahmi inscriptions datable from second century BCE to third century CE. As observed it is very likely that Chendan Kurran and his son who proceeded Kudunkon of the Pandya line by the least a century belonged to the line of Kalabhras (Subbarayalu 2012:32). According to this inscription, there was no specific details regarding the hostile attitude maintained by Kalabhra rulers towards orthodox sections of their political domain.

These inscriptions, though brief, underscore the decentralised nature of Kalabhra governance and their reliance on alliances with local chieftains and heterodox communities. This approach allowed them to maintain control over fragmented regions and not challenged the centralised Brahmanical frameworks upheld by dynasties like the Pandyas and Pallavas. Historians such as T.N Subrahmanian and T.V. Mahalingam have argued that the Kalabhras operated through a federated model of governance, forming strategic alliances with local leaders and religious institutions. By supporting non-Brahmanical traditions, the Kalabhras cultivated loyalty among hitherto unrecognised or not duly considered groups and communities resistant to Brahmanical dominance. This strategy enabled them to create a distinct socio-political identity, positioning themselves as followers of pragmatic approach and authority of decentralised power structure.

Later dynasties, such as the Pandyas and Pallavas, often depicted the Kalabhras as external threats or usurpers to legitimise their own return to centralised power and orthodox Brahmanical order. However, the Pulankurichi inscriptions suggest that the Kalabhras were a persistent and resilient force, leveraging local affiliations to maintain

their influence across Southern region. These inscriptions have highlighted that this decentralised governance model reflected the broader power dynamics of early medieval Tamilakam, where regional autonomy and fragmented authority were prevalent, and it also points to the Kalabhras' adaptability. Their alignment with local power structures and religious diversity allowed them to sustain their influence despite resistance from more centralised Brahmanical adversaries.

The Kalabhras' decentralised model contrasts with the hierarchical and temple-based governance of their successors, enabling them to maintain relevance in the socio-political milieu of this region. It is observed that the language of this inscription is similar to classical Tamil language depicted in ancient Tamil anthologies (Zvevil 1992:93). They demonstrate the Kalabhras' enduring influence and challenge the perception of them as mere interlopers, revealing instead their strategic and resilient approach to governance. As noted by Eugene Hultsch, their network of influence spanned multiple regions, operating through federated alliances rather than centralised rule, which was critical in shaping South Indian complex political landscape.

Velvikkudi Copper Plates

The Velvikkudi Copper Plates (Figure 2), a set of copper-plate inscriptions issued by a later Pandya king Parantaka Nedunjadayan in 771 CE, are one of the most critical sources for understanding the Kalabhra impact on Tamil society during the early medieval period (Sastri 1923:291). These plates, dated to the 8th century CE, detail the restoration of lands and privileges to Brahmins, which were disrupted during a time of social upheaval attributed to an unnamed force, widely believed by scholars to represent the Kalabhras. This document is invaluable for historians because it provides insights into both the socio-political disruptions associated with the Kalabhra period and the subsequent reclamation of authority by the Pandyas. The language and content of the Velvikkudi Copper Plates indicate the profound socio-political influence exerted by the Kalabhras, even though they are not explicitly named. The plates describe a period of disarray where Brahmanical authority was interrupted, temple traditions were affected, and land rights previously held by Brahmins were re-allocated.

The act of restoring these lands and privileges symbolises the Pandya effort to re-establish Brahmanical order, contrasting their rule with the perceived social disruptions of the Kalabhra period. This restoration act is more than a simple land grant; it reflects a political ideology that sought to align itself with traditional structures by distancing the Pandya rule from the heterodox tendencies of the Kalabhras. By framing their authority as a return to orthodoxy, the Pandyas signalled a rejection of the Kalabhra influence, which they depicted as a deviation from established norms. The Velvikkudi Plates also offer insights into the broader cultural landscape of the time. They reflect the revival of temple-based Brahmanical practices, which had likely been suppressed or neglected during the Kalabhra rule. K. A. Neelakanta Sastri suggests that this restoration served a religious purpose and helped

to re-establish a socio-political structure wherein the Brahmins resumed their role as cultural custodians and ideological anchors within Tamil society (Sastri 1976: 102). The language used in these inscriptions reflects strategic use of Pandyas religious narrative to portray the Kalabhras as adversaries of the traditional order. The term “usurpers,” commonly applied to the Kalabhras by later dynasties, suggests that they were viewed as a significant threat to the established Brahmanical elite. The lines 39 and 40 of the Velvikkudi Copper plates clearly depicts as *Kalabiran-enumkali-arasan kaikondu- adnairakkiapin*, a Kalabhra headman termed as Kaliarasan occupied the previously donated land to the Brahmins was captured and restored their rights.

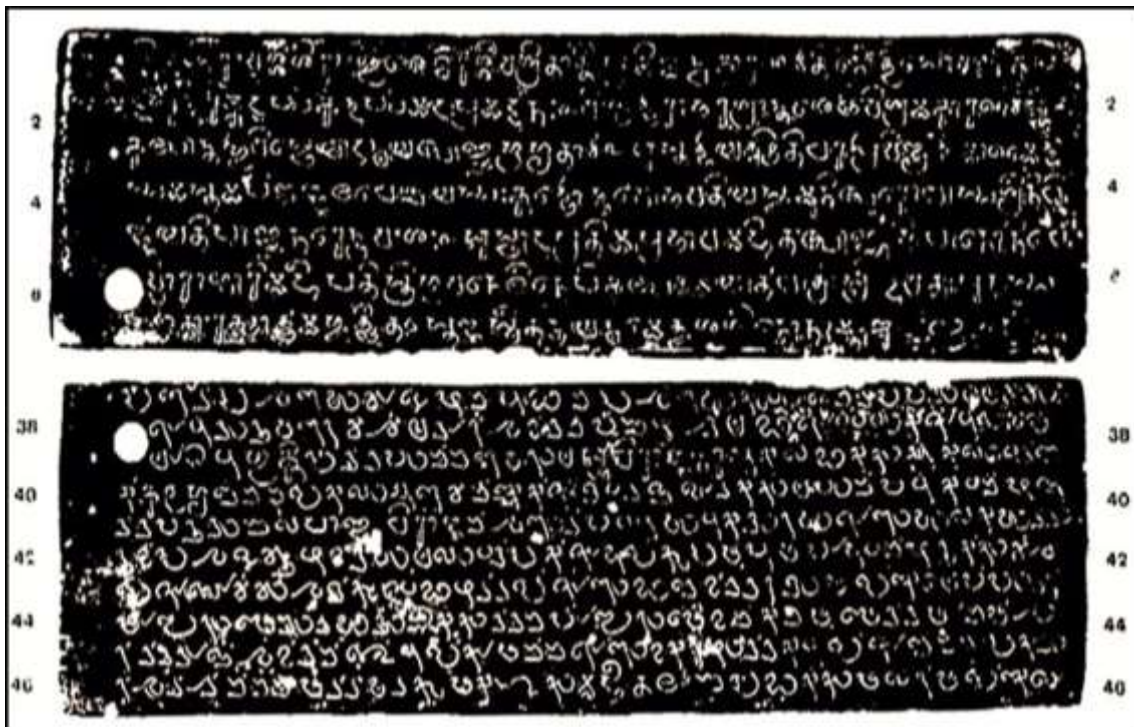


Figure 2: Velvikkudi Grant of Nedumjadaiyan (Source: Epigraphia Indica - Vol: XVII)

This portrayal aligns with the Pandya objective of framing their rule as a necessary correction to a period of supposed anarchy. By restoring Brahmin-held lands, the Pandyas sought to appease the religious elite and to symbolically cleanse the land of the Kalabhra influence, which they perceived as disruptive. The Velvikkudi Copper Plates also shed light on the administrative measures employed by the Pandyas to reinforce their authority. The restoration of land to Brahmins included tax exemptions and reaffirmed boundaries, highlighting the administrative emphasis on formalising Brahmin privileges as part of state policy. The Velvikkudi Copper Plates exemplify how inscriptions functioned as instruments of ideological narrative. The inscriptions offer a reconstructed narrative of a time when orthodox structures were compromised, followed by a redemptive phase where the Pandyas reclaimed authority through Brahmanical patronage. This narrative aligns the Pandyas with divine endorsement, contrasting their rule with that of the Kalabhras, whose heterodox affiliations with

Jainism were portrayed as antithetical to Tamil society's Brahmanical foundation. The Velvikkudi Copper Plates ultimately serve as a testament to the socio-political impact of the Kalabhras, who, despite limited direct records of their own, left an enduring legacy on South Indian history. By examining these plates, historians gain insight into the ideological conflicts of the time, with the Pandyas positioning themselves as restorers of social and religious order. This document exemplifies how epigraphy provides an indirect yet powerful window into the power struggles, cultural shifts, and historical narratives that shaped early medieval South India. Through this restoration act, the Pandyas legitimised their rule and reasserted the primacy of Brahmanical structures, challenging the legacy of the Kalabhras as a force of ideological deviation. This inscription, therefore, remains a cornerstone of Kalabhra studies, allowing scholars to reconstruct the period's socio-political dynamics and the enduring tension between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in South Indian history.

Kuram Grants

The Kuram Grants (Figure 3), issued by Pallava king Parameswara Varman-I in seventh century CE, stand as a testament to the Pallava dynasty's efforts to reclaim power and restore Brahmanical dominance following the disruptions attributed to the Kalabhra rule. The language of the first four plates of the Inscription is Sanskrit verse and prose; the remainder is written in Tamil. These grants celebrate Parameswara Varman's victory over the Kalabhras, marking a critical moment in the Pallava campaign to reassert their authority across Tamil region. (Mahalingam 1967: 145). The Kuram Grants are more than a record of military conquest; they reflect a deliberate attempt by the Pallavas to erase the socio-political changes introduced by the Kalabhras and reinforce Brahmanical orthodoxy as the foundation of their rule. The Kuram Grants describe the Pallavas' perspective on the Kalabhras, framing them as disruptive elements that had challenged the established socio-religious structures. Parameswara Varman's victory is portrayed not merely as a territorial conquest but as a restoration of the "dharma" or social order, reinforcing the notion that the Kalabhras had undermined Brahmanical norms and temple-centred traditions (Sastri 1976: 117). By re-establishing Brahmanical practices and instituting grants to Brahmins, the Pallavas positioned themselves as champions of orthodoxy, counteracting the perceived heterodoxy associated with the Kalabhra period (Pillay 1979: 101).

The Kuram Grants also indicate the ideological conflict between the Pallavas and the Kalabhras. While the Kalabhras are believed to have favoured Jainism and Buddhism, the Pallavas' restoration efforts concentrated on reinstating Brahmanical traditions. This ideological alignment reflects the Pallavas' strategic use of religion to legitimize their rule. As noted by Iravatham Mahadevan, the Pallavas' patronage of Brahmins and temple rituals in the Kuram Grants exemplifies how they used religious endorsement to consolidate their political authority and to erase the influence of the Kalabhras, who had promoted alternative religious practices (Mahadevan 2003: 163). According to K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, the language of the Kuram Grants underscores the Pallavas' intention to portray their victory as a divine mandate (Sastri 1976: 120). In his

analysis of South Indian inscriptions, R. Nagaswamy highlights the significance of the Kuram Grants in documenting the Pallavas' approach to governance (Nagaswamy 2006: 72). By detailing the restoration of lands to Brahmins and the revival of temple-based practices, the Kuram Grants underscore the Pallavas' efforts to integrate religious authority into their administrative framework. The grants served as both political instruments and records of state policy, reinforcing the role of Brahmins as cultural custodians within Pallava society. This restoration not only helped to erase the traces of Kalabhra influence but also strengthened the alliance between the Pallavas and Brahmanical institutions.

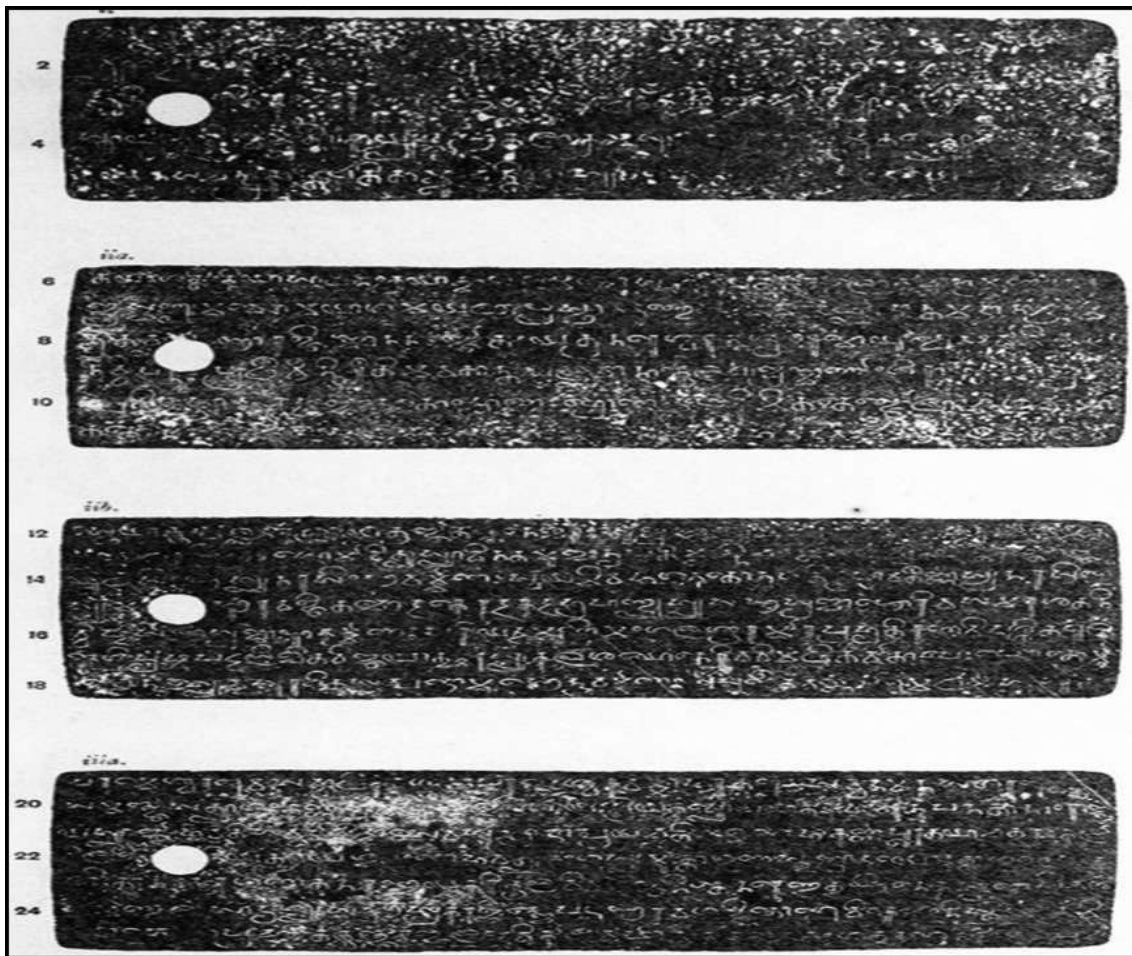


Figure 3: Kuram Grants of Pallava king Parameswara Varman I (Source: South Indian Inscriptions – Vol. II)

The Kuram Grants, like other Pallava inscriptions, serve as a record of the dynasty's commitment to Brahmanical orthodoxy and as a repudiation of the Kalabhra influence. By reinstating Brahmin privileges and temple rites, the Pallavas symbolically countered the heterodox tendencies of the Kalabhras, presenting themselves as restorers of cultural and religious continuity. Scholars such as K.R. Subrahmanian argue that this act of restoration was also a strategic move to ensure that the Pallavas gained the support of influential Brahmin communities, who played an essential role in

upholding the social hierarchy of the time (Subrahmanian 1988: 134). The Kuram Grants reflect the Pallavas' attempts to consolidate regional power through land grants, which were strategically used to establish a loyal base among Brahmin communities. By granting lands that had been disrupted or re-allocated under the Kalabhra rule, the Pallavas not only secured the loyalty of local Brahmins but also reinforced their ideological stance. This pattern of land grants as a political strategy was common in early medieval South India, where land ownership symbolised both economic power and social legitimacy (Pillay 1979: 107). The Kuram Grants further reveal how the Pallavas sought to inscribe their victory over the Kalabhras into the historical record, ensuring that their triumph would be remembered as a moment of restoration. According to Eugene Hultzsch, this emphasis on documenting victories in religious and ideological terms reflects the Pallavas' awareness of the political power of inscriptions (Hultzsch 1899: 84). By framing their conquests as acts of religious and cultural restoration, the Pallavas used inscriptions like the Kuram Grants to assert their ideological dominance over the Kalabhras, effectively re-writing the historical narrative to cast themselves as defenders of orthodoxy. The Kuram Grants serve as both a historical and ideological document that captures the Pallavas' response to the Kalabhra influence. This inscription commemorates Parameswara Varman's military success and reflects a deeper socio-political agenda to legitimize Pallava rule and restore continuity after the disruptions of the Kalabhra period. The Kuram Grants, therefore, provide a critical perspective on the ideological conflicts that shaped early medieval South India and underscore the central role of epigraphy in documenting the intersection of politics and religion in South Indian history.

Kasakudi Copper Plates

The Kasakudi Copper Plate (Figure 4)s, issued by Pallava ruler NandiVarman-II (718 CE-796 CE) in mid half of the 8th century is among the most revealing documents that shed light on the extent of Kalabhra influence and the subsequent Pallava response to their rule. It is discovered in 1879 CE at Kasakudi, four kilometre from Karaikkal by M.Julesde La fon of Pondicherry. These plates, dating to the 6th century CE, provide a detailed account of the military victories of SimhaVishnu, MaherndaVarman-I and NarasimhaVarman-I, they noted for their campaigns against the Kalabhras and other prominent powers in South India, including the Malavas, Cholas, Pandyas, and the rulers of Kerala and Cylone. The mention of the Kalabhras alongside such a diverse array of opponents underscores their significant influence and the scale of opposition they faced from established dynasties. The narrative in the Kasakkudi Plates portrays Simhavishnu's triumph as a restoration of order, implying that the Kalabhras had disrupted the socio-political balance in Tamilakam. By recounting his victories, Simhavishnu depicted as a ruler who restored stability and reasserted Brahmanical dominance, contrasting his rule with the heterodox tendencies associated with the Kalabhras.

The Kasakkudi Copper Plates also highlight the Pallavas' strategic use of military victories to legitimize their rule. The victory over the Kalabhras, therefore, was not

only a political accomplishment but also a symbolic re-establishment of religious orthodoxy. T.V. Mahalingam's analysis of the Kasakkudi Plates underscores how the Pallavas portrayed their rule as a restoration of cultural and social continuity (Mahalingam 1967: 151). Through the language and symbolism used in the inscription, the Pallavas sought to present themselves as defenders of the Brahmanical social order, positioning Simhavishnu's conquests as acts of divine retribution against forces that had destabilized Tamil society. This framing allowed the Pallavas to consolidate support among Brahmin communities, who held substantial influence over Tamilakam's socio-religious landscape.

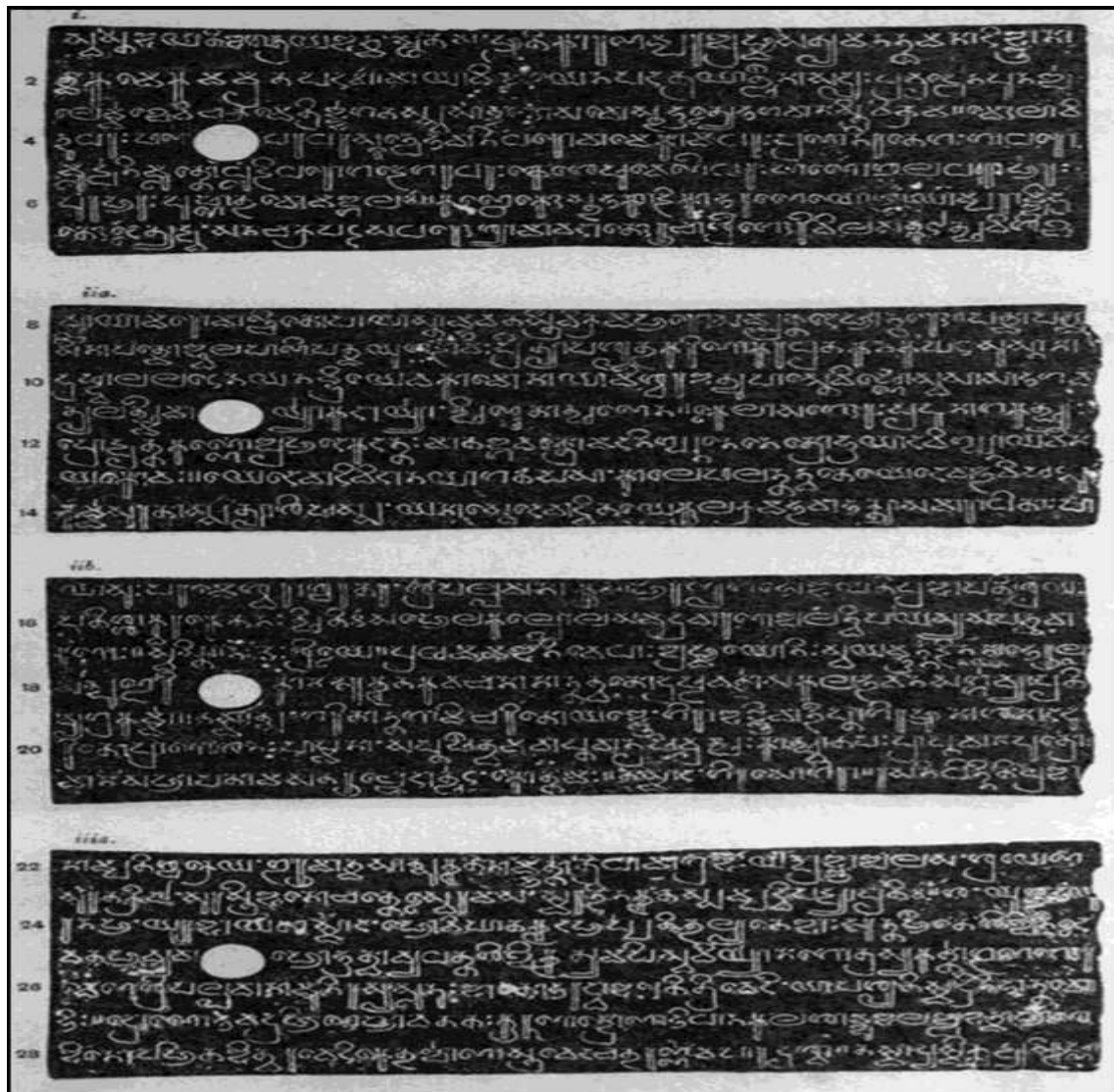


Figure 4: Kasakudi Plates of Pallava ruler Nandi Varman II (Source: South Indian Inscriptions – Vol. II)

By documenting their victories in inscriptions, the Pallavas not only preserved a record of their accomplishments but also reinforced their ideological stance. The Kasakkudi Plates, in particular, illustrate how the Pallavas used epigraphy to claim legitimacy and

to position themselves as the rightful successors to power after the period of Kalabhra rule. The Kasakkudi Plates also provide insights into the socio-political alliances and enmities that characterised early medieval Tamilakam. The victories of Pallava rulers over a diverse set of rulers, including the Kalabhras, reflect the highly fragmented political landscape of the time. As noted by K.R. Subrahmanian, this fragmentation allowed the Kalabhras to exert considerable influence by allying with local rulers or acting as intermediaries among competing powers (Subrahmanian 1988: 142). The inclusion of the Kalabhras in the Pallava military campaigns underscores their position as a significant power, requiring coordinated efforts from multiple dynasties to fully subdue them.

Eugene Hultzsch's work on South Indian inscriptions highlights that the Kasakkudi Plates also document the economic dimensions of Pallava rule, including land grants and religious endowments made in conjunction with their military victories (Hultzsch 1895: 91). By granting lands to Brahmin communities and temples following their conquests, the Pallavas used economic incentives to secure local support and re-establish Brahmanical authority. These grants, symbolically associated with the Pallava victory over the Kalabhras, reinforced the religious contrast between Pallava and Kalabhra governance, with the former favoring Brahmanical orthodoxy and the latter associated with heterodox practices.

Pattattalamangalam Copper Plates

The Pattattalamangalam Copper Plates (Figure 5), issued by Pallava king Nandivarman II Pallavamalla (718 CE-796 CE) in 61st regnal year, commemorate yet another significant military victory of Pallavas over the Kalabhras. Verse nine of this inscription says that, waiting to get entrance there were at his gate the Vallabha, Kalabhra, Kerala, Pandya, Chola, Tulu, Konkana. These plates are essential in understanding the continued presence and influence of the Kalabhras even after earlier conquests by the Pallavas under rulers like Simhavishnu (Hultzsch 1895 :116). The inscription, dated to the 8th century CE, recounts a campaign led by Nandivarman, reinforcing the notion that the Kalabhras were not fully subdued after previous Pallava victories.

This ongoing conflict underscores the resilience of the Kalabhras, suggesting they retained a stronghold in certain regions, challenging the Pallavas over generations. In recounting Nandivarman's victory, the Pattattalamangalam Copper Plates celebrate the Pallavas' reassertion of authority and the restoration of Brahmadeya, fourty velis of land to the Brahmins. The victory recorded as a divine accomplishment, framing Nandivarman's rule as a righteous restoration of Vedic order. By framing their campaigns in such terms, the Pallavas portrayed the Kalabhras as adversaries not only of the state but of the social and religious order that the Pallavas claimed to uphold. According to K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, this framing reveals how the Pallavas used their inscriptions to construct a narrative of divinely sanctioned authority, emphasising their role as protectors of dharma and traditional values (Sastri, 1976: 140).

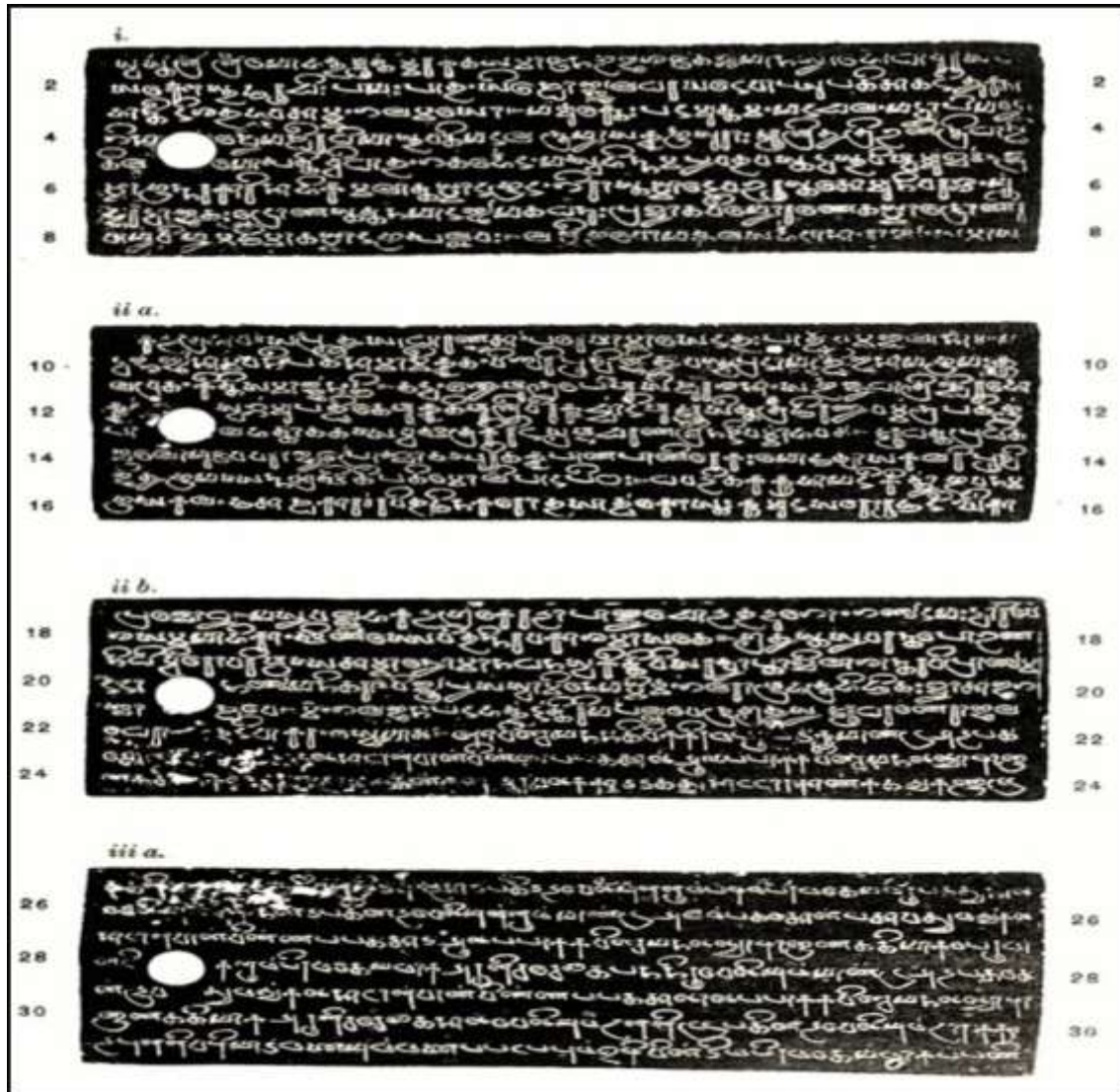


Figure 5: Pattattalamangalam Plates of Pallava king Nandivarman II (Source: Epigraphia Indica Vol. XVIII)

The Pattattalmangalam Copper Plates highlight the Pallavas' efforts to erase the ideological footprint left by the Kalabhras. The plates include descriptions of land grants and privileges conferred upon Brahmin communities, suggesting that the Pallavas sought to reinforce Brahmanical social structures as a means of stabilising their rule. The Pallavas appeased influential Brahmin communities and aligned themselves with the Brahmanical order, contrasting their governance with the more heterodox tendencies associated with the Kalabhras. It was crucial in consolidating Pallava power, as Brahmins held a central position in Tamil society's socio-religious hierarchy. The Pattattalmangalam Copper Plates further analysed by Iravatham Mahadevan, who suggests that the Pallavas' restoration of Brahmin rights and privileges following their victories was part of a broader strategy to establish their rule as divinely endorsed (Mahadevan, 2003: 186). The language in the plates reinforces the Pallavas' role as protectors of orthodoxy, with Nandi Varman portrayed as a ruler who

safeguarded dharma by defeating the Kalabhras. This portrayal served to delegitimise Kalabhra rule by presenting their influence as antithetical to the cultural and religious values upheld by the Pallavas. The Pattattalamangalam copper plates document the allocation of agricultural land to Brahmins, providing them with economic resources and fiscal privileges. By formalising these land grants, this Copper Plates highlight the integration of Brahmins into the Pallava administrative system, which relied on religious and social patronage as a foundation for governance.

Most of the South Indian Inscriptions mention the granting of generous Brahmadeyas as political strategy to maintain the sway over subjugated region and to minimize the hostility from the elite community. Through grants and privileges, the Pallavas strengthened their alliances with local elites, who were instrumental in upholding their rule across diverse territories. This strategy of using land grants as a political instrument is a recurrent theme in Pallava inscriptions, where religious patronage is depicted as essential for sustaining the social fabric. By supporting Brahmin communities, the Pallavas reinforced their ideological stance and created a network of local supporters whose interests aligned with the state. The theoretical and political narrative embedded in the Pattattalmangalam Copper Plates illustrates the Pallavas' approach to historical documentation. The plates were intended to immortalise the generational heros of Pallava dynasty commemorate the victory over the Kalabhras, ensuring their accomplishments would be remembered as a restoration of indelible memory. This act of documentation was an ideological tool ensuring for asserting legitimacy and transcending social order. The narrative constructed in the Pattattalmangalam Copper Plates aligns with a broader trend in Pallava inscriptions, where historical records serve as an apparatus for socio-political and religious sanction for their engagement.

Sendalai Pillar Inscriptions

The Sendalai Pillar inscriptions (Figure 6), dated in first decade of the 9th century CE, are noteworthy for their reference to a Muttaraiyan chieftain named Perumbidugu Muttaraiyan alias Suvaran Maran, some evidence provides connections to the Kalabhras. In South Indian historiography, "Kalvarakalavan" is often interpreted as a synonym for the Kalabhras, which suggests that the Muttaraiyan figure in these inscriptions might either descend from or be closely associated with the Kalabhras. This argument is questioned by scholars and historians through linguistic analysis. These inscriptions, although not directly issued by the Kalabhras, provide insights into the potential assimilation of Kalabhra elements into local ruling families, as well as their continued presence in regional politics long after the Pallava conquests. The Sendalai Pillar inscriptions reflect how, despite the decline of the Kalabhra political entity, elements of their influence endured through integration into South Indian society. The Muttaraiyan lineage, to which Perumbidugu Muttaraiyan belonged, played a significant role in political scenario of South India in subsequent centuries. The Kalabhras may have left a lasting legacy by merging with or being absorbed into Tamil society's local power structures, as seen in the prominence of the Muttaraiyan

lineage in the succeeding era. This assimilation indicates that the Kalabhra influence was complex, involving both resistance and integration within South Indian society.

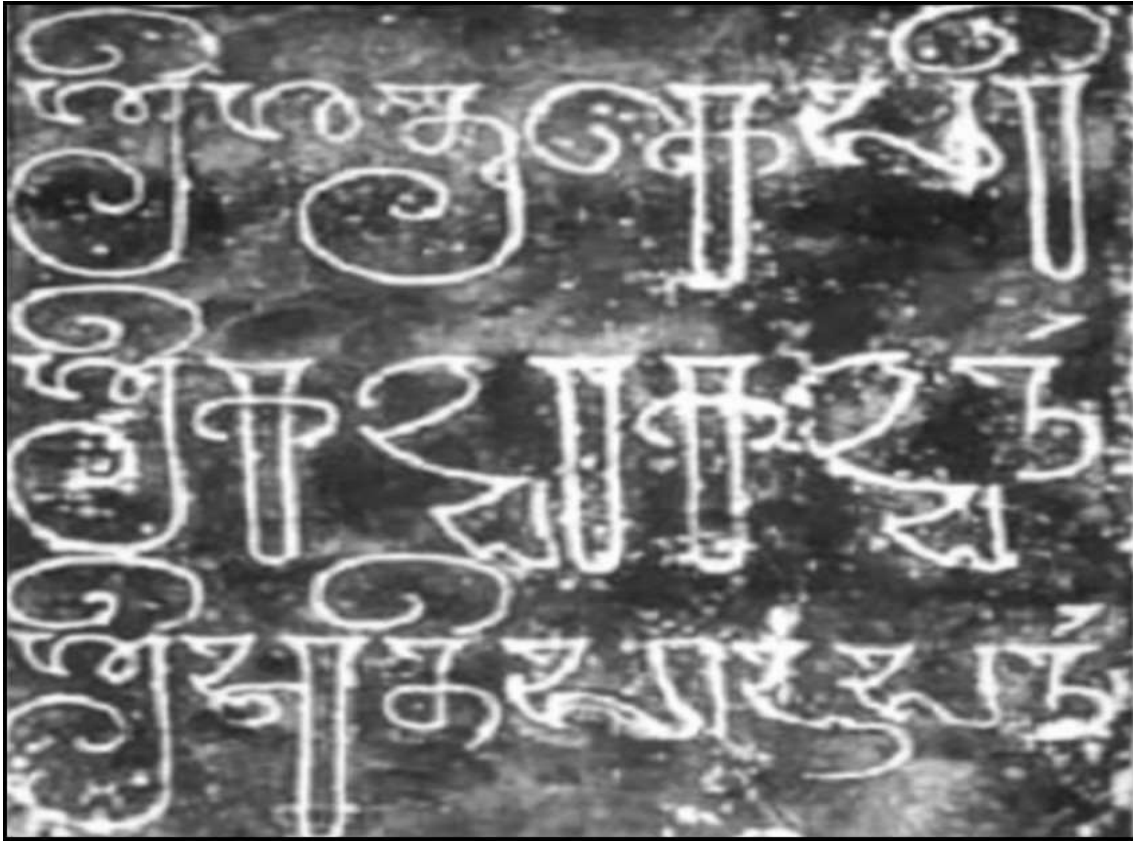


Figure 6: Sendalai Pillar Inscription of king Perumbidugu Muttaraiyan alias Suvaran Maran (Source: *Epigraphia Indica* - Vol XIII)

The Kalabhras, often depicted as disruptors in Pallava and Pandya inscriptions, were likely able to retain some degree of social and political agency by assimilating with influential families such as the Muttaraiyans. This blending of identities between former Kalabhra elements and Tamil rulers suggests a fluidity in early South Indian political affiliations, where alliances and familial ties could transcend earlier conflicts. The Sendalai Pillar inscriptions provide insight into the socio-political landscape of early medieval South India, a period marked by a high degree of regional diversity and shifting loyalties. This shift is evident, the Muttaraiyar chieftains, who ruled Tanjavur prior to its conquest by the Imperial Cholas, are noted in inscriptions as worshippers of Mahakali. (Nagaswamy2006:91). According to ancient Tamil anthologies, the inhabitants of the Palai region, known as the Kalavar and Maravar, were primarily devotees of Kottavi, later transformed Mahakali.

The Sendalai pillar inscriptions further suggest that the Kalabhra legacy involved a reconfiguration of local identities. Historian Iravatham Mahadevan points out that the advent of Pandya, Pallava hegemony over Tamil country resulted in the last quarter of sixth century CE, the number of Jaina Inscriptions decreased further during this period

reflecting the unsettled conditions following the invasion (Mahadevan 2003: 136). This disjuncture would have set them apart from the Brahmanical elite and potentially influenced their social integration strategy. By aligning with religious groups that operated outside the Brahmanical hierarchy, Kalabhra descendants, such as those within the Muttaraiyan lineage, may have found acceptance within a multi-faceted and religiously diverse society.

The Sendalai inscriptions are significant as they shed light on the Muttaraiyar's socio-political structure and their strategies for survival amidst the dominant powers of the region. Unable to establish an independent kingdom, the Muttaraiyars directed the complex political scene by aligning themselves with either the Pandyas or the Pallavas. This dependence underscores the fragmented yet dynamic nature of power in the Tanjore region during this era. Their legacy, as captured in the inscriptions, offers valuable evidence of their influence in shaping the history of South India, even as they functioned within the spheres of larger political entities like the Pandyas and Pallavas (Sastri 1955:112). The question of the origin of Muttaraiyans is obscure but certain literary and epigraphic evidence indicate the possibility of distant connection with the Pandyas. Unlike the depictions in Pandya and Pallava inscriptions that cast the Kalabhras as mere disruptors, the presence of Kalabhra-linked figures in later political contexts implies a capacity for social integration and cultural influence. Eugene Hultzsch's work on South Indian inscriptions indicates that such references to the Kalabhras, even indirectly, reflect a complex socio-political dynamic where former adversaries could transition into respected positions within society, particularly through strategic marriages and alliances (Hultzsch, 1899: 97).

The Sendalai Inscription, Muttaraiyans and other similar chieftains and groups were likely a faction or offshoot of the Kalabhras, reflecting the latter's influence on the socio-political landscape of early South India. These groups shared traits such as opportunistic political alignments and connections to heterodox religions like Jainism. The eventual integration and absorption of the Muttaraiyar into the Tamil socio-political framework, as seen through their allegiance to dominant dynasties and adoption of Hindu traditions, marked the final phase of Kalabhra influence in South India.

Vaikunta Perumal Inscriptions

The inscription mentions Alagiyastyan and records a donation of five cows by Tirumalaiy-Alagiyan, of Tiruvonnainallur. This donation was intended to ensure the daily supply of milk, measured as *Arumolidéva-ndli*, to the deity Vaikunda (Vaikuntha) Perumal. The donor is also referenced in 1237 C.E. The title *Alagiyasiyan*, conferred upon the chief, suggests he may be identified as the elder Koppernn. An altar shrine in the Vaikuntha-Perumal temple in the village was established by Arasalvar, the elder sister of Alappirandar Alagiyasiyar of Perugal. Alagiyasiyar was likely a member of a collateral branch of the Peruminda family, whose headquarters were situated at Porugai (Ayyar 1943:83).

The Vaikunta Perumal temple inscriptions in Kanchipuram offer a compelling view of the political and cultural transformations in early medieval South India. These inscriptions are particularly significant because they mention figures from the Muttaraiyan lineage, a powerful chieftain with considerable influence. Some Inscriptional evidence suggest that the Muttaraiyans may have connections to the Kalabhras, reflecting a lineage that integrated former Kalabhra elements into Tamil society. If true, this association indicates that while the Kalabhras may have lost political power as a distinct entity, their legacy continued through integration into local ruling families. The Vaikunta Perumal inscriptions reflect the dynamic political landscape of South India, where shifting alliances and kinship networks facilitated the assimilation of former rulers into new power structures. As noted by T.A Gopinatha Rao, the Muttaraiyans wielded considerable influence in the Kanchipuram region, suggesting that the Kalabhras' influence persisted indirectly through their descendants (Rao 1982: 49). This integration challenges the traditional narrative of the Kalabhras as mere disruptors, instead presenting them as adaptable figures who were able to transition from political rivals to influential members of the South Indian political players.

The Vaikunta Perumal inscriptions provide evidence that former Kalabhra figures may have embraced Brahmanical patronage as a means of solidifying their status within Tamil society (Sastri 1986: 8). This alignment with Brahmanical traditions represents a shift from the Kalabhras' association with heterodox religions, such as Jainism and Buddhism, which had set them apart from the Brahmanical establishment. By adapting to the Brahmanical framework, these figures could forge alliances with ruling dynasties like the Pallavas, who maintained control over Kanchipuram and supported the social hierarchy that placed Brahmins at its core. The transformation of the Kalabhra legacy, as reflected in the Vaikunta Perumal inscriptions, exemplifies the fluidity of political identities in early medieval South India. The integration of the Muttaraiyan lineage into the Pallava-dominated landscape indicates a pragmatic adaptation that allowed former Kalabhra chiefs to retain influence. Such alliances were common in Tamilakam's fragmented political landscape, where kinship and regional loyalties often superseded earlier conflicts, enabling former adversaries to consolidate power through strategic marriages and patronage. The Vaikunta Perumal inscriptions also reveal how religious patronage played a central role in the process of political integration.

The religious elements of the Vaikunta Perumal inscriptions reveals the ideological shift that former Kalabhra elements may have undergone. This ideological alignment, reflected in their patronage of temples and Brahmin communities, indicates that these former rulers were willing to adapt to the Socio- Political reality of the period and transforming waves of power relations. In this context, the integration of the Muttaraiyan lineage highlights the Kalabhras' adaptability, as they aligned themselves with the Brahmanical values promoted by the Pallavas and embedded themselves within South Indian power structures.

Dalavaipuram Copper Plates

The Dalavaipuram Copper Plates, issued by a later Pandya king Kadunkon in end of the 6th century CE, provide valuable insights into the socio-political upheaval associated with the Kalabhra period (Sastri1929:46). These plates describe the Kalabhras in negative terms, portraying their rule as a time of social and religious disruption. The language used in the Dalavaipuram inscriptions reflects the Pandya perspective, framing their own rule as a necessary corrective to the perceived disorder under the Kalabhras. By describing the Kalabhra period as a deviation from the norm, the Pandyas sought to reinforce their authority and legitimacy, contrasting their rule with the challenges posed by the Kalabhras under the Pandya king Kadunkon.

These records are thus essential for reconstructing the transitional period of South Indian polity offering insights into its Socio-political and cultural dynamics. The Pandyas presented themselves as defenders of Brahmanical traditions, positioning the Kalabhras as adversaries of the socio-religious order valued by Tamil society. This aspect navigates into the conceptual conflict between the Brahmanical perspectives and the Kalabhras, who were often associated with non - Brahmanical norms. By restoring lands and privileges to Brahmins, the Pandyas sought to re-establish the Brahmanical social hierarchy that may have been disrupted during the Kalabhra period.

The Dalavaipuram Copper Plates in the form of Eulogy try to establish Pandyas legitimate claim to the protectors of Vedic practices during this period. This inscription directly signifies the Pandya rulers far sight in commemorating and fulfilling Dharmasastra instigation of documenting the deals. The Pandyas' decision to document their restoration of Brahmin-held lands and tax exemptions signifies their commitment to the Brahmanical establishment, which held considerable influence over South Indian cultural and social landscape. By supporting Brahmin communities and temple-centred traditions, the Pandyas aligned themselves with the religious elite, contrasting their rule with the heterodox tendencies of the Kalabhras. By emphasising the restoration of Brahmin privileges, the Pandyas positioned themselves as rightful rulers who protected traditional values. It is suggested that this narrative was essential for legitimising Pandya rule, as it aligned their dynasty with the dharmic order and presented them as restorers of social stability.

The depiction of the Kalabhras as disruptors in the Dalavaipuram Copper Plates reflects a broader pattern in South Indian historiography, where later dynasties often portrayed former rulers in an undesirable narration to assert their own legitimacy. This inscription emphasises that by framing the Kalabhras as a threat to social harmony, the Pandyas not only delegitimised their predecessors but also reinforced the idea that their own rule was divinely sanctioned and necessary for restoring balance (Arunachalam 1979:91). The socio-political implications of the Dalavaipuram Copper Plates extend beyond religious patronage. By restoring land rights to Brahmins and reaffirming temple privileges, the Pandyas used economic incentives to reinforce their alliance with influential social groups.

By positioning the Kalabhras as outsiders, the Pandyas could strengthen their claims to indigenous rule, presenting themselves as the rightful custodians of South Indian socio-cultural heritage. This narrative allowed the Pandyas to align themselves with the values impregnated in early Tamil anthologies, creating a historical continuity and their legitimacy.

Nerur Grant

The Nerur Grant issued by the Chalukya king Mangalesa in first decade of the seventh century CE, provides unique insights into the recognition of Kalabhra influence from outside the Tamil region. Nerur Plates of Mangalaraja Kudal (Ratnagiri in Karnataka), Sanskrit and Southern Brahmi characters. 12th day of the month of Karttika. It informs us that king Mangalesa, son of Vallabha, has driven out king Buddharaja, son of Sankaragana, and had slain Svamiraja of the Chalukya lineage. It records that having fasted on the above tithi and worshipping lord Vishnu the king gifted the village of Kundivataka to Priyasvamin(Fleet1878:161). The Nerur Copper Plates, an epigraphic document of significant historical value, illuminate the reign and military achievements of the Chalukyan monarch Mangalesa. This inscription, written in Sanskrit using Southern Brahmi characters, provides a glimpse into the political dynamics of the period, reflecting both the monarch's territorial ambitions and religious piety. These events underscore Mangalesa's determination to consolidate power and eliminate threats to his authority, both external and internal. Such campaigns were pivotal in solidifying the Chalukyan rule during a time of intense regional rivalry among the Deccan kingdoms (Dikshit1958: 47).

The Nerur Copper Plates also attest to Mangalesa's religious devotion, a common practice among rulers to legitimise their power and gain support from religious elites. According to the inscription, Mangalesa observed a fast on the specified tithi and offered worship to Lord Vishnu before making the land grant. The village of Kundivataka was donated to Priyasvamin, a Brahmin, in a gesture reflecting the king's adherence to dharmic principles and the socio-political norms of patronage. These grants often served dual purposes: fostering loyalty among influential Brahmin communities and ensuring the religious sanctification of royal deeds. Epigraphic sources like the Nerur Plates are invaluable for understanding the socio-political and religious frameworks of the time. They not only highlight the expansionist policies of the Chalukyas but also provide insights into their administrative practices, such as the issuance of land grants. These grants were typically recorded on durable materials like copper plates to ensure their longevity and to serve as official records of the transaction. The meticulous details in the Nerur inscription, including the exact date and the religious rites performed, reflect the importance of such documents in the governance and cultural ethos of the Chalukyas.

The plates also contribute to the ongoing debate regarding the identity of the Kalabhras, mentioned in various Chalukyan records. The identity of the Kalabhras remains one of the unresolved questions in South Indian history. As inferred from the

Velvikudi grant, a Kali king named Kalabhran seized the Pandya country, and the Kalabhras were characterised as ruthless conquerors. Chalukya records refer to them along with other South Indian kings, but they provide little insight into their exact identity. Scholarly theories suggest connections with the Muttaraiyar lineage of Kodumbalur, the Karnatas based on Tamil texts, or even the Kallappalars of the Vellala region. Some scholars equate them with the Kalavar tribe, whose chieftains, such as Tiraiyan of Pavattiri and Pulli of Vengadam, are mentioned in Sangam literature as cattle-lifting robber chiefs of the frontier. Despite these conjectures, the identity of the Kalabhras remains elusive due to the lack of conclusive evidence for a long period. The Kalabhras' presence in the Chalukya records may indicate that they were either involved in direct military engagements with the Chalukyas or recognised as significant players within the broader regional alliances and conflicts that shaped early medieval South India. The Chalukyas' references to the Kalabhras highlight the complexity of Tamilakam's regional dynamics, where alliances were often fluid, and political affiliations could shift based on circumstances. This fluidity is a characteristic feature of South Indian political organisation, where decentralised powers like the Kalabhras were able to coexist with or challenge more centralised dynasties through adaptive and locally embedded governance structures.

The Nerur Grant, therefore, serves as a document that not only records a historical relationship but also reflects a strategic awareness of the distinct socio-religious landscape that the Kalabhras helped to shape. It references to the Kalabhras suggests that the Chalukyas viewed them as more than a regional anomaly; instead, the Kalabhras were integral to the socio-political fabric that shaped inter-regional interactions. This acknowledgment underscores the complexity of South India's political landscape, where powers like the Chalukyas navigated relationships with decentralised polities through a combination of diplomacy and religious awareness. The Nerur Copper Plates serve as a crucial resource for reconstructing the history of the Chalukyas of Badami while also adding to the broader discourse on early medieval South Indian history. They exemplify the interplay of power, religion, and administrative practices, portraying Mangalesa as a capable ruler who balanced military conquests with religious patronage. Moreover, the reference to the Kalabhras highlights the complexities of regional politics and the enduring gaps in our understanding of the subcontinent's historical texture.

Kongunadu Inscriptions

The Kalabhras' influence extended to Kongunadu, a fertile region historically under the Chera kings of the Irumporai lineage in the Sangam period (Mahadevan 2003:20). Following the decline of Chera power, Kongunadu witnessed a series of political transitions, with the Atiya rulers regaining prominence before the Kalabhras' incursions. The Kongunadu inscriptions (Figure 7) from Koduvai and Piramiyam (Seven Vattezhuthu inscription from Kongu country) depict the origin and transformation of the Kongu rulers and their connections with Kalabhras (Rao 1958:95). Occupied Kongunadu region and implemented administrative reforms that mirrored

systems in Deccan regions, such as village-level governance led by chiefs known as *Nattu-Kamindan* (Ramamoorthy 1986:156). These reforms laid the groundwork for subsequent political structures in the region. The Kalabhras are also credited with promoting Jainism, evident from numerous Jain inscriptions and relics found in Southern regions, especially in Kongunadu. For instance, Jain shrines such as the one erected by Ko-Visaiya Vinna-Varman in Palasai (modern-day Palayakottai) attest to the religion's influence during this time. However, their suppression of Hindu practices led to widespread discontent, ultimately it caused one of the reasons of their decline.

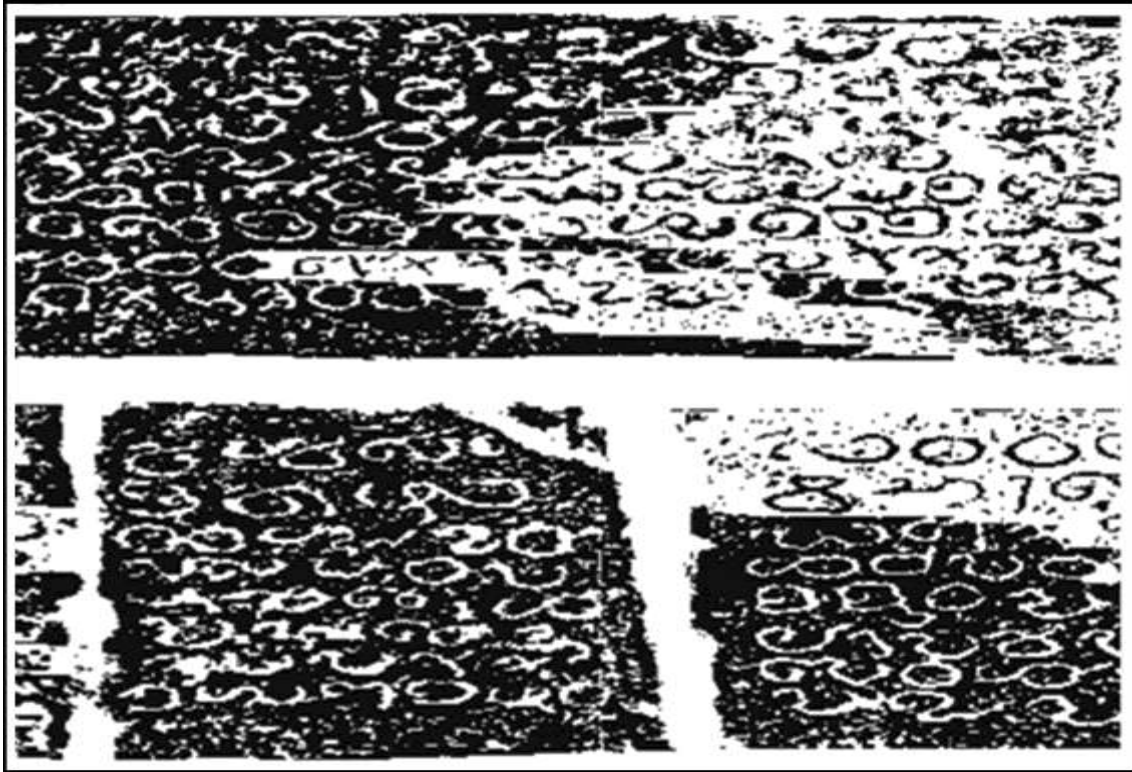


Figure 7: Kongunadu Inscriptions (Source: *Epigraphia Indica* - Vol. XVIII)

The Kalabhras' dominance was relatively short-lived according to recent scholarship. The coordinated efforts of the Pallavas, Pandyas, and Cheras played a crucial role in their downfall. Pallava rulers like Simhavishnu and Pandya kings like Kadungon are credited with overthrowing the Kalabhra rulers and restoring traditional Tamil dynasties. The Velvikudi plates explicitly mention Kadungon's role in defeating the Kalabhras and re-establishing the Pandya empire. The decline of the Kalabhras also coincided with the rise of powerful regional powers in the Deccan, such as the Western Gangas and the Kadambas. These dynasties, along with the Pallavas, exerted pressure on the Kalabhras, leading to their eventual marginalisation. The Pallava Simhavishnu, for instance, not only vanquished the Kalabhras but also expanded Pallava influence into regions previously controlled by the Kalabhras.

In Kongunadu, the Kalabhra rule left a lasting imprint on administrative and social structures. The introduction of village governance systems, which later evolved

into *Palayams* during the period Nayaks of Madurai, is attributed to the Kalabhras. These systems divided the region into smaller administrative units, each governed by a local chief. The Kalabhras' patronage of Jainism also contributed to the proliferation of Jain centres in Kongunadu, many of which remained significant religious sites for centuries. Despite their contributions to administration and religion, the Kalabhras' suppression of Tamil traditions created a cultural void that was filled by the resurgence of Saivism and Vaishnavism under subsequent rulers. The absence of hymns by early Saivite and Vaishnavite saints in Kongunadu until the 9th century CE suggests the lingering influence of Jainism, which gradually waned with the intervention of South Indian rulers. The Kalabhra Interregnum remains a contentious period in Tamil history, with scholars debating the extent of their rule and influence. While earlier narratives characterised the Kalabhras as rebellious political powers as well as their role in introducing administrative reforms and promoting religious diversity. However, their failure to integrate with the local population and their suppression of Tamil cultural practices ultimately led to their downfall. The Kalabhras' legacy is most evident in the epigraphic and literary records that document their rise and fall. Inscriptions like the Velvikudi copper plates, Tamil prosody *Yapparungalam*, and inscriptions from Kongunadu provide valuable insights into this enigmatic period. These sources shed light on the political and religious dynamics of the time and underscore the resilience of Tamil culture in the face of external disruptions.

The Kalabhra episode was a transformative face that disrupted the established order of Tamilakam and introduced new socio-political and religious paradigms. This inscription also provides clues regarding the transformative phase of feudatories and larger families their allegiance towards emerging political powers in South India like the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas. It also provides information regarding the changing position of women and their role in ritual and political arena of this region. While their rule was brief, the Kalabhras' impact on Tamil society, particularly in regions like Kongunadu, was profound. The resurgence of the Chera, Chola, Pandya and Pallava dynasties in the aftermath of the Kalabhras' fall underscores the enduring strength of Tamil traditions and their ability to adapt and thrive amidst change.

The inscriptions found in seven Saivaite temples in Kongunadu are particularly significant for understanding the history and culture of the region. These inscriptions, considered authentic and invaluable, provide insights into temple affairs, socio-economic conditions, and administrative structures (Ayyer 1958:95). Among the copper plate charters, the Namakkal plates of Vira Chola, a contemporary of Chola Parantaka I, and the Tiruchengodu copper plates of Sundara Chola stand out for their historical relevance. The records from the Ganga and Pandya dynasties also offer valuable references to Kongunadu, although the majority of information comes from inscriptions on temple walls. These temple inscriptions, mainly related to North Kongu, are crucial for constructing its historical chronology and provide a window into the art and culture of the region. Inscriptions from the Chola, Pandya, Hoysala, and Vijayanagara dynasties (Nayaks of Madurai) are abundant in Kongunadu. These

Inscriptions provide ample opportunity to enquire into the descendance of the Kongu rulers and the socio-political under Current of the changing dynamics of inter sub feudatory relations in Kongu region. Some epigraphs, while lacking specific ruler names, feature the title *Konerimaikondan*, which presents an intriguing area for further study (Ramamoorthy 1986:326).

Trade and commerce in the region from the 9th to the 17th century C E are also illuminated by these inscriptions, which frequently refer to the network of highways that facilitated economic activities and influenced the socio-cultural status of the local population. Many records pertain to monetary grants for temple lamp maintenance, but they also provide incidental details about the economic life of the community. Notably, some inscriptions reference the corporate activities of the merchant community, highlighting their significant role in regional development. The copper plates and private collections offer information on temple activities and social gatherings, contributing to a broader understanding of the region's socio-cultural and economic fabric. These records serve as indispensable tools for reconstructing the history of Kongunadu, underscoring its vibrant trade networks, religious practices, and administrative advancements.

Conclusion

The Kalabhra period remains an enigmatic chapter in the history of South India due to the lack of sufficient substantiating evidence and the contextual analysis of inscriptional sources. However, selected inscriptions issued by various power players of South India in diverse contexts now reveal the socio-political dynamics of the time. A survey and analysis of these epigraphic documents provide valuable insights into the socio-political and cultural transformations that characterised South India during this period. Inscriptions ranging from Halmidi to Kongunadu, both directly and indirectly, depict the socio-political milieu that eventually facilitated the consolidation of major powers in South India from the 7th century CE. Despite their eventual decline, these inscriptions inadvertently acknowledge the significant influence of the Kalabhras, positioning them as central to understanding the transitions of early medieval South India. While the reasons for the political dissolution of the Kalabhras remain understudied, it is evident that they gradually lost their overwhelming authority in the face of powerful emerging rulers. Nonetheless, they sustained their presence as local chieftains, continuing to play pivotal roles in various strata of political governance. The Kalabhras' governance, marked by a decentralised model that relied on alliances with local chieftains and communities, is clearly evidenced in inscriptions such as those from Velvikkudi, Kongunadu, and the Sendalai Pillar.

The Vaikunta Perumal inscriptions and references to the Muttaraiyan lineage suggest that elements of the former Kalabhra polity were assimilated into Tamil society, contributing to its evolving political and cultural milieu. This challenges the reductive characterisation of the Kalabhras and underscores their adaptability in a dynamic socio-political landscape. Their approach stabilised fragmented territories and enabled

administrative innovations that influenced subsequent dynasties. However, this model of governance also created tensions with the Brahmanical establishment, which led to their portrayal as usurpers in inscriptions commissioned by later dynasties such as the Cholas, Pandyas, and Pallavas. The Kalabhras were not merely a disruptive force but agents of significant socio-political and cultural transformation. Their rule facilitated religious diversity, administrative innovations, and a reconfiguration of power dynamics. By re-examining their role through epigraphic evidence, this study challenges traditional narratives and positions the Kalabhras as integral to the transitional phase of South Indian history. The Kalabhras advanced an ideology that challenged Brahmanical dominance during their peak power and prestige. However, over time, they themselves became part of the transforming socio-political fabric of South India.

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