



THE EPIGRAPHIC ANCHOR OF MAURYAN HISTORY: A CULTURAL HERITAGE ANALYSIS OF THE MASKI MINOR ROCK EDICT

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Abstract

The discovery of the Maski Minor Rock Edict in 1915 by C. Beadon marked a paradigm shift in Indian historiography. Located in the Raichur district of Karnataka, India, this ancient inscription provided the missing link connecting the regal epithet *Devanampriya* ("Beloved of the Gods") directly to Emperor Ashoka. Prior to this discovery, epigraphists and colonial historians relied on Sri Lankan chronicles such as the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* to infer Ashoka's identity, a link that lacked direct epigraphic confirmation within the subcontinent.

This research paper presents a comprehensive examination of the Maski Rock Edict through the lens of cultural heritage, epigraphy, and historical socio-geography. By analysing the linguistic characteristics (Early Middle Indo-Aryan / Prakrit), structural paleography (Ashokan Brahmi script), and socio-religious contexts, this article establishes the Maski Edict as a core pillar of tangible and intangible heritage. Furthermore, the study investigates the site's multi-period occupation from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic eras to the Iron Age and Medieval periods, showcasing Maski as an enduring cultural centre. The research addresses contemporary conservation challenges, urban pressures, and heritage management strategies required to safeguard this historic landmark for posterity.

1. Introduction and Objectives

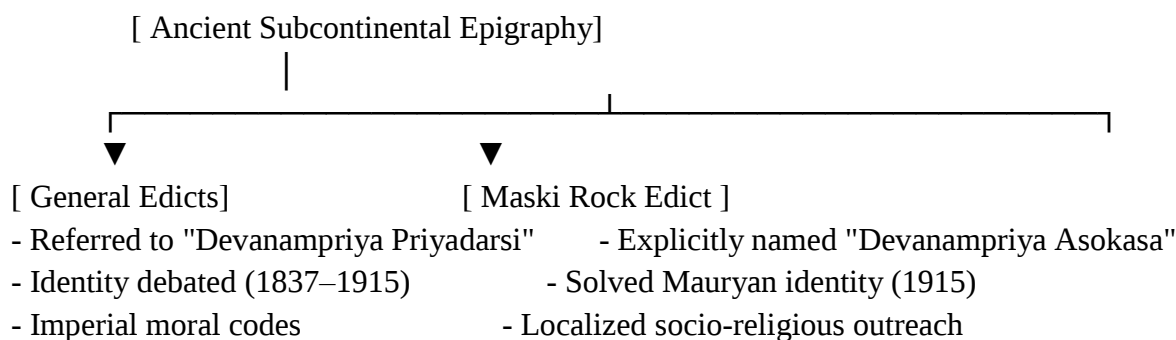
1.1 Historical Context

In the realm of South Asian epigraphy, few discoveries have altered the landscape of ancient historical studies as decisively as the Maski Rock Edict. Engraved on a natural boulder inside a cavernous outcrop on an inselberg, the edict belongs to Ashoka's Minor Rock Edict Series, issued around his 12th to 13th regnal year (c. 256–250 BCE).

When James Prinsep deciphered the Brahmi script in 1837, the vast majority of rock and pillar edicts across the subcontinent were credited to an enigmatic ruler named *Devanampriya Priyadarsi*. Scholars debated whether *Devanampriya* was a mythic ruler or King Devanampriya Tissa of Sri Lanka. The Maski inscription permanently resolved this debate by explicitly stating:

Devanampriya Asokasa

This simple phrase directly bridged royalty, name, and ideology.



1.2 Objectives

1. **Historiographical Re-evaluation:** Analyze how the Maski inscription resolved the identity of *Devanampriya Priyadarsi* and reshaped 20th-century Mauryan chronology.
2. **Epigraphic and Linguistic Analysis:** Deconstruct the paleographic and dialectal nuances of the Ashokan Brahmi script as manifested in Northern Karnataka.
3. **Cultural Heritage Framework:** Position the Maski site within a broader temporal continuum, connecting its prehistoric roots to its historical significance.
4. **Ethics of Morality and Governance:** Examine the socio-religious doctrines of *Dhamma* as articulated in the edict, emphasizing its democratic accessibility to all social classes (*khudaka* and *udāra*).
5. **Conservation and Heritage Policy:** Identify contemporary ecological, industrial, and social threats facing the monument and formulate sustainable management frameworks.

2. Scope and Limitations

2.1 Scope

The scope of this research covers:

- Epigraphic, textual, and paleographic analyses of the eight-line text found at Maski.
- Archaeological, landscape, and spatial contextualization of Maski (*Mosangi*) within the Raichur Doab.
- Socio-political implications of Mauryan administrative outreach in Southern India (*Dakshinapatha*).
- Comparative heritage frameworks juxtaposing Maski with other Southern Minor Rock Edicts (e.g., Nittur, Udegolam, Brahmagiri, Siddapura, Rajula Mandagiri).

2.2 Limitations

- **Physical Degradation:** The Maski inscription has suffered natural weathering and abrasion over two millennia, leaving certain glyphs fragmented.
- **Selective Primary Records:** Detailed stratigraphy from early 20th-century excavations (e.g., by the Nizam's Archaeological Department and later Wheeler/Thapar) lacks modern digital spatial mapping, requiring reliance on archival records.
- **Geographic Focus:** While this paper addresses the broader Mauryan heritage, detailed spatial analysis is restricted to the immediate environs of the Maski nala and inselberg.

3. The Discovery and Historiographical Breakthrough

3.1 C. Beadon and the 1915 Discovery

On January 27, 1915, C. Beadon, a British mining engineer exploring gold veins for the Hyderabad Deccan Company in the Lingsugur taluk of Raichur district, stumbled upon a cavernous rock outcrop. Engraved on a granite face was a partially weathered Brahmi inscription. Recognizing its potential importance, Beadon communicated the discovery to the Archaeological Department of His Exalted Highness the Nizam of Hyderabad and epigraphist Rao Bahadur H. Krishna Sastri.

[DISCOVERY -TIMELINE]

1837: James Prinsep deciphered Brahmi script; identified "Devanampriya"

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1837–1914: Scholars debated if Devanampriya was Ashoka or Tissa of Lanka

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1915 (Jan 27): C. Beadon discovered the Maski Minor Rock Edict

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1915–1916: H. Krishna Sastri published editio princeps confirming "Asoka"

3.2 Epigraphic Text and Translation

The inscription consists of eight lines written in the local variant of Ashokan Brahmi. Below is the transcription and standard English rendering based on the readings of H. Krishna Sastri, E. Hultzsch, and D. C. Sircar.

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Primary Epigraphic Text (Transliterated Prakrit)

1. Devānampiyasa Asokasa [sāvane]
2. adhikāni adhatiyāni vaṣāni yaṃ aṃ sumi budha-śake
3. sātireke saṃvatsare yaṃ ma yā saṃghe upayāte
4. bādham ca mi saṃpūṃkamante
5. pure jambudīpasi ye amisā devā husu te dāni misibhūtā
6. iyaṃ aṭhe khudakena pi dhammayutena sake adhigatave
7. na hevaṃ dakhitaviye uḍālake va imaṃ adhigacheyāti
8. khudake ca uḍālake ca vataviya hevaṃ ve kalantaṃ bhadake se aṭhe chiraṭhitike ca vaḍhisiti.

"A proclamation of Devanampriya Asoka:

It is now more than two and a half years that I have been a lay follower (*upāsaka*). But I had not exerted myself fiercely for a year. However, since I visited the Sangha and showed great zeal, the gods who were unmingled with men in Jambudvīpa have now become mingled with them.

This goal is not to be achieved only by the great (*uḍāra*); even a humble person (*khudaka*) who is devoted to morality (*Dhamma*) can attain the highest heaven. Let both the humble and the great be told: 'If you act thus, this matter will prosper and endure for a long time, and will increase exponentially.'"

[TEXTUAL BREAKDOWN]

Key Phrase	Historiographical Significance
Devānampiyasa Asokasa	Explicitly connects royal title to King Ashoka
Budha-śake / Upāsaka	Documents Ashoka's personal conversion history
Khudakena pi / Uḍālake	Democratizes moral achievement across classes
Misibhūtā	Visualizes spiritual transformation in society

4. Epigraphic, Linguistic, and Philological Analysis

4.1 Linguistic Characteristics

The language of the Maski Edict is an Early Middle Indo-Aryan dialect (Prakrit) displaying specific Southern/Central administrative traits.

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- Phonological Features:** The retention of *s* in *Asokasa* alongside sibilant variations illustrates a transition zone between Eastern Magadhan imperial Prakrit and local Southern dialects.
- Lexical Particularities:** The term *budha-śake* (interpreted as *Buddhasākyeti* or "follower of the Buddha Sakyamuni") directly establishes Ashoka's personal religious identity, contrasting with his more neutral public proclamations in the Major Rock Edicts.

4.2 Paleographic Features

The Brahmi script employed at Maski exhibits clear mid-3rd century BCE paleographic forms:

- Angular Forms:** The letter **A** (λ -shaped) and **Sa** show angular joints typical of early Mauryan stone carving.
- Vowel Signs:** Medial vowel markers (*matras*) for *e*, *o*, and *i* are attached to the upper bar of consonants with sharp vertical or horizontal strokes.
- Linguistic Adaptations:** Variations in the execution of the Brahmi character *Ra* and *Ka* demonstrate that local scribes (*lipikara*) were executing imperial directives using local stylistic habits.

COMPARATIVE EPIGRAPHIC CORPUS OF MAJOR NAMES

Site	Formulaic Phrase Used	Key Identification Marker
Girnar MRE	Devanampriya Priyadarsi	Imperial Epithets Only
Shahbazgarhi	Devanampriya Priyadarsi	Kharosthi Script Variant
Maski MRE	Devānampiyasa Asokasa	Personal Name "Asoka"
Gujarra MRE	Devanampriya Priyadarsi	Personal Name "Asoka"
	Asokaraja	
Nittur MRE	Raja Asoka	Personal Name "Asoka"

5. Cultural Heritage Dimensions

5.1 Tangible Heritage: Site Stratigraphy and Landscape

The Maski Rock Edict cannot be understood isolated from its physical environment. The site is an archaeological landscape spanning millennia:

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- Neolithic Phase (c. 2000–1200 BCE):** Evidence of pastoral communities, polished stone axes, and ash mounds scattered across the Raichur Doab.
- Megalithic / Iron Age Phase (c. 1200–300 BCE):** Extensive burial complexes including cairn circles, dolmens, and urn burials, pointing to a settled population prior to Mauryan contact.
- Early Historic (Mauryan) Phase (c. 300 BCE–200 CE):** Selection of Maski as a regional administrative post along trade routes connecting the Deccan plateau with the southern kingdoms (*Cholas, Pandyas, Satyaputras, Keralaputras*).
- Medieval Transformations:** Evolution of the town name from *Mosangi* (celebrated in Chalukya-Chola conflict records) to *Masgi*, and ultimately *Maski*.

Journeys across Karnataka

STRATIGRAPHIC CONTINUUM AT MASKI

Medieval / Vijayanagara Period (Mosangi / Masgi)
Early Historic / Mauryan Imperial Edict Phase (c. 250 BCE)
Iron Age / Megalithic Burial Complexes & Metallurgy
Prehistoric / Neolithic Pastoral Communities & Rock Art

5.2 Intangible Heritage: The Ethos of *Dhamma*

The Maski edict expresses a core cultural shift in ancient statecraft. Ashoka's *Dhamma* was not merely a state religion, but an ethical code designed to integrate a diverse empire.

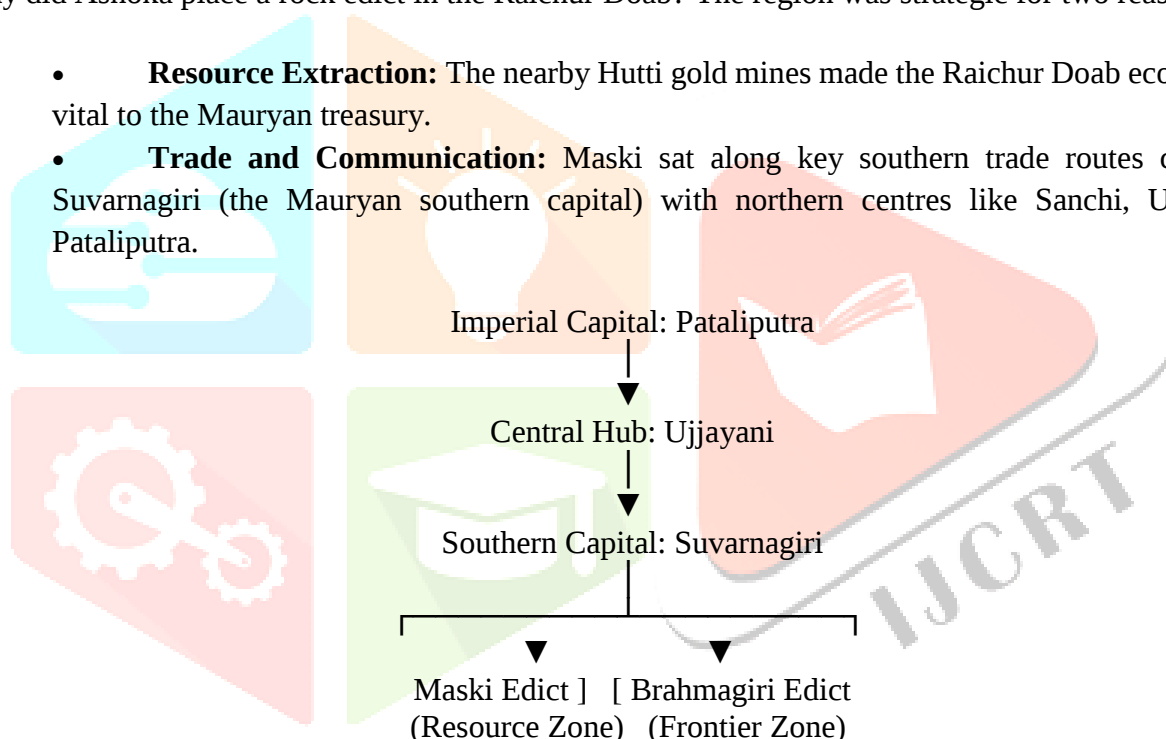
1. **Democratization of Spiritual Attainment:** The edict states that spiritual progress is not reserved for the elite (*udāra*); the humble (*khudaka*) can achieve it through moral effort.
2. **Egalitarian Governance:** By addressing subjects across social strata, the edict replaced royal autocracy with a governance model rooted in ethical responsibility.
3. **Pluralism and Coexistence:** The statement that "gods have mingled with men" reflects a vision of socio-religious harmony across the empire.

6. Socio-Political and Administrative Significance

6.1 The Mauryan Presence in *Dakshinapatha*

Why did Ashoka place a rock edict in the Raichur Doab? The region was strategic for two reasons:

- **Resource Extraction:** The nearby Hutti gold mines made the Raichur Doab economically vital to the Mauryan treasury.
- **Trade and Communication:** Maski sat along key southern trade routes connecting Suvarnagiri (the Mauryan southern capital) with northern centres like Sanchi, Ujjain, and Pataliputra.



6.2 The Role of Mahamattas and Local Dissemination

The edict was meant to be read aloud by state officials (*Dhamma-Mahamattas*) to non-literate populations, serving as both a legal directive and a public sermon.

7. Conservation, Challenges, and Heritage Management

7.1 Contemporary Threats

Despite its historical importance, the Maski site faces several preservation challenges:

- **Environmental Degradation:** Rainwater seepage, temperature fluctuations, and wind abrasion degrade the stone surface.
- **Industrial Encroachment:** Nearby quarrying and mining activities threaten the structural stability of the rock formation.

- **Vandalism and Urban Pressure:** Encroaching construction and unauthorized graffiti require immediate management measures.

RISK ASSESSMENT MATRIX		
Threat Vector	Risk Level	Mitigation Strategy
Mining / Blasting	HIGH	Enforce 1-km Eco-Protection Zone
Micro-climatic Decay	MEDIUM-HIGH	Chemical Consolidation & Canopy
Urban Encroachment	HIGH	Perimeter Fencing & Buffer Zones
Tourist Vandalism	MEDIUM	On-site Guards & Interpretation

7.2 Strategic Conservation Framework

To protect the site, conservation strategies should prioritize three main areas:

1. **In-Situ Preservation:** Install micro-climate monitoring systems and protective transparent canopies to reduce weathering while keeping the edict visible.
2. **Community-Centric Stewardship:** Involve the local community through educational programs, framing the site as a driver for sustainable heritage tourism.
3. **3D Laser Scanning and Digital Archiving:** Create high-resolution 3D photogrammetric models of the inscription to preserve a digital record of the text against future decay.

8. Comparative Analysis with Contemporary South Asian Edicts

Inscription Site	Primary Script	Target Audience	Epigraphic Focus
Maski (KA)	Ashokan Brahmi	Regional Population	Direct Royal Name
	& Miners	(Asokasa)	
Brahmagiri (KA)	Brahmi (with local	Frontier Communities	Administrative Rules
	Kharosthi signature)	& Moral Code	
Shahbazgarhi(PK)	Kharosthi	Northwestern Traders	Major Rock Edict
	& Border Peoples	Series	
Kandahar (AF)	Greek / Aramaic	Hellenistic & Persian	Bi-lingual Moral
	Populations	Outreach	

9. Conclusion

The Maski Minor Rock Edict remains one of the most important epigraphic discoveries in South Asian history. By providing the definitive link between Emperor Ashoka and the title *Devanampriya*, the inscription anchored Mauryan history in concrete textual evidence. Beyond its historiographical value, the edict embodies an enduring message of social equality, moral governance, and community responsibility. Preserving the Maski site requires a modern heritage management framework that combines advanced conservation techniques with local community involvement. Protecting this historic monument ensures that Ashoka's vision of ethical governance continues to inspire future generations.

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