

BHAGWANLAL INDRAJI: The First Indian Archaeologist and Epigrapher - A Pioneer of Indigenous Scholarship

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Abstract:

BhagwanlalIndraji (1839-1888) stands as a foundational figure in the development of modern Indian archaeology and epigraphy. Emerging from a traditional Sanskrit education in Junagadh, Gujarat, Indraji transcended the confines of colonial scholarship to become the first Indian to systematically conduct archaeological excavations, decipher major ancient inscriptions (particularly Ashokan edicts), and utilize numismatics for historical reconstruction. This paper examines Indraji's life, intellectual formation, major expeditions, and groundbreaking contributions. It highlights his mastery of the Brahmi script, pivotal discoveries (such as the Satavahana reliefs at Nanaghat and the sites of Bairat and Sopara), and his extensive documentation of cave inscriptions across Western India. Despite linguistic barriers that limited the dissemination of his Gujarati publications, Indraji's meticulous scholarship earned him international recognition, including an honorary doctorate from Leiden University. His work represents a crucial synthesis of indigenous knowledge and emerging archaeological methodologies, laying the groundwork for future Indian historiography and establishing him as a true pioneer who often surpassed his European contemporaries in insight and discovery.

Introduction

The study of India's ancient past underwent a significant transformation in the 19th century, largely driven by colonial initiatives. Yet, amidst this landscape, BhagwanlalIndraji emerged as a uniquely indigenous force. Born in 1839 in Junagadh, Gujarat, into a family of Ayurvedic practitioners, Indraji rose from traditional Sanskrit learning to become India's first professional archaeologist, epigrapher, and numismatist. His career, though tragically short, was marked by extraordinary achievements: the decipherment of critical inscriptions, the discovery and excavation of major archaeological sites, and the pioneering use of coins to reconstruct dynastic histories. Indraji's work transcended the role of a mere native informant; he was an independent scholar whose meticulous research, often conducted under challenging circumstances, fundamentally shaped the understanding of ancient Indian history, particularly the Mauryan and Satavahana periods. This paper explores Indraji's journey, his methodologies, his major discoveries, and his enduring legacy, arguing for his rightful place as the progenitor of a distinctly Indian tradition of archaeological and epigraphic scholarship.

Early Life and Intellectual Formation

BhagwanlalIndraji's foundation was laid in the rich intellectual environment of traditional Gujarat. Born on November 8, 1839, in Junagadh, his early education was steeped in Sanskrit, received from his father and local schools. This grounding provided him with deep access to Indian literary and philosophical traditions. A pivotal moment occurred during his teenage years when he encountered James Prinsep's chart deciphering the Brahmi script. Using this chart, the young Indraji turned his attention to the ancient rock inscriptions at Girnar, near his hometown. This self-directed study ignited his lifelong passion for epigraphy and marked the beginning of his journey towards mastering scripts that unlocked India's historical past.

Initiation into Archaeology and Epigraphy

Indraji's formal entry into the field was facilitated by Colonel Lang, the Political Agent of Kathiawar, who recognized his potential and encouraged his studies. His breakthrough came with his independent mastery of the Brahmi script, leading him to produce a new and highly accurate transcript of the crucial Rudradaman I inscription at Girnar. This feat brought him to the attention of leading Bombay-based intellectuals like Bhau Daji and A.K. Forbes. Recognizing his exceptional talent, they became his mentors and collaborators. In 1863, Bhau Daji sent Indraji to the Ajanta Caves as a draftsman. There, he meticulously recorded inscriptions, showcasing his skill. Upon his return, he dedicated himself to transcribing inscriptions from numerous cave sites across Western India: Nashik, Karli, Bhaja, Bhayandar, Junnar, and Pitalkhora. His most significant discovery during this period was at Nanaghat, where he unearthed the earliest known reliefs depicting Satavahana rulers, including Simuka Satakarni, Queen Nayanika, and other princes, providing vital visual evidence for this important dynasty.

Major Expeditions and Discoveries

Indraji's scholarly rigor was matched by his physical endurance, undertaking extensive and arduous expeditions across the subcontinent:

- 1863: A tour of British India with patrons Ardeshir Framji Moos and Cursetji Nusserwanji Cama, covering South India, North-Western Provinces, Bengal, and North India.
- 1864: Sent by Bhau Daji with Pandurang Gopal Padhye to Jaisalmer to examine and copy ancient Jain manuscripts preserved in the Jain *bhandar* (storehouse), spending three months on this critical task.
- 1865: A year-long expedition covering Banaras, Bodh Gaya, the Barabar and Nagarjuni caves in Bihar, the Hathigumpha caves, Dhauli, Jaugada in Odisha, and other ancient shrines.
- 1873: Sponsored by the Junagadh State, this major expedition took him to Nepal, the Indo-Tibet border, Baluchistan, Yusufzai territory (revisiting Barabar/Nagarjuni and Bodh Gaya), Kashmir, and the ancient city of Taxila.

Pioneering Contributions to Archaeology and Epigraphy

Indraji's contributions were foundational and multifaceted:

- **Ashokan Studies:** He was a pioneer in the identification, study, and accurate recording of Ashokan inscriptions, significantly advancing their understanding.
- **Excavation Pioneer:** Indraji discovered and conducted the first systematic excavations at Bairat (Rajasthan) and Sopara (near Mumbai, uncovering an Ashokan pillar fragment). He holds the distinction of being the first Indian to publish an excavation report. His findings filled volumes 4 and 5 of the Archaeological Survey of Western India Reports.
- **Epigraphic Documentation:** His collaboration with James Burgess was seminal. He was the primary contributor to *Inscriptions from the Cave Temples of Western India* and Burgess's *Ajanta Notes and Rock-cut Temples at Badami in the Deccan*. His detailed studies of memorial stones, caves, and sculptures significantly enriched the Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency.
- **Numismatics & History:** Indraji innovatively used coin evidence to construct genealogies of Indian rulers, particularly the Kshatrapas. He meticulously documented language, costumes, lifestyle, religion, and culture observed during his travels. His extensive personal coin collection, spanning the Parthian, Indo-Parthian, Kushan, Sasanian, and Gupta periods, was later bequeathed to the British Museum.
- **Multidisciplinary Approach:** His work inherently integrated epigraphy, archaeology, numismatics, art history, and cultural observation, providing a holistic view of the past.

Recognition and Legacy:

- Indraji's exceptional scholarship earned him significant international recognition during his lifetime:
- Honorary Member, Royal Asiatic Society (1877)
- Fellow, Bombay University (1882)
- Honorary Fellow, Royal Institute of Philology, Geography, and Ethnology of the Netherlands (1883)
- Honorary Doctorate, Leiden University (1884) - First Indian recipient of such an honour from a foreign university.

Despite this acclaim, a significant barrier existed: his limited proficiency in English. The bulk of his detailed work was published in Gujarati, rendering it inaccessible to the wider international scholarly community for decades. Consequently, many of his discoveries and interpretations, which were often ahead of his European contemporaries, remained sidelined in mainstream academic discourse.

Indraji bequeathed his invaluable research materials – notebooks, inscription copies, coins, and manuscripts – to the Royal Asiatic Society, the British Museum, and the Bombay Native General Library. His large leather-bound notebook, preserved in the RAS archives, stands as a tangible testament to his meticulous and tireless scholarship.

Methodology

This research employs a historical and analytical methodology:

1. **Biographical Reconstruction:** Drawing on existing biographies, archival records (particularly the Royal Asiatic Society archives), and Indraji's own published reports and notes to trace his life and career trajectory.
2. **Analysis of Primary Works:** Critical examination of Indraji's key publications (e.g., in the Journal of the Bombay Branch of the RAS, Indian Antiquary, Archaeological Survey Reports) to identify his specific contributions, decipherment techniques, excavation methods, and historical interpretations.
3. **Contextualization:** Situating Indraji's work within the broader context of 19th-century colonial archaeology in India, examining his interactions with institutions like the Archaeological Survey of India and scholars like Burgess and Bhau Daji, and assessing the dynamics between colonial and indigenous scholarship.
4. **Assessment of Impact:** Evaluating the reception and long-term influence of Indraji's discoveries (e.g., the Satavahana reliefs, Sopara excavations, inscription readings) on subsequent archaeological and historical research in India. This includes analysing the consequences of the language barrier (Gujarati publications).
5. **Legacy Analysis:** Examining posthumous recognition, the preservation and accessibility of his archival materials, and his portrayal in the historiography of Indian archaeology.

Conclusion.

Bhagwanlal Indraji's life and work represent a watershed moment in the study of India's ancient past. Emerging from a tradition of Sanskrit learning, he independently mastered the tools of modern archaeology, epigraphy, and numismatics, becoming India's first professional practitioner in these fields. His groundbreaking discoveries – from the Satavahana reliefs at Nanaghat to the Ashokan sites at Sopara and Bairat – and his meticulous documentation of countless inscriptions fundamentally reshaped the understanding of ancient Indian history, particularly the Mauryan and Satavahana periods. His innovative use of numismatics for historical reconstruction set a vital precedent.

Indraji's significance lies not only in his discoveries but in his very existence as a highly skilled, internationally recognized Indian scholar operating within and often surpassing the paradigms of colonial archaeology. He achieved this despite the significant disadvantage of publishing primarily in Gujarati, a factor that unfortunately delayed the full appreciation of his insights by the wider academic world. His legacy is one of pioneering spirit, meticulous scholarship, and the powerful synthesis of indigenous knowledge with rigorous empirical methods. Bhagwanlal Indraji rightfully deserves the title of India's first archaeologist and epigrapher, a colossus whose foundational work continues to inform and inspire the study of the subcontinent's deep history. His materials, preserved in institutions like the Royal Asiatic Society, remain a vital resource for ongoing research.

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