

FROM GRANITE TO GIGABYTES

Saving Bangalore's History

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I usually ask students I meet one question: What do you know about Bangalore's history? I am very often left getting crickets. I sometimes get name drops; 'Kempe Gowda, Founder of Bengaluru' or 'the Wodeyars, rulers of Mysore State'. Asking an older demographic the same question yields perhaps diverse but similarly underwhelming answers.

Does this mean that the country's Technology capital, the epicentre of innovation and modernity, has a sparse and short history? Do the places, temples, deities, lakes, inscriptions, hero stones and buildings dotting the city have no ancient tales to tell?

These questions don't even occur to most residents of the city. This is, for one, because of the way history is constructed and perceived in common parlance. School history books are the sole means of interaction most people have with the past, and they fall considerably short of inspiring curiosity in the reader. Lists of kings, dynasties, periods and wars crowd their pages; most people find little of interest within these unending lines. As soon as one progresses past these books and grades to whatever domain they make a living in, an impression of indifference or apprehension is all that remains about the field of history.

I have noted this from my career in the field of science and technology. Those who work with the sciences often have an active distaste for the Humanities and vice versa. I may have remained an ignorant member of this very dichotomy if not for a chance discovery I made through an acquaintance.

I had lived in Rajajinagar my whole life. My impression of the area's history had been that it was a post-

independence development named after C. Rajagopalachari. Then, in 2017, I learnt that a rather unkept locality in Rajajinagar, an erstwhile village by the name Kethamaaranahalli, had a 700-year history! An inscription had been found here dated to the 14th century, which mentioned the village by the same name it's still knownby. This extraordinary find was pivotal in the journey towards what has now become my life's most important project. Deeply intrigued, I set out to find the inscription. In my decades-long residence in Rajajinagar, I had neither seen nor heard of such an inscription existing in the area. In my search, I came across the Epigraphia Carnatica, a repertoire of information about inscriptions of Karnataka collated over a century ago. Though I still wasn't able to find the Kethamaaranahalli inscription (it has been lost to time), this text opened up a whole new world of local history for me. According to it, there were over 175 historical inscriptions just in and around Bangalore. The oldest of these are dated to the 8th century, and there is a continuous string of these artefacts stretching to as recently as the 19th century. Bangalore's history, I learnt, was far from being either sparse or short.

I began to go looking for other inscriptions mentioned in the Epigraphia Carnatica around my residence and place of work. I also began talking to my circles about the finds I had been making. Before long we had a group of people deeply interested in uncovering and spreading the word about Bangalore's long and virtually forgotten history. The online community 'Inscription Stones of Bangalore' embarked on regular expeditions to find and secure inscriptions, inform the locals of the significance of the artefacts and publicise the history uncovered from them on various platforms.

As we conducted more of these activities, we soon realised that simply finding these inscriptions was insufficient. Due to urbanisation, pollution and ignorance, these stones were all under different levels of threat. Some were left exposed to the elements and weathering away, some were being used to line stormwater drains; some others were soon to be obliterated to make way for construction. We had only just begun to uncover and popularise the previously unheard histories of Bangalore, and these threats were on the verge of destroying permanently many more such stories we were yet to rediscover.

We envisioned an ambitious project: making high-quality 3D digital copies of these inscriptions, copies that could be used as a substitute for the physical artefact for any imaginable purpose. Even if an inscription were destroyed due to uncontrollable factors, its digital twin would ensure no information about it would be lost.

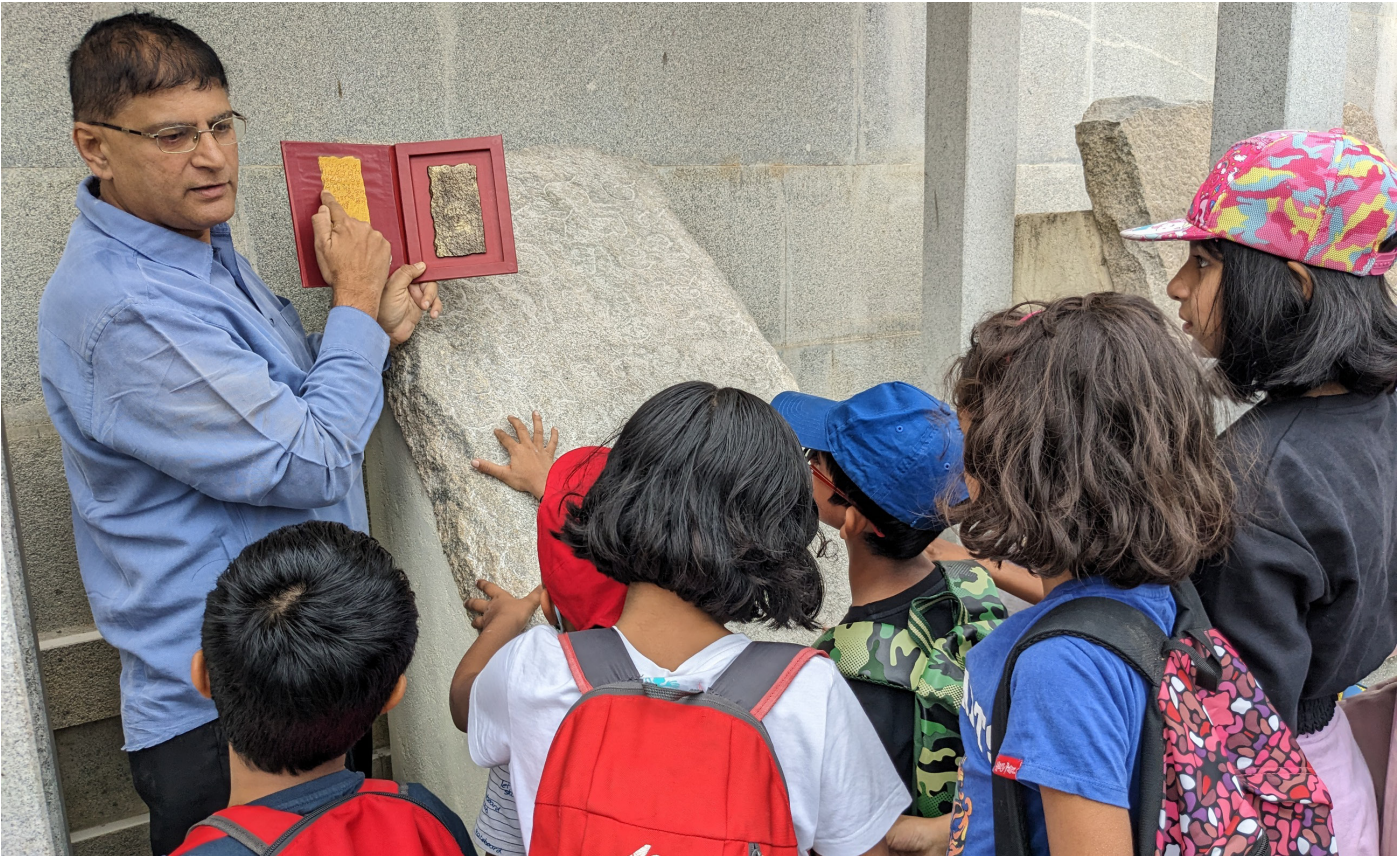
As visionary as this idea was, it was going to be a very expensive one. It required specialized cutting-edge technology that was not easily available. It also required a well-trained team of experts to run successfully. Our makeshift group of volunteers, however passionate and committed, would not be able to pull it off. We thus approached organisations we thought would be willing to help. We tried making the proposition to the government archaeological department. They were supportive in providing administrative and logistical support to the project, but in classic bureaucratic fashion, cited budget constraints as reasons not to help financially.

We also tried tying up with universities and academicians in the field of history. The responses we got from these circles were in the tone of reluctance and dismissal. Academically trained historians saw no need for such an effort. This history had already been recorded and written perfectly according to them. There was no need to revisit and preserve its sources as one would find nothing new of use in them. They further couldn't digest the idea of using the latest technology in the field of history. What place did high-tech machines have in a realm that did not use science and numbers? The Mythic Society, a pioneering heritage organisation working to preserve and propagate historical knowledge, finally

stepped forward to fund the project. Thus, in January 2021, began the Bengaluru Inscriptions 3D Digital Conservation Project. My weekend hobby had evolved into a full-time dream project. Our initial twofold mission was firstly to educate those who live in the vicinity of inscriptions about their history andsignificance, and secondly to create an exhaustive database of high-quality digital copies of all historical inscriptions around the city. With this vision, we set out on our quest to digitally preserve the estimated 1500 inscriptions for 'as long as the sun and moon persist'. As our project has progressed in the last few years, and as we have delved deeper into epigraphical research, we have made some startling discoveries. On revisiting inscriptions previously recorded over a century ago, we have found that the readings of these texts, which scholars widely accept, all have discrepancies ranging between degrees of 25 to 75 per cent compared to our readings from high-quality scans. The implications of this finding are staggering. These century-old readings, used extensively by scholars, are the foundation of most of history that has been reconstructed with academic consensus in the past century. If these readings themselves are considerably erroneous, where does this leave the vast historical narrative that has been constructed based on them? Is the 'perfect' history career historians swear by with confidence even remotely perfect?

I started on this path over half a decade ago with a unique vantage. Armed with the inquisitiveness and critical thinking one acquires from training in the sciences, I entered a field that treasures and closely guards the norm. Our work similarly approached the domain of history with fresh, innovative and highly technical means. Of what utility are our efforts? What contribution are we making to our society and country through our project?

In my three-decade career in software and engineering, I dealt extensively with people and organisations from around the world. What became clear to me in this process was how important it was to have a strong identity and sense of belonging in life. Having strong connections to one's roots and pride in one's heritage is paramount in today's fast-globalising world. In the absence of a confident cultural identity, it is next to impossible for a society to grow and progress.



There is almost no field in which the city of Bangalore hasn't made a significant contribution, be it technological, commercial or artistic. Why, then, is there such little celebration of the city's achievements among its people? Why does the city continue to look misdeveloped and unappealing at a glance despite its many successes? This, in my experience, is because the average Bangalorean playing a part in the city's achievements feels little affinity to it. He/she does not know that he/she is part of a city that has a glorious 2000-year-old history, without which it wouldn't stand the way it does today. If only he/she knew that Bangalorians were part of a grand old story that continues to be scripted as the city advances with great potential into the future, would he/she feel an emotional attachment to Bangalore. He/

she, with such an attachment, would likely be more invested in being part of its growth story, perhaps by solving pressing civic issues, contributing to the welfare of the city, etc.

The ultimate goal of our project, in essence, is to inspire such a sense of belonging and attachment to the city among all its citizens. We want to make true local history easily accessible to all Bangaloreans. We want to inspire pride within each resident of Bangalore for its 1300 years of progress. We want to make each citizen a stakeholder in the advancement of the city by establishing deep roots of belonging. To this end, Mythic Society's Bengaluru Inscriptions 3D Digital Conservation Project will work as far as it can play a meaningful and productive role.

Udaya Kumar P. L. is a Bangalore-based heritage conservationist, independent researcher, and the Honorary Director of the Bengaluru Inscriptions 3D Digital Conservation Project at the Mythic Society. He leads one of India's most ambitious citizen-driven digital humanities initiatives, combining field epigraphy, 3D documentation, and public engagement to document and preserve over 1,500 stone inscriptions from the Bengaluru region, dating from 200 to 1750 CE. Originally trained as an engineer, Udaya holds a Master's degree in Engineering Mechanics from IIT Madras and spent over three decades in leadership roles with Tata, General Electric, and Schneider Electric. He brings his interdisciplinary expertise to the field of heritage preservation, applying data science, geospatial analysis, and open-access technologies to reimagine epigraphy for the digital age. In recognition of his contributions to cultural heritage, he was awarded the Namma Bengaluru Citizen Individual of the Year in 2019.

Dyuvan D Machaaranda is passionate about the social sciences, with a special interest in history, aesthetics, and how societies evolve. He enjoys exploring reality through research, writing, and creative projects. Curious by nature and trying to have an interdisciplinary outlook, he's drawn to the connections between antiquity, culture, society, and everyday life. He is currently working in the field of historical research and conservation.