

**Reconstructing Educational Administration
within the Indian Knowledge System: A
Critical Epigraphical Study of the
Parthivapuram Copper Plates**

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Abstract:

The Parthivapuram Copper Plates also known as Huzur office copper plates, offer significant insights into the structure and administration of education in early medieval South India. Through detailed references to grants given by the Ay King Karunandadakkan for the erection of a Vishnu temple and a Salai associated with that temple at Parthivapuram, the inscription highlights the role of royal patronage in sustaining centres of learning such as Salas. The plates reveal a decentralized governance model led by Ooralar sabha (village assemblies), which managed Cattar Perumakkal (teacher) remuneration, Cattar (student) support, and institutional resources. The inscription further outlines the regulations governing the Cattars (students), specifying their obligatory duties in the temple as well as in the Sala. It also prescribes admission rules, including the sanctioned intake for every department. This epigraphical evidence demonstrates that education was treated as a public and sacred responsibility, supported through endowments rather than fees. The study emphasizes the sophisticated administrative mechanisms, economic foundations, and community involvement that shaped ancient Indian educational institutions, making the Parthivapuram plates an important source for reconstructing the region's educational history.

Key words:

Parthivapuram Sala, Huzur office Copper plates, Indian Knowledge System, educational administration.

Introduction:

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a rich and multifaceted tradition encompassing not only philosophy, literature, and science but also the practical organization of social, religious, and educational life. One of the critical sources of understanding IKS is epigraphical evidence, which provides direct insight into the socio-political and economic mechanisms that sustained education in historical India. Among such sources, the Parthivapuram Copper Plates, also known as the Huzur Office Copper Plates, are particularly significant. Dated to the early medieval period, these plates illuminate the role of royal patronage, community governance, and institutional administration in sustaining centres of learning known as Salas. The plates not only record grants made by King Karunandadakkan of

the Ay dynasty for the construction of a Vishnu temple and the attached Salai (educational institution) at Parthivapuram but also provide detailed regulations concerning teacher remuneration, student duties, and institutional governance.

This study examines the Parthivapuram plates as a lens to understand the administrative sophistication, economic foundations, and socio-cultural importance of education in early South India. By situating these inscriptions within the broader framework of Indian educational history, the paper highlights the enduring principles of the IKS that link knowledge, governance, and public responsibility.

Historical Context of the Parthivapuram Copper Plates:

The Parthivapuram Copper Plates were issued during the reign of Ay King Karunandadakkan, whose domain included parts of present-day southern Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Ays, as a prominent South Indian dynasty, were known for their patronage of temples, education, and culture, reflecting the interconnection between religious and educational institutions in medieval India.

The plates, preserved in the Huzur Office in Trivandrum, document land and revenue grants made to support the erection of a Vishnu temple at Parthivapuram, alongside a Salai, an educational centre attached to the temple. Inscriptions of this kind were common in early South India, reflecting a structured and codified approach to temple-based education, in which learning was intertwined with religious and moral instruction.

The period witnessed a decentralized model of governance, wherein village assemblies, known as Ooralar sabhas, played a pivotal role in local administration. These assemblies were responsible for managing temple lands, overseeing education, and ensuring the welfare of students and teachers. Such arrangements suggest that education was both a civic duty and a sacred responsibility, with community involvement complementing royal patronage.

Structure and Function of the Parthivapuram Salai:

➤ Royal Patronage and Endowments:

The Parthivapuram Copper Plates make it clear that royal grants were central to sustaining educational institutions. King Karunandadakkan provided land, revenue, and other resources for the construction and maintenance of the Vishnu temple and the attached Salai. These endowments ensured that education was accessible without tuition fees, relying instead on the economic surplus generated by temple revenues.

This reflects a core principle of IKS: knowledge as a public good, supported through state or religious patronage rather than market mechanisms. The arrangement underscores the cultural and spiritual value attributed to education, positioning teachers (Cattar Perumakkal) and students (Cattars) as stewards of sacred knowledge.

➤ Governance and Administration:

A particularly notable feature of the plates is the decentralized governance model. The Ooralar sabha, a local village assembly, oversaw several key aspects of educational administration:

- **Remuneration for Teachers:** The sabha allocated salaries and provisions for the Cattar Perumakkal, ensuring economic stability for educators.
- **Student Support:** Cattars received food, lodging, and other necessities from temple revenues.
- **Institutional Resources:** Maintenance of the Salai, procurement of manuscripts, and other material requirements were managed collectively by the village assembly.

This system highlights the collaborative model of governance, integrating the state, temple authorities, and local communities in sustaining education. It contrasts with modern centralized or fee-based educational systems, offering insights into alternative frameworks for knowledge dissemination.

➤ **Academic Structure and Regulations:**

The plates meticulously specify admission rules, departmental intake, and student responsibilities:

- **Admission Limits:** Each department within the Salai had a sanctioned number of students, ensuring quality control and manageable teacher-student ratios.
- **Obligatory Duties:** Students had ritual and educational duties, including temple service and learning activities within the Sala.
- **Teacher-Student Relations:** The inscriptions emphasize moral and ethical conduct, reinforcing education as both a discipline and a sacred responsibility.

Such regulations reflect a systematic approach to pedagogy and institutional management, suggesting that early South Indian education was highly structured and codified.

Economic Foundations of Salas:

The Parthivapuram Copper Plates reveal that education was financed through endowments rather than tuition fees, relying on the following mechanisms:

- **Land Grants:** Revenue from agricultural land supported teacher salaries and student welfare.
- **Temple Income:** Offerings and donations to the temple provided additional financial resources.
- **Community Contributions:** The village assembly coordinated local resources, highlighting collective responsibility.

This financial model illustrates the sustainability of knowledge systems independent of commercial pressures, aligning with broader principles in IKS, where learning is treated as a social and spiritual investment rather than a commodity.

Salas and Community Engagement:

A distinctive feature of the Parthivapuram Salai was community involvement in educational governance:

- Village assemblies actively managed resources and monitored teacher and student conduct.

- Community members contributed to the welfare of students and supported the maintenance of institutional infrastructure.
- Temple-based Salas ensured that knowledge dissemination was tied to local cultural and religious practices, reinforcing social cohesion.

Such arrangements reveal that education was embedded within the social fabric, with multiple stakeholders contributing to its sustenance. This approach ensured accountability, continuity, and alignment of educational objectives with societal values.

Educational Philosophy and Pedagogical Practices:

The inscription offers glimpses into the pedagogical philosophy of early South Indian Salas:

- Learning was holistic, integrating ritual, moral, and intellectual education.
- Teachers were respected as custodians of knowledge, enjoying both social prestige and economic security.
- Student discipline encompassed both academic responsibilities and temple service, reflecting the integration of spiritual and secular learning.

These principles resonate with broader Indian educational traditions, where knowledge (Vidya) is both a duty and a means of societal upliftment.

Comparative Insights from Other IKS Sources:

The Parthivapuram plates complement evidence from other South Indian inscriptions and texts, including:

- Chola and Pandya inscriptions, which similarly emphasize temple-linked education.
- Brahmapurana and other Sanskrit texts, which stress the sacred duty of knowledge dissemination.
- Studies by scholars such as Subrahmanyam (1957) and Ingale et al. (2014) on education and resource management in medieval India.

Together, these sources demonstrate a pattern of decentralized, temple-centered education across South India, underpinned by royal patronage and community governance.

Implications for Understanding Indian Knowledge Systems:

The Parthivapuram Copper Plates offer several insights into the nature and resilience of Indian Knowledge Systems:

- **Integration of Knowledge and Governance:** Education was closely tied to political, economic, and religious institutions.
- **Decentralized Administration:** Local assemblies played a critical role, offering a model of participatory governance.
- **Ethical and Moral Frameworks:** Student conduct and teacher responsibilities were codified, emphasizing the ethical dimension of learning.
- **Sustainability through Endowments:** Knowledge was financed through land grants and temple resources, ensuring continuity without reliance on market forces.
- **Community Ownership:** Learning was a collective responsibility, embedding education within the social and cultural matrix.

These features underline the distinctive character of IKS, where knowledge is intertwined with societal well-being, ethics, and spiritual practice.

Challenges and Limitations:

While the Parthivapuram plates provide valuable evidence, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

- The focus is primarily on elite and temple-centered education, leaving rural and non-elite systems underrepresented.
- The inscriptions offer limited detail on curriculum content, pedagogical methods, or long-term outcomes.
- Reliance on royal and temple patronage may have restricted access for marginalized groups, despite community involvement.

Nonetheless, these plates remain one of the most detailed surviving records of early South Indian educational administration, offering a template for comparative studies.

Relevance to Contemporary Education Policy:

Modern policymakers and educators can draw lessons from the Parthivapuram Salai system:

- **Community Involvement:** Engaging local stakeholders can enhance accountability and resource mobilization.
- **Sustainability through Endowments:** Innovative financing models for public education can reduce dependence on fees.
- **Ethical Education:** Integrating moral and civic education alongside academic instruction fosters holistic development.
- **Decentralized Administration:** Empowering local institutions can improve educational access and governance, especially in rural areas.

Such insights highlight the timeless relevance of IKS principles in designing equitable, community-centered, and sustainable education systems.

Conclusion:

The Parthivapuram Copper Plates provide a unique window into the organization, governance, and philosophy of early medieval South Indian education. Through detailed records of royal patronage, community involvement, and administrative regulations, the inscriptions reveal a sophisticated system in which education was treated as a public and sacred responsibility, financed through endowments and sustained through decentralized governance. The plates illuminate the holistic integration of spiritual, moral, and intellectual learning, offering enduring lessons for contemporary educational policy and governance. By situating the Parthivapuram Salai within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems, this study underscores the synergy between governance, pedagogy, and community in sustaining knowledge traditions. The insights gleaned from these plates not only enrich our understanding of South Indian educational history but also demonstrate the relevance of IKS principles for modern society, emphasizing ethics, sustainability, and community-centric learning.

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