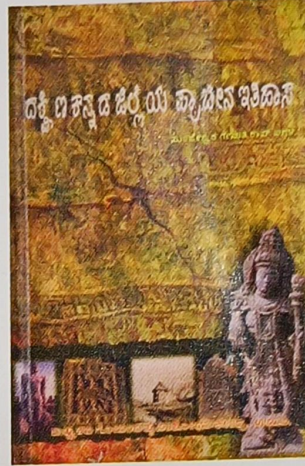


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ತ್ರೈಮಾಸಿಕ



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# Nattojas: Revisiting the Puttur Copper Plate Inscription

- Shreyas Kolpe

## Introduction

In this paper, I would like to propose a re-reading of a copper plate inscription from Puttur in Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka, whose text was published by H R Nagaraja Sharma as “Copper Plate Inscription from South Kanara” (2003: 62-66). This attempt is prompted by the remarkable coincidence of the *tithi* with that of the well preserved Vijayanagara-era stele to the right of the sanctum of the Puttur Mahalingeshwara Temple, published as SII Vol. 27, No. 105 (Sampath 2001: 156-161). In addition, the text of the plate indicates a donation made at the same event as that mentioned in the stone inscription, namely the visit of the preceptor Kriyashaktideva to the temple. These details match exactly- the king Pratapadevaraya was ruling from Vijayanagara under whom Annappa, son of Devaraja, was governing Mangaluru-*rājya* at the instance of *pradhāna* Hariyappa. Puttur is said to lie under the jurisdiction (*sthāna*) of the Banga chieftain Pandiyappa-arasa. The existence of this complementary text allows us to correct some mistakes that probably occurred in the earlier reading of the plate. One such rereading allows us to discuss the Nattojas, a prominent family among the Sthanikas of South Kanara. Certain details in the copper plate seem to confirm oral history regarding their migration from Polali, and their role in the temples of both Puttur and Polali. Additionally, these details also lend some weight to a proposed etymology of the name Nattoja.

## Proposed correction and reinterpretation

The text of the copper plate is reproduced here (Sharma 2003: 65-66), following which the corrections are proposed on grounds of reasonable probability, from the corresponding parts of the stone inscription. Also, the implications of the new reading are elaborated.

1. Namas-tuḡaśiracha(ś-chu)mbichamdra-chāmara-chāra-
2. vē[|\*] trayi(trai)lōkya-nagar-ā[ra\*]mbhamūlastambā(bhā)yaŚam-

3. [bha\*]vē[[\*]svastiśrī-jayābyu(bhyu)daya-Śālivāhana-Śakha (ka)-
4. vara(ru)sha 1353 nēvartamānaVirōdhikru(kṛi)t-nāma
5. saṁvatsaradaMār(ge)rgaśiraśu 5 Ā-luśrīmatu
6. Vije(ja)ye(ya)nagariyaluPratāpa-Dēvarāyaru
7. chatusa(s-sa)mudravapālisuvalipradā(dhā)naHariya-
8. ppa-damṇāyaka-vode(de)yanirūpadimḍā(mḍa) Mam-
9. gaḷūra-rājyavanuDēvarājagaḷamagaAmṇapa-
10. gaḷuāḷuvaliPā[m\*]ḍyaparasarādaBaṁgarastā(sthā)nada-
11. luPuḷinā-nadī-tīradimḍabamḍaamṇa-ta(m)maṁdi-
12. ralipādamuliKaṇavvōjiSubhaṇṇagebarasiko-
13. ṭtatambrāśāsanada da(dhā)re paṭṭikramava(ve)mṁta(te)mḍare
14. Amṇappagaḷakeḷaḷetiḷunādiyaadi(dhi)kāravanumā-
15. ḍuvaKriyāvatiidēvarugaḷavaru
16. PuttūrigebijeyamāḍidalinīvuyiligebamḍuMahadēvaranu
17. pratishṭe(shṭhe) māḍipujemaḍuvaliśridevarubhugata-
18. vadarimḍani[m\*]ma sti(sthi)tiyanusimeya[va\*]ramuṁti(mḍi)-
19. ṭṭubimṇapamāḍidakedevarasamṇidi(dhi)yalukra-
20. yakekoṁḍamṭabrahmadāyavanu da(dha)reya(ye)ra(re)du
21. śīla-śāsanabarasināḍisidalladenimṁmajivanakepa[m\*]-
22. ḍyapa-arasaradaBaṁgarimḍakrayakekoṁḍakamba-
23. ḷatimarumuntāgiimṇuraippaṭṭamuru
24. varahadabhumiyānūvusaṁtanaparamṇa
25. yavagibaḷianubhaviśīkalakalakesistanute-
26. ttubahadeṁdu da(dhā)radattamaḍikoṭṭad-agi a
27. de vīranu Nagamṇa.

Firstly, it is proposed that the name *Kriyāvatiidēvarugaḷavaru* (line 15) should be read as *Kriyāshaktidēvarugaḷavaru*. In this case, this personage is not a mere officer of the state but can be identified with the Kalamukha guru. The place name *Tiḷunāḍu* inferred from *tiḷunādiya* (line 14) should be *Tiḷugāḍi*. This might be a hitherto unknown name for an administrative division (*nāḍu*) and a village since the stone inscription reads *Tiḷugāḍiyanāḍugrāmamuntāgi* in line 5 (Sampath 2001:157). The unidentified *Puḷinā-nadī* (line 11) may be safely identified with the Phalguni river, that flows by Polali.

Pulina is said to be the name for Polali in the Markandeya Purana (Shastri 1992: 5). Also, the meaning of the Kannada word *pulina*, which means a sandbank or an island, from which the water had recently withdrawn (Kittel 1894: 999), corresponds well with the geography of Polali, which is surrounded on three sides by the river. The most significant correction might be that *Kaṇavvōji* (line 12) should in fact be read as *Naṭavvōji*, a variant of the surviving name *Natṭōja*. This is based on orthographic similarities in the Kannada script. The stone inscription does not contain this name nor any other sequence that resembles it. However, the copper plate appears in a study of the Sthanikas by KG Vasanta Madhava (2003). Listed as an unpublished inscription “in possession of Nattoje Krishnayya” (Madhava 2003: Appendix A – No. 4), the author notes that the text is not traceable but that its summary was noted in ARSIE 1970-71. While the discussion on its significance has some debatable elements, the name of the donee in the reproduced summary is given as “Nattoje Subbanna” (Madhava 2003: Appendix A – No. 4). This makes the last correction highly probable. With these corrections incorporated in the interpretation of the text provided by Sharma (2003: 62), we can infer that *Naṭavvōji(Natṭōja)Subbanna* who was a *pādamuli* of the temple at Puttur was one among the brothers who had come from Polali, and had installed Mahadeva, presumably as a *shivaliṅga*. This concise formulation lends some credence to oral history concerning the temples of Polali and Puttur and their association with the Nattojas. In addition, it provides some likely evidence for a proposed etymology of the word *natṭōja* as *sthāpanāchārya*.

### Oral history and *sthalapurāṇa*

In this section, an oral account is presented, followed by correspondences from texts concerning the Polali and Puttur temples. This account was given to me by Smt. KV Shankari of Mysore. It had been narrated to her by late Polali Nattoja Krishnayya around 1953. It contains an initial mythological element which is succeeded by an apparently historical narrative. It is presented as succinctly as possible. The idol of Rajarajeshwari had been installed by King Suratha in Polali after she had appeared to him. Long after this, in a time of adversity, a poor brahmin would collect food from a few houses and worship the goddess by presenting it as *naivēdya*. This man came to be called *natṭunaiyye* (the begging brahmin in Tulu), which over time became *natṭōje*. Thus, the

family came to be called by that name. In those times, it was in vogue to sacrifice a buffalo at the temple during Navaratri. The animal would come to the altar of its own volition after a period of being left to graze in the pastures. One year, the buffalo was particularly sturdy. There were three Nattoja brothers, one of whom stole this animal and substituted a weak buffalo from their own herd in its place. When the time came, the animal dissented, which was noticed. The goddess appeared and cursed the Nattojas that they would not prosper if more than one of them stayed in Polali. Two of the brothers left the temple from the southern door which was locked and blocked after their departure. Since then, the practice of animal sacrifice stopped, and the door has been barred to this day. The two brothers went to Kashi on pilgrimage to atone for their collective sin. One of them died by drowning in the Ganges, and the surviving brother came back to his native land with a *liṅga*. This was worshipped in the hand and placed back in its wooden container after being worshipped. He came to Puttur and continued to worship the deity in this manner. One day, he seemed to forget and placed the *liṅga* on the ground. Try as hard as he might, it would not budge. He went to the local king who sent an elephant. Even the elephant could not lift it off the ground. As it continued to exert force, it was itself torn apart, its parts scattered in ten different directions. Eventually, it was recognized that the god would not budge, and this came to be worshipped as the Mahalingeshwara of Puttur. Thus, the temple was established. The Nattojas continue to live in Polali and Puttur today and will not have social intercourse for fear of the curse.

A variety of sources mention some version of these episodes. Two works on Polali, Pulinapura Mahatme by Polali Sheenappa Hegde which was composed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Sri Kshetra Polali by Shankaranarayana Shastri contain the episode concerning Polali. While the former is closer to the *kshētramāhātmya* genre, the latter book provides the *sthalapurāṇa* along with an attempted history of Polali from the inscriptional record. Both present it under the heading of how animal sacrifice came to be stopped at Polali. Hegde provides a detailed account and proposes the additional etymology for Nattoja (1991: 264-269), while Shastri is more concise (1992: 28-29). Shastri acknowledges his source as Nattoja Shara (Chera) Shiva Rao of Puttur. Hegde follows his account by a list of duties performed by the Nattojas as *sthāpanāchārya* at Polali, which is credited to NS Shiva Rao (1991: 270-271). It is reasonable to assume that the same NS Shiva Rao provided the preceding oral history

as well as the etymology to Hegde. However, both authors do not speak of the episode concerning Puttur.

The Polali episode was also confirmed to me by Polali Nattoja Shiva Rao and Polali Nattoja Vishnumurthy, sons of Polali Nattoja Krishnayya. However, they were not aware of the Puttur episode. In addition, they gave the former etymology for Nattoja as *naṭṭunaiyye* and confirmed the list of duties provided by Hegde, which they affirm as *maryāde*, or honour that is still conferred on the Nattoja family. They also provided details of other close bonds between the Nattojas, the temple, and the Kota Brahmins who are the current priests at the temple. The southern door had continued to be barred but has been opened since the latest renovation in 2019.

The historian Y. Umanatha Shenoy has provided a multi-dimensional history of Puttur and the temple in the book *Putturu Kshetrada Itihasa*. The *sthalapurāṇa* of the temple is nonetheless presented in a small section (Shenoy 1985: 9-11). The account does not involve the Nattojas but the protagonist is a brahmin of the *shaivasampradāya* who was well versed in the Vedas and Vedangas, returning from Kashi with a *liṅga* (Shenoy 1985: 9). The account then proceeds along familiar lines, with the brahmin drowning in the river at Uppinangady and his companion bringing it to Puttur. In addition, the *liṅga* grew enormously as the elephant tried to pull it out, and thus the deity came to be called *mahāliṅgēshwara*. Shenoy acknowledges that a version involving the Nattojas is current but traces its written history to a composition in 1893 by Karinka Subbarayaru (1985: 22). It seems that by this time, the Nattojas had come to have a significant hold on the temple and its properties. In a suit of 1911, the court declared the temple as public property and a further appeal in Madras in 1916 ceased the hereditary involvement of the Nattojas in the temple (Shenoy 1985: 23).

Now, the proposed etymology for *naṭṭōja* as *sthāpanāchārya* will be discussed. As far as is known, the earliest mention is by NS Shiva Rao in his booklet on the Sthanikas of South Kanara (Rao 1944: 6). As has been mentioned, Hedge also gives the same (1991: 264). The word is split as *naṭṭa* + *ōja*, where *naṭṭa* is a form of the Kannada root *naḍu* meaning to plant or establish. *ōja* is taken to mean *āchārya*, which gives the combined form the meaning of the *āchārya* who established, in other words *sthāpanāchārya* (Rao 1944: 6).

## Inscriptional evidence

In this section, the claims made above will be interpreted in the light of inscriptional evidence and secondary sources. Both the temples are of considerable antiquity, based on epigraphy. The first mention of Polali as well as the goddess is found in the inscription of Alupa prince Jayasīṅga, published in SII Vol 9, Part 1, No. 399. Dated the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century, it is a donation to *hoḷalabhaṭṭāraki*. The place is called Hoḷal which means town in Old Kannada. This implies that Polali was a flourishing urban centre.

Today, notwithstanding the environs of the temple, it is considered as only a part of Kariyangala *grāma*. This earlier prominence of Polali might be the reason for the river to be called Pulina in the copper plate. The same Phalguni river is today also called the Gurupura river after the nearby village which must have become prominent later. In the case of Puttur, an inscription traced to the 12<sup>th</sup> century based on paleography (SII Vol. 27, No. 317), refers to the temple (*huttūradēvālayada*) as well as the construction of the tank beside it. It prohibits fishing and imposes a fine of 100 *gadyāṇas*. The restriction is still in force today. As Shenoy opines, the temple might have been built along with the tank. However, it might even be older. This inscription is followed by the stele of Pratapadevaraya, which consists of 91 lines and is worthy of study for its own sake. It provides a wealth of information regarding imperial and temple administration, village economy and agrarian development in the interior region of Dakshina Kannada district around Puttur. In general, more inscriptions are found in the coastal plains than in the hill tracts. This inscription is also the most detailed and complete record found in the less densely populated interior. It is a testament to the agricultural activities that brought prosperity to the area, which is evident from the substantial donations made to the temple. We might also infer that the temple was already quite prominent, and even attracted the attention of the distant imperial capital.

The copper plate can be read in the light of this stone inscription. Sharma notices that there are orthographical errors and ungrammatical colloquial usages (2003: 62), but these are said to be common in all Kannada inscriptions of the period. It is noticed that on the face of it, the Kannada characters appear to be of a slightly later date than 1431 AD (Sharma 2003: 64) but may still be assigned to the middle of the



15<sup>th</sup> century (Sharma 2003: 62). It also appears that the long vowels completely cease from line 17 onwards and in their place there are only the short vowels. Nevertheless, the inscription was taken up for study and published due to the many verifiable historical facts (Sharma 2003: 64). Here he has studied the emperor, the administrative hierarchy, the Banga chieftain, and provided many details that are known about them. Taking all the proposed corrections and identifications together, Nattoji Subbanna seems to have installed or consecrated the deity Mahadeva in the presence of Guru Kriyashaktideva. He is said to be one among the (two?) brothers who had migrated from Polali. As it is established that the temple was built 2-3 centuries earlier and given the fact that Kriyashaktideva used to visit it and institute grants for its upkeep, the presumed *liṅga* could not have been installed for the first time. The deity must have been reconsecrated. This is the view of Vasanta Madhava, who however arrives here by interpreting the phrase *bhūgataṅvādarimda* (lines 17,18) as the *liṅga* having been buried in the earth due to a calamity (Madhava 2003: Appendix A – No. 4). Sharma's interpretation is more likely whereby it means that the deity was installed on the ground by Subbanna. He further interprets the charter as donations granted to Subbanna since he had put the people of the place under obligation by his action. However he also notes that the donation to Subbanna for his subsistence was due to his being a *pādamūli* of the temple.

From the stone inscription, we know that there were four *pādamūlis*, who are mentioned twice. The exact import of the term is not clear and requires further study. DC Sircar glosses the word as an attendant, a temple attendant or temple servant (referring to Tamil *pādamūlattār*) (Sircar 1966: 224). P Gururaja Bhat has also paid attention to this term among others that denote persons in service of the temple (Bhat 1966: 9-15). In the section on *pādamūli*, he notices both the inscriptions from Puttur. However, these are rendered partially, and the provenance of the readings cannot be established with certainty. Mention has already been made of the suit of 1911 which ended the Nattojas' hereditary involvement in the temple's affairs. It is not clear whether the copper plate was submitted in the suit, but the stele seems to have been read by a commissioner appointed by the district Munsiff of Puttur (Bhat 1966: 34, note 117). Bhat only notes that the copper plate was presented to the Mangalore court by the temple committee in 1928 (1966: 34, note 117).

The etymology proposed by NS Shiva Rao might be supported in this manner. Kittel's dictionary gives the second meaning of the Kannada word *naḍu* as "to fix firmly; to stick or fix in the ground, to plant" and it can take the past tense as *nattu/natta* (1894: 836).

Regarding the suffix *ōja*, it may be observed that it occurs commonly among the names of artisans, sculptors, and scribes. Indeed, "an artificer: a carpenter, a blacksmith, a goldsmith" are the meanings provided by Kittel (1894: 321). However, it is also glossed as "a teacher, a guru" (1894: 321). Sircar also provides a meaning in the epigraphical context as "Oja..., same as Ojhā, designation derived from Sanskrit *Upādhyāya*" (1966: 222). Taking these into account, the proposed etymology of *sthāpanāchārya* might indeed be valid. Significantly, it is supported by the fact that Subbanna seems to have installed the deity. Having said this, this is a tentative reading of the text of the copper plate. It raises further questions such as how the name Nattoja existed in the senior line of the family in Polali, and what their role might have been in the temple. It might also be asked why the details of the copper plate do not appear in the stele.

It is pertinent to remember that NS Shiva Rao was making this claim as part of a polemic that asserted the high social status of the Sthanikas. Over the last few centuries, the Sthanikas had been looked down upon by the other brahmin castes of the region and had been understood as menial servants in the temples. It is interesting to note that Rao himself does not refer to the copper plate and it is not known whether the text had been read by then. Any conclusion, including that regarding the authenticity of the plates, can only be made if the plate or its estampage can be located and read again.

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### ಬಲಿಪ ನಾರಾಯಣ ಭಾಗವತರ ನಿಧನಕ್ಕೆ ಸಂತಾಪ

ತೆಂಕುತಿಟ್ಟಿನ ಪ್ರಸಿದ್ಧ ಭಾಗವತ, ಪ್ರಸಂಗಕರ್ತ, ಯಕ್ಷಗಾನದ ಕುರಿತು ಅಧಿಕಾರವಾಣಿಯಿಂದ ಮಾತನಾಡುತ್ತಿದ್ದ ವಿದ್ವಾಂಸ ಬಲಿಪ ನಾರಾಯಣ ಭಾಗವತರ ನಿಧನಕ್ಕೆ (ನಿಧನ 16-02-2023) ಯಕ್ಷಗಾನ ಕೇಂದ್ರ, ಇಂದ್ರಾಳಿ ಉಡುಪಿ ಇದರ ಆಡಳಿತಾಧಿಕಾರಿ ಡಾ. ಬಿ. ಜಗದೀಶ್ ಶೆಟ್ಟಿ ಹಾಗೂ ಗುರುವಂದ ಸಂತಾಪ ಸೂಚಿಸಿದೆ. ಅವರು ರಚಿಸಿರುವ ಪ್ರಸಂಗಗಳು ಈಗಲೂ ಪ್ರದರ್ಶನ ಕಾಣುತ್ತಿರುವುದು ಅವುಗಳ ಶ್ರೇಷ್ಠತೆಗೆ ಸಾಕ್ಷಿ. ಅವರ ಭಾಗವತಿಕೆ ಅಪಾರ ಜನಮನ್ನಣೆ ಗಳಿಸಿದೆ. ಅವರೊಬ್ಬ ಅಪರೂಪದ ಕಲಾವಿದರು. ಅಂತಹ ಶ್ರೇಷ್ಠ ಭಾಗವತರನ್ನು ಕಳೆದುಕೊಂಡು ಯಕ್ಷಗಾನ ಕ್ಷೇತ್ರ ದೊಡ್ಡ ನಷ್ಟವನ್ನು ಅನುಭವಿಸಿದೆ. ಅವರ ಅಗಲುವಿಕೆಯ ನೋವನ್ನು ಸಹಿಸಿಕೊಳ್ಳುವ ಶಕ್ತಿಯನ್ನು ಭಗವಂತ ಅವರ ಕುಟುಂಬದ ಸದಸ್ಯರಿಗೆ ನೀಡಲಿ ಎಂಬುದಾಗಿ ಕೇಂದ್ರದ ಆಡಳಿತಾಧಿಕಾರಿ ಡಾ. ಬಿ. ಜಗದೀಶ್ ಶೆಟ್ಟಿ ತಿಳಿಸಿದರು. ಸಭೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಕೇಂದ್ರದ ಎಲ್ಲಾ ಗುರುವಂದ, ವಿದ್ಯಾರ್ಥಿಗಳು ಹಾಗೂ ಅಭಿಮಾನಿಗಳು ಉಪಸ್ಥಿತರಿದ್ದರು.