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Engraved Sanskrit signatures deciphered after 180 years

by Rama Bhikhabhai

The local cultural heritage association (Hembygdsföreningen¹) for Vårdsätra and Gottsunda initiated a project in summer of 2012 to restore (re-paint) the Sanskrit verse which was inscribed by Professor Otto Fredrik Tullberg in 1830s on the stone slab, which lies in the corner of Vårdsättravägen and Gullvivevägen in Uppsala (Picture 1 and 2). I volunteered to paint the verse, as I am familiar with the Sanskrit alphabet. While repainting work was ongoing, some more texts were deciphered for the first time after 180 years. In this article I am giving my reflections on Otto Tullberg and the uncovered text.



Picture 1(left): The area with Sanskrit verse was washed with water and dirt was brushed off. Then letters were traced with white chalk. Note also that area under the text was covered with moss.

Picture 2 (right): Sanskrit verse was painted with dark blue color. It is believed that this is the only inscription in Sanskrit in northern Europe on the stone hill.

Historical background of the Sanskrit verse^{1, 2, 3}

This Sanskrit verse was inscribed on a stony hill by Otto Fredrik Tullberg (born 26 Sept 1802) as a declaration of undying love to his fiancée Sophia Ridderbielke, who grew up in Vårdsätra estate and was the great granddaughter of Carl Linnaeus.

Tullberg had his master's degree in Hebrew and Aramaic. In 1832, he became Professor of Oriental Languages at Uppsala University. He had deep admiration for India and Sanskrit language, and started learning Sanskrit, but there were very few books and teaching aids in the library then.

He made five long travels to Europe to do research on Sanskrit and Semitic languages. Before he left for his first trip, he secretly got engaged to Sophia in August 1835. His first travel lasted from November 1835 until June 1837. During that time he regularly wrote letters to Sophia³ and often mentioned if she had been to the hill where he had written Sanskrit verse and he would explain to her the meaning when he returned from his travel. Otto must have inscribed the verse between 1832 and 1835. It is said that he was very busy with research work when he came back

from his first trip. On his return he started teaching Sanskrit. He was the first one who introduced Sanskrit teaching in Uppsala as well as Sweden. He must have explained the inscribed verse to Sophia on his return in 1837.

After a long engagement period, they got married in 1841. It is said that Tullberg kept the location of the stone secret to the world as long as he lived. Perhaps it was only meant for his beloved wife. During his travels in Europe, he had written about 200 letters to family members out of which 175 were for Sophia. Some selected letters were published later in 1972³.

He was also a prominent musical figure in Uppsala and the driving force behind the establishment of Allmänna Sångern (Uppsala University Choir). He was appointed assistant court chaplain (hovpredikant) to the King, Carl XIV Johan during his visit to Uppsala in October 1837. When Otto returned from his fifth Europe travel, he fell sick and died in 1853. After his death, it seemed that no one was interested in finding the hill with the verse, partly because the family moved in the town.

It was in 1922, Karl Vilhelm Zetterstéen⁴ (best known for his Swedish translation of the Quran) found the stone slab, now called the Engagement Hill and managed to decipher the script. The two line verse turned out to be from the fifth song of the story of Nala and Damayanti in Mahabharata (Sanskrit epic of ancient India), written about 500 years before Christ.

It means: “And as long as my spirit dwells in my body, maiden with the serene smile! I will be yours, this is the solemn truth I tell thee”.

The phonetic transliteration is:

*yāvacca me dharisyānti prānā dehe śucismite
tāvattvayi bhavisyāmi satyam etad bravīmi te*

The presence of Sanskrit verse was reported by Uppsala’s local newspaper² in 1971, 1994 and 2012.

My inquisitive thoughts during verse restoration

Sanskrit is written in Devanagari script which can be easily recognized by a horizontal line under which all letters are hanging.

I got deeply fascinated at the love expressed by Otto Tullberg for his fiancée in an ancient sacred language. He had neatly engraved the two-line verse. It seems much attention and diligence was paid towards engraving the verse as all the letters are of the same size. Even the horizontal line is very straight. It appears that he had a good handicraft skill as he copied the verse exactly as written in the book.

An expert stonemason was interviewed and he put forward his thoughts regarding the carving of the verse: “When it comes to carving tools, Otto had only chisel and a club made from oak tree wood. He must have drawn all the letters and lines first. One cannot do freehand carving of a straight line and round letters. One had to be very careful in cutting the stones as there are chances of breaking the stones into small

chips. Such a verse would take considerably long time to inscribe. Otto was definitely stubborn and persistent and off course he had artistic eyes to carry out such a big stone masonry”.

As I had studied Sanskrit script and Indian epic Mahabharata in the school, I volunteered to paint the verse. I am an amateur photographer and I have a good experience in dealing with the photo editing program. I was very enthused with the inscription and I constantly clicked away on my system camera.

Being a research scientist, two questions kept cropping up in my curious mind.

Question 1. Why Tullberg did not inscribe his name on the stone slab?

It struck to my mind that, if Otto Tullberg wanted someone to discover his Sanskrit verse, he must have signed his name on the hill. Otherwise it would be extremely difficult to trace the person who inscribed this text.

I was very excited to work with this project. I frequently visited the hill at various times to see the inscribed text in the slanting sun rays, according to the recommendations by archeologists. Whilst I was cleaning the moss under the Sanskrit verse (picture 1), I noticed two horizontal faint lines and a Sanskrit letter “ळ” (L) which was under the verse (picture 3, 4). My curious mind started ticking. I asked myself, if it could be letter “L” as part of Tullberg’s name. After cleaning the area I was able to decipher Otto Tullberg’s name to my amazement (picture 3, 4). For the second horizontal line, the name Sophia Ridderbielke was deciphered and under the name the year 1837 was inscribed. I was overjoyed to be the first person to read his signature.



Picture 3 (left): The crevices and lines were filled with colored chalk. Letter “ळ” (L) in the middle was the first letter inspired me to check if the name Tullberg was there.

Picture 4 (right): The picture 3 was edited and the letters were outlined with blue color. The top line has the name “Otto Tullberg” and lower line has “Sophia Ridderbjelke” inscribed in Sanskrit. The year “1837” is faintly carved under her name.

Comments

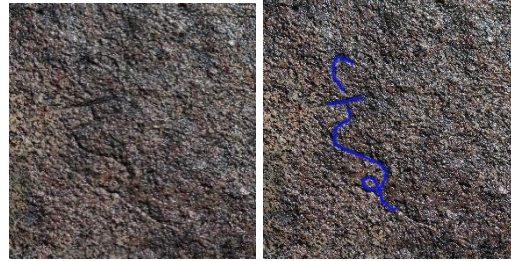
The uncovered signatures when compared to the main verse were not neatly inscribed. It seems that Otto Tullberg was in a hurry, as the letters were not well engraved. At the same time the structure of the rock was slightly softer than the one for the main text above. I wondered why he inscribed these

signatures in 1837. Was it because he wanted to impress King, Carl XIV Johan who was going to visit Uppsala in October that year?

Question 2. Where did Otto Tullberg practice to engrave Sanskrit text?

The second question came to my mind that he could have spent some time to practice engraving before he carved the main Sanskrit verse very neatly and skillfully. I went around the area to look for evidence of more carved stones but I was unable to find any. Otto had also mentioned in one of the letters to Sophia that he had inscribed initials on the trunks of birch trees along the avenue in the estate. In the beginning of 1800, it was a trend to declare the infinite love by engraving initials.

Just to the right hand side of the main verse (picture 5), the stone was completely covered with moss. A very clear Sanskrit letter “ई” (i) as shown in picture 6A and 6B was noticed when moss was removed. Three main faint horizontal straight lines were also observed. On further investigation of the area, more Sanskrit letters were noticed.



Picture 6A

Picture 6B

Picture 5 (left): The right hand side of the rock was covered with moss. The picture was taken when moss was removed carefully.

Picture 6A and 6B: Letter “ई” (i) was clearly seen when the moss was removed. In picture 6B, the letter is traced with blue color.

As usual, for documentation, the rock was photographed and analyzed with the help of photo editing program. To my surprise, even on this rock, the names of Otto and Sophia were inscribed (Picture 7).



Picture 7: The names of both OttoTullberg and Sophia Ridderbielke including the year 1837 in Sanskrit were deciphered (in blue) on the right hand side rock.

Comments

In the lowest horizontal line, only letter “ई” (i) was engraved very neatly just like the letters in the main verse. The names, Otto and Sophia were inscribed, not so neatly as in the verse. There were many scratches which indicated that the structure of the stone was not so hard. Initially I thought that he used this side of the rock to practice carving by writing their names. In the middle line, I could trace the surnames Ridderbielke and Tullberg. Both these lines could have inscribed before his first trip in 1835.

For those who can read Sanskrit, I would like to point out that here the word “Sophia” is spelled differently compared to one in picture 4. It could be that he had just started learning Sanskrit script.

In picture 7, the top horizontal line was clearer than other lines. Otto’s full name was inscribed together with the year 1837, just like the other signatures in picture 4. I am speculating here that he carved these letters when he came back in summer 1837 from his first Europe travel and possibly he wanted to show the signatures to King Carl XIV Johan in October.

General comments

In the year 2016, local heritage cultural associations in Sweden are celebrating 100 years. I decided to report my findings after four years for this event. I went through thoroughly all the letters which Otto had written to Sophia. He had asked often if she had been to Sanskrit (Siberiska) hill. He also mentioned in a letter dated 22nd January, 1837 from Paris; “When I come back in summer, we will go together to the Sanskrit hilland check if the moss on the stone slab beside has covered a dear name”. This indicates that Otto and Sophia knew about the Sanskrit hill, including verse and also their inscribed names. I found out that Otto had purposely inscribed the names so that in future the world would know that he had written the verse.

Regarding “the engagement hill” (Förlovningsberget in Swedish), I presume that the name was introduced by the loving couple as they got secretly engaged probably in

front of it in 1835 and everyone who lived around in Vårdsåtra area knew about the name.

Suggestions for future work

Digital scanning

Kerstin Forss, project leader and myself were excited about the new signatures. We cleaned the facades by using detergent, but we happened to use undiluted liquid. It removed the moss but unfortunately weathering of the stone occurred. Because of the harsh washing conditions of the signature areas, later on it was difficult to notice signatures under the main verse. One way to reveal the text would be to do digital scanning. A recent method to read faint inscriptions, is called RTI, Reflectance Transformation Imaging^{6, 7}. This technique needs a system camera and some flash lights. To trace these signatures, it can be a good University research project in archeology.

Published article in Sanskrit

I got connected with Samskrita Bharati, an organization in Bangalore, India which publishes monthly magazine, Sambhashana Sandesh, in Sanskrit. I contacted the editor of the magazine via emails. In November 2012, an article in Sanskrit about Tullberg's love message⁵ was published. It was pinpointed that the original version of the "love message" as presented by Zetterstéen⁴ was correct (picture 8). So in future if repainting is done by the local heritage association, then the third letter of the first word should be changed as shown in picture 9.

यावच्च मे धरिष्यन्ति प्राणा देहे शुचिस्मिते ।
तावच्चयि भविष्यामि सत्यमेतद्वीमि ते

Picture 8

यावच्च

Picture 9

As my findings do not add any additional historical value to the verse, I still feel that this should be published for the record. To summarize, I feel proud to have taken part in this project and was able to discover the hidden text.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Kerstin Forss, chairman of hembygdsförening who invited me to repaint the verse. It was a pleasure to work intensively for two weeks in summer 2012.

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