These Brahmana brothers have now forgotten the old good habits of Brahmanas and Vellalas and are steeped in the bad behaviour of the low jatis.

—A Tirukkachchur inscription of the thirteenth century

The main source of ancient and medieval south Indian history is inscriptions, which have survived in good numbers for the period from the eighth to seventeenth centuries. If we read these inscriptions, we can recognise the changes that occurred in state and social formation at certain stages during this millennium. These changes may be suggested even by a short passage in a single inscription. I have quoted above a passage from a Tamil inscription (SII, xxvi-333) of the thirteenth century surviving in Tirukkachchur\(^1\) in Chingleput District, which expresses, I believe, a perception of the social change felt by the people of that locality at the time. To make it into a history (narrative), however, we have to examine and study many more inscriptions.

\(^*\)This is a revised version of the lecture entitled “Reading Manuscripts: Observations on Medieval Society in South India” delivered at the India International Centre on 18 December 2008. The paper is being published with the following title, “The Emergence of New Imprecations in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Tamil Inscriptions and Jati Formation” in the forthcoming volume, D.N. Jha & Eugenia Vanina, eds, Mind over Matter: Essays on Mentalities in Medieval India, Tulika Books, Delhi 2009.

\(^1\)This inscription records the atrocities of five Brahmana brothers and the measures taken by local people against them.