

INSCRIBING RELIGION: A STUDY OF GAṄGA INSCRIPTIONS

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This paper is an attempt to examine different aspects of religion in the inscriptions of Gaṅgas, a dynasty that ruled from Karnataka in the early medieval period. In examining the problem, we have taken into consideration not only the religious factors but also the social economic and political aspects which influenced the course of developments in religion and, in turn, got influenced by them. We base ourselves mainly on the inscriptions from the period.

Deities

In the western Gaṅga Period, Viṣṇu is referred to as one of the most important deities of the time. Most of the inscriptions begin with the praise of Lord Padmanābha (जिनम्भगवतागतधनगगनाभेनपद्मनाभेन). Importance accorded to Lord Viṣṇu is clear from this almost universal epithet in the Western Gaṅga inscriptions. Other forms of Viṣṇu are also mentioned in the inscriptions. Inscription of Durvinīta¹ says that he meditated at the feet of Viṣṇu (भगवत्कमलोदरचरणानुध्याते) which perhaps indicates that his personal leaning was towards this particular deity. One of the inscription of Mārasimha² compares Śivamāra with Hari (i.e. Lord Viṣṇu). Many Western Gaṅga inscriptions³ mention worship of Nārāyaṇa. Lakṣmī the spouse of Lord Viṣṇu is also mentioned in various inscriptions.⁴

In addition to Viṣṇu we find the references of Śiva.⁵ Like Nārāyaṇa, Tryambaka a name of Lord Śiva himself is also mentioned in all the long praśastis. One of the inscription⁶ of Rājmallā mentions a brāhmaṇa called śākāri-bhaṭṭāraka as 'the firmament of pure śaivism.' Maḍivāla inscription of Śrīpuruṣa⁷ mentions that one of his administrator made a grant to a Śiva temple called Ttoṇḍiavara Saṅkara. Mahādēva has been mentioned in another inscription.⁸ However, we do not have any definite evidence about the other deities of the Śiva family. But, it is also possible that various local names of Śiva (e.g. Ttoṇḍīśvara) might have represented actually different cults and sects of Śivaism.

Apart from these two main deities, we have references to other deities. Goddess Kātyāyanī is mentioned in an inscription of Durvinīta.⁹ This indicates that Durvinīta had special regard for this goddess. It may indicate in the direction of the prevalence of various sakti cults also. We find various local deities worshipped in temples for example, god Poḷma-vinītīśvarar¹⁰, goddess of Ponniḍuki¹¹, god Pulikkurukki-bhaṭāra¹², Eṇyaṅgēśvara¹³, god Āditya-bhaṭāra¹⁴, Bhaḷari and Bhagavati¹⁵, etc. It seems that along with Viṣṇu and Śiva, various other deities existed and they were still free from complete subjugation by these two mighty Gods. Rāma and Brahmā¹⁶, Kṛṣṇa¹⁷ and Indra¹⁸ are also mentioned in the Western Gaṅga inscriptions but they are mentioned as ideal figures and kings are compared with them in their virtues. They are more poetic embellishments rather than expressions of popularity of cultic deities.

Temples must have been important religious institution in the Western Gaṅga inscriptions. We find the reference to various temples in the Western Gaṅga inscriptions. But, it is remarkable that we do not find their references in the beginning of at the time of foundation of the kingdom. Gradually in the latter period, especially from seventh-eighth century, we find that institution of temple is getting prominence in the Gaṅga territory. Instead of individual Brāhmaṇa donees, Brahmanic temples become major recipients of land grants.

We get the first reference to temple in the Nallālam grant of Durvinīta¹⁹ (year 40 equivalent to 6th century A.D.). But, subsequently we find a lot of references to donations of temples.²⁰ Temples were centres of many types of socio-religious activities. Nallālam grant of Durvinīta says that he constructed many temples and halls at different places. These halls could have been used for the purpose of religious congregations and philosophical debates.

RITUALS

An inscription²¹ of Avinīta indicates, that he had performed many Aśvamedhayajñas. Aśvamedha has been referred in other inscriptions²² also.

Peṇṇaūr grant of Durvinīta²³ (year 4, equivalent to 6th century A.D.) mentions that land was donated to a brāhmaṇa called Kāpāli-Śarman " whose religious rites were rendered special by his performance of those rites with Sōma." Ritual with Sōma may have been linked with tantric cult or practices? But it is very difficult to say anything clearly.

Gummareḍḍipuru Plates of Durvinīta²⁴ (year 40 equivalent to 6th century A.D.) refer to brāhmaṇas who were "well-versed in the lore of performing sacrifices, who had pursued the study of the six branches of Vēdic lore, who had incessantly drunk the sacred Sōma juice and who were engaged in performing six fold duties." Therefore, it can be understood that there was whole series of rituals in the lore of which brāhmaṇas were master. Such allusions are made in other inscriptions²⁵ also.

In the Western Gaṅga inscriptions we find that most of the religious texts were known to the Western Gaṅga society. They are referred to directly or indirectly in the inscription. Kūḍlūr Plates of Harivarma²⁶ (year 188, equivalent to 9th century A.D.) says that brāhmaṇas were erudite in the lore of the Vēdas and Vēdānta. Another inscription²⁷ says that two brāhmaṇas were students of the Taittirīyaśākhā and belonged to Hiranyakeśisūtra. Yet another inscriptions²⁸ mentions ĀpastambaSūtras and six auxiliary branches of Vēdic studies. Kūḍlūr plates of Mārasimha²⁹ (śaka 884) refer to philosophical system of Buddhism, Lōkāyata, Sāṅkhya, Vēdānta and Vādighaṅgaḷa.

In comparison to Brahmanism, Buddhism was not very flourishing in the Western Gaṅga period. We have one Western Gaṅga inscription which records the grant of land to the Buddhist Saṅgha. Meḷekōṭe Plates of Mādhavarman (II)³⁰ donated in perpetuity to Buddha-Saṅgha (बुद्धसत्वाय), various types of lands at various places alongwith gold and cloths used for covering corpses in the cremation ground. Apart from this at some places we get references to Buddhist Philosophy.

Jainism made considerable progress in the time of Western Gaṅga rule. We have numerous references to support this. Influence of Jainism can be seen on the rulers as well as people of that region from very early times. The first reference to the donation of land to the Jainas comes from Noṇamaṅgala Plates of Mādhavarman (II)³¹ (year 13, equivalent to 5th century A.D.) in Mudukottura-Viṣaya to the temple of Arhat which belonged to Mūla-Saṅgha, on the advice of ĀcāryaViradeva.

Jaina institutions received donations from all section of society. Grants were mostly made with the consent of king and some times by the kings themselves.³² In some cases we find that queen or ladies of the royal family made grants to Jaina institution.³³ Interestingly one inscription³⁴

refers to the Jaina temple constructed by people also. Grants were also made by feudatories.³⁵ we can also suggest that feudatories donated more land to Jaina institutions than brāhmaṇas. We can say that Jaina monastic order proliferated in Karnataka after seventh century.

We find one interesting thing that Jaina monks, who were earlier famous for their wandering habits, gradually started settling down in the monastic order. But these monasteries were attached to temple of Arhat. Perhaps they were a composite structure incorporating both maṭhas and temples. That is perhaps the reason why we mostly get the references only to the donations to arhat temples.³⁶ Permanent stay inside village community led to the constant social interaction with the people. Therefore, gradually they could have started influencing various aspects of socio-political life through their influence over people as well as rulers. Their linkages with the feudatories can very well be seen in the grants extended to them by the latter.

Interestingly, these inscriptional references do not furnish any evidence about the support of mercantile people to Jaina religious institutions. It may be suggested that such a development could have been due to shrinkage of trade and the declining influence of the mercantile community.

These large scale donations to Jaina temples bestowed upon them a superior economic status and a different social role as landlord. Since they were granted right to collect tax and other privileges, they must have functioned as landed intermediary and could have amassed large fortune.

The proliferation of Jaina monastic order is indicated in following evidences: Earlier inscriptions³⁷ refer only to the Mūla Saṅgha, Gaṇa and Gacchato indicate the monastic order. A seventh century record³⁸ of Śrīpuruṣa refers to three divisions of the monastic order such as the Nandi-Saṅgha, Eregittūrgaṇa and Pulikal Gaccha. May be, some of these were unified under the influence of some strong personality. For example, an inscription mentions the order of Viradeva, who was some great teacher.³⁹

The Yāpanīya Saṅgha was another significant order. Hosakōte Plates of Koṅgaṇyadhirāja⁴⁰, (year 12, equivalent to 5th-56th century A.D.) record grant to the temple of Arhat which was patronized by the members of this Saṅgha. Similarly, we find mention of Dēśiga-

Gaṇa in an inscription.⁴¹ Perhaps Women also acquired a significant position in the Jaina monastic order. Narsāpur plates of Satyavākya-Permānaḍi Rājmallā⁴² (śaka 824) say that a feudatory constructed a basadi and donated it along with garden to Kamungaṛe-Kantiyar, the female disciple of Maṇḍala-Bhaṭāra. However, we do not get any reference that they were leaders of any specific order. Perhaps they occupied lower and middle positions. But, even that is quite an achievement for women of that time.

Jaina monastic order was also a hierarchical institution. Perhaps ācārya used to head the order followed by his disciples.⁴³

It is interesting to note that all the inscriptions which contain praśastis along with grant to the Jaina institutions begin with praise of Lord Viṣṇu and end with imprecatory portion from Manu. They say, if the grant is flouted, it will amount to killing cows and brāhmaṇas. This indicates two things: first Jainism increasingly became less and less hostile to Brahmanism and secondly, in spite of the spread of Jainism on a large scale, the moral appeal of Brahmanism was still greater. However, we find the references to the ideological conflict amongst different sects. Intra- and inter-sect debates took place frequently. Though the participants in these ventures tried to win over people by their logic and arguments, violent altercations on these occasions cannot be ruled out.

The above survey shows that religious cults and practices evolved in this part of country as a result of various factors. These included the autochthonous factors which had local origins and the influence from the more evolved societies of Northern India. We see strands of Vedic, Puranic, Jain and Tantric religion developing in the region, but with its own authentic personality.

NOTE : All references to inscription numbers, unless stated otherwise, are from K.V.Ramesh, ed, *Inscriptions of the Western Gaṅgas*, ICHR, New Delhi and Agam Prakashan, Delhi, 1984

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4. Nos. 18, 20, 21, etc.

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- 10.No. 63, p. 236.
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