

The Efflorescence of Sanskrit as a medium of communication in some early Bengal Inscriptions (6th century CE onwards)

Priyankara Bhattacharya*

Submitted: 26.02.2024

Revised: 10.05.2024

Accepted: 17.06.2024

Abstract: *The early medieval inscriptions of Bengal exhibit a rich form of Sanskrit language and distinctive literary style. This particular style of writing in inscriptions invests a different essence which might be interesting to look into as far as the literary cultural milieu in early medieval Bengal is concerned. A regional literary climate had grown probably taking roots from the pan-Indian Sanskritic cultural atmosphere during the Early Medieval period. The first emergence of this regional form of rich Sanskrit language is seen in the 6th-7th century. Since there was a dearth of literary material in Bengal at that time, these inscriptions are the main source of understanding the language and culture of that period. Here, we will try to focus on the inscriptions of some post-Gupta rulers, for example, Pradyumnabandhu, Gopacandra, Dharmāditya, Samācāradeva, Śaśāñka, Bhāskarvarman, Rāta, Nātha and Khaḍgas to understand how this language was being nurtured in Bengal in its early phase. Their rule extended over various sub-regions such as Puṇḍravardhana, Rāḍha, Vaṅga and Samatāṭa-Harikela during the 6th-8th centuries CE.*

Key Words: *Early medieval, Bengal, Inscriptions, Sanskrit, Literary style.*

*Ph.D. Scholar, Jadavpur University, West Bengal.
e-mail: prim.style@gmail.com

Introduction

The early medieval inscriptions of Bengal exhibit a rich form of Sanskrit language and distinctive literary style. This particular style of writing in inscriptions invests a different essence which might be interesting to look into as far as the literary cultural milieu in early medieval Bengal is concerned. A regional literary climate had grown probably taking roots from the pan-Indian Sanskritic cultural atmosphere during the Early Medieval period.¹ The first emergence of this regional form of rich Sanskrit language is seen in the 6th-7th century. Since there was a dearth of literary material in Bengal at that time, these inscriptions are the main source of understanding the language and culture of that period. In the case of early medieval Bengal, inscriptions became a social creation using Sanskrit as the medium. This variety of literary styles was cultivated and flourished within a society. As Sheldon Pollock points out, since this literary culture was expressed through written documents, the task of writing it was entrusted to a specific authority and they were addressed to particular socio-textual communities.² Although this scenario was not so explicit through this particular phase of inscriptions, a glimpse can still be seen. Here, we will try to focus on the inscriptions of some post-Gupta rulers, for example, Gopacandra, Dharmāditya, Samācāradeva, Śaśāṅka, Bhāskarvarman, Rāta, Nātha and Khaḍgas to understand how this language was being nurtured in Bengal in its early phase.

The Historical Frame:

The post-Gupta rule in Bengal was characterized by localized territories of small-scale rulers who emerged across the whole region. For example, Vaṅga saw the rise of petty local rulers like Dharmāditya, Dvādaśāditya, Gopacandra and Samācāradeva during the 6th century CE.³ Amongst them, Gopacandra's political domain possibly had a wider extent covering the Vardhamāna bhukti and the Daṇḍabhukti of Rāḍha.⁴ Again, a copperplate inscription indicates the reign of one Mahārājādhirāja Pradyumnabandhu in Puṇḍravardhana during the 6th century CE.⁵ The first clear indication of an independent ruler in early medieval Bengal came with the rise of Śaśāṅka in power, attested by textual references as well as inscriptions and coins.⁶ His monarchical rule was firmly established in the first quarter of the 7th century CE in northern Rāḍha - Gauḍa. After Śaśāṅka, Karṇasuvarṇa possibly witnessed the reign of Bhāskarvarman, the king of Kāmarūpa for a short period, as indicated in the Nidhanpur copper plate.⁷

Alongside, in Samataṭa and Śrīhaṭṭa, close to the middle of the 7th century CE, Bhāskarvarman seems to have extended control over Śrīhaṭṭa as well as the Karṇasuvarṇa area.⁸ His Nidhanpur copperplate referred him as the overlord of the Rāta and Nātha rulers, who were sub-regional chiefs. Yet, we find the Nāthas and Rātas issuing their own grants

almost at the same time (middle of the seventh century CE), which might indicate their local autonomy.⁹ Again, during the middle of the same century, records indicate the Khaḍgas ruling in eastern Vaṅga and Samataṭa, and the Devas in Samataṭa during the eighth century CE.¹⁰ On the other hand, a bronze vase inscription of Devātideva indicates the emergence of a small polity in the sub-region of Harikela during the eighth century CE.¹¹

We have to note that the history of this particular period in Bengal has to be studied primarily through epigraphic sources as literary works are rather scanty. The Sanskrit inscriptions of this period, reflect the origin and initial development of a regional trend in literary formations. In the context of understanding the literary style of this period, the reference to Gauḍī rīti by Bāṇabhaṭṭa can be highlighted here. Gauḍī rīti has some special features such as gentle as well as hard words with long compounds, adorning and charming poetry with various 'upamā, dr̥ṣṭānta and unfamiliar words', overbearing composition or 'atīśoyokti'¹². It was very charming and euphonic. Although it has been criticized by several scholars such as Bhāmaha (c.7th century) and Daṇḍin (c.7th-8th century) as comparable to the prevailing Vaidarbhī style, yet this figurative language has also been honored by all the poets of that time. This regional Gauḍī rīti has obviously been considered as a distinct literary style of the 7th century on the wide horizon of pan Indian Sanskrit studies and accepted among a section in the contemporary literate world¹³. It remains to be seen whether these features of the Gauḍī rīti were reflected in the above-mentioned inscriptions of early medieval Bengal, which favored the cultivation of this language. It is worth noting here just how much the Sanskrit language flourished through these inscriptions of this period.

Historiography

Although there is no such previous work on the literary style of this period in Bengal, the work of Nupur Dasgupta can be referred in this context. She showed how the rise of Sanskrit literary culture in Bengal was first noticed in the inscriptions.¹⁴ At the same time, she also mentioned some literature as a medium of this culture. In this connection, Ryosuke Furui's writings provide an indication of the society within which this literary style was practiced, i.e., the author and the addressed community. He showed two different contours of social change during this period between the sub-regions of Vaṅga, Rāḍha, and Puṇḍravardhana and the sub-regions of Samataṭa, Śrīhaṭṭa, and Harikela.¹⁵ On one hand, in the sub-regions of Vaṅga, Rāḍha, and Puṇḍravardhana, the landed magnets like mahattaras and literate groups like kāyasthas authorized over rural society and land transaction procedures. On the other hand, Samataṭa- Śrīhaṭṭa sub-region witnessed the rise of widespread landholders under the authorization of kingship and the emergence of Brahmanical settlements. The brāhmaṇas, as the most emergent social being of this period, have been highlighted by Furui. He observed

the distinct social identity of brāhmaṇa donee and donors and their rise as a landholder in the rural society.¹⁶

Literary Efflorescence in Incriptions:

The literary style of this phase may be traced in inscribed texts from the 6th century CE onwards. Especially during the 6th-8th century when there was a lack of literature, the inscription was the sole dependency. Only the two grammatical works of this period, the *Gauḍapāda Kārikā* (c. 5th-6th century CE)¹⁷ and *Cāndra-Vyākaraṇa* (c.4th-5th centuries CE)¹⁸ of Candragomin, can be mentioned as literature. Among these, Nupur Dasgupta mentioned that *Cāndra-Vyākaraṇa* was considered 'the refreshed exposition of Sanskrit grammar on the lines of Pāṇinian tradition'.¹⁹ Although this was not regarded as the concerned genre of literary creation, it made a great impact on the post-Patañjali phase of Sanskrit grammar. The central element of this stage, however, was the inscriptional resources of various sub-regional kingdoms. The Nidhanpur copperplate of Bhāskaravarman, among them, was observed as the landmark of literary genesis. The Tipperah copperplate of Loknātha and the Kailan copperplate of ŚrīdhāraṇaRāta also bear testimony to this literary trend as reflected in their rhetorical expressions.

This process was initiated with mahārājādhirāja Pradyumnabandhu who ruled in Puṇḍravardhana in between 550-650 CE. The script of the copperplate is a variety of late eastern brāhmī which is assigned to about 6th century CE.²⁰ Being only a land grant document, it bears no trace of any literary style. Rather, clean documentation of some technical facts, for example, land measurement, land sale price etc. is reflected here. In terms of literary signs, the copperplates of Dharmāditya, Dvādaśāditya, Samācāradeva and Gopacandra in the sub-region of Vaṅga during the 6th century CE portrayed a similar use of upamā and dṛṣṭāntas as noted in the earlier Gupta inscriptions. These inscriptions were considered as reflecting the eastern Indian development of late brāhmī script.²¹ When we come to the literary aspect of these inscriptions, it has been found that different analogies have been used for the local rulers as reflected in the inscriptions of Dharmāditya, Dvādaśāditya, Gopacandra and Samācāradeva. The local kings had been compared to those who were generally considered Hindu mythological kings. For example, in the Faridpur copperplate Inscription of Dharmāditya, the supreme king of great kings Śrī-Dharmāditya is compared to the loyal and dedicated Yayāti, Nṛga, Naghuṣa and Ambarīṣa. On the other side, the Mallasarul and Jayrampur copperplate of Gopacandra attest to the reign of Gopacandra in Vardhamāna bhukti and Daṇḍabhukti of Rāḍha in the 6th century. With the exception of two verses in āryā metre at the beginning and eight other verses relating to land grant, the Mallasarul copperplate was composed in prose.²² The Jayrampur copperplate, was also a prose composition throughout

except the usual imprecatory and benedictory verses at the end which were in anuṣṭubh and puspitāgrā metres.²³ These inscriptions were significant for providing an insight of knowledge regarding the amount of crop plantation on a plot, the inferred measurement of the land and accordingly the determined price of the land.

The efflorescence of literary style had evolved to a somewhat enhanced form since the seventh century. With the possession of Śaśānka's throne, elevated royal power and status were embedded in Bengal. As far as the inscriptions are concerned, they gleamed high exaggerated terms and eloquent words. The two Medinipur Copper Plate Inscriptions of Śaśānka portrays the same. They belong to the type of north-east Indian alphabet of about 6th-7th century CE. They were verse compositions and written in anuṣṭubh metre.²⁴ These were adorned with literary traits like metaphor (rūpaka), similes (upamā) and ornate tones or dhvani. Śaśānka has been highly praised here ('Śrī-Śaśānke mahīm-pāti catur-jaladhi-mekhalām').²⁵ The use of high metaphor can be illuminated in the verse 'Viṣṇoḥ pottr-āgra-vikṣepa-kṣaṇabhā (vita-sādhvasām) śeṣa-śiro-madhyam=adhyāsīna-mahā-tanuṁ Kām-ārāti-śiro-bhraṣṭa (gaṅgaugha-dhvasta-kalmaṣām).²⁶

However, the most splendiferous example of the literary style at this phase can be seen in the Nidhanpur copperplate of Bhāskarvarman. Bhāskarvarman, the king of Kāmarūpa had a political alliance with Harṣavardhana against Śaśānka. After the demise of Śaśānka, maybe for a while, the reign of Bhāskarvarman was established in Karṇasuvārṇa, which was evidenced by his Nidhanpur copper plate. This copperplate symbolizes his successful reign in Gauḍa for a short period of time. This plate was issued from the victorious camp at Karṇasuvārṇa. It is especially inspired by Bāṇabhaṭṭa's writing style, who adorned the court of Harṣa. For the pompous diction and the excellence and elegance of the composition, it has appeared as a landmark of literary creation in Bengal.

This plate was discovered on the eastern fringe of the Sylhet district of Bangladesh in the village of Nidhanpur of Pañcakhaṇḍa parganā.²⁷ The script used was the eastern variety of the north Indian brāhmī alphabet of the 7th century. The verses were written in metres like, vaṁśasthāvila, āryā and anuṣṭubh.²⁸ The inscription exhibits a rich literary style through its elaborate grandiloquent dynastic narrative. The eulogy portion of 25 verses was followed by 14 lines of prose. The literary style of this inscription was composed in gauḍī rīti. It exhibited the literary merits of the gauḍī rīti, for example, pomp of syllables-akṣara dambara, overemphasized terms or śleṣa, rhetorical allusions or use of alaṁkāra etc. Hence, this is one inscription of this time that we can cite as a piece of evidence in favor of gauḍī rīti. It commenced with the panegyric of God. Here, the first ruler Puṣyavarman was considered the lord of the earth ('devabhūyaṁ kshitiśvaraḥ Puṣyavarmma-ābhūt').²⁹ His son Samudravarman was compared to five oceans ('pañchama iva hi samudraḥ Samudravarmmaābhava tasya').³⁰

King Kalyāṇvarman was devoid of every kind of flaw.³¹ King Gaṇapati was endowed with innumerable qualities ('Gaṇapatim-iva-dāna-varṣaṇam-ajasraṁ Gaṇapatim –agaṇita- guṇa-gaṇam- asūta- kali-hānaye- tanayaṁ').³² There was one Chandramukhavarman, who as charming and resplendent as the moon, was the dispeller of all the gloom ('Chandramukhas-tasya-sutaś-chandra iva kalā-kalāpa-ramaṇiyaḥ').³³ Bhāskaravarman, the main protagonist of this inscription, was like the sun of innumerable rise.³⁴ He was like a wish-yielding tree and the controller of the universe ('ity-api sa jagad-uduya-kalpan-āstemaya-hetunā bhagavatā kamala sambhavenā').³⁵ He ignited the light of the āryadharmā by eliminating the darkness of the Kali age and his prowess was equal to the strength of his feudatories ('yathāyatham- uchita-kara-nika-vitarāṇ-ākulita-kali-timara-sañchaya-tay prakāśit-āryadharmmālokaḥ sva- bhuja-vala-tulita-sakala-sāmanta-chakra-vikrama').³⁶

It is generally considered that this inscription is an imitation of Bāṇabhaṭṭa's style and technique. Due to Bhāskaravarman's alliance with Harṣavardhana, the clear influence of Harṣa's poet Bāṇabhaṭṭa's writing style is evident here. Even the verses of the text indicate that Bāṇabhaṭṭa was probably the original composer of this inscription. By analyzing the verses of the text, it can be seen that there was no mention of Bhāskaravarman's success or his political achievements. Only by following the style of alamkāraśāstra and gauḍī rīti, the verses were composed in high figurative language, rhetoric style and śleṣa in praise of the Varman dynasty. Probably under the patronage of Harṣa, Bāṇabhaṭṭa wrote the text. In this context, it is notable that the inscription begins with the hymns of Śiva, where Harṣavardhana himself was originally a follower of Māheśwara. All these hints indicated Bāṇabhaṭṭa as the probable author of this inscription. However, the exalted literary style and kāvyālamkāraṇ of the inscription have placed it as the most significant testimony of the time. This may be regarded as the trendsetter of the literary style of that time.

Alongside, South eastern Bengal saw the emergence of some synchronous line of rulers. Among them, the Nāthas and the Rātas were subordinate rulers of the Varmans of Kāmarupa. Their overlord was apparently Bhāskarvarmana, as mentioned already. They enjoyed a semi-independent status and issued their own grants. The 'Tipperah copperplate' of Loknātha issued during the reign of the Nāthas in the middle of the seventh century C.E. stands as a testimony to literary standard, sporting a beautiful composition. It was composed in metres like śārdūlavikrīḍita, sragdharā and vasantatilaka.³⁷ Again, during the middle to the last quarter of the 7th century CE, the literary layout of the Kailan copperplate of Śrīdharaṇa Rāta presents another fine creation. This inscription was composed in āryā, vasantatilaka and anuṣṭubh metres.³⁸ Except for the imprecatory and initial verses, these inscriptions were mainly composed in prose. Generally, the characters were an adaptation of Nāgarī from the Gupta alphabets. On the basis of characteristic features, Narendra Nath Law placed the Kailan

Copper Plate Inscription of Śrīdhāraṇarāta in the second half of the 7th century CE in terms of palaeography.³⁹

These two inscriptions carried the overwrought rhetoric trend of literary art. As Radhagovinda Basak said, they were composed in gauḍī rīti, which exhibited the characteristics of artificial poetry, for example, use of śleṣa, upamā, overbearing composition or atiśayokti etc.⁴⁰ He also observed that the literary expressions used by the poet were a reflection of Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita*. Like in the Tipperah copperplate of Loknātha, the literary expression 'aṣṭa-puṣpikā' used by the poet refers to the eightfold offering of flowers. This was a literary term borrowed from the work of Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita*.⁴¹

The Tipperah copperplate of Loknātha contains rhetorical subtleties. The use of long compound words with alliterations was overflowing here. For example, the first king of this dynasty Nātha, was praised for his sanctity and devotion.⁴² He was a prominent king who destroyed his earthly existence and destroyed all his sins. He has used lofty titles like adhi-mahārāja ('muni Bharadvāja-sad-vaṅśa-jātaḥ-śrīmān-prakhyāta-kīrttiḥ prabhavad-adhi-mahārāja-śavd-ādhikāraḥ saṁsāra-ochchhitti-hetuḥ praśamita-durito-ṇātho').⁴³ His courageous son sāmanta Śrīṇātha was lauded for his good deeds ('prakhyāta-vīrryo-mahān-sāmanto-yudhi lavdha-pauruṣa-dhano dharmya kṛiyaik āśrayaḥ Śrīṇātho-Bhagavān-iva pratihata').⁴⁴ King Lokanātha was expertise in every facet. His army was victorious by the intellect of his counselors.⁴⁵

In the middle of the seventh century, the Khaḍgas established their power in eastern Vaṅga and Samatāṭa. Following the Khaḍgas, the Devas rose to power during the eighth and ninth century CE in Samatāṭa. Around the eighth century CE, the Ashrafpur copper plate of Devakhaḍga portrayed the eulogistic account of the Khaḍga dynasty in an oratorical tone. Inscriptions of early Deva dynasties of 8th-9th centuries CE have also followed a similar literary intonation. The characters of the Ashrafpur copperplate inscription of Devakhaḍga belong to the 'early Kuṭila variety' of the northern alphabets. Kuṭila variety means the Magadhan alphabet of the 7th century. Overemphasized words are noteworthy in these copperplate inscriptions. Examples can be drawn from the Ashrafpur copperplate of Devakhaḍga. Here the great devotee of Lord Sugata, Khaḍgodyama has been glorified and admired in the three worlds. To him, religion was a peaceful spirit reachable through the meditation of the ascetics and a repository of all good qualities.⁴⁶ Khaḍgodyama was a conqueror of this world. His son Śrī Jātakhaḍga exterminated his multiple enemies with his prowess, as a piece of straw flew away by the wind and as a number of horses were destructed by an elephant.⁴⁷

A noted feature of this time is that most of the inscriptions were copperplates. The composers brought out literary styles by composing the inscriptions. However, the inscriptions in this particular phase referred to the scribes in most cases. For example, the Jayrampur

copper plate inscription of Gopacandra referred to kāyastha Mānadatta as the writer ('likhitaṁ kāyasthamānadatteneti').⁴⁸ Yet, we get another interesting piece of evidence from the Mallasarul copper plate inscription. Here, a sāndhivigrahika (a Minister of Peace and War) named Bhogacandra was mentioned as the writer of this text.⁴⁹ The Tipperah copperplate of Lokanātha was documented by sāndhivigrahika Praśāntadeva.⁵⁰ The Ashrafpur copperplate inscriptions of Devakhaḍga were written by Pūradāsa.⁵¹ Most interestingly, we also do have references to dūtakas who played the role of a conveyor. For example, the Mallasarul copperplate recorded Śubhadatta as the dūtaka.⁵² Laksmīnātha, the son of Lokanātha was the dūtaka of the Tipperah copperplate.⁵³ The Devaparvata copperplate inscription of Bhavadeva referred to the dūtaka, the chief mahāsāmantādhipati Nandadhara.⁵⁴ Citing Sheldon Pollock's view, it can be said that these inscriptions addressed or were associated with particular socio-textual communities.⁵⁵ Although the existence of an intended audience was obscure in this period, the issuer, petitioner, donor etc. as mentioned in the inscriptions hinted at some social classes who were aware of the literary tones and expressions used here. However, they varied according to different sub-regions of Bengal. Literary analysis of the inscriptions is significant in understanding this overall literary culture at this stage.

The Evolution of Literary Style

The literary style that grew throughout this period, portrays an evolution in the format, language as well as contents of the epigraphic messages. The inscriptions of this phase mainly continued to reflect the writing style of the Guptas. This was an obvious phenomenon as the Guptas had penetrated not only Puṇḍravardhana but also Vaṅga, Rāḍha and Samataṭa.⁵⁶ The impact of the Gupta presence was not only felt in administrative frame and socio-economic life but also in cultural aspects, which is evident from the epigraphic records. This is reflected in the copperplates of Pradyumnabandhu in Puṇḍra, those of Dharmāditya, Dvādaśāditya, Gopacandra and Samācāradeva in Vaṅga, and the records of Gopacandra in Rāḍha and Vainyagupta in Samataṭa. It is noteworthy, that they reveal a pragmatic employment of the device of the copperplate inscriptions as administrative records. Therefore, rather than poetic embellishments, they neatly documented the land sale figures, land measurement units and land evaluation methods, furnishing information of the developing stage of practical knowledge related to state matters. This reveals a different compositional aspect of the inscribed records.

It is actually with the seventh century copperplates of Śaśānka in Rāḍha that we get the first reflection of the sense of sovereign domination. The literary expression used here projects royal glory. The apotheosis of this trend was reached in the Nidhanpur Copperplate. We can cite the Nidhanpur copperplate as a reflection of the most adorning and charming

literary composition of this period. However, the historical significance of this copperplate lies behind Bhāskaravarman's association with Harṣavardhana. Based on that connection, it can be said that the writing style of Harṣa's poet Bāṇabhaṭṭa was reflected in this inscription. Even it is believed that Bāṇabhaṭṭa himself may have composed this. Following the trend, if we look at the inscriptions of Rāta and Nātha in South East Bengal, it is seen that these were a depiction of a subtle literary tone. Amongst them, the Tipperah copperplate of Loknātha and the Kailan copperplate of ŚrīdhāraṇaRāta were especially important. Radhagovinda Basak observed that the literary expressions used here were a reflection of Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita*.⁵⁷ In this context, it may be said that since Loknātha and ŚrīdhāraṇaRāta were subordinate rulers of Bhāskaravarman, the influence of Harṣavardhana's courtly literary air as his ally was also flown into these inscriptions. Although not rich in poetic ornamentation like the Nidhanpur copperplate, the poetic subtlety carries the beauty of these inscriptions. They were also an indication of the self-proclamation and legitimacy of these emergent sovereign rulers. Even though they were subordinate to Bhāskaravarman, their sovereign status has been reflected here. A somewhat enhanced form of this is seen in the copperplates of Khaḍga and Deva. The subtle precise literary tone used here gives its hint.

Conclusion

The literary form that we observe evolving through this phase, especially in the inscriptions was mainly transmitted through the scribes. The Kāyasthas emerged as a group of literates among administrative personnel. Clearly, they were appointed through the royal court and transcribed the courtly agenda in connection with the courtly circuit on the one hand and in collaboration with the rural society on the other hand. The inscriptions they wrote down involved the royal officials, local administrative officials, rural influential people, and prominent Brahmins who formed a circuit of literates and were all aware of the style and content of the concerned texts. Thus, it is observable, that the scope of tracking the origin of regional literary culture in early medieval Bengal is best possible through a study of the inscriptions issued by the royal houses since the 6th century CE. The only hope for understanding the literary style of this period was the copperplate inscriptions. However, a fuller development of this process can only be witnessed from the Pāla Candra phase.

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