

Vidarbha, an ancient princely region in central India, now eastern region of the Indian state of Maharashtra, comprising Nagpur & Amravati Divisions.

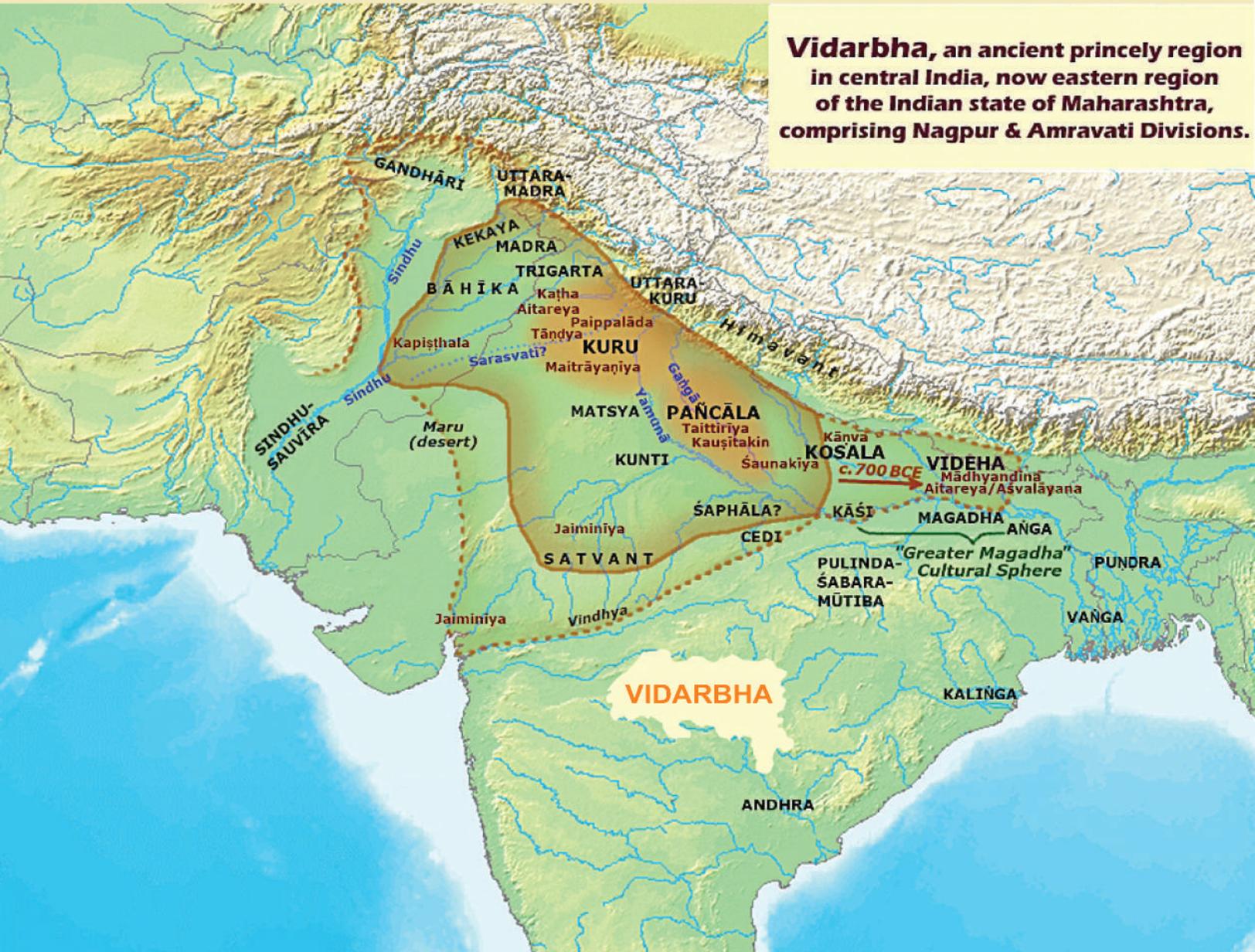


Fig.8.1 : The location of Vidarbha

An Obliterated Dynasty of Vidarbha in Central India

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In comparison to the medieval and modern phases, a reconstruction of the ancient Indian history had been a challenge due to the lack of the availability of coherent evidences. Much of this epoch is still enshrouded with uncertainties. However, the scrupulous efforts and analytical studies conducted by the pioneers of palaeography in deciphering the *Brahmi* and *Kharoshthi* scripts paved the way for a near-authentic reconstruction of ancient Indian history and culture. The legends written in relief on the coins and seals, usually produced out of moulds, are also considered to be inscriptions, even though these are not engraved. The inscribed grants are not merely the documents recording the gifts of the rulers to deserving persons, but these often supply valuable information about other aspects of life as well, that proved to be of immense help on various occasions in understanding the socio-political milieu of the past. Being a sort of eulogies, these charters generally recorded the genealogy of the princely donors and also highlighted the merits earned by them. Although in common practice, the information rendered by inscriptions in any form is considered to be authentic, yet a comparative study of concurrent literary and archaeological evidences taken together removes all doubts. On one hand, the experts of the inscriptions, especially eulogies, were reluctant to take notice of and record the defeat and discomfiture of their royal patrons and often completely suppressed such details. On the other hand, even a minor or null achievement of the patrons have often been largely exaggerated to establish their greatness and supremacy.

The Malhara Copperplate Grant of King Adityaraja

In spite of all measures, the scholars, in certain cases, are bound to accept all the information recorded in the inscription to be veracious, simply because no other source is available for their corroboration. One such case is that of the inconspicuous Munda dynasty which has come to our knowledge solely through a copperplate grant inscribed and issued by a king named Adityaraja. This inscription was recovered from Malhara in the Amravati district of Maharashtra.¹ The inscribed copperplate reveals the existence of a Brahmin dynasty of Bharadvaja *gotra* in the post-Satavahana and pre-Vakataka period in the region of Vidarbha, comprised of eleven districts, Figs.8.1 & 8.2. This grant of several villages by king Adityaraja to a number of Brahmins was incised on five copperplates joined together with a ring measuring 9 cm in circumference. The villages mentioned in this inscription, Mahagram, Chikkhalika, Amrakagartika, Lauhashalaka, Chinchapallika, Niggondijjhar, Daharakaptatta and Bujjatak, are all identified to be situated in the districts of Amravati and Akola, confirming the rule of Munda dynasty in

the Vidarbha region after the fall of the Satavahanas around 230 CE. Just like most of the other "grant-cum-eulogy" epigraphs, this also primarily aims at highlighting the acquisition and accumulation of reputation and honour garnered by the ascendants of the donor in the society through strict conduct of moral excellence and religious virtue. The purpose of any donation has always been the aspiration of pulling in the religious merits and glory for parents and one's own self, and same is the case here. Significantly, this inscription of utmost importance is considered to be the earliest grant so far known from the southern-half of India.

In the year 1974, a marketing officer of Achalapur in the Amravati district of Vidarbha brought one single plate out of the series to the Central Museum, Nagpur for decipherment. Subsequently, the remaining plates of the set were gradually recovered after arduous efforts from Achalapur and Malhara. The dimensions of each plate are : length - 17.6 cm, breadth - 9.7 cm and weight - 900 gm. The first and the last plate are inscribed uni-facially while the middle plates are inscribed bi-facially. This grant is composed in prose and poetry style in chaste Sanskrit in the box-headed *Brahmi* characters that resemble those of Vakataka copperplates.² It presents the complete genealogy of the Munda dynasty and the date of its issue is given at the end in Prakrit as the (regnal) year 2, the season *gimha* (summer), the fortnight 2 and the date 10 (and) 5. The plates were issued from Vanakheta, seemingly the present day Vanakhedapur in the adjoining Akola district,³ the capital city of Adityaraja.

The genealogy of the dynasty revealed through this copperplate grant is quite interesting. It is stated that the family was Bhagavata, worshipper of Vishnu, and performed an *Ashvamedha yajna*. The first name recorded in the plates is that of a learned Brahmana named Soma, who was not only a fervent devotee of Lord Vishnu, but who also mastered all the four *Vedas* and still refrained himself from self-glorification. His son Vardhana, described as a devoted son, was a great scholar as well, always busy in the performance of rituals and led a disciplined life by following the rigid rules of abstinence. His feet were adored by his son Munda, whose hands never accepted any gift and who wrapped himself up in prayers and performance of *Vedic* rituals. The fourth name in the lineage is that of Rashtra-Maharaja, son of Munda, who is said to have earned the royal title of "King" for himself with his efforts and capabilities. His son and successor, Rajakula-Maharaja gave oblations of his enemies in the *yajna*-fire at the battlefield. Ultimately, the final name registered is that of Adityaraja, who appears to have occupied the throne in about 270 CE. This grant was gifted in the second year of his reign. Seemingly, he was the last in the family line who ruled peacefully for about four or five years. Eventually, Pravarasena I (c.275-335 CE)⁴ of the Vakataka Dynasty invaded from the South and established his rule over the Vidarbha region in c.275 CE by overthrowing the Munda dynasty.

The following information about this Bhagavata family derived from this copperplate inscription deserve our attention:

- a. Six generations of the Munda dynasty flourished in the Vidarbha region for a short time span of about forty-five years, in between the decline of the Satavahanas (c.230 CE) and the rise of the Vakatakas (c.275 CE).
- b. Uniquely, the initial three generations of this Brahmin family were never designated with any royal title. They dedicated their entire lives only towards learning, performing religious obligations and following asceticism.
- c. About Munda, the third name in the list, it is stated that he never accepted any gift from anyone during his lifetime and his selfless *yajnas* always satisfied Indra, who bestowed boons from heaven. This is evidently to be understood in the sense that, though he himself accepted no gifts, people spontaneously made all arrangements and supplied the necessary provisions for his *yajnas*.⁵ His pious deeds established him as a venerable personality in the society and his successors took pride in associating themselves with his name. Although Munda was not the founding progenitor of this family, but still the dynasty came to be known by his name unlike other ancient Indian ruling clans.
- d. Rajakula-Maharaja, the fifth member in the lineage, appears to have been a mighty warrior, who acquired one or more victories in the battlefields with the valour of his arms. Therefore, it can be safely inferred that the performance of the *Ashvamedha yajna* by this clan, as documented in the inscription, must have been accomplished by this king.
- e. Finally, Adityaraja, the donor and issuer of this copperplate grant, was not strong enough to hold on to his kingdom any further and was overthrown by the powerful Vakataka king, Pravarasena I, who conquered Vidarbha in c.275 CE.
- f. The date of issue of this grant is inscribed in Prakrit while the main content is in Sanskrit. It is noteworthy that the use of Prakrit in official records was discontinued from the Vakataka period onwards. The Munda dynasty certainly preceded the Vakataka monarchs and continued with the ongoing practice of inscribing the issuing date in Prakrit.
- g. The inscriptions issued by the feudatories of the Vakataka rulers started with the praise of the feudal lord and his genealogy. But the absence of this notable feature in the copperplate under review confirms that the Mundas had an independent kingdom of their own.

"Munda" has been a popular name in ancient India since time immemorial. A king named Munda is recorded in *Mahavamsa* who succeeded Bimbisara and Ajatashatru ruling over Magadha before the Nandas.⁶ Another Buddhist text, *Anguttara Nikaya*, mentions about king Munda getting converted to Buddhism along with Aniruddha in the list of successors of Ajatashatru, the king of Pataliputra.⁷ Also, the name "Munda" is a Sanskrit word meaning "a headman". It is an honorific name given by Hindus and hence became a tribal name.⁸ Tribals who spoke the Munda language occupied the eastern region of ancient India and numerous Munda terms occur in the *Vedic* texts that were written between 1500 BCE and 500 BCE. The presence of such terms in the texts compiled in the upper Gangetic basin late in that period suggests that the tribes speaking that language were residing there at the time.⁹

The Munda people are spread in the Chhotanagpur Plateau region, which covers most of Jharkhand, as well as in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Tripura, West Bengal and in portions of Bangladesh even. According to Barbara A. West, the Mundas claim origin in Uttar Pradesh, and a steady flow eastward in history as other groups moved into their original homeland. They inhabited a much larger territory in ancient India.¹⁰ Whether the name "Munda" associated with this dynasty of Vidarbha was just an inspirational one or actually had any connection with any of the above, demands further research and deeper probing into the historical context.

References

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Fig.8.2 : Vidarbha region comprising of eleven districts