

On Devadroṇi and its Connotation

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D*evadroṇi* is an intriguing term which occurs in a few early inscriptions of India. It has been translated as 'procession of images of gods' by most scholars, though some have expressed doubt over this and offered alternative meanings. The base for understanding the term as 'procession of images of gods' or simply as 'idol procession' is the *Harāvalī* which equates it with *deva-yātrā*.¹ But the context of usage of the term *devadroṇi* in inscriptions does not seem to uphold this equation. This paper has the object of reviewing the occurrence and usage of the term to arrive at a judicious conclusion as to its meaning.

The first instance of use of the term *devadroṇi* is in the Karamdanda inscription of the time of Kumāragupta I, dated in CE 436.² The record is inscribed on the octagonal part (*Viṣṇu-bhāga*) of a Śiva *liṅga* which was excavated from Bharadhi Dih mound near Karamdanda village, about 20 km from Faizabad, a district headquarters in Uttar Pradesh. The *liṅga* is now preserved in the State Museum at Lucknow. Only 11 lines of the inscription are preserved of which the last one is partially damaged. Some more lines might have been there on the lost square lower part (*Brahma-bhāga*) of the *liṅga*. The record is in Sanskrit and the translation of the relevant part of the inscription is reproduced here:³

"... Pṛthvīṣeṇa, who was (at first) *Mantri-Kumārāmātya* (and) afterwards the *Mahābalādhikṛta* of the prosperous Kumāragupta the Mahārājādhirāja, who was the son of Śikharasvāmin, *Mantri-Kumārāmātya* of the prosperous Candragupta (II), and son of Viṣṇupālitaabhaṭṭa who (in turn) was son of Kuramāraṇyabhaṭṭa, a teacher of the Chāndoga and of the Aśvavājin *gotra* (placed) at the feet of

Śaileśvarasvāmin Mahādeva, for the worship of the feet of the same Lord Mahādeva, known as Pṛthvīśvara, with proper religious rites to (*Brāhmaṇas*) (*bhagavato Mahādevasya Pṛthvīśvara ity-evam samakhyātasy-asy-aiva bhagavato yathā-kartavya-dhārmika-karmaṇa pāda-suśrūśānaya bhagavach-Chaileśvarasvāmi-Mahādeva-pāda-mūle...*) from Ayodhyā of different *gotras* and *carāṇas* (and) conversant with penances, recitation of sacred texts, the *mantras*, the *sūtras*, the *bhāṣyas* and *pravacanas* at the procession of the image (... *devadroṇyam*)...."

The purport of the record seems to be as follows: Pṛthvīṣeṇa the Brahmin minister of Kumāragupta set up a *liṅga* of god Mahādeva Pṛthvīśvara, apparently in his own name, and made provision for religious rituals due to it. Expert Brahmins invited from Ayodhyā were assigned the grant for the purpose. The grant was made at the feet of (i.e., in the presence of) god Śaileśvarasvāmi.

God Śaileśvarasvāmi's name recalls Pṛthvīṣeṇa's father 'Śikharasvāmi' and it is likely that already there was the temple of god Śaileśvara Mahādeva, perhaps set up by Śikharasvāmin, close to which god Pṛthvīśvara was set up. Understandably, god Śaileśvarasvāmi was made witness to the grant. The context indicates that the earlier temple, i.e., of Śaileśvarasvāmi was the principal temple while that set up by Pṛthvīṣeṇa was secondary. The term *devadroṇi* figures at the end, but its context is lost. However, the editors of the inscription, though they have put the translation as 'procession of idols of gods' (*deva-yātrā*), have expressed doubt if this was the intended meaning:⁴

"It is, however, doubtful if this is the sense of the word *devadroṇi* here intended. The same word occurs in line 6 of a Taleśvara copper-plate (*Ep.Ind.*, Vol.XIII, p.115), where the same meaning is adopted (p.117). As the plate however came from the hilly district of Almora, it is better to take the word in the sense of 'the valley of (the shrine of) the God.' This agrees with the *paścima-droṇi* which is mentioned in line 24 and is evidently distinguished from *Deva-droṇi*. This may further be compared to *brhad-droṇi* mentioned as the site of a shrine in a Rajputana inscription summarized in *PRAC. WC.*, 1909-10, p.57. Perhaps, this is

not the sense of *droni* used in this (*Karamdanda*) record, as the inscribed *liṅga* was found in the plains, and not in the mountainous region of Uttar Pradesh."

The doubt raised by the editors of the inscription is well-founded. The Taleśvara plate of Dyutivarman (6th-7th century) mentions *devadrony-ādhikṛta-mahāsattrapati-Trāt-aikasvāmi*, translated as 'the solitary lord Trāta . . . who superintends the procession of idols'.⁵ On the strength of the reference to an officer overseeing *devadroni* in this copper-plate record, Goyal has suggested that it could mean 'temple's wealth or treasury'.⁶ But the intended meaning of *devadrony-ādhikṛta* in its context may be 'Trāta who is the official overseer of the worship of the deity in the valley of gods near a waterbody'. Apte's Sanskrit Dictionary lists 'valley' as well as 'water reservoir' among the meanings of *droni*.

While in the case of the *Karamdanda* and *Taleśvara* inscriptions, the context of location of the deity is speculative, a clearer instance of location-context of the *devadroni* is provided by Cālukya Maṅgaleśa's Mahākuṭa pillar inscription, in Badami Taluk, Bagalakote District of Karnataka. Fleet while editing this inscription has translated the term as 'idol procession':⁷

"The wealth of the Kalatsuri has been expended in the idol-procession of the temple of (our) own god. And (therefore) this property, which at (their) own idol-procession was assigned by our father and elder brother to (the god) Makuṭeśvaranātha, - supplement it, by (bestowing) enjoyment of the ten villages headed by Śriyambāṭaka, etc. (named)."
(*Kalatsuri-dhanam sva-devagrha-devadronyām gatam-idañca dravyam sva-devadronyām Makuṭeśvara-nāthasy-asmākaṁ pitrā jyeṣṭhena c-opadattam Śriyambāṭaka (etc.) . . . prabhṛti-daśa-grāma-paribhogena samarppayadhvam-iti*)

Ramesh's position on the issue is different. He says that literally the term *devadroni* would mean 'divine boat,' *droni* being Sanskritised form of the Dravidian *Toṇe/Doṇi* which means 'boat'.⁸ He identifies the 'divine boat' with the small four-pillared pavilion shrine in the *Viṣṇu-puṣkariṇī* pond at Mahakuta. He believes that it was 'originally constructed by Polekeśin I to serve as a divine vessel meant to carry his own soul after his death, heavenward'.⁹ He further takes the

Makīṣvaranātha temple as the one that had been built by Polekeśin (I) after his own name which, per him, in Sanskrit would mean Makuṣvara.¹⁰ This would lead to the conclusion that Polekeśi I consecrated the *liṅga* in the Mahākuṣvara temple in his own name and the *Caturmukha-liṅga* in the four-pillared pavilion in the Viṣṇu-puṣkariṇī was also his own representation. However, the meaning of the term *Devadroṇi* as derived by Ramesh can be contested. It does not require Dravidian *Toṇe/Doṇi* to be translated into Sanskrit to arrive at the term *Droṇi*. For, Sanskrit *Droṇi* also has the meaning 'boat-shaped vessel'. More likely, *Toṇe/Doṇi* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Droṇi*. The *Caturmukha-liṅga* in Viṣṇu-puṣkariṇī pond has features that make it difficult to be assigned prior to CE 650, thus creating a hurdle in accepting Ramesh's view. So also, according to architectural historians, today's Mahākuṣvara temple cannot be assigned before CE 650.¹¹ Hence



Fig.1 : Viṣṇu-puṣkariṇī-Devadroṇi at Mahakuta

Ramesh's view that *Devadroṇi* means the 'divine vessel' has problems in accepting it.

Before reverting to the possible meaning of the *Devadroṇi*, it is necessary to have an idea of the early Cālukyan temple complex at Mahakuta. The spot is in a valley dominated by a pond, called *Viṣṇu-puṣkariṇī* (hereinafter called also 'waterbody'), bound in early Cālukya times by dry masonry sandstone wall with steps leading into it from the north side (Fig.1). The waterbody is full of natural springs that retain excellent perennial water which flows out through an outlet on the east. Within this waterbody, closer to its northern wall, stands a small square four-pillared stone pavilion sheltering a *Caturmukha-liṅga* (Fig.2). The pavilion is flat-roofed but carries an *āmalaka* atop. Doubtless, the *āmalaka* originally would have supported a *kalāśa* over it. Its pillars correspond to *Nāgara* features. It is in the surrounding area of this waterbody that large number of temples facing one or the

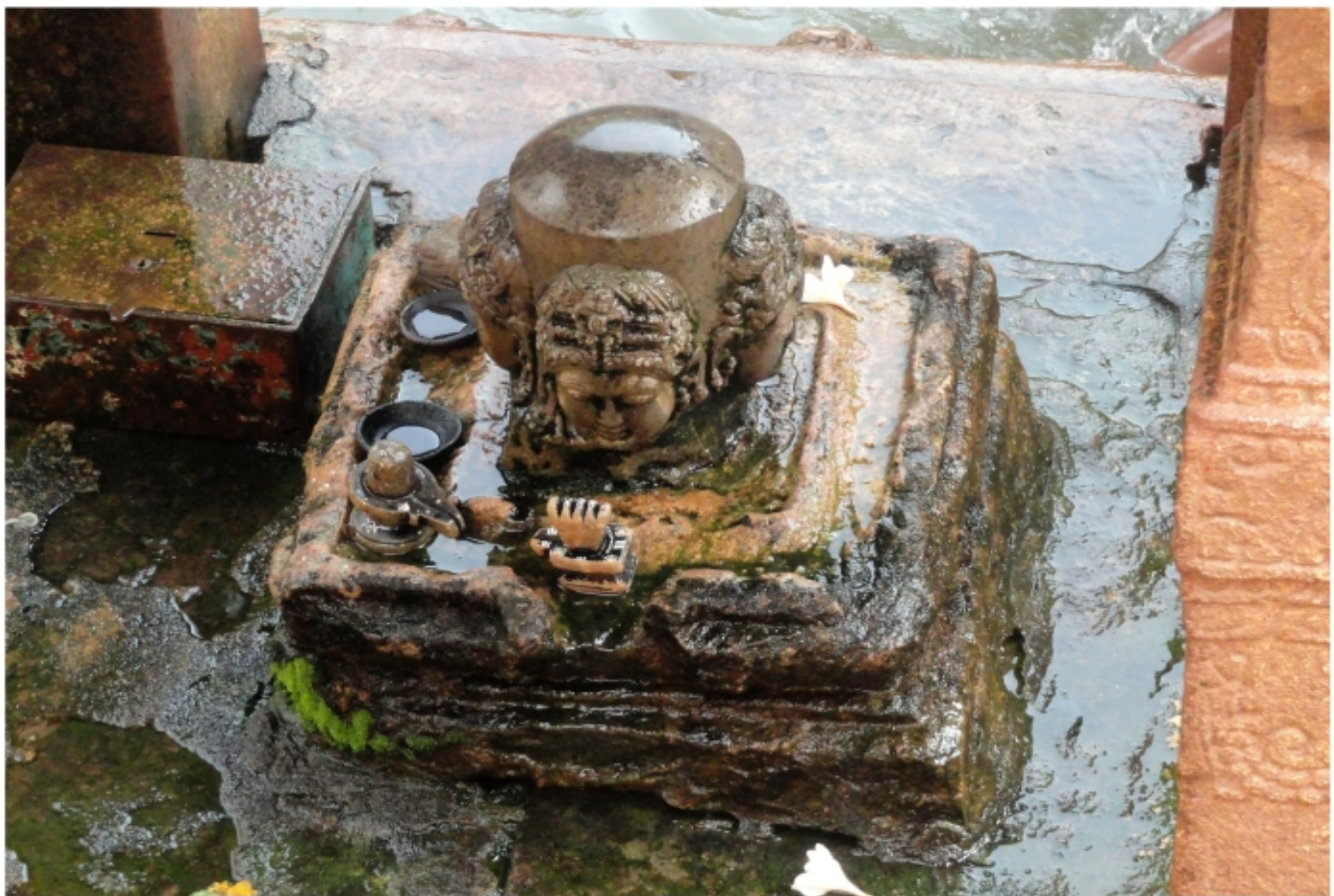


Fig.2 : *Caturmukha-liṅga* in *Viṣṇu-puṣkariṇī*



Fig.3 : Mahākuṭeśvara Temple, Mahakuta

other cardinal direction are erected, care being taken to see that the temple faces the Viṣṇu-puṣkariṇī if not the east. Two major early Cālukya temples stand to the north and south of the waterbody, viz. the Mahākuṭeśvara (north) (Fig.3) and Mudi-Mallikārjuna (south) (Fig.5). Both are *sāndhāra* (with inner ambulatory) and Dravidian in conception. Both share some *Nāgara* style components: Their *vimāna* exterior is characterized by double-offset central *bhadra* on south, west and north walls while there is no *karṇabhadra* (corner offset) at all for the ground storey; and some of the lattice windows (*jālavātāyanas*) feature *gavākṣa-āmalaka* scheme (Fig.4) over them on Mahākuṭeśvara temple. The upper storeys are well defined in Dravidian manner. Both temples have a square *garbhagrha* (sanctum), a rectangular *gūḍhamaṇḍapa* (walled hall) and a *mukhamaṇḍapa* (porch), and a separate *Nandiamaṇḍapa* (Nandi pavilion). These two are the only *sāndhāra* temples at the site and must have been sponsored by kings, since all known temples



Fig.4 : *Jālavātāyana* with Nāgara pediment, Mahākuṭeśvara temple, Mahakuta

sponsored directly by the early Cālukya ruling family at Badami, Aihole, Alampur and Pattadakal are *sāndhāra* and relatively large. The *Caturmukha-liṅga* pavilion, the Mahākuṭeśvara and the Mudi-Mallikārjuna shrines may therefore be regarded as contemporaneous. Numerous smaller temples, each with a sanctum and a porch, are clustered all around the waterbody. They are conceived in *nāgara* or *phāṁsanā* (Fig.6) style. Unfortunately, the sponsors of these smaller temples are not known, though they may be products of religious piety of lesser members of the ruling Cālukya family. Except one or two, all the temples are Śaiva. There is a small west facing temple called Bāṅantiguḍi located higher up on the slope of a hill opposite the Mahākuṭeśvara complex. This temple, a *dvitala-vimāna*, recalls the



Fig.5 : Mudi-Mallikārjuna Temple, Mahakuta

Upper Śivālaya temple at Badami. Its west orientation is understandable since the waterbody is in that direction. It must be mentioned that near the Mahākuṭeśvara complex there were remnants of some brick-structures, some of them with *liṅgas* open to air. Even today several *liṅgas* with early features, at least of 6th century CE, are seen within the Mahākuṭeśvara complex (Figs.7 and 8). In any case, the waterbody called Viṣṇu-puṣkariṇī was central to the complex as it is so today for pilgrims visiting the place.

The Mahakuta pillar inscription of Maṅgaleśa adverts by name to god Makuṭeśvaranātha and thereby suggests that among the temples here the temple of this god was central. As per the inscription, Maṅgaleśa had the desire of setting up a pillar of victory of his prowess (*śakti-jaya-sthambha*) on the bank of the Bhāgīrathī, i.e. the Gaṅgā. But after defeating the Kalacuris, he thought it appropriate to set up a pillar of victory of *dharma* (*dharma-jaya-sthambha*) and did so. In fact, the Mahakuta pillar is the *dharma-jaya-sthambha* set up by Maṅgaleśa. It is

noteworthy that like the pavilion shrine in the *puṣkariṇī*, the Mahākūṭeśvara and the Mudi-Mallikārjuna, the pillar itself is conceived in *Nāgara* form, fluted, and capped by *āmalaka* and *kalaśa* in that order. But why did Maṅgaleśa not set up this pillar at Badami, his capital, and why did he prefer the site of Mahakuta instead? It is important to note that he called the presence of his step-mother Durlabhadevī at the time of assigning the grant recorded in the inscription. These things would suggest that Mahakuta was of special significance for the early Cālukya rulers and that they had a familial attachment to it. It was a sacred Śaiva *tīrtha*, where the rulers prior to Maṅgaleśa had temples of Śiva constructed. Vināpoṭi, the *sūle* or concubine of Cālukya Vijayāditya (CE 696-734) inscribed her pious act of performing the *Hiraṇyagarbha-dāna* and gifts of land and silver umbrella and pedestal inlaid with rubies to the god on a pillar of the Mahākūṭeśvara temple.¹²



Fig.6 : A *phāṃsanā* shrine in Mahakuta complex



Fig.7 : Early *Līngas* in Mahakuta complex

This suggests that the Mahākuṭeśvaranātha referred to in Maṅgaleśa's pillar inscription is the same as today's Mahākuṭeśvara and represents the temple sponsored by his father Polekeśi I (CE 543-566). Further, since the temple called Mudi-Mallikārjuna largely shares its features with the Mahākuṭeśvara, it may be identified with the temple sponsored by his elder brother, Kīrtivarma I (CE 566-592). Under the circumstances, the dates assigned to these two temples by architectural historians can be reconciled only if the original temples sponsored by Polekeśi I and Kīrtivarma I were of brick and mortar and the existing stone temples were erected on the site using the wealth assigned to them by Maṅgaleśa. Maṅgaleśa was a devotee of Viṣṇu (*parama-bhāgavata*) and it is doubtful if he sponsored a Śiva temple at the site. His grants to the Śaiva temples of his predecessors at the site were guided by special emotional ties of the royal house. The numerous Śiva shrines at the site imply that it was considered meritorious to

consecrate deities here since it had a waterbody supported by natural springs. Hence, it is the 'location' of a sacred pond rather than 'idol procession' which seems to have called for the use of the term *devadroṇi*. The term suggests a fixed location rather than a temporary procession as will be seen below. Further support for this argument is found in the expression *sva-devagr̥ha-devadroṇi*, 'our own temple and *devadroṇi*', employed in the Mahakuta pillar inscription.

A peek into lexicons is instructive in this respect. Raghunandana indicates that *devadroṇi* was a Śaiva sacred spot such as a cavern accommodating a *Svayambhū-liṅga*: *Devadroṇi Svayambhūliṅgady-avasthāna-gahvaram*.¹³ He further states that a cow's death in *devadroṇi*, *vihāra*, well or temple does not warrant an expiation (*devadroṇyām vihāre ca kūpeṣv-āyataneṣu ca/ eṣu goṣu vipannāsu prāyaścittam na vidyate//*),¹⁴ thus pointing to the fact that *devadroṇi* was as much a 'sacred location' as a *vihāra*, or a well, or a temple. These references sweep aside Goyal's suggestion that *devadroṇi* could be 'temple treasury'. It also dispels



Fig.8 : Early *Līngas* in Mahakuta complex

Ramesh's suggestion that it referred to 'divine boat'.

A reference to *devadroṇi* in the *Skandapurāṇa* also implies that it connoted a 'location' and not 'an idol-procession'. The *Revākhanda* section of that Purāṇa refers to an episode in which Paraśurāma, after killing Kārtavīryārjuna and uprooting the warrior class, returned to the hermitage of his deceased father Jamadagni at Narmadāpura, and 'having paid respects to his mother and the ascetics, installed god Paraśurāmeśa (=Paraśurāmeśvara), performed the obsequies of his father, and set up an *aṇḍikā* (another object of worship, probably an egg-shaped *Liṅga*?) and a *pāvanī* (a cow, which in this case should be a figural representation of Kāmadhenu on stone). This spot (which has the aforesaid three) famous as *Devadroṇi* has a *Kapila-sīlā* (evidently the same as *pāvanī*). The offering of *piṇḍa-dāna* there fetches heaven to the ancestors.¹⁵ The last statement connects *Devadroṇi* to ancestor-worship. Since the location of the *Devadroṇi* is related to Narmadāpura, it may be surmised that it was on the river Narmadā.

Taking all this evidence into consideration, it may be inferred that *Devadroṇi* at Mahakuta was a Śaiva spot with a prominent waterbody, identifiable with *Viṣṇu-puṣkarinī*, which has active natural springs for its source and which was developed by the Cālukyas, and around which temples of Śiva were erected by early members of the dynasty for the religious merit of ancestors and themselves. The term *droni* acquired prefix *deva* because the waterbody (*droni*) is characterized by presence of temples of gods, particularly of Śiva, near it. And it is possible further that, such shrines were particularly built by members of a family, royal or ministerial. This suggestion is validated by both Karamdanda and Taleśvara records. In the former, the Pṛthvīśvara-*liṅga* was installed in the *devadroṇi* where probably minister Pṛthviṣeṇa's father Śikharasvāmin had earlier established god Śaileśvara. In the Taleśvara record, it is stated that Dyutivama, the king, who was worshipper of the feet of god Vīraṇeśvara (of the *devadroṇi*), was approached by Trāta, the overseer of the *devadroṇi*, accompanied by recluses, *brahmacārīs* and congregation of *Gauggulikas* and a host of others, requesting to sanction the previous gifts enjoyed by the deity Vīraṇeśvarasvāmi, that had been granted by king's ancestors for the sake of their spiritual welfare. And the king out

of devotion for the god and for the increase of the religious merit of preceding royal saints and himself sanctioned the previous gifts which included among others many villages on the Pitṛgaṅgā river.¹⁶

After initiation of Cālukya Vikramāditya I in CE 659 into Māheśvara (= Pāśupata) form of Śaivism through the ritual of *Śivamaṇḍala-dīkṣā* in the region of Karnul-Mehabubnagar in Andhra-Telangana, the site of Alampur on the Tuṅgabhadrā acquired importance as a site of temple building activity of the Cālukyas. The Nava-Brahmeśvara temples at the site were Cālukya creations. A fort-like wall called *Niravadya-prākara* (after 'Niravadya', the title of Vijayāditya) was constructed in CE 713 near the Tuṅgabhadrā river for the complex during the reign of Vijayāditya by Śaiva teacher Īsānācāryasvāmin. This location 'near the steps leading to the river' is recorded by the editor of the inscription as *Devadroṇi*.¹⁷ This confirms the view propounded above that the *Devadroṇi* is 'a location near waterbody' and not 'an idol procession.' Alampur was the site of *Devadroṇi* for the early Cālukyas next to Mahakuta. Understandably, numerous Śaiva temples were erected here by the members of the Cālukya family. After Alampur, Pattadakal became central to Cālukya temple construction activity. It is well known that this site is also on the bank of the river, viz., Malaprabhā. It is worth noting that Kisuvoḷal, i.e., Pattadakal on the bank of the Malaprabhā was one of the ten villages assigned to the temple of Mahākuṭeśvara. It would be appropriate to designate Pattadakal as the third *Devadroṇi* of the Cālukyas.

The above discussion leads to the following conclusions: 1. *Devadroṇi* was not an 'idol-procession' as has been believed hitherto by scholars. Nor was it a term for 'temple-treasury' or 'divine vessel'. 2. *Devadroṇi* connoted a 'sacred location near a waterbody' in a valley, particularly having flowing water. This is true even in the case of the *Devadroṇi* of Mahakuta, since the pond *Viṣṇu-puṣkariṇī* incessantly receives water from springs and flows out through an outlet. 3. *Harāvalī*'s equation of *Devadroṇi* with *Deva-yātrā* is intriguing, but it is likely that *Deva-yātrā* itself may not be connoting 'idol-procession' as put in English by scholars.

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References and Notes

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2. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. III (Revised edition), pp.280-282.
3. *Ibid.*, p.282.
4. *Ibid.*, p.281, note 2.
5. *Epigraphia Indica* (hereafter, *EI*), Vol.XIII, pp.115-118; quote on p.117.
6. S.R. Goyal, *Guptakālīna Abhilekha*, under Karamdanda inscription, Kusumāñjali Prakāśana, Meerut, 1984.
7. *Indian Antiquary* (hereafter, *IA*), Vol.XIX, p.20 (Translation) and p.18 (Sanskrit).
8. K.V. Ramesh, *The Chalukyas of Vātāpi*, Agam Kala, New Delhi, 1984, p.47.
9. *Ibid.*, p.46.
10. *Ibid.*, p.48.
11. George Michell, *Temple Architecture and Art of the Early Chalukyas*, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2014, p.83; For details of these temples see pp.84-89 and 97-101.
12. *IA*, Vol.X, pp.103-104.
13. Mentioned by Raghunandana in *prāyaścīta-tattva*, and quoted in Syar-Raja-Radhakantadeva Bahadur, *op.cit.*, p.743.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Skandapurāṇa*, Revākhaṇḍa, Kārtavīryākhyāna, Chapter XV, verses 44-46: *mātaraṃ ca namaskṛtya tataś-cānyān munīśvarān/ devaṃ paraśurāmeśaṃ saṃsthāpya vidhipūrvakam//15.44// viśokair-aṇḍikā caiva tṛtīyā pāvanī tathā/ pituś-cakāra tatraiva sahasaiv-ottarāṃ kriyām//15.45// devadroṇīti vikhyātā tatrāste kapilā śilā/ tatra piṇḍa-pradānena divaṃ gacchanti pūrvaajāḥ//15.46//* From, http://grettil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/grettil/1_sanskr/3_purana/skprevku.htm. This is claimed to be the genuine version of Revākhaṇḍa belonging to *Skandapurāṇa*. However, it is not traced in the published versions of *Skandapurāṇa*. On verification, I was told that some manuscripts in the Mysore Oriental Library were found to have this version, but there seem to be some gaps. There are also grammatical issues in the quoted part, but these do not come in the way of the arguments of the present paper.
16. *EI*, Vol.XIII, pp.115-118.
17. *EI*, Vol.XXXV, p.121.