

# *Varanasi as Gleaned from its Inscriptions*

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## *Aśoka's Pilgrimage to Varanasi:*

Varanasi, i.e. Kāśī, the radiant city, is one of the most ancient cities of world. Its history goes back to the Vedic period but inscriptional material starts coming from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC only. The Maurya emperor Aśoka has the credit of starting tradition of writing on hard surface like stone in India and we are fortunate enough to have found his edicts from Sarnath and Ahraura near Varanasi. These two epigraphs tell an untold story of his visit to this sacred place and Aśoka had installed the relics of the Buddha, first on a platform and later in *stūpa*, after giving a sermon about the propagation of Buddhism at the end of 256 night's tour or *dhamma-yātrā*, as he calls it. The story needs to investigate his edicts and see how he accepted the path of the Buddha.

Aśoka informs us that in the 8<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, he conquered Kalinga and in this war one lakh people were killed and one lakh and fifty thousand people were displaced. His heart felt grief over this misery of people, as he recorded it in his 13<sup>th</sup> Rock Edict<sup>1</sup> (RE). This is again reflected in his administrative instructions given to the *Mahāmātras* of Tosali, (the Tansuliya of Khāravēla), and Samāpā, modern Jaugada, in two separate rock edicts. These give a glimpse of his mind over this tragedy. Perhaps, Tosali was the provincial capital of Kalinga. Khāravēla, in his Hāthīgumphā Inscription, confirms this historical conquest by Aśoka when he says that three hundred years ago 'Nandarāja' excavated a canal at Tanasuliya, i.e. Tosali<sup>2</sup>.

Aśoka took almost two years to contemplate about his future steps regarding this stirring mishap in Kalinga. Of course, he was heavily leaning towards spiritualism, and at last, he found some solace in the teachings of the Buddha. But as a king, he felt his duties towards his people instead of his personal spiritual gains. He made several changes in his personal lifestyle and eating habits. In the 10<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, he went to Bodhagayā, and with this, started his *Dhammayātrā*, religious tour or pilgrimage<sup>3</sup>. This must have been the starting point of his tour that lasted for 256 night-halts, as mentioned in all his Minor Rock Edicts (MREs). On calculation, we find that it comes to eight months and sixteen days, i.e. seventeen fortnights or *uposathas*. It was concluded at Sarnath.

Aśoka enumerates five purposes behind this *dhammayātrā* in his 8<sup>th</sup> RE- (i) to

have *darśana* of the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Śramaṇas* and give *dāna* to them; (ii) to have *darśana* of the elders, i.e. *Theras* and arrange funds for their livelihood; (iii) to meet the people (*janas*) of the *janapadas*; (iv) to instruct them in *dharma*; and (v) to answer their queries (about religion). He also assures that such steps will be abundantly taken in the later part of his reign<sup>4</sup>.

During this pilgrimage of eight and a half months, Aśoka addressed the assemblies of, perhaps, the general public as well as the Buddhist monks. This memorable event was recorded in his MREs spreading all over the country. In his own words :

“Devānampriya said this. Since last two and a half years. I am a (Buddhist) *upāsaka*. I could not do much effort. But now more than a year have lapsed I came in the fold of *Saṅgha* and I am doing much efforts. During this period in the *Jambūdvīpa*. i.e. in my empire, those deities, who were not known, were made known to the people (people were preached about *dhamma*). This is the result of efforts (in the field of religion by me). It is not that only big people can achieve this; even small people can get abundant *svarga* through efforts. For this purpose, *sāvanas* (religious lectures or sermons) are arranged so that big and small should do efforts; the bordering people should also know that results of these efforts are everlasting. Thus, the purpose will increase; it will increase one and a half times. This should be written on the hills accordingly. Where there are building pillars and stone pillars (free standing or in stone buildings or in caves), it should be written. With this purpose this (*dharmalipi*), you should send an officer on tour (for encampment) all over in the area of your operation. This sermon was delivered while on tour of 256 (nights’) encampment or living out of home (*vivāsa*).”

The Ahraura MRE is more specific about the last sentence. It records ‘*esa savane vivuthen duve saparīnā lāti sati am mañce Budhasa salīle āloḍhe ti*’, i.e. this *sāvana* (religious lecture) was delivered (by the king) while on tour of 256 nights’ halts of living outside home (*vivāsa*) and the relics of the Buddha were placed on the platform. In modern Hindi it is now *pravāsa*, instead of *vivāsa*.

Now we can speculate about the place where the relics of the Buddha might have been placed on platform (*mañca*) for the purpose of worship and suitable enshrinement later. Certainly, it was Sarnath near Varanasi where the Lord preached his First Sermon. The last encampment of Aśoka, on the 17<sup>th</sup> *uposatha* day. i.e. 256<sup>th</sup> halt was planned at Sarnath. Kāśī was under the direct administration of Pāṭaliputra since the time of Ajātaśatru. This can be confirmed by the partly obliterated text of the Sarnath Pillar Inscription, which is addressed to the *Mahāmātra* of Pāṭaliputra. Thus,

it is certainly plausible proposition that Aśoka visited Varanasi on this occasion. Perhaps, it was the dilapidated Dharmarājikā *Stūpa* of Sarnath where the relics were ceremoniously deposited after proper religious rites. Later, it is said that, this *stūpa* was dismantled and the debris was used in establishing the Jagataganja *Mohallā* of Varanasi by Jagata Singh, a *Divāna* of Kāśī state. As the king wished, the account of this ceremony and the summary of his lecture with its effect on the people he met, was engraved on the hills through out his empire. It was also recorded at Ahraura, the nearest suitable hill near Varanasi with specific mention of the relics of the Buddha and a hint of the ceremony at Sarnath. This practice was not singular to Aśoka, but in later period also, we find some such examples. The Tārācaṇḍī Rock Inscription was engraved about fifteen miles away from the site of the village it concerns<sup>5</sup>.

### ***Kaniṣka's Administration at Varanasi :***

The foundations of the Kuṣāṇa Empire in India were laid by Vima Kadphises, who was the father of Kaniṣka I. The Rabatak<sup>6</sup> Inscription was issue by Kaniṣka declaring the inauguration of an era starting from year 1 and hoping that it will last until Year 1000. This was done to celebrate the extension of the Kuṣāṇa empire - 'unto India, unto the whole of realm of the *kṣatriyas*, that as far them - both the (city of)... and the (city of Sāketa, and the (city of) Kosāmbī, and the (city of) Pāṭaliputra, as far as the (city of) Śrī Campā'. This list of the places conquered by or included in the Kuṣāṇa Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of Kaniṣka's reign and the foundation of an era in his own name shows that a long heartfelt desire of the Kuṣāṇas was fulfilled. At the same time, it also shows that most parts of northern India were under them before Kaniṣka. Varanasi was one such place where Kaniṣka posted a *kṣatrapa* as well as a *mahākṣatrapa*. The Sarnath Bodhisattva Image Inscription of *Bhikṣu* Bala informs us that the image of the Bodhisattva and the *chattrayaṣṭi* was established at Varanasi with *Kṣatrapa* Vanaspara and *Mahākṣatrapa* Kharapallāna<sup>7</sup>. Among these, Vanaspara proved to be more illustrious because in the early medieval period, we find that in the legends, two successors of Vanaspara, Ālhā (Allhana) and Udala (Rudrala) were in the service of the Candela king Paramadri. These two brothers are claimed to be *kṣatriyas* in legends. Incidentally, Kaniṣka in his above mentioned inscription claims whole of the north India to be the realm of *kṣatriyas*. It is possible that by '*kṣatriya*' he meant 'the ruling class'. This inscription of Bala is dated in the year 3 of *Mahārāja* Kaniṣka and is a significant record of the Kuṣāṇas for the history of Varanasi.

## ***Early Medieval Period***

### ***The Kalacurīs:***

During the early 11th century AD, Kalacurī king Gāṅgeyadeva and his son Lakṣmī Karṇa were ruling over Varanasi. Vaihaki in *Tawarikh-I-Subugtaghin* gives an account of the Varanasi exploit by Ahmed Niyaltighin in 1033 AD during the reign of Gāṅgeyadeva. The description appears to be imaginary and doubtful. It says that in 1033, he started from Lahore and after crossing Gaṅgā and marching on its left bank, he suddenly reached the city of Banaras and looted it till noon and returned before *namāz* because they wanted to escape safely with their exploits without confronting the army of the king. Considering the distance between Lahore and Banaras, it seems to be a flight of imagination to march with an army and return after half-a-day's looting<sup>8</sup>. I have every doubt about this exploit of Varanasi in 1033 by Niyaltighin.

Karṇa was the most illustrious ruler of Kalacurī dynasty. His Banaras Copper Plates<sup>9</sup> inform that he performed the *saṁvatsara śrāddha* of his father Gāṅgeyadeva at Allahabad after bathing in (*Tri*)*veṇī* or Gaṅgā at Prayāga in 1042 AD. Scholars hold this *śrāddha* was performed on the first anniversary of Gāṅgeyadeva's death. From other Kalacurī records we know that Gāṅgeyadeva died at the foot of the holy banyan tree at Prayāga. But the donated village Srusi was in the Kāśī area. The Kalacurī Empire, at times, included Kannauja and most of north India during Lakṣmī Karṇa's rule.

The Sarnath fragmentary inscription of the time of Karṇadeva informs about one Mamkā, wife of Dhameśvara devout worshipper of Mahāyāna, caused to be written a copy of the *Aṣṭasāhasrika-prajñā* and 'donated it to the Order of Venerable Monks'<sup>10</sup>.

Karṇa is credited to have erected a Śiva temple at Varanasi known as Karṇameru at a place, which is still known as Karṇghaṅṭā. Varanasi and Allahabad were his favourite cities and at Allahabad he is said to have constructed a *ghāṭa* called Karṇa Tīrtha on the banks of Gaṅgā. It is also said that the Kashmirian poet Bilhaṇa stayed with him at Varanasi for some time.

### ***The Gāhaḍavālas:***

The Gāhaḍavālas were the direct successors of the Kalacurīs in Varanasi. Their first king Candradeva is said to have acquired the kingship of Kānyakubja, i.e. Kannauja by valour of his arms after quelling the unrest among the people. Kānyakubja being a traditional seat of imperialism since the time of the Pratihāras, it might have been their capital of honour; but Varanasi seems to be their most favoured capital. There are about

ninety inscriptions of the Gāhaḍavālas; and in a majority of them, they donated land to the Brāhmaṇas after bathing in the Gaṅgā at Varanasi. Thus, it is natural that many places of the city find mention in their donations. Among these places we find some temples, *ghāṭas* on Gaṅgā as well as some other places. These kings, even princes and queens have donated land and villages to the learned Brāhmaṇas, sometimes as large a number as five hundred, after bathing in the holy river, or at a *ghāṭa* in the vicinity of some temple or god, or simply with the Gaṅgā water, perhaps in the palace. Often they claim 'after bathing in the Gaṅgā at Varanasi'. But sometimes, they mention the god and the temple, *ghāṭa* or even a pleasure garden (*vāṭikā*). In one of the inscriptions, Gaṅgā is described as north-flowing (*uttaravāhini*)<sup>11</sup>. Among the temples, we get the names of Ādikeśava<sup>12</sup>, Kṛttivāsa<sup>13</sup>, Lolārka<sup>14</sup>, Avimukta<sup>15</sup>. etc. Some of the *ghāṭas* mentioned in the epigraphs are - Kapālamocana Ghāṭa<sup>16</sup>, *Ghāṭa* of Deva Vedeśvara<sup>17</sup>, Koṭi Tīrtha<sup>18</sup>, Ādikeśava<sup>19</sup> & c. Krishna Deva opines that the god Ādikeśava might have been the family deity of the Gāhaḍavālas. He writes; 'The Candravatī Plate of Candradeva of V.S. 1156, which is described as *janita-surasarid-varan-aghamaṛṣaṇa*, implying that it was situated on the sacred confluence of the Gaṅgā and Varāṇā. Now the river is locally called Varuṇā. The present situation of the Ādikeśava Ghāṭa exactly conforms to this description and it is interesting to note on the close proximity of the *ghāṭa* to be find-spot of the present copperplates. Two other Gāhaḍavāla records mention the Ādikeśava Ghāṭa and three more the god Ādikeśava, whose shrine then, as now, was situated on the *ghāṭa* bearing the same name. But the earliest epigraphical reference to this deity, probably the family deity of the Gāhaḍavālas, is found in the following verse occurring in the Candravatī plates of Candradeva of V.S.1150:

हैमानि येन मणिभिः खचितान्यनर्ध्वैर्दत्तानि विष्णुहरये च विभूषणानि।

काश्यां व्यभूषयदनेकसुवर्णरत्नैर्यश्चादिकेशवविभोः प्रतिमां निवेश्य॥८॥

This gives us valuable information that the image of Ādikeśava was installed by Candradeva in or before V.S.1150<sup>20</sup>. Thus, it is quite possible that Ādikeśava was the family deity of the Gāhaḍavālas because it was nearer to their residence in Varanasi. Their palace might have been on the present mound of Rājaghāṭa. Perhaps, the name Rājaghāṭa was given to the place because of its association with the kings of Banaras.

One copperplate of Govindacandra, dated in the V.S.1190<sup>21</sup> records that a grant was given after bathing in the Govindavāṭikā (*śrīmadgovindavāṭikāyām snātvā*). This Govindavāṭikā must have been situated within the royal palace at Rājaghāṭa.

This is not an exhaustive study of inscriptions of Varanasi that throw light on

its history. But these selected epigraphs present some little known facts about the history and culture of Varanasi.

### References

1. See Sircar, D.C., *Select Inscriptions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1965, p.34. अठवस अभिसितस देवनं प्रियस प्रियदशिस रजो कलिग विजिता दिअढ मत्रे प्रण शत सहस्रे ये यतो अपवुडे शत सहस्र मत्रे तत्र हते बहु तवतके व मुटे।
2. Verma, T.P., 'Can Aśoka be identified with Nandarāja of the Hāthigumphā Inscription of Khāravela', *Prāgadhārā*, No. 6, Journal of the U.P. State Archaeological Organization, pp. 185-188.
3. R.E.8, सो देवानंप्रियो पियदसि राजा दसवसभितो संतो अयाय संबोधिं।
4. *Ibid.*, तेनेसा धंमयाता। एतयं होति बाम्हणसमणानं दसणे च दाने च थैरानं दसणे च हिरणं पटिविधानो च जानपदस च जनस दस्पनं धंमानुसस्टी च धंमपरिपुछा च तदोपया। एसा भुय रति भवति देवानंपियस प्रियदसिनो राजो भागे अंजे।
5. *Ep. Ind.* XXXIV (1960-61), No. 5, D.S. Sircar, Tārācaṇḍī Rock Inscription of Pratāpadhavala, V.S.1225, pp.-27.
6. Mani, B.R., 'Rabatak Inscription of Kaniska and Genealogy of the Kuṣāṇas, *Purātattva*, No. 32, 2001-2002, pp. 162-65; and Mukherjee, B.N., 'The Great Kuṣāṇa Testament', *Indian Museum Bulletin*, 1995, Calcutta (published in 1997-98).
7. Sircar, D.C., *Select Inscriptions*, pp.136-38.
8. Verma, T.P. and S.P.Gupta, *Ayodhyā kā Ithhāsa evam Purātattva*, p.111.
9. *Copus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol.IV, Inscriptions of the Kalacuri-Cedi Era, Part-I, pp.236-250.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.275-278.
11. *Ep. Ind.*, IV, pp. 109-10.
12. *Ep. Ind.*, IV, pp. 118, 123 and others.
13. *Ep. Ind.*, IV, pp. 125
14. *Ep. Ind.*, V, pp. 116-17
15. *Ep. Ind.*, IV, pp. 113-14.
16. *Ep. Ind.*, IV, pp. 109-10
17. *Ep. Ind.*, IV, pp. 114.
18. *Ep. Ind.*, VIII, pp. 158.
19. *Ep. Ind.*, IV, pp. 118, 123
20. *Ep. Ind.*, XXVI, pp. 269-70
21. *Ep. Ind.*, IV, pp. 111-12.