

Chapter 24

Inscriptions as Historical Writing in Early India: Third Century BC to Sixth Century AD

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The linguistic paradox of early India is that Sanskrit, the linguistic parent of Middle Indo-Aryan, first appeared in inscriptions later than its own descendants (such as Prākṛit). But inscriptions are textual records with varying functions requiring different languages spoken by different people. In nineteenth-century India they were initially listed under archaeology and came to be treated as artefacts and, at most, a source for dynastic succession and chronology. They were later recognized as important documents providing information on society and economy. Now we can recognize them additionally for the study of historical writing.

Inscriptions are of many kinds: royal proclamations, votive inscriptions recording gifts, eulogies of rulers, records of particular events, or legal documents pertaining to rights and obligations over land and such like. As with all categories of historical data, they reflect historical change. The context of a text involves asking many questions, such as: Who is the author? What is the intention of the text? Who is the intended audience? How does the language reflect history? And, where there is a change of language, what determines the choice? These questions can be asked of inscriptions.

Writing, whether pictorial or alphabetic, is a way of communicating. The earliest forms were the Harappan signs, engraved with special care on the small seals found in abundance at the city sites of the Indus civilization. To a lesser extent they occur on amulets and as graffiti on pots. It was assumed that the signs represented a language. The debate has centred on whether the script was logographic or alphabetic, and of course whether the language was Proto-Dravidian or Indo-Aryan, which were the two probable languages.¹ Attempts at decipherment in either language have so far not succeeded. More recently it has been suggested that communication was through signs, and that these signs should not be treated as a script—a view that only some scholars accept. The system of writing/

¹ A. Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script* (Cambridge, 1994).

communication terminated with the decline of the Harappan cities around 1700 BC, and an entirely different phonetic system emerged a few centuries later in the form of Old Indo-Aryan, which had cognates with Old Iranian. This disjuncture suggests a language change in north-western India. Whatever the Harappan language may have been, the subsequent language was predominantly Indo-Aryan in northern India.

Language change is not an isolated phenomenon but is tied to other historical changes. Who uses which language and for what purposes is basic to understanding societies of the past, since there was no uniform use of an identical language for all occasions. This is interestingly reflected in early Indian inscriptions. Those up to the Christian era are generally in Prākṛit (a widely used and varied vernacular form of Old Indo-Aryan), although Sanskrit was simultaneously being used for other purposes, such as in *brāhmaṇa* ritual. In the early first millennium AD there was a change to using Sanskrit in inscriptions which coincided with Sanskrit becoming the court language, although Prākṛit continued to be a commonly used language.²

Scripts also evolved and changed over time. There were two scripts in use initially: *brāhmī*, which had some similarities with the southern Semitic script and remained the primary script, and *kharoṣṭhī*, derived from Aramaic current in Achaemenid Asia, which was limited to north-western India and Central Asia, and gradually declined in use. *Brāhmī* remained the main script, and consequently underwent considerable change. The change was not so marked to begin with, but became so after the mid first millennium AD. This was also in part because it was being adapted to a number of regional languages. It changed to such an extent that it gradually became impossible to read the earliest inscriptions. Attempts by a Sultan of Delhi in medieval times to have the Aśōkan inscriptions read came to naught. Inscriptions that were nearly contemporary could be read, but the early scripts were an enigma.

The decipherment of *brāhmī* became a major challenge to Orientalist scholarship in India.³ It was thought—quite correctly—that the early inscriptions would provide valuable information. William Jones, the preeminent Indologist of the late eighteenth century, suggested a common linguistic ancestry for Sanskrit and Greek. He read the reference to an Indian king, Sandrocottos, in a Greek text as the linguistic equivalent of the Sanskrit Candragupta. Although the context points to this being the first Mauryan king, some argued that it could be a reference to Candragupta of the Gupta dynasty, who ruled more than six centuries later. Historians are now of the view that only the first reading is viable.

² Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and the Other Indo-Aryan Languages* (Austin, 1998); and Ahmad Hasan Dani, *Indian Paleography* (Oxford, 1963).

³ Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 199.

Charles Wilkins and Henry Colebrooke began with the medieval period inscriptions and tried to reconstruct the script in retrospect. A modicum of success came from this exercise. Some dates and an occasional name could be read. But the breakthrough came with James Prinsep, who focused on the Aśokan inscriptions. He argued that they did not seem to be in Sanskrit since double consonants were rare, and when he used a statistical method he noticed the repetition of a text on some of the pillars. Both Prinsep and Charles Lassen found some clues in the bilingual coins of the post-Mauryan Indo-Greek and Kṣatrapa rulers. Prinsep then turned to examining the brief votive inscriptions of donors at the much frequented Buddhist *stūpa* sites such as Sanchi. Here he noticed that most of the statements ended in the same three letters. These he guessed quite correctly were the signs for the genitive *śya* followed by 'gift of' (*dā-nam*). This began to unlock the decipherment.

The earliest edicts included phrases such as *devānampiya piyadasi rāja hevam āha*—'the beloved of the gods, the king Piyadasi, speaks thus'. This name 'Piyadasi' is not mentioned in the Puranic king lists, but occurs in Buddhist sources narrating the history of Sri Lanka. So it was first assumed that the reference was to a Sri Lankan king. It was a while before an inscription was discovered that confirmed the title of *devānampiya*, as also *piyadasi*, as the personal name of Aśoka (written in Prākṛit as Asoka).⁴ The Puranic dynastic lists merely mention Aśoka as a name in the list of Mauryan kings, whereas in the Buddhist tradition he is the role model of the *cakravartin*, the universal monarch, the focus of many narratives. This is another pointer to the bifurcation in the Puranic and Buddhist historiographic traditions, which either ignored or contradicted what the other said.

The late nineteenth century was when many inscriptions began to be read and the variations in the script were recognized. The focus was mainly on those providing a reliable chronology, since many were dated. Mention of the ruling king made it possible to start reconstructing dynastic history, especially of the period subsequent to the Guptas when the *Purāṇas* ceased to carry dynastic information, but there was a substantial increase in inscriptions. The growing awareness of sources of power being other than ritual is evident from the deliberate drawing on the past and using it to legitimize the present. This was to become an important aspect of the data in inscriptions, quite apart from their information on the present.

The earliest deciphered inscriptions are the edicts of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka dating to the third century BC.⁵ These edicts as royal proclamations are in three languages—Prākṛit, Greek, and Aramaic—and in four scripts: *brāhmī*, *kharoṣṭhī*, Greek, and Aramaic. The largest number is in Prākṛit with locations

⁴ Maski Inscription; Jules Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka* (Paris, 1955), 145.

⁵ Eugen Hultzsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 1: *The Inscriptions of Asoka* (Calcutta, 1877); and see also Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka*.

all over the subcontinent—from Mansehra in the north, to Girnar in the west, Dhauli in the east, and Yerragudi in the south.

The conversational tone and the informal contents of the edicts would have been inappropriate in Sanskrit, since Aśoka's subjects would have been mostly Prākṛit-speaking. This is made apparent by the king mentioning that his officers were to read the royal orders to the public. This would imply that there may have been areas where literacy was not sufficient for the general public to read the edicts, although literacy in Prākṛit among state officials, Buddhist monks, traders, and some others can be assumed. Regional differences of dialects, reflected even in words as common as *rājā* (chief/king), would only occur, as they do, if the language was widely spoken. Probably the edicts were sent out in the Māgadhi form of Prākṛit current in the capital at Pāṭalipūtra, and local scribes and engravers may well have introduced local dialect usage.

That Prākṛit was the most widely used language is evident from the linguistic features of the epigraphs indicating regional variations of dialects. Politically, the most important language was Māgadhi Prākṛit, spoken in the area that was the nucleus of the emergent kingdoms and what became the heartland of the Mauryan empire—the middle Ganges plain. One of the interesting variations is that in Māgadhi, the 'r' is replaced by 'l'. Thus *rājā* is written as *lājā*. This replacement has a long history and was referenced in the Vedic corpus five centuries earlier as characteristic of the speech of the *asuras* or the *mlecchas*—barbarians who cannot speak Sanskrit correctly.⁶ From the orthodox Sanskritic perspective, the language used by the emperor Aśoka was that of the barbarians, despite being the language of the royal edicts. The variant in central India and the west was often called the Ujjain dialect, the town of Ujjain being the hub, and that of the north-west was called Gandhāri Prākṛit, so named after the north-western border area being called Gandhāra. The distinctions are reasonably apparent.

The Aśokan edicts, written in Aramaic, had incorporated some elements of Prākṛit, possibly because of Prākṛit speakers settled in that area mixing with Aramaic speakers. An Aśokan bilingual Aramaic–Greek inscription indicates the presence of a Greek-speaking population, which is further supported by translations of the Major Rock Edicts from Prākṛit into Greek. These become epigraphic cross-references to events in Hellenistic west Asia—an inference made more firm by the mention in one edict of five Hellenistic kings who were contemporaries of Aśoka.⁷ The type of Greek used was generally the *koine*, which was the *lingua franca* of the Hellenistic world, registering regional variation, and it therefore parallels the use of Prākṛit in India.

The five Hellenistic kings are mentioned as follows: *'atta amṭiyoge nāma yonala[ja] palam cā tenā amṭiyogenā cattali 4 lājana tulamaye nāma antekine*

⁶ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 3. 2. 1. 23.

⁷ XIII Major Rock Edict; Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford, 1961), 40 ff.

nāma makā nāma alikiyaśudale nāma... ('where reigns the Yona king named Antiochus and beyond that Antiochus four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas, and Alexander...').⁸ The first four have been identified with certainty, but the fifth could be either Alexander of Epirus or Alexander of Corinth. This reference to the *yonarājās* has come to be treated as a bedrock of ancient Indian chronology, since the dates of these kings as contemporaries of Aśoka are well established. The certainty of this evidence supersedes that made by William Jones in equating Sandrocottos with Candragupta Maurya.

What is remarkable about these edicts, apart from the languages and forms that were used, is that the king touches on many facets of Indian life and history that were being constantly acted upon in later centuries. Without saying so directly, there was much that had its genesis in the ideas and attitudes propounded in these texts. In more senses than one, the edicts can be regarded as the introduction to the historical traditions of early India.

The Greek and Aramaic versions are not translations but renderings of some of Aśoka's thoughts from the Prākṛit edicts relating to his concern with social ethics. As such, they add to the meaning of some of the Prākṛit usage in words such as *eusebeia* in Greek for *dhamma* in Prākṛit, meaning virtue or piety, with no necessary connection to Buddhism; and this is rendered in Aramaic as *qsy* (truth) and *dāta* (law and piety), hinting at links with Zoroastrianism. There was possibly an attempt to relate these concepts to the cultural idioms of those speaking non-Prākṛit languages. The Greek *diatribe* is the same as the Prākṛit *pāsāṇḍa*, referring to philosophical schools, and it too changes its meaning in later periods to mean those teaching false doctrines. These inscriptions are from areas ceded to the Mauryas by the Seleucids. The presence of these languages points to populations speaking various non-Indian languages.

The edicts emphasize social ethics as defined by Aśoka and, although they are not identical with Buddhist philosophy, they nevertheless carry something of an imprint. The Major Rock Edicts (MRE), a set of fourteen, and an additional two Separate Edicts (SE), were inscribed on rock surfaces in various parts of his domain where people gathered. These were issued in the years after his twelfth regnal year (*dbādasa vāssābhisittena*). After a break of about a dozen years, another set of seven edicts was issued inscribed, this time, on pillars, some specially constructed, at important locations in the Ganges plain. These latter are a retrospective where he reviews what he has achieved, and to that extent they are a comment on his past actions. He is careful about recording his regnal years, and the edicts therefore carry a chronological narrative of his thought. Frequent mention is made of *purā* (past times), or more specifically *atikkātam aṃtaram bahuni vāssastāni*, when kings indulged in pleasures that have now declined (MRE I, IV). Some activities are to continue until the end of the universe (*samvaṭṭa kappā*).

⁸ Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Aśoka*, 130.

Aśoka refers to his domain as *vijaye*, that over which he rules (MRE XIV). There are friendly references to his western neighbours, the five Hellenistic kings, mentioned by name (MRE XIII). There are references to various peoples within the imperial territories: the Yonas, Kāmbojas, Nābhakas, Nābhapanktis, Bhojas, Pitinikas, Āndhras, and Pārindas; and in the south, the Cholas, Pāṇḍyas, Keralaputras, and Satyaputras. These latter seem not to have been kingdoms as there are no names of kings, and the suffix *putra* is often used for a clan. This is a contrast with the Hellenistic rulers.

Mention is also made of the forest peoples—the *aṭavikas*. It is said that the king is like their father and feels for them, and that they will be forgiven by the king in so far as they can be forgiven. But what they are to be forgiven for is not stated (SE II). Presumably forest-dwellers were resisting the encroachment into forests by kingdoms desirous of cutting forests and converting them into cultivable land to enhance the revenue of the state. This is implied in some of the remarks on forest tribes in the *Arthaśāstra*—the text of political economy thought to be of this period.⁹ The confrontation between the state and forest-dwellers was a constant one, resolved either by the latter ceasing to be clan entities and becoming law-abiding peasants and castes and changing their way of life, or by some moving deeper into the recesses of the forest. It is surprising that in an otherwise humanistic document there should be such threats to the forest-dwellers.

The imperial administration seemed less concerned with reaching out to the chiefdoms of the south, and does not translate the edicts into Tamil—the language widely used there. The *brāhmī* script could have been adapted to Tamil if it had been thought important to communicate locally. This was done soon after at the initiative, it would seem, of local merchants, some identifying cargo, and others recording their gifts to Jaina monks and nuns, among other things.¹⁰ There are elements of Prākṛit and some Prākṛitisms in the Tamil-brāhmī inscriptions, again suggesting Prākṛit speakers in the area. There are co-relations between the references to clans and chiefs in these short inscriptions and in references in the Tamil anthologies of poetry of about the same date.

It is puzzling that there is little reference to the Buddhist institutions such as the *Saṅgha* (Order) or *vihāras* (monasteries) or worship at *stūpas*, the tumulus built to mark a relic, in these southern inscriptions, especially when compared with the earliest inscriptions of Sri Lanka, written in Prākṛit but recognizable as the local Sinhala Prākṛit, which refer almost exclusively to Buddhism. According to the Buddhist chronicles of the early history of India and Sri Lanka, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvaṃsa*, Buddhist missionaries came by sea from north India, bypassing the south, and this may be one explanation. Equally puzzling is why

⁹ *Arthaśāstra*, 2.17.

¹⁰ Iravatham Mahadevam, *Early Tamil Epigraphy from the Earliest Times to the Sixth Century A.D.* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

Jaina missions did not continue their journey from south India to Sri Lanka. If there was a Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka backed by Aśoka, this may have dissuaded the Jains.

Judging by the language of the inscriptions, Prākṛit was widely used for almost four centuries from the Mauryan period. Dynasties of the immediately post-Mauryan period issued a variety of inscriptions in Prākṛit. It was also used in coin legends of the Śātavāhanas, Indo-Greeks, and Indo-Scythians. This is not surprising at a time when trade was in the ascendant, encouraging bilingualism. Royal inscriptions recorded donations to Buddhist monasteries and to *brāhmaṇas*. The inscription was a statement of status as well as a record of a pious gift as, for example, in a substantial investment by a member of the Kṣatrapa royal family in two weavers' guilds, the interest of which was to be used for purchasing robes for monks (EI, 8, 82 ff.) or the planting of 32,000 coconut trees for a congregation of monks, or the lavish donations to *brāhmaṇas*, including providing some with wives (EI, 8, no. 10. 78 ff.).

These impressive royal grants recorded at Nasik are juxtaposed with the much smaller grants from householders and their families, female ascetics, a fisherman and his kinsfolk, and small land owners (EI, 8, 55 ff.), all for the Buddhist Saṅgha. Thus, whereas royalty patronized both the Buddhists and the Vedic Brāhmaṇas, the ordinary folk at this time were inclined to make donations to the Buddhist Saṅgha.

An innovation in royal inscriptions was the inclusion of a brief biography of a ruler in an inscription from western India, as well as in another somewhat longer autobiographical statement from a king of Kāliṅga in the east, both issued at about the same time. Gotami Balasiri, a Śātavāhana Queen, refers to the achievements of her son Siri Satakaṇi Gotamiputa (EI, 8. 60 ff.). The reigning king took the title of Vasithiputa Siri Pulamāyī, where Vasithiputa is the Prākṛit for the Sanskrit Vasiṣṭhiputra. The other name, Pulamāyī, does not appear to be of Indo-Aryan origin. The use of bilingual coins in Tamil and Prākṛit by the Śātavāhanas would suggest some component of Dravidian speakers. A possible Dravidian etymology could be *puliṇan* or *puliyān*, forest-dwellers or mountaineers (DED 3547, 3548), and may also have provided the root for the Sanskrit name Pulinda, referring to such people. Whereas he is referred to as *rāṇo*, Gotamiputra is given the title of *rājarāṇo*, king of kings, later to take the form of *mahārājādhirāja*. Was the Śātavāhana royalty a local clan that rose to power? Gotamiputa is said to have revived the glory of the Śātavāhana dynasty (*śātavāhanakulayaśapatiṭhāpana*) by defeating the Yavanas and rooting out the Khakharāta clans. He also stopped the contamination of the four *varṇas* (castes), as required by the orthodox brahmanical social code—a phrase that had become more formulaic than reflective of social observance.

Conquests and support of the caste organization were to be continuing features of kingship. Nevertheless it is also recorded, as was often to be so, that Gotamiputra was patron of the Saṅgha, Order of Buddhist monks, who in

theory were opposed to caste organization. Gifts and grants given separately to Śramana (Buddhist and Jaina) and to *brāhmaṇa* grantees were a common practice, and were to remain so until grants to Buddhist and Jaina recipients declined.

The unusual Hathigumpha inscription from Orissa is a brief autobiography of the early career of Khāravela, the Cedi ruler of Kalinga (EI 20.71 ff.). It is virtually a year-by-year account of his achievements in early life. The location of the inscription is near a Jaina centre, perhaps because the king was a Jaina. Khāravela refers to conflict with the Sātavāhanas over territory in the Deccan. He also refers to the Yavana-rājā Dīmīta—probably the Indo-Greek king Demetrius—whose presence in central India is mentioned in other sources, and who refers to himself in his coins as Dime[tra] in *kharoṣṭhī*. Other conflicts included campaigns against the kingdoms of south India, and closer to home against those of the middle Ganges plain.¹¹ He takes an interest in the compiling of Jaina texts, doubtless on the model of what was being done in the Buddhist monasteries at the time, and which was to give rise to an historical tradition. Most of the place names that he mentions have been identified. Such inscriptions were precursors to the *praśasti* form, now becoming a part of inscriptional style referring to the ancestry and activities of particular rulers in the form of a eulogy.

The Hathigumpha inscription introduced a number of features that were to become hallmarks of inscriptions in the later period. The opening section has statements on the king's origins. He refers to himself as *airena*, which could be the descendent of Ilā/Ilā, a lineage ancestor/ancestress from the Puranic tradition. His own lineage, he states, is that of the Mahāmeghavāhana, which in the Jaina tradition is a particularly illustrious lineage, and is linked to the Cedi descent group claimed by a number of dynasties, such as the Kalacuri and the Haihaya of central India at this time. As the term Kalingādhīpati indicates, he regards himself as the lord of Kalinga, of substantial importance in eastern India.

His claim to a Cedi connection marks a significant historiographical point. The Cedis were one of the sixteen major states of northern India in Buddhist sources. In the genealogical lists of the *Purāṇas* they are said to belong to the Yādava lineage. But Khāravela's claim doubtless comes from Jaina sources and is prior to the construction of descent groups in the *Purāṇas*, since these would date to the early centuries AD. The comparison of Khāravela to Vena is also of interest. It is based on the myth of the first king, Vena, being a great king but opposed to brahmanical orthodoxy, and therefore killed by the *brāhmaṇas*. Khāravela refers to his consecration as the *mahābhiṣeka*, drawing attention to the description in the Vedic corpus. Claim to conquering the Rathika and the Bhoja

¹¹ Dines Chandra Sircar, 'Problems of the Yuga Purana', in id., *Studies in Yugapurana and Other Texts*, ed. Swarajya Prakash Gupta (Delhi, 1974), 1–19.

goes back to a mention in Aśokan inscriptions. The reference to the Nandas of Magadha is to the pre-Mauryan dynasty that is said to have constructed a water course in Kalinga dated to the year 103 of the Nanda era. Khāravēla is anxious to make connections with earlier rulers and events.

The most widespread use of Prakrit was in votive inscriptions at Buddhist and Jaina sacred sites. The donations are recorded at *stūpa* sites, on icons, and on pottery. Rulers are not donors in significant numbers, nor are they given grandiloquent titles. The larger number of donors are ordinary people of varied professions, whose donations are either individual or often as a family or community group. The record of the donation usually ends in the phrase *śya dānam*, 'the gift of...'.¹²

The most striking of these is the much discussed Piprahwa Buddhist Vase Inscription of about the late third century BC.¹³ A vase was donated by a family to a Buddhist *stūpa*, and the claim made in the inscription is that it contained the relics of the Buddha: *iyam salīla nidhane budhasa bhagvate sākiyanam*. It echoes the story in the Buddhist texts that the relics of the Buddha were divided between the clans that revered him, and a *stūpa* was built over each collection. Is this intended as epigraphical evidence of that story, and an attempt to give it historicity? The problem remains as to how such an important relic came into the hands of an obscure family. There is an echo of this in the Aśokan edict at Ahraura in the sentence that states *maṃca buddhase salīle ālodhe*, referring to raising the relics of the Buddha. The worship of a bodily relic after cremation would be anathema to *brāhmaṇas*, for whom death was a source of impurity.

From the second century BC to the third century AD there is a flood of votive inscriptions recording donations made by many people for the building and adornment of Buddhist *stūpas*, and occasionally as records on the pedestals of Jaina icons. Such inscriptions are important to the reconstruction of the history of Buddhism, which by this time was split into many sects. Apart from mentioning the name, family, and occupation of the donor, the place of origin, the nature of the donation, and sometimes the sect to which the donor belonged, the ruling king is occasionally mentioned. The title significantly continues to be a form of *rājā* and nothing more grandiose. In the construction of a pavilion by a perfumer, the list of donors includes the father, mother, wife, brothers, daughters, daughters-in-law, grandson, kinsmen, and friends.¹⁴ In one inscription the descent of five generations is listed by name.¹⁵ The phrase *sanātimitabadhava* covers kinsmen and friends and those in any way connected.

¹² Luder's list, no. 931, *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 10; and Fredrik Barth, 'The Inscription on the Piprahwa Vase', *Indian Antiquary*, 36 (1907), 117 ff.

¹³ N. J. Francis, *A Source Book of the Early Brahmi Inscriptions of Amaravati* (Shimla, India, forthcoming), no. 224.

¹⁴ Bharhut Pillar Inscriptions in Luder's list, no. 687, *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 10.

A group of inscriptions from Bhattiprolu have their own interest.¹⁵ They are paleographically close to Aśokan *brāhmī* and are therefore dated to about the early second century BC. Three are relic caskets with inscriptions on the rim or the lid, which was to become a fairly common practice when interring the relics of the Elders of the monastery. But in one case there is another claim that the casket contains the relics of the Buddha. It would seem that relic worship had become so important that claims of the relics being those of the Buddha were not questioned. Relics are also regarded as proof of the historicity of the person. Reference is made to a *gothi*, a community of Buddhists, who are named, and were obviously persons of local importance, some officials and some others, who gave various objects to be included in the donation. Community donations meant that segments of the monument could be constructed through such donations and acknowledged separately, unlike royal donations which often consisted of the monument itself. The gift of a woman donor is specifically mentioned, along with the fact that she came from Nandapura.

The Buddhist *stūpa* at Amaravati has a history of votive inscriptions starting in the late third century BC and continuing for five hundred years, indicating that it remained a major site of worship for that length of time. Here again the patronage comes mainly from the community, and from monks and nuns who constitute about a third of the donors, with a tiny fraction of royal donations.¹⁶ The royal donations are from women of the Ikṣvāku family since they tended to be the major royal patrons of Buddhism, whereas the men more frequently supported the rituals of Vedic sacrifices. References to the rulers are in part to give an indication of the date, and in part to provide an association with the male donor of the royal family. Thus a slab showing in low relief the worship of the Bodhi tree carries the statement that it refers to *rājño gotamiput্রে sri yajna [sa]takarnasya*, the king Gotamiputra Sri Satakarni.¹⁷ Another inscription by a *gahapati* (householder), mentions the year of the *rājño vāsithīputa sami siri pulumāvi*, the king Vasiṣṭhiputra Pulumāvi.

In neighbouring Nagarjunakonda there is a continuation of votive inscriptions at this major Buddhist site, and again they are in the Prākṛit language and the *brāhmī* script.¹⁸ The inscriptions are of the Ikṣvāku/Ikṣvāku dynasty which succeeded the Mauryas in that region. The patrons were mainly the queens and their kinswomen. The wives of important clansmen and officers took the title of their husbands; thus the wife of the *mahātalāvara* was referred to as the *mahā talāvarī*. The king is said to be an *asamedhayājīśa*, a performer of the *aśvamedha*. The Ikṣvāku royal family was taking no chances and was supporting both religious systems—Buddhism and Vedic Brahmanism. The kings are described as great patrons, who not only performed a variety of Vedic sacrifices, but also gave

¹⁵ *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 2, 323.

¹⁶ See Francis, *A Source Book of the Early Brahmi Inscriptions of Amaravati*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 159.

¹⁸ *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 20, 1–37.

plentifully in gold, cows, and ploughs—the gifts traditionally mentioned in Vedic texts, and usually in exaggerated quantities. It is unclear whether ploughs refer to land, but possibly not at this stage, or else it would have been singled out for special mention. At the same time there are other inscriptions that refer to Buddhist texts and teaching such as the *Nikāyas*, going back to an earlier period. Curiously there is no disapproval of animal sacrifices as in the earlier Pāli Buddhist Canon.

Buddhist sites of *stūpas* and *vihāras* were located in every part of the subcontinent. Many considerations led to the choice of a site. There could be an existing sacred place that went back to prehistoric times. The more obvious of these were the sites of the megalithic cultures such as Amaravati, which was appropriated by a large Buddhist structure engulfing the earlier one, but the sacredness of which became an historical continuity. This was a process that continued throughout Indian history, with Hindu temples built at the site of Buddhist *caityas* (halls of worship), as at Ter and Chezarla, or Muslim mosques built on Hindu temples, as at Delhi and Ajmer. The inscriptions, however, do not refer to the taking over of such sacred spaces.

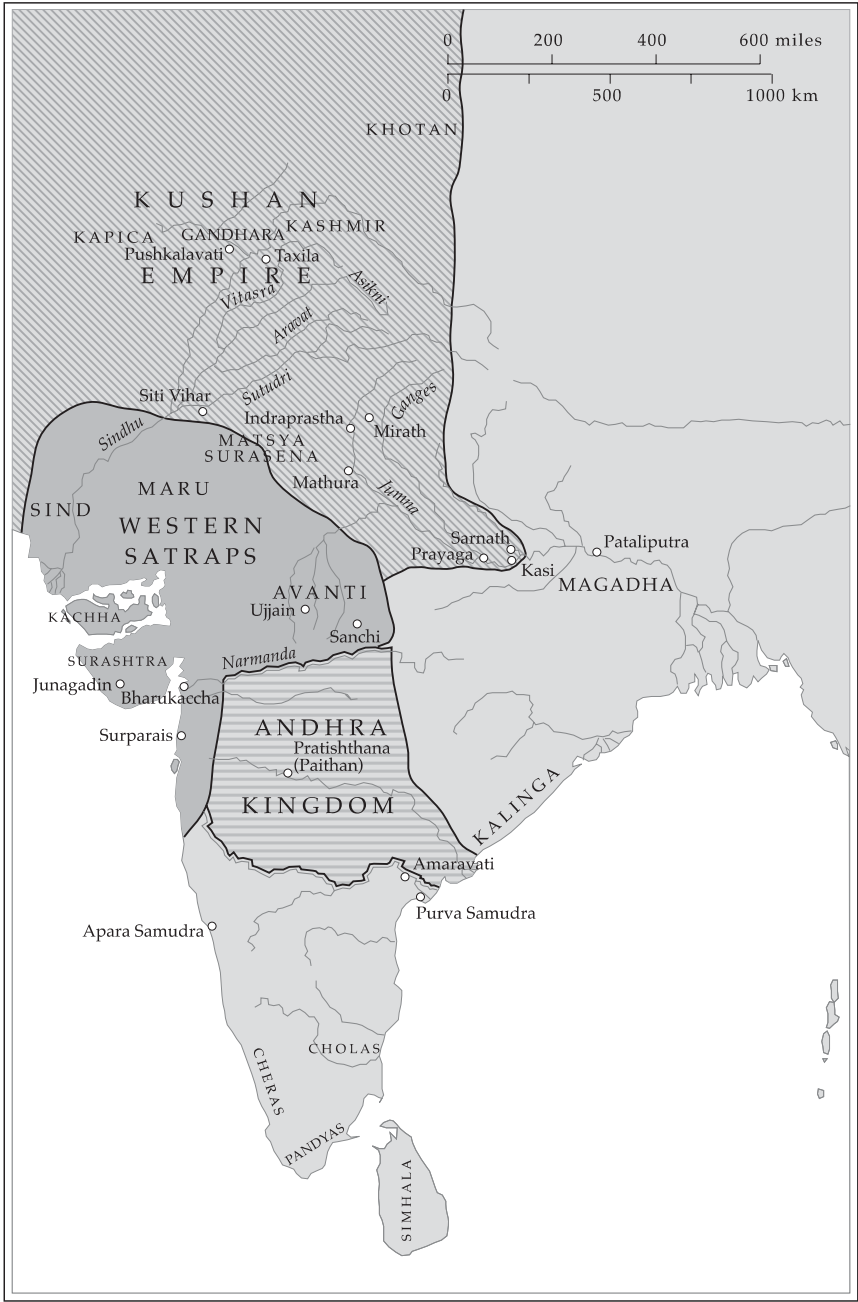
Alternatively, the location may have been on a trade route. This is evident in the conjoining of commercial centres and monastic sites, and the rarity of monastic sites in unapproachable wildernesses. The participation of monks in exchange and commerce has been the subject of extensive study.¹⁹ This is also evident in the routes going from northern India to central Asia, peppered with Buddhist Prākṛit inscriptions in *kharoṣṭhī*, with the oasis towns of Central Asia being the habitat of Buddhist monasteries.

Prākṛit inscriptions were not entirely concerned with Buddhist votive gifts. Some refer to other situations. Among the more interesting is a pillar inscription dedicated to Viṣṇu, the Puranic deity who was becoming popular at the turn of the Christian era.²⁰ The pillar was established by Heliodora, the son of Diya/Dion, a native of the city of Takṣaśīla or Taxila in the north-west and who describes himself as a Yona/Yavana, the term used for Greeks and west Asians. He is the ambassador of the *mahārāja* Amtalikita/Antalkidas to the *rājan* Kāśiputa. The pillar is his declaration of being a follower of the Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa cult—one of the many forms of the worship of Viṣṇu. It is worth noticing that he refers to his king as a *mahārāja*, whereas the local Indian king is simply a *rājan*, in keeping with the current Indian tradition.

Among the last of the important inscriptions in Prākṛit was the group found at Andau in Kathiawar and date to the early second century AD. Issued during the reign of Rudradāman, three generations of his ancestors are named—information that was becoming common in inscriptions. The date is given as the year 52,

¹⁹ Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* (Honolulu, 1997).

²⁰ Luder's list, no. 669; Besnagar Garuda Inscription, in *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 10, 63 ff.



India c. AD 150.

but the era is not mentioned. If it was issued in the currently popular Śāka era it would work out to AD 130, which would be in agreement with the paleography. The inscriptions are records of a group of funeral monuments of a family, and appear to have a Jaina association.

Buddhist and Jaina sectarian literature was still largely in Pāli and Prākṛit. The inscriptions would suggest that public discourse was associated with Prākṛit, which was the language of state administration as well as sectarian teachings. As a language of public discourse over such a vast area, regional differences were inevitable, and continued to be recorded from the time of the Aśoka inscriptions.

Apart from Siñhala Prākṛit in Sri Lanka, Prākṛit also had a substantial presence to the north of the subcontinent in central Asia, with inscriptions in *kharoṣṭhī* and *brāhmī*. Among the many routes from India to central Asia, the Karakorum Highway (touching on Gilgit, Chitral, and Hunza) was the location of innumerable short inscriptions in Prākṛit mentioning names, votive gifts, and prayers associated with Buddhism. Prākṛit travelled along the Silk Route from Khotan eastwards to Miran and further to Loulan, where inscriptions in *kharoṣṭhī* date to the first century AD. Inscriptions come largely from the oasis towns along the trade routes and, judging by their numbers, Prākṛit was used by traders and Buddhist monks, and thus was doubtless known to those who lived in these towns and interacted with both. At the political level, Kuṣāna administration of the early centuries AD would have furthered its use, with the Kuṣāna kingdom spreading across western central Asia and much of northern India. One can perhaps speculate that the flexibility of Prākṛit made it more acceptable to speakers of other languages. Given the presence of Prākṛit elements in central Asian languages such as Bactrian, Khotanese, Tokharian, and more particularly Sogdian, which was the *lingua franca*, the use of the language was not limited to Indians settled in that area.

There are, therefore, many reasons for the extensive use of Prākṛit. State administration, wishing to communicate with a range of people and not just the elite, made Prākṛit the language of polity; as the language of merchants and artisans it was tied to trade that was crucial to the economy of the time; both Buddhism and Jainism, which had a considerable following, used Prākṛits, including texts that dealt with the past; and the extensive donations to *stūpas* and *vihāras* were from the *upāsakas* (lay followers) who were Prākṛit speaking, and among them women were conspicuous. The Prākṛits evolved from Indo-Aryan and, with their regional divergence, reflected a linguistic diversity. From the third century BC to the second century AD, Prākṛit was the language of the cosmopolitan discourse of the south Asian region and its neighbourhood, in virtually every direction.

This situation underwent a distinctive historical change in the early centuries AD when Prākṛit was gradually replaced by Sanskrit as the language of public discourse. With all the activity involving Prākṛit and its preeminence in

epigraphs, one wonders at the absence of inscriptions in Sanskrit, since it was regarded as the preeminent ritual language of early India and of early literature. Its appearance in inscriptions began tentatively in the early centuries AD. The well-known Bala inscription commemorates the establishing of a statue and monastery at Sarnath at the instance of a Buddhist member of the Saṅgha, claiming that it was on the spot where the Buddha himself used to stroll.²¹ This was the inventing of a tradition.

An inscription in the Mathura region used Prākṛit, but veered close to Sanskrit linguistic forms.²² This has been labelled Epigraphical Hybrid Sanskrit. The inscription commemorates the setting up of an image of a *bodhisattva*, a Buddha to be, by the daughter of a local *mahārāja*, and is dated to the 23rd year of the Kuṣāna king Kaniṣka. Another inscription of a second king Kaniṣka gives the day, month, and year, again in an unknown era—possibly the Śaka era of AD 78. The king takes elaborate royal titles, culminating in *mahārājasa rājātirājasa devaputrassa kaisarasa*, the great king, the king of kings, the son of the deity, the *kaisara*—indeed a far cry from the simple *rājā* of earlier inscriptions.²³ The use of these titles has been debated. Their frequent occurrence in the north-west was perhaps the influence of Roman imperial titles, where *kaisara* may be a version of Caesar, and *devaputra* suggests the Chinese ‘son of heaven’. The Kuṣāna kingdom had transactions with both the Roman and Chinese empires. Other than adopting a fashion, it was an indicator of a change in the perception of kingship, where the king was now a far greater focus of authority and power than had been the earlier *rājā*.

The use of a Sanskritized Prākṛit is evident in inscriptions connected with what were to emerge as Puranic deities.²⁴ An inscription from Ayodhya of the Suṅga period records the building of a shrine by a person sixth in descent from the *senāpati* (commander of the army) Puṣyamitra.²⁵ In literary sources, the *senāpati* (commander) Puṣyamitra is said to have usurped the Mauryan throne and founded the Suṅga dynasty. As a good *brāhmaṇa* he would have given preference to the use of Sanskrit, however bowdlerized, and performed the *aśvamedha* as stated in the inscription. The publicity given to the performance of Vedic rituals in association with emerging kingship at this time would have been qualitatively different from the same rituals being performed by the chief of the clan in earlier centuries. A major factor would have been that the wealth expended on the ritual would now have been greater. The concept of wealth was slowly beginning to include land, which had not been the case earlier.

The first inscription in Sanskrit of a reasonably good quality, which in a sense turned public discourse from Prākṛit to Sanskrit, was that of Rudradāman, the *mahākṣatrapa* of western India. It was issued in the Śaka era of 72, the

²¹ *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 17, 173 ff.

²² Mathura Inscription, *ibid.*, vol. 28, 42 ff.

²³ Ara inscription of Kanishka II, *ibid.*, vol. 14, 130 ff.

²⁴ Gosundi inscription, *ibid.*, vol. 16, 25 ff.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 20, 57 ff.

equivalent of AD 150, and engraved on the same rock as the set of Aśoka's edicts at Girnar in Kathiawar.²⁶ The rock marked an entry into the valley that had been dammed by the Mauryan administration to create the Sudarshan lake, presumably as a source of irrigation. Because it describes the restoration of the lake after it had been destroyed during a fierce storm, the inscription is located where the original edict of Aśoka was engraved. The inscription mentions that the dam was built by *mauryasya rajnāh candraguptasya rāṣṭriyena vaiśyena Puṣyaguptena karitam*, Candagupta Maurya's governor, the *vaiśya* Puṣyagupta. Subsequently, after another storm, it was restored by *aśokasya mauryasya te yavanarājaena tuṣāspheṇa adhiṣṭhaya*, Asoka's administrator, the *yavanarāja* Tuṣāśpa, and the current breach was restored by his own governor, Suviśākha. Barring the first, the names suggest that Kathiawar may have been a borderland for the Iranians and Parthians. It is impressive that an event of the fourth century BC was being recalled in the second century AD, and was to be remembered later still. He makes a particular point of stating that the restoration of the dam did not require forced labour or extra taxes, since the finances from the treasury were sufficient and the administrator Suviśākha was an upright man and not susceptible to corruption.

The *praśasti* (eulogy) on Rudradāman mentions his father, Jayadāman, and grandfather, the better-known Caṣṭana. He acquired the title of *mahākṣatrapa* through his conquests in the area and makes a point of referring to defeating the Yaudheyas who claimed to be *kṣatriyas*. Presumably this referred to the Puranic use of the term *kṣatriya* as the clans of old. He defeated Satakarni the Sātavāhana, but let him off because of a close relationship. He donates cows to *brāhmaṇas*, which would have brought him the support of the brahmanical orthodoxy. In listing the characteristics of a king he mentions some of the requirements of a state system as given in texts on political economy, such as the army and the treasury. It is also noticeable that, although the Kuṣānas were taking grandiose titles, Rudradāman refers to both the Maurya kings merely as *rājās*. The latter part of the inscription is more conventional in describing his good looks and the number of *svayamvaras* where he won the hand of many a princess.

A striking question is why a *mahākṣatrapa* (literally the great *satrap*), whose title indicates that he was not a local ruler, should use Sanskrit for his inscriptions. Prākṛit was still commonly used, and the earlier inscription of Aśoka at Girnar was in Prākṛit. Was he making a claim that, although of alien stock, he was not a *mleccha*, and that his status was as good as that of any other ruler? Or was it becoming fashionable to use Sanskrit at court to demarcate the members of the court from others, and he therefore chose it for his inscriptions as well?

Inscriptions in Sanskrit now began appearing, but what is surprising is that it took so long for it to become the language of inscriptions. The centrality of

²⁶ Ibid., vol. 8, 42 ff.; and Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 89.

Prākṛit in state administration declined in the early first millennium AD and was gradually replaced by Sanskrit, which became the language of court and administration from the mid first millennium AD. This, in a sense, also liberated it from being essentially the language of ritual. Texts exploring knowledge, such as those on mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and creative literature, had already begun to adopt Sanskrit. To state that Sanskrit was the refined language and Prākṛit a natural language was to create a hierarchical relationship between the two. The inferiority of Prākṛit is strikingly set out in the dramas of these times, where upper-caste men spoke Sanskrit—all except the *viduṣaka*, the *brāhmaṇa* who provided comic relief—whereas the women and lower-caste men spoke Prākṛit.

The mid first millennium AD also witnesses some changes in calligraphy within the *brāhmī* script. Whereas in post-Aśokan times there were curving strokes that went downwards, these were now discarded and, instead, there was a heavy impression at the top of each letter which has led to its being called 'box-headed *brāhmī*'. In the southern scripts, the tendency was to give the letters more rounded forms. The intention was to state a change, and by the seventh century the change was established.

Within the hegemony of Indo-Aryan culture, Prākṛit had to give way to Sanskrit. The change may have been affected by some other factors as well. A few of the early Hybrid Sanskrit inscriptions are linked to the emerging worship of Puranic deities, in particular Śiva and Viṣṇu. Some inscriptions from the courts of rulers regarded as foreign, such as the Kṣatrapas, were replacing the earlier use of Prākṛit. Was the use of Sanskrit a method of identifying with the orthodox against the earlier patronage to the heterodox sects, particularly if one was not of the upper caste oneself? But the latter were also using a Hybrid Sanskrit, and why they were doing so is in itself a question that needs an answer. Was the legitimizing of kingship more accessible through brahmanical rituals? By the rules of the normative social codes—the *Dharmaśāstras*—Rudradāman would have been a *mleccha*. In the previous period such rules were less adhered to, but now they became a part of the play of political power.

There may have been considerations in the choice of language in northern and western India, but in the Deccan and south India there was a difference. The use of a mix of Prākṛit and Sanskrit continued until later than in the north, up to the fourth or fifth centuries AD. In some cases the pattern that emerged was one in which data on the king is given in Sanskrit, but the grant and its details are in Prākṛit.²⁷ This, it would seem, was harking back to an historical model, since by this time Tamil, rather than Prākṛit, would have been the more convenient language for recording the details of the charter. The local languages began to replace Prākṛit by about the seventh century AD, when some sections of the inscriptions could be written in the regional language. With grants to religious

²⁷ Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 91.

beneficiaries there is much less distinction of language, and both Buddhists and *brāhmaṇas* received their grants in charters written either in Prākṛit or Sanskrit, or sometimes with different sections in different languages.

The efflorescence of Sanskrit as the language of the court and of inscriptions was well established by the Gupta period. The best known is the retrospective pillar inscription at Allahabad.²⁸ It is regarded as an exemplar of the *praśasti* or eulogy, and was probably issued by Samudragupta's son, Candragupta II, and dates to the fourth century AD. Samudragupta is given the full imperial title of *mahārājādhirāja*: by this time even lesser rulers were taking extraordinarily grand titles, many of which were, of course, hyperbole. *Praśastis* refer back to dynastic origins, particularly where deities are involved, but there is a distinction between what is exaggerated in formulaic ways and that which is more historical. Conquests over kingdoms and over chiefdoms are listed. The latter seem to have been politically more important than is conceded by modern historians. We are told that the composition was the work of court poets, and the name of Hariṣeṇa is mentioned.

The location of the inscription raises many questions. It is engraved on the pillar erected by Aśoka and inscribed with his pillar edicts in Prākṛit; in fact, it is the one moved in later centuries to Allahabad. Apart from the edicts and a couple of other Aśokan inscriptions, it also carries this *praśasti* as well as a Persian inscription giving the lineage of Jahangir. The inscriptions date to three different millennia and are in three different languages. Why was Samudragupta's *praśasti* engraved on this pillar? If Aśokan *brāhmī* could still be read in the Gupta period, which is possible, the message of the Gupta inscription, extolling military conquest, contradicted that of Aśoka endorsing non-violence. Was it an attempt to denigrate Aśoka and to show Samudragupta as the great conqueror? But that might have been more effective on a separate and more imposing pillar. Was the Aśokan message seen as a Buddhist discourse which needed to be overwritten? Or was it, on the contrary, an attempt at historical continuity evoking the legitimacy of the Mauryan Emperor?

Attempts were made in Gupta art to emulate some Mauryan forms, especially in the capitals of the pillars.²⁹ Such attempts at historical continuity also led to relocating and using Aśokan pillars from later Sultanate times, especially during the reign of Firuz Tughlaq. There is a curious political ambiguity in the placement of all the inscriptions. The puzzle is that in the brahmanical historical tradition, often referred to as the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition, Aśoka, because he was such a staunch patron of the Buddhist Saṅgha, is barely mentioned, except as a name in the dynastic list of the Mauryas. The title which Aśoka took, *devā nampiya*, the beloved of the gods, is treated with contempt in much of brahmanical literature. It is only in Buddhist historiography that he is a figure

²⁸ *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 3, 195 ff.

²⁹ Joanna Williams, *The Art of Gupta India: Empire and Province* (Princeton, 1982), 96 ff.

of exceptional historical importance. Or can we assume that his historical importance was known, but not reflected in brahmanical texts? This seems more likely.

This is not the only example of the Guptas making connections with the Mauryas. At Girnar there is a third inscription of the later Gupta, Skandagupta, who records that the embankment of the Sudarshan lake dam burst once again due to heavy rain in AD 456. The local governor, Cakrapālita, had it repaired. These inscriptions, ranging over 800 years, are clearly linked to the building and breeching of a dam. What is impressive is that the previous breaches were known and recorded. There is a suggested continuity in the engraving of the inscriptions, and it would seem that the earlier ones could still be read since their subject matter was familiar.

A set of grants from Damodarpur in eastern India is not just a record of information but refers to the state's record keepers and permission from the state to sell some land to an individual to enable him to make a benefaction.³⁰ These copper-plate inscriptions mark an historical watershed as they are sale deeds of land transactions, which were an new and significant feature from this period. Land is purchased by private persons to be gifted to religious beneficiaries to acquire merit for the donor and his parents. This was frequent in Buddhist donations, but here the beneficiaries are *brāhmaṇas*. In one case the request is for tax-free fallow land which has not been previously gifted. This required the checking of the records relating to the land, and the price was doubtless fixed in accordance with the state's demand.

A series of such purchases was made over a period of about a hundred years from AD 443 to 533 during the rule of the later Gupta kings, and the dates are recorded in detail as required for legal documents. The donation was used to provide a residence for *brāhmaṇas*, to build two small temples, and to conduct rituals.

The dates given for the Gupta rulers provide a chronology and a genealogy. Royal titles are more elaborate—*paramādaivata paramabhāṭṭāraka mahārājā dhirāja*. This is not merely the influence of earlier Kuṣāṇa titles, but also marks a demarcation between the self-perception of the earlier *rājās* and the exaggerated sense of persona of the current ones. These inscriptions are symptomatic of a different kind of state. Even if the territory involved is on the periphery of the kingdom, the legalities of its ownership are controlled by a hierarchy of officials involved in both recording and permitting the grant. The matter had also to be passed by the civic administration of the governors and advisers who were officials, such as the *mahattaras*, *aṣṭa-kula-adhikaranas*, *grāmikas*, and *puṣṭapālas*, responsible for maintaining the records. Civic patrons, such as the chief merchant, artisans, and various scribes, were also consulted. Grants of land began

³⁰ *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 15, 113 ff.

to be given frequently in the post-Gupta period, often for the performance of rituals, or due to the magnanimity of the ruler. Since some were quite substantial grants, one has to examine possible political reasons as well.

Grants were originally made of revenue from land in lieu of salaries and an income. Gradually, however, because these were hereditary grants, the land itself came to be claimed by the grantee. Grants of land were made to religious and ritual specialists and to selected officers. *Brāhmaṇa* grantees were being recompensed for performing rituals to enhance power or ward off evil, or to provide a genealogy legitimizing the ruler with acceptable genealogical links. If the grant was of wasteland or forest, then it encouraged the grantee to convert it to agricultural use; and interestingly even *brāhmaṇas*, although forbidden from being agriculturalists, did take to this specialization. This is clear from Sanskrit texts such as the *Kṛṣiparāśara*, which is a manual particularly for wet rice cultivation—the most lucrative crop in areas where water could be made available.

Kings conquering neighbouring kingdoms converted the defeated king and made him into a *sāmanta*—often translated as feudatory, but perhaps more correctly, an intermediary. The word is derived from *simā*, the boundary, which originally referred to a neighbour, but subsequently came to apply to an intermediary. It gradually developed into a hierarchy of intermediaries between the peasant and the king. The latter had the power to revoke the grant unless categorically stated to the contrary by the original grantor. This was seldom done, since it created a nucleus of political opposition. Some grants stated that it was more meritorious to preserve a grant than to create a new one.

An example of such a grant at a relatively earlier period is one issued by Prabhāvatī Gupta. She was the daughter of the Gupta king and married into the Vakāṭaka royal family, ruling as the queen regent until her son came of age. The grant reads as follows:

Success. Victory has been attained by the *Bhagavat*. Issued from Nandivardana. There was the *mahārāja*, the illustrious Ghaṭotkaccha, the first Gupta king. His excellent son was the *mahārāja*, the illustrious Candragupta. His excellent son was the *mahārājā dhīrāja*, the illustrious Samudragupta, who was born of the Queen Kumāradevī who was the daughter's son of the Licchavi, who performed several *aśvamedhas* (horse sacrifices). His excellent son is the *mahārājā dhīrāja* Candragupta [II], graciously favoured by him who is a fervent devotee of the *Bhagavat*, who is a matchless warrior on the earth, who has exterminated all kings, whose fame has tasted the water of the four oceans, who has donated many thousands of crores of cows and gold. His daughter, the illustrious Prabhāvatī of the Dharana *gotra*, born of the illustrious Queen Kubernāga who was born in the Nāga family, who is a fervent devotee of the *Bhagavat*, who was the chief queen of the illustrious Rudrasena [II], the *mahārāja* of the Vakāṭakas, who is the mother of the heir apparent, the illustrious Divākarasena, having announced her good health commands the householders of the village *brāhmaṇas* and others in the village of Danguna in the *ahāra* of Suprathistha to the east of Vilavanaka to the south of Shirshagrama to the west of Kadapinjana to the north of Sidivivaraka as follows:

Be it known to you that on the twelfth lunar day of the bright fortnight of Karttika we have, for augmenting our own religious merit, donated this village with the pouring out of water to the *ācārya* Chanalasvāmin, who is a devotee of the *Bhagavat*, as a gift not previously made after having offered it to the footprints of the *Bhagavat*. Wherefore, you should obey all his commands with proper respect. And we confer here on him the following exemptions incidental to an *agrahāra* granted to the *caturvidyā brāhmaṇas* as approved by former kings: it is exempt from providing grass, hides for seats and charcoal for touring officers; exempt from purchasing alcohol and digging salt; exempt from mines and *kadira* trees; exempt from supplying flowers and milk; it carries the right to hidden treasures and deposits and major and minor taxes. Wherefore this grant should be maintained and augmented by future kings. Whoever disregarding our order will cause obstructions when complained against by the *brāhmaṇas*, we will inflict punishment together with a fine....

The charter has been written in the thirteenth regnal year and engraved by Cakradāsa.³¹

The grant states the essential information. It invokes the deity Viṣṇu, also referred to as the Bhagavat. It provides the credentials of the donor, the Queen-mother, by giving her family connections and also a résumé of the Gupta kings where, interestingly, she makes specific mention of the names of their mothers. The Licchavi princess was socially a cut above the obscure Gupta family. She also explains why she has the authority to make the grant, that is, because she is the queen regent for her son. As is normal for such inscriptions, she mentions the village granted and indicates its exact location in the district of Supratistha. The purpose of the donation is the acquisition of religious merit, and the donation is sanctified by the pouring of water into the hands of the recipient. The latter is a *brāhmaṇa* well-versed in the four *Vedas*. The duties, obligations, and exemptions of the recipient are listed. The perpetuity of the grant is wished for, with punishments for those who obstruct it. The name of the engraver is mentioned.

Such land grants were often the nucleus of what were later to become principalities and small kingdoms. One such is recorded in the well-known Khoh copper-plate inscription of the *mahārāja* Hastin, issued in the Gupta era of 156, the equivalent of AD 475.³² He claims to have come from a family of royal ascetics and was generous with his gifts. He is said to have inherited an ancestral gift of a *brahmadeya*, land given to a *brāhmaṇa*, which in this case consisted of eighteen forest kingdoms. He was thus well able to establish himself as a semi-autonomous ruler and gift a village to a *brāhmaṇa* in turn. This is an example of the manner in which many states and kingdoms encroached into forests and cleared them for cultivation and the attendant revenue by coercing the forest-dwellers to become their peasants. Such inscriptions have been used to suggest a new periodization of Indian history in the second millennium AD.

³¹ The Poona Plates of Prabhāvātī Gupta in Vasudev Vishnu Mirashi, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 5: *Inscriptions of the Vakatakas* (1963; Calcutta, 1973), 5 ff.

³² *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 3, 93 ff.

A central feature of the inscription as a record was the fact that it was usually precisely dated and followed one of many eras current at the time.³³ Initially, calendrical time was based on the lunar year, each with twelve months in accordance with the *nakṣatras* (constellations). Each month is divided into the bright and dark fortnight, the *śukla* and *kṛṣṇa pakṣa*. The days are the *tithis*. Later there is a shift to the solar year, although some reckonings continue to be made in the lunar year. The division of time that covers the existence of the universe is into four *yugas* (ages): the Kṛta, Treta, Dvāpara, and Kali. We are currently in the fourth. The length of each yuga declines, as does the observance of social codes and customs. The Aihole inscription gives the equivalence of the start of the Kaliyuga, which works out to 3102–1 BC.³⁴ Modern scholars treat these ages and their figures as relevant to astronomical calculations, but they are rarely used in defining a precise chronology in inscriptions.

Many of the early inscriptions mention regnal years such as those of Aśoka, Khāravela, and some Śātavāhana ones. Others provide a date but do not mention the era. Precision in dating became common from the fifth century AD. The era most commonly used with precision is the *samvat* (era) first referred to as Kṛta, then Mālava, and finally (and most frequently) as Vikrama. This is the equivalent of 58 BC. How and why it came to be used remains controversial. It may commemorate the accession of Azes I, or it may be a calculation used by astronomers at Ujjain, which was the capital of Malava. The other commonly used era was the Śāka era of AD 78, as also the Kalacuri-Cedi era of 248, and the Gupta era of 319. Eras used after the sixth century often related to important events of that period.

Outside the subcontinent in Central Asia and Sri Lanka, inscriptions in Sanskrit are rare. But in south-east Asia they are known from about the fifth to the sixth centuries AD, especially in Cambodia and Vietnam, and they conform to a fairly standard Sanskrit. In Burma and Thailand, inscriptions in Pāli precede those in Sanskrit but continue even after the introduction of Sanskrit. The use of language takes a pattern familiar to India. Khmer, Old Javanese, and Old Malay are also present, together with Sanskrit. Had the use of Sanskrit become something of a formality?

It has been argued that Sanskrit became a public political language in the post-Gupta period and came to form a cosmopolis—a cultural formation that transcended political boundaries and religious affiliations.³⁵ The use of Sanskrit-linked politics to a political culture beyond the region, whereas the later inclusion of regional languages in inscriptions were records of specific

³³ Dines Chandra Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy* (Delhi, 1965), 119 ff.; and Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 180 ff.

³⁴ J. F. Fleet, 'The Kaliyuga Era of BC 3102', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1911), 479–96, 675–98.

³⁵ Sheldon Pollack, 'The Cosmopolitan Vernacular', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 57 (1998), 1, 6–37.

local powers. Could the same not be said of Prākṛit in the Mauryan and post-Mauryan period? Why then did Sanskrit become the hegemonic language during this period?

Epigraphic Sanskrit was not of a uniform standard. A major stylistic departure from earlier inscriptions was the *praśasti*. Techniques of *kāvya* were used in *praśastis* whose authors were sometimes court poets. It gradually became formulaic. But it had a purpose. Obscure families claiming to be royal used the *praśasti* to latch themselves onto the *ṣatriya vaṃśas* (lineages) given in the *Purāṇas*. The *praśasti* accommodated upward mobility among ruling families. The inscription terminated with a statement in Sanskrit mentioning the author, the scribe, and the engraver, who were virtually the witnesses and added to the legitimacy. The *praśasti* had some affinities with the *carita* literature of royal biographies from the seventh century. The functional portion of such inscriptions was less literary, although crucial as a legal document. It came to be written quite often in the regional language, to ensure its accessibility to local administration. The Sanskrit passages were a formality. In a sense the resort to regional languages acted as the parallel to variants in Prākṛit.

The multiplicity of kingdoms, each with a court copying the more powerful ones, required an array of Sanskrit-literate scribes, officials, and ritual specialists. Intermediaries were created through their control of expansive grants of land in settled lands or forests, and the acquisition of their inhabitants as labour. Inscriptions attempt to encapsulate the political order of the time, where sovereignty had to be acquired and protected. Sovereignty was dependent on a hierarchy of political relationships and was frequently founded on a control of major economic resources—the balancing of these was essential. Those who could extend resources were central to the polity. Did *brāhmaṇa* grantees become agricultural entrepreneurs? Since land was permanent wealth, it became hereditary, enabling the *brāhmaṇa* to participate in the political culture and stamp it with the accoutrements of his culture' such as Sanskrit as the language of authority.

Added to this was the claim to controlling the supernatural and the unforeseen through ritual. Parallel to this was the tradition of knowledge of various kinds preserved or rendered into Sanskrit, and going back many centuries, now reinforced by the functional use of Sanskrit. The polity became a play between those appropriating the expanded agricultural economy, underlining caste status that included a larger range of occupational and status identities becoming castes, and the emergence of the many sects of Puranic Hinduism as a system of religious incorporation. These activities had moved from the patronage of merchants and religious communities and some members of royalty, as in the many Prākṛit inscriptions. They were now centred on the royal court, and the major players were kings and members of the royal family and those associated with them as ministers and scribes. The keeping of records shifted from the monasteries and local centres to the royal courts and prestigious families.

TIMELINE/KEY DATES

321–185 BC	Mauryan dynasty
268–232 BC	Aśoka Maurya
261–246 BC	Antiochus II Theos
285–247 BC	Ptolemy II Philadelphos
276–239 BC	Antigonos Gonatas
Mid 3rd cent. BC	Magas
c.183–147 BC	Puṣyamitra Śuṅga
1st cent. BC	Khāravēla
2nd cent. BC	Demetrius
50 BC–AD 250	Sātavāhana dynasty
57 BC	Vikrama era
AD 78	Śaka era
2nd cent. AD	Rudradāman
1st cent.–3rd cent. AD	Kuṣāna dynasty
1st cent. BC–4th cent. AD	Śaka rulers
3rd cent.–4th cent. AD	Ikṣvāku dynasty
3rd cent.–5th cent. AD	Vakāṭakas
AD 319–467	Gupta dynasty
AD 335–375	Samudragupta
AD 475	Hastin

ABBREVIATIONS

CII	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum</i>
DED	<i>Dravidian Etymological Dictionary</i>
EI	<i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
MRE	<i>Major Rock Edict (of Aśoka)</i>
SE	<i>Separate Edict (of Aśoka)</i>

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