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RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF VAKATAKA COPPER PLATES: IDENTITY, PATRONAGE AND CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

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Abstract. This article discusses the Religious Dimensions of Vakatakas. The Vakatakas were one of the most glorious dynasties that flourished in South India. Their empire at one time extended from Malwa and Gujarat in the north to the Tungbhadra in the South and from the Arabian Sea in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east. J Dubreuil, is of the view Vatkatakas excelled all others dynasties of the whole of the Deccan is unquestionably the illustrious dynasty. The Vakatakas dynasty became known only when the Siveani copper plates grants of Paravarasena II was discovered in 1836. But Bhau Daji, argues that the Vakatakas was a dynasty of the Yavanas or Greeks, who took the lead in performance of Vedic scarifices as well as in the execution of most substantial and costly works for the encouragement of Buddhism. He argued that Vindhyasakti, the founder of the dynasty, is referred in Siwani Copper-plate grant as a dvija, which usually means a Brāhmaṇa.

Keywords: Vakatakas, Therā, Bhikshu, Ashvamedha, Nivartanas, Ishta-devatā, Mahāpurūsha, Vihāras and Chaityas.

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1. Introduction

The Vakatakas age saw unprecedented religious activity. The religious history of the Vakataka dynasty (3rd–5th centuries CE), as preserved in inscriptions and copper-plate charters, offers a rich and complex narrative of religious plurality, elite negotiation, and state-sponsored sacrality. Beyond mere chronicles of piety, these records—particularly copper plates—function as material and symbolic instruments of political theology. When situated within the theoretical frameworks of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991), ritual kingship (Turner 1969; Geertz 1973), and textual-cultural hegemony (Pollock 2006; Guha 1983), the Vakataka religious corpus becomes legible as a performative and discursive strategy through which kingship, authority, and cultural legitimacy were constructed and asserted

2. Religious Transition

The founder of the royal family was the *Grihapati* Vakataka, who was a follower of Buddhism. He embarked on a pilgrimage to the distant holy place of Amaravati in the Guntur District of Andharadesa. At the behest of the *Therā* (Buddhist *Bhikshu*) *Bodhika*, he left an inscription recording his gift of a stone pillar for the longevity of himself, his two wives, friends, and relatives. (Epigraphia. Indica., (reprinted), p. 267) (Mirashi, 1963) He left an inscription recording his gift of a stone pillar for the longevity of himself, his two wives, friends, and relatives. The gift was made at the instance of the *Therā* (Buddhist *Bhikshu*) *Bodhika*. The descendants of this *Grihapati* Vakataka changed their religious faith and became staunch supporters of the Vedic and It Puranic religions. They were guided in this by a pious *Brāhmaṇa* family of Vallura. This family maintained its reputation for Vedic learning for several generations; its founder was Yajnapati, who was probably a contemporary of the Vakataka king Vindhyasakti. His son Deva had great influence with the ruling prince; for we are told that on account of him, the whole kingdom, including the king, engaged itself in religious activities. As a matter of fact, we find phenomenal religious activity in that age. Pravarasena I, the son of Vindhyasakti I, who had made extensive conquests, performed a large number of Vedic sacrifices, such as the four *Aśvamedhas* and the seven Soma sacrifices, including the *Vājapeya*. Thereafter we have no record of Vedic sacrifices being performed by later Vakataka kings, but they must have extended liberal patronage to learned *Brahmanas* and helped them in the performance of *Śrauta* sacrifices. Thus, one grant of Pravarsasena II records the gift of 8000 *nivartanas* of land to as many as a thousand *Brahmanas*. Several other grants of this prince and his mother as well as of some princes of the *Vatsagulma* branch have been discovered, which record gifts of land and even of whole villages to learned *Brahmanas*.

Puranic Hinduism also received a fillip during the age of the Vakatakas. Throughout their rule, they built several temples dedicated to Hindu gods. Most of the Vakataka princes were devotees of Siva. So, the temples of that god must have been much larger in number than those of other deities. Owing to the paucity of inscriptions, we do not, however, notice many references to them. Pravarasena I, the great Emperor who distinguished himself by his numerous Vedic sacrifices, is known to have constructed a temple of Siva under the name of Pravaresvara, the territorial division of twenty-six villages in which it was situated came to be known by its name. His grandson Rudrasena I, who succeeded him, also constructed a *dharmasthāna* (temple) at Chikkamburi, modern Chikmara in the Chanda District, which was probably dedicated to his *ishta-devata Mahābhairava*. Temples dedicated to Vishnu also were not rare. Rudrasena II, the grandson of Rudrasena I, became a devotee of Chakrapāṇi (Vishnu), probably through the influence of his chief queen Prabhavatigupta, who, like her illustrious father Chandragupta II, was a devout worshipper of that god.

She frequently visited the temple on the holy hill of Ramagiri, situated not far from her capital, where the footprints of Ramachandra, an incarnation of Vishnu, were installed. Both her known grantsare made on Karttikasu. Di., evidently at the time of the *parana* after the completion of the fast on the preceding *Prabodhini Ekādaśi*. One of them specifically mentions the footprints of Ramagirisvamin, near which the grant was made. Prabhavatigupta's active religious role—timing land grants with sacred calendrical events such as the Prabodhini Ekādaśī further underscores how gendered power and ritual piety intersected in the performance of Vakataka sovereignty. Her presence in Ramagiri and later Pravarapura, along with the construction of a Viṣhṇu temple there, demonstrates how royal women were also agents in sacral geography and religious politics.

Some other grants of her son also appear to have been made at the same place. A merchant named Chandra donated half of the village in one grant. There was another famous temple at *Asvatthākhetaka* (modern Pattan in the Betul District), in which also the object of worship was a pair of the footprints of *Mahāpurūsha* (Vishnu). Pravarasena II made a monumental donation of 400 *nivartanas* of land for the maintenance of the charitable feeding house (*sattra*) attached to the temple.

Another temple of Ramachandra probably existed at Pavnar near Wardha, just at the place where Vinobaji's *āśrama* now stands on the bank of the river Dham. Beautiful panels, some recently discovered at the site, appear to have decorated it, depicting scenes from the Ramayana. (Mirashi V. V., pp. 270-288) These panels were probably built into the

walls of the temple, as in the case of the Gupta temple at Devagadh. Pavnar, as shown above, is probably identical to Pravarapura, which Pravarasena II founded and made the seat of his government sometime after the eleventh regnal year. This temple may have been constructed by him at the instance of his mother, the dowager queen Prabhavatigupta. So long as the capital was at Nandivardhana, Prabhavatigupta could have the *darśana* of her *ishta-devata* (i.e., Ramachandra) at Ramagiri, which was only about 3 miles away; but when the capital was shifted to Pravarapura, she, having gone to stay there, must have felt the need for a temple of Ramachandra there. At her instance, her dutiful son Pravarasena II appears to have erected this temple and got it decorated by the best artists of the age. Vinobaji's *āśrama*, which is situated on an artificial mound and the area round which yielded the panels mentioned above, probably marks the site of this temple. (Mirashi V. V., p. 272) This blend of Gupta-Vakataka religious ideology reflects a fusion of dynastic piety and transregional Vaishnava symbolism.

3. **Cultural Synthesis**

In the Vakatakas kingdom, Buddhism was also flourishing. Flourishing in the kingdom of the Vakatakas had perhaps a greater attraction for those who, on account of some calamities befalling them, were convinced of the transitory nature of health, worldly possessions, and life. Varahadeva, minister of the Vakataka king Harishena, who was so convinced, caused a magnificent *vihāra* cave to be excavated at Ajanta in memory of his father and mother. He got it adorned with windows, doors, beautiful picture galleries, ledges, statues of the nymphs of Indra, etc. It contained a temple of the Buddha inside and was provided with a large reservoir of water as well as a shrine of the lord of the Nagas. He presented the magnificent cave to the community of Buddhist monks at Ajanta.

Varahadeva spearheaded the excavation of another cave at Gulwada, located 11 miles west of Ajanta caused another cave to be excavated at Gulwada, 11 miles west of Ajanta. Like Cave XVI, this cave also is of the *Vihāra* type, with a shrine of the Buddha in the *dharma-chakra-pravartana-mudrā* at the farther end. It is decorated with beautiful sculptures and well-carved pillars and pilasters but contains no paintings. As the inscription in which Varahadeva gave an account of his ancestors is sadly mutilated in its lower portion, the purpose for which the cave was excavated remains unknown. Nearby is another smaller cave of the *vihāra* type, which was also probably excavated by the same minister and dedicated to the Buddhist *Sangha*.

Two other caves at Ajanta belong to the Vakatakas era. Caves at Ajanta belong to the age of the Vakatakas. There are two caves: *Vihāra* Cave XVII and Chaitya Cave XIX.

Both were excavated by a feudatory of Harishena, who ruled over the Rishika country. His name is unfortunately lost, as the inscription in Cave XVII, in which he had given an account of himself and his ancestors, is now very much mutilated. From the extant portion of it, we learn that this prince was overwhelmed with sorrow at the premature death of his younger brother Ravisamba. Being convinced of the transitory nature of worldly existence, he began to lead a pious life. Realizing that wealth causes an obstacle in the attainment of *Siddhi*, he adorned the earth with *stupas* and *viharas*. He caused the excellent monolith *maṇdapa* (i.e., Cave XVII) containing the *chaitya* of the Buddha to be excavated and provided it with a water cistern. To the west of it, in another part of the hill, he caused a *gandhakuti* (i.e., Chaitya Cave XIX) to be excavated. These two are known for their excellent paintings and sculptures, respectively.This inscription suggests that many viharas and chaityas excavated or built elsewhere in the Vakataka Empire have since disappeared. These viharas and chaityas were not only devotional centers but cultural inscriptions—replete with elaborate iconography, architectural grandeur, and water management systems—that signified the Vakatakas' alignment with Mahayana ideals of compassion, transitoriness, and renunciation.

An analysis of the Vakataka kings grants and feudatories would shed intriguing light on the religious tendencies of the age of the 27 inscriptions edited here; as many as nine are either incomplete or record no gift, one of the remaining eighteen grants, three record donations of *vihāra* and *chaitya* caves to Buddhist *Sanghas*, and fifteen gifts of some land or village to Hindu gods and *Brāhmaṇas*. This shows that Buddhism was gradually losing ground and Hinduism was asserting itself. It would again be interesting to see on what occasions the gifts were made. The grants to Buddhist *Sanghas* mention no particular occasion. Again, two of the grants to *Brāhmaṇas* contain only season dates and therefore afford no basis for conjecture. Of the remaining thirteen grants also, only three state explicitly the *tithī* of the gift, while the others contain only the dates when the gifts were actually recorded. From these latter, however, we can in some cases conjecture the occasion of the gift. For instance, if a gift is recorded on the 12th or the 13th of the bright or dark fortnight of a month, it would not be wrong to conjecture that it was made on the occasion of the *parana* after observing a fast on the preceding *ekādaśi* (11^{th} *tithī*). We thus find that of the aforementioned thirteen grants, as many as nine were made at the time of the *paranas* of the following *ekadasis*:

This illustrates the significance of the *ekādaśi-urata* in that era. What significance did the *ekādaśi-urata* hold in that era? Again, even among the *ekadasis*, that called *Prabodhini ekādaśi* was regarded as most sacred. It is interesting to note that Kalidasa also mentions

this *tithī* in the *Meghaduta* as the day of deliverance for the exiled Yaksha. It was believed that on that *tithī* the god Vishnu rose from his serpent couch after a sleep of four months. These alignments reveal a sophisticated understanding of ritual temporality, where royal generosity became synchronized with the divine calendar.

On Jyeshtha *ekādaśi*. 10, a Brahmana named Vishuva-vachanaka received a grant (No. 12). It seems therefore to have been made on the occasion of the *Mesha Sankrānti*. In the case of the two grants, no particular sacred *tithī* seems to have been the occasion of the gifts. One grant (No. 14) was made on the occasion of *tila-vachanaka*, i.e., probably a *Srāddha*.

The foregoing analysis reveals certain surprising facts. Most of the Vakataka kings were *Paramamaheśvaras*, i.e., devout worshippers of Mahesvara or Siva. Still, apart from No. Nevertheless, apart from No. 1, which may have recorded the construction of a temple for that god, there is not a single inscription that records a gift in honor of him. Despite No. 1 possibly documenting the construction of a temple for that god, there isn't a single inscription that records a gift in his honor. Similarly, there is no mention of any gift having been made on a solar or a lunar eclipse. It may be noted in this connection that eclipses and *sankrāntis* were the usual occasions when land grants were made to Brahmanas in later times, while gifts on completion of the *ekādaśi-vrata* were very rare.

People highly revered the *Brāhmaṇas* for their dedication to studying the *Vedas* and *Śāstras*. Those who devoted themselves to the study of the *Vedas* and *Śāstras* were highly venerated. Some of them mastered more than one *Veda*. This was indicated by epithets like *Dviveda* prefixed to their names, which had not yet become mere surnames. Some *Brāhmaṇas* officiated as priests at *Sṛauta* sacrifices and *Gṛihya* rites. Those who performed certain rites like *Gana-yagas* were looked down upon and were not invited to a *srāddha*. The Brahmana who officiated at such rites received a munificent gift. Some *Brāhmaṇas* preferred to lead a celibate life and were known as *Naishthika Brahmachāriṇs*. Kaluttaka, who received the Jamb plates, was a *Brāhmaṇa* of this type. Some *Brāhmaṇas* were known for their pious and saintly lives. Such was the *Āchārya* Chanalasvamin, who is described as *Bhagavad-bhakta* (a devotee of Vishnu) in the Poona plates of Prabhavatigupta. He was probably staying at Ramagiri and appears to have been in charge of the temple of Ramachandra there, for the village Danguna, which Prabhavatigupta granted to him, was first offered to the feet of the god on Karttika.

4. **Conclusion**

The copper plate inscriptions of the Vakatakas offer not only administrative records but also valuable insight into the religious, cultural, and political ethos of early historic central India. A close reading of these epigraphic materials through a theoretical lens—one that incorporates symbolic power, postcolonial textuality, and ritual performance—reveals the deliberate construction of religious identity and royal legitimacy. Far from being neutral legal documents, the copper plates functioned as ideological instruments, embedding socio-religious meaning within acts of land grant and patronage. One of the key observations emerging from the inscriptions is the presence and prominence of Brāhmaṇas from Vidarbha, whose religious affiliations, nomenclature, and geographical origins reflect broader strategies of legitimation. The use of suffixes such as *śarman*, *ārya*, *ācārya*, and *svāmin*—titles closely linked to Brahmanical status—signals the prestige and ritual authority attributed to the donees. The specificity of their affiliations with particular *Vedas* and *Śākhās* (branches), although not universally recorded, adds further dimension to their identities. Notably, the dominance of *Taittirīya* followers among the recipients of land grants underlines a pattern of selectivity. Followers of the *Ṛigveda* and *Sāmaveda* are curiously absent, suggesting either a lack of local presence or a conscious ideological and political choice by the state to prioritize certain traditions over others.

This selective patronage reveals the Vakataka rulers' role in shaping religious orthodoxy, a process best understood as a form of symbolic power. By granting land to specific sectarian groups and establishing tax-free *agrahāras*, the monarchy cultivated cultural capital, reinforcing their legitimacy through sacral authority. These acts were not passive gifts but public rituals of political theology—rites that established and reaffirmed the king's dharmic credentials. As Bourdieu notes, symbolic acts derive their power from their performance within socially legitimized structures. In the case of the Vakatakas, these structures were defined by Brahmanical ritualism and the idioms of Vedic sacrifice. (Bourdieu, 1991)

At the same time, the inscriptions reflect a broader cultural synthesis, characteristic of the early historic Deccan. The Ajanta Caves, with their Buddhist viharas and chaityas, bear testimony to the state's multifaceted religious affiliations. Thus, the religious landscape was not monolithic but fluid, negotiated through regional traditions, elite ideologies, and the practicalities of statecraft. Importantly, the inscriptions also allow us to infer the possible integration of Brāhmaṇas into the administrative machinery. Although caste is not directly mentioned in relation to officers, names such as *Devanandasvamin*—who served

as a *Dūtaka* (royal messenger or emissary)—suggest Brahmanical affiliations. Similarly, the presence of scribes bearing names ending in *dāsa* could point to broader social networks involving religious functionaries within the state apparatus. This suggests that the Brāhmaṇa class not only served as ritual specialists but also played a key role in bureaucratic and legal processes, reinforcing their influence in both sacred and secular spheres.

The economic dimension of this religious patronage is also notable. The grants frequently mention that *agrahāra* villages were exempt from royal taxes and duties. This delicate balance of autonomy and obligation underscores the transactional nature of such grants. They were at once gifts and political contracts—symbols of royal favour that also bound the recipients into networks of loyalty and service. The Pravarasena I Indore plates, for instance, mention a merchant (*vanijaka*) named Chandra who purchased part of a village granted to Brāhmaṇas. Such references highlight the economic integration of religious and commercial interests and the social legitimacy conferred on such transactions through royal endorsement.

From a postcolonial textual perspective, (Pollock, 2006) the use of Sanskrit in these inscriptions can be seen as an act of elite self-fashioning. The epigraphic medium, carefully stylized in the high registers of courtly Sanskrit, projected a vision of kingship rooted in cosmopolitan ideals and regional specificity. As Sheldon Pollock argues, Sanskrit was not merely a language of record but a language of power—a medium that carried ideological weight. The Vakataka inscriptions, therefore, should be understood as texts of power, where the intersection of language, religion, and politics articulated a vision of the world in which the monarch was both a patron of dharma and the embodiment of it.

Finally, the Vakatakas' religious pluralism challenges simplistic narratives of dynastic orthodoxy. While Shaivism received official sponsorship, the coexistence of Buddhist, Jain, and Vaishnavite traditions under their rule demonstrates a level of tolerance and adaptability that was likely pragmatic as well as principled. Religious patronage served as a unifying force in a socially and culturally diverse realm. The study of these epigraphs not only deepens our understanding of early Deccan history but also exemplifies the potential of interdisciplinary approaches in historical inquiry.

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