

## Locating Spatial Mobility: Occasional Glimpses in the Early Medieval Inscriptions

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**Abstract:** The present essay underlines some important aspects of the early medieval inscriptions pertaining to the region of Bengal. It has been found that many times the spatial migrations of some sections like the engravers of the charters, their descent, family of origin, etc. have found to be mentioned. These information could be woven together to bring out the tendencies prevalent then.

**Keywords:** Inscriptions, Early Medieval, Bengal, spatial mobility, *Gotra*, *Pravara*, etc.

The chronological span from fifth-sixth to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries of the Common Era is called as the early medieval period of Indian history. This period witnessed the large-scale donation of lands to the priestly class, as well as *matha* (monastery) and temple complexes. Hence the epigraphic sources in the form of land grant inscriptions recording such acts of donation, and in some cases recording buying and selling of lands for various purposes are an important category of source material for the reconstruction of history pertaining to the early medieval centuries. The inscriptions throw light on various aspects of the said period, including the ways in which the ruling classes projected their self-image, ideas regarding kingship, various social-groups appearing regularly in the epigraphs, the religious inclination of the ruling classes, economic terms, etc. Broadly, one gets a (partial) glimpse into social, economic, political as well as cultural spheres of the time. This essay shall concentrate on how sometimes these land grant charters give

some information on the dynamic historical process of migrations, and tell us about the original places from where the donee, donors as well as engravers of the inscriptions hailed.

History is full of migrations, in which physical factors, as well as political and socio-economic causes have all played their part. As Swati Dutta says, demographic causes like pressure of population, combined with other factors like necessities of extension of trade, the desire for political and cultural expansion, political discontent and unsatisfactory economic conditions,<sup>1</sup> are the reasons behind migrations.

As has been mentioned the early medieval inscriptions also give some evidence of the process. A number of inscriptions talk about the original place from where the Brāhmana donees hailed. A few instances show people coming from outside Bengal. Though the Damodarpur plate of Damodargupta (c.543) is the first inscription which mentions an instance of buying of some land for the

purpose of repair and maintenance of a temple of Visnu<sup>ii</sup> by a person who was not a native of Bengal, nothing has been mentioned on the *varṇa* affiliation of the person. The plate speaks only about the fact that he was a noble-man from Ayodhya, named Amrtadeva (*Ayodhyaka-kulaputraka-amrtadevena*).<sup>iii</sup> We cannot say for sure, whether this person came to Bengal for a short period of time, or to reside there permanently. But it is nevertheless clear that he was a considerably wealthy person, so that he could buy, and consequently donate some land to the temple of a deity. After that the next plate that talks about such instances is the Khalimpur plate of Dharmapāla, mentioning a Brāhmaṇa from Lāta country (*Lāta-dvija*), who was to work as the keeper of the Nanna-Nārayaṇa temple.<sup>iv</sup> This is no doubt an example of some people belonging to the priestly section who came to Bengal from a different part of the sub-continent (*Lāta-deśa* is Gujarat) to settle/reside in the Pundravardhana bhukti. The twelfth century Belāva plate of Bhojavarman is another such inscription which informs us that the donee's family was originally inhabitants of *Madhyadeśa* (the 'middle country', roughly corresponding to the middle-gangetic valley), who later shifted to the village of Siddhala in Uttara-Rārha (a sub-region in ancient Bengal, roughly corresponding to western part of it).<sup>v</sup> Similarly, the Ramaganj plate of Iśvaraghoṣa mentions the donor Bhattaśrinirbbokaśarman as originally an immigrant from Candavara,<sup>vi</sup> which according to N.G.Majumdar was probably the same as Chandwar near Etawa in U.P as is known from Muslim historians.<sup>vii</sup>

The next plate that talks about such

movements is the Bānagada plate of Mahipala I. The donee in this case was a Brāhmaṇa named Bhattaputra Krsnaditya, originally a resident of village Hastipada, presently living in Cavati, who got his land in a village in the Kotivarsa *visaya*.<sup>viii</sup> This case shows movement of Brahmanas within Bengal. The Irda plate of Nayapala, similarly mentions the donee Pandita Asvatthaśarmman as born in Droṇa, but actually hailing from Kuntira.<sup>ix</sup> Another example of this kind is the Belwa plate of Vighrahapala III, in which the donee Jayanandadevaśarmman was an inhabitant of Vellāvagrāma, but his family was originally from Vahedagrāma.<sup>x</sup>

The inscriptions give some information on the mobility of certain other groups as well. A lot of plates do also mention the engravers and the Dhanaidaha plate of Kumaragupta I (c. 432-3) is probably the first one to do so. Stambheśvaradāsa is said to be the engraver in this case.<sup>xi</sup> But, there is no mention of any native place, or of any kind of genealogy.

The next plate in line is the above mentioned Khalimpur plate, appearing after a period of three centuries (c. 802) and mentioning not only the engraver's name (Tatata) but also his father (Śubhata), as well as his great grandfather (Bhogata).<sup>xii</sup> Similarly, the Garuda pillar inscription of the time of Narayanapaladeva the Manahāli plate of Madanapaladeva and Kamauli grant of Vaidyadeva all mention only the inscriber, and nothing more. Inscribers were Sutradhara Visnubhadra<sup>xiii</sup> for the Garuda pillar inscription, Tathāgatasara<sup>xiv</sup> for the Manahali plate and Karnabhadra<sup>xv</sup> for Kamauli grant. Very different from these mentioned inscriptions is the Bhagalpur plate of Narayanapaladeva, which mentions not

only the name of the engraver (Mankhadāsa) and his father (Śubhadāsa), but also the place where he was born, ie, Samatata<sup>xvi</sup>. Though this plate was not issued from any of the sub-regions of Bengal, yet this information is worth mentioning, because the case of the engraver Mankhadāsa clearly shows the movement of an occupational group from Samatata to a place where their service was required, and remunerated. His son Vimaladāsa is the engraver of the Jajilpara plate of Gopala III.<sup>xvii</sup> This fact shows “the long term function of a family of scribes as engravers of the Pala royal grants,”<sup>xviii</sup> apart from their movement to Varendra (north Bengal). Another such example is the engraver Dakkadāsa who inscribed the Mohipur plate of Gopala II and is said to be born to a good person of Samatata origin.<sup>xix</sup> The use of ‘-dāsa’ in his name, and the Samatata connection shows that perhaps he was also of the same family.

Not only engravers, a few inscriptions also give short genealogies of those on whose petition the king donated land to an individual, or an establishment. A case in point is the Indian Museum plate of Dharmapala where the monarch gave an uncertain number of plots to the Buddhist *sanghas* belonging to three different facilities established by *mahasāmanta* Bhadrānāga and his wife Sanhāyika.

Apart from details on family, as well as places of origin of these individuals who appear in the inscriptions many times some other kinship groups like the *Gotras*, *Pravaras* and *Caranas* are also mentioned. These categories, like clans are continuous entities persisting through generations.<sup>xx</sup> All three of these are

Brahmanical social institutions, first of which in very simple terms means a real or an imagined family lineage claimed by a Brahmana, and it was used to distinguish different exogamous groups. *Gotra* names are thus the patronymics of the saintly progenitors of a certain lineage. The second institution of that of *Pravara*, which comes into increasing use from the tenth century onwards,<sup>xxi</sup> distinguished different sub-groups within the *Gotra*. Its increasing usage, as Barrie M. Morrison says, was probably necessitated by the growing size of the *Gotra*, and to create more categories which could check breaches in the *Gotra*. The *Carana*, which is the third institution, signified an ideal succession of teachers and pupils who learn and teach a certain branch of the Vedas.<sup>xxii</sup>

The earliest inscriptions do not mention *gotras* of the Brahmana donees, and what is given is their Brahmana *varna*, and occasionally *Carana*. The first plate mentioning *gotra* in the Varendra region is the Nandapur plate of Budhagupta (c.488). The *Gotra* which is mentioned is the Kaśyapa *gotra*. It remains so till the Jajilpara plate (c.954) of Gopala III. After that Hastidāsa, Parāśara, Bharadvaja, Bhargava, Kautsa and Kausika *Gotras* occur. Of these, both Kāśyapa and Bharadvaja *Gotras* occur twice, former in the case of Budhagupta Nandapur, and Gopala III Jajilpara plates, and the latter in the Vighrahapala III Belwa and Laksmanasena Tarpandighi plates. The 10<sup>th</sup> century acts as a divider in which none of the *Gotras*, used in the pre 10<sup>th</sup> century plates are used afterwards and vice-versa.

In Samatata the trend comes out to be quite

different from that in Varendra. Sricandra's Pascimbhag plate (c.929-75) is the first inscription which mentions Gotras. Other than this there are only two 13<sup>th</sup> century inscriptions, the Mehar and Sobharampur plates of Damodaradeva, which mention *Gotra*.<sup>xxiii</sup> Since as many as six grants have been donated to Buddhist institutions, one does not expect *Gotra* to be given, but the lack of it even when groups of Brahmanas, or even individual Brahmanas are the donees, it is no doubt very surprising.

In the case of Dacca-Faridpur region the first reference to the *Gotra* of the donee occurs in the 6<sup>th</sup> century Faridpur plate of Gopacandra. With the exception of Ghagrahati plate of Samacaradeva, Madanpur plate of Sricandra and the Adavadi plate of Dasarathadeva, which is incomplete, all other inscriptions do refer to the Gotras of the donees. The early inscriptions do have Kanva and Bharadvaja Gotras which do not find mention after that. The later *Gotras* are Vardhakaśika, Śandilya, Vatsya, and the Vatsa, of which the last two occur twice each.

In the Rārha region mid and late sixth century and early seventh century plates mention the donees to be of Kaundinya, Kāsyapa and Bharadvaja *gotras*. This changes in the eleventh century plates after which only Vatsa and Vatsya Gotras are mentioned. So, the pattern is more or less same in all the sub-regions, and Kāsyapa, Kaundinya and Kanva *gotras* do not occur after the tenth century in any one of them.

The first inscriptions to mention *Pravara* in the Varendra region are the two plates of Gopala II, in his fourth regnal year (second

half of ninth century), which mention the *pravaras* as Bhargava, Cyavana, Apnuvana, Aurva and Jamadagni.<sup>xxiv</sup> So this new inscription alters Morrison's view that *pravaras* were started to be increasingly used from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>xxv</sup> After that the various *pravaras* that we find are like this: Avatsara and Naidhruva, Angirasa, Ambarisha and Yauvanasva, Angirasa, Amahiyava and Auruksya, Sakti, Vasistha and Parasara, Angirasa and Barhaspatya, Sandilya, Asita and Devala, Bhargava, Cyavana, Aurva, Apnavana and Jamadagnya, Bharadvaja, Angirasa and Bārhaspatya.

In Samatata *Pavaras* do not occur at all, yet again because of the fact that so many grants were meant for Buddhist institutions. Some grants are for groups of Brahmanas as well, but even these do not speak much about *Pravaras*.

In the Vanga region the first plate to mention *Pravara* is the tenth century Dhulla plate of Sricandra, mentioning *Pravaras* of three *r̥ṣis*. After that *Pravaras* appear regularly, except in the Adavadi plate of Dasarathadeva which is incomplete. Some other *Pravaras* which occur are as follows: *Pravara* of five *r̥ṣis*, Bhargava, Cyavana, Apnuvana, Aurva and Jāmadagnya.

On *carāṇa*, i.e. the school and branch of the Veda with which members of the *gotras* were identified, the Samatata region has only two inscriptions which have any information on it—the Nidhanpur plate of Bhaskaravarman and the Nasirabad plate of Damodaradeva. In the former, one hundred six were Vājasaneyins (Yajurveda), 9 belonged to Caraka śākhā

(Yajurveda), and two to Taittiriya śākhā (Yajurveda).<sup>xxvi</sup> In the Nasirabad plate, the donee Prithvidharaśarman was a Yajurvedi brahmana.<sup>xxvii</sup> In the Varendra region, of all the nine grants which specify the vedic affiliation of the donees, only two have Yajurvedic donee- the Kalaikuri Sultanpur grant of Kumaragupta and the Bangarh plate of Mahipala I. Rest of the plates include three Sāmavedic donee- Varahasvamin of Dhanaidaha plate of Kumaragupta, a Brahmana whose name is not legible in the Nandapur plate of Budhagupta, and Sridharaśarman of Jajilpara plate of Gopala III. The Biyala plate of Mahipal I and plate #1 as well as plate #2 of Gopāla II had donees belonging to the Paippalāda branch of Atharva Veda. The Paharpur plate of Budhagupta gave land to Guhanandin, a Jaina preceptor, while the Indian Museum plate of Dharmapala and the Mohipur plate transferred land to Buddhist establishments. After the tenth century, out of six grants, five are donated to Atharvavedi Brahmanas – two to Paippalāda Śākhā, and three to Kauthuma śākhā. Now, this sub-regional picture does not conform to the conclusion that Morrison draws by taking all the grants together, wherein he says that the tenth century acted as a divide, with the pre tenth century period witnessing grants largely to Yajurvedic Brahmanas.<sup>xxviii</sup> Similarly, during the post tenth century period, the Atharvavedic Brahmanas are a majority, in place of Samavedic Brahmanas, as Morrison notices. Thus, the sub-regional picture need not always be in conformity with the conclusion derived otherwise.

In Vanga, out of 12 inscriptions, 10 do give information on the affiliation of the

Brahmana donee. Out of these 10, atleast 3 are Yājurvedic Brahmanas, viz, the Gopacandra Faridpur, the Faridpur #1 Dharmaditya, the Faridpur #2 Dharmaditya grants. The Harivarman Samantasar plate mentions the donee to be a Śāntivārika of Asvalāyana sakha of the Rgveda. The Samacaradeva Ghugrahati, the Madanpur plate of Sricandra and the Adavadi plate of Dasarathadeva mention nothing on Vedic affiliation. But the Dhulla and Rampal plate of Sricandra both mention that the donees were Santivarikas, or priest-in-charge of royal rituals, with the former adding that the donee belonged to the Kanva sakha of the Yajurveda. The Madanapada plate of Visvarupasena mentions that the donee was a srutipāthaka<sup>xxix</sup>, ie, he recited holy texts, and the Idilpur plate of Kesavasena was a nitipāthaka, a reciter of moral texts<sup>xxx</sup>. The Bhagirathi-Hooghly region presents a mixed picture, and of total six inscriptions only one, the 7<sup>th</sup> century Midnapur#2 plate of Sasanka had a Yajurvedic donee belonging to the Madhyandina sakha. Two plates, the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century Mallasarul plate of Vijayasena, and the 12<sup>th</sup> century Barrackpur plate of Vijayasena mention the Vedic affiliation of the donee to be Bahvrca sakha and six angas of the Asvalayana sakha of the Rgveda. Two plates had Samavedic donee, the Mallia plate of Jayanaga (late 6<sup>th</sup> century) and the Irda plate of Nayapala (c.1051), both belonging to the Candoga Carana.

#### Endnotes:

- i Swati Datta, *Migrant Brahmanas in Northern India*, 1989
- ii R Mukherji, S.K.Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, ibid, p.73
- iii Ibid, p.71
- iv Ibid, Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapala, p. 108

- v Ibid, Belava Plate of Bhojavarman, p. 235  
vi Ibid, Ramganj Plate of Isvaraghosa, p. 367  
vii Ibid, p. 370  
viii Ibid, Bangada Plate of Mahipala I, pp. 206- 7  
ix N.G. Majumdar, *Epigraphia indica*, volume 22, Irda Plate of Nayapala, p. 151  
x D.C.Sircar, *Epigraphia Indica*, volume 29, Belwa Plate of Vigrahapala, p. 11  
xi R Mukherji, S.K. Maity, *Corpus...*, Dhanaidaha Plate of Kumaragupta I, p. 44  
xii Ibid, Khalimpur Plate of Dharmapala, p. 110  
xiii Ibid, Garuda Pillar Inscription of Narayanapaladeva, p. 161  
xiv Ibid, Manahali Plate of Madanapaladeva, p.219  
xv Ibid, Kamauli Plate of Vaidyadeva, p. 386  
xvi Ibid, Bhagalpur Plate of Narayanapaladeva, p. 178  
xvii Pramatha Nath Misra, R.C.Majumdar, *Journal of Asiatic Society*, Letters.  
xviii A New Copper Plate Inscription of Gopala II, Mohipur plate, p. 71  
xix *Mohipur Plate, Rosuke Furui*, p. 67  
xx Nayanjot Lahiri, *Pre-Ahom Assam*, Chapter 5, p. 121.  
xxi Barrie M. Morrison, *Political Centres and cultural Sub-regions in Ancient Bengal*, p. 120  
xxii Nayanjot Lahiri, *Pre-Ahom Assam*, Chapter 5, p. 121  
xxiii Savarannya gotra in the Mehar plate and Agnivesa gotra in the Sobharampur plate.  
xxiv Ryosuke Furui, 'Re-reading Two Copper Plate Inscriptions of Gopala III, Year 4', in *Prajnadhara*, p. 320  
xxv Barrie M. Morrison, *Political Centres and Cultural Sub-regions in Early Bengal*, p.122  
xxvi M.M.Sharma, *Inscriptions of ancient Assam*, pp.38-81.  
xxvii N.G.Majumdar, *Inscriptions...*, *ibid.*, Chittagong Plate of Damodaradeva, p.159  
xxviii Barrie M. Morrison, *Political Centres...*, p. 123  
xxix R. Mukherji and S. K. Maity, *Corpus...*, Anulia Plate of Lakshmaansena, p. 319  
xxx Ibid, Idilpur Plate of Kesavasena, p. 346

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Kāmarupa (early seventh century A.D)', *JASB, Letters, I*

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