

Religious Plurality in Gayā in the Pāla Age : An Epigraphic Interpretation

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Abstract

Gayā is one of the famous Tīrthas in India, chiefly extolled for its sanctity as a Vaiṣṇavite sacred centre. Though, Gayā professes Vaiṣṇavism mainly in its religious realm, but the place has a long tradition of practicing various cults and even Buddhism too. In present days, one may observe various shrines of different Hindu deities in Gayā that is an evidence of the existence of religious plurality in that place. Now, in this article, I will be going to present a synthetic view of the religious pluralism, practiced in Gayā, as has been manifested in the early Medieval Pāla epigraphs.

Key Words : *Gayā, religious plurality, Pāla epigraphs, Vaiṣṇavism, Buddhism*

Introduction

India is the motherland of diverse religions and different faiths. The world's oldest surviving religion was originated in Indian soil. One of the major strands of Hinduism is 'Tīrtha' or the locative form of religiousness where the place itself is the primary locus of devotion.¹ However, visiting at these sites or undertaking a pilgrimage is one of the traditional networks that connects the whole of the subcontinent and provides an unitary identity. Most intriguingly, the tradition of 'Tīrtha' is the common thing in all the divergent religious beliefs India is practicing. More specifically, the concept and continuing practice of the visiting at the sacred spots or Tīrthas is one of the mechanisms that weaves all the variegated cultural beliefs and thus Hinduism acquires an integrated nature on the whole. The vast territory of Indian subcontinent consists of numerous sacred places or Tīrthas and one of those leading Tīrthas is Gayā, located in Eastern India. Lying on the western bank of the river Phalgu, the holy city of Gayā in southern Bihar attracts hundreds of pilgrims through the ages. Gayā is mainly famous as the place of performing Hindu funeral rites, but, on the other hand, Gayā is a reputed pan-Indian Vaiṣṇavite Tīrtha. Thousands of pilgrims gather here to observe and venerate the famous lotus foot-print of Lord Viṣṇu and the Viṣṇupāda temple. The famous Purāṇic myth of slaying of Gayāsura by Lord Viṣṇu made Gayā a Vaiṣṇavite Tīrtha. But, from the epigraphic references, specially from the Pāla charters, we come to know that Gayā inherited the tradition of worshipping different cults and

practices religious plurality within its religious sphere.

The Pāla Charters

The Gayā Copper Plate Inscription of Gupta Ruler Samudragupta, issued on his 9th regnal year,² and dated back to the first quarter of the 4th Century A.D. bears the testimony of Gayā's political placement. The inscription provides a very important information that Gayā was politically under the domination of Gupta Kings. Gayā was a Viśaya or a district of the Gupta territory. When the Pāla dynasty established their rule centering Magadha, at around the middle of 8th century A.D., Gayā inevitably went under their control. This political development has been clearly visible in the wide ranges of fragmentary inscriptions that have been found at Gayā, spanning from the middle of 8th century to the end of the 12th century. In this series of epigraphs, the Gayā temple inscription of the Pāla king Nārāyaṇapāla engraved at the wall of the Mahādeva shrine in the compound of the Viṣṇupāda temple complex may be mentioned at first. The epigraph was issued on the Vaiśākḥī-Pūrṇimā in the seventh regnal year of Nārāyaṇapāla which date is ascribed to the seventh decade of the 9th century A.D, specifically 870 A.D. The inscription starts with praising Murārī, that is Lord Viṣṇu and it is quite possible because Gayā is one of the strongholds of the Vaiṣṇava faith. The verse 8 and verse 9 records the dedication of a Vāsa or house at Gayā, made by Bhaṭṭa Bhānudeva for the housing of the ascetics. The charter also refers to

1. Eck, Diana. L., "India's Tīrthas: Crossings in Sacred Geography", *History of Religions* 20 (4), 1981, pp - 323

2. *CORPUS INSCRIPTIONUM INDICARUM, Vol III, Inscriptions of The Early Gupta Kings*, ed., Bahadurchand Chhabra & Govind Swamirao Gai and (Revised by), Ramakrishna Devdatta Bhandarkar, Archaeological Survey Of India, New Delhi, 1981, pp - 229

the house as an Āśrama or Maṭha for the Brahmachārīs. The record interestingly calls Āśrama as Maṭha plausibly to indicate a monastery.³ Such reference might make us understand that in Gayā a stream of Buddhist faith was also flown and Buddhist ascetics also went or inhabited there. Side by side, it was a place of Brahmanical beliefs too. Moreover, D.C.Sircar has shown that some scholars suggest that the term Lokenātha used in the charter is actually addressing Buddha instead of Viṣṇu because the Pālas were Buddhist by faith; or it was the evidence of considering Buddha as one of the incarnations of Viṣṇu;⁴ another argument may have been placed here that during the Pāla era, in Bengal, the Neighbour-land of Gayā, Avalokiteśvara-Lokenātha was one of the most popularly venerated Mahāyānī Buddhist Deity who was actually an amalgamation of Hindu God Sūrya-Viṣṇu and the Buddha;⁵ this tradition might have been followed in Gayā too because of the political proximity. Whatever it could be, but the epigraph surely proves that Gayā was a holy site or a tīrtha where both Buddhists and Hindus or particularly Vaiṣṇavas visited regularly, so that the erection and donation of resting house for them were needed.

Five fragmentary stone inscriptions of a Brāhmaṇa ruling family of Gayā ascribed to the middle of the 11th century and earlier part of 12th century A.D. assure the sanctity of that place. The four inscriptions among the five belong to Viśvarūpa or Viśvāditya, the son of Śudraka and the fifth belongs to Yakṣhapāla, son of Viśvarūpa or Viśvāditya. The charters reveal that they were the feudatory chiefs under the Pālas, who ruled over Gayā under Pāla-sovereign.⁶ The first inscription found at the gate of the Kṛṣṇa-Dvārikā temple at the Viṣṇupāda temple complex of Gayā was carved by Viśvāditya in the 15th regnal year of the Pāla king Nayapāla. Starting with a popular adoration of the Lord Viṣṇu (om namo Bhagavate Vāsudevāya), the charter refers to Gayā as 'Mokṣhdvāram' or the 'open door to salvation' because it is the residence of God Prajāpati (Brahmā). It also describes Gayā as a great centre of Vedic studies and sacrifices. Further, the inscription records the event of the

erection of a temple of Janārdana (Viṣṇu) by Viśvāditya in the 15th regnal year of the Pāla king Nayapāla, probably in 1053 A.D.⁷ The second inscription of Viśvāditya too was issued in the same year. It is found to be engraved inside the small shrine of Narasiṃha temple within the courtyard of Viṣṇupāda temple. Interestingly, the charter starts with an adoration of Goddess Lakṣmī, as he is the consort of Puruṣottama or Viṣṇu (Lakṣmīscirañjayati... adhigatā Puruṣottamasya) and commemorates the construction of the temple of Gadādhara and other unspecified shrines at Gayā by Viśvarūpa. Further the epigraph mentions that Gayā was created by God Vedhas (Lord Brahmā) as a Brahma-Purī. D.C.Sircar thinks here the term Brahma-Purī is used to indicate Gayā as a 'settlement of Brāhmaṇas'.⁸

Another fragmentary inscription has been discovered on a slab under the image of the God Gadādhara. As only the first five lines of the epigraph could be deciphered, that is why the date of it is not known exactly. But from the deciphered portion, it has been clear that this epigraph, composed by Vaidya Vajrapāni eulogizes and commemorates the same event of the building of Gadādhara temple by Viśvarūpa in the similar way it is written at the earlier mentioned one. The fascinating fact is, this inscription begins with an obeisance to the Mārtaṇḍa or Sun-God.⁹ In the 5th regnal year of the next Pāla ruler Viḡrahapāla, another fragmentary charter of Viśvarūpa has been seen affixed to the wall of a small shrine under the Akṣhay-Vaṭa at Gayā. The eulogistic record, starting with the praise of Śiva and written by Vaidya Dharmapāni, dated to 1060 A.D., speaks that the temple of Prapitāmaheśvara (Brahmā), Gaṅgeśa, Kanakeśvara, Janārdana, Śukla-Bhānu and other Gods were built and repaired by Viśvarūpa. The charter further suggests that God Brahmā (Abjājanman) created the Gayā Tīrtha.¹⁰

The undated Śitalā temple inscription of Yakṣapāla, starting with an adoration of the Sun-God or Sūrya, refers to the flights of steps for reaching the bed of Phalgu (Phalgutaṭa) and the trunk of the Akṣhay-Vaṭa. The writer of the charter, a Brāhmaṇa named Murāri, praises Yakṣapāla, the contemporary ruler of Gayā for constructing a temple as the abode of Lord Manuāditya (a form of the Sun-God),

3. *Epigraphia Indica, Volume XXXV*, Sircar D.C. (ed.), Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1963-1964, No. - 32.1, pp – 225-228

4. *Epigraphia Indica, Vol, XXXV*, No. - 32.1, ibid, pp - 226

5. Roy, Niharranjan, *Bangaleer Itihas, Aadi Parba*, Deys Publishing, Kolkata, 8th ed., 2015, pp - 677

6. *Epigraphia Indica, Volume XXXVI*, Sircar D.C. (ed.), Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1965-1966, No. - 11, pp - 81

7. *Epigraphia Indica, Volume XXXVI*, ibid, No. - 11.1, pp – 81, 84-86

8. *Epigraphia Indica, Volume XXXVI*, ibid, No. - 11.2, pp – 81, 86-88

9. *Epigraphia Indica, Volume XXXVI*, ibid, No. - 11.3, pp – 81, 88-89

10. *Epigraphia Indica, Volume XXXVI*, ibid, No. - 11.4, pp – 81, 89-92

Sahasralinga (Śiva), Kamalā (Lakṣmī), Ardhāngīna (Ardhanārīśvara Śiva), Nārāyaṇa, two Someśvaras, Phalgunātha, Vijayāditya and Kedāreśvara. The epigraph also records about the excavation of a lake named Uttaramānasa and erection of a free feeding house or satra for the pilgrims by Yakṣapāla.¹¹ But, here P.V. Kane suggests that Yakṣapāla might have repaired the lake Uttaramānasa but did not excavate it because the inscription refers this tank as khyāta or famous. As it was famous it seems that it already existed at the time of Yakṣapāla. Moreover, this tank has been mentioned in the Vāyu Purāṇa and the Kṛtyakalpataru of Lakṣmīdhara, a work of 1110 A.D. Therefore it can be guessed that the tank was well known at least in the 8th-9th centuries A.D. The inscription probably refers to some sort of repairing or restoring the famous lake.¹²

Another inscription during the Pāla rule, mentioning the king Govindapāla, has been embedded in the wall of a small shrine close to the Gadādhara temple below the courtyard of the Viṣṇupāda temple at Gayā. The record says about a transaction relates to the Gadādhara temple and it was conducted by some devotees of Viṣṇu. But, interesting fact is, though the epigraph has been engraved in one of the most celebrated Vaiṣṇava shrine of India, a Śiva-linga has been seen represented above the writing. The incision of the Śiva-linga may suggest that the engraver of the record was a Śaiva in faith. This 1175 A.D. inscription states that an incense-burner of the Gadādhara temple named Vidyādhara deposited some money for making provision for feeding brāhmaṇas at the temple on Āśvina-sudi 5 every year. This has been also proclaimed that those who would arrange for the feeding of the Brāhmaṇas out of the endowment given by Vidyādhara would acquire the merit of the performance of Aśvamedha sacrifice, and who would stop doing such dharma would commit five great sins.¹³

Various Facts

Some intriguing facts can be derived from these Pāla charters. Firstly, these records clearly show that apart from Vaiṣṇavism, other foremost religious beliefs of Brahmanical Hinduism also existed in Gayā and those faiths were quite popular among the masses. In fact, the invocation of the Gods as recorded in the beginning of the epigraphs

reveal that despite being a reputed Vaiṣṇavite Tirtha, Gayā inherited the tradition of venerating the cult of Śiva, Brahmā, Sūrya and even of Śakti (remember the Śītālā devī temple). So, Gayā possessed some sort of religious plurality in the socio-cultural spectrum. In fact, till now, Śivarātri, Navratri and Chhaṭa Vrata are the three most popular occasion when Gayā witnesses huge crowd of thousands of people. Further, L. P. Vidyarthi has collected the data that in Monday for Prapitāmaheśvara and in Tuesday for Bāgeśvarī and Maṅgalagaurī, the number of devotees gather in those shrines.¹⁴

Secondly, Buddhism was also popular in Gayā probably because of its vicinity to the famous Buddhist pilgrimage site Bodhgayā. In fact, in Buddhist Pāli literature, like Vinayapīṭka, Saṃyuttanikāya, Anguttaranikāya, Suttanipāta Gayā is sometimes called as Brahmagayā, similar to Brahmasara, in order to avoid the confusion with the Bodhgayā.¹⁵ Notably, these works are ascribed to the Pre-Christian era. All these works unanimously agree on the fact that Buddha stayed at Gayā on several occasions. Anguttaranikāya states that Brahmagayā was the first destination where Buddha went in quest of spiritual truth and after attaining enlightenment at Bodhgayā, again Gayāśira was the place from where he preached the famous Gayāsutra.¹⁶ The usage of the term Lokenātha too attest the existence of Buddhism in that region.

Thirdly, some of these charters repeatedly state that Brahmā had created Gayā Tirtha which statement surely differs from the Purāṇic origin myth related to Gayā. Rather, it reminds of the epic narratives from the Mahābhārata where Gayā was mentioned as Brahmasara or the lake of Brahmā. Such distinction indicates that in Gayā, besides Purāṇic legends, other older myths were surely much popular to be recorded at the royal epigraphs. Fourthly, that Gayā was inhabited by Brāhmaṇas is evident from the epigraphic record. This narration is however quite related to the Purāṇic myths that Brahmā donated lands to the Brāhmaṇas in Gayā after successfully completing his sacrifice. It would be possible that the Purāṇic myth is a justification

14. Vidyarthi, L. P., *The Sacred Complex in Hindu Gaya*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1961, pp – 12

15. Sircar, D. C., *The Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*, Motilal Banarsidas Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1960, pp -230

16. Paul, Debjani, "Antiquity of Viṣṇupāda at Gaya: Tradition and Archaeology", *Journal East and West*, Vol 35, No. 1/3, 1985, pp - 109

11. *Epigraphia Indica*, Volume XXXVI, *ibid*, No.- 11.5, pp – 81, 92-94

12. Mathur, Parul, "Sacred sites : Sacred Death Performance of Funerary Rituals at Tirthas", *Centre for Historical Studies*, New Delhi, 2007, pp - 129

13. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol, XXXV, No.- 32.3, *ibid*, pp – 233-238

of the spread of Brāhmaṇa settlement in that spot. Fifthly, these epigraphs are found engraved either inside the temple or a small shrine or under the image of God. That means, the famous Viṣṇupāda temple complex, and some other small shrines where these epigraphs were carved already took its preliminary form during the Pāla age. Some of the famous images were also installed inside the temples. As the construction date of the Viṣṇupāda temple is unknown, and as the Pāla epigraphs do not credit any Pāla rulers for building the temple, so it can be surmised that the temple existed prior to the Pāla era. Due to its popularity, the feudatories of the Pālas used this temple complex to propagate their patronage-activities. Sixthly, the records show that apart from kingly people, the common people were too enable to give endowment for the name of God and Brāhmaṇas. The people associated to different activities happened in a temple complex were allowed to give patronage and those patronages were to be maintained for the name of Dharma or righteousness. Lastly, all these epigraphs provide ample evidence of state-favored patronization. The kings lend patronage in different form of constructing or repairing temples, donating land for resting house for the ascetics, building of satra and in various way which clearly indicate that the immense popularity that Gayā gained, forced the rulers to do patronage in order to consolidate their power and earn popular-acceptance. Moreover, it was quite a salient feature in the early medieval era that the local rulers lend patronage to the Brahmanical religions for seeking validation of their rules from the Brahmanical leaders.

Conclusion

The Pāla epigraphs of early medieval India are the proofs of religious pluralism as well as the religious sanctification of a place. Being a Vaiṣṇava sacred centre, Gayā consists of the famous temple of Lord Viṣṇu, but it seems from the Pāla evidences that the erection of the temple was started before the issuing of these epigraphs. This proves that Gayā was already undergoing the process of early medieval cultic sanctification and temple-building was one of the main instruments for affiliating a particular site into a particular sectarian belief. But such sectarian affiliation surely was not able to oblivate the continuing practice of worshipping different cults and faiths in that region. Therefore, the Pāla charters present an integrating approach towards the religious harmony, existed in Gayā in the early medieval era.