

## ABSTRACT

The current research attempts to explore into the conditions of emergence and manifestation of a rich literary culture in early medieval Bengal through a study of inscriptions. The study is also designed to throw light on a juncture of this history to trace the rise of a literate society. This society was emerging under varied state powers and was influenced by respective dynastic policies at different phases of history. This literary culture is seen to be initiated with the records related to a few ruling figures whose dynastic affiliations are not clear, for example, Pradyumnabandhu, Gopacandra, Dharmāditya, Dvādaśāditya, and Samācāradeva group of rulers and further with the records of Śaśānka, Bhāskarvarman, and the Khaḍgas, etc. The full-fledged efflorescence of a literary style and presentation in epigraphic form takes off through large and ornate inscriptions of the Pālas and Candras. Finally, the optimal level of enrichment is attained in the inscriptions of the Varman and Sena rulers.

A vast number of inscriptions are available from the context of early medieval Bengal which offers a window to the emergence of rich Sanskrit language and also hints at a distinctive literary style. This distinctive style of writing in the inscriptions of early medieval Bengal presents a different perspective that needs to be analyzed further to comprehend the dynamics of the socio-cultural paradigm. It is very significant that with the rise of regional powers in the post – Gupta times, the region of Bengal not only emerged as a politically vibrant region but that it had also borne a regional trend in literary formations. This resonates in an elegant literary tone that eulogizes ruling dynasties, kings, and various aspects of material life.

In the context of ancient India, inscriptions have been found to not only serve as important administrative devices but also offer excellent means for tracking the emergence of literary culture, parallel to the textual tradition. As Sheldon Pollock points out, since this literary culture was expressed through written documents, the task of writing it was entrusted to a specific authority.<sup>1</sup> He also states that this authorship was related to a specific socio-political privilege that imposed some limitations on the cultural freedom of this medium of communication. According to Pollock, the literature indicated the emergence of particular socio-textual communities. All these references allude to a closed community of writers and their intended audience. Inscriptions from early medieval Bengal can be offered as examples

to substantiate this case. For not only do we see the earliest glimmer of an evolving literacy in physical form in these inscribed words but also as records of administration this very body of evidence remains geared to the state and ruling community and as such flourish within an enclosed community to begin with. The authorship of these inscribed messages thus possibly invested agency of some kind to its writers. It is through them that the literary style expanded and flourished. This process was obviously endorsed by a politico-administrative infrastructure that grew and evolved over time. The epigraphic records not only reveal the complex political history of the region and the dimensions of dynastic rule in different subregions, a close scrutiny of the records also offer indication of the nature of personnel associated with administration and agrarian life. We note the emergence of communities of the literate like *karaṇas* and of brahmanical scholars whose presence is observed in the upper echelons of society in the different politico-geographical subregions.

At the same time, we note that this very significant regional literary trend had grown with deeper roots connected to the emerging pan-Indian Sanskritic cultural trends, visible in the post Gupta phase. The references made to the Gauḍī style by Bāṇabhaṭṭa and others following him indicate this phenomenon.<sup>ii</sup> This gauḍī rīṭī, has some special features, such as, gentle albeit hard words with long compounds, ornate and charming poetry with various ‘upamā, drṣṭānta and unfamiliar words’ and overbearing composition or ‘atiśoyokti’, etc. Although it has been criticized by several scholars such as Bāṇabhaṭṭa (c.7<sup>th</sup> century CE), Bhāmaha (c.7<sup>th</sup> century CE) and Dandin (c.8<sup>th</sup> century CE) and found to lack finesse, especially in comparison with the prevailing Vaidarbhī style, yet at the same time this figurative language did not lack in attention from contemporary and later litterateurs and poets.

Of all these eloquent Sanskrit scholars, Bāṇabhaṭṭa was the one who deserves special mention. He was a Vātsyāyana brāhmaṇa of the Bhārgava lineage in association to Dādhīchas.<sup>iii</sup> Brāhmaṇas of this group who inhabited in eastern India during the early medieval period have been referred in several early medieval Bengal inscriptions like Irda copperplate of Nayapāla, Barrackpore copperplate of Vijayasena, Govindapur copperplate of Lakṣmaṇasena, Madanpur plate of Keśavasena and Madanpada plate of Viśvarūpasena.<sup>iv</sup> The genealogical identities of all these eminent brāhmaṇas are found in these inscriptions. They also emerged as potential authors of the inscriptions. This may indicate a cultural-genealogical connection with the great litterateur and could explain the notable influence of Bāṇabhaṭṭa's style of writing found in some of the Bengal inscriptions.

On the other hand, it is very surprising to note that there is no mention of any significant literature in Bengal as the bearer of the *Gauḍī rīti* in the 6th and 7th centuries even though Bāṇabhaṭṭa speaks of the *rīti* during that era. In subsequent times this *rīti* has also been discussed specifically in the writings of Bhāmaha and Daṇḍin. In view of the lack of any extant textual sources, we can only cite the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Nidhanpur copperplate of Bhāskaravarman, as a possible example, which bears a mark of early genesis of literary creativity. However, even with a few glimpses of literary trend evident in some inscriptions of the late 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, it is only with the Pāla - Candra phase that true efflorescence of literary composition makes appearance in inscriptions. Even then we have to admit that barring Chandragomin's work on grammar there were no early texts that could lay claim to a regional textual tradition of literacy in these early days. How then could we explain the problem of the early references to Gauḍī rīti as a distinctive regional literary style made by poetic critics of import and try to understand the implications of this reference in the context of the wide horizon of pan Indian Sanskrit studies? We can hypothetically offer the idea that the presence of early epigraphic compositions in post – Gupta Bengal tentatively indicates the emergence of a regional class of elite literates, growing familiar with Sanskrit-based literary culture of the heart-land of Pan-Indian state society. The identity of this group of composers may not have been known at first, but later they do have a somewhat more transparent identity, which we note especially from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards. They flourished further from the 12<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of the Varmans and reached an apex in the 13<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Lakṣmaṇasena. The composers were obviously addressing a literate society, indicated in the references to various royal officials, urban and rural elites, landholding classes, etc. The artisanal groups and other social classes and sundry residents of rural society could have formed the background of this socio-cultural fabric. So, this whole process certainly indicates a potential society, variously situated with the rise and fall of dynastic rulers in the varied sub-regions of Bengal. The role of the regional states in their varied orders and orbits had, over time, provided patronage and thus impacted the direction that literary culture took. For example, one notes that with the emergence of new political forces during the time of the Senas, the literary efflorescence culminated into a heightened creativity of the brahmanical affiliation. And yet, there are indications of a sustained development of literary culture beyond the scope of political state.

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## Notes and References

- <sup>i</sup> Sheldon Pollock, 'The Cosmopolitan Vernacular', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.57, No. 1, 1998, p.8.
- <sup>ii</sup> Kāśināth Pāṇḍurang Parab, *The Harṣacharita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa*, 4th edition, Bombay: Nirnay Sāgar Press, 1918, line 7.
- <sup>iii</sup> Vishwambhar Sharan Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India; A Study in Historical Biographies*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966, p.33.
- <sup>iv</sup> N.G.Majumdar, Irda copperplate of the Kamboja king Nayapāladeva, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol.XXII, p. 151; N.G. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. III, Rajshahi, 1929, pp.63, 96, 125, 137.