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TRACING THE HISTORY OF LITERARY CULTURE IN EARLY MEDIEVAL BENGAL IN THE LIGHT OF INSCRIPTIONS (6TH CENTURY CE TO 13TH CENTURY CE)

Introducing the Theme and its context:

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 Śāsānka, 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.¹ 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 Sanskrit cultural trends, visible in the post Gupta phase. The references made to the Gauḍī style by Bāṇabhaṭṭa and others following him indicate this phenomenon.² 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.7th century CE), Bhāmaha (c.7th century CE) and Dandin (c.8th 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.³ 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.⁴ 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 7th 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 6th – 8th 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 10th century onwards. They flourished further from the 12th century during the reign of the Varmans and reached an apex in the 13th 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.

Secondary Literature

The review of secondary literature begins with a focus on the early trend of research on the growth of literary style in Sanskrit inscriptions in general. The phenomenon of Sanskrit as a medium of language in epigraphs has been discussed by several eminent experts in epigraphy. For example, D.C. Sircar had pointed out how in the later part of early historic period Sanskrit took over Prakrit as the primary language for inscriptions.⁵ According to Richard Saloman, Sanskrit inscriptions could be noted on the scene from the end of the pre-Christian era and the language was used by the brahmanical elite to exhibit a high classical style in the administrative realm.⁶ Pandurang Vaman Kane traced the theory of poetics that had evolved through the inscriptions, remarkably illuminated in the Junagadh rock inscription of Rudradāman (mentioning 72 śaka era i.e. 150 CE) and the Allahabad Pillar inscription of the 4th century CE. These bore testimony of high quality kāvya in Sanskrit inscriptions.⁷ Inspired by these perspectives and theories, we turn our attention toward searching for a poetic style in the inscriptions of early medieval Bengal. Debarchana Sarkar has enlightened us about the manifestation of an ornate style of language structure, full of rhetorical inflexions and complex grammatical formations in the inscriptions of early medieval Bengal.⁸

We may now turn our attention towards the prior works on Sanskrit literature of Bengal. The first review was made in the work of S. K. De, whose contribution was pivotal in providing a detailed list of Sanskrit literature of Bengal, especially during the Pāla and Sena rule.⁹ For the first time, he brought out all the literary genres together in distinct categories. We may refer to Siddheswar Chattopadhyay's work next which emphasized the form and the style of writing Sanskrit literature in Bengal.¹⁰ In recent times Nupur Dasgupta's article on a myriad of Sanskrit literature and technical Treatises reveals the cultural flow and evolution in the literature of early medieval Bengal since the early period.¹¹ Jesse Ross Knutson observed the grand emergence of ornate and aesthetically high literary creativity in the court of Lakṣmaṇasena between 12th-13th centuries.¹²

The way in which previous researchers have shown distinctive development of literary traditions mark a cultural flow that was particularly regional in tone. But this is possibly most observed in the style of composition met with in the inscriptions. This is evident if we review the early tone of compositions starting with the Nidhanpur Copper Plate inscription up to the examples from the Sena inscriptions. For example, we note a distinct similarity of literary

tone between textual literature of Sena period as highlighted by Knutson and the contemporary inscriptions. It is the root and course of this phenomenon of a complex, multi-layered regional literary culture vibrantly exhibited in epigraphic form and its associative sphere of communication that has been sought in the current research.

The regional literary style of early medieval Bengal as reflected in the inscriptions and literature hinted toward a potential literate society among whom this culture was practiced. As far as society is concerned, we may turn our attention towards the prior literature on the trends of studying the social structure of early medieval Bengal. Here, the first mention may be made of Ramesh Chandra Majumdar's edited volume, '*The History of Bengal*'. This work provides the basic socio-economic and political framework for the early history of Bengal.¹³ But it is with Nihar Ranjan Ray's *Bāṅgālīr Itihas: Ādi parban*, that we truly enter into an analytic frame of social history. Ray perceived ancient Bengal society in new light, moving away from a narrative of facts to analytic examination of frameworks of State, polity and economy. He delved deep into understanding the social structure, social strata, class, language and literature of Bengal.¹⁴

This general social structure refers to a stratified society and its internal world with diverse social classes and functional communities. Chitrarekha Gupta had attempted to understand the position of the *kāyasthas* - as the class of literate writers in a pan-Indian frame from the 9th century onwards.¹⁵ Puspa Niyogi had made an attempt to trace the rise and development of the *brāhmaṇas* in early Bengal.¹⁶ Both these works provide important premises for our research. In recent times, Ryosuke Furui has made an in-depth study of the social structure of early medieval Bengal based on the epigraphic records. He found the rural society of early medieval Bengal to evolve through phases of agrarian relations from 400 CE to 13th century CE, and highlighted the hierarchy in power relations evident in the agrarian structure. He talked about the presence of subordinate rulers, landed magnets, grassroots cultivators and agrarian labourers.¹⁷ Furui has also thrown deeper light on rural social networks and integrations highlighting the emergence of regional features of *varṇa-jāti* system in early medieval Bengal.¹⁸ In the process he has offered important clues to the emergence of the *brāhmaṇas* as a social group with clear socio-cultural dominance, having built genealogical networks and links with both the royal court and local elite clientele, and the wider rural society.¹⁹ Suchandra Ghosh and Sayantani Pal illuminated the life of elite and non-elite groups and the people of the lower strata in the varied sub-regions of Bengal up to c. 1300 CE.²⁰ These works offered

several significant clues, some of which have helped in marking the social orbit of the literary culture which forms one of the major aspects of the present research.

Turning attention towards the diverse political structure of early medieval Bengal the recent volume of 'The History of Bangladesh', edited by Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranbir Chakraborty offers rich and current data-base on the very complex political history of early medieval Bengal.

Ranbir Chakraborty focuses on the local state formation in early Bengal from 300-1300 CE reviewing the political forces and entities characterizing the diverse and layered nature of monarchical polity in different sub-regions of Bengal.²¹ Ryosuke Furui's article on "Variegated Adaptations: State Formation in Bengal from the fifth to the seventh century" have been utilized to understand the variable process of secondary state formation in Bengal especially in the light of environmental conditions and different levels of agrarian developments.²²

Research Question and Methodology

The referred secondary works provide significant clues and theoretical frames for analyses.

However, extensive and focused research on the current theme of research remains absent. The work, therefore, delved deeper to track the different scopes of investigations into the primary sources and came up with many hypotheses based on these investigations in order to frame the findings and provide answers to a hitherto unveiled chapter of cultural history of early medieval Bengal. The current research has observed its findings within the wider socio-political frame in order to track deeper into the problems of emergence and sustenance of a literate culture and society in early medieval Bengal. The evident fact that this culture continued to grow and evolve led us to wonder and seek for the social and material support base. Questions on patronage, creativity, consumption and conduits of literary culture have been sought in epigraphic evidence, which were aligned with the textual sources, and then found to provide valuable information on these varied aspects.

The specific questions that needed to be addressed were focused on the nature of the society in general and in the specific scopes of the sub-regions. The major question also revolves around the matter of the identity of the agents of literate culture and patronage. What was the nature of influence that worked behind the formation of this social infrastructure and who cultivated such a rich culture? These questions have been sought and addressed as far as possible with

reference to the primary sources and based on some major hypothetical parameters set in earlier studies.

Details of methodological parameter

The major source and subject matter of the study are the Sanskrit inscriptions of early medieval Bengal that exhibited a rich literary style. This trend of development of literary style has evolved in at a Pan-Indian level for a long time. Even the poets who wrote the inscriptions mentioned their own work to be poetry. For example, Hariṣeṇa and Ravikīrti had both presented themselves as poets. Manabendu Bandyopadhyay and Debarchana Sarakar's earlier analyses of the literary value of the early historic inscriptions, substantiate the idea that epigraphic compositions were indeed taking off to a level of heightened literary activity in many cases.²³ Taking cue from this Pan-Indian perspective, our study seeks to establish the value of epigraphic compositions from early medieval Bengal as a special example of the phenomenon. In parallel to this we also take cue from the rich research on textual literature of early medieval Bengal carried out by S.K. De and in recent times by Nupur Dasgupta to track the cultural flow and evolutionary paradigm of Sanskrit literature of Bengal. Knutson's work makes an important contribution in situating an ultra rich creative literature within the domain of courtly culture, thus pointing to the possibilities of envisaging an aspect of the social domain within which the literary society flourished.

This literary style, communicated through the inscriptions, demonstrated a literary community and a community who accessed it. Here we can refer to Sheldon Pollock's theory where he talks about inscriptions as representations of literary culture and illustrates how it was cultivated within a particular socio-textual community.²⁴ It is through this mode of communication that a literate society emerged. Nurtured within the domain of social and political structure of power, the pursuit of Sanskrit ornate literature represents on the one hand the upper echelons of society. In this regard, Sheldon Pollock stated that 'Sanskrit inscriptions, typically issued from the royal courts, were crucial as an expression of the political'.²⁵ Thus, the political picture that these inscriptions highlight, indicates the prevalence of a grand and visibly powerful political authority behind the growth of this literate society - possibly a court. Since we want to delve into this courtly background for the literary paradigm, we are resorting to the methodology and perspective furnished by Daud Ali.²⁶

Chapter I:

Literary Culture of Bengal: The Historical Frame

Chapter 1 discusses the general socio-political framework of Bengal behind the emergence of a rich literary trend, which flourished predominantly from the 5th-6th century CE onwards in distinct geo-ecological zones like Puṇḍravardhana, Rāḍha, Vaṅga and Samataṭa-Harikela.

Chapter II:

Inscriptions of Bengal: The Period of Genesis (6th – 8th centuries)

We have begun the discussion on the tentative emergence of literary style in the regional inscriptions in the second chapter. These inscriptions bear a regional trend of literary style as is evidenced from the references made to the *Gauḍī rīti* by several scholars. A thematic analysis of the inscriptions reveals that the records of each dynasty carried their distinctive features. This process was shaped with the records related to Pradyumnabandhu, Dharmāditya, Dvādaśāditya, Gopacandra and Samācāradeva, Śaśāṅka, Nāthas, Rātas, Khaḍgas and early Devas.

Chapter III:

The flourishing Phase of literary style in inscriptions (8th – 12th)

The third chapter deals with the evolution of compositional quality in the inscriptions of the rulers of the phase between 8th and 12th centuries. This is the period when early medieval Bengal witnessed the establishment of strong dynasties like that of the Pālas, the Candras, the rulers of Harikela who ruled wider territories covering several sub-regions like Puṇḍra, Rāḍha, Vaṅga, Samataṭa and beyond.

Chapter IV:

The Zenith of Embellishment in Inscriptions (10th-12th centuries)

Inscriptions belonging to 12th-13th centuries may be regarded as an exuberant and matured phase of literary style. This has been discussed in the fourth chapter.

Chapter V:

Social and cultural matrices of the Bengal inscription

The last chapter reviews the discussions made so far and attempts to look into the convergence of varied socio-cultural and political factors that led to the emergence of the distinctive Bengal Sanskrit Literary culture and also attempts to understand the social orbit of this development.

Concluding Observations:

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. namely, Puṇḍravardhana, Rāḍha, Vaṅga, Samataṭa-Harikela etc. 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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