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Prayag Prashasti of Samudragupta Conquest, Kingship, and the Making of Imperial Authority in Early Historic India

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Abstract: One of the most elaborate and academically complex inscriptions of early historic India is the Prayag Prashasti of Samudragupta, which was written by the court poet Harishena and written on the Allahabad Pillar. The inscription presents an in-depth knowledge of empire, royalty, and political order in the fourth century CE; it is by no means a straightforward royal praise. The Prayag Prashasti is examined in this essay as a political text as well as a historical source. It examines its linguistic choices, diplomatic tactics, religious beliefs, military categories, and narrative structure. This study contends that the Prashasti suggests an empire model based on flexible power rather than strict centralization by placing the inscription within larger historiographical discussions on the establishment of Gupta states. (Sharma 2005; Thapar 2002).

Introduction

A major turning point in development of northern India politically occurred in the fourth century CE. The rise of Gupta dynasties resulted in the concentration of power in the Gangetic plains, and it marked the beginning which historians would later refer to as a "classical" period of political and cultural advancement. The Prayag Prashasti is one of the most detailed and politically rich inscriptions among the many texts which are accessible for understanding this era. (Sircar 1965).

The inscription, which is found on the Allahabad Pillar, this structure was first built under Ashoka's rule, it is an example of symbolic political appropriation. By writing his accomplishments on a Mauryan pillar, Samudragupta intentionally positioned himself within an imperial power structure. An understanding of political significance and historical memory is evident in the monument choice. (Singh 2008).

Harishena, who was a senior court official, he combined administrative responsibilities with literary talent, wrote the inscription (Sircar 1965).

The Prashasti, has been composed in complex prose and verse written in Sanskrit, is a prime example of the rising prominence of language as an instrument for political expression (Thapar 2002; Sharma 2005). Despite being presented as a tribute, its historical significance can be seen from the way it gave information regarding the campaigns, categorized the monarchs, and



expressed the philosophy of kingship. The Prayag prashasti rather than being a just pleasant book, the Prayag Prashasti is seen as an ideological statement that describes the characteristics of Gupta imperialism.

Historical Background and Accession

During the middle of fourth century CE, after replacing Chandragupta I, Samudragupta appeared as one of the most energetic emperors of Gupta dynasty (Majumdar 1954; Raychaudhuri 1953). The inscription shows him as the legitimate and divinely chosen heir, but it also hints that his rise might have been the result of internal struggle (Sircar 1965).

Samudragupta had an ambitious goal of territorial expansion as soon as he was becoming king. He inherited a political environment which included forest tribes, frontier polities, and many regional powers in both northern and central India. To achieve dominance, he adapted an aggressive strategy to take over the subcontinent rather than keeping a defensive position (Sharma 2005).

He was also known as the "Napoleon of India" by many contemporary historians like V.A. Smith, who also made the comparison to highlight his military prowess. This example highlights the scope of the campaigns detailed in the Prayag Prashasti (Thapar 2002).

Structure and Narrative of the Inscription

The structure of the Prayag Prashasti is detailed. To demonstrate dynastic legitimacy, it starts with a genealogy that charts the Gupta emperors' ancestry because it places Samudragupta in a larger historical range, this introduction part is essential for confirming the dynasty's stability and authority. His military operations can be seen in the inscription's middle section. This section is especially significant because of the classification system used, and not just on the bases of quantity of victories. The inscription makes a difference between the defeated and annexed northern Indian rulers, the southern monarchs which were defeated but restored, the frontier states that recognized his authority, and the distant rulers paid respect.

Samudragupta is described as as brave in warfare, giving in victory, devoted to Brahmanical customs, and talented in poetry and music. These depictions provide an idealized picture of royalty that combines maturity in culture with military prowess. (Basham 1954).

Military Policy and Flexible Imperialism

The Prayag Prashasti's campaigns show us an advanced strategy for setting up empires. Direct annexation guaranteed administrative authority over economically productive areas in the Gangetic heartland. This region needed a stable administration because it was the center of Gupta power. On the other hand, the way southern rulers were treated shows practical calculation. Following their defeat, Samudragupta revived these monarchs on one condition of loyalty and tribute. This approach maintained symbolic primacy while avoiding the administrative burden of remote administration. It implies that imperial authority was designed in terms of hierarchical connections rather than just territorial occupation. (Chattopadhyaya 1994).



Kingship, Ideology, and Cultural Authority

On the basis of Brahmanical political theory, the inscription creates an example of kingship. Samudragupta is shown as an all-powerful monarch whose victories are justified as achievements of moral obligation rather than self interest. To justify growth within a moral framework, warfare is defined as restoring order and defending dharma.

The king's cultural achievements have also been given a lot of attention at the same time. The image of a prince who symbolised artistic maturity is further supported by coins made during his reign that show him playing the Veena. This dual image of scholar and warrior reflects a larger Gupta ideal in which cultural patronage and political power were inseparable.

This ideological framework has further strengthened by using of classical Sanskrit. The Prayag Prashasti speaks mainly about elites, regarding to other Mauryan inscriptions written in Prakrit and also addressed to a larger community. This change shows the rise of courtly literary culture as a medium for political expression and the strengthening of Brahmanical influence in governance. (Singh 2008).

Reading the Prashasti Critically

The praise of Prashasti is a glorifying inscription that constantly exaggerates accomplishments and ignores out defeats (Sircar 1965)

. The king's qualities are shown in an idealized manner, and no losses are mentioned. Historians examine the text carefully because of this, comparing it with other inscriptions and numismatic evidence. Its worth is still significant, though. The inscription describes the political geography of India in the fourth century, names the provincial rulers, and shows the concept of imperial authority. Scholars acknowledge it as a political literature that lays out the ideological underpinnings of empire rather than rejecting it as fiction. The Prashasti shows how early Indian empire functioned through strategic accommodation, symbolic submission, and negotiation. It offers a sophisticated kind of government in contrast to oversimplified ideas of centralized control. (Sharma 2005).

The Idea of Empire in the Gupta Age

The Mauryan model of centralised bureaucracy is not the same as the empire that the Prayag Prashasti represents. The imperial authority of the Gupta seems deeper and less inflexible. Diplomatic alliances and tribute arrangements coexisted with direct administration. Because of its multi-layered sovereignty, the empire was able to operate in a variety of geographical areas without enforcing uniform administrative frameworks (Sharma 2005).

As a result, the Prayag Prashasti becomes crucial to understanding how early Indian dynasties struck a balance between sustainability and growth. The inscription creates a model for succeeding kings by portraying Samudragupta as both a conqueror and a patron of culture. It displays the Gupta era's intellectual originality as well as military aims.

Literary Style and Cultural Transformation

A major turning point in the development of political communication is the Prayag Prashasti. The development of courtly literature is seen in its complex Sanskrit prose. The Prashasti talks mostly to elites, in contrast to Ashokan inscriptions that addressed popular themes in easily



understood language. This change is a reflection of larger cultural changes. During the Gupta era, Brahmanical scholarship was consolidated, classical poetry flourished, and Sanskrit grammar was standardized. This intellectual environment is reflected in the inscription. Social hierarchies were strengthened by the Gupta court's adoption of Sanskrit as the language of authority. Cultural refinement became deeply associated with political authority.

Conclusion

One of the most important inscriptions from ancient India is still the Prayag Prashasti. It serves as a structured presentation of political ideology and imperial policy, even if it is presented as a royal tribute. It provides unmatched insight into Gupta statecraft through its thorough categorisation of rulers, illustration of conquest strategies, and development of royal ideals. A critical analysis shows that Samudragupta's empire was established via cultural legitimacy and strategic adaptability in addition to force. Thus, the inscription functions as a political statement as well as a historical document, giving light on the methods used in early historic India to define and defend imperial authority.

In this way, the Prayag Prashasti represents the changing concept of empire on the Indian subcontinent as well as a stone memorial engraved onto the Allahabad Pillar.

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