



The Allahabad Stone Pillar Inscription: A Key to Understanding Samudragupta's Empire and Legacy

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ABSTRACT

The Allahabad Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta epitomizes the role of Sanskrit inscriptions as historical texts that provide invaluable insights into ancient India's political, cultural, and intellectual life. By chronicling the military conquests, religious tolerance, administrative innovations, and ethical values of Gupta rulers, it helps us appreciate the legacy of Samudragupta as a symbol of a golden age. Such Sanskrit texts have not only preserved India's historical narrative but also allowed modern historians to reconstruct a more nuanced and holistic view of Indian history. Inscriptions like these remain key to understanding the complexities of India's past and continue to inspire scholars in their efforts to uncover and interpret the rich legacy of Indian civilization.

Introduction

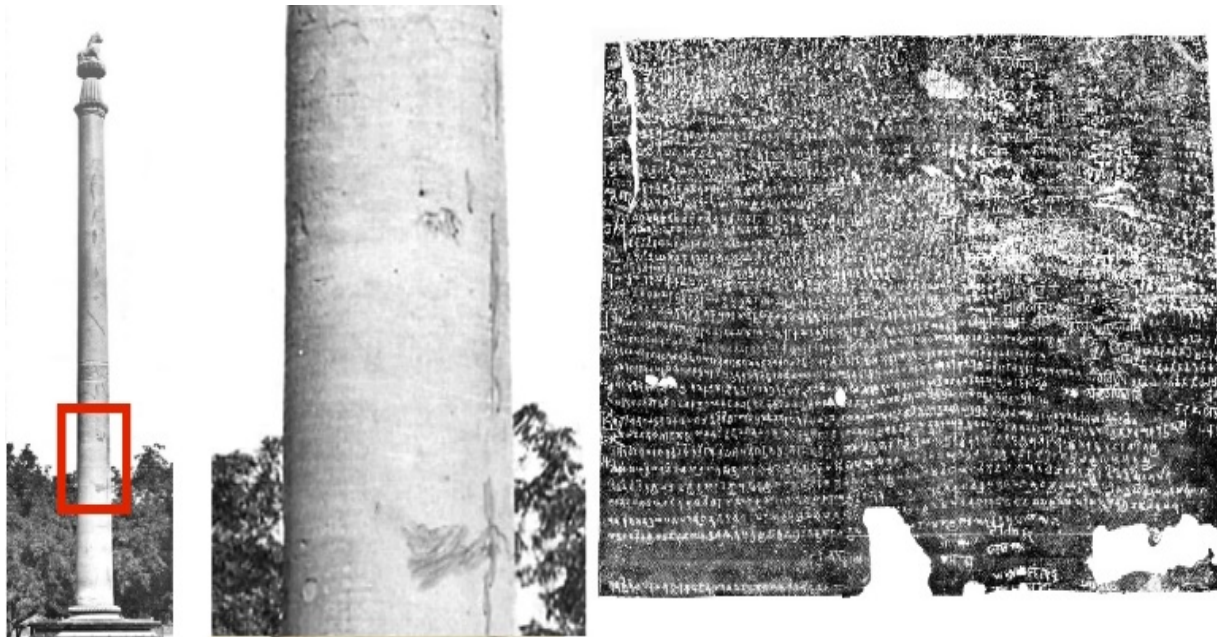
On the Allahabad Pillar, immediately below the inscriptions of Ashoka, there is an inscription attributed to the Gupta king Samudragupta, who lived in the 4th century. The Allahabad Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, also known as the Prayāga-praśasti, is one of the most important historical records from ancient India. Composed by Harishena, Samudragupta's court poet, this inscription highlights Samudragupta's conquests, administration, and ideals of kingship, and offers valuable insights into the political, cultural, and social fabric of the Gupta period. In the year 1834, A. Troyer published this inscription along with a translation in the Asiatic Society of Bengal journal, followed by W.H. Mill's

revised version and translation. However, both translations were inadequate, so in 1837, James Prinsep provided an improved reading based on Captain Edward Smith's impression. However, the first accurate reading and fresh translation came in 1888 from J.F. Fleet in his book '*Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*', Volume III.

This article is an attempt to analyse how Sanskrit texts have contributed to reshaping Indian history and examine the historical significance of the Allahabad stone pillar inscription of Samudragupta.

Physical description:

This inscription is written in beautiful Sanskrit language and uses the elegant Gupta script, a refined version of the Brāhmi script. Only 33 lines make up the eulogy, which is a mixture of prose and poetry in different forms. Originally, the inscription was carved on the Asokan pillar in Kausambi, near Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh. Later, it was moved to the Allahabad Fort, where it remains today. Alexander Cunningham believed that Firuz Shah Tughlaq moved the pillar to its current place in



Allahabad, while J.F. Fleet thought that Akbar might have played a key role in its relocation. In 1605, the Mughal emperor Jahangir supervised its repair. The pillar stands 35 feet (10.07 meters) tall and is 35 inches (0.09 meters) wide. Made from sandstone, it dates back to the third century BCE or even earlier.

Historical Significance:

The inscription describes Samudragupta as a notable person. He was the son of Chandragupta-I and the Lichchavi princess Kumārdevī. He took imperial titles like mahārājādhirāja and Paramabhattāraka. He had a kind and protective attitude towards his subjects, portraying him as a benevolent ruler who cared deeply for his subjects and loved them like a mother- "*Kṛta-praṇaya-jana-saṁvardhano mātrvatsalaḥ.*"¹ He was a ruthless conqueror, a capable and compassionate ruler with unwavering devotion to the well-being of his subjects, a king with a sharp and sophisticated mind and an expert in music and art. He was referred to as kavirāja, which means "king among poets."² He ruled with steadfast devotion to the well-being of his subjects. He was a warrior who fought hundreds of different wars. The conqueror of all kings, he, like Dharma-Raja (Yudhishtira or the king of Dharma), rules the earth with Dharma- "*Sarva-rājo vijetā, Dharma-rāja iva ca pṛthivyām dharmataḥ śāsanān kārayati*"³ It was said that he was equalled with the gods like Dhanadā or Kubera, Varuna, Indra, and Yama. The literary quality of the inscription is a testament to the high standard of classical Sanskrit and poetic expression that developed under the Guptas. Composed in elegant Sanskrit verse, it reflects the linguistic and literary sophistication of the era, showcasing the Gupta period as the golden age of Sanskrit literature.

King Samudragupta conquered various kingdoms- "*Vinaya-mudrayā pradarśita-vinīta-upacārān.*"⁴ This phrase describes how many rulers submitted to Samudragupta's authority, acknowledging his power and showing respect, sometimes even without conflict, as a testament to his dominance. In one part of the inscription, Harishena praises the king, saying, "He had no enemies on earth; he, by the abundance of his many good qualities, adorned with hundreds of good deeds, has destroyed them. He was a defender of what is right in the world and a conqueror of everything that is wrong. He took up the appellation of courage, which is also known as parākrama. He conquered the lords of numerous kingdoms by dint of his own bravery and the might of his arms. Samudragupta is referred to as the Napoleon of India in Vincent Smith's book."⁵ His body was most alluring, and it was

1 "कृतप्रणयजनसंबर्धनो मातृवत्सलः"

2 "कविज्ञाति सकलकलाः सहृदयः परमोदारः।"

3 "सर्वराजो विजेता, धर्मराज इव च पृथिव्यां धर्मतः शासनान् कारयति"

4 "विनयमुद्रया प्रदर्शितविनीतोपचारान्"

5 Vincent A. Smith, *The Early History of India: From 600 B.C. to the Muhammadan Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), p. 171.

covered with the plenteous beauty of the marks of hundreds of promiscuous scars generated by a variety of weapons.

The Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta is a remarkable record. The victories achieved by the Gupta monarch are the subject of this lengthy eulogy. This inscription makes its initial reference of three Āryāvarta kings. Following that, the inscription describes a number of conquered kings, who are organised primarily into five distinct classes. In the praśasti, twelve conquered kings from south India (Dakṣiṇāpatha) and their kingdoms are mentioned. He conducted extensive military campaigns and conquered every place—"Prathamam Āryāvartān jitvā tataḥ Dakṣiṇāpatham prabhutā yukto hi yaśaḥ prāptavān".⁶ This poem praises Samudragupta's two-stage conquests: first in northern India (Aryavarta) and later in the southern regions (Dakshinapatha), highlighting his efficient expansion and fame as a conqueror. These Sanskrit verses capture Samudragupta's power and righteous rule, contributing to his legacy as one of the greatest rulers of ancient India.

Following this, the praśasti provides a list of nine Āryāvartā rulers whose lands were annexed to the Gupta Empire when they were defeated. Their incorporation into the empire resulted in the dissolution of their own kingdoms, hence the names of those countries were omitted from the record. The Atavika States were kingdoms made mostly of forests and were located in the Vindhyā area. They were forced into a position of obedience. Following this, the inscription provides a summary of Samudragupta's victories over a total of five Border States (Samatata, Davāka, Kāmarūpa, Katripura, and Nepāla) and twelve republics located within the Punjab region. The inscription further asserts that the defeated kings were compelled to pay tributes of various types, to obey his orders, and to give him reverence. In this category were included the Daivaputra Shāhi Sahanushahi, the Saka Murundas, the residents of Śimhala and all of the other islands, and also all other island people. It is said that these rulers pleased the Gupta emperor by providing their own people to him, bringing presents from maidens, and requesting for charters bearing the Garuda seal for the pleasure of their own regions. Moreover, it is said that these rulers offered their own people to the emperor. He bears the glory of victorious sovereignty- "*Dhṛta-vijaya-rājya-lakṣmīḥ pramathita-śatru-cakraḥ aśvamedhābhiṣiktaḥ*".⁷ This verse emphasizes Samudragupta's triumph in battles, his defeat of enemies, and his performance of the Aśvamedha sacrifice—a symbol of imperial authority and divine favour. Although Samudragupta

⁶ "प्रथमं आर्यावर्तान् जित्वा ततः दक्षिणापथं प्रभुता युक्तो हि यशः प्राप्तवान्"

⁷ "धृतविजयराज्यलक्ष्मीः प्रमथितशत्रुचक्रः अश्वमेधाभिषिक्तः"

himself was a Hindu, the inscription reveals a level of religious tolerance and patronage of various religious traditions, a characteristic of the Gupta period. It suggests a policy of respecting different faiths within his empire, which contributed to the cultural prosperity of the period.

The inscription offers a unique description of the Gupta empire and the territories that it controlled. It provides a detailed account of the political climate in India during the fourth century after Christ. At the time of Samudragupta, the record provides a variety of information regarding the political situation and scenario that existed in India. This information comes from the rulers and kingdoms that are recorded in the inscription. In addition to this, they offer essential hints that can be used to piece together the history of the region, which includes a great number of smaller kingdoms. On other hand, the names of a few emperors from northern India and the Decan region, in addition to the names of a number of kingdoms that are recorded in the inscription, provide us with an understanding of the political structure that was prevalent at that time. Which helps a lot to renovate the original history of the Indian subcontinent. The inscription illustrates Samudragupta's diplomacy and statesmanship, particularly through his approach to southern rulers. By allowing these defeated rulers to remain in power as vassals, he ensured loyalty and maintained stability in distant regions, avoiding the need for direct administration. It also highlights his role as a "Chakravarti" (universal monarch), recognized even by neighbouring kingdoms who paid homage to him, reflecting his diplomatic acumen and influence beyond his immediate territories.

Harishena's elaborate use of metaphors and praise poetry demonstrates the high intellectual and artistic standards of Samudragupta's court, contributing to the cultural legacy of the Gupta Empire. The inscription notes that rulers from neighbouring regions and beyond acknowledged Samudragupta's authority, sending tributes or aligning as vassals. This aspect reflects the Gupta Empire's influence and the diplomatic skills of Samudragupta, which helped him, establish cordial relations and extend his cultural reach across Asia, setting the foundation for India's historical connections with Southeast Asia. The *Prayag Prashasti* portrays Samudragupta as a Chakravarti, or universal ruler, embodying the ideal of a king who upholds justice and righteousness. This portrayal reflects the aspirations of Gupta kings to establish themselves as supreme rulers, uniting India under one authority. Samudragupta's ambition and achievements set a precedent for future Indian rulers, influencing the concept of centralized governance and imperial rule in India.



From the above discussion it is said that the Allahabad Stone Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta is a key source for understanding ancient Indian history. It provides valuable information about the political, cultural, and social aspects of the Gupta Empire. This inscription honours Samudragupta's accomplishments as a warrior, diplomat, and supporter of arts and religion. It also highlights the ideals of leadership and governance in the Gupta period. Through this inscription, historians gain insight into the values, goals, and strategies of one of India's most important dynasties, making it an essential resource for studying ancient India.

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