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EXAMINATION OF THE AUTHENTICITY OF RUMMINDEI PILLAR INSCRIPTION

IN THE LIGHT OF AN ALTERNATE INTERPRETATION OF THE INSCRIPTION

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Abstract: Several issues have been raised in the past regarding the authenticity of Rummindei inscription. Many of them can be attributed to the inability to understand about half of the inscription. Certain other issues relate to inconsistencies of the inscription and suspicion of forgery by the discoverer. An alternate interpretation of the inscription has been able to provide a complete translation. It makes this inscription an edict prohibiting animal sacrifice as against the present belief that it is a record of King Aśoka's pilgrimage to the birthplace of Buddha. The aim of this paper is to examine if the alternate interpretation can explain the above issues. The results of the examination show that some of the issues could be satisfactorily explained.

Index Terms – Rummindei, Inscription, Authenticity, Birthplace, Buddha.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pādariyā or Rummindei pillar inscription is believed to indicate the location of the pillar to be the birthplace of Buddha (Weise 2013, pp. 47-48; Smith 1897, p. 619; Führer 1897, p. 27). However, there is no unanimity about the exact meaning of the inscription. Particularly, two words, *viḡaḡabhīcā* and *aṡhabhāgiye* have evaded satisfactory interpretation.

Viḡaḡabhīcā *viḡaḡabhī cā* has been interpreted in various ways, such as a horse (Charpentier vide Hultzsch 1925, p. 164; Smith 1920, p. 222), a she-ass (Basak 1959, p. 150), a figure (Mookerji 1928, p. 201); Dhammika 1994, p. 15), an enclosure/railing (Bhandarkar 1902, P. 366 note 14; Fleet 1908, p. 477; Sen 1956, 122), (brick) wall decorated (with stone) (Hultzsch-note 3, p. 164); big sun (Bühler 1899, p. 4), inscribed (Mahapatra 1977, p. 17); scarping (of stone) (Mitra 1929, p. 748), flawless (stone) (Pischel vide Smith 1905, p. 2), (a stone) in its natural condition (Tsukamoto 2006, pp. 1117-1118) etc.

Similarly, *aṡhabhāgiye* has been interpreted as one-eighth of land produce (Thomas 1914, p. 391; Hultzsch 1925, p. 165; Sen 1956, 122; Basak 1959, p.150; Tsukamoto 2006, p. 1120), eight plots of land (Fleet 1908, p. 479), recipient of wealth/ king's bounty (Bühler 1899, p. 4; Fleet 1908, p. 479; Mitra 1929, 751). However, there is unanimity to the extent that *aṡhabhāgiye* implies some kind of a concession for Lumbinī village.

In the English translation of the inscription adopted by Japanese Buddhist Federation (Weise 2013, p. 48), the word *viḡaḡabhīcā* has been kept untranslated in view of wide variance in its interpretation, and *aṡhabhāgiye* has been translated as 'one-eighth part (of the produce)', which reflect the majority view. Therefore, this can be considered as the least controversial translation of the inscription. However, the phrase 'liable to (pay) only' has been added in the translation just before 'one-eighth part (of the produce)', although such phrase does not exist in the inscription. Clearly it has been added to make sense of the phrase 'one-eighth part', which otherwise does not fit into the context if used standalone.

The rest of the inscription is comparatively easy to understand and it is translated, ignoring variations in the words used, as follows (Hultzsch 1925, p. 164-165; Sen 1956, 122; Bühler 1899, p.4; Mitra 1929, 751; Basak 1959, 150; Tsukamoto 2006, p. 1120).

When King Piyadasi (Aśoka), the beloved of the Gods, had been anointed twenty years, he personally came here and paid reverence since Buddha, the Śākyamuni was born here.

The statement 'Buddha, the Śākyamuni was born here' is believed to indicate the place where the inscribed pillar stands as the spot of Buddha's birth. Since King Piyadasi went there to worship, the inscription is considered to be a record of Piyadasi's pilgrimage to Lumbinī (Weise 2013, p. 47; Mitra 1929, p. 728).

Inability to arrive at the correct meaning of these two words has been a serious constraint. As a result, more than half of the inscription remain unintelligible. The inscription purports to say that King Piyadasi offered prayer at Lumbinī, caused a pillar to be set up at the spot of Buddha's birth and waived a part of the tax. But neither in the Sanskrit text of Aśokāvadāna nor in any one of the three independent Chinese versions of it, is there any mention about a stone pillar set up by the king or any reduction of tax or the existence of a village at the Lumbinī Garden (Watters 1905, p. 16). This puts a question mark on the authenticity of the inscription.

Apart from the above, there are several other issues regarding the authenticity of the inscription. These can be broadly classified into four categories.

1. Uncertainty about the date of the pillar and the inscription
2. Inconsistency with other Aśokan inscriptions
3. Question mark on the carving and the letter quality
4. Allegations of fraud

Date of the pillar and the inscription

Mahapatra observes that Aśokan pillars are well proportioned and better polished compared to the Pāḍariyā pillar (Mahapatra 1977, pp. 4-5). He therefore infers that Pāḍariyā pillar cannot be an Aśokan pillar. Smith observes that the brick railing which surrounds the base of the Rummidei pillar is built of small bricks and is evidently of comparatively modern date (Smith 1899, p. 7). If the bricks used at the base of the pillar belong to a later date, then this might indicate that the pillar too should belong to a date later than Aśoka's reign.

Pāḍariyā pillar is believed to be the same pillar which Hiuen Tsiang saw in Lumbinī. Hiuen Tsiang has reported that the Lumbinī pillar was broken and lying prostrate on ground at the time of his visit. To explain the fact that the Pāḍariyā pillar presently stands erect, Smith conjectures that the pillar may have been set up again by one of the Buddhist Pāla kings in the eleventh or twelfth century CE (Smith 1899, p. 7). With this conjecture Smith explains how the pillar came back to an erect position and why small bricks are found at the base of the pillar. However, no evidence has been found to support his conjecture. Rather evidences point to the opposite. When the pillar inscription was discovered, the pillar was covered with earth up to 12-13 feet above its base, and the inscription was hidden (Führer 1897, pp. 27-28). About 10 feet of the pillar remained above the ground (Führer 1897, p. 28) and this exposed part of the pillar had mediaeval scribbings (Smith 1897, p. 617 note 2). One of the scribbings which is near the top of the pillar is actually a prayer which reads, 'Om Mani Padme hum. Sri Ripu Mallā Chidam Jayatu (May Prince Ripu Malla be long victorious!)' (Weise 2013, p. 54). Ripumalla was a ruler of Malla dynasty in the Western Nepal who ruled sometime during late thirteenth to early fourteenth century CE (Phuoc 2012, p. 269). If the pillar was set up again in the eleventh or twelfth century CE, as Smith claims, then it is difficult to explain how the pillar was buried up to 12-13 feet by late thirteenth-early fourteenth century CE, i.e. in just about two hundred years.

When Rhys Davids visited Pāḍariyā in the year 1900, he found the letters of the inscription beautifully clear, which seemed almost as if freshly cut. He wondered how that was possible when the letters had been exposed to the light for three years (Rhys Davids 1915, p. 196). The duration for which the letters were exposed to light would be three years only if it is assumed that Führer carved them in 1896; the duration should be hundreds of years if the letters were carved during King Aśoka's time. If Pāḍariyā pillar is the same as the Lumbini pillar, then it is difficult to explain why the letters have not undergone significant weathering effects during such a long period of exposure. Since the inscription appeared to Rhys Davids as if 'freshly cut' and not even 'three years old', this alone is sufficient ground to suspect that the inscription might not be two thousand years old (Mishra 2017, ch. 4).

Whereas all other words of the inscription are either Arddhamāgadhī or Prakṛit words, which were being used during Aśoka's time, *Sakyamuni* is a Sanskritized word. The corresponding Prakṛit word would be either *Sakamuni* or *Sakiyamuni*. The fact that these were ignored in the inscription in favour of *Sakyamuni*, an adaptation of the Sanskrit word *Śakyamuni*, points to a later date of the inscription. Beckwith points out that Sanskrit words were not used in inscriptions until the first century BCE (Beckwith 2017, p. 245). This means that the inscription could not have been issued during Aśoka's time.

Inconsistencies with other Aśokan inscriptions

A peculiarity of Pāḍariyā inscription is that the word 'Buddha' has been used in it. We do not find this word in any other Aśokan inscription, except the Calcutta-Bairat inscription (Hultzsch 1925, p. 172). '*Sakyamuni*' is another word of the inscription, which is not found in any other Aśokan inscription. The use of these words makes the inscription unusual, which might indicate that the inscription does not belong to Aśokan period (Beckwith 2017, p. 245).

The Pāḍariyā inscription has been written in third person. This indicates that the inscription was written by someone else at a later date (Beckwith 2017, p. 246), reporting the visit of King Piyadasi to Lumbinī, which he undertook in the twentieth year of his coronation. In contrast, all other Aśokan inscriptions are issued in King Piyadasi's own name. If the inscription was written by someone else, then it must have been written after a gap from the time of visit and that such gap could be centuries. This indicates that the inscription might be spurious.

It is normal to have some mistakes in an original inscription, which Aśoka himself admitted in Rock Edict-XIV. But Pāḍariyā inscription is free from mistakes. A perfect inscription is unlikely to be an original and therefore Pāḍariyā inscription could be a copy made at a later date (Mishra 2017, ch. 5).

The carving and the letter quality

The letters of Pāḍariyā pillar inscription have certain characteristics which set them apart from other Aśokan inscriptions (Mishra 2017, ch. 4). These are:

1. the letters of the inscription are nearly perfect and appear as if printed characters
2. height to width ratio of the letters is more than that in other Aśokan inscriptions
3. lines and curves of letters are unusually smooth
4. there is clear spacing between letters. There is no case of a letter touching another
5. there is space to mark the end of each word unlike other Aśokan inscriptions
6. much larger spacing between lines; the spacing between lines is more than the height of the letters
7. letters look more like geometric figures drawn using modern geometrical instruments rather than free flow handwriting
8. the letters have been carved to more depth than that in other Aśokan inscriptions. This makes them look fresh, even now
9. the lines and the curves of the letters have sharp sides unlike other Aśokan inscriptions
10. the technology used to carve the letters of this inscription appear more sophisticated than the prayer etched near the top of the pillar in the thirteenth-fourteenth century CE. In other words, the letters of the inscription must have been engraved later than thirteenth century.

The above features make them stand out from other Aśokan inscriptions. Apparently the inscription was copied from an original during recent times and that the letters were carved using modern machinery. When Rhys Davids visited Pāḍariyā in the year 1900, he found the letters to be beautifully clear and as if freshly cut. The reason behind this is sharp and deep carving of the letters made possible by the use of modern equipment.

Allegations of fraud

Pāḍariyā inscription has been mired in allegations of fraud ever since its discovery. Dr. Führer, the discoverer of the inscription had been engaged in fraudulent activities since a few years before this discovery. He knew Prakṛit language and Brāhmī script. He was the Assistant Editor of Epigraphia Indica for some time. It was therefore easy for him to forge an inscription. More importantly, he had the inclination to commit forgery. Führer gave a bogus relic-casket to a Burmese monk, U Ma, claiming that it contained a tooth-relic of the Buddha, which later on turned out to be a tooth 'apparently that of a horse' (Smith 1899, p. 4). Führer claimed discovery of fictitious stupas near Niglivā pillar although there were none. Every word of his elaborate description was false, his claim that Pāḍariyā was called Rummindēi too was false (Smith 1899, pp. 3-4, Thomas p. 18 notes 2, 3). The fraudulent activities of Dr. Führer were exposed after an investigation, following which he was sacked (Allen Charles, p.232). There is therefore a possibility that Führer might have forged this inscription as well, with the intention to prove the place to be Lumbinī.

Führer left the excavation site after identifying the pillar to be Aśokan, but before the inscription was actually exposed. This is unbelievable given that he was appointed to supervise the excavation (Phelps 2008, p. 4). Before leaving, however, he assured that an Aśokan inscription would be found after further excavation. That he was able to predict the existence of an inscription below the ground level indicates that he had seen the inscription on an earlier occasion and the fact he did not claim discovery of the inscription on that occasion indicates his involvement in engraving the inscription.

At the time of discovery, the inscription was just 3 feet below the ground level and after excavation, the inscription was found to be at a height of 9 feet 8 inches above the base (Führer 1897, p. 28). Since the inscription was meant for common people to read, it should have been at a reasonable height. Moreover, this was the lone inscription and the entire pillar was available. Therefore, the height of more than 9 feet cannot be explained. On the other hand, the depth of just 3 feet from the ground level can be explained as a convenient depth for the forger. It is possible to quickly dig up to 5-6 feet around the pillar, engrave the inscription and then fill it up with earth, all in a single day. Digging to more depth would take more time without any commensurate benefit, particularly when it was not known at what depth the base of the pillar was buried. The above facts therefore favour the possibility of a forgery.

II. ALTERNATE INTERPRETATION OF THE INSCRIPTION

All the attempts made in the past to interpret the Pāḍariyā inscription were loaded with the presumption that Pāḍariyā was the birthplace of Buddha. It was believed that Lumbinī was situated in the North-Kośala region and near the Himalayas (Thomas 1931, p. 13; Watters 1898, p. 536). Since the inscription says 'here was born Buddha, the Sakyamuni', and because Pāḍariyā is situated in the North-Kośala region and near the Himalayas, it appeared to corroborate that belief.

On the other hand, Śrāvastī and Kapilavastu were actually situated on the Southern Highway which joined Pāṭhan on the bank of Godavari with Rajgir (Mills, pp. 296-304). This means that Śrāvastī and Kapilavastu could not be situated in North-Kośala, rather they should belong to South-Kośala (Mishra 2020 a, p. 66-67), since the entire Southern Highway was located to the south of the Ganges (Barua 1929, p. 218). This is corroborated by the fact that a river named Sundar flows in South-Kośala region, which matches with Chinese Buddhist scriptures which inform that there was a river named Sundara in Kośala (Watters 1904, pp. 398-399). Within the South-Kośala region, Kapilabhata situated in Bolangir district, on the bank of river Bāgihara, has been identified as the site of Kapilavastu (Mishra 2020 b, ch. 11.5). The location of Kapilabhata matches with the description given in some Chinese versions of Divyāvādāna that Kapilavastu was situated on the bank of a river named Bhāgira (Watters 1898, p. 536). Limpara situated near Kapilabhata has been identified as the site of Lumbinī (Mishra 2020 b, ch. 13.4). There is a small river (*gor*) to the southeast of Limpara, which is a tributary of River Tel. Since 'tel' translates to 'oil', this matches with the description of Lumbinī given by Hiuen Tsiang, who says that Lumbinī was situated near a little river called 'River of Oil' (Beal 1884, p. 25).

Since Lumbinī was situated in the South-Kośala region, it means that Pāḍariyā cannot be Lumbinī and that the Pāḍariyā inscription cannot be a description of Aśoka's Lumbinī pilgrimage. An alternate interpretation of Pāḍariyā inscription makes the inscription an edict of King Aśoka prohibiting the practice of animal sacrifice (Mishra 2017, ch. 7). In this interpretation, *vigaḍabhī* and *cā* are joined to make *vigaḍabhīcā*, which is rendered as *vikṛita bhittā* meaning 'mutilated by splitting', *āgāca* is rendered as *agaccha* meaning 'fixed or installed' and *usapāpīte* is rendered as *ushpāta kāritaḥ* meaning 'felled down by burning'. *Bali* is interpreted as 'animal sacrifice' and *aṭhabhāgiye* as 'eight parts or eight provinces of the kingdom'. With these modifications, the translation of the inscription becomes as follows:

(This edict is) by the King Priyadarśī, the beloved of the Gods. In the twentieth year of (his) coronation, (after) the highly esteemed stone plate, which was installed by (King Priyadarśī) himself, and which proclaimed "here was born Buddha, the Śakyamuni", was caused to be mutilated by splitting (and) the stone pillar too was felled down by burning (heating). Lumbini village, where lord Buddha was born, was made a prohibited area for (the practice of) animal sacrifice. (Now the prohibition stands extended to all the) eight provinces (of the kingdom) too.

III. METHODOLOGY

The issues regarding the authenticity of the inscription were examined afresh in view of the alternate interpretation of the inscription. The alternate interpretation of the Pāḍariyā inscription makes it an edict prohibiting animal sacrifice and not a record of King Piyadasi's Lumbinī pilgrimage. Many of the issues relating to the Pāḍariyā inscription arose because it was presumed to indicate Pāḍariyā as the birthplace of Buddha. Those issues were expected to be impacted by the change in the interpretation. Examination of the issues was done by logical analysis.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first issue of the Pāḍariyā inscription was the difficulty in translating the words, *vigaḍabhīcā* and *aṭhabhāgiye*. In the past, *vigaḍa* was rendered as *vikṛita* (Bhandarkar 1902, p. 366 note 14; Mahapatra 1977, p. 17) and *bhīcā* as *bhittā* or *bhittiyā* (Bhandarkar 1902, p. 366 note 14; Mahapatra 1977, p. 17; Tsukamoto 2006, pp. 1117-1118), which are not very different from the rendering in the alternate translation. But *vigaḍabhīcā* was considered undecipherable since these meanings did not agree with the presumption that the inscription was a description of King Piyadasi's Lumbinī pilgrimage. But no such presumption was made in the alternate interpretation; the words were assigned their natural meanings (Mishra 2017, ch. 7). As a result, it was possible to translate the entire inscription without leaving any word as undeciphered. This is the first time that a translation of the complete inscription could be arrived at.

The alternate translation offers reasonable explanation regarding some of the other issues raised as well. The words 'Buddha' and 'Sakyamuni' find place in the inscription, because these were engraved on the stone plate which King Aśoka laid in Lumbinī. Since King Aśoka laid the stone plate to mark the spot of Buddha's birth in Lumbinī, it is obvious that these words would have appeared on that marker stone plate. The legend on any commemorative stone plate would generally contain formal words rather than colloquial language. This explains why the Sanskritised word 'Sakyamuni' was used in the legend engraved on the marker stone plate instead of its Prākṛit variant. Although Sanskrit words were not used in inscriptions until the first century BCE, as pointed out by Beckwith (Beckwith 2017, p. 245), Sanskrit was being used in India for literary purposes and was considered pure and erudite. Therefore, the use of a Sanskritised word in the birth-plate of Buddha would have been considered appropriate. The use of these two words in the inscription is, therefore, legitimate and cannot be held to indicate that the inscription was not Aśokan.

The issue that the Pāḍariyā inscription has been written in third person, unlike other Aśokan edicts, can be explained by the fact that this inscription is different from all other Aśokan inscriptions. While someone else reporting the pilgrimage of King Piyadasi to Lumbinī would appear odd, someone announcing the king's decree would not. Clearly, this inscription is an administrative decree of the king unlike personal appeal of King Piyadasi enjoining the subjects to adhere to Dharma, which is the case with other inscriptions. Evidently this administrative decree was approved by the council of ministers and proclaimed through official channels. The language used in this case conforms to what an official decree should be and hence in third person. The authority of King Piyadasi has been quoted to give it the required weight.

Allegation of Fraud

The language used in Pāḍariyā inscription clearly indicates that it belongs to Aśokan period. The words *vigaḍabhīcā* and *aṭhabhāgiye* are difficult words, which could not be deciphered for over one hundred years. It was beyond the capability of Führer or anyone else of that time to conceive these words. Führer would have rather used simpler words, had he authored the inscription. Moreover, these two words are actually not appropriate, if we consider that the presumed intension of Führer was to prove Pāḍariyā to be Lumbinī. It is therefore highly improbable that Führer would have used these words had he authored the Pāḍariyā inscription. At a later date, another version of this inscription was found at Kapileswar in Odisha, which has essentially the same text as Pāḍariyā (Mitra 1929, pp. 728-729; Mahapatra 1977, p. 8). The corroboration by this second version proves that the text of the Pāḍariyā inscription was issued by Aśoka. Therefore, the conjecture that Führer might have authored the Pāḍariyā inscription cannot be true.

Mitra examined the Kapileswar inscription from various angles, including Linguistic, Orthographic, Paleographic angles, and arrived at the conclusion that it was an original (Mitra 1929, p. 739). However, he could not conjecture as to what could be the reason behind King Piyadasi replicating the inscription. Since these inscriptions were believed to indicate their respective locations to be the spot of Buddha's birth, two copies of the inscription appeared unexplainable. Mitra remarked that Aśoka had a royal procedure of multiplying the records, due to which the inscriptions were issued in multiple copies and that there could be some reason behind issuing multiple copies of this inscription as well (Mitra 1929, p. 737). With the alternate translation, these inscriptions become king's order prohibiting animal sacrifice and therefore could legitimately be published at multiple sites. Rather publication of the inscription at multiple sites can be expected. That Pāḍariyā inscription has another version, proves it to be an authentic Aśokan inscription.

However, the same cannot be said about the engraving of the letters. The Brāhmī letters of the Pāḍariyā inscription differ from those of other Aśokan inscriptions. The issues raised above about the engraving of the inscription cannot be explained in any way other than the supposition that they were engraved at a later date and possibly by Führer himself. To reconcile that the text of the inscription is Aśokan but the letters are of recent date, it may be conjectured that this inscription originally existed on another media. It could be a stone plate, just like the Kapileswar inscription. The original stone plate inscription could have existed somewhere in Oudh, where Führer was engaged in excavating various sites as the archaeological surveyor at the time he discovered the Pāḍariyā inscription. Since he knew the script and the language, he would have understood the meaning at once and could have decided to trade it at an appropriate time, just like he traded the bogus relic-casket with the Burmese monk.

V. CONCLUSION

It is remarkable that the alternate interpretation is able to explain many of the issues related to the inscription. This removes the misconceptions about the inscription. Actually the inscription does not indicate the spot of the Pāḍariyā inscription as the birthplace of Buddha. It was wrongly believed to be a record of King Piyadasi's pilgrimage to Lumbinī because half of the inscription could not be understood. The situation has changed with the alternate interpretation of the inscription. The Pāḍariyā inscription talks about the marker stone plate laid by King Aśoka in Lumbinī; it does not say 'Pāḍariyā is Lumbinī'. The above analysis shows that the text of the inscription is genuine even though a Sanskritized word has been used. The quality of engraving indicates use of modern equipment. If Führer forged the inscription, then he would have used modern equipment to shorten the time required for engraving, since he used to go to Nepal on short visits. Unwittingly, he copied a genuine Aśokan inscription on to the pillar believing it to be a description of King Piyadasi's visit to Lumbinī, which it is not. Thankfully he did not author an inscription of his own, although he was quite capable of doing that, otherwise we could not have known the truth.

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