



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Shaivism in Vakataka Age: An Epigraphic Study

Dilawar Nabi Bhat

### *Abstract*

*The Vakatakas were contemporaneous of the Guptas. The Vakatakas like the Guptas were Brahmans themselves (belonging to the, Vishnuvridha gotra) were great champions of the Brahmanical religion and performed numerous Vedic sacrifices. One of the features of the Vakataka age is the growth of Shaivism. In this paper some of the epigraphical and sculptural evidence from various sites are assembled and discussed which reveals that Vakataka rulers were predominantly Maheshvaras. This paper will focus on epigraphical evidences related to Shaivism and due importance is given to the religious centers with their artistic elements. Patronage pattern as evident from the epigraphical record clearly shows the direct involvement of the Vakataka monarchs of Eastern branch in excavating the shrines and temples.*

**Keywords:** Vakatakas, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Brahmanism, Shiva, Mansar, Mandhal

The Vakatakas were one of the most glorious dynasties that flourished in ancient India. They rose to power in Deccan from the mid-3rd century and ruled until to the beginning of the 6th century CE.<sup>1</sup> They were the great patrons of literature, art and architecture. The temples they erected are no longer in existence, but the sculptures found in their ruins are regarded as the best specimen of ancient times. They played a pivotal role in the politico-cultural history and were considered a political power next only to the Imperial Guptas.<sup>2</sup> J. Dubreuil states that 'of all the dynasties of the Deccan that have reigned from the third to sixth century, the most glorious, the most important, the one that must be given the place of honour, the one that has excelled all others, the one that had the greatest influence on the civilization of the whole Deccan, is unquestionably the illustrious dynasty of the Vakatakas'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A. M. Shastri, *Vakataka; Sources and History*, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 1997, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>3</sup> G. Jouveau Dubreuil, *Ancient History of the Deccan*, Asian Educational Service, New Delhi, 1991, p. 71.

The Vakataka rulers have been mentioned as Brahmins belonging to the Vishnuvridha *gotra*. Vindhyaśakti I, the founder of the Vakataka dynasty is not mentioned by his descendants in the genealogical list of the house. He is mentioned only in an inscription from Ajanta as the founder of the family. He is described as 'there was a Brahmin on earth named Vindhyaśakti, whose strength increased in great battles, whose valour, when he was enraged, was irresistible even by Gods, and who was mighty in fighting and charity'.<sup>4</sup> The *Puranas*, like the Ajanta record mention him as one of the rulers who rose to power after the end of the hegemony of the Andhra or the Satavahana dynasty.<sup>5</sup> Vindhyaśakti was succeeded by his son, who is called Pravira in the *Puranas* and Pravarasena in inscriptions.<sup>6</sup> All the inscriptions of the Vakataka period begin with the family genealogy of the illustrious emperor Pravarasena I. He indeed was a first ruler, who raised the family to an undisputed imperial position in the Deccan.<sup>7</sup> He alone among the Vakataka rulers assumed the title of *śamrat* (emperor). He performed seven great *soma* sacrifices and as many as four *ashvamedha* sacrifices, which indicates his successful campaigns to extend the Vakataka domain.<sup>8</sup> According to the *Puranas* Pravarasena I, had four sons, all of whom became kings. Epigraphic evidences attest that after the death of Pravarasena I, his extensive empire was divided into two branches.<sup>9</sup> The main branch i.e., the Padmapura-Nandivardhana-Pravarapura continued to rule from the old capital Purika and the second branch ruled from the holy city of Vatsagulma (modern Basim).<sup>10</sup> Though the two branches had separate centers of activity, distinct artistic and cultural influence, differing religious patronage and political affiliation. However, both had played an important role in the development of the political and cultural history of the Deccan.

It is generally believed that Shaivism was the official religion of the Vakatakas but they were far from sectarian bigotry and other religious sects also flourished in their kingdom. Some of the Vakataka rulers were devout Vaishnavites and some of their vassals and feudatories were adherents of *Mahayana* Buddhism. They adopted the approach of religious tolerance that encouraged a heterogeneous religious atmosphere throughout their realm. Their rule marked the emergence of kings and courtiers as a major class of patrons. The state patronage was not confined only to their personal religious sect but also stretched out towards other religious movements as well.<sup>11</sup> This patronage took the form of financing prestigious building projects like temples as well as lending financial support to religious groups and individuals through gifts of money and land.

Brahmanism received a great fillip during the age of the Vakatakas especially under the Eastern branch, several temples dedicated to Hindu gods were erected throughout their dominion. Most of the Vakataka princes were devotees of Shiva, so the temples of that god must have been much larger in number than those of other deities. Owing to paucity of inscriptions we do not however, notice many references to them.

<sup>4</sup> V. V. Mirashi, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum: Inscriptions of the Vakatakas*, Vol. V, No. 25; Plate XXV, Ootacamund, 1963, pp. 103-111.

<sup>5</sup> B. N. Mukherjee, 'A Note on the Rule of Vakatakas', in: H. C. Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006, pp. 769-77.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> A. S. Altekar, 'The History of the Vakatakas', in: G. Yazdani, (ed.) *The Early History of the Deccan*, Parts I-VI, Oxford University Press, London, 1960, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>9</sup> B. N. Mukherjee, 'A Note on the Rule of Vakatakas', p. 769-77.

<sup>10</sup> Mirashi, *CII*, V, p. xx.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Rudrasena I, grandson of Pravarasena I is referred as the 'foremost devotee of Lord Mahabhairava' (*atyantasvamimahabhairavabhakta*) (the terrific aspect of Shiva) in the Vakataka records.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, the Vakataka rulers adopted the more general epithets, such as *atyantamaheshvara* or *parameshvara* (entirely devoted to Shiva) in declaration of the religious adherence.<sup>13</sup> It is said that Rudrasena I became a Shaivite, most probably under the influence of his maternal grandfather Bhavanaga of the Bharashiva dynasty, who were noted for their devotion to Shiva.<sup>14</sup> His Deotek inscription refers to the construction of a *dharmasthana* (place of religious worship) at Chikkamburi. It is supposed to have been a Shaiva temple.<sup>15</sup>

Rudrasena I was succeeded by his son Prithivishena I and was gloriously eulogized in the land grant charters. He is praised for his various qualities such as 'truthfulness, straightforwardness, compassion, heroism, valor, political wisdom, modesty, high-mindedness, intelligence, righteous conqueror and is recorded as being a pious devotee of *Maheshvara*'.<sup>16</sup>

Although, both of the parents of Pravarasena II (Rudrasena II and Prabhavatigupta) were the devotees of *Bhagavata* but he shifted to Shaivism the faith of his ancestors.<sup>17</sup> In his inscriptional records he is repeatedly described as the, '*maharaja* of the Vakatakas a fervent devotee of *Maheshvara*, who by the grace of the Sambhu, had established the *Kritayuga* (golden age) (on earth)'.<sup>18</sup> It is evident that Pravarasena II drew legitimization of the Vakataka power from the cult of *Maheshvara* (Shiva), which seems to have been far more popular than Vaishnavism in central India during this period. Not only was his grandfather, Prithivishena I, a devotee of *Maheshvara* but he also proudly pronounced the Shaivite affiliation of his maternal kinsmen, the Bharashivas, whose royal family was created by Shiva.<sup>19</sup>

Archaeology has revealed that Mandhal and Mansar were the two major sites of *Maheshvara* worship in the eastern part of the Vakataka kingdom.<sup>20</sup> Although most of the sculptures found at Mansar are mainly fragmentary and most probably the product of second quarter of the fifth century A. D. The archaeological remains found at the Mansar site include the impressive sculpture of the 'Mansar Shiva' found at Hidimba Tekdi in 1972, five kilometers west of Ramtek.<sup>21</sup> It has been variously identified as Shiva, Jambhala or Kubera, Nidhi and Gana. This sculpture is of exquisite quality and has been used to suggest royal patronage of the site.<sup>22</sup> It is dated on stylistic grounds to the second quarter of the fifth century A. D., and is reminiscent of

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., No. 3: Plate III, pp. 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Alexis Sanderson, 'The Śaiva Age: An Explanation of the Rise and Dominance of Śaivism during the Early Medieval Period', In: Shingo Einoo (ed.), *Genesis and Development of Trāntism*, University of Tokyo, 2009, pp. 41-349, p. 44, n. 7.

<sup>14</sup> The royal family of the Bharashivas has been told to have been created by Shiva, who was pleased by their penance of carrying the *Shivalinga* on their shoulders. They performed ten *ashvamedhas* and were crowned after having poured on their heads the pure water of the Ganges that they had obtained by their valour. (Mirashi, *CII*, V, No. 3: Plate III, pp. 13-14).

<sup>15</sup> Mirashi, *CII*, V, No. 1: Plate I, pp. 1-4.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., No. 3, Plate III, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Bakker, 'Religion and Politics in the Eastern Vakataka Kingdom', *South Asian Studies*, Vol. 18, Issue I, 2002, pp. 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Mirashi, *CII*, V, Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., No. 3: Plate III, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Bakker, *The Vakatakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, Egbert Forsten, Groningen, 1997, p. 76.

<sup>21</sup> J. P. Joshi and A. K. Sharma, 'Mansar Excavation 1998-2004: The Discovery of Pravaraapur', *Puramanthana (Pravarapur Issue) Current Advances in Indian Archaeology*, Vol. 3, 2005, pp. 1-26, p. 13. See also, Hans Bakker, *The Vakatakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, Plate XXXVII, pp. 149-151.

<sup>22</sup> Kaoru Nagata, 'The Problem in the Identification of Gana-like Images from Mansar: Is it Shiva or Gana?', in: Hans Bakker (ed.), *Mansar: The Discovery of Pravaresvara and Pravaraपुर Temple and Residence of the Vakataka King Pravarasena II*, Groningen, 2008, pp. 1-12.

other Shaiva images from Vakataka site of Mandhal.<sup>23</sup> Hans Bakker states that the magnificent image of Shiva at the brick temple of Hidimba Tekdi is the full fledged Shaiva counterpart of the 'Vaishnava Ramagiristhana' opposite it in the east.<sup>24</sup> Bakker identifies the temple on the Hidimba Tekdi with Pravareshvaradevakulasthana and the deity assumed to be the Pravareshvara installed by Pravarasena II in the second quarter of the fifth century A. D.<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 6.1 Mansar: Shiva (Courtesy: *The Vakatakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, Plate XXXVII)**

It is important to mention that Pravarasena II donated the village of Mahallata to Suryasvamin, a resident of Pravareshvara-Sadvimsativataka (the donee is mentioned as a resident of the twenty sixth village (vataka) of Pravareshvara).<sup>26</sup> Since, Pravarasena II was the builder of the temple Pravareshvaradevakulasthana, the donee Suryasvami is likely to have been involved in this royal project. The Pandhurna Plates of the Pravarasena II were also issued from the temple of Pravareshvara. V. V. Mirashi mentions that the Pravareshvara was

<sup>23</sup> Hans Bakker, *The Vakatakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Plate XXXVII, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Mirashi, *CII*, V, No. 4: Plate IV, p. 21.



evidently the name of the Shivalinga, however, he attributes its installation to Paravarasena I.<sup>27</sup> As a counterpart of the Vaishnava Ramagiri, Pravarasena II erected his own state sanctuary (*sthana*) on a prominent hillock near the present day village Mansar, which mirrored, as it were, the Ramtek hill situated 5 km to the east; this sanctuary (*devakula*) dedicated to Shiva was named Pravareshvara.<sup>28</sup>

During the excavation at Mandhal a complex of brick temples, sculptures and a set of Vakataka copper plates were unearthed. The images from Mandhal are important from the point of view of development of the major Hinduistic sects and to determine the development of the Vakataka sculpture. The majority of the images found are not Vaishnava, but Shaiva. Among the various sculptures of Shaiva nature, the most remarkable were the Maheshvara,<sup>29</sup> Sadashiva,<sup>30</sup> Rudra,<sup>31</sup> Naigames,<sup>32</sup> Parvati,<sup>33</sup> and Brahma.<sup>34</sup>



**Figure 6.2 Mandhal Maheshvara and Sadashiva (Courtesy: *The Vakatakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, Plate XXXVII)**

<sup>27</sup> Miirashi, *CII*, V, No. 14: Plate XIV, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Hans Bakker, *The Vakatakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, p. 88. See also, Peter Bisschop, 'Śaivism in the Gupta-Vakataka Age', *JRAS*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (October 2010), p. 480.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Bakker, *The Vakatakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, Plates I & II, pp. 95-97.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Plates VII & VIII, pp. 101-107.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Plates IX & X, pp. 107-109.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Plates XI- XII, pp. 110-111.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Plates XIII & XIV, pp. 111-117.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Plates XVII & XVIII, pp. 117-118.



**Figure 6.3 Mandhal: Rudra and Parvati (Courtesy: *The Vakatakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, Plate IX and XIII)**



**Figure 6.4 Mandhal: Brahma Sadashiva (Courtesy: *The Vakatakas: An Essay in Hindu Iconology*, Plate XVII)**

The different forms of Shiva are very unique from the point of view of iconography and show an early stage of development. The site also revealed some Vaishnava sculptures, which testify that the religious harmony as the *Bhagavatas* and *Maheshvaras* existed side by side during the Vakataka period.<sup>35</sup>

The epigraphical data and various religious centers give us valuable information regarding the role of patronage in the establishment and growth of Shaivism under Vakatakas. In the Eastern branch of the Vakatakas, rulers and the other members of the royal court took actively part in patronage. Epigraphical evidence reveals that the Vakataka age was essentially one of religious harmony and toleration. Though Shaivism was the official religion of the Vakatakas, other religions like Vaishnavism and Buddhism were the principle religions not only co-existed but flourished under mutual understanding, co-operation and good will, though the popularity of each seems to have varied. This paper has focused on epigraphical evidences related to Shaivism and due importance is given to the religious centers with their artistic elements. Patronage pattern as evident from the epigraphical record clearly shows the direct involvement of the Vakataka monarchs of Eastern branch in excavating the shrines and temples. It is interesting to note that the sites like Mansar, Mandhal sculptures of Shaiva sect were found on the large scale. The Eastern Vakatakas both Shiva and Vishnu were elevated and given prominence. At Ajanta and its vicinity inscriptions speak of lavish religious endowments made by wealthy and powerful ministers and feudatories under Western Vakatakas patronized Buddhist monasteries. In fact, while the Vakataka ruling houses directed patronage towards Brahmanical sects, other members of the political elite patronized Buddhist monasteries.

The above survey clearly establishes that Shaivism was popular religious sect from a very early date and continued to flourish during the Vakataka period as well. It received liberal patronage from the kings and individuals alike. During the period of our study, we have also ample evidences of the presence of several other religious sects patronized by the same persons. After the decline of the Vakataka Empire, Shaivism continued to be patronized by the rulers as proved by the numismatic and the epigraphical records. Sasanka king of Bengal, Maukharis of Kanauj, Pushyabhutis of Thaneshwar, Maitraka's of Valabhi and many other royal families were the great devotees of Shiva. In the Deccan Brihatphalayanans, the Anandas, and the Vishnukundins were followers of Shaivism, and many Salankayana, Kadamba and Western Ganga rulers were ardent devotees of Shiva.

<sup>35</sup> Hans Bakker, 'Royal Patronage and Religious Tolerance: The Formative period of Gupta-Vakataka Culture', p. 469. See also, A. P. Jamkhedkar, 'Vakataka Sculpture', in: Ratan Parimoo (ed.), *The Art of Ajanta: New Perspectives*, Vol. I, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 198-201.