

THE WESTERN GANGAS OF TALAKAD AND JAINISM

VENKATESH B G

Assistant Professor, Department of History,
Government First Grade College, Koratagere 572129,
Tumkur District, Karnataka State, India

Abstract: The Western Ganga dynasty, which ruled over the region of Talakad in present-day Karnataka, India, from the 4th to the 11th centuries CE, was a significant power in southern India during the medieval period. This dynasty was notable for its patronage of Jainism, which had a profound impact on the cultural, religious, and artistic landscape of the region.

Keywords: Gangas, Vedic, Ceremonies, Jains, Simhanandi's

Introduction

The history of the Ganga dynasty which is one of the earliest royal houses of Karnataka (425-1004 AD) was reconstructed for the first time by B.L.Rice. On the basis of some inscriptions of the 10th and 11th centuries, he presumed that all the rulers of this dynasty professed Jainism.² After B.L.Rice, the several scholars who were in the field simply followed the opinion of Rice in this matter, although several inscriptions belonging to the early period of the Ganga dynasty were discovered furnishing fresh information on different aspects of the history of the dynasty. In the inscriptions of the earlier period there is not even an indirect clue to believe that the Gangas had any inclination towards Jainism. On the other hand, they clearly reveal that the early rulers of this dynasty were the staunch followers of the Vedic religion performing various Vedic ceremonies and sacrifices.

Objectives:

- To explore The Western Gangas of Talakad and Jainism

At the very outset, it is necessary to examine the factors that prompted the scholars to believe that the Ganga rulers were Jains. One important and misleading cause is the story narrated relating to origin of the Gangas to the effect that the dynasty came into stance under the Jaina aegis. Till very recently, it has been surmised by almost all the scholars that the Jaina saint Simhanandin had something to do with the establishment of the Ganga kingdom. A lumber of inscriptions of the 11th and 12th centuries, which mostly do not belong to the Ganga dynasty furnish this fantastic story.³ It goes on narrating the advent of the two brothers to Peruru, Simhanandi's compassion with them, his obtaining of a boon from goddess Padmavathi, the sudden appearance of a sword. Madhava's adventure of catching the sword and cutting off of the stone pillar two parts and finally creation of the kingdom and a crown of Kanikarapushpa by Simhanandi, who confirmed the kingdom on the brothers putting the crown on the head of one of the brothers.

The gist of the above story appears for the first time in the Kudlur Copper plate of 963 A.D. of Marasimha III. There is not even a single record which mentions the name of Simhanandi prior to this date. In case there was a person of the name of Simhanandi at the time of the establishment of the Ganga kingdom in the 4th century A.D. and in case if the Ganga monarchs of the earlier period professed Jainism such important information would have been surely mentioned and found expression through several means in the innumerable grants of the early kings. Therefore, it is undoubtedly the creation of the 10th century Jaina bards of the Ganga court. Two factors were responsible for the innovation of this story. Firstly, the Ganga kings of the 9th and 10th centuries became the followers of Jainism. Secondly, it became a matter of convention to connect the origin and genealogy of almost all the ruling families of South India to some puranic dynasties weaving together ingenious and fantastic stories with legends and miracles. This fact has been very well pointed out by John Faithful Fleet in his "Dynasties of Canarese districts" Even S. K. Iyengar upholds the above view, when he says "Genealogy making was the pastime of the eleventh century bards". Further Jaina influence in the establishment of the Ganga kingdom has been clearly refuted by Dr.B.Sheik Ali in his recently published work on the Gangas. The very idea connecting the establishment of the Ganga kingdom to the Jaina influence is undoubtedly fictitious and really far from truth. First of all the history of Simhanandi is doubtful. If he were a historical figure, the same would have been recorded either in the early inscriptions of the Ganga kings or in the Jaina church history. It is worthwhile to note in this connection that a person bearing the name of Jata Simhanandi lived in the 7th century A.D. But it is unwarranted to bring down the date of Jata Simhanandi to the 11th century to associate him with the above story. Therefore, the role of Simhanandi in the establishment of the Ganga kingdom is absolutely baseless and does not stand historical scrutiny. Above all else miracles like the obtaining of the boon of goddess Padmavathi, appearance of a sword, cutting of the stone pillar into two etc., are brought to the scene, which fact is against the historical dictum that "to admit the possibility of a miracle is to annihilate the possibility of history". And hence the narration that we came across in the records of the 10th and 11th centuries connecting the establishment of the Ganga kingdom to the Jaina influence is not only fictitious, but far from truth.

Paradoxically enough all the records which claim the Gangas to be Jains belonged to the later period and they contradict what is contained in the early grants of the Ganga kings. A survey of some of the grants issued by the Ganga kings from Madhava to Sivamara II show beyond doubt that they were the followers of the Vedic faith. Even the very names of the early Ganga kings like Madhava, Harivarma, Vishnugopa, Tadangala Madhava, Sri Vikrama, Bhuvikrama and Sripurusha show their leanings towards the Vedic faith. They also observed the Vedic rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices as prescribed in the Vedic texts. They took titles after the Vedic deities like Siva and Vishnu. They took pride in calling themselves as the upholders of Varnasrama dharma. They constructed a number of temples to the Vedic deities. Their innumerable grants were bestowed upon the Brahmins although they followed a liberal religious policy and extended their patronage to the Jaina scholars.

A record of Madhava II (370-390) states that he was not only well-versed in the Upanishads and Nitisastra but also devoted the worship of the 'Guru - Go-Brahmans.'⁹Madhava II's son Harivarma was a staunch follower of the Vedic faith and gifted several villages to Brahmin ascetics and dedicated a temple to Mulastaneswara. Further, Harivarma encouraged a Brahmin scholar by name Madhava Bhatta by conferring on him the title Vadhibha - Simha for having defeated a Buddhist disputant.

Harivarma's son Vishnugopa was a staunch follower (410-430) of Vedic religion and a great devotee of lord Vishnu. A number of records hail them as the worshippers of GuruGo-Brahmana.¹² In one of the inscriptions he is styled as the meditator on the feet of Narayana. In several other records he is called Sakratulya Parakrama Narayana Charananudyata (as strong as Indra in valour and a humble devotee of Narayana). Harivarma's son Tadangala Madhava (430-466) was a devotee of God Thriyambaka (Shiva). He converted several villages in Bellary and Kolar districts into agraharas and granted them to several Brahmins. He also revived the donation to the long ceased festival of Gods and Brahmins. Although Tadangala Madhava was a great devotee of Shiva he gave rich grants to the Buddhist and Jaina scholars.¹⁷ This act of Tadangala Madhava speaks of his liberal religious policy.

Avinita (466-495) son and successor of Thadangala Madhava was a follower of Vedic religion and a great devotee of Hara. For his devotion to Shiva he earned the title Haracharanaravinda Pranipata.¹⁸ He also evinced keen interest in upholding and maintaining Varnasramadharma,¹⁹ Above all else he was the famous monarch among the rulers of the royal line, who performed the Horse sacrifice. His Kodengeruru grant declared that Avinita bathed in the sacrificial water of the uninterrupted Horse sacrifice performed by him. The same grant tells us that he distributed income of that village to 72 Brahmins. His Sringeri inscription informs us that he granted a village to learned Brahmin by name Keshavasharma of the Kasyapagotra. Likewise large number of grants were given to Brahmins. He also patronized the Jaina scholar Ravikirthi and thus upheld the traditional religious policy of toleration.

His illustrious son Durvinita (495-535) who is one of the remarkable rulers of the Ganga dynasty was undoubtedly the follower of Vedic religion and enjoyed the titles like Madhava, Madhavanka, Madhavesa, Dharmamaharajadhiraja. Although he patronized the Jaina scholars like Pujoyapada he was a great devotee of Lord Vishnu and enjoyed the title Kamalodara. He is said to have performed every year several vedic sacrifices like Hiranyagarbha and others. A number of grants were given to Brahmins during his reign. Durvinita has been compared to Vyvaswatha Manu, Chanakya and Parasurama in his upholding Dharma, and possessing political sagacity and handling the Astropastras or the Weapons of war. According to several of his grants he constructed number of temples to various gods. Likewise, his successors Mushkar, Srivikrama Bhuvikrama Sivamara I and Sripurusha were undoubtedly the followers of the Vedic religion. A noteworthy feature of all the Ganga monarchs was that their liberal outlook in religious matters which prompted scholars to regard them as having inclination towards Jainism-Uptill we come down to the latter half of the reign of Shivamara II (788-814) we do not come across any single reference to the construction of a Jaina Basadi by any one of the earlier Ganga monarchs. Further no Jaina king has ever performed any vedic sacrifices. On

account of these various facts it can be concluded that the Ganga kings from its founder Madhava I to Shivamara II were undoubtedly the followers of the Vedic faith and to regard them as the followers of Jainism is a baseless myth.

The reality namely the Ganga Kings were Jains begins from the reign of Shivamara II. The Ganga kings from Shivamara II were undoubtedly the followers of Jainism. The credit of embracing Jainism and constructing of a Jaina Basadi for the first time goes to Shivamara II. He was the most unfortunate monarch among the Gangas who has suffered imprisonment in the Rastrakuta capital Manyaketa twice at the hands of the great Rashtrakuta monarchs Dhruva and afterwards Govinda III. During this period there lived great Jaina saints and philosophers at the Rashtrakuta court like Jinasena I, Jinasena II, Dhavalu Nandi and Thorana Charya. Perhaps while passing through the nadir of his fortune, Sivamara II came under the influence of his preceptor Thorana Charya and embraced Jainism.²⁵ Shivamara II built a Jaina Basadi on the smaller hill at Sravanabelagola. This is the first authentic record of any Ganga king ever building a Jaina Basadi. He also gave number of grants to several Jaina Basadis. From Shivamara II till the end of the dynasty the Ganga kings professed Jainism. They built several beautiful Basadis, lavishly granted money and lands to the Jaina scholars and establishments and some of the kings ended their lives according to Jaina rite Sallekana. On account of the patronage of the later Ganga monarchs Sravanabelagola and few other places became the centres of Jainism.

Hence it can be safely asserted that the early Gangas can in no sense be considered as the followers of Jainism. The rulers of Gangas followed the Hindu faith until the time of Shivamara II (788-814) who too was only a convert to Jainism by about 800 A.D. Therefore, the clear phase of Jaina influence on Ganga dynasty was only for 200 years, from 800 A.D. to 1004 A.D. when this dynasty was overthrown by the Cholas. For a dynasty that was continuously in power for over 700 years, with as many as 30 rulers in the main line, it is a misnomer to call this line a Jaina dynasty, if the effective phase of Jaina hold was only for 200 years with hardly ten or twelve ardent followers of Jainism. Therefore, my contention is that we are not warranted to regard all the Ganga rulers as Jains.

Conclusion

It is far from truth to regard the Ganga house as a Jaina dynasty. The earlier rulers were the followers of the Vedic faith forming agraharas, bestowing gifts to the Brahmanas, worshipping the various Vedic deities and performing the Vedic sacrifices while allowing the followers of other religions to share their benefaction. Likewise the later Ganga rulers became the staunch followers of Jainism yet making grants to the Brahmanas. Their capital Talakad consists of a number of Shaiva and Vaishnava monuments and still remains as an important centre of the Hindu faith attracting lakhs of followers on the occasion of the PanchalingaDharshana, while Sravanabelagola which became prominent after the Ganga kings adopting Jainism and where stand all the important Jaina monuments including the colossal statue of Gommata, still attracting the followers of Jainism on the the occasion of Mahamastakabhisheka .

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