

Western Ganga Dynasty and their Pivotal Role in the Development of Society and Culture in Karnataka

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study how **Western Ganga Dynasty** (350 – 1000 CE) an important ruling dynasty of ancient Karnataka in India contributed immensely to **the development of society and culture in Karnataka**. Western Ganga was an important ruling dynasty of ancient Karnataka in India which lasted from about 350 to 1000 CE. They are known as "Western Gangas" to distinguish them from the Eastern Gangas who in later centuries ruled over Kalinga (modern Odisha). The general belief is that the Western Gangas began their rule during a time when multiple native clans asserted their freedom due to the weakening of the Pallava empire in South India, a geo-political event sometimes attributed to the southern conquests of Samudra Gupta. The Western Ganga sovereignty lasted from about 350 to 550 CE, initially ruling from Kolar and later, moving their capital to Talakadu on the banks of the Kaveri River in modern Mysore district. Most of the Western Gangas were Jainas, but some patronized Brahmanical Hinduism. They encouraged scholarly work in Kannada (Kanarese), built some remarkable temples, and encouraged deforestation, irrigation, and cross-peninsular trade.

After the rise of the imperial Chalukyas of Badami, the Gangas accepted Chalukya overlordship and fought for the cause of their overlords against the Pallavas of Kanchi. The Chalukyas were replaced by the Rashtrakutas of Manyakheta in 753 CE as the dominant power in the Deccan. After a century of struggle for autonomy, the Western Gangas finally accepted Rashtrakuta overlordship and successfully fought alongside them against their foes, the Chola Dynasty of Tanjavur. In the late 10th century, north of Tungabhadra river, the Rashtrakutas were replaced by the emerging Western Chalukya Empire and the Chola Dynasty saw renewed power south of the Kaveri river. The defeat of the Western Gangas by Cholas around 1000 resulted in the end of the Ganga influence over the region. Though territorially a small kingdom, the Western Ganga contribution to polity, culture and literature of the modern south Karnataka region is considered important. The Western Ganga kings showed benevolent tolerance to all faiths but are most famous for their patronage toward Jainism resulting in the construction of monuments in places such as Shravanabelagola and Kambadahalli. The kings of this dynasty encouraged the fine arts due to which literature in Kannada and Sanskrit flourished. Chavundaraya's writing, Chavundaraya Purana of 978 CE, is an important work in Kannada prose. Many classics were written on various subjects ranging from religion to elephant management.

Key words: Western Ganga Dynasty , Mudiraj , Kannada , development of society, classics culture, Karnataka

Introduction

The Western Ganga kings were the ancestors to the people of Mudiraj warrior community. The Ganga kings Sripuriusha and his son Shivamara were known as Muttarasas through some of their inscriptions. The Ganga kings established their kingdom in Deccan India that spread across Tamilnadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. They were also matrimonially related to Pallavas who ruled Tamil country. These kings used olden South Indian script in their inscriptions which seems to be the common ancestor language for both Telugu and Kannada scripts of today. The Western Ganga rule was a period of brisk literary activity in Sanskrit and Kannada, though many of the writings are now considered extinct and are known only from references made to them. Chavundaraya's writing, Chavundaraya Purana (or Trishashtilakshana mahapurana) of 978 CE, is an early existing work in prose style in Kannada and contains a summary of the Sanskrit writings, Adipurana and Uttarapurana which were written a century earlier by Jinasena and Gunabhadra during the rule of Rashtrakuta Amoghavarsha I. The prose, composed in lucid Kannada, was mainly meant for the common man and avoided any reference to complicated elements of Jain doctrines and philosophy. His writings seem to be influenced by the writings of his predecessor Adikavi Pampa and contemporary Ranna. The work narrates the legends of a total of 63 Jain proponents including twenty-four Jain Tirthankar, twelve Chakravartis, nine Balabhadras, nine Narayanas and nine Pratinarayanans.

The earliest postulated Kannada writer from this dynasty is King Durvinita of the 6th century. Kavirajamarga of 850 CE, refers to a Durvinita as an early writer of Kannada prose. Around 900 CE, Gunavarma I authored the Kannada works, Shudraka and Harivamsha. His writings are considered extinct but references to these writings are found in later years. He is known to have been patronised by King Ereganga Neetimarga II. In Shudraka, he has favourably compared his patron to King Shudraka of ancient times. The great Kannada poet Ranna was patronised by Chavundaraya in his early literary days. Ranna's classic Parashurama charite is considered a eulogy of his patron who held such titles as Samara Parashurama.

Nagavarma I, a brahmin scholar who came from Vengi in modern Andhra Pradesh (late 10th century) was also patronised by Chavundaraya. He wrote Chandombudhi (ocean of prosody) addressed to his wife. This is considered the earliest available Kannada writing in prosody. He also wrote one of the earliest available romance classics in Kannada called Karnataka Kadambari in sweet and flowing champu (mixed verse and prose) style. It is based on an earlier romantic work in Sanskrit by poet Bana and is popular among critics. Gajashtaka (hundred verses on elephants), a rare Kannada work on elephant management was written by King Shivamara II around 800 CE but this work is now considered extinct. Other writers such as Manasiga and Chandrabhatta were known to be popular in the 10th century.

In an age of classical Sanskrit literature, Madhava II (brother of King Vishnugopa) wrote a treatise Dattaka Sutravritti which was based on an earlier work on erotics by a writer called Dattaka. A Sanskrit version of Vaddakatha, a commentary on Pāṇini's grammar called Sabdavathara and a commentary on the 15th chapter of a Sanskrit work called Kiratarjunneya by poet Bharavi (who was in Durvinita's court) are ascribed to Durvinita. King Shivamara II is known to have written Gajamata Kalpana. Hemasena, also known as Vidya Dhananjaya authored Raghavapandaviya, a narration of the stories of Rama and the Pandavas simultaneously through puns. Gayachintamani and Kshatrachudamini which were based on poet Bana's work Kadambari were written by Hemasena's pupil Vadeebhasimha in prose style. and Chavundaraya wrote Charitarasara.

The Western Ganga style of architecture was influenced by the Pallava and Badami Chalukya architectural features, in addition to indigenous Jain features. The Ganga pillars with a conventional lion at the base and a circular shaft of the pillar on its head, the stepped Vimana of the shrine with horizontal mouldings and square pillars were features inherited from the Pallavas. These features are also found in structures built by their subordinates, the Banas and Nolambas.

The monolith of Gomateshwara commissioned by Chavundaraya is considered the high point of the Ganga sculptural contribution in ancient Karnataka. Carved from fine-grained white granite, the image stands on a lotus. It has no support up to the thighs and is 60 feet (18 m) tall with the face measuring 6.5 feet (2.0 m). With the serene expression on the face of the image, its curled hair with graceful locks, its proportional anatomy, the monolith size, and the combination of its artistry and craftsmanship have led it to be called the mightiest achievement in sculptural art in medieval Karnataka. It is the largest monolithic statue in the world. Their free standing pillars called Mahasthambha or Bhrahmasthambha are also considered unique, examples of which are the Brahmadeva pillar and Tyagada Brahmadeva Pillar. At the top of the pillar whose shaft (cylindrical or octagonal) is decorated with creepers and other floral motifs is the seated Brahma and the base of the pillar normally has engravings of important Jain personalities and inscriptions.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze the **Western Gangas** rule over a large swathe of territory in Karnataka in south-western India. Also how despite this large area of territory, development of society and culture prospered Karnataka

Ancestry of the founders of the Western Ganga's

Multiple theories have been proposed regarding the ancestry of the founders of the Western Ganga dynasty (prior to the 4th century). Some mythical accounts point to a northern origin, while theories based on epigraphy suggest a southern origin. According to some records, the Western Gangas were of the Kanvayana gotra and traced their lineage to the Ikshvakus of the solar dynasty. Historians who propose the southern origin have further debated whether the early petty chieftains of the clan (prior to their rise to power) were natives of the

southern districts of modern Karnataka, the Kongu Nadu region in modern Tamil Nadu or of the southern districts of modern Andhra Pradesh. These regions encompass an area of the southern Deccan where the three modern states merge geographically. It is theorised that the Gangas may have taken advantage of the confusion caused by the invasion of southern India by the northern king Samudra Gupta prior to 350, and carved out a kingdom for themselves. The area they controlled was called Gangavadi and included regions of the modern districts of Mysore, Hassan Chamarajanagar, Tumkur, Kolar, Mandya and Bangalore in Karnataka state. At times, they also controlled some areas in modern Tamil Nadu (Kongu region starting from the 6th century rule of King Avinita) and Andhra Pradesh (Ananthpur region starting from the middle of the 5th century). The founding king of the dynasty was Konganivarma Madhava who made Kolar his capital around 350 and ruled for about twenty years.

By the time of Harivarma in 390, the Gangas had consolidated their kingdom with Talakad as their capital. Their move from the early capital Kolar may have been a strategic one with the intention of containing the growing Kadamba power. By 430 they had consolidated their eastern territories comprising modern Bangalore, Kolar and Tumkur districts and by 470 they had gained control over Kongu region in modern Tamil Nadu, Sendraka (modern Chikkamagaluru and Belur), Punnata and Pannada regions (comprising modern Heggadadevanakote and Nanjangud) in modern Karnataka. In 529, King Durvinita ascended the throne after waging a war with his younger brother who was favoured by his father, King Avinita. Some accounts suggest that in this power struggle, the Pallavas of Kanchi supported Avinita's choice of heir and the Badami Chalukya King Vijayaditya supported his father-in-law, Durvinita. From the inscriptions it is known that these battles were fought in Tondaimandalam and Kongu regions (northern Tamil Nadu) prompting historians to suggest that Durvinita fought the Pallavas successfully. Considered the most successful of the Ganga kings, Durvinita was well versed in arts such as music, dance, ayurveda and taming wild elephants. Some inscriptions sing paeans to him by comparing him to Yudhishtira and Manu – figures from Hindu mythology known for their wisdom and fairness.

Politically, the Gangas were feudatories and close allies who also shared matrimonial relations with the Chalukyas. This is attested by inscriptions which describe their joint campaigns against their arch enemy, the Pallavas of Kanchi. From the year 725 onwards, the Gangavadi territories came to be called as the "Gangavadi-96000" (Shannavati Sahasra Vishaya) comprising the eastern and western provinces of modern south Karnataka. King Sripurusha fought the Pallava King Nandivarman Pallavamalla successfully, bringing Penkulikottai in north Arcot under his control temporarily for which he earned the title Permanadi. A contest with the Pandyas of Madurai over control of Kongu region ended in a Ganga defeat, but a matrimony between a Ganga princess and Rajasimha Pandya's son brought peace helping the Gangas retain control over the contested region.

In 753, when the Rashtrakutas replaced the Badami Chalukyas as the dominant force in the Deccan, the Gangas offered stiff resistance for about a century. King Shivamara II is mostly known for his wars with the Rashtrakuta Dhruva Dharavarsha, his subsequent defeat and imprisonment, his release from prison and eventually his death on the battle field. The Ganga resistance continued through the reign of Rashtrakuta Govinda III and by 819, a Ganga resurgence gained them partial control over Gangavadi under King Rachamalla. Seeing the futility of waging war with the Western Ganga, Rashtrakuta Amoghavarsha I gave his daughter Chandrabhalabbe in marriage to Ganga prince Butuga I, son of King Ereganga Neetimarga. The Gangas thereafter became staunch allies of the Rashtrakutas, a position they maintained till the end of the Rashtrakuta dynasty of Manyakheta.

After an uneventful period, Butuga II ascended the throne in 938 with the help of Rashtrakuta Amoghavarsha III (whose daughter he married). He helped the Rashtrakutas win decisive victories in Tamilakam in the battle of Takkolam against the Chola Dynasty. With this victory, the Rashtrakutas took control of modern northern Tamil Nadu. In return for their valour, the Gangas were awarded extensive territories in the Tungabhadra river valley. King Marasimha II who came to power in 963 aided the Rashtrakutas in victories against the Gurjara Pratihara King Lalla and the Paramara kings of Malwa in Central India. Chavundaraya, a minister in the Western Ganga court was a valiant commander, able administrator and an accomplished poet in Kannada and Sanskrit. He served King Marasimha II and his successors ably and helped King Rachamalla IV suppress a civil war in 975. Towards the end of the 10th century, the Rashtrakutas had been supplanted by the Western Chalukya Empire in Manyakheta. In the south, the Chola Dynasty who were seeing a resurgence of power under Rajaraja Chola I conquered Gangavadi around the year 1000, bringing the Western Ganga dynasty to an end. Thereafter, large areas of south Karnataka region came under Chola control for about a century.

Society: Western Ganga administration

The Western Ganga administration was influenced by principles stated in the ancient text arthashastra. The prajagavundas mentioned in the Ganga records held responsibilities similar to those of the village elders (gramavridhdhas) mentioned by Kautilya. Succession to the throne was hereditary but there were instances when this was overlooked. The kingdom was divided into Rashtra (district) and further into Visaya (consisting of possibly 1000 villages) and Desa. From the 8th century, the Sanskrit term Visaya was replaced by the Kannada term Nadu. Examples of this change are Sindanadu-8000 and Punnadu-6000, with scholars differing about the significance of the numerical suffix. They opine that it was either the revenue yield of the division computed in cash terms or the number of fighting men in that division or the number of revenue paying hamlets in that division or the number of villages included in that territory.

Inscriptions have revealed several important administrative designations such as prime minister (sarvadhikari), treasurer (shribhandari), foreign minister (sandhivirgrahi) and chief minister (mahapradhana). All of these positions came with an additional title of commander (dandanayaka). Other designations were royal steward (manevergade), master of robes (mahapasayita), commander of elephant corps (gajasahani), commander of cavalry (thuragasahani) etc. In the royal house, Niyogis oversaw palace administration, royal clothing and jewellery etc. and the Padiyara were responsible for court ceremonies including door keeping and protocol.

Officials at the local level were the pergade, nadabova, nalagamiga, prabhu and gavunda. The pergades were superintendents from all social classes such as artisans, gold smiths, black smiths etc. The pergades dealing with the royal household were called manepergade (house superintendent) and those who collected tolls were called Sunka vergades. The nadabovas were accountants and tax collectors at the Nadu level and sometimes functioned as scribes. The nalagamigas were officers who organized and maintained defence at the Nadu level. The prabhu constituted a group of elite people drawn together to witness land grants and demarcation of land boundaries. The gavundas who appear most often in inscriptions were the backbone of medieval polity of the southern Karnataka region. They were landlords and local elite whom the state utilized their services to collect taxes, maintain records of landownership, bear witness to grants and transactions and even raise militia when required.

Inscriptions that specify land grants, rights and ownership were descriptive of the boundaries of demarcation using natural features such as rivers, streams, water channels, hillocks, large boulders, layout of the village, location of forts (kote) if any in the proximity, irrigation canals, temples, tanks and even shrubs and large trees. Also included was the type of soil, the crops meant to be grown and tanks or wells to be excavated for irrigation. Inscriptions mention wet land, cultivable land, forest and waste land. There are numerous references to hamlets (palli) belonging to the hunter communities who resided in them (bedapalli). From the 6th century onwards, the inscriptions refer to feudal lords by the title arasa. The arasas were either brahmins or from tribal background who controlled hereditary territories paying periodic tribute to the king. The velavali who were loyal bodyguards of the royalty were fierce warriors under oath (vele). They moved with the royal family and were expected to fight for the master and be willing to lay down their lives in the process. If the king died, the velavali were required to self immolate on the funeral pyre of the master.

Culture: agrarian communities of Western Ganga

The Gangavadi region consisted of the malnad region, the plains (Bayaluseemae) and the semi-malnad with lower elevation and rolling hills. The main crops of the malnad region were paddy, betel leaves, cardamom and pepper and the semi-malnad region with its lower altitude produced rice, millets such as ragi and corn, pulses, oilseeds and it was also the base for cattle farming. The plains to the east were the flat lands fed by Kaveri, Tungabhadra and Vedavati rivers where cultivations of sugarcane, paddy, coconut, areca nut (adeka totta), betel leaves, plantain and flowers (vara vana) were common. Sources of irrigation were excavated tanks, wells, natural ponds and water bodies in the catchment area of dams (Katta). Inscriptions attesting to irrigation of previously uncultivated lands seem to indicate an expanding agrarian community.

Soil types mentioned in records are black soil (Karimaniya) in the Sinda-8000 territory and to red soil (Kebbayya mannu). Cultivated land was of three types; wet land, dry land and to a lesser extent garden land with paddy being the dominant crop of the region. Wet lands were called kalani, galde, nir mannu or nir panya and was specifically used to denote paddy land requiring standing water. The fact that pastoral economies were spread throughout Gangavadi region comes from references to cowherds in many inscriptions. The terms gosahasra (a thousand cows), gasara (owner of cows), gosasi (donor of cows), goyiti (cowherdess), gosasa (protector of cows) attest to this. Inscriptions indicate ownership of cows may have been as important as cultivable land and that there may have existed a social hierarchy based on this. Inscriptions mention cattle raids attesting to the importance of the pastoral economy, destructive raids, assaults on women (pendir-udeyulcal), abduction of women by bedas (hunter tribes); all of which indicate the existing militarism of the age.

Lands that were exempt from taxes were called manya and sometimes consisted of several villages. They were granted by local chieftains without any reference to the overlord, indicating a de-centralised economy. These lands, often given to heroes who perished in the line of duty were called bilavritti or kalnad. When such a grant was made for the maintenance of temples at the time of consecration, it was called Talavritti. Some types of taxes on income were kara or anthakara (internal taxes), utkota (gifts due to the king), hiranya (cash payments) and sulika (tolls and duties on imported items). Taxes were collected from those who held the right to cultivate land; even if the land was not actually cultivated.

Siddhaya was a local tax levied on agriculture and pottondi was a tax levied on merchandise by the local feudal ruler. Based on context, pottondi also meant 1/10, aydalavi meant 1/5 and elalavi meant 1/7. Mannadare literally meant land tax and was levied together with shepherds tax (Kurimbadere) payable to the chief of shepherds. Bhaga meant a portion or share of the produce from land or the land area itself. Minor taxes such as Kirudere (due to the landlords) and samathadere (raised by the army officers or samantha) are mentioned. In addition to taxes for maintenance of the local officer's retinue, villages were obligated to feed armies on the march to and from battles. Bittuvatta or niravari taxes comprised usually of a percentage of the produce and was collected for constructing irrigation tanks.

Conclusion

The Western Gangas ruled as a sovereign power from the middle of fourth century to middle of sixth century, initially from Kolar, later moving their capital to Talakad on the banks of the Kaveri River in modern Mysore district. Though territorially a small kingdom, the Western Ganga contribution to polity, culture and literature of the modern south Karnataka region is considered noteworthy. The Western Ganga Dynasty (350 – 1000 CE) was an important ruling dynasty of ancient Karnataka in India. The Western Ganga Dynasty of Talakad ruled a large part of ancient Karnataka alongside the Kadambas in India, during 350-550 CE. They continued to rule until the 10th century as feudatories of the Rashtrakutas and Chalukyas. They are known as Western Gangas to distinguish them from the Eastern Gangas who in later centuries ruled over modern Orissa.

After the rise of the imperial Chalukyas of Badami, the Gangas accepted Chalukya overlordship and fought for the cause of their overlords against the Pallavas of Kanchi. The Chalukyas were replaced by the Rashtrakutas of Manyakheta in 753 CE as the dominant power in the Deccan. After a century of struggle for autonomy, the Western Gangas finally accepted Rashtrakuta overlordship and successfully fought along side them against their foes, the Chola Dynasty of Tanjavur. The defeat of the Western Gangas by Cholas around 1000 resulted in the end of the Ganga influence over the region.

Though territorially a small kingdom, the Western Ganga contribution to polity, culture and literature of the modern south Karnataka region is considered important. The Western Ganga kings showed benevolent tolerance to all faiths but are most famous for their patronage towards Jainism resulting in the construction of monuments in places such as Shravanabelagola and Kambadahalli. The kings of this dynasty encouraged the fine arts due to which literature in Kannada and Sanskrit flourished. 9th century Kannada literature refer to the Ganga King Durvinita of 6th century as an early writer in Kannada language prose.

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