

Appraisal of Vishnukundins: B.N.Sastry

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical appraisal of B.N. Sastry's pioneering contribution to the reconstruction of Vishnukundin history through epigraphically research. By identifying and publishing the Indrapalanagara (Tummalagudem) copper plate inscriptions, Sastry corrected earlier misconceptions regarding the dynasty's genealogy, chronology, and regional origins. His systematic interpretation established a reliable sequence of twelve rulers from 358–624 CE and highlighted the Vishnukundins' political expansion, religious affiliations, and cultural achievements in Telangana and Andhra regions. The study emphasizes Sastry's role in redefining post-Satavahana history and demonstrating the importance of epigraphy in understanding the socio-religious and administrative developments of early South Indian dynasties.

Keywords: *Vishnukundins; Indrapalanagara Inscriptions; Epigraphy; Genealogy; Chronology; Telangana History; Copper Plate Inscriptions; Buddhism*

1. Introduction

In the journey of the origin and progress of human civilization few personalities through their wisdom, activities, writings etc became role model to the successors. There is no reservation for any specific group in this context. Scholars, rulers, emperors like Porus, Bimbisara, Ajatashatruvu, Kautilya, Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, Gautamiputra Satakarni, Samudragupta, Kalidas, Aryabhatta, Harshavardhana and Rudramadevi etc. became popular for their achievements or good qualities or works.

South India in general Andhradesha in particular also became the home for many brave, intelligent personalities. During the medieval period Rudra Deva, Ganpati Deva, Rudramadevi, Shri Krishna Devaraya, Mohammad Quli Qutb Shah and Akkanna, Madonna etc. earned great place in the hearts of the people for the good qualities or services or works. The Asaf Jahis, who ruled presently Telugu speaking majority area and few parts of Karnataka and Maharashtra between 1724 CE-1948 CE also earned special credit for the few good works. During this period also talented, capable personalities such as Nizam-ul-Mulk, Salar Jung-I, Mir Mahboob-Ali Khan and Mir-Osman- Ali Khan etc. emerged. The Asaf Jahi reign was described as the most turbulent, progressive and oppressive by different scholars, poets and singers etc.

During the period of last Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan in Nalgonda district, a great soul was born in a humble Brahmin family. He is none other than B.N. Sastry. He was humble Telugu school teacher but he developed a great passion towards Epigraphy and History. B.N. Sastry is well known as "Shasanala Sastry" (Sastry of Inscriptions) for his contribution to collection, editing and publishing of epigraphs. He was multi- faceted personality like teacher, author, epigraphist, historian, editor, revolutionary activist and publisher. He became a great historian without a degree in History.

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2. Epigraphically sources

The Vishnukundins were the most important of the dynasties that ruled Andhra after the Satavahanas. The research done by B.N. Sastry in determining the time and genealogy not only changed the opinions of earlier historians but also contributed to the construction of a comprehensive history of the Vishnukundins through the two Thummalagudem copper plate inscriptions. These two copper inscriptions have made historians re-examine the history of the Vishnukundins.

The main inscriptions available so far for the study of the history of the Vishnukundins are the Pier copperplates, the Ramatirtha copperplates, the Chikkilu copperplates, the Tundi copperplate inscription, the two Thummalagudem copperplate inscriptions, the Polamur copperplate inscription, the Khanapur copperplate inscription, the inscription at Velpur, a village near Sattenapalli in Guntur district, and the Chaitanyapuri inscription.

3. Genealogy of Vishnukundins prior to SENTRY

Until B.N. SENTRY declared the Thummalagudem copper inscriptions as Indrapalanagara copper inscriptions, historians accepted two copper inscriptions found in Polamur village of East Godavari district as the basis for studying the history of the Vishnukundins. The first inscription was issued by the Vishnukundina king Madhava Varma IV during his 48th regnal year to Siva Sharma on the occasion of granting the village of Pulumbur as an agrahara. The second copperplate inscription was issued by Eastern Chalukya ruler Jayasimha I to Dama Sharma by recognizing the service rendered by their ancestors. Based on the first inscription of Polamur, historians such as the late Komaraju Venkata Lakshmana Rao have explained the lineage of Vishnukundins as follows.

- Vikramendra varma
- Govinda varma
- Madhava varma

The inscription issued by Madhava Varma IV was found together with another Polamur inscription issued by the Eastern Chalukya king Jayasimha I in his 5th regnal year. Since these two inscriptions were given to the same family in the context of donating a Pulumbur village. Kommaraju Venkat Laxman Rao and Bhavaraju Venkata Krishna Rao believed that the difference between the periods between issuing these inscriptions can be determined according to the reign of the Eastern Chalukya king Jaysimha I and the reign of Madhava Varma IV and is also useful to determine the chronology of Vishnukundins.

Kommaraju Venkat Laxman Rao and Bhavaraju Venkata Krishna Rao come to conclude that Madhava Varma IV was a contemporary of Western Chalukya ruler Pulakeshi II on the basis of the recipient of the donation from Jayasimha I being the father of the recipient of Madhava Varma IV. From this, both the scholars come to the inference that Madhava Varma IV came to power in 596 AD.

Before the discovery of these Polamur copper plates, the second inscription of Impure was considered to be the oldest by scholars. According to the scholar Hulse, who examined the evolution of palaeography, the name of Madhavavarma mentioned in both the Chikkullu and Ramatirtha copper inscriptions is the same and one. He also thought that Madhavavarma would have issued the impure inscription. The Tundi copperplate inscription, which came to light later, completely agrees with the Chikullucopperplate inscription in terms of genealogy but also mentions that the reign of Vikramendravarma II lasted 14 years, not 10 years as mentioned in the Chikullu inscription.

4. Indrapala Nagara Copper Plate Inscriptions

While intensive debate is going on among the scholars, B.N. Shastry has published two Thummalagudem inscriptions in the name of Indrapatanagaram Copper Plate Inscriptions I & II, which provided an unknown chronology of the Vishnukundina dynasty, and has contributed greatly to the construction of a comprehensive history of the Vishnukundina period.

These two inscriptions were found by Mr. Tammali Anjaneyalu while digging foundation bricks in Nagavaram near Tummalagudem village, in Ramannapet Thaluka. Anjaneyalu handed them to Mr. Rajarao, who in turn handed them over to Mr. K. Manohar Rao. K. Manohar Rao handed it over to B.N. Sastry to study. The first inscription consists of 5 sheets; each sheet is 25.8 cm long and 5.5 cm wide. These five sheets are attached to a copper ring. The circumference of the ring is 23.5 cm. The inscription weighs 1.4 kilograms. This inscription is written in 32 lines. This inscription was issued by Govindavarma in 435 AD. The second inscription also has five sheets. Each sheet is 18.8 cm long. The width is 6.6 cm. The weight of the inscription is 1.33 kilograms. This inscription is written in 45 lines. This inscription was engraved by Vikramendra Bhattacharaka varmain 566 A.D. These inscriptions were handed over to the Archaeological Department of the Government of Andhra Pradesh by B.N. Sastry. One inscription is on display at the Archaeological Museum in Panugallu, Nalgonda district, and the other at the Government Museum in Keesaragutta.

The first inscription was issued by Govindavarma, in the 37th year of his reign, who donated two village Penukapara, to the 14th Arya Sangha for the maintenance of the Mahadevi Vihara in 435 AD. It was built in the honour of his consort, Mahadevi. This inscription begins with a eulogy of Lord Buddha after the Swastivachaka and describes the genealogy of the Vishnukundins up to Govindavarma. The inscription mentioned the genealogy of Vishnukundin rulers like Indravarma, Madhavavarma, and Govindavarma. This inscription praised Govindavarma in detail.

After the swasthiwachaka, the second inscription of Tummalagudem mentioned the list of Vishnukundin rulers up to the author of the inscription and their greatness (Vikramendra Bhattacharaka II). According to the copper plate inscription of Vikramendra Bhattacharaka II, the genealogy of the Vishnukundin rulers is as follows.

- Govinda Varma
- Madhava Varma
- Vikramendra Varma
- Indrabhattacharaka Varma
- Vikramendra Bhattacharaka Varma II

5. Krishna Sastry's Approach

Rao Bahadur Krishna Sastry considered Madhavavarma I as the progenitor of the Vishnukundina dynasty. He named Madhavavarma I, Devavarma, Madhavavarma II, Govindavarma, Madhavavarma III, Vikramendravarma, Indravarma, and Vikramendravarma II as Vishnukundin rulers. After Sastry got the Polamur inscription, he extended the dynasty by two more generations by adding Govindavarma II and Madhavavarma IV.

6. D.C. Sarkar's Approach

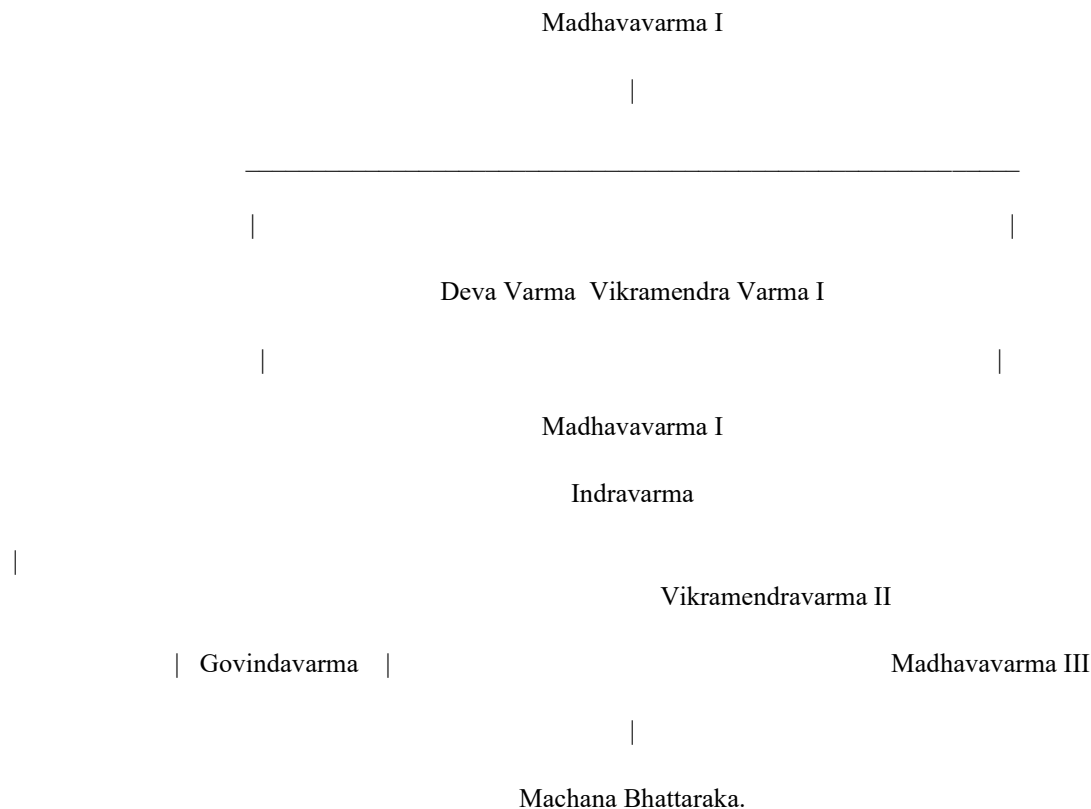
D.C. Sarkar criticized the genealogy of the Vishnukundins propounded by Rao Bahadur Krishna Sastry. He propounded the genealogy of the Vishnukundin dynasty in another way.

- Vikramendravarma
- Govindavarma
- Madhavavarma
- Devavarma Vikramendrava
- Madhavavarma Indravarma
- Vikramendravarma II

7. Neelakanta Sastry's Approach

This approach was accepted by scholars like K. Gopalachary and Dr. Maremanda Rama Rao.

Bhavaraju Venkatakrishna Rao and Dr. K. Neelakanta Sastry disapproved of the D.C. D.C. Sarkar approach. They noticed the in the title and its meaning of Madhavavarma in Chikkullu copper, Ramthirtha copper plates, and of Madhavavarma in Impure and Polumur copper plates inscriptions and therefore came to the conclusion that Madhavavarma mentioned in the set of pair inscriptions is not the same. They accepted the argument of Komura Venkata Lakshman Rao and accepted that Madhavavarma was a contemporary of the Western Chalukya ruler Pulakeshi II. Pulakeshi II defeated Madhavavarma and was deposed. These scholars reconstructed the genealogy of the Vishnukundin family tree in this way.



B.N. Sastry's Approach to Reconstruct Genealogy of Vishnukundins

On the basis of the second copper plate inscription of Tummalagudem, B.N. Sastry finalized the genealogy of the Vishnukundina dynasty and disapproved of the earlier version of all the scholars. According to this inscription, the reign of Vikramendra Bhattaraka II of Vishnukundina is identified as 556 AD. Therefore, his reign may have begun in 555-56 AD. Vikramendra BhattarakavarmaII issued the Tundi Copperplate Inscription in his fourteenth reign, which was made in 570 AD. This is his last inscription. B.N. Sastry has corrected the genealogy of the Vishnukundinas in the two copper inscriptions of Thummalagudem and revised the order established by the earlier scholars. He comes to conclude that 12 kings ruled the Vishnukundin dynasty from 358 AD to 624 AD.

- Maharajendra Varma (358-370 AD)
- Madhava Varma I (370-398 AD)
- Govindavarman I (398-435 AD)
- Madhava Varma II (435-470 AD)
- Devavarma (470-473 AD)
- Madhava Varma III (473-522 AD)
- Vikramendra Varma (522-528 AD)
- Indra Battaraka Varma (528-556 AD)
- Vikramendra Bhattarakvarma II (556-570 AD)

- Govindavarman II (570-576 AD)
- Madhavavarman IV (576-623 AD)
- Manchyana Bhattachakka (623-24 AD)

This chronological order has been considered authentic by all the scholars, including Dr. Nelaturi Venkataramanayya, Ajay Mishra Sastry to date.

Unlike the Ananda Gotrajas, the Brihatpalayanas, and the Shalankayanas, the Vishnukundins began their rule in the region north of the Krishna River, which is identified as the Telangana region. According to B.N. Sastry, the Vishnukundins first established the power in Telangana and ruled the region of Amarabad. He believed that the Vishnukundins shifted their capital from Amaravati to Indrapuri (Indrapalanagaram) after the empire expanded. Bezvada, Vengi, Dendulur, Velpur and Indrapuri also their capitals.

On the basis of the phrase "Sripavata Swami Padanudhyayi" in the Vishnukundinsinscriptions, Bhavaraju Venkatakrishna Rao believes that they were from the Vinukonda region. He felt that Vishnukundin is a Sanskritization of Vinukonda. Kelharan also agrees that Vinukonda was the capital of the Vishnukundins. According to Shankara Narayana, the Vishnukundins belonged to the Srisailam region. On the basis of the word Sripavatiyulubeing mentioned in the second copper plate inscription of Tummalagudem, Shankara Narayana interpreted the Vishnukundins as great kings from Sripavatam. Keelaharan understood that Sripavatam was Srisailam.

The word "Sripavataswamy" in the swathivachaka "Sripavataswamy Padanadhyata" mentioned in inscriptions is doubtful to identify with Lord Mallikarjuna of Srisailam. It is because the Ikshvaka inscriptions of the 3rd-4th centuries AD mentioned that they ruled from Sripavatam. Sripavatam is identified with Nagarjunakonda. It is also observed that Kartikeya Swamy temples in the surrounding areas of Sripavatam have come to light during archaeological excavations. Based on the findings of excavations, Dr. Nelaturi Venkata Ramanayya opined that Sripavataswamy is the Ilavelpu of Vishnukundin, maybethe Kartikeya Swamy of Vijayapuri (Nagarjunakonda). On the basis of this, the Ikshvakas were treated as Sripavatiyas, and Govindavarman I of Vishnukundi was a Buddhist, and his consort, Parama Bhattarika Mahadevi, built a Mahaviharam at Indrapuram. Some of the scholars are of the opinion that Sripavata Swamy is Lord Buddha.

Dr. V.V. Krishna Sastry believes that Sripavataswamy and Lord Buddha is not the same and that the Vishnukundins became Shaivites from Madhavavarman II onwards. He also expressed the opinion that Ramalingeswaraswamy, located on Keesaragutta, 35 km from Hyderabad, is the venerable deity of Vishnukundins.

8. Conclusion

B. N. Sastry considered Maharajendravarman, Madhavavarman I, Govindavarman I, Vikramendravarman, and Vikramendra Bhattachakavarma II to be Buddhists. Based on the two Indrapalanagara copper plate inscriptions, he concluded that the Vishnukundins adopted Buddhism. He states that many temples were built during the Vishnukundin era. B.N. Sastry believes that the Panchalingeswara Temple, Amareswara Temple, Mallika Temple, and Keesara Ramalingeswara Temple were built in the capital of the Vishnukundins. They also built the Amareswara Temple and Chejerla Kapoteswara Temple in Amaravati. B.N. Sastry believes that the Mahadevi Vihara, the Chaityas in Indrapala Nagar, the Mahaviharam of Phanigiri, the Gajulabanda Chaityas, and the Buddhist stupas of Tirumalagiri were built during the Vishnukundin era.

It not only proves that the Vishnukundins established the kingdom in Telangana as their centre, but also the research done by B.N. Sastry on genealogy and chronology serves as a standard and is useful for the construction of the history after the Satavahanas.

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