

The Mazar-i-Sharif Inscription of the Shahi Ruler Veka: Revisited*

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Introduction

The Mazar-i-Sharif inscription is a rectangular stone slab that is inscribed with 11 lines of Śāradā characters. The inscription is said to be discovered in the northern part of Afghanistan and brought to Pakistan from Mazar-i-Sharif (Dani 2001: 81). The inscription was previously belonged to late (Gen.) Nasirullah Babar, the then Interior Minister of Pakistan. The said owner presented the inscription under description to the Islamabad Museum (Dani 2001: 81). This inscription was studied and published by AH Dani (2001). The said author exhaustively studied the Sanskrit text and provided informations about the purpose, ruling king and the date of the inscription. The inscription refers to the reign of Veka, the Hindu Shahi ruler. Dani identified this king with Vakadeva¹ who according to the inscription was occupied by eight fold forces, the earth, the markets and the forts (Dani 2001: 81). The inscription narrates the establishment of the image of Śiva Bhaṭṭāraka with Umā. According to Dani, it was built by Parimahā (great) Maitya for the benefit of himself and his son at Maityasya (Dani 2001: 81). Although the study of Dani is a significant contribution to unveil the contents of the inscription but his transliteration and translation are by no means final and free from mistakes. The present

scholar attempts to revisit the said inscription for better understandings.

Decipherment

The decipherment made by Dani poses some problems and irregularities. Some parts of the transliteration and translation are based on conjectural and unsubstantiated reconstructions. One of the glaring example is the digit “100 30 8”, which is absent in the first line of the inscription. Another problem of the previous reading noted by the scholar are two characters in second line read as “ṇanka”, although they are digits instead of characters. Apart from this, the English translation of the content does not go entirely hand in hand with the Sanskrit text. In view of certain issues, the previous transliteration and translation need to be revisited

Follwoign is the transliteration and translation of the said inscription by Dani (2001: 84-85):

Line 1: [om] || samvatsare varṣe 100 30 8 aṣṭa
triṃ śādhike samvate

Line 2: śate (śu)kla grihṇa māghe rbha (rya)ti
matu ksaṅgi ṇanka śrī

Line 3: śāhi veka rājye bhū(va)na haṭṭa Durga
aṣṭa b(v)ale

Line 4: nāsītavyā śivabhaṭṭārakasya umā ma

Line 5: hitasya deva pratimā maityase
parimahā mai

Line 6: tyena pratiṣṭhito atra śiva
bha(ṭṭārakaṃ) mahā

Line 7: śraddhayaṃ vadṇaṃ ubhaṃ saputra
puṇya phalaṃ tato

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¹ The name King Vakadeva is mentioned on his copper coins (Rehman, 1979: 203-04)

Line 8: Śiva bhaṭṭārakasya umā sahitasya guro
mā

Line 9: tā pitro ra kha(di)vatu || aṣṭeṣṭaka samā
yu

Line 10: ktaṁ cha karotu śivalāyaṁ bhāva
umā la(ṅga)ne

Line 11: svargonya || (mi)ttrā-nścha bhukṣaśā
iti || Śrī (Śāhi)

Om̐ in the year 138, one hundred increased by thirty-eight, on the while half of Māgha, during the reign of Śrī Śāhi Veka, marked by powerful Kṣaṅgiṇa, having occupied the eath, markets and forts by eightfold forces: the godly image of Śiva Bhaṭṭāraka with Umā was established by Parimahā (the great) Maitya at Maityasya. Here Śiva Bhaṭṭāraka is worshipped with great devotion for the merit of both along with son; hence Śiva Bhaṭṭāraka with Umā (‘s blessing) may protect the teacher, mother and father. At the temple of Śiva with the embrace of Umā, eight desired ceremonies should be performed for the attainment of Svarga etc., friends be pleased, Śrī.

This inscription can be divided into 5 verses, each describes a specific subject. The first verse starts with the date of the inscription. The transliteration and translation of few characters and words of the first verse pose some problems. The verse starts with “samvatsare varṣe + aṣṭaṭṛiṁ sādhike samvat śat”, the character that follows the word “varṣa” (rainy season) cannot be read with certainty. The translation of the first part is “the year thirty eight, increased by one hundred years of the rainy season”. The translation of the first three characters of the second line is not certain. However, the first two characters could probably be read as

“lagna” which refers to the moment of the sun entrance into a zodiacal sign. The succeeding character, could possibly be the corrupted form of “dhā” which probably stands for “dhanus”, the ninth astrological sign referring to Sagittarius. The text clearly mentions the month “māgha” (January-February) and “ti(thi) caturdaśi” (the 14th day of the lunar fortnight), followed with the digit “14” in reference to the preceding word. The second verse mentions the name of ruling king, most probably contemporaneous with the date of the inscription. In that verse, the kingdom of the illustrious Śāhi king, Veka (Śrī Śāhi Vekarajya) is said to be placed above the “eight strengths/ powers of the goddess Durga” (dune bhaṭṭā durga aṣṭabala kāśī bhavatyā(h)). The goddess Durga is one of the popular reincarnation of Devi, the consort of Śiva who defeated Mahiśasura and has the combined power of Śiva, Viṣṇu, Varuṇa, Agni, Vayu, Indra, Yama, Viṣvakarma, Himavat and other gods.

The third verse mentions the purpose of the inscription. The reading and translation of this verse does not pose any problem. It records the establishment of the image of Śiva-Uma at a temple (Śiva-Bhaṭṭārakasya Uma-Mahitasya devapratima caityasya-upari). The image was established by a person, known as the Great Maitya. The phrase “maha maityena pratiṣṭhita atravadha” is a sentence using the passive form of verb, of which the subject (Maha Maitya) is being declined in the locative case (Maityena). Maitya could have been an esteemed person of nobility or high ranking official of the government as the word “maha” or “great” precedes his name. The fourth verse further describes the purpose of the establishment of the image as well as the people who were benefited and gained merit

from the religious act. The transliteration of this verse pose few problems such as the definite number of characters were either defaced or could not be identified properly. The words that could be translated as: “maha sraddhayam dhayam” (with great faith), “punya phalam” (meritorious gift), “tat Śiva Bhaṭṭāra(ka)sya Uma Mahitasya”, (in reference to the lord Śiva-Uma), and “guro, mata, pitro (bha)vatuḥ” (guru, mother and father). The word “vatuḥ” could probably be reconstructed as “bhavatuḥ”. The verse perhaps implies that the meritorious gift, which is the Śiva-Uma image was made out of the great faith in the reference to these gods and done for the benefits of the patron’s teacher, mother and father.

The fifth verse of the inscription highlights the merits that will be achieved through the pious act. The text starts with the mention of “the combination of the eight sacred rights was done” (aṣṭeṣṭaka saṁmayuktam ya karo(ti)). The word “aṣṭeṣṭaka” can be decomposed as “aṣṭa” and “iṣṭaka” due to the sandhi rule. The word “aṣṭa” means eight while the word “iṣṭa” with the suffix “-ka” can be translated as “a group of sacred rites”. The word that follows “saṁmayuktam” is perhaps a corrupt form of “saṁyuktam” which means “the union of” or “the combination of”. The succeeding words can be transliterated and reconstructed as “ya karo(ti)”. “karoti” means “to do” or “to be completed”. The word “Śivalayam” means “the abode of Śiva”. “bhāvata” is an adjective that describes the succeeding word “balaṣam”. It comprises a word “bhāva” with suffix “-ta” that can be roughly translated as “coming into being”, “to materialize”, “coming into reality” while the word “balaṣam” probably means “power”. The word “svargadya” comes from the word “svargada” with the suffix “-ya”,

which means “procuring place in heaven”. The phrase “Śivalayam bhāvata balaṣam svargādyā” perhaps refers to the “to materialize power from the abode of Śiva to procure place in heaven”, that was achieved by the completion of the “combination of eight sacred rites” (aṣṭeṣṭaka saṁyuktam). The meaning of the word “candrāśaturdaśā” is not clear while the word “iti” is a quotation mark.

In view of above discussion, the following is revised translation and transliteration of Sanskrit text by the author:

Line 1: [om] || **[verse 1]** saṁvatsare varṣa +
aṣṭatṛim sādhike saṁvat

Line 2: śat lag(na) dhā māgherya ti(thi)
caturdaśi 14 **[verse two]** Śrī

Line 3: Śāhi Veka rājyo dune bhaṭṭā durga
aṣṭabala

Line 4: kāśi bhavatyā(h) **[verse 3]** Śiva
Bhaṭṭārakasya Uma Ma

Line 5: hitasya deva(pra)ti(ma) caityasya upari
maha mai

Line 6: tyena pratiṣṭhita atravadha **[verse 4]**
+++maha

Line 7: sraddhayam dhayam ++++punya
phalam tat

Line 8: Śiva Bhaṭṭāra(ka)sya Uma Mahitasya
Guro Ma

Line 9: ta Pitro ++(bha)vatuḥ || **[verse 5]**
aṣṭeṣṭaka saṁmayu

Line 10: ktam ya karo(ti) Śivalayam bhāvata
balaṣam

Line 11: svargādyā +candrāśaturdaśā iti ||| śrī
|||

Verse 1: In the year thirty eight, increased by one hundred years, in the rainy season of the

month of māgha (January-February), the fourteenth day of the lunar fortnight

Verse 2: The kingdom of the illustrious Śāhi king, Veka is above the eight power of the Lord Durga

Verse 3: At this moment, the image of the Śiva-Uma is established by the great Maitya

Verse 4: With the great faith to the Lord Śiva-Uma, (for the benefit of) the Guru, and (his) parents, the meritorious donation was made

Verse 5: The combination of the eight sacred rites was done to procure place in heaven

The date given by Dani is 138 of an unspecified era, probably referring to the Śāhi Era as suggested by Abdur Rahman from his analysis of the Zulamkot Bilingual Inscription (Rahman 1998: 38). Accordingly, the era was commenced with the overthrowing of Lagaturman, the last king of Turk Shahi by his Brahman minister Kallar in 821-22 CE. Dani who assigned the year 138 to this era, calculated the date to 959 CE. Due to this date, Dani rejected the identification of Vakkadeva to Kamaluka by Rahman (Dani 2001: 82). In terms of the date of the inscription, the calculation of Dani has no problem as it corroborate with the palaeography of the text. From the translation above, the purpose of this inscription is to record the meritorious gift of the Great Maitya, by the establishment of the Śiva-Uma image in a temple, out of his great piety to the Lord Śiva-Uma. The donation was made along with the "eight sacred rites" that were carried out for the benefit of his guru, mother and father in order to procure place in heaven for them. This occasion took place during the reign of Śrī Śāhi Veka in 959 CE, whose kingdom was said to be established above the eight powers of the goddess Durga.

The date 959 CE of the inscription is contemporaneous with the rule of Bhīmadeva. He is mentioned in the Jayapala Śāhi inscription as possessing a terrible valour who had conquered his enemy's troops and protected the earth (Rahman 1978: 33) probably in reference to his military campaigns against Alaptigin at Ghazna

Conclusion

Dani further suggests that Śrī Śāhi Vekaraja was the independent ruler of Afghanistan in the mid of the 10th century CE (Dani 2001: 82). According to that scholar, the Hindu Shahi dynasty was split into two branches during the reign of Bhīmapala; one was headed by Jayapala in Lamghan and Punjab and the other by Śrī Śāhi Veka (mentioned in inscription) in northern Afghanistan. The latter also gained success against the Arab rulers in southern Afghanistan (Dani 2001: 82). This line came to an end by the conquest of Alaptigin in the second half of the 10th century CE (Dani 2001: 82). Dani correlates Śrī Śāhi Veka to the branch of Kallar dynasty who ruled until the invasion of Alaptigin. However, this interpretation is not consistent with the fact that northern Afghanistan was under the rule of the Samanid dynasty in the 10th century CE. Its control was passed on to the hands of Alaptigin in 961 CE. It was in the second half of the 10th century CE that there were regular military conflicts between the Hindu Shahi kings and Alaptigin. Due to this reason the western boarder of the Hindu Shahi, probably came under the feudatory rule of Āṣatapala (Rahman 1979: 126, 132). Under such circumstances, the Hindu Shahi rule was not extended beyond Kabul and Ghazna in the west (Rahman 1979: 128). The historical background of northern Afghanistan in the 10th century CE raised some doubts regarding

the real provenance of the inscription. It is likely that the inscription was discovered further south where the rule of Bhīmadeva still prevailed in the mid of the 10th century CE.

Śrī Ṣāhi Veka appears to be a title rather than a proper name of the ruling monarch. The name “Veka” shows close resemblance with the word “Vakkaraja”, a title used in the legend of Hindu-Shahi bronze coins. Rahman identified the title Vakkaraja with the Kamaluka (903-21 CE) (Rahman 1979: 204). Kamaluka was a Shahi king who came to power through foreign military intervention, and thus tried to legitimize his own reign by issuing coins with his own title (Rahman 1979: 204). There are three main possibilities

regarding the identification of Śrī Ṣāhi Veka. The first is, the word Veka is synonymous with Vakkaraja. If that is the case, the identification of Rahman of Vakkaraja with Kamaluka could no longer be held, as this inscription is dated long after his death, and probably refers to king Bhīmadeva. The second possibility is that the Śrī Ṣāhi Veka and Vakkaraja are two different titles, the first stands for Bhīmadeva and the second for Kamaluka as identified by Rahman. In third possibility Śrī Ṣāhi Veka may be referred to Āṣatapala (Rahman 1979: 131-32) or any other unknown ruler of inferior rank who probably ruled at Kabul as a feudatory of king Bhīmadeva.

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Pl. 1. The Mazar-i-Sharif inscription of Shahi ruler Veka
(source/courtesy Prof. M. Nasim Khan)