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**Development of the Panchveera cult of the Vrishni heroes : A  
Review of the Early Brahmi Inscriptions**

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**Abstract**

Inscriptions are first hand authentic source to understand religious in ancient times. Post Mauryan early Brahmi inscriptions offer wide variety of subjects as compared to the centrally controlled and didactic edicts of Emperor Ashoka. The inscriptions analysed in this research paper will enable us to understand the development of Panchveera cult of the Vrishni heroes in the post Mauryan period.

**Key Words:** Hathibada - Ghosundi, Naneghat, Besnagar, Vrishni Mora, Pabhosa, Reh, Inscriptions

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**Introduction**

After the death of emperor Ashoka, next fifty years experienced rapid break-up of the Mauryan Empire. Once spread over pan India level, it was now relegated to a very small territory. Shungas, the successor of the Mauryas inherited a small regional Kingdom. This paper will investigate the royal epigraphical records produced during successive centuries after the breakup of the Mauryan empire.

The edicts of emperor Ashok were royal charters addressed to his citizens. Although available on a pan India level, these inscriptions illustrate uniformity in form, character and content as they were issued by the direct royal orders of the emperor. Apart from his own edicts, Dasharatha was the only other Mauryan king and grandson of Ashoka whose inscriptions are available at the earliest rock cut cave at Barabar Hills in Bihar. Donation to the Ajivika sect by Ashoka and Dasharatha has been recorded at this site. He probably deployed expert supervisors to the sites where these inscriptions were carved. The case of scribe Chapada well illustrates this point.

The fragmentary Mahasthan tablet and Sohagura Copper Plate inscriptions cannot be attributed to any particular king. The Piprahwa Relic Casket inscription is a Buddhist funerary inscription. The

Hathigumpha Inscription of King Kharavela is a Prakrit Brahmi inscription that opens with the Namokar Mantra and goes on to delve year by year account of his rule and personal life.

However, the situation soon changed. Large number of donative Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical Brahmi inscriptions were engraved by the royals as well as lay people. The scope and content of these inscriptions allow us to glean into the social and religious fabric of early ancient India. Shaiva and Vaishnava cults were emerging as popular traditions among the Indians as well as the people of foreign descent such as the Greeks and the Shakas. One of the popular traditions was worship of the five heroes of the Vrishni tribe.

**The Vrishnis**

The five warriors of the Vrishni clan included Vaasudeva (son of Vasudeva – Krishna), Samkarsana (son of Vasudeva–Balarama), Pradyumna (son of Vaasudeva-Krishna and Rukmini), Samba (son of Vasudeva-Krishna and Jambavati) and Aniruddha (son of Pradyumna and Rukmavati, and the grandson of Krishna and Rukmini). They belonged to the mythological Vrishni family in the Mathura region in some remote antiquity.<sup>1</sup> The Vrishnis were an ancient Vedic Indian clan who were believed to be the descendants of Vrishni. It is believed that Vrishni was the son of Satvata,

a descendant of Yadu, the son of Yayati. He had two wives, Gandhari and Madri. He has a son named Devamidhusa by his wife Madri. Vasudeva, the father of Krishna was the grandson of Devamidhusa. According to the Puranas, the Vrishnis were residents of Dvaraka.

The Vrishnis were known in the later Vedic texts. They are as as Varshna, Varshneya and Varshnya. The Mahabharata narrates them as one of the powerful families. Panini cites Vrishni and Andhaka as kshatriya tribes.<sup>ii</sup> They soon were worshipped as pentads. Of the five warriors, Sankarshana and Vaasudeva were more popular. Soon the popularity of Vaasudeva as Krishna outnumbered others. Their triad

form included Sankarshana, Vaasudeva and Ekanamsha. She was the daughter of Nanda and Yashoda, who was taken away by Vasudeva. When Kamsa tried to kill her, she transformed into the goddess Yogamaya.

Many artworks as well as numismatic sources elucidate the popularity of this cult in the early centuries of the Christian era. The Tikala rock painting discovered in a rock shelter in Madhya Pradesh is perhaps the earliest known Indian depiction of the Vrishni Triad. It was first recorded by the renowned archaeologist V S Wakankar. The Brahmi inscription dated to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE on the top suggests that it was a contribution of someone named Dambuka.



Rock Painting at Tikala

### Epigraphical Review of the Panchveera Cult

The corpus of edicts of Ashoka is very large. However, they are essentially didactic in nature, having a bearing on the Buddhist precepts. They do not allow us to glean into the other contemporary religious traditions. However, soon after the downfall of the Mauryan empire, donative inscriptions ceased to be a royal prerogative. Foreign traditions like Greeks and that of the Shakas, influenced the image worship and construction of temples for the deities. Following early Brahmi inscriptions are crucial to understand these traditions, especially the Panchveera cult.

### Hathibada and Ghosundi Inscriptions at Nagari

A set of three Brahmi inscriptions discovered separately in the vicinity of Nagari in Rajasthan exudes multiple significant aspects. It is one of the oldest available Sanskrit inscriptions corroborating the existence of Vaishnavism in the area.

### Hathibada Inscription

The Hathibada inscription were found near Nagari village, about 13 kms north of Chittorgarh, Rajasthan. The Ghosundi inscription was found in the well at the village of Ghosundi, 4.8 kms southwest of

Chittorgarh. It is one of the oldest known Sanskrit inscriptions in the Brahmi script dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> BCE, the other being Ayodhya inscription of Dhanadeva. Three fragments of this unique inscription were found scattered in the nearby area.<sup>iii</sup> Similar text has been engraved on both slabs at Hathibada as well as Ghosundi.

Bhandarkar states that a single text was engraved at three different places in the enclosure that we know today as Hathibada. With the passage of time when the structure was out of use and disintegrating, one stone block that contained greater portion of the inscription was removed and stuck up in the well at Ghosundi while the large part of the third inscription is still in situ. It was discovered by the government epigraphist. The best preserved of the three is the Ghosundi version.

According to legend, when Mughal emperor Akbar came to reduce Chittorgarh he encamped at Nagari. He used an enclosure situated here for his elephant stable. It is a parallelogram (93.6 m x 45.90 m) of huge cut blocks of stone. Since then, it was known as Hathibada. Based on the existence of pile of huge, dressed stones, D R Bhandarkar has suggested that the structure could be of pre-Muhammadan antiquity.



1.....tena

Gajayanena

P(a)rashariputrana

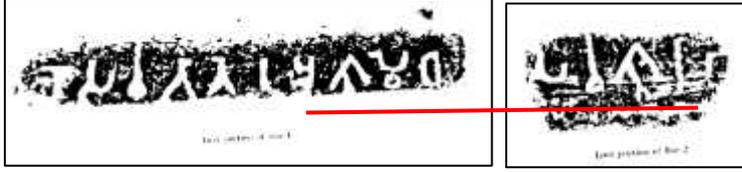
Sa-

2.....[j]i[na]

bhagavabhyam

Sankarshana-V[a]sudevabhya(m)

3 .....bhyam pujashila-prakaro Narayana-vat(i)ka



### Fragment

1.....□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□□□□...

2. ... □□□□□.....□□□□□□□□□□

1. ....[tr](e)(na) Sarvatatena As[v]amedha....

2. ....sarveshvarabh(yam)

### Meaning of the Inscription

The text in the initial parts of all three fragments is broken, while the end part is very well intact. The text can be translated as, '(this) enclosing wall round the stone (object) of worship, called Narayana-Vatika for the divinities Sankarshana and Vaasudeva who are unconquered and are lords of all (has been caused to be made) by the (King) Sarvataata, a Gajayana and son of (a lady) of the Parashara Gotra, who is a devotee of Bhagavat (Vishnu) and has performed the Ashvamedha sacrifice.

### Identity of the King Sarvataata

After the downfall of the Mauryan empire, many small independent kingdoms sprouted on the political map of Northern India. Unfortunately, we get very scanty information about them. Gaajayaana was either family name or gotra of the king. Matsya Purana mentions Gaadaayana as the name of a gotra. Bhandarkar suggests the difference could be the error of the scribe. It is interesting to note that he mentions the name of his mother who is identified not by her personal name but by her maternal gotra, Parashara (Parashariputra). This practise was very well observed in the Satavahana and Ikshvaku inscriptions. Examples can be cited of Gautamiputra and Vasithiputra. The inscription states that Sarvataata performed Ashvamedha sacrifice, a prerogative of the king. This reference helps to identify his royal lineage very clearly. The contemporary Naneghat inscription also records various Vedic sacrifices performed by King Satakarni and his wife Queen Naganika. One of which was the Ashvamedha sacrifice. We cannot

ascertain whether Sarvataata was a personal name or his epithet. Example can be cited of king Ashoka who preferred his epithet 'devanam piya piyadassi' over his personal name. Bhandarkar suggests that he could be one of the Kanva rulers. Although the name Sarvataata does not appear in any of the puranas, it can be justified if we assume it to be his epithet and not a personal name.

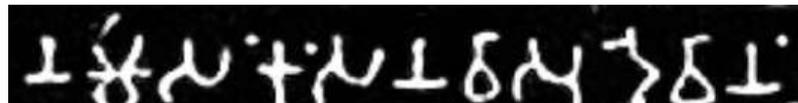
### Epigraphical Confirmation of the enclosure as a centre of Vaishnavism known as 'puja-shila-prakara' of the Narayana vatika

The enclosure is known in the inscription as 'puja-shila-prakara', literally meaning 'a stone enclosure round an object of worship'. Emperor Ashoka uses a similar expression 'silavigadhabhicha' meaning a huge stone enclosure wall in the Rummendei inscription.

Bhandarkar discovered an inscription attached to this enclosure that was dated to 7<sup>th</sup> CE. The letters were highly withered. However, he could read 'Shri-Vishnu Padabhyam' which confirmed that the enclosure was a place of Vaishnava worship. This is an important remark and suggests that at that time the footprints of Lord Vishnu were object of worship and not his image.

### Existence and Popularity of Vrishni Cult

A review of contemporary inscriptions suggests that the worship of Vaasudeva and Sankarshana was popular in 1<sup>st</sup> BCE. The Naneghat inscription of Satavahana queen Naganika opens with obeisance to various states including Yama, Varuna, Indra, Sankarshana and Vaasudeva.



## (namo samkamsana-vaasudevanam)

**Besnagar Garudadhvaja Inscription**

The Besnagar inscription speaks of only Vaasudeva as 'god of gods (devadevasa)'. This inscription was engraved on a pillar that served as a garudadhvaja placed outside Vaasudeva temple that exists no more. It was donated by Heliodorus, an ambassador of the Indo-Greek King Amtalikita (Antialkidas) to the court of King Kashiputra Bhagabhadra. It was the 14<sup>th</sup> regnal year of Bhagabhadra. Heliodorus identified himself as Bhagavata. He was son of Dion, and a resident of Takshashila. This is the earliest known example of a follower of Vaasudeva cult by a Greek. The images of Vaasudeva and Sankarshana are engraved on the coins of Indo Greek King Agathocles (c. 180 BCE) further confirming the popularity of this cult in the Takshashila region.

**The Text**

Line 1. □□□□□□ □□(□□□)□□  
□□□□□□□□ □□□

Devadevasa Va[sude]vasa Garudadhvaje  
ayam

Line 2. □□□□□ □(□) □□□□□□□□□□  
□□□□□□□

karito i[a] Heliodoreṇa bhagavatena

Line 1 This Garuda-standard of Vasudeva,  
the god of gods

Line 2 was constructed here by Heliodora  
(Heliodoros), the Bhagavata

**Popularity of Vaasudeva Krishna as Narayana**

A review of these inscriptions suggests that gradually Vaasudeva Krishna as Narayana gained ascendance and popularity than his elder brother Sankarshana-Balarama. Taking a clue from the above mentioned three inscriptions, the Naneghat inscription can be placed earlier followed by Ghosundi and Besnagar at the last.

The popularity of cult of Krishna can be gleaned through the records left by the Greek ambassador Megasthenese who stayed

at the Mauryan court at Pataliputra. He states that Herakles was especially worshipped by the Sourasenoī, an Indian nation in whose land is two great cities Methora and Kleisobora and through it flows the navigate to river Jobares.<sup>vii</sup> The geographical names of Mathura and river Jamuna or Yamuna can be clearly observed.

**Epigraphical Evidence of Pratima Worship of Panchveeras at Mathura during Indo-Scythian Northern Satrapa Rule of Shodasa/Shudasa****Mora Well Inscription**

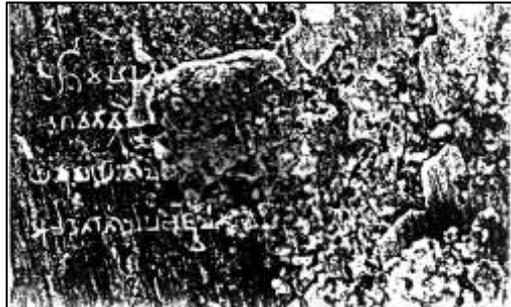
Large number of inscriptions have been discovered from Mathura city and its environs.<sup>viii</sup> In 1982, General Cunningham discovered a large, inscribed slab at Mora, about 11 kms from Mathura. The slab formed the part of the terrace of an ancient well. It was removed to Matura Museum under the supervision of Dr. Vogel and Pandit Radha Krishna. The inscription contains four lines. However, the text is obliterated at many places. General Cunningham, Dr. Vogel and Heinrich *Lüders*<sup>six</sup> have given their versions of the reading.

**Text**

1. Mahakshatrapasa Ranjuvulasa putrasa svami ...
2. bhagavatam Vrishnina(m) panchviranam pratimah shailadevagri(he)
3. ya[s] Toshayaa shailam shrimad griham atulam udadhasamadhara ...
4. archadeshm shailam pancha jvalata iva paramavapusha ...

**Meaning of the Inscription**

1. . . . of the son of mahakshatrapa Ranjuvula, svami . . .
2. the images of the holy panchaviras of the Vrishnis. . .
3. the stone shrine...whom the magnificent matchless stone house of Tosha was erected and maintained...
4. five objects of adoration made of stone, radiant, as it were with highest beauty...



Mora Well Inscription

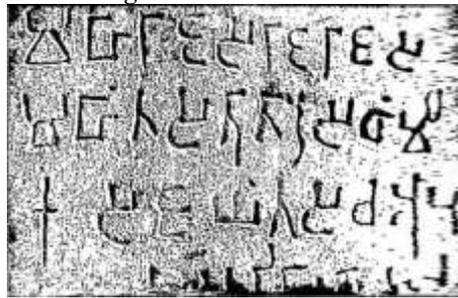




### Vasu Door Jamb Inscription of Mathura Reh Shaiva Inscription

Soon the influence of image worship was becoming popular. The Reh inscription discovered in 1980 by G R Sharma on the bottom of a polished Shiva linga shaft that was at some point cut out from its original

location.<sup>xi</sup> Three of its lines are well preserved, the fourth is at the edge of where the linga was cut off and is damaged. Other lines if any below the fourth line are lost. According to palaeography the inscription can be placed in 2<sup>nd</sup> BCE. This makes it oldest Shaiva inscription.



Reh Inscription

The inscription reads:

Line 1. maharajasa rajarajasa

Line 2. mahamtasa tratarasa dhammi

Line 3. kasa Jayantasa ca apra

#### Meaning

Of the king of kings, Great Saviour, Just, Victorious, and Invincible

#### Conclusion

A review of the epigraphical sources throws light on the existence and popularity of the Panchaveera cult in ancient India. All these inscriptions are essentially undated. However, necessary markers like the contemporary palaeographical styles and references of ruling kings help us to determine the tentative period of the inscriptions. These inscriptions refer to constructions of temples. Unfortunately, none of these temples are extant now. They also indicate the progression of Vaishnavism, from the Panchveera cult to the popularity of Vaasudeva-Krishna.

#### Reference :

<sup>i</sup>The four earthly emanations, or "Vyuhās", are identified as Samkarshana (Balarama-Samkarshana, son of Vasudeva by Devaki), Vasudeva Krishna (son of Vasudeva by Devaki), Pradyumna (son of Vasudeva Krishna by Rukmini), Samba (son of Krishna and his second consort, Jambavati) and Aniruddha (son of Pradyumna) and Samba.

<sup>ii</sup> Gupta Vinay Kumar, Vrishnis in ancient Art and Literature, Indology's Pulse: Arts in context, Aryan Books International, 2019, pp. 69-90

<sup>iii</sup> Bhandarkar D R, Hathi-Bada Brahmi Inscription at Nagari, in EI-XXII, No. 31, 1933

<sup>iv</sup> Bhandarkar D R, Memoirs- Archaeological Survey of India, Vol IV, No. 4, p. 120

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<sup>v</sup> Haldar R R, The Ghosundi Inscription of 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B. C., Indian Antiquary Vol- LXI (61),1932, p. 203

<sup>vi</sup> Jayaswal K P, The Ghosundi Inscription, EI-XVI, No. 6

<sup>vii</sup> Bhandarkar R G, Vaishnavism Shaivism and Other Minor Religious Systems, Indological book House, Varanasi, 1913, p. 19

<sup>viii</sup> *Lüders* Heinrich, Mathura Inscriptions (ed. Janert, Klaus L), 1961

<sup>ix</sup> *Lüders* Heinrich, Seven Brahmi inscriptions from Mathura and its vicinity, in EI-XXIV, No. 1, 1938

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid*, No. VII

<sup>xi</sup> Sharma G R, Reh Inscription of Menander and the Indo-Greek Invasion of the Ganga Valley, Abinash Prakashan, Allahabad, 1980