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Component-I (B) – Description of module:

Subject Name	Indian Culture
Paper Name	Indian Epigraphy
Module Name/Title	Eras in Inscriptions
Module Id	IC / IEP / 22
Pre requisites	Notion of reckoning, early phase of regnal reckoning, later systems of reckoning by eras
Objectives	Importance of Dates in Inscriptions, Types of Reckoning in Indian Inscriptions, Regnal Reckoning, Reckoning by Era, Current Reckoning, Obsolete Reckoning and Contribution to Indian Culture
Keywords	Eras / Saka era / Vikrama era / Gupta era / Regnal

E-text (Quadrant-I) :

1. Introduction

One of the key components of early Indian inscriptions are their dates—dates being crucially important in understanding different facets of political, social, economic and religious history. And, closely related to the notion of dating inscriptions is the practice of reckoning in terms of an era that specifies the chronological limits of an epigraphic document. But, as a matter of fact, for the earliest phase of epigraphical records of South Asia, one does not find the existence of any era used in dating inscriptions. The earliest indigenous inscripational records are formed by the huge gamut of Asokan inscriptions, followed by some administrative records, *prasastis* and dedicatory records written in Prakrit. However, it is interesting to find that none of these records are dated under any known system of reckoning. It is only at a later date that the use of reckoning in terms of a current or pre-existing era comes into practice in the Indian epigraphic records

2. Types of Reckoning

From the time of the Asokan inscriptions till the late first century BCE/early first century CE, the system of reckoning was based on regnal years of the ruling authorities. Though this practice was in vogue even in the later inscriptions of the early medieval period, an equally wide custom of dating inscriptions with known systems of reckoning became popular from the early centuries of the Christian era.

2.1. Regnal Reckoning

As already noted, the earliest epigraphical records are dated in terms of regnal years and not that of any of the later established systems of reckoning by era. D.C Sircar has cited a large number of early epigraphical records, where dates are recorded in terms of regnal years of the ruling kings. He has further elaborated the problems related to the practice of reckoning dates in terms of regnal years.

2.2. Reckonings by Era: Current and Obsolete Reckonings

As noted earlier, a number of systems of reckonings in terms of a certain era/ epoch was a common practice in the epigraphical literature of India. Here we may discuss some of the major systems of reckonings in the light of available epigraphical records.

2.2.1. The Vikrama Era

The *Vikramabda* or *Vikrama Samvat* was started in the year 57/58 BCE. Of all the eras used in early Indian inscriptions, this is one of the most significant systems of reckoning and has been used in hundreds of inscriptions throughout South Asia.

In the later centuries of the pre-Christian era and the early centuries of the Christian era, this system of reckoning has been used under the names 'Kṛta' (Badwa stupa inscription from Kota, Rajasthan), 'Malava' (Mandasor inscription of the time of Kumaragupta and Bandhuvvarman) etc. The Mandasor inscription says *malavanam ganasthitya*. The system of reckoning came to be known as *Vikramabda* only from about the ninth century. This fairly proves that the introduction of the name Vikrama era has no connection whatsoever with the usurpation of the Sakas from Ujjayini by Vikramaditya—as usually believed. The exact line of genesis of this widely used era has been a matter of major debate among historians. But some recent epigraphic discoveries have thrown some welcome light on this controversy. Special mention in this connection may be made of the Bajaur inscription. This epigraph was dated in the reign of the Saka ruler Azes and this was issued in the year 63 of '*atita maharaja aya*, clearly suggesting an attempt to distinguish this Aya or Azes from Azes II, who was the contemporary ruler of the region. In that case Azes the first has to be credited for introducing this new system of reckoning. B.N. Mukherjee has unimpeachably demonstrated that Azes I had introduced a new era that his successor continued to follow. Mukherjee argued on firm grounds that the year 57/58 BCE should be the date of introduction of this new era named after Azes I. In majority of cases, the years falling under Vikrama era are conventionally 'expired. And exceptions to this are infrequent. In north Indian inscriptions, years under the Vikrama era usually end in in the month of Caitra, while in southern India they terminate in Kartika; again, in north India, the months end in Full Moon, while they end in southern India in the New Moon day. The calculation through deduction of 56 or 57 has to be carried out with reference to the month a specific inscription refers to. In the case of current Vikrama era, however, the number to be deducted is either 57 or 58.

2.2.2. The Saka Era

Of all the eras occurring in Indian inscriptions, the most frequently and widely used one is the Saka era. The Saka era came to be regular epigraphic usage from the time of the Calukyas of southern India around the sixth century CE. The era is also widely used in western (Gujarat and Saurashtra), eastern (Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Assam) and central Indian territories adjacent to the eastern Deccan. Among the Southeast Asian States, Java and Cambodia has a strong tradition of recording dates in terms of the Saka era.

The Saka era is recorded in inscriptional literature under various names: *saka-nrpa-kale*, *saka-varsesvatitesu*, *sakavarse*, *salivahanasake* etc. However, the last phrase, i.e. 'salivahanasake' is found to surface on inscriptions as late as the twelfth century CE. It is

presumable that, like the Vikrama era, the origin myths of the Saka era are also embedded within the larger canvas of narratives of legendary Hindu kings. The earliest historical record that documents the use of the Saka era is the Barh (Thane district, Maharashtra) inscription of Suketuvarman. This inscription records the date as Saka era 322, which stands for 400 CE. The epigraphical documents of the lineage of the western Ksatrapa king Castana are closely related to the use of the Saka era, though the term does not occur in these records clearly.

Here again, the exact route of the genesis of the Saka era is debated. However, majority of opinions are in favour of the date of coronation of Kaniska I as the beginning of the Saka era. It is almost generally accepted that the dates appearing on the inscriptions of Kaniska and his successors, without any reference to a particular era, are to be taken to stand for the Saka era, and these should represent the earliest use of this era in inscriptions. However, Richard Salomon has argued that both the chronology of the Kusana kings and the connection of the origin of the Saka era with Kaniska are both not beyond doubt. Salomon seems to support Ajay Mitra-Shastri who believes that the western Ksatrapa Castana is more appropriate to be credited for the introduction of Saka era than Kaniska. But B.N. Mukherjee has shown in the light of a critical analysis of the epigraphic and numismatic evidence of the Ksatrapa rulers that Castana actually used the era introduced by Kaniska and the Kaniska era of year 78 has been used by the former as the Saka era. Thus, this reckoning has to be taken as a commemoration of Kaniska's enthronement in 78 CE. The expression 'Saka' was an interpolation and probably had its root in the attempts of the Saka-Pahlava rulers in popularizing this system of reckoning in their newly annexed territories of western India that they were able to snatch from the Satavahana rivals of the region.

While in most of the early epigraphic records the Saka years are conceived as 'expired', from eleventh/twelfth century they also came to be recognized as a major system of current reckoning. Years in the Saka era end in Caitra and months end in the New Moon, although we have references in north Indian inscriptions where they end in Full Moon. Theoretically, the commencement of the Saka era is believed to have taken place on 1st Caitra, 78 CE. Years expressed in Saka era can be converted to the Common Era by adding 78 or 79 to the year expressed in the inscription, keeping in mind the month mentioned in the record.

2.2.3. The Kalacuri-Cedi Era

From the fifth to the thirteenth century CE, the Kalacuri-Cedi era has been used in more than 100 inscriptions of central and western India. In terms of comparative chronology, inscriptions dated in the Kalacuri-Cedi era can be divided into two distinct classes/groups.

- (1) The Early Group: Inscriptions dated between the fifth and the eighth century fall within this group. The Traikutaka, early Kalacuri and Gurjara records of western India, the inscriptions of the Calukyas of Gujarat and those of some of the contemporary minor lineages of western Deccan belong to this group.
- (2) The Later Group: Epigraphs dated between the ninth and the thirteenth century fall under this group. Kalacuri inscriptions and the epigraphs of their successor lineages of central India are grouped under this category.

The earliest undisputed use of the Kalacuri-Cedi era is encountered in a Traikutaka record dated in the year 207 of the Kalacuri-Cedi era falling in 457 CE. On the other hand, the latest inscriptional record mentioning this era is one copperplate inscription of the Kalacuris of Ratanpur, dated in 969 Kalacuri-Cedi era, i.e. in 1218 CE.

It is significant to note that the inscriptions of the early group record both the regnal year as well as date in the Kalacuri-Cedi era. In such cases, the records do not furnish the name of any specific reckoning. Therefore it is at times difficult to understand if a particular year mentioned in an inscription of this group refers to the Kalacuri-Cedi era or some other current system of reckoning. For example, the Uccakalpa records of the region were earlier believed to have been directly connected with this era. But later, these records were recognized as connected directly with the Gupta era. The inscriptions of the later group are sometimes found to have designations like the 'kalacuri samvat', 'cedi samvat' or the 'cedi-dista samvat'. The term 'Kalacuri-Cedi era' is thus a coinage of modern scholarship, based on these empirical records; the name as such does not occur in any inscriptional record.

Like its name, the origin of the Kalacuri-Cedi era is also shrouded in mystery. No inscription connected to this reckoning system prior to the third century CE is available. The historical circumstances under which the year 248 CE came to be the year of commencement of this era is equally problematic. Some scholars have attempted to explain the initiation of this era with the coronation of the Abhira king Isvaradatta or Isvarasena. But a recently discovered coin of this king shows the date 154 (Saka era), which should stand for 232/233 CE. Thus his connection with the commencement of this era becomes questionable on justifiable grounds. V.V. Mirashi supports the connection of Isvaradatta with the Kalacuri-Cedi era on the basis of his solitary record, discovered from Nashik, Maharashtra, dated in his 9th ruling year. However, D.C Sircar has rightfully argued against Mirashi's hypothesis and suggested that his method leads to no conclusion of the problem.

In order to retrieve the approximate date of initiation of the Kalacuri-Cedi era, comparative studies have been undertaken by scholars with inscriptions dated in this era and those dated in the known reckoning of the Vikrama era. Kielhorn suggested that this era was started on the 26th day of July 249 CE (i.e. the first lunar day of Bhadra of the current Vikrama era). But later he changed his own opinion and suggested, instead, the 5th day of September of 248 CE as the date of commencement of the Kalacuri-Cedi era. However, this hypothesis of Kielhorn was later challenged by Mirashi who argued that this era had two different dates of commencement.

Years counted with this era are usually 'expired' though examples of current reckonings are also available in the epigraphical corpus of central India. Mirashi believed that the second date of initiation was the result of a faulty reckoning by mistaking a current system as an expired reckoning. He further collected epigraphical documents in support of a third year of initiation of the Kalacuri-Cedi era around 250-51 CE. In fact, the confusion between the current and the expired years continuing for centuries has resulted in a series of debates about the actual date of commencement of this era.

For the sake of chronological reconstruction, the years in the Kalacuri-Cedi era are converted to the Common Era by adding 248/249 years. Here again, the month-endings are highly influenced by regional traditions, according to Mirashi.

2.2.4. The Gupta-Valabhi Era

We know that the Gupta era was current in northern, western and parts of eastern India. This era was in regular reckoning, in general, from the third to the eighth century CE. The same system of reckoning came to be popular in later centuries in western India. The Maitrakas of Valabhi were a major feudatory lineage ruling under Gupta suzerainty. It is obvious that the name had close association with this ruling lineage. The era remained current under Valabhi rule, thus, even after the decline of the Gupta ruling house. The latest inscriptional record dated under the Gupta-Valabhi era is found from Beral in Gujarat, where 945 Valabhi era (equals to 1264 CE) is recorded. Al-Biruni also recognizes the reckoning under the same name.

The earliest dates reckoned under this era are called '*samvatsara*' or its varying abbreviations. It is well known that the earliest reference to the use of the Gupta era is found on the Mathura pillar inscription of the time of Candragupta. Here the date is written as his fifth regnal year as well as the *kalanuvartamanasamvatsara* 61, implying that the era was in continuous use since its initiation under the Gupta. Therefore the fifth regnal year of Candragupta falls in the 61 Gupta era. In some epigraphic records, the era is explicitly connected with the Gupta era. For example, the Junagarh inscription of the time of Skandagupta uses the phrase *gupta-prakara ganayanam vidhaya*. The name Valabhi, however, appears, not earlier than 574 CE.

According to the calculations of J.F. Fleet, the Gupta era had commenced on the first lunar day of Caitra in 319 CE. According to his opinion, the set of early epigraphic records referring to this era are current reckonings, with months ending in the New Moon day. In that case the current Gupta era has to be converted by adding 320/321, while the expired years of the era have to be converted into the Common Era by adding 319 with this system of reckoning. In the case of western Indian Valabhi era, however, the southern system of conversion under Kartika-ending *amanta* system has to be followed. Thus, in this reckoning the date is receded by five months and therefore, the calculations have to be made by adding 319/320 (for current year) and 319/318 (for expired year).

2.2.5. The Nepali or Newari Era

The terms Nepalabda or Nepalavarsa are found on inscriptions in Sanskrit and local languages of northern India from a considerably early date. And, these terms also indicate current reckonings as well. Kielhorn traced the commencement of the era on 20th October of 879 CE. Therefore, to convert a year falling in this era has to be converted into the Christian era by adding 879/880 to the year mentioned in the inscription. According to the Nepalese genealogies, the king Jayasenamalla (son of Abhayamalla of the second Thakuri lineage) was the founder of this era. R.C. Majumdar, however, thinks that this is a date actually denoting a Saka era from where the digit 800 has been expelled. Alexander Cunningham opined that Raghavadeva was the founder of this era. Jayadevamalla had his twin capital stationed at Kantipura nad Lalitapattana, while his brother Anadamalla ruled from his administrative headquarters stationed at Bhaktapura/Bhaktagaon. Subsequently, both the brothers were usurped by the Karna king Nanyadeva. We have other sources confirming that Nanyadeva conquered Nepal on the seventh lunar day of Sravana in the year 811. Interestingly this year falls in the ninth year of the Newari era. Rulers of Nepal initially

followed the Saka era and then took to the era initiated by Amsuvarman. The inscriptions of Manadeva and his descendants, including an early set of records of Amsuvarman, show the regular use of the Saka era. But, it is curious to note that the era used in the later inscriptions of Amsuvarman and his successors can be achieved only by deducting 500 from the current Saka era. Thus, 501 Saka era = the regnal year 1 of Amsuvarman. Probably, the regnal reckoning of Jayadevamalla was given the name of a new era by the subjects of the Nepala region, for they did not like the reestablishment of the Saka era by the extraneous Karnata polity.

According to available genealogical traditions, the difference between the Vikrama era and the Newari era is 937 years. According to the *Navaratna* of Damodarabhatta, on the other hand, this difference is 801 years. The months in this era usually end in the New Moon and the years are expired. Therefore, the Newari/Nepali era can be converted into the Common Era by adding 878/879 years to it.

It is again interesting to find that the earliest group of Nepal inscriptions refers to an unspecific era with a date-range of 386-535. It was earlier believed that this 'mysterious' era is connected with some separate era initiated by the Licchavis. But, now it is generally accepted to be identical with the Saka era. All the inscriptions dated in the reign of Amsuman are dated between the years 30 and 194. This '*samvatsara*' also does not have a specific name. Some scholars have recently demonstrated in the light of Tibetan sources that the identity of this second Nepalese era is based on the model of Saka era and had its commencement after 500 of the commencement of the latter, i.e. in 578 CE.

3. Fabricated Reckonings

D.C. Sircar made a critical study of the epigraphic reference to all the different types of reckonings prevalent in the inscriptional corpus of South Asia. Apart from the more widely found current and obsolete reckonings, he also gave a detailed account of a number of 'fabricated reckonings and doubtful cases' where the actual date of the initiation of an era is not possible to reconstruct from epigraphic references. Foremost among these were the Kali-yuga Era, the Saptarsi Era, the Jain Nirvana Era, the Buddhist Nirvana Era, the Grahaparivrtti Era etc.

4. Summary

The extensive inscriptional gamuts of the early-early medieval periods bear testimony to an extensive corpus of evidence on dates. These dates are expressed either in terms of regnal year of a reigning king or years expressed with reference to a particular era in under which dates are fixed. While the genesis of most of these eras is shrouded in mystery, their currency in the epigraphical literature is worth considering. Apart from the major current and obsolete reckonings, the inscriptions of South Asia also provide information on a large number of fabricated reckonings.