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Paper : **Indian Epigraphy**
Module : **Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta**

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Component-I (B) – Description of module:

Subject Name	Indian Culture
Paper Name	Indian Epigraphy
Module Name/Title	Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta
Module Id	IC / I Epi / 33
Pre requisites	Written in excellent Sanskrit, the inscription is a panegyric of king Samudragupta. It gives a vivid description of the virtues and military exploits of the king.
Objectives	The importance of the inscription is assessed. The information gleaned from the inscription reveals the geopolitical landscape of early India in the 4 th century CE. The names of the kings and the kingdoms mentioned in the record unfold the political situation of India and policies of the emperor.
Keywords	Allahabad, Pillar, Inscription, Samudragupta, Harisena, Sanskrit, Gupta

E-text (Quadrant-I) :

1. Introduction

The Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta is one of the important epigraphic sources for the study of the political history of the Imperial Guptas. Written in excellent Sanskrit it is in the form of a panegyric. It therefore popularly called as Allahabad *prasasti* in the academic circles. It eulogizes the virtues and achievements of the patron by the court poet. The military exploits of the king have been narrated in a graphic manner. The names of the kings and kingdoms mentioned in the record offer a glimpse of the geopolitical situation of the country in the 4th century CE. The political ideologies followed by the ruler in matters of war and peace forms a subject of absorbing interest in the context of early India.

2. The Inscription

2.1 The Allahabad *prasasti* was originally engraved on the Asokan pillar instituted at Kausambi near Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh. It was later removed to the Allahabad Fort where it is now located. According to Alexander Cunningham, the pillar was shifted to Allahabad by Firuz Shah Tughlaq. But J.F. Fleet inclines to believe that it was Akbar who was instrumental in removing it to Allahabad. It was re-erected by the Mughal emperor Jahangir in 1605. In 1838 it was again set up by Captain Edward Smith with a new lion capital.

2.2. The inscription was first brought to notice in the year 1834 in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* by Captain A. Troyer, Secretary of Sanskrit College, Calcutta . Troyer was

first to publish the text and translation of the inscription. In the same year Rev. W.H. Mill, Principal of Bishop's College and Vice President of the Asiatic Society of Bengal published a revised text and translation of the inscription. An improved version of the inscription together with a fresh lithograph was given by James Prinsep in the year 1837 in the same journal. But credit goes to J.F. Fleet for making an accurate decipherment of the inscription and presenting the standard text and translation of the inscription. Fleet's transcript and rendering have been accepted as most authentic by scholars like G. Buhler, D.R. Bhandarakar and D.C. Sircar.

2.3. Like other Asokan pillars, the round monolithic column of Allahabad was built in fine sandstone. The tapering column is 35 ft high and its diameter at the bottom is 35 inches and at the top is 26 inches. There are three sets of inscriptions on the column belonging to three important emperors, namely Asoka Maurya (3rd century BCE), Samudragupta (4th century CE) and Jahangir (early 17th century CE). However, due to long exposure to rain and sun, the inscription is damaged at places making it difficult for decipherment and translation.

3. Composer of the Inscription

The Allahabad *prasasti* of Samudragupta was composed by Harisena who was a poet and minister in the royal court of the king. He assumed the official titles *sandhivigrahika* (minister of war and peace), *kumaramatya* (minister attached to the king and the crown prince) and *mahadandanayaka* (officer in charge of military and judicial matters). He was the son of *mahadandanayaka* Dhruvabhuti and a resident of Khadyatapakika. In spite of assuming important positions in the administrative hierarchy of the Guptas, Harisena called himself as a servant or *dasa* of the enlightened king. From the official designations of both the father and the son, it is apparent that they were serving under the king indifferent administrative capacities. The inscription was executed by another important officer named Tilabhataka. He is also described as a *mahadandanayaka*, who meditated on the feet of the *paramabhattaraka*, which is undoubtedly referring to the sovereign.

4. Language and script

The inscription is written in chaste Sanskrit language. It is in the form of a poem or *kavya*. It is written both in verse and prose. There are nine verses of different metres; eight in the introductory portion and one at the end. The rest of the inscription is in prose. It is interesting to note that the verses of this inscription are consecutively numbered. Perhaps this is the earliest inscription where the verses are numbered serially. There are thirty-three lines in total. The characters of the record are later Brahmi script. Some scholars prefer to call it as Gupta script while others suggest it as the eastern variety northern script. From the extant portion of the inscription it is suggested that the record is not dated. The introductory portion of the record is much damaged and the first two verses are completely illegible. The rest of the verses in this portion up to line 15 are also not in a good state of preservation.

5. Ancestry of the king

The inscription mentions the ancestors of the king and their titles. He was born to Chandragupta (I) and Mahadevi Kumaradevi. Kumaradevi is called in the inscription as a princess of the Lichchhavis and therefore, Samudragupta is referred to as *Lichchhavi-dauhitra* or grandson of the Lichchhavis. Chandragupta (I) was the first ruler of the dynasty to assume the high sounding imperial title of *maharajadhiraja* and he was also the first Gupta ruler to issue coins. The inscription further tells us that there were two more rulers who ruled over the Gupta kingdom prior to Chandragupta (I). They were Srigupta and Ghatotkachagupta. Very likely there were

respectively the grandfather and great grandfather of Samudragupta. Both the rulers wielded having the humble title of *maharaja*. Thus, Srigupta was the progenitor of the Gupta dynasty and he was followed by Ghatotkachagupta, Chandragupta (I) and Samudragupta. Chandragupta (I) had started a new era popularly known as Gupta era the initial year of which has been fixed at 319-20 CE. Scholars working on the history of the Imperial Guptas have the consensus of opinion on the chronology of the early Gupta rulers and they fix the reigning period of the first four rulers of the dynasty as follows; Srigupta from 275 to 300 CE, Ghatotkacha from 300 to 319-20 CE, Chandragupta (I) from 320 to 335 CE and Samudragupta from 335 to 375 CE. The Gupta capital was located at a place called Purusha or Purushapura which has been equated with Kusumapura and identified with Pataliputra.

6. Samudragupta as an ideal king

The Allahabad inscription projects King Samudragupta as an exceptional individual and an ideal king. Because of his versatility and all the good qualities he was chosen by his father Chandragupta I to climb to the throne of the Guptas. His consecration to the throne was looked up with sad faces by others of equal birth while the courtiers rejoiced cheerfully. He assumed the imperial titles like *maharajadhiraja* and *paramabhataraka*. He was also called as *kaviraja* or king among poets. He was a relentless conqueror, an able and compassionate ruler with supreme commitment for the welfare of his subjects, a ruler with sharp and polished intellect, and an expert in music and art. He was a warrior of hundred battles. He assumed the epithet of *parakrama* or valour. By dint of his own prowess and might of his arms, he subdued the lords of many kingdoms. His body was most charming and it was covered with plenteous beauty of the marks of hundreds of promiscuous scars caused by many weapons. In lines 24-26, Harisena praised his patron in the following words, "He was without an antagonist on earth; he, by the overflowing of the multitude of his many good qualities adorned by hundreds of good actions, has wiped off the fame of other kings with the sole of his feet...". He is extolled as a Purusha or Supreme Being. He was a protector of the good and destroyer of the evil. He was a giver of hundred thousand cows. He was equaled with the gods like Dhanada or Kubera, Varuna, Indra and Yama. His had put to shame Brihaspati (the preceptor of gods) by his sharp and polished intellect and also Tumburu and Narada by the graces of his musical performances. He had the royal emblem of Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu. Thus, in extolling the qualities of his sovereign and patron, the poet had an open heart and applied all his poetic skills. Therefore, as a panegyric, the Allahabad *prasasti* stands apart in epigraphic literature of India.

7. Conquests

The inscription is non-sectarian. The major portion of the eulogy is devoted to the glory and military achievements of the king. Its great value lies in the abundant information given about the divisions of early India and the kings and tribes of the 4th century CE. The contents of the inscription are indispensable for the study of the historical geography of India and the extent of the Gupta empire. It further reveals the system of political organization that had developed in India at that time. In the following paragraphs the major conquests of Samudragupta have been narrated. The sequence in which they are recorded in the inscription is maintained without any alteration and this offers an idea about the army mobilization in a chronological frame.

7.1 First Aryavarta War

As the capital of the empire of Samudragupta was located at Pataliputra, it seems that the ruler had inherited an empire that roughly comprised of Magadha or the areas adjoining Uttar Pradesh and Bihar together with territories in the foothills of the Himalayas. His initial military

campaigns were directed towards extending his control over territories lying immediately beyond this area. Lines 13-15 of the inscription make us believe that Samudragupta in his first Aryavarta war defeated three important rulers namely, Achyuta, Nagasena and Ganapatinaga of north India. All the three rulers were belonging to the Naga family and they came together to fight against the Samudragupta. The three Naga rulers possibly formed a coalition against the Gupta emperor. However, the hostile confederacy was uprooted by the king. Besides, while he was amusing in his capital city, his forces captured a scion of the Kota family. Some scholars suggest that Kota scion was also a part of this confederacy. The Naga rulers probably ruled over the territories lying between Ahichhatra and Padmavati or western Uttar Pradesh and north-western Madhya Pradesh. Aryavarta roughly corresponded to the territories between the Himalayas to the Vindhyas in north India.

7.2 Dakshinapatha Campaign

After having consolidated his position in north India, Samudragupta mobilized his imperial army to the south. In his Dakshinapatha campaign, the king had defeated twelve rulers of different kingdoms of south India. In lines 19-20, not only their names but also those of their kingdoms have been specified. They are as follows: 1. Mahendra of Kosala, 2. Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara, 3. Mantaraja of Kurala, 4. Mahendragiri of Pistapura, 5. Svamidatta of Kottura, 6. Damana of Erandapalli, 7. Vishnugopa of Kanchi, 8. Nilaraja of Avamukta, 9. Hastivarman of Vengi, 10. Ugrasena of Palaka, 11. Kubera of Devarashtra, and 12. Dhananjaya of Kusthalapura. Regarding the identification of the kingdoms mentioned in connection with the south Indian campaign, Kosala corresponds to the modern districts of Raipur and Bilaspur in Chhatisgarh and western Odisha. Mahakantara may have been located to the south of Kosala in western Odisha, particularly in the Kalahandi district of Odisha. Kurala may be identified with the area immediately south of Mahakantara. Pistapura has been identified with Pithapuram in the Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, while Kottura may have been located in south Odisha. Erandapalli could be the modern Erandapalla in the Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh. Kanchi is apparently Kanchipuram in the Chingliput district of Tamil Nadu. Vishnugopa the king of Kanchi was a Pallava king. Nothing is known about the kingdom of Avamukta and its ruler Nilaraja. Vengi is the same as Vegi or Pedda-vegi a village in the Ellore district of Andhra Pradesh. Hastivarman, the ruler of Vengi as mentioned in the inscription was undoubtedly the Salankayana king of the same name ruling over the kingdom of Vengi. The kingdom of Palaka may have been located in the south of the river Krishna. The kingdom of Devarashtra has been identified with Yellamanchili region of the Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh. Kusthalapura is identified with Kuttalur in north Arcot district of Tamil Nadu. But this identification is far from truth.

In his south Indian campaign Samudragupta followed a different policy. No doubt he defeated all the twelve rulers but he liberated and reinstated them in their respective kingdoms. All the conquered territories were restored to their respective rulers. This policy has been mentioned in the Allahabad inscription as *grahana-moksa-anugraha*. In other words, it can be said that the king had adopted the policy of Digvijaya in the north while the policy of Dharma-vijaya was adopted in the south India. As a great politician and diplomat he was, he realized the difficulty of administering the far-flung areas in south India from his capital city of Pataliputra. Owing to this fact, he did not annex the conquered territories of the south to his empire.

7.3 Second Aryavarta War

In his second Aryavarta war he had defeated nine rulers of north India. The nine rulers were: Rudradeva, Matila, Nagadatta, Chandravarman, Ganapatinaga, Nagasena, Achyuta, Nandin

and Balavarman. All the nine rulers were violently exterminated by the king. The inscription does specify the names of the kingdoms of these nine rulers. But the inclusion of Nagasena, Ganapatinaga and Achyuta in the list evidently makes it apparently that the three were who were defeated by the king in his first Aryavarta war were again exterminated. It seems that in the absence of the emperor in north India during his army movement to the south, these rulers again formed a confederacy against Samudragupta and challenged the emperor. Besides, the king had also subjugated the Atavika or forest kingdoms.

7.4 Subjugation of Frontier kingdoms

Line 22 of the inscription specially describes the conquests of Samudragupta over the frontier states. The names of the frontier states as mentioned in the inscription are Samatata, Davaka, Kamarupa, Nepala and Kartaripura. Samatata has been identified with the area around south-east Bengal, comprising of the delta of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. Davaka has not yet been properly identified. Fleet thinks that it was the ancient name of Dacca, while V. Smith locates it north Bengal. But the possibility of its location somewhere in West Bengal and Bangladesh cannot be ruled out. Kamarupa and Nepala are the same as Assam and Nepal respectively. Kartarapura could be the region including Kumaon, Gharwal and Rohilkhand in Uttarakhand. All the above frontier kingdoms not only accepted the suzerainty of the overlord but also offered allegiance and tribute to him.

7.5 Suppression of Tribal kingdoms

In the western side of his empire there were a number of tribal kingdoms who were famous for their bravery. Mostly these tribes were inhabited in Punjab, Rajputana and Central India. Nine such tribal states were suppressed by Samudragupta. They were obliged to pay obeisance and tribute to the emperor. The nine tribes are the Malavas, the Arjunayanas, the Yaudheyas, the Madrakas, the Abhiras, the Prarjunas, the Sanakanikas, the Kakas, and the Kharaparikas.

7.6 Relation with Foreign Rulers

The Allahabad pillar inscription then gives the names of some independent foreign countries such as Daivaputra-sahi-sahanusahi, Saka-Murundas, Simhalas and all other dwellers in Islands (*sarva-dvipa-vasin*) as entering into friendly relationship with Samudragupta. Daivaputra-Sahi Sahanusahi refers to the later Kushanas. Saka-Murundas ruled over the western India. Simhala is the same as Ceylon. It is known from other sources that Meghavarman, a king of Ceylon had cordial relations with Samudragupta. With the permission of the latter he built a monastery at Bodh Gaya, for use of the Ceylonese pilgrims. The reference to *sarva-dvipa-vasin* in the Allahabad *prasasti* is indeed very interesting. It evidently shows that the Hindu colonies in the south-east Asia maintained close contact with their mother country in the Gupta age. According to R. C. Majumdar, the Javanese text *Tantri-kamandaka* stated that Maharaja Aisvaryapala of the Iksvaku race traced his genealogy to the family of Samudragupta. However, Harisena while narrating the friendly relationship of the alien powers with Samudragupta had gone to the extent of exaggerating the fame of his mater. This is evident from lines 23-24 which has been translated by Fleet as, "The unimpeded flow (*prasara*) of the prowess of (whose) arm (was arrested) by an earth embankment (*dharani-vandha*) put up by means of service through such measures as self-surrender. Offering of their own daughters in marriage and a request for the administration of their won districts and provinces through the Garuda badge, by the Devaputra-Sahi-Sahanusahi, and the Saka lords and by (rulers) occupying all Island countries, such as Simhala and others." These are admittedly hyperbolic

exaggerations by the poet and one has to be very cautious while testing the veracity of the statements incorporated in the text.

8. Asvamedha sacrifice

In order to commemorate his magnificent conquests in different directions, Samudragupta had performed Asvamedha sacrifices. This is proved by the Asvamedha type of gold coins issued by the king with legend *asvamedha parakramah*. In the Poona plates he is given the epithet *anek-asvamedha-jajin*, showing possibly that he performed more than one horse sacrifice. But nothing about this is mentioned in the Allahabad inscription of the king. Scholars incline to opine that probably the horse sacrifice was performed by the king after Harisena composed the *prasasti*. At any rate, Samudragupta by performing the horse sacrifice revived the Brahminical ideology of *Chakravartin*.

9. Extent of Empire

Samudragupta had launched a career of conquests. He mobilized his troops in all directions and subjugated many kingdoms. By his military exploits he carved out a vast empire. It comprised the whole of north India with the exclusion of Kashmir, western Punjab, western Rajputana, Sind and Gujarat, together with the highlands of Chhatisgarh and coastal Odisha. The confederacy of the north Indian rulers was shattered twice and their territories were annexed to the dominion of the king. The forest and tribal kingdoms of western and central India were annexed to his empire. The rulers of the frontier kingdoms acknowledged his suzerainty and paid tribute to the emperor. The foreign powers and the all the Island dwellers established cordial relationship with him. The rulers of the southern states were defeated and liberated by the king. Realizing the difficulty of administering the far-flung empire, the emperor adopted a diplomatic policy of not annexing their territories rather reinstating them in their respective kingdoms. Thus, within a short span of forty years the Gupta empire under Samudragupta extended from the Himalayas in the north to the river Narmada in the south and from the Brahmaputra in the east to the Chambal in the west. By his military exploits and diplomatic tactics, the emperor could create a concentric structure of the emerging Gupta empire with its dynastic core area, extended by annexed neighbouring kingdoms and surrounded by a circle of tributary vassals and powerful allies at the periphery.

10. Summary

Thus, the Allahabad pillar inscription is an important document for the study of the political history of the Imperial Guptas. Apart from the literary merit, the record furnishes a vivid description of the historical geography of the whole of India in the 4th century CE. The kings and kingdoms mentioned in the record provide a mine of information regarding the political situation of India of the time of Samudragupta. Moreover, they provide important clues for the reconstruction of the regional history of many smaller kingdoms. But while depicting the personal traits and qualities of Samudragupta, Harisena has gone a step further. In extolling his master as a king of poets, comparing him with gods like Indra, etc., calling him as equal to Brihaspati and as Purusa or Supreme Being, and equating him with Tumburu and Narada in matters of musical accomplishments, he made pure hyperbolic exaggerations. They can hardly be taken in their face value.