

Prayāga Tīrtha: An Epigraphic Study (6th -12th Century)

Paper Submission: 15/02/2021, Date of Acceptance: 26/02/2021, Date of Publication: 27/02/2021

Abstract

The religious heritage of India contains divergent elements within its realm and Tīrtha or the holy spot for pilgrimage is one of those elements. The notion of Tīrtha undergoes dynamic transformations through the ages but the common notion of getting liberated while visiting the physical holy spot remains the same from the dawn of Indian civilization. Prayāga or the well-known confluence of three holy rivers in Allahabad is no-doubt one of the most visited and sacred Tīrthas in the Indian subcontinent. The site bears the testimony of continuing inhabitation due to its sacrality or sacred aspect. In this article, the author intends to go through the epigraphic evidences that attest the sacredness of Prayāga from different aspects and by various means. The approach is very methodical and that is to analyze some of the significant inscriptional sources and try to understand the important position that the spot holds in the religious heritage of India. Here, the time span of the selected evidences has been limited from sixth to twelfth centuries A.D., considering the vast and varied nature of Indian History.

Keywords: Prayāga, Tīrtha, Epigraphs, Pilgrimage, Sacred.

Introduction

In the land of numerous religious beliefs and faiths, the common tradition that binds the whole territory of Indian sub-continent into an one and unitary identity is the touring or crossing over the sacred sites or which is known as 'Pilgrimage' or 'Tīrthayātra'. The notion of pilgrimage is one of the oldest yet continuing practices in Hinduism, the oldest surviving religion of the world. In a polytheistic faith like Hinduism, the whole of the earth is traditionally represented as a vast 'sacredscape' or a prominent and composite geographical unit reflecting the embodied humans and its cultural landscapes and values.¹ Sacred places constitute the cultural and ritualistic practices which regulated the human quest for attaining the ultimate spiritual knowledge.² In specific, the notion of the sacred landscape of India connects various places with each other through local, regional and trans-regional practices of Pilgrimage. In fact, the entire land of India is a great network of Pilgrimage places³ and thus the whole land with its sacred and symbolic geography creates a 'faithscape' encompassing all the holy places, customs, rituals and beliefs.⁴ Basically, the concept of 'sacred' separates a space from the other normal places⁵ and such sacred spots are enriched with the salvific power, as it is commonly believed. Now, experiencing that salvific power of a place through the act of Pilgrimage is one of the central characteristics of Hinduism.⁶ But, the focal point of the tradition of pilgrimage is the sacred place which is called as 'Tīrtha'. It is a popular belief that visiting a Tīrtha and performing holy rituals there help devotees in attaining the ultimate salvation crossing over the mundane worldly life.

From the R̥gveda onwards , the Indian religious and secular literatures provide varied connotations about the term 'Tīrtha', circumscribing different meanings, like - the holy water and bathing in that holy water in order to do penance, the path or the ford that aids the crossing over the worldly life and entering into the transcendental world, the supreme spiritual knowledge that helps in attaining inner bliss, the physical holy spot which acts as the crossing path or the link between the earthly world and the heavenly sphere, and above all the virtues of the heart of a human being that purify a soul itself. In general, the concept of 'Tīrtha' actually implies a medium that assists the devotees to attain purification and salvation of soul.



Sreyashi Sen

Research Scholar,
Dept. of Ancient Indian History
& Culture,
University Of Calcutta
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Aim of the Study

In the Indian soil, one may witness countless sacred 'Tīrthas that have been regularly visited by the pilgrims. One of those leading 'Tīrtha's is Prayāga or the confluence or Saṅgama of the three holy rivers – Gaṅgā, Yamunā and hidden Saraswatī located in the modern city of Allahabad. The site is famous for the Kumbha Mela which is considered as the world's largest gathering of people. We have ample literary references about the sanctity of the Prayāga Tīrtha from the time of the composition of the Vedas. The epics and Purāṇas repeatedly emphasize its sanctity as the great sacred place where all desires of the devotees get fulfilled and they can attain salvation. The texts also proclaim that the act of mere remembering this place can liberate a pilgrim from the Fear of death and all sorts of sins.⁷ Due to such widely known power of purification, Prayāga is known as Tīrtharāja, foremost of the all tīrthas in the three world.⁸ Even Trīśālīsetu, a comparatively modern text of 16th century also recognizes Prayāga as one of the three pillars of the 'bridge to the realm of soul'.⁹ But, the Epigraphic evidences about the same testify the varied range of rituals and performances observed in the holy land of Prayāga which help us in understanding the significance of the site in the Indian religious spectrum as well as in the popular belief.

Epigraphical Analysis

The famous Allahabad Praśasti or Prayāga stone pillar inscription of Gupta Emperor Samudragupta dated back to the 4th century A.D., shows that the sacred region formed a part of the Gupta Province. But, apart from the Gupta inscription, the pillar consists of the much earlier Aśokan edicts of Mauryan era of 3rd century B.C. While Upinder Singh has argued that the pillar was moved to Prayāga from Kausambi,¹⁰ John Irwin totally counters her by proposing that the pillar was never moved and was always at the confluence of the river Gaṅgā and Yamunā. Irwin, on the basis of some pre-Aśokan ancient scribbling and minor inscriptions, inscribed on the pillar, opines that those references indicate to the Magha Mela, one of the famous bathing pilgrimage festival observed in Prayāga.¹¹ This Magha Mela is probably equated with the Kumbha Mela, one of the greatest festivals in India, famously performed in Prayāga till nowadays. On contrary, this festival may indicate the 'Mela' which is observed in Vasanta Pancami every year in Prayāga. However, without delving into the controversy regarding the originality of the location of the Pillar, we may hypothesize that Prayāga was continuously Under inhabitation and royal control from much prior to the starting of the Christian era, and this tradition continued down to the modern days. The epico -Purāṇic testimonies of continuous and regular pilgrimage to Prayāga too prove about the same.

The earliest epigraphic evidence that overwhelmingly records the sanctity of Prayāga is most probably the Rithapur copper-plates of the king Bhavattavarmana of the Nala Family ascribed to the first half of the 6th century A.D. The record, scripted with Sanskrit language, documents about a grant of village Kadambagirigrāma to a Brahmin named

Mātrāḍhyāryya and his eight sons by the king. The grant was issued from Nandīvardhana which place is supposedly to be identical with Nandur in the central Province, because the finding spot of the copper-plates, i.e., Rithapur of the Amaravati District belonged to the Central Province. The interesting fact is, though the grant was issued from Nandīvardhana, but the grant was made at Prayāga, on the 7th day of the dark Fortnight of the month Kārtika.¹² However, the Prayāga or the Saṅgama was not included in the dominion reigned by Bhavattavarmana, but it was a well-known practice in ancient and early medieval India to proclaim grants at the exceptionally holy places or tīrthas so that the donor can acquire high merits. Similar tendency has been observed in case of this epigraph, indeed.

However, another corresponding example of donating land at holy Tīrtha may be cited now from the Nagardhan Plates of the Svāmīrāja of the Rāṣtrakūṭa Dynasty, dated back to the last half of the 6th century A.D., i.e., 573 A.D. These three copper-plates were discovered at a small village named Nagardhan, located at about 3 miles south of Ramtek town in Nagpur district in the year 1948. Written in the Sanskrit language, the plates were issued from Nandīvardhana by Nannarāja who meditated on the feet of his brother, the illustrious Svāmīrāja, the King on whose reign the plates were issued. The location Nandīvardhana (Nagardhana) mentioned here is obviously different from the locality of same name referred in the earlier Rithapur grant. In real, these copper plates record about two gifts one of which was a grant of a village named Ankollīkā, situated on the right bank of the river Śūla, to the west of the agrahāra of Achalapura and to the east of Śrī-Parṇīkā. The Brāhmaṇa donees were exempted from the obligations of all taxes and were permitted to enjoy the free land by a succession of generation after generation. The donation was made on the occasion of an eclipse on the new moon day of Caitra while the king was staying at the Chaṭuka Vaṭa in the midst of the Gaṅgā. After taking a deep bath into the holy confluence of Gaṅgā and Yamunā, the king donated the land. V.V.Mirashi, the editor of these epigraphs, rightly identifies the Chaṭuka -Vaṭa with the famous Akṣhaya-Vaṭa of Prayāga.¹³ But, what intriguing is that the donation was made not at the actual place of the donated village, but at a holy site on a holy occasion to acquire merit. Moreover, the Ritual of bathing on an eclipse is a very common motif of Hindu religious practices, and in Prayāga or other pilgrimage sites furnished with holy river, like in Gayā also, such observances have been seen continuing till present days. In fact, ritual of bathing is one of the oldest practices associated with Tīrtha. From this perspective, the king, probably for assuring merits for himself and his family, made the grant at a sacred pilgrimage site, like Prayāga on a holy occasion.

Further, another piece of interesting information has been provided by the Aphasad inscription of the Later-Gupta King Ādityasena, ascribed to the 7th century A.D. The inscription, while documenting the victory of King Kumāragupta (probably Later-Gupta King Kumāragupta III) over

Īśānavarmana, states that even after winning the glorious campaign, Kumāragupta went to Prayāga decorated with flowers and plunged into the fire. J.F.Fleet assumes that this verses indicate that the king's last funeral rites possibly took place at Prayāga;¹⁴ but another possibility should be mentioned here. The verse 7 says that the King himself went to Prayāga and garnered by flowers he himself plunged into fire, just like plunging into the water for bathing (Śaurya-satyavrata-dharo Prayāga-gatodhane... karīṣh -agnau magnaḥ pushpa -pūjitaḥ).¹⁴ Such saying might indicate that the king performed self-immolation or suicide by embracing the cow -dung fire that means that Prayāga was considered as a place of religious suicide. In fact, from the Gupta period onwards, the purāṇas started to proclaim that the custom of seeking death in the holy river like Gaṅga would help a devotee in attaining supreme liberation. Hence, the Kūrmapurāṇa, Nārada-purāṇa and other contemporary religious texts continuously put great importance on the ritual of committing suicide at Prayāga -Saṅgama in order to enjoy infinite pleasure in heaven.¹⁵ The Aphasad inscription can be considered as a testimony of the reflection of Purāṇic orders and its acceptance in the popular mindset. The Khairah plates belonged to the King Yaśaḥkarnadeva of Kalacuri dynasty dated back to 1071 A.D., also affirms the ritual of committing suicide at Prayāga for attaining liberation while stating that king Gāṅgeyadeva, the grandfather of Yaśaḥkarnadeva used to reside at the foot of the sacred fig tree of Prayāga (prayāgavaṭmūlanivesavandhoḥ) and he committed suicide there along with his hundred wives (śārdhaḥ śatena grhiṇībhiramutra muktīm).¹⁶ Even, the Jubbalpur plates of the king Jayasimhadeva of the same dynasty, dated in 1167 A.D., too emphasizes the rituals of giving gift at Prayāga on the occasion of suicide.¹⁸

In this relevance, it should be remembered that rituals of gift-giving or Dāna is an ancient tradition of getting redemption from sins, acquisition of salvation and getting liberated.¹⁹ The epics and the purāṇas repeatedly propagate that a person can acquire merit through the performance of gift-giving at holy places. ²⁰ Actually, in the beginning of the Christian epoch, when the earlier sacrificial rituals were placed backward while the temple-culture and image worship became the most popular forms of religious expression, the practices of pilgrimage to the sacred spots came forward and turned out to be one of the most revered religious practices ²¹ because such practice included the lower castes and the women into its fold, who were earlier outlawed in the conservative Brahmanical religious arena. In addition, the decline of commerce and trade from the end of the Gupta rule led to the revival of gift giving system to the Brāhmaṇas because it was the Prime basis of their income and livelihood. ²² In return, the Brahmanical literature proclaimed that the ritual of gift would be considered as highly fruitful and meritorious if to be performed in a sacred Tīrtha. Such proclamation basically fulfilled two needs, firstly, large gathering of masses at Tīrthas and observances of

religious customs helped Brahmins to refuel their economic status and secondly, the royal donations assured their income of wealth. Thus, Prayāga too was considered as a fruitful sacred spot where Dāna could be made for attaining Punya or heaven. Several inscriptions bear the testimonies of such claim. The Bhadavana grant of Govindachandradeva of the Gahadavala dynasty of Kanauj, dated in 1129 A.D., records about the donation of the village Bhadavana (may now be equated with the village Budawan in Allahabad district) by the King to two Brāhmaṇas. The grant was made at Prayāga after the king had taken bath, worshipped Vāsudeva and made oblations to fire following the sacred rites. Most significantly, the grant was made for acquiring merit and fame for the King and his family.²³ Likewise, the Gadag inscription of Jayasimha II (1042 A.D.) and the Plate of Jayachandra (1171 A.D.) also highlight the importance of the ceremony of bathing and the intentional offering of the gift of villages in Prayāga Tīrtha for acquisition of merits.²⁴

Here, I am going to refer some glimpses of other inscriptional evidences that throw some lights on the particular ritual of gift of cow occurred in Prayāga Tīrtha. In the early medieval era, gifts of land and cow were regarded as the most meritorious offerings due to which the performer could enter into heaven, ²⁵ because the cow was a powerful source of wealth which could assist the Brāhmaṇas in several ways. ²⁶ An inscription documented in the reign of the chālukya King Jayasimha II Jagadekamalla (1022 A.D.) refers to a huge grant consisting of lands, oil mills, golds etc for the maintainance of the temple of Śiva and building of the resting house for the Brahmins, made by an eminent local Brāhmaṇa named Māchimaṃya. ²⁷ The epigraph clearly declares that whoever maintains this pious endowment "will acquire the merit of decorating with gold the horns and hoofs of a thousand kine at Prayāga.... And giving them, during an eclipse of the sun, to a thousand Brāhmaṇas learned in the Vedas."²⁸ The Gadag Inscription of the same King dated in 1037 A.D., somehow repeats this type of proclamation of earning merits gained from Cow-gifting at Prayāga in return of preserving the pious endowments done by the ruler. ²⁹ The inscription of Huli of the Western Cālukya Emperor Tribhuvanamalla Vikramāditya VI, found in the inside wall of Vīrabhadra temples at Huli, Karnatka and dated to 1082 AD mention Prayāga Tīrtha with utmost reverence. The record places Prayāga at the foremost position of other Tīrthas in the context of promulgating that who will protect the temple of Vīrabhadra, will earn the merits of making great gifts at the holy place like Prayāga and others.³⁰ Similarly, the Ablūr inscriptions of 1200 A.D., also laid importance on the merit-giving ritual of gift of kine at Prayāga. ³¹ These three inscriptions reveal the fact that Prayāga as a leading Tīrtha possessed immense and pan-Indian fame by 11th century AD, and acquiring merits at that spot was so precious for the devotees that it had been used to maintain the welfare of the temple.

Derivations

The author of this article here chooses some of the significant evidences to prove that Prayāga was

rigorously considered as a holy spot for pilgrimage during a long era without any break. Though there are more inscriptions with scattered references of the sanctity of the Prayāga Tīrtha, even in the Medieval period too, but the scope and span of this article are limited up to 12th century A.D., that is why, the author would not be intended to further prolong the discussion.

Some facts can be derived from the above discussed inscriptions. Firstly, Prayāga as a sacred spot influenced the mindset of the masses so widely, that from the Royal persons to the simple Brahmins all were willing to visit and donate at that spot for acquiring merit. Secondly, the spot gained much fame as a spot for bathing. In fact, one of the reason behind the fame Prayāga acquired was the performance of ritualistic bathing. Even the Mahābhārata also affirms that the bathing at Prayāga yields the merit of horse sacrifice.³² The epic also confirms that the merit earned by the bathing in that confluence is equal to the merit attached with the four kinds of knowledge and the supreme truth.³³ Thirdly, the epic further states that any opinion of the Vedas cannot dissuade a man from the desire of dying at Prayāga as it gives the highest merit.³⁴ This statement is a clear attestation of the tradition of committing suicide at the very spot. Though, suicide is usually condemned in the Indian Philosophical thought, but religious suicide has been allowed in special cases and Prayāga is one of those examples.

Conclusion

Compiling all the suppositions and facts, it can be stated that the holy land of Prayāga fulfills almost all the criterias of considering as a Tīrtha, as manifested in the epigraphic evidences – the bathing spot, the holy water that liberates the soul, the name of the Prayāga itself connotes the meaning of a sacrificial ground (Pra-Yāga; the land of auspicious sacrifice), the land that provides salvation to the human souls. For such various reasons, the site never was demeaned or desolated rather underwent into continuous inhabitation. The frequent mentions of Prayāga as a leading Tīrtha in the epigraphs prove that the pious spot has succeeded in maintaining its revered position in the spectrum of Indian religious heritage through a long course of time and even till modern days. Thus, the epigraphic evidences of early medieval India render a deep insight regarding the beliefs and religious significance of the sacred spot Prayāga, the soil where death too becomes glorious.

References

1. Singh, Rana P.B., *Hindu Tradition of Pilgrimage : Sacred Space and System*, Dev Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 2013, pp - 80
2. *ibid*, pp - 80
3. Eck, Diana L., *India: A Sacred Geography*, Crown Publishing Group, New York, 2012, pp – 12-15
4. Sing, Rana P.B., "Pilgrimage in Hinduism : Historical Context and Modern Perspectives", in Timothy, Dallen J. and Olsen, Daniel H., (ed.), *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, Routledge-Taylor & Francis Group, London & New York, 2006, pp - 221
5. Goswami, Ankur, "Pilgrimage as Imagined Site : A study of Prayag Tirtha", *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, Vol 4, Issue 6, 2016, pp - 16
6. Jacobsen, Knut A., *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition : Salvific Space*, Routledge, London, 2013, pp - 19
7. Arya, Samarendra Narayan, *History of Pilgrimage in Ancient India, AD 300-1200*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2004, pp - 81
8. Ganguly, Kisari Mohan, *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa (English Prose Translation)*, Vana Parva, Reprint by Mushiram Manoharlal Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1998, pp - 194
9. Singh, *Hindu Tradition of Pilgrimage : Sacred Space and System*, *ibid*, pp - 61
10. Singh, Upinder, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India : From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*, Pearson Education, India, Reprint 2014, pp - 327
11. Irwin John, "The Ancient Pillar Cult at Prayāga (Allahabad) : its Pre-Aśokan Origins", *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp – 253-280
12. *Epigraphia Indica*, vol – 19, Hirananda Sastri (ed.), No. 17, edited by Y. R. Gupte, *Archaeological Survey of India*, New Delhi, 1927-28, pp – 100-104
13. *Epigraphia Indica*, vol 28, Dr. B. Ch. Chhabra (ed.), No. 1, edited by V.V.Mirashi, *Archaeological Survey of India*, New Delhi, 1949-50, pp – 1-11
14. *Corpus Inscription Indicarum*, vol III, No. 42, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors*, John Faithfull Fleet (ed.), *The Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta*, 1888, pp - 206
15. *Corpus Inscription Indicarum*, vol III, No. 42, *ibid*, pp - 203
16. Arya, *ibid*, pp – 183-184
17. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol – 12 , Professor Sten Konow (ed.), No. 22, edited by Rai Bahadur Hira Lal, *British India Press*, Bombay, 1913-14, pp – 205-217
18. Arya, *ibid*, pp – 82
19. Arya, *ibid*, pp - 177
20. Arya, *ibid*, pp - 177
21. Arya, *ibid*, pp - 2
22. Arya, *ibid*, pp - 2
23. *Epigraphia Indica*, vol – 19, No. 52, edited by N. C. Mehta, *ibid*, pp – 291-292
24. Arya, *ibid*, pp - 82
25. Arya, *ibid*, pp - 178
26. Arya, *ibid*, pp - 82
27. *Epigraphia Indica*, vol – 19, No. 38, *ibid*, pp - 223
28. *ibid*, pp - 226
29. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol – 19 , No. 37, *ibid*, pp - 221
30. *Epigraphia Indica*, vol – 18, Rao Bahadur H. Krishna Sastri & Hirananda Sastri (ed.), No. 22.C, edited by Lionel D. Bennett, *British India Press*, Bombay, 1925-26, pp – 178-182
31. Arya, *ibid*, pp - 82
32. Ganguly, *ibid*, Vana Parva, *ibid*, pp - 195
33. Ganguly, *ibid*, Vana Parva, *ibid*, pp - 195
34. Ganguly, *ibid*, Vana Parva, *ibid*, pp – 195