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Copper Plates: An Inevitable Source Material to Reconstruct the Hineage and Historicism of the Pallavas

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Abstract

The Pallavas rose to power in the Krishna-Guntur region after the fall of the Ikshvakus of Vijayapuri. They moved further south and established their capital at Kanchipuram in Thondaimandalam, which forms the northern part of Tamil Nadu and ruled from there for nearly six centuries from the middle of 3rd century A.D. to the first decade of the 10th century A.D. There were many debates among scholars regarding the origin of the Pallavas. Prof. S. Krishnaswamy Aiyangar also refuted the theories of the foreign origin of Pallavas and says that the two terms Pallava and Pahlava refer to historically different people and draws his support from a ninth century work Kavyamimamsa. The Hirahadagalli plates issued during the eighth regnal years of Sivaskandavarman < I (330 A.D.-350 A.D.) seem to hint at the imperial status attained by him after the overthrow of the Ikshvakus, as known from his title dharmamaharajadhiraja and the performance of vajapeya and asvamedha sacrifices. Regarding the rise of Pallavas as an independent power, Dr. T. V. Mahalingam relies on the account mentioned in the Velurpalaiyam plates of Nandivarman III (846 to 869 A.D.), and says that 'considering the political situation during the aftermath of the fall of the S-atavahana power, it is not unlikely that Virakurca by a matrimonial alliance with the Cut/u-Nagas of Vanavasi was able to become an independent ruler'. The Velurpalayam plates of Nandivarman < III credit Kumaravishnu II and his son Buddhavarman < to have regained Kanchi from the Telugu-Cholas, who seem to have defeated the Pallavas and occupied Kanchi for some time during the early days of the reign of Kumaravishnu II. According to the Honnur plates of Chalukya Vikramaditya I, dated in his 16 regnal years (670 A.D.-671 A.D.), he camped in Malliyur on his way to Kanchipuram and with the help of the Gangas of Talakkad defeated the Pallavas.

Keywords: Pallavas, Kanchipuram, Thondaimandalam, Svaskandavarman, Velurpalaiyam Plates, Nandivarman III, Kumaravishnu II, Vikramaditya II, Western Chalukya, Matrimonial Alliance, Kendur Plates

Introduction

The Pallavas rose to power in the Krishna-Guntur region after the fall of the Ikshvakus of Vijayapuri (3rd century A.D. to mid-4 century A.D.). They moved further south and established their capital at Kanchipuram in Thondaimandalam, which forms the northern part of Tamil Nadu and ruled from there for nearly six centuries from the middle of 3rd century A.D. to the first decade of the 10th century A.D (Balambal). The early Pallavas (295 A.D.-610 A.D.) are known mostly for their Prakrit and Sanskrit charters and a solitary stone inscription from Manchikallu (Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh). The provenance of these inscriptions and the territories referred to them seems to suggest that during the initial periods, their power was concentrated in the southern parts of modern Andhra Pradesh and some parts of eastern Karnataka.

Origin of the Pallavas

There were many debates among scholars regarding the origin of the Pallavas. There are two major theories regarding the origin of the Pallavas, one

is the foreign origin tracing them to the Persians or Parthians or Pahlavas advocated by scholars such as Vincent Smith, Lewis Rice, Rai Bahadur Venkayya, Jouvieu Dubreuil, etc. However, subsequently, Vincent Smith himself rejects this view of the foreign origin of Pallavas and regards them as of indigenous tribe, clan, or caste. Jouvieu Dubreuil surmises that the Pallavas reigned 'over an empire, which, having Kanchipuram for its capital, extended not only along the coromandel coast up to the mouth Krishna but also to the west, in the Deccan, up to the banks of the Tungabhadra river' (Dubreuil-Jouvieu). Later on, by the middle of the sixth century A.D., their territory expanded towards the south and extended as far as the river Kaveri in Tamilnadu. From Simhavisnu's time, it expanded further northwards up to the river Godavari and in the south down to the river Kaveri. Thus the Pallavas held sway over such a vast territory, which is evident from their epigraphs, which have been discovered within the limits of the dominions mentioned above. Even though the territorial limits of the Pallava empire expanded or contracted following the waxing and waning of their power, the Thondaimandalam region formed the core area of their rule with Kanchipuram, on the northern bank of the river Palar in Chengalpattu taluk, Kanchipuram district, Tamilnadu as the capital city (Rajayyan).

Archaeological Evidence

Venkayya tried to connect them with the Pahlavas tribe of Northwestern India for their namesake, who finds mention in the Nasik cave inscription of Gautami Balasri in which the Satavahana king Gautamiputra Satakarni was said to have defeated the Palhava tribe along with the Sakas and Yavanas in 130 A.D., and also in the Junagadh inscription of Kshatrapa Rudradaman, wherein one Pahlava minister Suvis'aka is mentioned. He also gets the support of scholars like Professor Weber, who traces their origin to the Arsacidan Parthians. Similarly, Jouvieu Dubreuil tries to connect the Pallavas with the Palhavas of the Nasik cave inscription of Gautami Balasri and the Pahlava of the Junagadh inscription of Rudradaman with the Palava of the Mayidavolu plates. Based on the Velurpalaiyam plates of a later Pallava king Nandivarman III, Dubreuil concludes that the first member of the Pallava became a king by

marrying the daughter of a Naga king and says that 'a Pallava prince, who was a native of the territory adjoining Aparanta married the daughter of Siva-Skanda-Naga, and became king of Kanchi, after the downfall of the Satavahana dynasty; and the son born of the marriage of the first Pallava king with the Naga princess bore, according to the custom of the Hindus, the name of his grandfather' (Dubreuil-Jouvieu). Ayyar tries to visualize these elephant-shaped crowns by comparing them with those depicted on the coins issued by the Bactrian king Demetrius and concludes that the Pallavas could be of foreign origin. The other group which traces an indigenous origin of the Pallava family can also be divided into two classes: one describing them as natives of Tamil-speaking region and the other as descendents from northern parts of India. Prof. S. Krishnaswamy Aiyangar also refuted the theories of the foreign origin of Pallavas and says that the two terms Pallava and Pahlava refer to historically different people and draws his support from a ninth century work Kavyamimamsa. However, he says that the Pallavas were certainly not the natives of the Tamil-speaking region and regards the name Pallava as a Sanskrit translation of the Tamil name Thondaiyar or Thondaman. Regarding this name, he further says that 'the rulers of Kanchi had continued to be known as Thondamans all through historical times. The people of the locality were similarly known as Thon/d/aiyar and the region inhabited by them consequently came to be known as Thondaimandalam. These names are all traceable in South Indian literature in the period of prominence of the Pallavas and even before' (Heras). From the provenance of the solitary stone inscription of the early Pallavas and their many copper-plate grants and also based on the territories mentioned in their grants, it could be certainly said that initially, they were ruling parts of Guntur and Nellore districts of Andhra Pradesh before they moved down south to Kanchipuram to establish an independent rule of their own. Even after they made Kanchipuram their capital, it seems that their hold over Guntur-Nellore region did not cease.

Copper Plates

An examination of the copper-plate charters issued by the various kings of this dynasty is also

not very useful in solving the problem of their origin. It only helped in constructing their genealogy after eliminating the legendary list of ancestors and by comparing all the varying genealogies listed in different charters. In the charters of Prakr/it language issued by the early Pallavas viz., the Mayidavolu, Hirahadagalli, and Gunapadeya no genealogical list is found. They claimed only as belonging to the Pallava family of Bharadvaja Gotra. It is only from the time of Skandavarman III (400 A.D.-436 A.D.), i.e. the Omgodu (I) plates onwards, when the charters came to be written in the Sanskrit language, a genealogical list can be seen mentioning up to four generations including the donor king. However, the exception is the Vesanta grant of Simhavarman II (436-477 A.D.), where only three generations of rulers inclusive of the reigning king were mentioned. However, the prasasti in the charters issued by the imperial Pallavas, starting from the time of Simhavarman III (540-550 A.D.) give a long genealogical list, tracing their family to legendary ancestors starting from Vishnu, Brahma, Angirasa, Brhaspati, Samyu, Bharadvaja, Drona, Asvatthama, Pallava, etc. In an inscription from the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram of the time of Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha, another new member viz., Pruthu was introduced as the son of Asvatthama and father of Pallava (Govindaswamy). However, even among the charters of the imperial Pallavas, two exceptional cases can be noticed, i.e., in the Vunnaguruvapalem plates of Paramesvaravarman I, in which the old tradition of giving a genealogical list up to four generations was followed and also in the Reyuru plates of Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha, which gives names up to only three generations.

A study of the prasastis given in the copper-plate grants shows that originally in the beginning they made no claim of their legendary ancestry and it was invented later, maybe to trace their family to antiquity or to claim divine kinship. This is proved by the Mayidavolu plates, wherein it is mentioned that Yuva-maharaja Sivaskandavarman issued an order from the capital Kanchipuram to the governor of Dhannakada (i.e. Dhanyakataka, modern Amaravati in Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh) concerning the villages of Viripara, situated in the provinces of Andhrapatha (Gopalakrishnan). The name of

the Queen is reminiscent of Sivaskandavarman of the Pallava family and the name of the Chuta king also shows the matrimonial relationship between Chutas and Satavahanas. Thus, it seems that the Pallavas are ultimately related to the Satavahanas, through the intermediary Chut/ kings and they became independent after the downfall of the Satavahanas. The son of Virakurca is mentioned in the Velurpalaiyam plates of Nandivarman III as Skandasishya and he is credited to have seized the ghatika at Kanchi from Satyasena. This incident is an important turnover in the history of the Pallavas because the ghatika at Kanchi played a significant role in the selection and coronation of rulers in the Pallava kingdom as can be seen later in the case of Nandivarman II. After the seizure of the ghatika, till the reign of Simhavarman I (295 A.D.-330 A.D.), their genealogy is not clear probably due to the conflicts between the Pallavas assisted by the Chut/ us and the Ikshvakus of Vijayapuri, who became powerful in the Andhrapatha region which was earlier ruled by the Satavahanas. It is only with the downfall of the Ikshvakus of Vijayapuri in about mid-third century A.D., the Pallavas rose to imperial status. This changed status of the kings can also be seen especially in the Manchikallu stone inscription of Simhavarman I, the Mayidavolu plates of his son yuvamaharaja Sivaskandavarman and in the Hirahadagalli plates of the same ruler, but with the title Dharma-maharajadhiraja.

From the time of Simhavarman I a systematic genealogy of their family and important political events comes to light, especially through several copper-plate grants issued by the successive rulers. Regarding his role in the supplanting of the Ikshvakus, there are different opinions. Based on the provenance of the inscription near Vijayapuri, the capital city of the Ikshvakus, D. C. Sircar credits Simhavarman I the final destruction of the Ikshvaku dynasty, along with its capital city and the many Buddhist establishments about the end of the third century A.D. and beginning of the fourth century A.D. (Sircar). However T. V. Mahalingam argues that Simhavarman perhaps visited the region as part of his initial campaigns against Ikshvakus and made some propitiatory ceremonies at the temple of Jivasivasvamin at Kihatti. He further says that

Simhavarman I by that time did not attain independent status, as no regal title is found in association with his name (Mahalingam). He was only referred to as belonging to the Pallava family of Bharadvaja-gotra. Apart from that the inscription also does not mention any regnal year. These facts may indicate two things: that Simhavarman-I could not exercise his powers independently in the region and at the same time he also did not recognize the authority of the Ikshvakus, the rulers of the region. So, he was not concerned about including the name of the Ikshvaku king in his record, which was a usual procedure followed by the sub-ordinate rulers. Perhaps, by that time the power of the Ikshvakus had decreased. He further prefers to consider that the Ikshvakus were completely overthrown by Sivaskandavarman I, the son and successor of Simhavarman I. He supports his argument based on the Mayidavolu plates, issued by Sivaskandavarman as a yuvamaharaja in the 10 years of a king (probably maharaja Simhavarman I). It records an order issued from Kanchipuram by the Yuvamaharaja addressed to his official at Dhannakada (i.e. Dhanyakataka - modern Amaravati in Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh) conferring a gift of the village Viripura in Andhrapatan as brahmadeya, with all exemptions to two Brahmanas (Srinivasan).

This charter also hints at the possibility that Sivaskandavarman also participated in the war against the Ikshvakus as a yuvamaharaja during the reign of his father. Based on the Mayidavolu plates, it can be understood that the area over which Simhavarman I ruled would have covered the present districts of Bellary, Guntur, Krishna, Nellore, and parts of the Kanchipuram district with Kanchipuram as the capital. The Hirahadagalli plates issued during the eighth regnal years of Sivaskandavarman-I (330 A.D.-350 A.D.) seem to hint at the imperial status attained by him after the overthrow of the Ikshvakus, as known from his title dharmamaharajadhiraja and the performance of vajapeya and asvamedha sacrifices. T.V. Mahalingam based on the provenance of this inscription near the Kunt/ala region, which was ruled by the Kadambas, suggests that 'the early Kadambas were probably feudatories of the Pallavas of the Prakrit charters'. From the British Museum plates of Charudevi, it is learned

that yuvamaharaja Buddhavarman, elder son and successor of Sivaskandavarman I predeceased his father. As the record was directly issued by the queen and addressed to the officials of Kataka, it can be surmised that Charudevi acted as regent for her son Buddhankura and governed over a part of the Pallava kingdom.

Endowments in Copper Plates

The son and successor of Viravarman, Skandavarman III (400 A.D.-436 A.D.) is described in the Vedanta and Sakrepat/na grants of his son Simhavarman III as having conquered the whole of Dakshinapatha and the Mangalur grant describes him as samarasatakarana, i.e, one who fought hundreds of battles. He is also mentioned in the copper-plate charters from Omgodu, Vilavetti, Uruvappalli, Nedungaraya, Omgodu, and Pikira issued by his successors. Skandavarman III interfered in the internal politics of his contemporaries viz., the Kadamba and the Gangas. S~antivarman of the Banavasi branch who was so far kept aloof by his step-brother Krishnavarman I, also joined in as a diplomatic move against the Triparvata branch. However, despite this short diplomatic peaceful move by the Banavasi branch of the Kadambas, their enmity towards the Pallavas and Triparvata branch continued. This is confirmed from the Halsi plates of Mrigesavarman, the son and successor of Santivarman, which show that the latter had conflicts with the Gangas as well as the Pallavas (Krishnarao).

The next ruler of this branch is Dharmamaharaja Vijaya Vishnuogopavarman, the son of Simhavarman as known from his Chura copper plate grant, which was issued from the adhisthana of Palatkada. From the Penukon/d/a plates of Madhava II, it is known that Skandavarman IV followed the diplomatic steps of his father and caused the anointment of Simhavarman alias Madhava II, the son of Aryavarman to the Ganga throne. However, it seems that Skandavarman faced defeat at the hands of Ravivarman, the Kadamba ruler of Banavasi when he went in support of Vishnuvarman of the Triparvata branch of Kadambas (Sircar). Skandavarman IV was succeeded by his elder son Nandivarman-I (485-520 A.D.). Verse 9 of the Velurpalayam plates of Nandivarman III makes it known that he brought under control a powerful

Naga chieftain called Drstivisa. Next in the Pallava line is seen a quick succession of three kings namely Kumaravishnu II, the younger son of Skandavarman IV, Buddhavarman, the son of Kumaravishnu II, and Kumaravishnu III, the son and successor of Buddhavarman. All three kings appear to have ruled for a short period between 520-540 A.D. Another grant found from the village Hirahadagalli refers to the location of the donated land as situated on the southern boundary of the village Chillakreka-kodunka in Satahani-rat/t/ha (Satavahanarashtra). Regarding the rise of Pallavas as an independent power, Dr. T. V. Mahalingam relies on the account mentioned in the Velurpalaiyam plates of Nandivarman III (846 to 869 A.D.), and says that ‘considering the political situation during the aftermath of the fall of the Satavahana power, it is not unlikely that Virakurca by a matrimonial alliance with the Cutu-Nagas of Vanavasi was able to become an independent ruler’. The Velurpalayam plates of Nandivarman-III credit Kumaravishnu II and his son Buddhavarman to have regained Kanchi from the Telugu-Cholas, who seem to have defeated the Pallavas and occupied Kanchi for some time during the early days of the reign of Kumaravishnu II (Ramachandran).

The next ruler of the Pallava throne was Simhavarman III (540-550 A.D.) of the Pallankoyil plates, whose descendants commenced and attained great importance and a new dimension. However, nothing much is known about the achievements of Simhavarman III, except for the fact that he issued the Pallankoyil plates during his sixth regnal years, recording the grant of the village Amancerkkai in Venkunra-kottam, of Perunagara-nadu and another 16½ patti of land in the Damar village as pallichandam to Vajranandik-kuravar of Paruttikunru for offering worship to Lord Jina. It is interesting to note here, that it is the only copper-plate grant made for the benefaction of the Jaina sect in the Pallava period. This charter also records that Simhavarman III sent his son Simhavishnu on a southern expedition to conquer the Chola country and defeated another Simhavishnu. Simhavarman III seems to have maintained a cordial relationship with the Gangas and entered into a matrimonial alliance with them as can be known from the Hosakote plates issued in the 12 regnal year of the Ganga king Avinita (600 A.D.).

It records a gift made by the king to a Jaina temple, built by the mother of Simhavishnu for the glory of her husband’s family and to increase her merit. Probably these qualities of Simhavishnu are reflected to some extent in the Pallankoyil plates of his father Simhavarman III. From this record, it is known that Simhavishnu (550-610 A.D.) conquered the Chola territory and defeated another Simhavishnu. From the Hosakote plates of Ganga king Avinita, it is known that the mother of Simhavishnu was a Ganga princess. But this matrimonial relationship between the Pallavas and the Gangas seems to have turned into a calamity for Simhavishnu, as he was forced to interfere in the politics of war of succession in the Ganga family, which emerged soon after the death of Avinita. From the Kuram plates of his grandson Paramesvaravarman I, it is learned that very soon Narasimhavarman I regained his strength, conquered the Chola, and forced the Telugu Cholas to accept his suzerainty. The exploits of this king are also mentioned in the Udayendiram plates of Nandivarman-II and also in the Velurpalaiyam plates of Nandivarman-III.

According to the Honnur plates of Chalukya Vikramaditya I, dated in his 16 regnal years (670 A.D.-671 A.D.), he camped in Malliyur on his way to Kanchipuram and with the help of the Gangas of Talakkad defeated the Pallavas. From the Udayendiram plates of Nandivarman II, it is known that the battle occurred at a place called Peruvalanallur, a village near Uraiyur in the Chola territory itself when the Chalukyan army was camping there. The Udayendiram plates of Nandivarman-II and Rayakot plates of Skandasishya refer to Chitramaya alias Pallavaraya Skandasishya as a contestant to the throne at Kanchipuram, which was also not accepted by the courtiers. From the Kasakkudi plates, it is learned that Nandivarman-II (731-796 A.D.), a descendent of Bhimavarman, the younger brother of Simhavishnu, was chosen as a ruler by the subjects. From the Kendur plates of Vikramaditya II, it is known that at about 734 A.D. the ruler of the Western Chalukya empire Vikramaditya II, supported by Ganga Sripurusha marched into Kanchi, defeated and captured the royal insignia of Pallavamalla like the twin musical instruments viz., Khatumukhavadi and Samudraghosha

and also the royal scepter Khatvangadhvaja. The Udayendiram plates of Nandivarman-II dated in his 21 regnal years (752 A.D.), refer to many northern campaigns undertaken by his general Udayachandra and consequently his victory in the battlefields of Nimbavana, Chutavana, Sankaragrama, Nellur, Nelveli, Suravalundur, etc. and annexed those territories with the Pallava kingdom. The Kasakkudi and Tandantotam plates as well as the hymns of his contemporary saint, Thirumangai Alvar praise Pallavamalla as a devout Vaishnavite. The Velurpalaiyam plates of the king issued in the sixth regnal year (852 A.D.) describe him as acquired the fortunes of the Pallava kingdom by killing his enemies on the battlefields, but it does not mention the famous battle of Tellaru. From the Udayendiram plates of Prithvipati I, of about 895 A.D., it is learned that the Ganga ruler lost his life while ensuring victory for his Pallava ally Aparajitavarman and this battle marked the end of the rule of Nirpatungavarman. From the Thiruttani copper plate grant of the nine years of Aparajitavarman, it is known that he was a son of Kampavarman through a Ganga princess Vijaya. From his Thiruttani plates, he is known as a great devotee of Subrahman/ya enshrined in the temple atop the hill of Thiruttani and also gifted the villages Pudur and Melirujeru as devadana brahmadeya (Nagaswamy).

Conclusion

The Pallavas ruled for nearly six centuries from the middle of the 3rd century A.D. to the first decade of the 10th century A.D. The Pallava dynasty maintained its varying forms of architecture for some three centuries, from A.D. 600 to 900, and its productions resolved themselves into two phases,

the first of these occupying the seventh century, and the second the eighth and ninth centuries. Society comprises people belonging to various professional groups and the material culture associated with them also differs widely based on their means of existence, economic condition, and the prominence given to them in the society. The Pallavas were finally defeated by the Chola ruler Aditya-I in the 9th century A.D.

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