

# Naneghat Inscription from the Perspective of the Vedic Rituals

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## Abstract

A cave at Naneghat contains a long inscription stating the details of a number of Vedic sacrifices performed by the ruler of the Satavahana dynasty. It throws light on the religious and social history of ancient Maharashtra. The present paper is in attempt to study the inscription from the perspective of the Vedic rituals and to note some interesting facts that come before us.

**Key-words:** Naneghat, Satavahana, Inscription, Vedic Ritual, Shobhana Gokhale, Ashvamedha

## Introduction

Naneghat is one of the ancient trade routes in western India, joining the coastal region to the hinterland. It is situated 34 km to the west of Junnar. Junnar is a taluka place in the district of Pune, Maharashtra.

There are several groups of Buddhist caves situated around Junnar. But the cave under consideration, which is situated right in the beginning of Naneghat trade route, is not a religious monument. It houses the royal inscriptions of Satavahanas and mentions several deities and rituals that are important in the Vedic religion. They are written in Brahmi script and in Prakrit language.

A long inscription occupies the left and right walls of the cave. It is a generally accepted fact that this inscription was written by Naganika, the most celebrated empress of the Satavahana dynasty. It records the performance of sacrifices and donations given by the royal couple, Siri Satakarni and Naganika. The rear wall of the cave has the label inscriptions (at the top) and it is supposed that there were statues of the royal personages either carved or planned (but were not carved) below each of these carved names. The inscribed names are respectively of Simuka Satavahana (father of Siri Satakarni), Naganika and Siri Satakarni (the royal couple), Kumara Bhaya (son of Siri Satakarni), Maharathi Tranakayira (father of Naganika), Kumara Hakusiri and Kumara Satavahana (sons of Siri Satakarni). If we imagine the so-called statues of these personalities below each inscribed name, the Naneghat cave would have served as the temple of the ancestors (*devakula*) following the pattern of the similar structures of Kushanas found at Mathura and Rabatak. But the persons indicated by the label inscriptions as well as their sequence— both have created a lot of debate on why these specific names were carved in this particular sequence.

The long inscription at Naneghat starts with paying homage to Vedic deity Indra, followed by Sankarshana and Vasudeva. It also enlists the names of the four *lokapalas*, viz. Yama, Varuna, Kubera and Indra. This is important because it points towards the influence of the Vaishnava sect in Maharashtra at the time of creation of the inscription. Dr. Anuradha Jamkhedkar (through personal communication) brought to my notice that the names of the *lokapalas* begin with Yama, and not with Indra. She opines that this may be an indicative of affiliation of the inscription (or of the cave) with

worship of ancestors. This supports the argument mentioned above, regarding the cave serving as an image-house of the bygone royal members.

Naneghat inscription is one of the most important inscriptions of the Satavahana dynasty. Its importance also lies in the fact that it is one of the earliest inscriptions referring to the Vedic religion. It was noted by Sykes for the first time and was later studied by Bühler. Several letters of the inscription are mutilated and therefore there are lacunae in the reading of the inscription. Several scholars such as Bhagwanlal Indraji, V. V. Mirashi, D. C. Sircar, A. M. Shastri and Shobhana Gokhale have dealt with this inscription. Dr. Shobhana Gokhale studied the inscription especially with references of the Vedic sacrifices mentioned therein. She also gave a thought towards locating the place where the sacrifices would have been performed (*yajñabhumi*).

### ***Religious Affiliation of the Naneghat Inscription***

The available reading of the Naneghat inscription records a number of sacrifices such as Agnyadheya, Anvarambhaniya, Angarika, Rajasuya, Ashvamedha (two times), Saptadashatiratra, Gargatiratra, Gavamayana, Aptoryama, Shatatiratra, Angirasamayana etc.

The name of one of the sacrifices (viz. Vajapeya) which is mutilated, was reconstructed by Shobhana Gokhale by studying the available reading which contained the reference to the sacrificial fees (*dakshina*) given in the number 289. This is rather an odd figure to give *dakshina*, but Shobhana Gokhale pointed out that it is a square of 17, the number which holds highest importance in the arrangements of the Vajapeya. She also studied several other details of the inscription pointing to the performance of the Vedic sacrifices.

Dr. Gokhale has shown that the sacrificial fees mentioned in connection with most of the Vedic sacrifices appearing in the inscription match with those mentioned in the Baudhayana Shrautasutra of the Krishna Yajurveda. It implies that the person(s) employed by the Satavahanas as Adhvaryu (main priest belonging to the Yajurveda) for performing these sacrifices belonged to the Sutra of Baudhayana. This discovery throws light on one of the important aspects of religious history of Maharashtra and also on the settlement of Brahmins in ancient Maharashtra.

An attempt is being made in the present paper to study the Naneghat inscription from the perspective of the Vedic rituals. We shall consider various opinions of the scholars and also try to see the conclusions that can be drawn based on this study. One of the last important publications is the one by Gokhale (2019). Therefore it is also important to seek some information given in this monograph.

### ***Performance of Vedic Sacrifices: By Whom and Why?***

If we assume that the inscription was written by Naganika, one may conclude that she might have been the performer of the sacrifices mentioned in the inscription. But it is to be noted in this regard, that although the participation of the wife is necessary in the Vedic rituals, the performer is always the husband (*yajamana*). A wife, in absence of her husband can perform the rites partially (limited only to giving some oblations in the sacrificial fire), but cannot undertake a big sacrificial ritual on her own. Similarly, it is necessary that a couple is physically present to perform the ritual. A widow or even a widower is considered ineligible to perform any of the Vedic rituals.

Therefore, strictly speaking according to the Vedic ritual manuals, it is not possible to argue (following Mirashi) that either the queen performed the rituals (as a consort or after the death of her husband) or through her family priests. The performer of the rituals must have been Siri Satakarni.

Another interesting point to note is the mention of the Ashvamedha sacrifice being performed twice. Two royal sacrifices, viz. the Rajasuya and the Ashvamedha serve a particular purpose. Any king

would usually perform Rajasuya sacrifice first. It denotes the highest authority of the king in the family members of his generation. Therefore, if one member of the family performs the Rajasuya, all the other members of his generation are automatically debarred from the performance of this sacrifice (unless the king is killed or is defeated). They accept the sovereignty of the king by the non-performance. A reference may be made to the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, wherein we are told that Duryodhana could not perform the Rajasuya, as it was first performed by Yudhishtira.

Performance of the Ashvamedha is considered to be of a higher level. It denotes that the king is superior not only in his family, but among the other kings as well. The sacrificial horse set free for wandering as per its will may travel from any other kingdom. But the owner king is so much powerful that nobody dares to catch his horse. In this way, others accept his superiority. In this particular connotation, lies the importance of a reference of a performance of the Ashvamedha for the second time. If a king who has performed the Ashvamedha is challenged by someone later, or the king gets defeated in some battle, then his sovereignty is principally lost. Therefore it would become necessary for him to perform the Ashvamedha again and to reiterate that he can still set his horse loose to wander as per its will, and his sovereignty is intact.

Another interesting feature of the Ashvamedha is that for its performance strictly as per the Vedic ritual manuals, it is necessary that four wives of the king participate in the sacrifice. Each of them has specific ritual duty. It indicates that the king whom wishes to perform the Ashvamedha must have four wives. It is to be noted, therefore, that a person who does not have four wives, is not eligible to perform the Ashvamedha sacrifice!

Although polygamy was not uncommon in ancient India, we do not get the references of all the queens of any of the ancient Indian kings. Speaking about Siri Satakarni, we have to admit that we only know the name of Naganika. The names of his other wives have been forgotten. They were never mentioned anywhere. From the inscriptional evidence of the performance of the Ashvamedha by Siri Satakarni, we come to know that he had (at least) four wives, which provided him the eligibility to perform this sacrifice.

Shobhana Gokhale (2019: 48) has calculated that the time span of all the religious activities of the king (Siri Satakarni) to be of eight years and six months. This may throw light on the calculations of the total regnal years of the king as well as time he spent in performing the Vedic rituals. As mentioned above, she has also stated that the performance of the sacrifices was done following the prescriptions of the ritual manual of Baudhayana. However, it is to be noted that there are several discrepancies in the references given by Gokhale (2019: 30–31). The references provided do not match with actual *sutras* of Baudhayana. Some provide different information than stated by Gokhale.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It may be said in conclusion, that the inscriptions at Naneghat provide various clues to understand the religious and social life (especially of royal family) in ancient Maharashtra. There are several lacunae in the available reading as well as the research that has been carried out till date. It is possible to interpret the available data in multiple ways.

*Junnar Inscriptions* was published by BORI many years after the sad demise of Shobhana Gokhale, the author of the book. There is no way to comment on the reasons behind the discrepancies in the references in the said book. We would never come to know what Dr. Shobhana Gokhale actually wanted to say. A fresh study of the sacrificial details mentioned in the Naneghat inscriptions may either support Gokhale and provide the missing references or throw a fresh light on some new aspects of the inscription. This will definitely open a new avenue for further research.

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