The *Harṣacarita* and Two Contemporary Epigraphic Texts: Reflections on the Polity of Kāmarūpa during the Reign of Bhāskaravarman

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Abstract: The period from c. 300 to 700 CE witnessed the emergence of classical Sanskrit literary traditions, the biography (*carita*) in prose and the versified eulogy or panegyric (*praśasti*), mostly of rulers and occasionally of influential *brāhmaṇa* families. The earliest known *carita* was Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita*, "Deeds of Harṣavardhana". The seventh chapter (*ucchvāsa*) of the *Harṣacarita* entitled "The Gift of the Umbrella" (*chatralabdhi*) narrates a treaty sealed in common interest between the Kanauj ruler Harṣavardhana (606–647 CE) and Bhāskaravarman, a ruler of the Bhauma-Varman dynasty of Kāmarūpa, Assam (c. 600–650 CE). This paper attempts to situate the seventh *ucchvāsa* of the *Harṣacarita* vis-à-vis two significant copper plate inscriptions (both approximately dated to the 7th century CE) issued by Bhāskaravarman himself and containing elaborate eulogies as preambles. Bhāskaravarman was eulogized in versified *praśasti*s which were followed by the operative part of these royal

epigraphic texts recording the grants of landed property (exempted from revenue) to *brāhmaṇa*s. These compositions which shower praises on Bhāskaravarman will be analysed in order to compare the representations and political profiles of Bhāskaravarman in two different genres of court literature – the first in the form of a *carita* by Bāṇabhaṭṭa and the second in the form of *praśasti* in royal epigraphic documents. Our use of the three literary and epigraphic texts will reflect on the making of the monarchical state society in the early 7th century CE in the Brahmaputra valley.

Keywords: Sanskrit literature, epigraphy, panegyric, Assam, political history, polity

1.   Introduction

Literary court compositions in ornate Sanskrit are inseparably linked to monarchy, captured particularly in biographies (*carita*) in prose and in versified eulogies or panegyrics (*praśasti*), mostly of rulers and occasionally of influential *brāhmaṇa* families, included in epigraphic texts as preambles to land grant charters. Three examples of these, all dated to the early 7th century CE – the *Harṣacarita* and the Dubi[1] and Nidhanpur[2] copper plate inscriptions – bear on Bhāskaravarman, a powerful 7th century CE ruler of Kāmarūpa in the Brahmaputra valley of the Indian subcontinent and a contemporary of Harṣavardhana of Kanauj (606–647 CE) and Śaśāṅka of Gauḍa (c. 600–625 CE). While the two copper plates on the one hand side are directly connected with Bhāskaravarman and his court as official and royal documents, the *Harṣacarita* on the other hand, though it speaks of Bhāskaravarman, too, puts its primary focus on Harṣavardhana, king of the court poet Bāṇabhaṭṭa.

The period from c. 300 to 700 CE on the Indian subcontinent witnessed the emergence of classical Sanskrit literary traditions pertaining to the past (*itihāsa-purāṇa* texts) in two broad forms: the *carita* and the

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1   Edited by D.C. Sircar, "Dubi Plates of Bhāskaravarman", in: *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXX (1953–54), pp. 287–304.

2   Edited by P.N. Bhattacharya, in: *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XII, No.13, and Vol. XIX, No. 19; see also Sarma 1981, pp. 1–43, Gupta 1967, and Pandey 1962, pp. 235–40.

praśasti.[3] Both are reckoned poetic compositions (*kāvya*) with an aesthetic appeal in ornate Sanskrit and highlight the life of charismatic rulers. The post-Gupta or "early medieval" period (c. 600–1300 CE) in the subcontinent saw a burgeoning of local and regional powers, many of which experienced a monarchical polity for the first time.[4] If families of obscure social origin aspired to be kings and did not belong to the *kṣatriya varṇa*[5] nor enjoyed a royal pedigree, then their genealogies (*vaṃśāvalī*) had to be constructed, thereby endowing them with the legitimacy to rule.[6] These genealogies, whether actual or fictional, were invariably linked to famous dynasties of yore or to legendary figures.

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3   The term *itihāsa* now stands for what is known as the academic discipline of History. The academic discipline of History emanates from the enlightenment in Europe and reached the subcontinent in colonial times. The Sanskrit term *itihāsa* (lit. "thus indeed it was") is known at least since the time of the *Atharvaveda* and the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa. The term *purāṇa* (lit. "that which is old") includes events and stories believed to go back to ancient times. Thus, the conjoint term *itihāsa-purāṇa* referred to that which was believed to have happened in the past. See Thapar 2013, pp. 55f.

4   The period from c. 600–1300 CE was connoted by R.S. Sharma as "early medieval" and witnessed the remarkable spread of the state at local and regional levels. See Sharma 2013 and Chattopadhyaya 1994.

5   The term *kṣatriya* drew on *kṣatra* (power) and the term *varṇa* has been defined as ritual status, which automatically accentuates hierarchy; henceforth traditionally the *kṣatriya varṇa* indicated the ruling clans (Thapar 2013, p. 74).

6   Sheldon Pollock specifically questions this theory of legitimation. He denounces the combination of legitimation theory and instrumental reason, which he takes to be the scholarly conventional wisdom in accounting for the Sanskrit cosmopolis, as "not only anachronistic but intellectually mechanical, culturally homogenizing, theoretically naive, empirically false, and tediously predictable". He states that "legitimation" suggests a knowledge-ability on the part of rulers that is unavailable to people at large, who are therefore cultural dopes. As such they are induced to believe in ideas opposed to their interests that rulers know to be such. He argues that rulers could be just or unjust, true heirs or false, but there is no reason whatever to assume that they cared to secure the assent of their subjects one way or the other. In such circumstances, the process of legitimation would seem not only cognitively redundant but virtually unthinkable. See Pollock 2006, pp. 18, 33, 511–22. Pollock's position has been questioned by David N. Gellner who states that the former's own interpretations show royal elites using Sanskrit as a way to buttress claims to rank and privilege. Hence, Pollock's objections against legitimation as an explanatory device will

In the great Indian epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* the genealogies were traced back to great heroes either of solar (*sūryavaṃśa*) or lunar (*candravaṃśa*) descent.[7]

*Carita*s and *praśasti*s were traditionally used to write dynastic history and chronology highlighting the most charismatic political personalities as the principal subject matter of these compositions. An earlier form of praise is seen in the *Gāthānārāśaṃsī* of the Vedic corpus. These are oral compositions in praise of men or heroes and obviously not created by court poets.[8] Additionally, hero-stories in the *Mahābhārata* were composed orally and recited by the bards Vaiśampāyana and Ugraśravas Sauti. Similarly, these heroic narratives in the form of bardic compositions were not court literature and were not meant only for the royal and courtly audience.[9] However, these could be the precursors of later *carita* and *praśasti* compositions. The earliest known royal *praśasti* is that of Khāravela's Hāthīgumphā inscription (from Odisha), composed in Prakrit and palaeographically assigned to the late 1st century BCE.[10]

As stated above, both, *carita*s and *praśasti*s, are eulogies composed in writing, for written documents, usually by poets in praise of their patrons who were mostly political figures. These Sanskrit compositions were connected with courtly life and culture and a new tendency from the mid-2nd century CE onwards extended the Sanskrit language to rituals for royal ceremonies. This began with the composition of the Junagarh *praśasti* of Rudradāman (mid-2nd century CE) in Sanskrit. In the opinion of Daud Ali, "the co-appearance of inscriptions and literary texts between the second and fourth centuries of the common era is significant, representing not a 'revival' or continuation of a long-standing tradition, but, as Sheldon Pollock has argued, 'the inauguration of a new cultural formation'."[11] Pollock argued that Sanskrit became a public po-

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work only if he comes up with a more convincing alternative. See Gellner 2008, pp. 443–5.

7   There are also dynasties claiming to belong to a Brahmin lineage, for instance the Vākāṭakas and the Pallavas.

8   Macdonell & Keith 1912, pp. 445f.

9   Thapar 2013, pp. 157f.

10   Jayaswal & Banerji 1930.

11   Ali 2004, p. 79.

litical language in the post-Gupta period and came to form a cosmopolis – a cultural formation that transcended political boundaries and religious affiliations.[12]

The compositions of such eulogistic inscriptions were also seminal to the later *carita* literature, written as part of courtly literature emerging almost at the same time (the *Buddhacarita* on the life of the Buddha was composed by Aśvaghoṣa in the early 2nd century CE). Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita* in the 7th century CE was the first formal *carita* of a king and inaugurated a whole genre of literature. It marked the beginning of the classical Sanskrit prose composition of *carita* as a biography of a ruler-patron by the court poet. Both, *carita*s and *praśasti*s, often presented elaborate dynastic genealogies (*vaṃśāvalī*) of the ruling house with maximum centrality to the reigning king which provided legitimacy and aided the upward mobility among ruling families. In fact, *carita*s and *praśasti*s were used as validation of ruling authorities who, from c. 500 CE onwards, increasingly appeared in areas far from the Ganga valley and the north Indian plains – the cradle of the Brahmanical or Sanskrit civilizational matrix. This style marked the entrenching of monarchy in areas where it had been less familiar and sets the tone for describing the ideal king.

2.   Kāmarūpa: historical and physical geography

This brings us to the land of Kāmarūpa[13] located in the Brahmaputra valley, which figures through a successive genre of literature by the early name of Prāgjyotiṣa. The *Mahābhārata* names Bhagadatta as a ruler

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12   Pollock 1996. Pollock argues that a new medium, and a new cultural politics was inaugurated with the secularization of Sanskrit. The worldly transformation of Sanskrit made the language's enormous resources available for describing the world of human action; writing preserved its new products and made possible the dissemination of Sanskrit culture across vast reaches of Asia. The new order of culture and power, visible in the fragmentary inscriptional record of the new dynasties of western and northern India, set the fashion for an unprecedented way of using Sanskrit for political and literary ends that would dominate in the following centuries. See Pollock 2006, p. 89.

13   A possible explanation of the name Kāmarūpa is recorded in the *Kālikāpurāṇa* (c. 10th–11th century CE), as the kingdom where Kāmadeva (*Kāma*) regained his form (*rūpa*); see Barua 1969, p. 15.

of Prāgjyotiṣa/Kāmarūpa who had participated in the Kurukṣetra war on the side of the Kauravas.[14] The *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a logbook, by an anonymous mariner of the late 1st century CE, after describing the Gange (Ganges) country (the western part of the Ganga delta), mentions the land of Kirradai, inhabited by people named Kirradai (possibly a Mongoloid population) which had access to Thinae, i.e., China. Kirradai stood for the Kirātas (usually associated with the north-east including Prāgjyotiṣa/Kāmarūpa) who inhabited the north-eastern borderlands of the subcontinent, standing in close proximity to the south of China and the north of Myanmar.[15] "Kāmarūpa" is also mentioned as a frontier zone (*pratyanta*) in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta in the 4th century CE.[16] The term frontier zone (*pratyanta*), applied to Kāmarūpa along with Davakā, is obviously used from the viewpoint of an assumed centrality of the Ganga valley where the stronghold of the Gupta rulers was located. Chronologically very remote, the *Kālikāpurāṇa* (c. 10th–11th century CE) states that Brahma, while once residing in this land, gave up one star from the constellation (or created this constellation; the name of the constellation is not specified), hence this place is called Prāgjyotiṣapura.[17] It is not surprising that etymologically, Prāgjyotiṣa (*prāk* meaning "east" and *jyotiṣa* meaning an "astral/luminous entity") was understood in the sense of a land in the east where sightings of astral figures were more likely than in other areas. Kāmarūpa is also enlisted as one of the localities (*janapada*) in the eastern quarters (*prācyadeśa*).[18]

The above discussion is setting the stage for a closer look at the physiography of the region of Kāmarūpa. Comprising the western part of the Brahmaputra valley, Kāmarūpa is marked by the river Karatoya as its western border in literary sources ranging from the 5th to 13th centuries CE. In the Mikir hills, on the Shillong plateau and in the Bhutan Himalayas to the west, the Brahmaputra valley merges with the northern Bengal region. The Barak-Surma valley towards the south, which is

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14 Sharma 1978, pp. 0.7f.

15 Casson 1989, p. 234; see also Chatterji 1951.

16 Ed. in Sircar 1942, p. 258.

17 Shastri 1991, p. 490.

18 On the significance of *janapada*s in the historical geography of early India, see Chattopadhayaya 2017.

contiguous to Tripura and accessible to the Noakhali-Comilla region in Bangladesh, is interlocked with the Brahmaputra valley in the rubric of networks and communication patterns.[19] This valley, lying within the girdle of the Eastern Himalayas, Patkai and Naga hills in the east, has always been in the prime focus of historical events, which is demonstrated by the provenance of most of the extant inscriptions assigned to the period of the 6th to 13th centuries CE (labelled the "early medieval").

3.   Early state formation and the associated political culture in Kāmarūpa

The 7th century CE saw for the first time a protracted penetration of the state system in Kāmarūpa. The period from around 400–700 CE on the subcontinent has been designated by Romila Thapar as "threshold times" which carried on some processes from the earlier times, and at the same time witnessed many new features and traits which would consolidate and mature in subsequent centuries. Politically, it was a period that set–in motion the triumph of monarchy over non-monarchical polities (*gaṇasaṃgha*) and clan societies, often inhabiting forests, pastoral zones and other non-agricultural tracts. As complex state societies penetrated into the erstwhile pre-state situations, the process often accompanied the expansion of agriculture which formed the principal resource base of the emergent monarchical polity. The penetration of the hierarchical *varṇa-jāti* system into the simpler clan organization, closely following the formation of the monarchical state, invariably accorded primacy to the *brāhmaṇa* as the highest social group who was patronized by rulers in the form of perpetual and revenue-free grants of land. New kings of non-*kṣatriya* origin – and often without a dynastic pedigree – sought their roots among the earlier *kṣatriya*s for legitimation. In this endeavour the *brāhmaṇa*'s support was crucial and his assistance was recognised. Kings were careful to patronize the *brāhmaṇa*, who, as supplicants of royal favours, in their turn composed genealogies (*vaṃśāvalī*) for them to ensure their *kṣatriya* status. As legitimizers of kingship, they were rewarded with land grants. The nuclei of support for the king rested on these new settlements along with the extension

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19 See Barpujari 2007, p. 2, Kakati 2017, and Kakati 2019.

of the *varṇāśramadharma*, the code of duties and obligations defined by one's social status and age and in accordance with one's caste and encapsulated social hierarchies, implicit in these settlements. The spread of Sanskrit legitimized a new Brahmanical order and dynasties whose origins were often obscure and who sought legitimacy by becoming patrons of sects that might not have been dominant, but had the potential to legitimize kings with an obscure pedigree.[20]

This leads us to the two coeval *praśasti*s in question. They are parts of the Dubi and Nidhanpur copper plate inscriptions (both dated c. 7th century CE) which were issued by Bhāskaravarman of Kāmarūpa himself. The copper plate inscription from Dubi which is located in Pathshala (Kamrup district, Assam) was issued from Prāgjyotiṣapura,[21] situated in the very heartland of the Brahmaputra valley,[22] while the inscription from Nidhanpur in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh was issued from Karṇasuvarṇa (Murshidabad district, West Bengal), the former capital of Śaśāṅka.[23] Bhāskaravarman was eulogized in versified *praśasti*s which appeared as preambles to the operative part of these royal epigraphic texts recording the grants of landed property (exempted from revenue) to *brāhmaṇa*s as pious acts of patronage by the ruler. It is well known that the *Dharmaśāstra* tradition lauds the custom of gift (*dāna*) and lays down the gift of land (*bhūmidāna*) as the gift par excellence. This is best exemplified in the *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* which praises the gift of land (*bhūmidāna-praśaṃsā*). This is surely a didactic section added to the heroic *kṣatriya* narrative of the *Mahābhārata*. It is equated therein with the gift of gold (*hiraṇyadāna*) and cattle (*godāna*). This is closely associated with the glorification of making the gift or the act of *dāna* as the highest virtue in the present Kali age – typically upheld in the *Purāṇa*s, especially the *Matsya-, Agni-* and *Varāha-Purāṇa*s.[24] This implies that the Dubi and Nidhanpur land grant records were in con-

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20 Thapar 2002, pp. 323–325.

21 Kāmarūpa was often explicitly equated with Prāgjyotiṣa. However, the location of Prāgjyotiṣapura has not yet been identified; see Shin 2018.

22 Sharma 1978, p. 10.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

24 Sharma 2013, pp. 272–274. For more discussion on *dāna*, see Kane 1941, pp. 837–888.

formity to the *Dharmaśāstra* norms. The ruler was the principal donor and also the ideal patron for endowing revenue-free landed property to *brāhmaṇa*s.

This takes us to the epigraphic bearings on the formation of the territorial entity of Kāmarūpa which were conspicuously present in the two copper plate inscriptions under review here. During the reign of Bhāskaravarman (c. 600–650 CE), the Bhauma-Varmans (the dynasty to which he belonged) reached the zenith of their political power and territorial expansion in the region. The seventh chapter (*ucchvāsa*) of Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita* ("Deeds of Harṣavardhana") titled "The Gift of an Umbrella" (*chatralabdhi*) narrates a treaty sealed in common interest between Harṣavardhana (606–647 CE) and Bhāskaravarman against their common enemy, Śaśāṅka (c. 600–625 CE), the ruler of Gauḍa.[25] The Nidhanpur copper plates issued by Bhāskaravarman indicate that immediately after Śaśāṅka's death, the core territory of Śaśāṅka was occupied by Bhāskaravarman, although for a brief period. One also has to take into consideration the expansion of Kāmarūpa to Śrīhaṭṭa (today's Sylhet) and its access to the sub-region of Samataṭa (today's Noakhali-Comilla area in the trans-Meghna zone of Bangladesh) which is contiguous to the Bay of Bengal. This is corroborated from the fact that Samataṭa yielded gold coins bearing the legend Śrīkumāra identified with Kumāra Bhāskaravarman.[26] Thus it can be postulated that after the death of Śaśāṅka, the smaller rulers of Samataṭa might have accepted the suzerainty of Bhāskaravarman in order to ensure the flow of trade from Kāmarūpa.[27] With this underlying of territorial control, it cannot but indicate that Bhāskaravarman's territorial possessions stretched from Karṇasuvarṇa in the west to Kāmarūpa in the east and to Samataṭa in the south. It comes with no surprise that Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita* describes Bhāskaravarman as the "lord of Kāmarūpa" (*kāmarūpādhipati*).[28] This implies that Bhāskaravaraman's territorial control and possession

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25 For a detailed discussion on Harṣa's campaigns against Gauḍa, see Bakker 2014, pp. 97–102. Since this paper focuses on the monarchical polity formation on Kāmarūpa during the reign of Bhāskaravarman, it is beyond the scope of the paper to discuss the enmity between Harṣa and Śaśāṅka.

26 Rhodes 2011, pp. 266f.

27 Chakravarti 2011, p. 16.

28 Cowell & Thomas 1897, pp. 216f.

of these areas were real and not merely an attempt to take or to formalise control in the area concerned by the grant.

Further, this geo-political entity of Kāmarūpa is demonstrated by the near contemporary Xuanzang's travel account from A.D. 629–645, which mentions the country of "Ka-mo-lu-po".[29] The region later finds expression in the above mentioned *Kālikāpurāṇa*, an *Upapurāṇa* believed to have been compiled in Assam and narrating the legend of the creation of this region. This text stood as an emblem of the Brahmaṇical/Vaiṣṇava ideological model of kingship in the Brahmaputra valley in *prācyadeśa*, but now imbibing the political culture and social norms of the *madhyadesa* which we shall discuss further below. The land of Kāmarūpa therefore sees its emergence and consolidation from a frontier zone (*pratyanta*), according to the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta (4th century CE), to a distinct geopolitical entity by the 7th century CE, marking the formation of monarchical polity there.

It has already been stated that in many kingdoms royal genealogies (*vaṃśāvalī*) were sometimes fabricated, in order to give legitimacy to the makers of the grant. As reflected for the first time from the *praśasti* sections of the two copper plates (the Dubi and Nidhanpur grants), the Varāha incarnation of Viṣṇu, Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta, came to be placed in the unilineal line of the sacred genealogy of the 7th century CE Bhauma-Varmans of the Brahmaputra valley. This claim was not made in the earlier inscriptions of the time of Bhāskaravarman's ancestors, the Umācal and Bargaṅga inscriptions from about the 5th and 6th century CE respectively. The genealogical contents represented in these copper plates are more or less similar. Both inscriptions begin with the eulogies of Naraka, Bhagadatta and Vajradatta. This genealogy also stands in conjunction with the genealogy mentioned in Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita*. What is of striking importance here is the genesis of the lineage from the Varāha *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, the primaeval boar who is described to have rescued the earth goddess Pṛthvī.[30] By this analogy the ruler could be

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29 Watters 1973, pp. 185f.

30 For the famous Varāha sculpture from Udayagiri, Vidisa, created during Chandragupta II's (375–415 CE) reign; see Singh 2009, p. 533. The symbolic power of the Varāha imagery has been explicitly discussed. The imagery of the earth being rescued by the boar acts as an article of faith and hope in the face of disaster and the fall of the existing order; see Bakker 2014, p. 247.

projected as the protector and rescuer from political calamity and/or from the non-observance of the Brahmanical *varṇāśramadharma* ideals.

This genealogy can be seen against the backdrop of the *Kālikāpurāṇa* which introduces the region of Kāmarūpa with the legendary Naraka by presenting him in a metamorphic narrative. The narrative of Naraka begins with the circumstances leading to his birth through the union of Pṛthvī with Viṣṇu as Varāha. He was raised as the son of Janaka, the ruler of Videha where he imbibed human and *kṣatriya* qualities (*kṣatraṃ bhāvaṃ ca mānuṣam*) till the end of his boyhood. At the age of sixteen he was escorted to the bank of the Ganga where Pṛthvī and Viṣṇu revealed themselves to him as his parents. All of them then entered the Gaṅgā whereby they were transported to Prāgjyotiṣa which was situated in the midst of Kāmarūpa. In Kāmarūpa he conquered the Kirāta chief and kingship under the tutelage of Viṣṇu. After years of his virtuous rule in Kāmarūpa his reign experienced a downfall when he befriended Bāṇa, the ruler of Śoṇitapura and a worshipper of Śiva. He adopted a demonic nature (*asurabhāva*) when he stopped worshipping *brāhmaṇa*s, Viṣṇu, Pṛthvī and Kāmākhyā. Because of his loss of *nīti* (righteousness / ethics / right conduct / also perhaps: Brahmanical sacred norms) he was eventually killed by Kṛṣṇa.

The major thrust of the narrative was to ensure that despite the inevitability of Naraka being ultimately an *asura* (a demon), he was not born an *asura*. His divine qualities (*devabhāva*) were drawn from the fact that he was the son of Pṛthvī and Viṣṇu and had a close sibling relationship with Sītā. There is repeated emphasis on his human qualities (*mānuṣabhāva*) which guaranteed his survival and prosperity. Secondly, Naraka was associated with *madhyadeśa* (Videha) which was perceived as a part of civilized human space and not in a peripheral (*pratyanta*) country. The motif of the Gaṅgā provided initial purification of the profane land. Third, the text portrays the *asura* Bāṇa as the real villain who leads Naraka along the unrighteous path, thereby illuminating the hostility of a Brahmanical Purāṇic text with a strong Vaiṣṇava sectarian orientation against Śaivism.[31]

Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya proposes that the genealogical descent from Naraka in the *Kālikāpurāṇa* appears to be in conformity with a reg-

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31 Kakati 2017, p. 235.

ular and familiar process in the context of local monarchical state forma-
tion in Indian history, particularly from the Gupta period onwards (4th
century CE), to provide legitimacy to royal families in early Kāmarūpa
like the Bhauma-Varmans (c. 4th–7th century CE), Śālastambhas (c. 7th–10th
century CE) and the Pālas (c. 10th–12th century CE). The transformation
of the Naraka story stands at a juncture of transition from pre-state to
state society in Kāmarūpa. In the post-Gupta period (c. 600–1300 CE),
the hilly regions of India and the comparatively remote regions far from
the Ganga valley witnessed for the first time the transition to a complex
state society. The *Kālikāpurāṇa* thus portrays Naraka not as an initiator
of cultural transformation but as a passive medium by portraying his
transformation.[32]

The genealogy in the two land grants reflects the high pedigree, real
or imagined, of the ruling family of Bhāskaravarman. It does so by mak-
ing use of the following narrative techniques. First, there is an allusion
to the Naraka legend which is elaborated in Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita* and
again in the *Kālikāpurāṇa*. Second, the predecessors of Bhāskaravarman
have been projected to have genealogical links to Bhagadatta of the
Mahābhārata in order to establish a high pedigree of the royal family.
Third, no less significant is the regular description of the king and his
chief queen in the context of the birth of sons who would become future
rulers. The recurrent enlisting of the chief queens (*devī*) underlines the
excellence of descent, an unblemished genealogy and unbroken succes-
sion from both the parents' sides, upholding the law of primogeniture.[33]
Interestingly, Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita* eulogizes the forthcoming alliance
between Harṣavardhana and Bhāskaravarman with that between Śiva
and Kuvera, Daśaratha and Indra, Dhanañjaya (Arjuna) with Kṛṣṇa, and

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32 Chattopadhyaya 2017, pp. 104–137.

33 In Indian courts, there was one proper queen as distinct from concubines, all
    of whom may have sons. The law of primogeniture qualifies heavily along with
    other considerations like capacity, virtue, health and personal predilections
    of the reigning monarch towards his sons. However, what distinguishes the
    claimant to the throne from his other half-brothers is not their patrilineages,
    which are identical, but their mother's patrilineages which are different and
    which determines their claims of superior status. When a chief queen is pub-
    licly recognized, a special claim is conferred on her sons; see Trautmann 1972,
    p. 9.

Duryodhana with Karṇa.[34] Hence Bāṇabhaṭṭa who was aware of the lineage of Bhāskaravarman portrayed this alliance as an ideal alliance by bringing in a flavour of the Purāṇic divinities and celebrated heroes of the two epics which in their turn underlined the legitimacy, heightened glory and pedigree of both the ruling houses.

The royal genealogy seems to have been effective in various ways. First, it asserted the reputation of Bhāskaravarman who sought for political alliance with Harṣavardhana. The genealogy of Bhāskaravarman was narrated by Haṃsavega, the emissary of Bhāskaravarman in the court of Harṣavardhana, when the envoy conveyed his master's wish to make friends with the latter. Second, it impressed the Chinese monk Xuanzang who visited Kāmarūpa in the 7th century CE. Xuanzang stressed the lengthy history of Bhāskaravarman's family and wrote that the king belongs to the old line of *Nārāyaṇa deva* and that the sovereignty over the country was transmitted in the Bhauma-Varman family for a thousand generations. Third, it legitimized the sovereignty of Bhāskaravarman. The Nidhanpur copper plate mentions that Bhāskaravarman has the power of splendour (*prabhāvaśakti*)[35] exhibited by the elevation of the rank obtained through the succession of the son of Vasumatī (Earth).[36] It denotes that the resource or his power was the lineage of Naraka. Such elaborate treatment of the genealogy of rulers became common from the 7th century CE onwards, the time of consolidation of monarchical polity.

4.   The *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa on the Kāmarūpa ruler

This leads us to Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita* which captures the historical ambience of the 7th century CE and Harṣavardhana's attempt to acquire sovereignty. The portrayal of Bhāskaravarman in the seventh chapter

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34 Cowell & Thomas 1897, p. 218.

35 This is similar to a line in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, which has a discussion on the three *śakti*s: *evam utsāhaprabhāvamantraśaktīnām uttarottarādhiko 'tisaṃdhatte*. In this line (9.1.16), the power of a king is said to be derived from three sources (*śakti*): energy (*utsāha*), might (*prabhāva*, which, among other things, probably refers to the richness of a kingdom), and counsel (*mantra*); see the translation by Shamasastry 1951, p. 368.

36 Shin 2011, p. 178.

(*ucchvāsa*) of the *Harṣacarita* is marginal as he is not the principal focus of the composition but relevant to Harṣavardhana's political plans to cement an alliance with the Kāmarūpa ruler against their common rival, the Gauḍa ruler Śaśāṅka. The *Harṣacarita* states that Harṣavardhana was on a day's journey from Kānyakubja, today's Kanauj, in the course of his eastward expedition against Śaśāṅka. At this point Bhāskaravarman, who has recently risen in status, too, requests a treaty with Harṣavardhana through his emissary Haṃsavega, for he is also battling against their common enemy, the king of Gauḍa.

It is no wonder that Bāṇabhaṭṭa highlights the importance of the envoy Haṃsavega much more elaborately than the standardized epigraphic statement on the messenger (*dūta/dūtaka*) conveying the royal order of the land grant. Haṃsavega was supposedly offered a warm hospitability by Harṣavardhana. After all, Haṃsavega was involved in the cementing of a very crucial political alliance. Harṣavardhana accepted the alliance and this was reciprocal. The advantage derived by Bhāskaravarman through this alliance was that the Nidhanpur copper plate inscription was issued from Karṇasuvarṇa, which means that Bhāskaravarman captured Śaśāṅka and immediately exercised control of his capital, while the property transfer took place in Sylhet which was beyond the Kāmarūpa valley. The Dubi copper plate is already indicative of his firm control over Kāmarūpa, the core Brahmaputra valley. These episodes of alliance and friendship, whether actual or imagined, the accounts of which are recorded with poetic embellishments, underline the importance of a north-eastern ruler of the Indian subcontinent, situated on the fringes of the Ganga valley for the first time playing a major role in north Indian politics.

The alliance was accompanied by a large number of most selected gifts for Harṣavardhana. Among these the parasol (*ātapatra*) of Varuṇa called Ābhoga is singled out. The gift of the parasol, one of the insignia of royalty, highlights the ritual significance and indication of Bhāskaravarman's acceptance of Harṣavardhana's sovereignty. This was followed by a large variety of indigenous and non-indigenous goods fit for royal gifts. While the Ābhoga was an inheritance from Bhagadatta, other items were indigenous specialities of Assam. These included ornaments like crest jewels and pearl necklaces, quantities of pearl, shells, sapphire; finished products including silken towels rolled up in baskets of coloured

reeds, drinking vessels embossed by skilful artists, loads of Kārdaraṅga (a horse breed) leather bucklers with gold-leaf work and cases to preserve their colour, soft loin cloth, pillows of Samūruka (kind of a deer) leather and other kinds of figured textures, volumes of fine writing on leaves made from aloe bark, bundles containing sacks of woven silk, curved boxes of panels for painting with brushes and gourds to hold paints; indigenous items like bamboo tubes containing mango sap, cane stools, milky betelnut fruit; forest products comprising bundles of black aloe, black aloe oil, Gośīrṣa sandal, camphor, scent bags of musk oxen, sprays made from the Kakkola plant, clove flower bunches, nutmeg clusters, cups of Ullaka juice, rings of hippopotamus ivory, encrusted with rows of pearls from the temples of elephants; animals which incorporated pairs of Kinnaras and mermen, orang-outangs, musk deer and female camara deer, pheasants, parrots, mynas and other birds, partridges in cages of coral, etc. A non-indigenous gift which stood out from the rest were heaps of black and white cowrie shells.[37] Cowries are not indigenous to the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, nor are they locally available. They are clearly a marine product which was obviously procured from the sea coast of Bengal. Cowries form part and parcel of maritime transportation and possibly might have been transported from the Maldives.[38] The shells therefore stood out as suitable gifts even for a regional Kāmarūpa ruler. These gifts stood symbolic in the light of the forthcoming alliance which would cement this arrangement.

A close look at the nature of the *praśasti* will further make the study of polity formation in 7th century Kāmarūpa more palpable. Ornate court poetry follows the literary tradition and strategy of elaborately describing the challenges and hurdles the rulers had to face. By highlighting the degree of difficulties, which these rulers are portrayed to have overcome, the composers of *praśasti*s and *carita*s actually glorify the deeds of the heroes, thereby enhancing the stature of the hero in question. This is first reflected in the Dubi copper plates where we find an allusion to two young sons of the Kāmarūpa king Susthitavarman, Supratiṣṭhitavarman and Bhāskaravarman, who were imprisoned by the Gauḍa enemy.[39] First,

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37 Cowell & Thomas, pp. 214f.

38 Basu Majumdar 2014, p. 596.

39 Sharma 1978, pp. 26f.

this could allude to the hostilities carried out by the Magadhan ruler, Mahāsenagupta (of the Later Gupta dynasty) who in his Aphsad stone inscription claimed to have defeated Susthitavarman, the king of Kāmarūpa, on the banks of the Lauhitya (Brahmaputra) river. It is likely that Śaśāṅka of Gauḍa (c. 600–625 CE) started his career as a *mahāsāmanta* (a powerful subordinate ruler) under the later Gupta rulers. When Śaśāṅka became an independent ruler, he seems to have continued his erstwhile overlord's enmity with Kāmarūpa, this time, however, as a Gauḍa ruler.[40] Whether it was Mahāsenagupta's or Śaśāṅka's hostilities, it would have implied a time of trouble in Kāmarūpa. Bhāskaravarman in the Dubi copper plate inscription acknowledged a period of political turmoil preceding his reign which might have caused a temporary loss of power followed by the abrogation of the existing grant. However, with the accession of Bhāskaravarman to power, political stability in Kāmarūpa might have been achieved for nearly half a century. In this context, the need for regranting an old land grant charter by Bhāskaravarman might be postulated, although the Dubi copper plate does not explicitly state the reason.

A striking parallel is Harṣavardhana's accession to the throne followed by the composition of Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita*. Like Bhāskaravarman, Harṣavardhana, too, succeeded his elder brother to the throne. In both instances the law of primogeniture is not followed and the succession is passed from the elder to the younger brother. Harṣavardhana, originally a Puṣyabhūti ruler from Sthāṇīśvara, modern day's Thanesvar, is best known as a formidable ruler, having his seat of power at Kānyakubja in the Gaṅgā-Yamunā doab. Kānyakubja was originally the seat of the Maukharīs with whom the Puṣyabhūtis had contracted a marriage alliance (the Maukharī king Grahavarman married Puṣyabhūtis princess Rājyaśrī). Devagupta of Malwa (of the later Gupta dynasty), aided by the Gauḍa ruler Śaśāṅka, attacked the Maukharī kingdom, which led to the death of Grahavarman. This was followed by the murder of Rājyavardhana, the Puṣyabhūti king, by an act of treachery on the part of Śaśāṅka, as the *Harṣacarita* describes.[41] This again set the stage for

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40 Chowdhury, 2018, pp. 530f.

41 Bāṇabhaṭṭa describes Śaśāṅka as a terrible "Gauḍa serpent" (*gauḍabhujaṅga*); see Cowell & Thomas 1897, p. 185.

Harṣavardhana to virtually usurp the power in Kānyakubja and become the master of Gaṅgā-Yamunā doab. Thus, it can be postulated that Harṣavardhana's usurpation of power in Sthāṇīśvara and Kānyakubja and the element of questionability of his accession to the throne might have impelled the composition of the *Harṣacarita* to justify his legitimacy to rule.[42] In fact, it was argued that one of the immediate reasons for writing the *Harṣacarita* was to legitimize the reign of the younger brother who might have been a rival of the elder, an act that challenged the sanctity of primogeniture.[43]

5. An overview of the Kāmarūpa polity in the light of epigraphic texts

This leads us to the typical features of a complex polity: a well-defined territory, subject population, administrative officers, resource mobilisation, urbanity and writing, replete with details of statecraft as reflected in the two coeval copper plate inscriptions.[44] A typical hallmark of the new type of political formation in the 7th century CE is the custom of granting revenue-free landed property to religious donees (individual or institutional). This feature of the "threshold times" which was already experienced in the greater parts of the Ganga valley, Central India and the Deccan, was witnessed in Kāmarūpa during the 7th century CE. The rapid increase of land grants in the early medieval times were actually instrumental in clearing hitherto uncultivable and unsettled areas into

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42 Though Bāna's description of Harṣa's consecration as chief of the army, after earlier having declined kingship, seems to follow a literary convention that has its basis in a mythic representation, Hans Bakker opines that the historical reality underlying Bāna's literary imagination was that Harṣa's sister had been captured, his brother killed and he was installed as commander of the army (*senāpati*) in Sthāṇīśvara. Henceforth he marched against Śaśāṅka. The eventual recovery of his sister, the dowager queen Rājyaśrī or 'Royal Glory,' which concludes the *Harṣacarita*, is Bāna's ingenious allegorical justification of King Harṣavardhana's ascension to the throne of Kānyakubja; see Bakker 2014, p. 87f.

43 Thapar 2002, p. 288.

44 While the two coeval copper plate inscriptions reflect features of a complex polity, we cannot be definite in asserting if it was actually models of complexity grafted to a geopolitical entity in formation.

sedentary agrarian settlements which in their turn would provide the vital resource base to the emergent local and regional polities, firmly rooted to their respective local or regional resource bases. The several instances of creations of *brāhmaṇa* settlements in a conquered territory by transporting them from the victor's core area ensured the presence of an influential loyal element in a new country.

The institution of the *brahmadeya*, land or villages given as a gift (usually tax-free) to specifically one or a group of *brāhmaṇa*s, and the *agrahāra*, revenue free landed property in favour of a religious donee – *brāhmaṇa*(s), religious complexes, or administrative officials –,[45] introduced Sanskritic culture which included the norms of social organization as laid down in the Dharmaśāstras. These elements are apparent in the coeval inscriptions under study. These idealized Brahmanical piety as *varṇāśramadharma* and *āryadharma* with the ethos of *kṣatriya* valor, grants of revenue-free land to *brāhmaṇa*s and the creation of Brahmanical settlements, the principle of *bhūmicchidra-nyāya* (free enjoyment of land by one who brings it under cultivation for the first time), benedictory praise of the giver of land and punishment to confiscators (*narake vasate*).[46] The Dubi copper plate records that Śrī Bhūtivarman (great-great-grandfather of Bhāskaravarman) presented a charter to certain *brāhmaṇa*s. However, the earlier plates were damaged (*kṣata*) on all sides (*āsamantāt*). Hence Bhāskaravarman re-issued the charter for the same purpose to those very *brāhmaṇa*s once again. The Nidhanpur copper plates similarly records the institutional re-granting of land to *brāhmaṇa*s in the Mayūraśālmalāgrahāra of Candrapuri region/district (*viṣaya*) which had become liable to revenue because of the loss of the copper plates. Thus, the Brahmanical form of the kingship/rulership model is reflected in the texts. Besides, the agrarian expansion proceeded significantly in the peripheral area and the regional state formation seems to have reached a crucial phase during this period.

This leads to our subsequent discussion on the importance of the linkage between state power and the writing of records. The striking information in both the Dubi and Nidhanpur copper plate inscriptions is

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45 See Sircar 1966, p. 61.

46 On *narake vasate*, lit. "he lives in hell," see Sharma 1978, p. 58. On the *bhūmi-cchidra-nyāya* see Sircar 1966, p. 58.

that Bhāskaravarman recorded the grants in favour of certain *brāhma-ṇa*s who had originally received the grant of land in Śrī Bhūtivarman's time. The charters explicitly state that his grant was actually the re-grant of an earlier one. This highlights the possibility of the existence of an admirably efficient practice of land transactions. As a result of this, an older grant of the 6th century CE (considering that Bhūtivarman ruled in the 6th century CE when he issued the Bargaṅgā rock inscription) could be retrieved and reproduced in the 7th century CE (almost a century later) even when such documents of land transfer belonged to the easternmost fringe of the Indian subcontinent. These are firm indicators of the monarchical state formation. The Nidhanpur copper-plate further records that the newly issued plates appeared different from the earlier record in terms of their letters (*bhinnarūpāṇy akṣarāṇi*) and as such they were not to be suspected as forged edicts (*kūṭaśāsana*).[47] This may be an indication that there might have been instances of forged copper plate land grants from contemporaneous kingdoms. This in turn implies that copper plate land grant records had emerged as translocally accepted documentary proof of possession in land and revenue-exemption from the state. In other words, this cannot but indicate that the state machin-ery in Kāmarūpa, if not yet complex, was in the process of becoming complex by adopting models from elsewhere.

What is striking in the inscription from Nidhanpur, is its familiarity with the designations of a few high-ranking functionaries, usually en-countered in the Ganga valley. During the "threshold times", irrespective of the size of the territory of a ruler, the land grant charters usually en-listed a very large number of officers, often marked by their hierarchical gradations. These copper plates recording remissions from revenue in fa-

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47 Sharma 1978, p. 49. We can however still suspect the plates as forged, maybe the more so because this claim is made strongly. In certain instances, copper plates were replicated to replace lost genuine ones, and this action was sometimes considered legally valid. Historically, there have been documented instances where replaced copies of lost genuine originals were legally sanctioned. Rich-ard Salomon has defined 'forgery' and 'spurious' to address the circumstances and intentions of such copper plate creators. He argued that in certain instances where the claims to land or other grants were legitimate and copies were made to represent the damaged or lost originals, the intention to deceive was "found in the presentation of the replacement as if it were the original"; see Salomon 2009, p. 111.

vour of the donees are also reliable indicators of the increasing demands of taxes by the ruling authorities. This speaks of the ensuing process of resource mobilisation which was indispensable for the monarchical polity, whether local, regional or supra-regional.[48] The Nidhanpur copper plate inscription records numerous royal functionaries involved in marking the boundaries of the land granted. However, it should be borne in mind that some of these functionaries, particularly those unnamed, might be fictional or mentioned by convention as they were expected to exist. The order of *mahārājādhirāja* Bhāskaravarman in respect of the grant was addressed to the present and future district officers (*viṣayapati*) and the various offices of the administration (*adhikaraṇa*). These were the *prāptapañcamahāśabda* (a subordinate title or epithet sometimes applied to a crown prince)[49] Śrī Gopāla who was the executor of the grant, the headman (*nāyaka*) of Candrapurī Śrī Kṣikuṇḍa, the dispute settler (*nyāyakaraṇika*) Janārdanasvāmi, the law officer (*vyavahārin*) Haradatta and the scribe or clerk (*kāyastha*) Dundhunātha, the master of treasury (*bhaṇḍāgārika*) *mahāsāmanta* Divākaraprabha, and the tax collectors (*utkheṭayitṛ*) Dattakārapūrṇa and Pūrṇa.[50] This may indicate the growth and consolidation of bureaucratic control in the early medieval period.

That the monarchical polity had consolidated in Kāmarūpa by the 7th century CE will be driven home by the reference to the aforementioned *prāptapañcamahāśabda* Śrī Gopāla, typically associated with a high-ranking vassal who was a subordinate ruler vis-à-vis the suzerain power of Bhāskaravarman. The higher rank of Bhāskaravarman is further clearly visible as he himself had a dependent ruler under him, *mahāsāmanta* Divākaraprabhā. This clearly brings into light the existence of at least two intermediaries or dependents under Bhāskaravarman. The other important and indispensable functionary, connected with the land transfer records, was the scribe or clerk (*kāyastha*). A literate person and someone with regular access to royal documents and records, the *kāyastha* occupied a special position in the court. Closely associated with him was the scribe (*lekhaka*) Vasuvarṇa who wrote the draft of the record

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48 Chakravarti 2018, p. 879.

49 Sircar 1966, p. 257.

50 Sharma 1978, p. 49.

and who was clearly differentiated from Kāliya who was the brazier and engraver (*sekyakāra*) of the Nidhanpur cooper plate record.

Talking about political epithets, the genealogies evident from the Dubi and Nidhanpur copper plates mention fourteen generations preceding Bhāskaravarman. All the preceding rulers are listed and endowed with generic titles such as *nṛpa* and *rājan.* For that matter even Bhāskaravarman doesn't use any political epithet in the Dubi copper plate, but has himself called Śrī Bhāskaravarman. However, the Nidhanpur copper plate mentions the use of the political epithet *mahārājādhirāja* which suggests that the monarchical realm under him has grown strong in a period of a few years and his suzerain power is more exalted. As stated above, the Bengali sub-region Samataṭa had yielded coins bearing the legend Śrīkumāra, identified with Bhāskaravarman, which lends further veracity to this claim.[51] This means that after the death of Śaśāṅka, the smaller rulers of Samataṭa might have accepted the suzerainty of Bhāskaravarman.

6.   Concluding remarks

To conclude, it can be stated that these two genres of Sanskrit compositions, the *praśasti* and the *carita*, are neither identical nor corroborative, but reflect both the formation of monarchical state society which drew upon the ideologies of the *varṇāśramadharma*. The *praśasti* as well as the *carita*, which primarily dwell on the conquest of a ruler eclipsing his rivals, can also be read from the perspective of the emergence and consolidation of monarchical polity. The combined testimonies of the two *praśasti*s and the *Harṣacarita* underline the importance of Kāmarūpa as an emergent regional power in the northeast area. Two crucial points from the 7th century CE are to be further noted in this context: first, Bhāskaravarman's role as a political ally of the new centre of power at Kānyakubja, which indicates that the monarchical realm polity under the Bhauma-Narakas had taken strong roots in the region, which grew from within and was not a result of the disintegration of the erstwhile Gupta realm; and second, Xuanzang's mention of the country of "Ka-mo-lu-po", which suggests that within a span of three centuries Kāmarūpa

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51 Rhodes 2011, pp. 266f.

had developed from a frontier ruler (*pratyanta-nṛpati*) zone in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta in the 4th century CE to a historical supra-local stature by the 7th century CE. This is clearly evident from the pre-eminence of the *brāhmaṇa*s in the socio-political order, the elaborate genealogies of the ruling family, the growing number of state functionaries and the complex record keeping system.

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