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Jaina Temples in East Bengal in the Seventeenth Century

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The late Jainologist Sri Puran Chand Nahar published the texts of as many as 2592 inscriptions collected from different parts of India in his well-known work entitled *Jaina Inscriptions (Jaina Lekha Samgraha)* in three volumes published from Calcutta respectively in 1918, 1927 and 1929. Even though the presentation of the transcripts of the epigraphic records in the volumes is not quite satisfactory in all respects, they are a valuable contribution to Jaina epigraphy and we are extremely thankful to the author for the great energy he exhibited in collecting the material especially in view of the fact that some of the records do not appear to be traceable at present.

The inscriptions generally record erection of temples and installation of the images of Tirthankaras, their foot-prints, etc., by members of the mercantile community. They are usually dated and often bear the names of the Digambara or Svetambara religious leaders who performed the ceremony of installation of an image or consecration of a temple. Occasionally the inscriptions mention the names of the places where the temples were built or images installed and sometimes the names of the rulers in whose territories the places were situated.

Even though they are mediaeval private records, some of these inscriptions have been found to be of considerable importance. This can be illustrated by an instance. A place called Kakandi or Kakandinagari is famous in both Buddhist and Jaina traditions. The Buddhists regarded it as the home of an ancient sage named Kakanda while the Jainas considered the locality to have been the birth-place of the Tirthankara Suvidhinatha. The locality is also mentioned in the early inscriptions from Barhut. Unfortunately the place was not satisfactorily identified. B. C. Bhattacharya identified Kakandi with Kiskindhya of the *Rāmāyana* without noticing that Kiskindhya was in Karnataka far away from the activities of the early Jainas. B.C. Law, the well-known writer on early Indian geography, places Kakandi in Northern India and says that the place cannot be identified. The place was, however, actually in Eastern India and can be satisfactorily identified with the help of Inscription No. 173 at p. 41 of Vol. I of the *Jaina Lekha Samgraha*.

This inscription is found in the Jaina temple in the village of Kakan which lies under the Sikandra Police Station in the Jamui Sub-division of the Monghyr District, Bihar. It is dated in Samvat 1822 Vaisakh sudi 6 falling in April 1765 A.D. and is engraved around two foot-marks. The inscription records installation of the said foot-marks and clearly states that they were installed at Kakandi or Kakandinagari which was the birth place of the Tirthankara Suvidhinatha. The foot-prints are stated to have been of the said Tirthankara. Thus the above inscription helps us in identifying ancient Kakandi with modern Kakan in the Monghyr District. (See also Sircar, *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Mediaeval India*, 2nd edition, 1971.)

An inscription, found in a temple at Patna, the headquarters of the present State of Bihar and transcribed in *op.cit.*, Vol. I, p. 81, No. 326, attracted my attention because it refers to the existence of a flourishing Jaina religious establishment at Dacca, at present the capital of Bangladesh (comprising some of the eastern and northern Districts of Bengal), in the seventeenth century.

The date of the inscription is quoted as Samvat 1732, Margasirsa badi 5, Thursday. This date regularly corresponds to the 28th of October, 1675 A.D. That was the time when Shaista Khan was ruling over Bengal from Dacca during the first term of his governorship (1664-77 A.D.) in the name of the Mughul emperor Aurangzeb Alamgir (1699-1707 A.D.).

The language of the major part of the inscription is Sanskrit ; but there is a small passage in Hindi about the end of the record. At four places some letters have been left out in the transcript as unread. There are some errors of language and orthography in the record.

After the above, we have the expression *dhākā-madhye*, i.e., 'at or within Dacca', after which some letters are lost. Thereafter mention is made of the Digambara religious teacher Bhattaraka Rupacandra who belonged to the Kastha-samgha, Mathura-gaccha, Puskala-gana and Lohacarya-nvaya. The expression *rūpacandra-pratiṣṭhitam* shows that the said Digambara religious teacher performed the installation ceremony of an object. Unfortunately, the word found in the sequel is *pādukā* in the feminine gender, which does not suit the word *pratiṣṭhitam*. It is therefore not impossible that a word like *bimbam* meaning 'an image' (of one of the Jaina Tirthankaras) occurred in the unread and lost passage of the epigraph between *dhākā-madhye* and *kāṣṭha-samgha*, etc.

Then we have mention of the following persons of the Agravala Gamgalu-gotra. Savala Simghavi, Bhramara Simghavi and Kesara Simghavi who were the sons of Sa Gulaladasa and his Bha Mula-de. Here *Sā* stands for *Sādhu* often used in the mediaeval documents before the names of members of the mercantile community while *bhā* stands for *Bhāryā* (wife) and *de* (in Mula-de) for *Devi*. The well-known surname Simghavi is a modification of *Samghapati* which was the designation of one who led and bore the cost of a group of pilgrims visiting Jaina holy places. Thus the above parts of the records suggest that the three Simghavi brothers Savala, Bhramara and Kesara established a Tirthankara image at Dacca, which was installed by the Digambara religious teacher Rupacandra. It is not possible to say whether the brothers were residents of Dacca or visited the city in connection with their mercantile activities.

After the name of Kesara Simghavi, there is an unread passage which contained an unknown number of letters and is followed by the words *pratiṣṭhā kārāpitāni serapurentike...dhākāyām pratiṣṭhā.. pādukānām/ śreyostu/pādukā ādināth-ki/guru-pādukā*. It will be seen that there are two lost passages in the above quoted concluding section of the inscription. There is some difficulty with the word *kārāpitāni* (in the plural), standing for Sanskrit *kāritāni*, in the section. Probably the intended reading was *pratiṣṭhā kārāpitā*, i.e., installation of certain objects was caused to be made at a place called Serapura and also in its *antika* or neighbourhood. It is also possible to think that *kārāpitāni serapure* refers to the making of certain objects at Serapura and their installation at a neighbouring locality or at Dacca.

The lost letters in the following passage may probably be restored as follows :

dhākāyām pratiṣṭhā (kārāpitā) pādukānām, i.e., foot-prints were caused to be installed at Dacca (probably by the same Simghavi brothers.) Owing to the fragmentary condition of this part of the document, it is difficult to say whose foot-prints are referred to here.

The above is followed by the word *śreyostu*. Let there be good (out of the pious deed) which indicates the end of the original document. The words indicating the installation, at the same place of the foot-prints of the first Tirthankara Adinatha and of the Guru (probably a Dharmacarya) at a subsequent date may have been added sometime later.

About Jaina activities at Dacca in the seventeenth century, we know that the Rajasthani merchant Hiranand of the Svetambara Jaina community founded a number of business centres in Eastern India with his headquarters at Patna. One such centre was established at Dacca, which later became the property of Manikchand, the youngest of the seven sons of Hiranand. Manikchand transferred his business headquarters to Muksudabad or Murshidabad. Manikchand's adopted son Fatechand (c. 1664-1745 A.D.) obtained the title 'Jagatseth' from the Mughal emperor early in the eighteenth century. It may be conjectured that the Jaina religious establishment at Dacca, referred to in the inscription under study, owed its existence to the local business centre run by Hiranand and Manikchand. But they belonged to the Svetambara community while the inscription speaks of Digambara association. Sri B. S. Nahar informs me that there was once a Svetambara Dadabadi at Dacca besides a Jaina temple and that certain Jaina poems were composed at Dacca, the most celebrated among them being the *Vṛndā Satsai*. He further says that little is known about the fate of the Jaina religious establishments at Dacca after the Jainas had left for Murshidabad, but that the inscribed stone slab now in the Patna temple must have been originally in a Jaina temple at Dacca and was later carried by some one to Patna.

A second geographical name mentioned in the inscription is Serapura. There are two places called Sherpur in Bangladesh, one near Jamalpur in the Mymensingh District and the other near the chief town of the Bogra District. Both of them are Thana (Police Station) headquarters, but the first of the two places called Sherpur is not far from Dacca and may be the same as Serapura mentioned in our record. As already indicated above, the fragmentary nature of the transcript makes it difficult to determine whether there was a Jaina religious establishment at Sherpur or certain objects were made there for their installation elsewhere.

I shall be grateful if anybody traces the inscribed stone slab in the Patna temple and let me have a few inked impressions, so that I can see if the unread passages can be deciphered and if they throw any further light on the Jaina religious establishments in Bangladesh flourishing during the seventeenth century.

It may be said in this connection that the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art attached to the University of Calcutta is said to have, in its collection, a few late mediaeval Jaina sculptures secured from areas now in Bangladesh.