Csaba Dezső

The Meaning of the Word *ārya* in Two Gupta-Period Inscriptions

1 Sanskrit Eulogistic Poetry

The composition of good poetry – as Bhāmaha, the oldest authority on classical Indian poetics, observed – brings about both pleasure (*prīti*) and fame (*kīrti*).¹ The latter benefit includes not just the poet's fame, but also that of his patron. Kings, in particular, relied on poets to immortalize their glorious deeds and to transmit their fame to future generations. As Rudraṭa, a Kashmirian author on poetics, pointed out, once the temples and other foundations they have built are destroyed by time, not even the kings' names would remain if there were no good poets to preserve them.²

Praśasti, Sanskrit eulogistic poetry, has as one of its principal goals the perpetuation of the memory of its patrons. It does not simply recount the battles fought and the foundations made by the king, but through praising his meritorious and valorous deeds it affirms his unique suitability for his position. As Sheldon Pollock has observed, "Fame may be the product of concrete practices, but it is not something that exists concretely, like a temple or a victory pillar. It remains amorphous until embodied in some language; it remains unintelligible unless that language can speak in the figures of speech that explain to us the otherwise inexplicable; and it remains transient if that language itself is transient."³ Cosmopolitan Sanskrit, the language of the gods, was uniquely fit for preserving and transmitting fame in the form of inscriptions throughout South and Southeast Asia. These inscriptions publicly proclaim the truth of the acts they relate as well as the truth of the qualifications of the kings they praise.

To illustrate the potency of poetic speech, this paper presents two uniquely important inscribed Sanskrit praise poems, *praśastis*, from Gupta India: the Allahabad pillar inscription, composed by Hariṣeṇa and celebrating the deeds of the Gupta king Samudragupta (r. ca. 335–376 CE), and the Bhitari inscription,

1 Batuk Nath Śarmā and Baladeva Upādhyāya, *Kāvyaṭīkāra of Bhāmaha*, Kashi Sanskrit Series (Benares: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1928), 1, verse 2cd: *prītiṃ karoti kīrtiṃ ca sādhu-kāvya-nibandhanam*, "the composition of good poetry creates pleasure and fame."

2 Śrī-Rudraṭācāryaviracitaḥ Kāvyaṭīkāraḥ, Śrī-Namīsādhupraṇītayā saṃskṛtaṭīkayā samupetaḥ (Delhi: Motilāl Banārsīdās, 1983), 3, verse 5.

3 Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 146.

praising the achievements of Skandagupta (r. ca. 455–467 CE). We shall also touch upon the Junagadh inscription of the latter king. The Gupta empire held sway over much of the northern part of the subcontinent in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. The Gupta period saw the production of long and elaborate Sanskrit *praśastis* inscribed on stone for the first time after the pioneering inscription of the Śaka ruler Rudradāman in the second century CE. As we shall see, in both the Allahabad and the Bhitari inscriptions, the poet used the multi-valent word *ārya* in a meaning that gives a special position to the king in the royal family.

2 The Bhitari and Junagadh Inscriptions of Skandagupta

Skandagupta, the son of Kumāragupta, is perhaps best known for his successful battles against the Huns. When we read his inscriptions, we may get the impression of a “self-made” king: there are many allusions to the victories he achieved by his own efforts and to the strength of his arms, by which he defeated his enemies and conquered the earth.⁴ The Bhitari pillar inscription presents a genealogy of the Gupta kings and praises Skandagupta’s achievements in saving the tottering sovereignty of the dynasty. While the poet of the inscription refers to Skandagupta’s predecessors with the conventional expressions *tatparigrhīta*, “accepted by him (i.e. his father),” and *tatpādānudhyāta*, “approved by (his) respectable (father),”⁵ indicating succession on the basis of the father’s favor, Skandagupta is said to be *pitṛparigatapādapadmavartī*,⁶ “staying at his father’s lotus-feet, which have gone everywhere.” This might indicate that although he may have been close to his father, he was not the one whom he favored as heir to the throne.

⁴ Bhitari inscription, line 7: *bhujabalāḍhyo guptavaṃśaikavīraḥ*; line 13: *bhujabalavijitāriḥ*, line 14: *bāhubhyām avanim vijitya*; line 15: *dorbhyām dharā kampitā*, in John Faithfull Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors*, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum 3 (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1888), 53–54. Junagadh inscription, line 2: *svabhujajanitavīryo*, line 4: *avanim . . . cakāra ātmasaṃsthām . . . ātmaśaktyā*, in Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 59.

⁵ On these expressions, see Cédric Ferrier and Judit Törzsök, “Meditating on the King’s Feet? Some Remarks on the Expression *pādānudhyāta*,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 51 (2008): 93–113.

⁶ Line 7 of the Bhitari inscription, Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 53.

The Junagadh inscription is on a famous rock at Girnar, in Gujarat, that also contains inscriptions of the Maurya king Aśoka (third century BCE) and the epigraph of the Śaka king Rudradāman (second century CE). The Gupta inscription was engraved by a local governor who restored the reservoir when its dam had broken. The poet of the Junagadh inscription claims that Skandagupta was chosen by the goddess of royal fortune, Rājyalakṣmī, herself:

*krameṇa buddhyā nipuṇaṃ pradhārya
dhyātvā ca kṛtsnān guṇa-doṣa-hetūn |
vyapetya sarvān manujendra-putrāṃl
lakṣmīḥ svayaṃ yaṃ varayāṃ cakāra ||*⁷

Whom Lakṣmī herself chose after considering with her intellect in due order and carefully all the causes of virtues and faults, and after discarding all (other) sons of kings.

While in the genealogies of earlier Gupta kings not just their fathers but also their mothers are named, Skandagupta's mother remains anonymous in the sixth verse of the Bhitari inscription, in which he is said to hurry to his mother after restoring the ruined fortunes of the dynasty, just as Kṛṣṇa hurried to Devakī after killing Kāṃsa.⁸ The anonymity of the mother might indicate, as Hans Bakker has observed, that Skandagupta was "a boy from the harem."⁹

The last *pāda* of the seventh verse of the Bhitari inscription has been read differently by various scholars. Fleet reads and translates it as follows: "*gītaiś ca stutibhiś ca vandakaja(?)no(?) yaṃ prā(?)payaty āryyatām*,"¹⁰ "whom the bards raise to distinction with (their) songs and praises."¹¹ Sircar adopts the same reading.¹² Basham interprets the word *āryatā* in the context of the *varṇa* system, and suggests that Skandagupta was the "son of a humble *śūdra* concubine."¹³ Bhandarkar reads *vṛttakathanam* in place of *vandakajano* and translates the line as follows: "whom the narration of (his) mode of life, whether

7 Junagadh inscription, line 5, in Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 59.

8 For a fuller discussion of this verse, see Hans T. Bakker, *The Vākātakas. An Essay in Hindu Iconology* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997), 26–27.

9 Hans T. Bakker, "A Theatre of Broken Dreams: Vidiśā in the Days of Gupta Hegemony," in *Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke*, eds. Martin Brandtner and Shishir Kumar Panda (New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), 178.

10 Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 54.

11 Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 56.

12 Dines Chandra Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, vol. 1, *From the Sixth Century B. C. to the Sixth Century A. D.* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1965), 323.

13 Arthur Llewellyn Basham, "The Date of the End of the Reign of Kumāra Gupta I and the Succession after His Death," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 17 (1957): 369.

with songs or with panegyrics, is raising to the dignity of an Ārya.”¹⁴ Agrawala, following Jagannath, reads the line differently still: “*gītaiś ca stutibhiś ca [vṛttakathanaiḥ] yaṃ hreṇyaty āryatā*,”¹⁵ “whom (his) nobility causes to blush by reason of the narrations of his exploits through songs and eulogies.”¹⁶

Gupta, however, having examined the various copies of the inscription, concludes that “the reading of the line by Fleet stands where it was.”¹⁷ But did the poet of the inscription really imply that Skandagupta was raised from the status of a *śūdra*? There is perhaps yet another interpretation, but first let us have a look at a comparable Gupta-period inscription in which the word *ārya* occurs.

3 The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta

The Allahabad pillar today stands in the city fort, but it may originally have been erected at ancient Kauśāmbī on the bank of the Yamunā. This pillar too contains inscriptions of Aśoka. The author of the Gupta inscription (fourth century CE) was Hariṣeṇa, the king’s minister of alliance and war (*sāndhivigrahika*). The text describes Samudragupta’s conquests in ornate poetic language. The fourth verse of the inscription, in which Candragupta transfers sovereignty to his son, Samudragupta, reads as follows in Fleet’s edition:

[ā]ryyo hīty upaguhyā bhāvapiśunair utkarṇṇitai romabhiḥ
sabhyeśucchvasiteṣu tulyakulajamlānānanodvikṣi[ta]ḥ |
sn[e]havyālulitena bāṣpaguruṇā tattvekṣiṇā cakṣuṣā
yaḥ pitrābhihito ni[r]ikṣ[y]a nikhi[lāṃ pāhy eva]m [u]rv[v]im iti ||¹⁸

¹⁴ Bhandarkar’s translation, in John Faithfull Fleet and Devadatta Ramakrishna Bhandarkar, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, rev. ed., *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 3, eds. Bahadur Chand Chhabra and Govind Swamirao Gai (New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India, 1981), 317.

¹⁵ Prithvi Kumar Agrawala, ed., *Imperial Gupta Epigraphs. Guptādhirājalekhamāṇḍala* (Varanasi: Books Asia, 1983), 72.

¹⁶ Jagannath’s translation, quoted in Bahadur Chand Chhabra, “Beauties of the Bhitari Inscription of Skandagupta,” in *Felicitation Volume. A Collection of Forty-Two Indological Essays, Presented to Mahamahopadhyaya Dr. V. V. Mirashi*, eds. G. T. Deshpande, Ajay Mitra Shastri, and V. W. Karambelkar (Nagpur: Vidarbha Samshodhan Mandal, 1965), 363.

¹⁷ Parameshwari Lal Gupta, *The Imperial Guptas*, vol. 1, *Sources, Historiography & Political History* (Varanasi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1974), 339.

¹⁸ Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 6.

“For he is an *ārya*” – [with these words his father] embraced him with gooseflesh that betrayed his feelings, and when the people in the assembly breathed a sigh of relief, being watched by the sad faces of others who had been born in the same family, he was addressed by his father, looking at him with an eye that was tremulous with affection, heavy with tears, and observant of the truth: “Protect thus the entire earth.”

The revised edition of the third volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* reads *[ā]ryy[ai]hīty*, “*ārya*, come,” as the beginning of the verse.¹⁹ Chhabra suggests a different reading of the first words – *ehy ehīty*, “come, come”²⁰ – which has been adopted by Sircar²¹ and Agrawala.²² This reading is certainly attractive, and Chhabra cites several parallels from Sanskrit literature, though he does not refer to what is probably the closest parallel, from the *Harṣacarita* (seventh century CE), in which the dying king, Prabhākaravardhana, beckons his son, Harṣa, with the same words:²³

*avanipatis tu dūrād eva dṛṣṭvātidayitaṃ tanayaṃ tadavastho 'pi nirbharasnehāvarjitaḥ
pradhāvamāno manasā prasārya bhujau “ehy ehi” ity āhvayaṃ śarīrārdhena śayanād udagāt.*

As soon as the king perceived his darling son while still at some distance, swayed even in that extremity by overpowering affection, he ran forward in spirit to meet him, and putting out his arms, half rose from the couch, calling to him “Come to me, come to me.”²⁴

And just as Candragupta transfers the protection of the earth to Samudragupta, Prabhākaravardhana addresses Harṣa in a similar way, e.g. *kṣitir iyaṃ tava*, “this earth is yours”; *gṛhyatām śrīḥ*, “accept royal majesty”; *prajāḥ parirakṣyantām*, “may the people be protected.”²⁵

Instead of *āryyo*, Goyal suggests the reading *arhyo*, “worthy,”²⁶ while Thieme conjectures *varyyo*, “eligible, excellent.”²⁷ Both of these readings would imply that Samudragupta was eligible to the throne because of his outstanding qualities, some of which were probably mentioned in the preceding, fragmentary

19 Fleet and Bhandarkar, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 212.

20 Bahadur Chand Chhabra, “Chandragupta’s Abdication,” *Indian Culture* 14, no. 4 (1948): 143.

21 Dines Chandra Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, 263.

22 Agrawala, *Imperial Gupta Epigraphs*, 4.

23 Pandurang Vaman Kane, ed., *The Harṣacarita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa, Text of Uchchhvāsas I–VIII* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [1918] 1997), 79.

24 Translation by Cowell and Thomas, in Edward Byles Cowell and Frederick William Thomas, trans., *The Harṣa-Carita of Bāṇa* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1897), 141.

25 Kane, *The Harṣacarita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa*, 86–87.

26 S. R. Goyal, *A History of the Imperial Guptas* (Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1967), 193, note 5.

27 Paul Thieme, “*ārya*,” *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 79, nos. 3–4 (1965): 284.

verses; thus his learning seems to be the focus of such expressions as *śāstratattvārthabhartuḥ*, “who was the supporter of the real truth of the scriptures,” and *sphuṭabahukavitākīrtirājyaṃ bhunakti*, “who enjoys . . . the sovereignty of fame (produced) by much poetry.”²⁸ The “worthiness” of the heir is also emphasized in the *Arthaśāstra*, when it teaches that “a son who possesses the exemplary qualities of the self he should appoint as Chief of the Armed Forces or as the Crown Prince.”²⁹

Nevertheless, if we follow Fleet’s (*āryyo hīty*) or Bhandarkar’s (*āryyaihity*) reading, we may pose the question of what exactly the word *ārya* refers to. The word *ārya* or *āryaputra*, as Thieme and Scharfe have pointed out, can mean “elder or eldest son or brother.”³⁰ We know from several inscriptions that Samudragupta was *Licchavi-dauhitra*, that is, the son of the daughter of the Licchavi king.³¹ According to the *Manusmṛti*, “the daughter’s son (*dauhitra*) shall take the entire property of a man without son”³² (9:131, *dauhitra eva ca hared aputrasyākhilam dhanam*);³³ therefore, Samudragupta was entitled to succeed his sonless maternal grandfather on the Licchavi throne. But the *Manusmṛti* also teaches that “the daughter’s son shall indeed take the entire estate of the father who is without a son”³⁴ (9:132, *dauhitro hy akhilaṃ riktham aputrasya pitur haret*).³⁵ Now in the case of Samudragupta, there may have been other contenders to the Gupta throne, as the expression *tulyakulaja*, “those born in the same family,” indicates: these might have included his brothers. But Manu also says that the eldest son alone may take the whole paternal estate (9:105, *jyeṣṭha eva tu gṛhṇīyāt pitryaṃ dhanam aśeṣataḥ*), and this might have been the case for Samudragupta: when Candragupta referred to him as *ārya*, he might have meant “eldest brother

28 Fleet’s translations, in Fleet, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, 11.

29 R. P. Kangle, *The Kauṭīliya Arthaśāstra. Part I. A Critical Edition with a Glossary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), 24 (1.17.43): *ātmasampannaṃ saināpatye yauvarāje vā sthāpayet*. Translation by Olivelle, in Patrick Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India. Kauṭīliya’s Arthaśāstra. A New Annotated Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90. The exemplary qualities of the self are listed in *Arthaśāstra* 6.1.6.

30 Paul Thieme, “*ārya*,” 284; Hartmut Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 27, note 10.

31 For more details on the question of *dauhitra*, see Hartmut Scharfe, “Griech. θυγατρῖδοῦς, Sanskrit *dauhitra* ‘[Erb]tochtersohn,’” *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 79, nos. 3/4 (1965): 265–284; Thomas R. Trautmann, “Licchavi-Dauhitra,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (1972): 2–15.

32 Translation by Olivelle, in Patrick Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law. A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 196–197.

33 Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law*, 770.

34 Translation by Olivelle, in Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law*, 197.

35 Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law*, 770.

among my sons,” and thus, as Thieme has already pointed out,³⁶ he confirmed with a legal argument Samudragupta’s right to the Gupta throne. The words of the king in the inscription, *nikhilāṃ pāhy evam urvīm*, “protect thus the entire earth,” seem to echo the *pitryaṃ dhanam aśeṣataḥ*, “the entire paternal estate,” of the *Manusmṛiti*.

4 Conclusions

Returning to the problematic last *pāda* of the seventh verse of the Bhitari inscription, there, too, *ārya* might have the same meaning. Skandagupta was probably not the eldest son by a chief queen, and thus he was not the strongest candidate to the throne. Nevertheless, he fought for the throne and secured it for himself by the power of his arms. When the panegyrists sing the praises of his glorious victories, they elevate him to the status of an *ārya*, that is, “eldest son,” a rightful heir to the throne.

In the fourth verse of the Allahabad pillar inscription, Candragupta embraces his son Samudragupta and chooses him to be the protector of the earth, while those born in the same family (*tulyakulaja*) watch the scene with dejected faces. Here the selection is clearly made by the father, the reference to whose “eyes that observe the truth” (*tattvekṣiṇā cakṣuṣā*) indicates that he has decided after due deliberation. He addresses his son with the word *ārya*, which here probably means “eldest son,” and affirms Samudragupta’s right to the throne. Skandagupta, on the other hand, was chosen not by his father, but by the goddess of royal majesty herself, also after careful consideration. Skandagupta, who was probably not the eldest son of Kumāragupta, won the throne with his strong arms, and he was elevated to the status of an *ārya*, “eldest son” and heir, by his deeds and by the poets who sang the praises of his deeds.

These two verses of the Allahabad and the Bhitari inscriptions express the power of poetry from which kings can benefit. As Daṇḍin would write a couple of centuries later (*Kāvyādarśa* 1:5):

ādirājayaśobimbam ādarśaṃ prāpya vāṇmayam |
*teṣāṃ asaṃnidhāne ’pi na svayaṃ paśya naśyati ||*³⁷

Look! The image of the fame of ancient kings, reflected in the mirror of literature, itself does not disappear, even though they are not present.

³⁶ Thieme, “*ārya*,” 284.

³⁷ Shripad Krishna Belvalkar, *Kāvyādarśa of Daṇḍin. Sanskrit Text and English Translation* (Poona: The Oriental Book Supplying Agency, 1924), 1.

In Samudragupta's case, the *praśasti* publicly declares and affirms his right to the Gupta throne. In the case of Skandagupta, the unique power of the panegyrist goes beyond the assertion of the truth of facts: it creates facts when it invests the king with a status he did not actually have.

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