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THE IKSHVAKU DYNASTY OF ANDHRA: ART, RELIGION AND ADMINISTRATION [3RD - 4TH CENTURY CE]

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Abstract

The Ikshvaku dynasty of Andhra Pradesh, ruling from c. 225 CE to 325 CE with its capital at Vijayapuri, represents a significant yet under-studied phase in the political and cultural history of South India. Emerging as successors to the Satavahanas, the Ikshvakus played a crucial role in maintaining political stability in the Deccan during a period of transition. This paper examines the multifaceted contributions of the Ikshvakus, with special focus on three dimensions: art, religion, and administration. Archaeological evidence from Nagarjunakonda reveals that the Ikshvakus were great patrons of Buddhism, establishing it as an international center of learning, while simultaneously performing Vedic sacrifices, thereby reflecting religious pluralism. Their limestone sculptures and stupas mark a distinct phase in early South Indian art that influenced Southeast Asian traditions. Administratively, the Ikshvakus issued land grants and Prakrit-Sanskrit inscriptions that provide insight into their governance and economy. Through analysis of epigraphic, literary, and archaeological sources, this paper argues that the Ikshvakus were not merely a regional dynasty but key contributors to the formation of early Andhra cultural identity and the diffusion of Indian art and religion.

Keywords: Ikshvakus, Nagarjuna Konda, Ancient Andhra, Buddhist Art, Deccan History, Religious Patronage

1. INTRODUCTION

The Deccan plateau occupies a central position in the cultural history of ancient India. Between the decline of the Satavahanas in the early 3rd century CE and the rise of the Pallavas and Guptas, the Ikshvaku dynasty of Andhra emerged as a significant political power². Ruling for approximately a century from their capital Vijayapuri, identified with modern Nagarjunakonda in Nalgonda district of Telangana, the Ikshvakus bridged two great eras of Indian history.

Despite their importance, Ikshvaku history has not received adequate scholarly attention compared to the Mauryas, Satavahanas, or Guptas. Most textbooks present Indian history as a direct transition from Satavahanas to Guptas, ignoring the regional dynamics of the Deccan. This research gap forms the basis of the present study.

The primary sources for reconstructing Ikshvaku history are epigraphic. Over 30 inscriptions have been found at Nagarjunakonda, Jaggayyapeta, and Guntupalli. The archaeological excavations by ASI under H. Sarkar in 1954-60 revealed stupas, monasteries, and palaces that throw light on their art and religion.



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This paper aims to: 1. Reconstruct the political history of Ikshvakus, 2. Analyze their contribution to Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions, 3. Evaluate their administrative and economic policies, and 4. Assess their legacy in shaping early Andhra culture.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to:

1. To reconstruct the political history of the Ikshvaku dynasty from 3rd to 4th century CE with special reference to Nagarjunakonda.
2. To analyze the contribution of Ikshvakus to Buddhist and Brahmanical art and architecture in Andhra.
3. To examine the administrative system, economy, and social structure under Ikshvaku rule.
4. To study the model of religious pluralism and patronage followed by Ikshvaku kings and queens.
5. To assess the legacy of Ikshvakus in shaping early Andhra cultural identity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarship on Ikshvakus began with *H. Sarkar's* ASI excavations which revealed the Buddhist complex at Nagarjunakonda

K.V. Ramesh compiled and translated all Ikshvaku inscriptions providing the epigraphic base

K.A.N. Sastri placed Ikshvakus between Satavahanas and Pallavas in South Indian history

R. Champakalakshmi discussed Ikshvaku role in trade and urbanization

D.C. Sircar analyzed the administrative terms in Ikshvaku records.

METHODOLOGY

This research follows a source-based historical methodology:

1. Primary Sources: Prakrit and Sanskrit inscriptions from Nagarjunakonda, Jaggayyapeta, and Guntupalli. Archaeological reports of ASI 1954-60.
2. Material Evidence: Study of limestone sculptures, stupas, and Yajna kundas for art and religious history.
3. Secondary Sources: Works of Sarkar, Ramesh, Sastri, and epigraphic journals.
4. Approach: The paper uses a regional history approach, combining political, religious, and art history to present a holistic picture of Ikshvaku Andhra.



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2. POLITICAL BACKGROUND AND ORIGIN OF IKSHVAKUS

The political vacuum created by the decline of Satavahanas around 225 CE led to the emergence of several regional powers in Andhra. The Ikshvakus, who claimed descent from the solar dynasty of Ikshvakus mentioned in the Ramayana, established themselves in the Krishna valley.

The earliest known Ikshvaku king was Vasisthiputra Sri Shantamula I. His inscriptions record performance of Vedic sacrifices including Ashvamedha, which signifies assertion of sovereignty. The most powerful ruler was Virapurushadatta, c. 270-290 CE. His queen Bhattideva, Kamadasa, and princess Kodabalisiri were great patrons and administrators.

Ikshvaku administration was monarchical with officials like Mahasenapati and Mahatalavara. The capital Vijayapuri was a fortified city with palace complex. By mid-4th century CE, Ikshvakus were overthrown by the Pallavas and Abhiras.

3. RELIGIOUS PATRONAGE: BUDDHISM AND BRAHMANISM

Patronage of Buddhism

Nagarjunakonda became one of the most important Buddhist centers in South India. The site has 30 Buddhist establishments including Mahachaitya and monasteries. Queens Kamadasa and Kodabalisiri made major land grants. Inscriptions mention monks from Ceylon, China, and Gandhara, showing its international character. The art style influenced Southeast Asian Buddhist art.

VEDIC TRADITIONS AND BRAHMANICAL PATRONAGE UNDER IKSHVAKUS

The Ikshvakus were equally committed to Vedic Brahmanism. Sri Shantamula I performed Ashvamedha, Agnishtoma, and Vajapeya yajnas. The Ashvamedha was a political statement of sovereignty. Kings also made agrahara land grants to Brahmanas. Later inscriptions shift from Prakrit to Sanskrit, showing Brahmanical influence.

They claimed descent from Ramayana's Ikshvaku lineage and used titles like "Dharma-Maharaja". This dual patronage gave them international prestige through Buddhism and local legitimacy through Vedic rituals. This model was later followed by Pallavas and Chalukyas.

RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE: COEXISTENCE OF BUDDHIST AND VEDIC STRUCTURES

ASI excavations 1954-60 revealed Buddhist and Vedic structures coexisting. The Buddhist complex included Mahastupa 90ft diameter with Jataka panels, 27 viharas, and chaityagrihas. The Vedic zone had brick Yajna Kundas with ash remains



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confirming Soma rituals, and palace ritual enclosures. The spatial proximity shows state policy of tolerance. This architectural pluralism became the hallmark of Andhra culture.

4. ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF NAGARJUNAKONDA

The Ikshvaku period marks the “Nagarjunakonda School” of art using local limestone. Features: slender figures, narrative panels, royal portraits. Architectural remains include planned city, palace, and audience halls. This style directly influenced Amaravati and through maritime trade reached Borobudur in Java. Thus Ikshvakus played a role in Indianization of Southeast Asia.

5. ADMINISTRATION, ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

Administrative Structure and Officials

The Ikshvaku state was a hereditary monarchy where the king held supreme authority. The king was addressed with titles like Maharaja, _Maharajadhiraja, and Dharma-Maharaja. Officials: Mahasenapati, Mahadandanayaka, Mahatalavara, Amatya. The kingdom was divided into Rashtra and Ahara. Village administration was in hands of Gramika. Queens Kamadasa and Kodabalisiri issued independent land grants.

Revenue System and Land Grants

Land revenue was the primary source of income, usually one-sixth of produce. Two types of grants: 1. Religious Grants to Buddhist monasteries with tax exemptions. Queen Kamadasa donated village of Vaddamanu. 2. Brahmadeya Grants to Brahmanas⁶⁴. These led to early feudalism.

Trade, Coinage and External Contacts

Ikshvakus controlled Krishna-Godavari delta. Roman gold coins, amphorae, and beads found at coastal sites. Ikshvaku coins were of lead and potin. Buddhist monks acted as agents of cultural and commercial exchange.

Society and Social Classes

Society organized on varna lines but flexible. Guilds of artisans and merchants _srenis_ made donations. Position of women was relatively high. Women donors, nuns, and lay followers mentioned.



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Conclusion of Section

Thus, Ikshvaku administration combined monarchical authority with decentralization. Their economy was agrarian but linked to maritime trade.

6. DECLINE AND HISTORICAL LEGACY

By c. 325 CE, Ikshvakus declined due to Pallava and Abhira attacks⁵¹. Legacy: 1. Preserved Andhra culture 2. Model of religious tolerance 3. Foundation for Pallava art 4. Nagarjunakonda remained Buddhist center.

7. CONCLUSION

The study of the Ikshvaku dynasty reveals that regional powers played a decisive role in shaping Indian civilization during the post-Satavahana period. Ruling for approximately one century in the Krishna valley, the Ikshvakus were culture-builders.

Politically, they filled the vacuum created by Satavahana decline and their administrative system became a model for Pallavas. Religiously, they perfected dual patronage - Buddhist international center at Nagarjunakonda and Vedic sacrifices locally. Artistically, the Nagarjunakonda School influenced Southeast Asia⁷⁵. Economically, they maintained agricultural prosperity and Indo-Roman trade.

In an age of religious polarization, their example of state-supported pluralism offers an alternative model. The ruins of Nagarjunakonda stand as testimony to a century when Andhra was at the crossroads of Indian and Asian history. The Ikshvakus remind us that the strength of Indian civilization lay not only in large empires but also in regional kingdoms that nurtured diversity and creativity.

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