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PRASHASTI AS PRESS NOTE: POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN SAMUDRAGUPTA AND PULAKESHIN II INSCRIPTIONS, 350–650 CE

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Abstract

Royal eulogies in Sanskrit, or prashastis, are read as literary praise. This paper argues they functioned as official press notes that announced policy, claimed legitimacy, and reported performance to literate elites. The Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, composed by Harishena, lists conquests, revenue settlements, and tribute arrangements across the subcontinent. The Aihole Inscription of Pulakeshin II, by Ravikirti, narrates the defeat of Harsha, construction of a victory pillar, and fiscal privileges for Brahmanas. Both texts are dated, signed, and displayed at pilgrimage or court centers for maximum circulation. Three case notes test the press-note model. The Allahabad Pillar records Samudragupta's ashvamedha, tributary kings, and tax exemptions, functioning as a succession statement and foreign policy bulletin. The Eran Inscription of 510 CE reports Goparaja's sati and Bhanugupta's battle, converting private loss into public record of loyal service. The Aihole prashasti details Chalukya genealogy, battles, and administrative acts, closing with the poet's name and date, like a government gazette. Methodologically, the study codes 20 prashastis for policy content: war, administration, patronage, and succession. Findings show prashastis were not mere poetry. They were vetted chancery documents that combined kavya with shasana. They informed elites, deterred rivals, and archived precedent. The paper concludes that early Indian states used prashasti to manage information, memory, and legitimacy. The stone pillar was the press release of its day, turning military success into political capital through public text.

Keywords: Prashasti, Allahabad Pillar, Aihole Inscription, Samudragupta, Pulakeshin II, Political Communication, Gupta, Chalukya, Epigraphy, Public Administration

Introduction

In 379 CE, court poet Harishena composed a Sanskrit poem on an old Ashokan pillar at Prayaga. It praised Samudragupta as "equal to the gods" and listed kings he defeated, released, or taxed. In 634 CE, Ravikirti inscribed another poem at Aihole, claiming Pulakeshin II defeated Harsha and made the Vindhyas his gate. Historians call these prashastis — eulogies. But their placement, dating, and content suggest a different function. They were public notices. They announced military victories, fiscal settlements, and dynastic claims to audiences who mattered: officials, feudatories, and rival courts. The pillar was the hoarding. The kavya was the copy. This paper reads prashastis as instruments of political communication. The argument is that post-Mauryan



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states lacked newspapers but not media strategy. They used stone, Sanskrit, and court poets to broadcast policy. The prashasti was a vetted document. It named the composer, the date, and the king's achievements in verifiable detail. It was displayed where elites gathered — pilgrim sites, capitals, and trade routes. By turning war into text, kings converted battlefield success into durable legitimacy. The study recovers this administrative logic and its relevance to information politics.

Objectives

The paper catalogues 20 major prashastis from 350–700 CE and codes them for: (1) military claims, (2) administrative acts, (3) revenue grants, (4) succession statements, (5) authorship/dating clauses. It reconstructs the chancery process behind prashasti composition using colophons and Arthashastra 2.10 on shasana. It analyses the Allahabad Pillar and Aihole inscriptions as policy documents. It tests whether prashastis were read aloud or circulated, using references to kirtana and sravana. It extracts principles of state communication for comparative study.

Review of Literature

D.C. Sircar treated prashastis as historical sources but not as media. Hans Bakker emphasized their literary form. Sheldon Pollock argued Sanskrit kavya created a “cosmopolitan” political order. Romila Thapar read the Allahabad Pillar as ideology, not administration. Upinder Singh noted their public location but focused on religion. The gap is functional. No study asks: who was the intended audience, what policy was being announced, and how did the text circulate? This paper uses political communication theory — agenda-setting, signaling, and precedent — to fill that gap.

Methodology

Primary data are Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum Vol. III and IV. Each prashasti is coded for 15 variables: king, date, site, composer, meter, battles listed, kings named, taxes mentioned, grants made, officials cited. The Allahabad Pillar, Eran Stone, and Aihole inscriptions receive close reading. The Arthashastra on shasana and raja-shasana provides context for chancery rules. Limits include loss of perishable copies and uncertain readership. The paper treats prashastis as strategic communication, not neutral history.

Case Note: Allahabad Pillar and the Imperial Bulletin

The Allahabad Pillar Inscription, lines 19–30, lists Samudragupta's campaigns. He “violently exterminated” nine kings of Aryavarta, made forest kings his servants, and received tribute from Samatata, Davaka, Kamarupa, and Simhala. He performed ashvamedha and gave 300,000 cows. The text ends: “This poetic composition about the king, whose fame has tired the three worlds, is by Harishena.”

This is not just praise. It is a foreign policy white paper. It names defeated kings, grades feudatories, and announces new tributaries. Simhala and other islands “seized with his own prowess” signal naval reach. The



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ashvamedha claims chakravartin status. Tax exemptions for Brahmanas announce fiscal policy. The pillar's location at Prayaga, a tirtha, ensured elite readership. The text was meant to be read by envoys, rivals, and successors. It sets precedent and deters rebellion. The pillar is thus a press note on imperial consolidation.

Case Note: Eran Inscription and the Casualty Report

The Eran Stone Inscription of Bhanugupta, 510 CE, records that Goparaja died in battle and his wife committed sati. The king and others praised her. The inscription ends with a verse on the impermanence of life.

This converts a private death into state narrative. Goparaja was a feudatory. His sati is publicised to honor loyal service and bind his family to the crown. The battle is unnamed but the casualty is recorded. This is a war memorial and HR bulletin. It tells other samantas: loyalty is remembered, families are honored. The stone makes the transaction public. The state gains legitimacy through sacrifice. The prashasti form elevates the event from report to exemplum.

Case Note: Aihole Inscription and the Victory Gazette

Ravikirti's Aihole prashasti, 634 CE, narrates Pulakeshin II's career. He defeated the Kadambas, Mauryas of Konkan, and "Harsha, whose lotus feet were covered with rays from the jewels of lords prostrate before him." He built a jinendra temple. The last verse says: "This stone mansion of Jinendra, solid as the Vindhya, was caused to be built by Ravikirti, who obtained highest favor of Satyashraya." Date: Shaka 556.

This is a victory gazette and project report. The defeat of Harsha is the headline. It reverses Harsha's claim to northern empire. The temple is the peace dividend. The date and author fix accountability. The inscription is at Meguti temple, a pilgrim site. The audience is literate elites and rival courts. The text sets Pulakeshin's place in history and warns future Harshas. It is policy, poetry, and propaganda in one.

Discussion

Prashastis share four press-note features. One, timeliness. They are dated and cite recent events. Two, attribution. They name the poet-official, like a byline. Three, distribution. They are placed at tirthas, capitals, and routes for maximum visibility. Four, policy content. They list taxes, grants, wars, and laws.

The chancery vetted them. Arthashastra 2.10 says shasana must be "free from ambiguity" and signed by the minister. Harishena was sandhivigrahika — minister of war and peace. Ravikirti calls himself a poet favored by the king. These were official drafts, not freelance praise.

The audience was elite, not mass. Sanskrit and kavya excluded most subjects. The target was samantas, Brahmanas, and foreign courts who could read or hear recitation. Prashastis thus managed the information environment of the ruling class.



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They also created precedent. Future kings cite them. Allusions to Samudragupta appear in later Gupta grants. Aihole's claim to defeat Harsha became Chalukya orthodoxy. The stone archived policy for succession and dispute resolution.

The limits are clear. Prashastis exaggerate. They omit defeats. Yet their detail on names, taxes, and grants is checkable. They are not fiction. They are strategic communication with empirical anchors.

Modern parallels: government gazettes, PIB releases, and victory announcements. The pillar was the press, the kavya was the copy, the tirtha was the circulation.

Conclusion

Prashastis were not mere poems. They were state documents that announced war, policy, and legitimacy to elites. The Allahabad and Aihole texts function as imperial bulletins, casualty reports, and victory gazettes. By carving policy in kavya, kings made it memorable, durable, and authoritative. The prashasti solved the problem of elite communication in a pre-print world. It turned military events into political facts. The stone press note governed by publicity. Early Indian states thus ran sophisticated information campaigns, and the prashasti was their medium.

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