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# A New Perspective on Dynamic Role of Prabhāvatīgupta in the Regimes of the Vākāṭakas and the Guptas

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**Abstract:** During the third/ fourth century of the Christian era two powerful kingdoms emerged in India, namely the Guptas and the Vākāṭakas, respectively. They ruled in the northern and southern parts of India. After the downfall of the Sātavāhanas many petty kings ruled in different parts of the southern India. Among them the Vākāṭakas emerged as the powerful dynasty in the southern parts of India and that too in Vidarbha region of present northeastern part of Maharashtra state. Vindhyaśakti I and Pravara Sena I were the first rulers of the Vākāṭaka dynasty. After Pravara Sena I the Vākāṭaka dynasty was divided into four branches. However only two branches are known so far. Rudra Sena II and his agramaharsi Prabhāvatīgupta belong to the main branch. After the sudden demise of Rudra Sena II, Prabhāvatīgupta had assumed the power of the Eastern Vākāṭaka kingdom as the regentess of her three minor sons. This article focuses on a dynamic role played by Prabhāvatīgupta, as one of the rulers of ancient India in stabilising and consolidation of the Vākāṭakas kingdom. The thrust of the paper is on Prabhāvatīgupta regime.

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**Keywords:** Vākāṭakas, Guptas, Vidarbha, Rudra Sena II, Prabhāvatīgupta, Seal, Inscription

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## Introduction

Two powerful kingdoms emerged in India during the third/ fourth century of the Christian era. They ruled in the northern and southern parts of India, namely the Guptas and the Vākāṭakas, respectively. The Guptas were well known for their powerful rule as well as for all round development of the society under their jurisdiction (Bhaisare 2012).

After the downfall of the Sātavāhanas many petty kings ruled in different parts of the southern India (Mirashi 1957: 27; 1963: xii). Among them the Vākāṭakas emerged as the powerful dynasty in the southern parts of India and that too in Vidarbha region, northeastern part of Maharashtra state. The following pages are devoted to a dynamic role played by Prabhāvatīgupta, as one of the rulers of ancient India in stabilising and consolidation of the kingdom of the Vākāṭakas.

Vindhyaśakti I was the founder of the Vākāṭaka dynasty. Pravara Sena I was the first ruler who enhanced political power of the dynasty. According to A.M. Shastri (1997: 168-169), he has carved out his principality in Vidarbha where the Sātavāhanas were once ruling. Pravara Sena I deposed the Sātavāhanas and established the Vākāṭaka kingdom in Vidarbha region. However, there is no mention of the defeated Sātavāhana king in any records of the Vākāṭakas.

After the rule of Pravara Sena kingdom of the Vākāṭaka was divided into four branches; however, only two branches are known so far to the historians from the study of various sources at their disposal. These two known branches ruled in the eastern and western parts of Vidarbha. The main branch is known as Padmapura-Nandivardhana-Pravarapura, ruled from Eastern Vidarbha; whereas, the second branch was established by Sarva Sena I. The latter branch ruled in western part of Vidarbha and it is known as Vatsagulma branch (Present Washim) (Shastri 1997: 171-172). Nearly nine rulers happened to have rule from main branch; they were - Gautamīputra, Rudra Sena I, Pṛithivi Sheṇa I, Rudra Sena II, Divākārā Sena, Dāmodar Sena, Pravara Sena II, Narendra Sena, and Pṛithivi Sheṇa II. In case of Prabhāvatīgupta of the main branch, she ruled after Rudra Sena II, owing to his untimely death. She, on behalf of her sons being minor, took the reins of the political power of the Vākāṭakas and consolidated the kingdom (Bhaisare 2012: 117-127).

Pṛithivi Sheṇa I was the son of Rudra Sena I and was a devotee of god Maheśvara (*atyanta-Māhesvara*). His rule was a peaceful one and never made any attempt to conquer any territories. Samudragupta and his son Chandragupta II of the Gupta dynasty were contemporary with him. These Gupta emperors were involved in constant annexation of neighbouring territories. For instance, Chandragupta II launched an attack in 395 CE on the Western Kshatrapas who were ruling from Mālwa, Northern Gujarāt and Saurāshṭra. These Kshatrapas were the northern neighbour of the Vākāṭakas. Subsequently, the Vākāṭakas extended their help to the Guptas against the Kshatrapas. As a result, their joint venture could easily defeat the Kshatrapas. Therefore, Chandragupta II married his daughter Prabhāvatīgupta with Rudra Sena II, the son of Pṛithivi Sheṇa I (Mirashi 1963: xxii-xxiii). The conquest of Kuntala had enhanced the prestige of the Vākāṭakas. As a result the Gupta emperor Chandragupta II was contemplating the overthrow of the Western Kshatrapas around this time. He felt that it would facilitate his task if he could secure a helpful ally on his southern flank. He also further thought of possibilities of his armies operate in Malwa and Gujarat. He, therefore, proposed a matrimonial alliance to Pṛithivi Sheṇa. Chandragupta II offered his daughter Prabhāvatīgupta in marriage to the crown prince Rudra Sena II of the Vākāṭakas. The offer was welcomed by Pṛithivi Sheṇa and the marriage was celebrated with great show, probably at Pāṭaliputra, the capital of the Guptas in c. 380 A.D (Altekar 1954: 110).

The marriage of Rudra Sena II with Prabhāvatīgupta had transformed the religious faith of the Vākāṭakas from Shaivism to Vaishnavism. The Māṇḍhaḷ and Jāmb copper-

plate record of the Rudra Sena II mentioned that his succession to the throne was due to a grace of lord Chakrapāṇi, namely, Viṣṇu (Mirashi 1957: 41; Shastri 1975-76: 68-76; 1997: 180). As fate would have it, the Vakatakas met with sudden death of Rudra Sena II. His wife Prabhāvatīgupta might be about twenty-five years old. Apart from that he left behind three sons and one daughter (Shastri 1997: 181-183; Bakker 1997: 16). All these children were minor; consequently, they couldn't assume the throne of the Vākāṭakas. In such circumstances Chandragupta II advised his daughter Prabhāvatīgupta to shoulder the responsibilities of the Vākāṭaka kingdom and its administration as regent for their minor sons (Altekar 1954:111-112). Hence Prabhāvatīgupta had to act as a regent for her three sons, namely, Divākarā Sena, Dāmodar Sena and Pravara Sena II till they become capable to rule the Vākāṭaka throne. Unprecedented situation shaped the era of Prabhāvatīgupta. In brief, the era was challenging in many ways for her, including for her family and for the administration of the kingdom. Moreover the era of Prabhāvatīgupta was an important milestone for women folk in the Early Historic period of Ancient India.

Prabhāvatīgupta was a strong woman who successfully faced any emotional and political challenges. Vindhyaśakti II of the Vatsagulma branch was a contemporary of Prabhāvatīgupta. He was the eldest relative with akin to the family of the Vākāṭakas and hence must be unhappy of not being appointed as a regent. But it seems he did not offer any opposition to Prabhāvatīgupta owing to strong support of her father Chandragupta II. Therefore, Vindhyaśakti II had to approve her regency. During her regency the relations between both the branches of the Vākāṭakas remained stable (Altekar 1954: 111-112; Shastri 1997: 184-85).

Prabhāvatīgupta ruled for her eldest son the *yuvarāja* Divākarā Sena, Her rule coincided with the issue of Poonā/Pune copper plate charter in thirteenth year of her regency. It is most likely that the *yuvarāja* Divakarsena met with tragedy. As a result Prabhāvatīgupta had to continue her regency upon his death. Therefore she had to continue her regency for few more years till Dāmodar Sena became capable to ascend the Vākāṭaka throne. Unfortunately, Prabhāvatīgupta had to face another family tragedy related to sad demise of Dāmodar Sena who also died prematurely. As a result she had to shoulder again the responsibilities to rule on behalf of her third son Pravara Sena II. The repeated tragedies in the form of the death of her sons made her impatience; and hence, she was waiting for the day when she would be relieved from the obligations of the Vākāṭaka kingdom (Shastri 1997: 185; Altekar1954:113).

Earlier there was no unanimous view regarding certain facts and events pertaining to Dāmodar Sena and Pravara Sena II. The scholars like A.S. Altekar (1954: 111) and V.V. Mirashi (1957: 41, 43; 1963: xxiii-xxiv) believe that Dāmodar Sena and Pravara Sena II were the same individual, and Dāmodar Sena assumed the name Pravara Sena II at the time of his coronation. Another group of scholars like A.M. Shastri (1997: 182-183) and Hans Bakker (1997: 16) states that these were two distinct individuals and were coronated kings. Latter group of the scholars had furnished two relevant epigraphical

evidences. According to them the Riddhapur plates mention Prabhāvātīgupta as the mother of Dāmodar Sena and Pravara Sena II (*Mahārāja-śri-Dāmodarasena-Pravarasena-janani*). In addition, the Miregaon charter seal sheds light on the fact that Prabhāvātīgupta was the ‘mother of two kings’ of the Vākātakas (*vikrāntayor jananyās tu Vākātakanarendrayoḥ | śriprbhāvātīguptāyāḥ śāsanaṃ ripusāsanaṃ ||*). Her Poonā/Pune copper plate charter is also important source / document for establishing the chronology of the Vākātakas in which the rulers are mentioned in a chronological order.

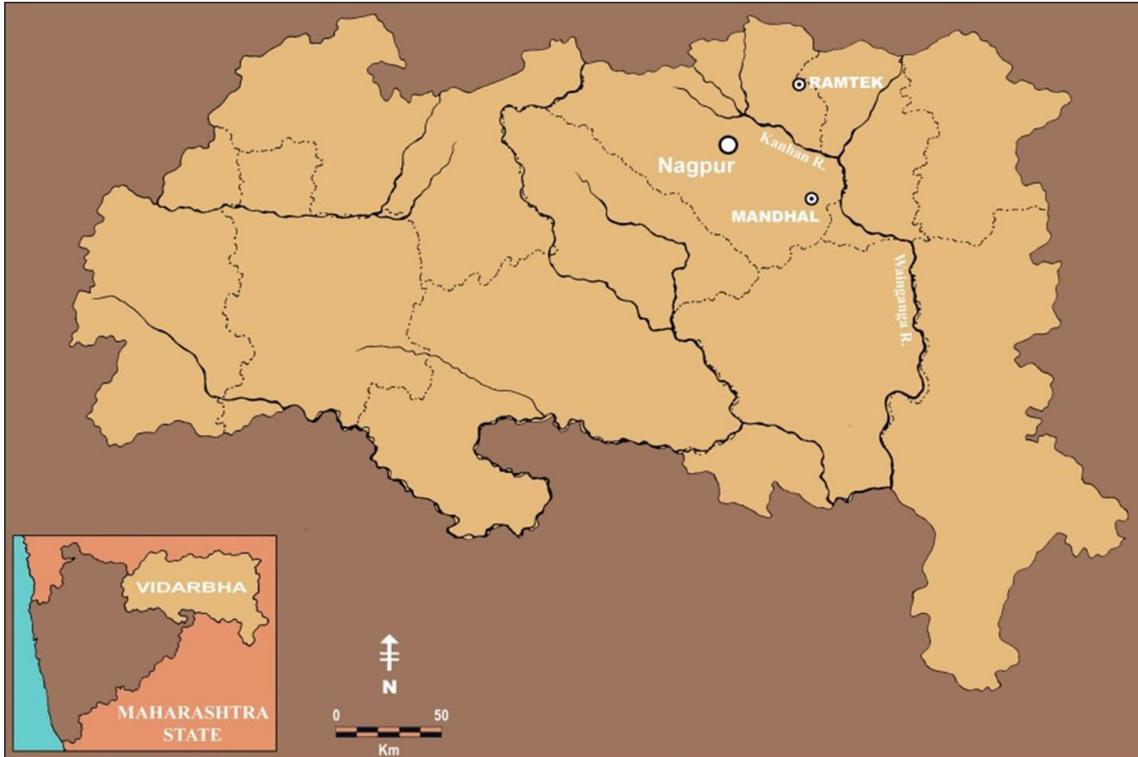


Figure 1: Map of Vidarbha showing Ramtek and Mandhal location

During her regime, Prabhāvātīgupta had issued two copper-plate grants and built temples in the memory of her father-in-law Pṛithivi Sheṇa I and husband Rudra Sena II. The scholars like A.P. Jamkhedkar (1983: 26; 1988: 63-67) and others believe that the group of temples in ashlar masonry at Ramagiri (present Ramtek, near Nagpur) (Figure 1) was built within the fifty year’s time-span during the regime of Pravara Sena II. However, Hans Bakker (1992: 14; Bakker and Isaacson 1993: 69) presents altogether a different view saying that the Varāha shrine (Figure 2a) at Rāmagiri must have been built by Rudra Sena II in his lifetime; whereas the Rudra-Narasimḥa temple (Figure 2b) dedicated in the memory of her husband Rudra Sena II conceived by Prabhāvātīgupta. It is important to note that the only known date of Rudra Sena II was his fifth regnal year known from the Māṇḍhaḷ cooper-plate set (Shastri 1997: 180-181) (Figure 1). On the basis of the above evidence it is inferred that the temples in ashlar masonry had taken shape in the territory of the Vākātakas during the regency of Prabhāvātīgupta.



Figure 2a: Varāha shrine at Rāmtek

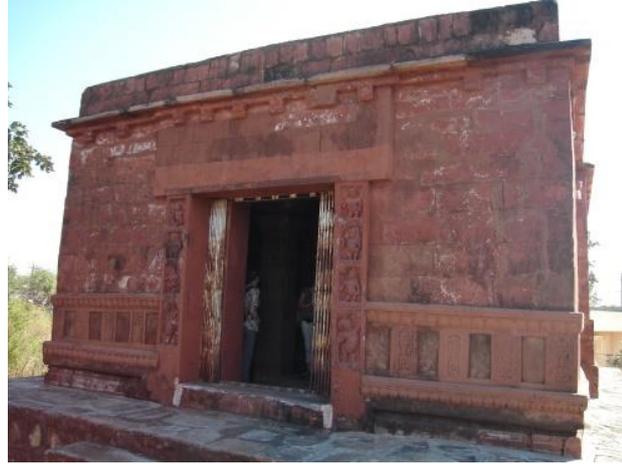


Figure 2b: Rudra-Narasimha temple at Rāmtek

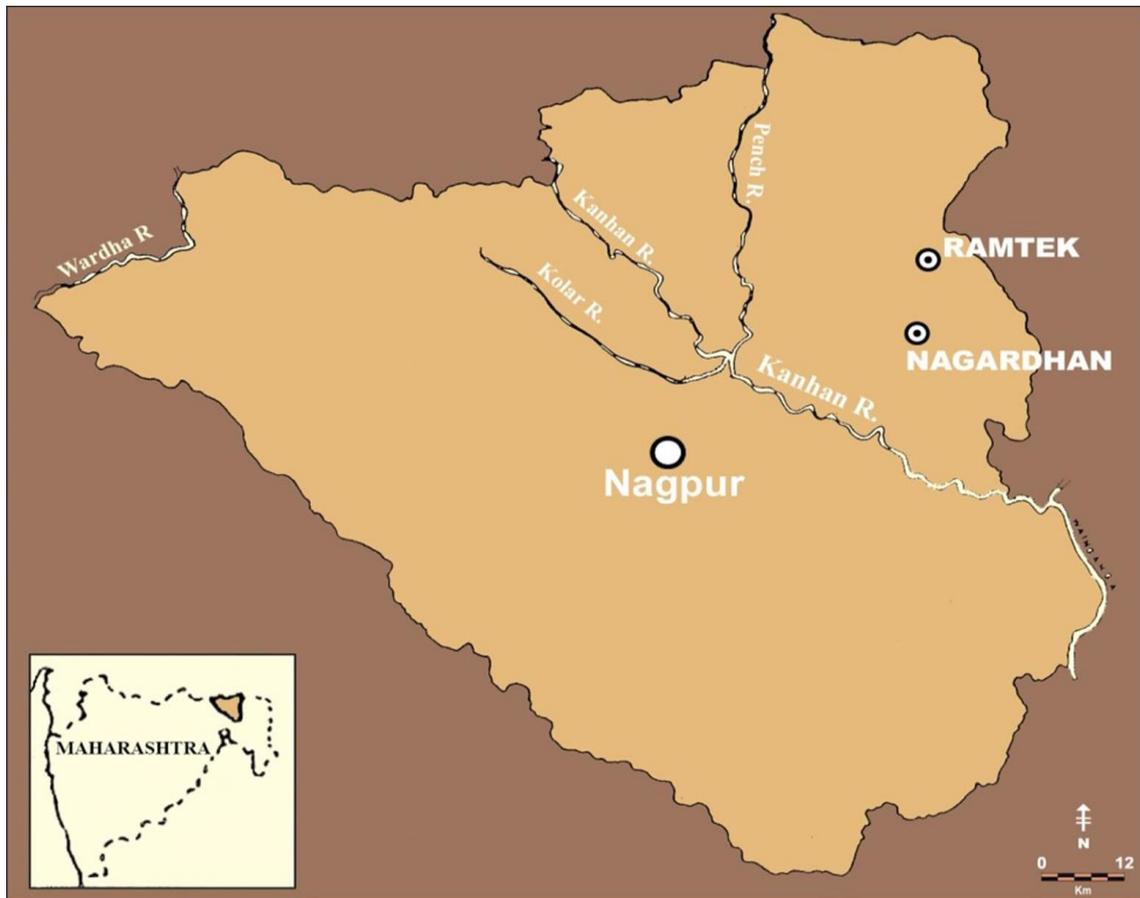


Figure 3: Location of Nāgardhan and Ramtek

During the period of Rudra Sena II and Prabhāvatīgupta, the places like Ramagiri (Present Ramtek) and Padmapura, respectively, became religious centre and the capital of Vākāṭakas. The Poonā/Pune plate of Prabhāvatīgupta was issued from Nandivardhana (present Nāgardhan, Ramtek taluka of Nagpur District). It reveals that the capital was shifted from Padmapura to Nandivardhana during the regency of Prabhāvatīgupta. Recent excavations at Nāgardhan (2015-2016) (Figure 3) (Sontake *et.*

al. 2016: 50) have unearthed an oval-shaped clay seal (Figure 4) of Prabhāvatīgupta. The size of the seal is 35.71 mm x 24.20 mm x 9.50 mm and weight 6.4 gm. The seal bears her name in this fashion, namely 'Śrī Prabhāvatīgupta[yāh]' in a box-headed Brahmi script and Sanskrit language along with a depiction of conch (Dandekar *et al.* 2018: 45). The depiction of a conch shows Vaishṇav affiliation of Prabhāvatīgupta. This seal was introduced and issued by her. It indicates a strong support to the fact that her regency was powerful amid her contemporary administrators and politicians. The seal was recovered from the stratigraphic context of Nāgardhan excavations. Therefore, there is hardly any doubt that Nandivardhana — identified with modern Nāgardhan — was the capital during the regency of Prabhāvatīgupta. It shifted from Padmapur to Nandivardhana during her regency.



Figure 4: Seal of Prabhāvatīgupta from Nāgardhan (Courtesy: Dandekar *et al.* 2018: 45)

Prabhāvatīgupta carried out successful administration of the Vākāṭakas nearly a period of twenty years on behalf of her minor sons. It became possible owing valuable assistance of the officers that had been deputed by her father Chandragupta II. Chandragupta II had promised her with military and administrative support. As a result he deposed some trusted officers and statesman to assist his daughter in the administration of the Vākāṭakas. He also sent Sanskrit poet Kalidasa as a tutor to impart an education to her minor sons (Altekar 1954: 111-112). Her dynamic role in various sphere of cultural and political fields contributed all round development of the kingdom of the Vākāṭakas. She left behind a rich cultural heritage in the form of temple architecture, sculpture, and iconography. It is conjectured that she left this world at the ripe age of about eighty-five (Shastri 1997: 185).

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that Prabhāvatīgupta was a seasoned and a competent authority to face any challenge in her political life including untimely death of her husband Rudra

Sena II. Rudra Sena II and Prabhāvatīgupta had three sons and a daughter, namely, Divākarā Sena, Dāmodar Sena, Pravara Sena II and Atibhāvātī. The religious faith of the Vākāṭakas had undergone a sea change from Śaivism to Vaishṇavism owing to matrimonial alliance with the Guptas through a wedlock of Prabhāvatīgupta (the daughter of Chandragupta Vikramaditya) and Rudrasena II (the Vākāṭaka ruler). Subsequently, Prabhāvatīgupta might have begun altogether a new mode of temple building activity dedicated to Vaishṇavism in ashlar masonry (stone), first of its kind in Vidarbha region. As a part of dynamics of polity, she probably shifted capital of Padmapura to Nandivardhana during her regency associated with *yuvarāja* Divākarā Sena. Recent contextual evidence of a seal of Prabhāvatīgupta from the Nāgardhan excavations (2015-16) highlights the impact of her political power in the consolidation and ushering in political stability of Vākāṭakas rule. This recent discovery of a seal seems to be an important official document which reflects her dominant role in the administrative and transactional activity in the Vākāṭaka kingdom. Prabhāvatīgupta left behind the evidence in the form of a seal that enlightened us more about being one of the successful women among the prominent rulers in ancient India in general and the Vākāṭakas in particular.

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