

A Brief Study of the Saka Era: An ancient Indian calendric system

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Introduction

Ancient Indians used more than one calendar to calculate their time and dates. These numerous calendars had been imposed to them by various authorities like sovereign rulers or religious authorities. Some of the sovereign imposed calendars are Saka samvat, Vikram samvat and Gupta era and Kalchuri era and religion imposed calendar are like Kali Yug calendar and Buddha Nirvana calendar. The present study attempts to understand the Śaka era, which was one of the calendric systems practiced in ancient India, and also present Indians have been practicing it for their religious activities. The new Saka year begins on 21st in Caitra month and every months end on the full moon day

Research Problem

The present research intends to explore how the Śaka era was used in ancient India. It intends to study its gradual usage through the reign.

Aims of the Research

The aims and objectives are attempted as [an follows:] the following steps:

- to know when Saka era was began in India
- to study its gradual usage through the reign

- to get the knowledge of the calendar system imposed by invasions in India

Research Methodology

The data collection has to be done through previous works review, and the analysis should be done through the induction method.

Discussion

Ancient Indians used the calendric systems when they wrote the inscriptions. Out of them, the oldest Indian era is called Early Śaka or ancient Śaka era, which was started in Gandhara area, by somewhere in the second century BCE (Henry Falk, 2007: 131- 133).

The historical origin of the Śaka era is highly controversial. It's beginning is relatively clear when it comes on April 1 in 78 CE. The beginning of the Saka era is now widely equated to the ascension of king Chashtana in 78 CE. His inscriptions dated to the years interpreted as Saka years 11 (89 CE) and 52 (130 CE) have been found at Andhau in Kutch region. The first date of this era goes back to the first Śakas' invasion of India. The first invention of Śakas can be assigned to c. 71 or 61 BCE. The victory of Śakas in 71 or 61 BCE occasioned the foundation of an era which can be called an Early Śaka Era. In their first attempt of conquering Śakas India lost their ground in Avanti, but a branch of them survived in north-west India and continued to use the Śaka era founded in 71 or 61 BCE. The year 191 of this era marks the end of the reign of Wima Kadphises and the beginning of the reign of Kaniška in c. 71 BCE + 191= 120 CE.

The inscriptions of Chāṣṭana dated to the years 11 and 52, have been found in Andhau in Kutch region. These years are

interpreted as Śaka years 11 (89 CE) and 52 (130 CE). When Śakas under the leadership of Chāṣṭana occupied Avanti for the second time, they founded the latest Śaka era in 78 CE, which was used by the Śakas of south-west India and later on adopted by the Indians.

Previously the beginning of the Śaka era corresponds to the ascension of Kaniśka I in 78 CE. Among the early inscriptions usually attributed to this Old Śaka Era are the Taxila copper plate of the year 78 and Taxila silver vase of 191. Several years later, Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions with dates in the three hundred of an unspecified to the Old Śaka era were also usually attributed to this era. (Richard Solomon, 1998: 181,182)

The earliest authentic epigraphic reference of the era by the name “Śaka” is now the Vāḷa inscription of Suketuvarman dated in Śaka 322= CE. 400. The dates of some inscriptions, notably those of the Western Kṣatrapa rulers of the line of Chāṣṭana, are the Śaka era, though they are not explicitly designated as such. In any case, the name of the era clearly points toward an origin with one of the nonindigenous dynasties of the 1st century CE. The legend recorded by Brahmagupta, Al- Bīrūnī, and others that it was founded to mark the second expulsion of the Śakas by Vikramāditya.

Śaka dates in inscriptions are normally counted as expired, but current years are also found. Śaka era dates are sometimes combined with dates in other eras. So, Śaka era theoretically began on the first day of Caitra in CE. 78. Expired Śaka years are converted to CE dates by adding 78 or (for the dark half i.e. Kṛṣṇa pakṣa of Pauṣa and for Magda and Phāḷguṇa 79). For current years, add 77 or 78. (Richard Solomon, 1998: 183) From the reign of Rudrasimha first (178-197), they recorded the date of minting of their coins in the shaka era, usually written on

the obverse behind the king's head in Brahmi numerals. During the early centuries of this era, the word 'Śaka' was not found associated with it. The words used are, generally 'varśe' and, rarely 'samvatsare' both meaning 'in the year'. Up to the 12th century CE, Śaka era was regarded as founded by some Śaka king, and the word 'Śālivāhana' was not associated with it. It was only later that the era came to be called Śālivāhana Śaka or Śaka Śālivāhana. So, this association of Śālivāhana with the Śaka era made this era respectable not only in the south but all over India.

The Saka era came to be regular epigraphic usage from the time of the Calukyas of southern India around the sixth century CE. The era is also widely used in western (Gujarat and Saurashtra), eastern (Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Assam) and central Indian territories adjacent to the eastern Deccan. Among the Southeast Asian States, Java and Cambodia has a strong tradition of recording dates in terms of the Saka era.

Month names of Saka calender with length and start date

Saka Months	Length (Dates)	Gregorian Months
Chaitra	30-31	March 22
Vaishakha	31	April 21
Jyestha	31	May 22
Ashadha	31	June 22
Shravana	31	July 23
Bhaadra	31	August 23
Ashwin	30	September 23
Kartika	30	October 23
Agrahayana	30	November 22
Pausha	30	December 22
Magha	30	January 21
Palguna	30	February 20

Conclusion

Starting from the 71 or 61 BCE, the Saka Era Calendar is one of the most relevant calendars of the subcontinent. This calendar helps in modern-day time calculating simultaneously. It disclose some knots of the ancient times in-front of the archaeologists and epigraphists. Though the origin of this particular era is under some big confusions, it can be said that Saka calendar continues the tradition of ancient India, which was very much decorous.

References

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