

Draupadi's Silent City: Kampilya and the Poetics of Forgetting

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Abstract

The village of Kampil today (Kampilya), in the Farrukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh, is removed from the mainstream of Indian culture. It is the place cited in Mahabharata as the place of Draupadi's swayamvara. According to the Jain belief it is the birthplace of 13th Tirthankara Vimalanatha. It was noted by the nineteenth century colonial surveyors as a mound that could be dug, and has been established by archaeologists that people inhabited it continuously from the Painted Grey Ware period and beyond. Kampilya, however, hardly became as integral part of the narrative that is the regular history of ancient India as did Hastinapura or Indraprastha. This paper argues that the recently provided edited collection of Kampilya: Unravelling the Essence of History, Literature and Spirit, by Shaleen Kumar Singh and Seema Gautam, should be read with epic, Jain and archaeological documents and poses the question about why this city of reference was on that much the slimmer of scholarship for so long. The argument is not "No evidence". It's that the proof still had to be spread out over disciplines and sects that scarcely read a lot of other people, and that an e-book made just to set those pieces on a single page are doing something which is incredibly useful.

Keywords: Kampilya, Southern Panchala, Ayodhya, Draupadi's swayamvara, Hastinapura.

Introduction

Delhi-born Indian Kampilya is so familiar to most Indians that even they don't realize that they know the name. It's the city of Drupada, who was humiliated by his old classmate Drona and upraised the Army under him; it's the city of humility and yet a son-in-law, which eventually led to a war. The swayamvara of Draupadi is one of the most recounted events from the epic and recreated in the serials for decades without any attempt being made to pinpoint the exact location of the event and retelling of this event in school textbooks has not stopped either. The location has lost its role in the narrative that it gave birth to.

This certainly isn't a mythography like Ayodhya or Dwarka, nor is it a myth switching speeds. It's not just about myth running faster than geography, like Ayodhya or Dwarka.

There is a real village perched upon it, real archaeological strata below its base and a paper trail dating back to the discovery of the mound at Kampil by Alexander Cunningham in 1878, who associated it with the ancient southern seat of Panchala, Misra, "Draupadi's Birthplace". What it has lacked is a body of scholarship willing to hold the epic material, the Jain material, and the archaeological material in the same hand. Singh and Gautam's edited volume, gathering eleven essays that move between Jain scriptural study, comparative mythology, sacred geography, colonial-era survey extracts, and folklore, is an attempt to do exactly that. Reading it alongside the primary and secondary material it draws on suggests both how much has already been recovered about Kampilya and how much of that recovery has happened in isolated pockets that this kind of collection is only now starting to connect.

The Epic City: Kampilya in the Mahabharata

The Adi Parva gives Panchala a fairly precise origin story: Bharmyashva, its founder-king, is said to have divided the territory among five sons, one of whom was named Kampilya, and the region came to be called Panchala, "the land of five," in their honor (qtd. in "Kampilya as a Centre of Learning"). Whether or not that etymology is historically sound, it shows that the epic tradition itself treated Kampilya as old even by its own standards, a city that predates the war it is best known for.

The war-adjacent story is more familiar. Drupada and Drona had studied together as young men, and Drupada's later refusal to acknowledge that friendship set off a chain of events that runs through most of the epic. Drona's revenge against Drupada eventually splits Panchala into a northern half, held by Drona, and a southern half, which stays with Drupada and is ruled from Kampilya (Suryavanshi). It is here, after his son Dhrishtadyumna and daughter Draupadi are born from a sacrificial fire, that Drupada stages the swayamvara, and it is here that Arjuna, disguised as a Brahmin, strings the bow and hits the revolving target to win Draupadi's hand. Local tradition in Kampil still points to a specific spot as the site of that contest, and to a small pool as the "Kund" associated with Draupadi (qtd. in "Glory of Kampilya"). Whether these are genuine survivals of an old memory or later devotional retrofitting is hard to say with certainty, but their persistence across generations of villagers is itself worth noting.

The interest of the epic towards Kampilya does not exhaust in the swayamvara. The Shikhandi episode, in which a child of Drupada was raised as a girl, but discovered to be a boy at his marriage with a princess, and led to a siege of the city is also set here (Suryavanshi). That is the place of "drona's death" (kampilya) as well as the line it gave birth to, the basis for the birth of Dhrishtadyumna who took oath to slay his father's old friend. That is, Kampilya is not a mere background in the Panchala plot of the Mahabharata. It does the story. It creates the story line. All big ramifications of the break up of Drupada-Drona, swayamvara of Shikhandi, the change of his name and the vendetta of Dhrishtadyumna can be traced to this one city. This reputation can be reinforced by the references to it in the Vedic period. Many of the Samhitas and Brahmanas, such as the Taittiriya Samhita, the Maitrayani Samhita and the Shatapatha Brahmana contain a verse to call upon the beautiful, learned women of Kampil "Kampeelvasineem"— "Incredible Kampilya"—in the future. In the centuries when it was already part of a classical Sanskrit grammar (as is the case for Kampilya, which is mentioned as a settled city, by Panini), it took on the status of a geographical location that was not just a legend. None of these verify Draupadi's existence or her actual self sacrifice for her husbands. It does prove that "Kampilya" existed; that it was a real place with a name, an inhabited place, a literary place, centuries before and after the core story of the Mahabharata. But it does establish that "Kampilya" was such a place—an inhabited place, a real place, had a name, and was a

literary place, centuries before and after the core story of the Mahabharata.

Kampilya in Jain Sacred Geography

With the Mahabharata, Kampilya has one identity while the Jain tradition has a second, distinct one. According to Jain cosmology the Tirthankara of the current cosmic cycle Vimalanatha, was born in Kampilya, the kingdom of King Kratavarma of the Ikshvaku lineage, ('Vimalnatha'). The Jain calendar marks his birth on the third day of the bright half of Magha, and later hagiographical works, including the Trishashtishalakapurushacharita and the Uttarapurana, repeat the Kampilya birthplace as settled fact (qtd. in "Images of Tirthankara Vimalanatha"). For Jain pilgrims and scholars, this single detail is enough to place Kampilya among the more sacred geographies of the tradition, on a par with other Tirthankara birth-cities even though it receives far less devotional traffic than, say, Ayodhya or Pavapuri.

What is striking about the Jain material is how much of it operates on its own timeline, unbothered by the epic chronology. The Avasyaka Niryukti records Kampilya as the site of the Panchakalyanaka, the five auspicious events of a Tirthankara's life, descent, birth, renunciation, omniscience, and liberation, and treats the town as having been "hallowed" by these events independent of anything Draupadi's family did there generations later (qtd. in "Glory of Kampilya"). The Uvasagadasao, one of the Jain Agamas, records that Mahavira himself visited Kampilya during his travels, which if

taken at historical face value would place the twenty-fourth Tirthankara in the same city the epic assigns to Drupada, several centuries and one entire cosmic identity apart from the thirteenth Tirthankara's birth ("Glory of Kampilya"). Jinaprabha Suri's fourteenth-century Vividha Tirthakalpa goes further still, devoting a separate section, the Kampilapura Tirthakalpa, to the city's specifically Jain history, distinct from and largely indifferent to its epic associations.

The essays in Singh and Gautam's volume that deal with the Digambara and Shvetambara traditions separately are useful here precisely because the two sects do not always agree on the details of Vimalanatha's iconography or on which local shrines mark which events, even while agreeing on Kampilya itself as the birthplace. Shvetambara art traditionally renders Vimalanatha in gold; Digambara art renders him in yellow, without ornamentation (Kamboozal). Specificities such as these can be overlooked as a trivial detail, but there is a degree of sensitivity about these things in the structure of this volume that it succeeds in achieving: Kampilya is not just one sacred place, but several, and remembered in various ways. It is a place which several traditions have put together their own and sometimes conflicting claims on and any investigation of the city must be able to keep the various claims and legends distinct, not squash them together into a composite legend. Colonial Archaeology and the Search for a Lost Capital.

The third strand, the driest and—may I say—most decisive, is the liveliest of all the strands. In March, 1878, while conducting the

survey of the area, Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, visited the site of Kampil, and compiled what is now Volume XI of his tour reports (Cunningham). He wasn't the first person who heard about it. Local tradition had already preserved the association between Kampil and Draupadi's swayamvara well enough that villagers, in Cunningham's own account, could point him to the supposed site of the archery contest and to "Drupad's Kund," even though no structure from the Mahabharata period had survived above ground (qtd. in "Glory of Kampilya"). What Cunningham contributed was not a discovery so much as a confirmation: he matched the oral geography of Kampil to the textual geography of southern Panchala and put that identification into the colonial administrative record.

That record turned out to matter. Kampil was declared a protected site under the Archaeological Survey of India in December 1920 (Misra, "Draupadi's Birthplace"). Decades later, B. B. Lal's explorations of Mahabharata-associated sites in the mid-1950s recovered Painted Grey Ware and Northern Black Polished Ware from the location, material culture markers that archaeologists conventionally associate with the later Vedic and early historic periods in the Gangetic plain (Misra, "Draupadi's Birthplace"). Further excavations conducted in 1976 confirmed a single-culture Painted Grey Ware deposit some 1.3 to 2 meters deep, along with terracotta and copper artifacts consistent with continuous habitation ("Painted Grey Ware Culture"). None of this proves the swayamvara

happened. What it proves is that Kampil was a real, continuously occupied settlement in exactly the period the epic tradition assigns to it, which is about as close to corroboration as archaeology of this kind can offer for epic geography.

The unhappy part of this story, and one that several of the volume's essays gesture toward without dwelling on at length, is what happened to the site after Cunningham's visit rather than before it. Being catalogued by the colonial survey seems to have made Kampil more vulnerable, not less. Structures with carved walls were reportedly demolished for building material or converted into newer Jain temples; the ruins locally known as Drupad's Qila have eroded further even within living memory; and the Archaeological Survey of India, despite its own 1920 protection order, has been criticized for directing the bulk of its conservation budget elsewhere (Misra, "Bird's View"). It is a common pattern in Indian locations of complex religious value: the greater the number of competing values, as in Vedic, epic, Jain, and later devotional, the more difficult institutional support of that value is likely to be rather than less.

Kampilya in Devotional and Folk Memory

In addition to the epic and the Jain material and mostly buried beneath them all is a strand of oral tradition which the essay in this volume on folklore seeks to enlist before it slips away. Many of these are simple devotional: Kamopilvasini Temple and Rameshwar Mandir are still preserved by locals and are still visited by pilgrims, although in a few numbers ("Incredible

Kampilya"). Some of it is more diffuse, more to the story of the village than to any single cult, like the story that claims Kampil was founded by a sage named Kampila Rikh and a later king, Brahmadatta, who ruled the town long before Draupadi's time ("Glory of Kampilya"). The Buddha and his mother made their way through the city, as the nearby location of Sankisa was part of Kampilya's ancient orbit ("Incredible Kampilya," with Buddhist sources adding one more layer), Buddhist tales refer to the city.

There is no consistency between these fragments - frequently they contradict each other in chronology and detail; what unites them is persistence. A settlement of continuous occupancy for typically several thousand years does not provide a purified history, a single perspective on itself; it leaves some layers and adds others on top. The editors have chosen, among their other features, to present folklore and oral tradition as a major theme and a source in its own terms, rather than as colorful commentary overlaid on the "real" oral record or scriptural texts.

Kampilya and the Case for a Multidisciplinary Recovery

Taken together, the essays in *Kampilya: Unravelling the Essence of History, Literature and Spirit* make an argument that is less about any single new fact and more about method. A 2025 study in *Knowledgeable Research* put the underlying problem plainly: despite dense religious, historical, and cultural associations across Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist sources, Kampilya "remains largely neglected in modern

scholarship" ("Kampil (Kampilya)"). Reading the volume against the material surveyed above suggests why that neglect happened even though the evidence itself was never really thin. Epic scholars working on the *Mahabharata* have had little professional reason to track Jain hagiography of Vimalanatha. Jain studies specialists working on the Tirthankara traditions have had equally little reason to track Painted Grey Ware stratigraphy. Archaeologists reporting excavation data are not typically in the business of adjudicating between Digambara and Shvetambara iconographic conventions. Each discipline produced solid, careful work on its own slice of Kampilya, and each slice sat more or less unread by the scholars working the slice next to it.

This is where an edited volume, as opposed to a single-authored monograph, has a real structural advantage. Singh and Gautam's collection can put a Jain scriptural study by one contributor next to a Cunningham-derived historical extract and a folklore essay, in the same table of contents, without requiring any single author to have mastered all three fields personally. Dr. Bhagwan Singh Suryavanshi's contribution on Kampilya's place in Indian civilization, and Jyotiprasad Jain's essay on Kampilya in Jain literature, translated for this volume from a rare Hindi source, sit a few pages apart from an extract of Cunningham's own nineteenth-century field notes. That juxtaposition is the argument. It does not resolve the tension between, say, the Jain dating of Vimalanatha's birth and the epic chronology of Drupada's reign; those traditions were never going to be

reconciled into one timeline, and the volume wisely does not try. What it does is make it possible for a single reader to hold both accounts, and the archaeological record besides, in view at the same time, which is the precondition for any future scholarship that wants to do more than repeat one discipline's version of the story.

Conclusion

Kampilya's problem was never a shortage of sources. Between the Mahabharata, the Jain Agamas and hagiographies, the Vedic Samhitas, Panini's grammar, Cunningham's survey, and a century and a half of subsequent excavation, there is more material bearing on this one small village than on most sites of comparable size anywhere in North India. The problem was that the material never got read together. Singh and Gautam's *Kampilya: Unravelling the Essence of History, Literature and Spirit* does not claim to settle the unresolved questions, whether the swayamvara has any historical kernel, how the epic and Jain chronologies of the city relate to one another, why a protected archaeological site has been allowed to erode as badly as it has. What the volume does, and does well, is put the relevant traditions on speaking terms with one another, essay by essay, so that a reader coming to Kampilya for the first time does not have to reconstruct that conversation from a dozen scattered journals and out-of-print survey reports. Given how much of Kampilya's physical heritage has already been lost to demolition, encroachment, and administrative neglect, a book that at least

keeps the textual and scholarly record intact and in dialogue is not a small contribution.

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