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The Origin and Branches of the Kalachuri Dynasties: A Study in Fragmented Sovereignty

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Abstract: The Kalachuris occupy an important but complex position in the political history of early and medieval India. Rather than constituting a single continuous empire, the Kalachuris appeared as several dynastic houses that exercised authority in different regions and periods. The earliest historically identifiable Kalachuri rulers are associated with the sixth-century kingdom centred on Mahishmati in the Narmada region. Krishnaraja, Shankaragana and Buddharaja are known through inscriptions and, particularly, through a substantial corpus of silver coinage. Following the decline of this early power in the face of Chalukyan expansion, Kalachuri political authority re-emerged in a number of regional formations, most notably at Tripuri in central India, Kalyani in the Deccan, Ratanpur in Dakshina Kosala, Raipur in Chhattisgarh, and Sarayupara in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

This paper examines the origins, political development and geographical distribution of these branches. It also investigates the problem of dynastic identity: whether the later Kalachuris should be regarded as direct descendants of one historical family or as separate ruling houses that adopted a common prestigious genealogy. Their claims of descent from the Haihaya lineage and the legendary Kartavirya Arjuna played an important role in constructing political legitimacy. At the same time, inscriptions, coins and architectural remains reveal substantial regional differences. The history of the Kalachuris therefore provides an important example of **fragmented sovereignty**, in which dynastic identity survived political fragmentation and enabled related or similarly named ruling houses to establish authority in different regional contexts.

Index Terms - Kalachuri, Haihaya, Mahishmati, Tripuri, Kalyani, Ratanpur, Raipur, Sarayupara, Chedi, Dahala, Kartavirya Arjuna, Epigraphy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of the Kalachuris presents a distinctive problem in the study of early medieval Indian political formations. The name *Kalachuri* occurs in a number of regions and historical contexts, yet these references do not necessarily describe one uninterrupted political dynasty. Instead, the evidence points to several Kalachuri ruling houses that emerged at different times and in different geographical settings. The earliest historically attested Kalachuris are associated with western and central India during the sixth and early seventh centuries CE. Their rulers—particularly Krishnaraja, Shankaragana and Buddharaja—are known from inscriptions and coinage. Krishnaraja's silver coins have been found across a wide area extending from Rajasthan to the Deccan. However, the geographical distribution of these coins does not necessarily demonstrate that the king directly controlled every region where his currency circulated. Indeed, the

continued circulation of *Krishnaraja-rupakas* after the decline of the dynasty demonstrates the importance of distinguishing monetary circulation from political sovereignty.

The political importance of the early Kalachuris declined following the expansion of the Badami Chalukyas. Yet the disappearance of their early kingdom did not result in the disappearance of the Kalachuri name. During the early medieval period, several Kalachuri houses emerged in central, northern and southern India. The most important among them were the Kalachuris of Tripuri, the Kalachuris of Kalyani, the Kalachuris of Ratanpur and Raipur, and the Kalachuris of Sarayupara.

This geographical dispersal raises an important historical question: **how did a dynastic identity survive after the disappearance of an earlier political centre?** The answer lies partly in genealogical traditions. Later Kalachuri inscriptions frequently associated the ruling houses with the Haihayas and the legendary king Kartavirya Arjuna of Mahishmati. Such genealogies connected contemporary rulers to an ancient Kshatriya tradition and provided a powerful instrument of political legitimization.

The present study therefore approaches Kalachuri history not simply as a succession of dynasties but as a history of **fragmented sovereignty**. The term refers here to a political situation in which a shared dynastic identity could persist across multiple regional states without necessarily implying the existence of a single centralized empire.

2. Sources and Methodology

The study of the Kalachuris depends heavily upon epigraphic, numismatic and architectural evidence. Literary sources are useful for reconstructing their political relationships, but inscriptions provide particularly important information concerning royal genealogies, territorial claims, religious patronage and administrative practices. Three categories of evidence are especially significant.

2.1 Inscriptions

Copper-plate grants and stone inscriptions constitute the principal primary sources for several Kalachuri branches. The inscriptions frequently begin with genealogical accounts and contain royal titles, descriptions of military achievements, religious donations and grants of villages or land. The Sarayupara branch, for example, is known from inscriptions discovered at Kasiā and Kahla. The available records demonstrate the existence of Kalachuri rulers in the region north of the Sarayu, although the precise relationship between different Kalachuri families in that area remains uncertain.

2.2 Numismatic Evidence

Coins provide important evidence for the early Kalachuris. The silver coinage of Krishnaraja, generally dated to the sixth century, is especially significant. These coins imitated aspects of earlier Western Kshatrapa and Gupta monetary traditions while carrying the ruler's own name and religious titles. Their circulation demonstrates the economic importance of the Kalachuri polity, although coin finds must not automatically be equated with territorial sovereignty.

2.3 Architectural Evidence

Temples and religious monuments associated with Kalachuri rulers provide additional evidence for their political and cultural activities. Their patronage of Shaivism was particularly important, while later branches also supported diverse religious and literary traditions.

3. The Origin of the Kalachuris

3.1 The Haihaya Tradition

One of the most persistent features of Kalachuri royal ideology was the claim of descent from the **Haihaya** lineage. The Haihayas were associated in Sanskritic tradition with the legendary king **Kartavirya Arjuna**, also known as Sahasrarjuna, and with the ancient city of **Mahishmati**. Kartavirya Arjuna occupies an important position in Puranic and epic traditions. He is represented as an exceptionally powerful king and is traditionally associated with the Narmada region. By claiming descent from him, later Kalachuri rulers connected themselves with an ancient and prestigious Kshatriya genealogy. This genealogy should not, however, be treated automatically as literal historical evidence of uninterrupted descent. Medieval royal genealogies often served political purposes. They connected contemporary rulers with prestigious legendary ancestors and thereby strengthened their claims to sovereignty and social status. Thus, the Haihaya tradition should be understood simultaneously as **mythological memory and political ideology**.

3.2 Mahishmati and the Early Kalachuris

The earliest historically identifiable Kalachuri rulers are associated with Mahishmati and the surrounding Narmada region. Krishnaraja, generally placed in the sixth century CE, is the earliest securely known ruler of this line. He was followed by Shankaragana and Buddharaja. Evidence from coins and inscriptions establishes the existence of this ruling house and its Shaivite orientation.

Krishnaraja's silver coins are particularly important. They have been discovered over a large geographical area, including parts of Rajasthan, Maharashtra and western India. Yet their wide distribution should be interpreted carefully. Some coins remained in circulation long after the political decline of the dynasty, demonstrating that monetary circulation could extend beyond the boundaries of direct political control. The early Kalachuris therefore represent an important example of a regional state whose political and economic influence extended beyond the territory that can confidently be identified as its administrative core.

4. Decline of the Early Kalachuris

The political position of the early Kalachuris deteriorated during the early seventh century. The expansion of the **Badami Chalukyas** brought increasing pressure upon the Kalachuri kingdom. Buddharaja, the last major ruler of the early Mahishmati line, appears to have faced Chalukyan military expansion. The resulting political transformation did not necessarily eliminate the Kalachuri ruling family altogether, but it destroyed its position as a major regional power. This distinction is important. The decline of a centralized kingdom did not necessarily mean the disappearance of its dynastic traditions. Over subsequent centuries, the Kalachuri name reappeared in several regions. The emergence of these new centres provides the basis for understanding Kalachuri history as a process of political fragmentation and regional adaptation.

5. The Kalachuris of Tripuri

The **Kalachuris of Tripuri**, also called the Chedi or Dahala Kalachuris, became the most politically important of the medieval Kalachuri branches. Their capital was **Tripuri**, identified with modern Tewar near Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh. The kingdom was generally known as Dahala or Chedi. The branch became particularly prominent from the ninth century onward. A historical account of the dynasty places the accession of **Kokalla I** in the mid-ninth century, marking an important stage in the consolidation of Tripuri Kalachuri power. Kokalla I was an energetic ruler whose reign marked the beginning of a period of expansion. The Tripuri Kalachuris interacted with several of the major powers of northern and central India, including the Gurjara-Pratiharas, Rashtrakutas, Paramaras and Chandelas. The dynasty reached a particularly high point under rulers such as **Gangeyadeva** and **Lakshmikarna**. Their political ambitions extended well beyond the immediate territory surrounding Tripuri.

The Tripuri branch illustrates one of the central themes of Kalachuri history: the transformation of a regional dynasty into an imperial claimant. Royal titles, military campaigns and genealogical traditions were used to present the ruler as a universal or near-universal sovereign. Nevertheless, Tripuri Kalachuri power was not permanent. Competition from the Paramaras, Chandelas and other regional powers gradually reduced their influence. By the later medieval period, their political significance had declined substantially.

6. The Kalachuris of Sarayupara

A less powerful but historically significant branch emerged in **Sarayupara**, the region north of the Sarayu or Ghaghara River in present-day eastern Uttar Pradesh. The branch is especially important because it demonstrates that the Kalachuri name had spread into northern India independently of the main Tripuri centre. Surviving inscriptions from Kasiā and Kahla provide evidence for rulers associated with this regional dynasty. The Archaeological Survey's published epigraphic material identifies the Sarayupara Kalachuris through a stone inscription from Kasiā and a copper-plate grant from Kahla.

The political status of this branch appears to have varied over time. Its rulers interacted with the powerful **Gurjara-Pratiharas** and **Palas**, and the dynasty eventually disappeared from the historical record during the eleventh century. The Sarayupara evidence is particularly valuable for understanding the concept of fragmented sovereignty. The existence of a Kalachuri ruling house in this distant region does not necessarily prove that it was administratively subordinate to Tripuri. Instead, it demonstrates the capacity of Kalachuri dynastic identity to operate within different regional political environments.

7. The Kalachuris of Ratanpur

Another important branch developed in **Dakshina Kosala**, corresponding broadly to parts of present-day Chhattisgarh. The Ratanpur Kalachuris became one of the longest-lasting regional manifestations of the Kalachuri political tradition. Their capital at **Ratanpur** became an important political and religious center. The dynasty's inscriptions provide evidence of a distinct regional political culture. Rather than attempting to dominate northern India on the scale of the great Tripuri rulers, the Ratanpur Kalachuris consolidated their authority within Chhattisgarh and neighbouring territories.

Their longevity is particularly significant. While the Tripuri branch declined as a major political force, the Ratanpur branch continued to exercise regional authority for centuries. Its history therefore demonstrates that political durability did not necessarily depend upon imperial expansion. Kalachuri patronage contributed to the development of temples and religious institutions in the region. The architectural remains associated with the dynasty form an important part of the cultural heritage of Chhattisgarh.

8. The Kalachuris of Raipur

The **Raipur Kalachuris** represented a later regional development within the Chhattisgarh political sphere. The branch emerged from the Ratanpur political tradition and established its authority around the Raipur region. Its emergence illustrates a second level of fragmentation: an already regional Kalachuri kingdom could itself divide into additional political centers. This process should not necessarily be interpreted simply as dynastic weakness. Regional subdivision could allow members of a ruling family to establish independent political bases in areas where direct centralized control was difficult. The Raipur branch survived into the early modern period before the expansion of Maratha power transformed the political structure of Chhattisgarh.

9. The Kalachuris of Kalyani

The **Kalachuris of Kalyani**, also known as the Southern Kalachuris, represent one of the most significant later manifestations of Kalachuri power. Their political centre was **Kalyani**, modern Basavakalyan in Karnataka. Their rise occurred within the political environment of the Western Chalukyas. The most prominent ruler was **Bijjala II**, who initially served as a powerful Chalukyan subordinate before asserting independent authority. Around the middle of the twelfth century, the Kalachuris established control over Kalyani and much of the surrounding Deccan. Their independent rule was relatively brief, conventionally dated to approximately **1156–1181 CE**. The importance of the Kalyani Kalachuris extends beyond military and political history. Their reign coincided with the development of the **Virashaiva/Lingayat** religious movement and the emergence of the Kannada *vachana* literary tradition. The period associated with Bijjala and his successors therefore represents a major moment in the religious and literary history of medieval Karnataka. The Kalyani branch demonstrates that Kalachuri political identity could be adapted to a substantially different regional environment. Their connection with the Deccan also illustrates how medieval political authority frequently developed through the transformation of powerful feudatories into independent rulers.

10. Dynastic Identity and Fragmented Sovereignty

The central argument of this study is that the history of the Kalachuris cannot adequately be explained through the model of a single dynasty rising and falling. Instead, the Kalachuri experience reveals three interconnected processes:

Political Fragmentation: The early Kalachuri kingdom disappeared as a major centralized state, but Kalachuri ruling houses subsequently emerged in different geographical regions.

Genealogical Continuity: The Haihaya-Kartavirya tradition provided a common ideological language. Dynasties operating in different regions could use this genealogy to associate themselves with an ancient Kshatriya past.

Regional Adaptation: Each branch adapted to its own political environment. The Tripuri Kalachuris competed with major north Indian powers. The Kalyani Kalachuris emerged from the Deccan feudatory system. The Ratanpur and Raipur branches developed within the political geography of Chhattisgarh, while the Sarayupara branch interacted with the Pratiharas and Palas.

Thus, **fragmentation did not necessarily destroy dynastic identity**. In some circumstances, fragmentation actually permitted that identity to survive by allowing different branches to adapt to different political environments.

11. The Kalachuri Era and the Problem of Chronology

Another important feature of Kalachuri history is the use of the **Kalachuri-Chedi Era**, traditionally beginning in 248–249 CE. The era appears prominently in later Kalachuri inscriptions and became an important chronological system in central India. Its use, however, should not be taken as straightforward proof that the later medieval Kalachuris were politically continuous with a dynasty beginning in the third century CE. The continued use of the era demonstrates something different but equally important: historical memory could itself become a source of political legitimacy. By maintaining an established chronological tradition, later rulers connected their administration with an older political past. In this respect, chronology, genealogy and political identity operated together.

12. Epigraphy and the Reconstruction of Kalachuri History

Epigraphic evidence is particularly important because the Kalachuri branches often left relatively limited narrative literary material. Inscriptions provide information about: royal genealogies; succession; military campaigns; religious affiliations; land grants; administrative divisions, titles and claims to sovereignty, relations with neighbouring dynasties. The inscriptions of the Sarayupara Kalachuris demonstrate the importance of such evidence. The Kasiā inscription and Kahla copper-plate grant preserve genealogical information that would otherwise be almost impossible to reconstruct. The published epigraphic material also shows that scholars have historically distinguished between different local Kalachuri families because the surviving records do not establish a simple continuous genealogy.

13. Conclusion

The history of the Kalachuris illustrates the complexity of political formation in early and medieval India. The Kalachuris did not constitute a single uninterrupted empire stretching from the sixth to the eighteenth century. Rather, the Kalachuri name was associated with a series of political formations that emerged in different regions and historical circumstances. The early Kalachuris of Mahishmati, represented by Krishnaraja, Shankaragana and Buddharaja, provide the earliest securely identifiable political foundation. Their silver coinage and epigraphic evidence demonstrate the existence of a significant sixth-century kingdom, although the wide circulation of their coins should not be confused with direct territorial control. Following the decline of this early kingdom, Kalachuri identity persisted through regional branches. The Tripuri Kalachuris became the most powerful political formation and played an important role in central Indian politics. The Sarayupara branch demonstrates the spread of Kalachuri political identity into eastern Uttar Pradesh. The Ratanpur and Raipur branches-maintained Kalachuri traditions in Chhattisgarh for centuries, while the Kalyani Kalachuris briefly established a major Deccan kingdom under Bijjala II. The most important conclusion is therefore that **Kalachuri history is better understood as a history of dynastic networks than as the history of a single continuous state**. Their repeated invocation of the Haihaya lineage and Kartavirya Arjuna provided ideological continuity even when political authority was geographically fragmented.

The concept of fragmented sovereignty thus helps reconcile two apparently contradictory features of Kalachuri history: the absence of continuous centralized rule and the remarkable persistence of Kalachuri identity. Political fragmentation did not necessarily mean cultural or genealogical disappearance. Instead, it created opportunities for different branches to establish new centers of power and adapt old traditions to new political environments. The Kalachuris consequently offer an important case study in the relationship between **dynastic memory, regional state formation and political legitimacy** in medieval India.

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