

Women in Deccan: An Epigraphical Substantiation

Dr. Rupali Mokashi

Associate Professor, Head, Post Graduate Department of History,
R. K. Talreja College of Arts, Science & Commerce, Ulhasnagar

Abstract: India is an ancient land with a living and unbroken traditions of diverse religions, cultures and faiths. Women have always been a vital link in this process from the days of the Harappan Civilization. When one tries to appreciate and understand the women of historic ancient India, it is realized that customarily the position of women in ancient India is judged by analyzing the famous female protagonists depicted in the literary works produced by stalwarts or relying on the norms laid down in scriptures of different times, thus overlooking the 'real' women. Their patronages, contributions and personal achievements to the making of the Indian society were rarely brought to light. There is a need to re write the history of women in ancient India in general and in Deccan in specific.

Keywords: Women, Ancient India, Inscriptions, Deccan

Introduction

Inscriptions were never satisfactorily utilized as source to reconstruct the history of women in ancient India. The earliest instance of engraving inscriptions in India belongs to the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka. (273-236 B.C.) It was because of the vision of this great emperor that Buddhism became a world religion without shedding a drop of blood.

So inscriptions as a source of history were available only after 3rd century B.C. But there after thousands of inscriptions scattered all over, issued by royalty as well as engraved by laity cascade insight on various aspects of life of ancient Indians in general and women in specific. At this juncture it becomes essential to understand why inscriptions outweigh other conventional literary sources.

'As compared to lengthy descriptions and commentaries about the famous female protagonists in the literature, the women depicted in the inscriptions offered lesser content but greater validity.' The genuineness of each of the woman discovered during the research rendered them invaluable as an individual as well as a source to reconstruct the history of Deccan in a fresh perspective.

Initially it was that expected that only the royal class would be represented in the inscriptions and their number also would be very minimal. But contrary to my belief that only queens and princesses would appear in the inscriptions, hundreds of laywomen, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain, Devadasis i.e., the temple ritual specialists and even the courtesans did find mention in the inscriptions.

1. Find spots of Inscriptions

Inscriptions are scattered all over Deccan in the form of many copper plates and rock edicts. They are engraved in Buddhist caves, Hindu temples, nisidi stones, hero stones (viragal) etc. Most of the

inscriptions studied are religious or donative in character which, however, does not impede them from revealing socio, political and economic information in great details. By duly recognizing the contributions and achievements of these remarkable yet very 'real' women of India will help to create a profound awareness about the role that they played in shaping the society of ancient Deccan.

There are achievers, patrons of various performing arts and education, devotees, donors and financiers of different religions as well as governors and regents of different areas. Inscriptions reveal the glorious tradition of capable and confident women of ancient Deccan. Due to the huge geographical spectrum of India this survey has been restricted to a specific geographical area called Dakshinapatha or Deccan.

2. Dakshinapatha

Traditionally Dakshinapatha or Deccan has always been a melting pot between the North and peninsular South. Geographically it covers a large plateau bounded on both the sides by Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, which could be identified with the modern states of Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Chronologically the period under this study covers fourteen centuries spanning over Deccan from 200 B.C. to 1200 A.D.

Prominent religious faiths such as Buddhism and Jainism along with Hinduism found liberal patrons among the royalty as well as the laity. On the economic front, merchants from Deccan flourished considerably due to the sea borne trade with the Ptolemaic and Greco-Roman Empires through the ports dotted on the Arabian coast. During the early centuries of the Christian era, India's flourishing overseas trade with Europe had a lasting impact on the social, economic and religious life, especially Buddhism. It thus becomes important to identify the role women played in shaping the society of Deccan in these vibrant fourteen centuries.

3. The Queen's Edict: Earliest Instance of Epigraphical Record of Indian Woman

As said earlier, if the first issuer of the inscriptions in ancient India was Emperor Ashoka, then the first woman appearing in the inscriptions was his queen Karuwaki.¹ The Allahabad pillar inscription of 3rd century BC otherwise known as the 'Queen's pillar edict' was in form as well as content a command from the king Ashoka (273 BC-232 BC) to his Mahamantras or the royal officers on religious duty. He asked them to take note of various donations made by her. Queen Karuwaki donated mango groves and alms to the Buddhist. An interesting aspect of this inscription is that King Ashoka introduced her as his second queen and the mother of Prince Tivala.² His other queens such as Asandhimitra, Tissarakha and Padmavati do not find a place for themselves in his inscriptions.

4. Women, Patrons of Buddhism

One of the great contributions of Buddhism was in the field of architecture. After the reign of Ashoka, different architectural types for the veneration, such as Stupa (the object of worship) Chaitya (Prayer Hall) and the Viharas or dormitories were excavated in rock all over Deccan. Buddhist women devotees, queens, nuns as well as laywomen have partially financed for the excavation of these sites.

The Stupa of Sanchi is a world heritage site. It is essential to know that no less than eighty-five women devotees have recorded their donations in the individual capacity at the famous stupa of Sanchi. Only one of them is a queen called Vakalaye devi. The only sign of her royal status is the suffix 'devi' otherwise there are no other details about her. Her donation reads 'Vakalaye deviye Ahimita matu'.³ Remaining all female donors are either lay women or nuns. It will be one of the rare instances when lay women and nuns have donated in such large numbers.

The inscriptions at Sanchi are not casual references but carefully drafted identities, e.g. they have been variously known as daughters, wives, first or second what ever the case may be, daughter in laws, mothers and at times simply by their personal names like Naja⁴, Reva⁵, Ijavati⁶, etc. Their places of residence are also recorded. Sometimes places like Vidisha and Ujjain can be identified while others have lost in obscurity. Either these women must have traveled a long way and reached Sanchi and personally entrusted the donation for the construction of this stupa or found some network that would have delivered their donations at the site.

5. Free Expressions of faith by Women

Inscriptions reveal that female donors were free to donate a sum whatever they could afford for the cause of religion they upheld. There are many instances where the donor woman is a devotee of the great masters like Buddha and Mahavira while the rest of the family followed the Hindu traditions.

Even the courtesans of the kings like Paliyakka⁷ could freely exercise this right. Paliyakka was the daughter of a palace cook. She dedicated a temple for Arhat Parshva or Mahavira which exists in good condition even today. After her death her mother built Paliyakka basadi or a temple in her memory.

Inscriptions not only confirm the existence of courtesans in ancient India but also show that they could freely exercise religious expressions, donate for the cause and more importantly, unveil their profession in the donative inscriptions which were to survive for the generations to come. Mathura, now famous for the Krishna worship was a great seat of Jainism during the early centuries. An inscription informs us about donation of some courtesans and their relatives. Nada styled as a ganika or courtesan, Vasu (the daughter of another courtesan named Ada) and Lonasobhika together with their relatives set up water reservoir (prapa) and a stone slab (shilapatta) in the Jain temple there.⁸

A still better example of this type can be found at Nagarjunakonda. After the downfall of the Mauryan dynasty, various local dynasties sprang all over Deccan. Most of the rulers upheld Hindu traditions. Today religious fanaticism is a major threat to world peace and harmony. But inscriptions indicate the prevalence of a beautiful religious harmony. It's remarkable to know that more than two thousand years ago, women in ancient Deccan were torch bearers of this harmony.

There is a magnificent Chaitya at Nagarjunakonda in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The key financier of this site was Mahatalavari Chamtisiri. Mahatalavari was a title that indicated a female version of a high sounding noble. Mahatalavari Chamtisiri was the sister (Sodara bhagini) of Ikshvaku King Vasithiputra Sri Chantamula. She was married to the Mahasenapati the Mahatalavara Vasithiputra Kandasiri of the

Pukiya family. Chamtisiri erected this great chaitya in the 6th regnal year of King Madhariputra Virapurasadatta.⁹ Apart from Chamtisiri no less than eight women have financed at Nagarjunakonda. One of them was Bodhisiri, a lay woman, and a grand matriarch, who not only financed for the construction of this Chaitya but also wished the merit to be shared among her family members, a solid group of twenty nine relatives.¹⁰

It should be noted that the Ikshvaku kings were staunch Shaivites. They have performed various Vedic sacrifices. King Siri Ehavala Chantamula has donated two pieces of land as perpetual endowment (akshayanivi) as the bhikkhu- bhoga for the use of the monks. Whether this benevolence inspired the financiers of Nagarjunakonda or the later inspired the men in the royal household of Ikshvaku can not be decisively ascertained.¹¹

6. Naganika, First Marathi Queen recorded in Inscriptions

The known history of Deccan unfolds in the second century B.C. from the era of the great Satavahanas. Though Deccan was a part of the Mauryan Empire, we hardly know anything about the history, rulers, people and especially women. But fortunately around second century B.C, we come across an exceptional queen of the third ruler of the Satavahana dynasty. She is special in many ways. Queen Naganika is the first queen known to ancient Deccan. There is a natural curiosity to see at least some of the exceptional women mentioned in the inscriptions. Unfortunately, inscriptions rarely give an opportunity to see the donor's image. But this visionary queen selected a special place to create a family portrait with lengthy inscriptions glorifying the members of her family.

Regrettably due to the ravages of time and people hardly anything has survived there. Naganika had ordered seven relievo figures to be excavated inside Naneghat¹² cave with labels of their names at their feet. Naganika was the first woman in India to do so. We also must keep in mind that Naganika was a widow. When this project was conceived and executed, her son Vedishree was the king and she was quite old in age. The Naneghat cave was neither a religious layout nor a burial site, it was carefully chosen by the Satavahanas to exalt the family glory at a busy trade route toll collection centre bustling with caravans and traders of far-off land who would carry the fame of Queen Naganika with them to distant lands.

'Nane' means coin and 'ghat' means pass, a route where caravans and traders of far-off land perhaps as far as west-Asia and Mediterranean would be frequently visiting and paying toll in cash. Even today this route is used by the local people. Even the choice and sequence of the relievo figures excavated inside the cave show a definite mind-set of Naganika and her powerful position in the family. Naganika's father-in-law Simuka, founder of the dynasty, was succeeded by his brother Krishna as Naganika's husband Satakarani was then minor. There seems to be a feud between the uncle and the nephew regarding the accession to the throne. Probably, Naganika's father who was a local ruling chief must have helped. This matrimonial alliance must have helped Satakarni to consolidate power. This fact explains the presence of Tranakayir's image in Naneghat cave along with the Satavahana royal family.

The sequences in which these images are engraved are also unique.

1. Simuka, 2. Naganika, 3. Satakarni, 4. Vedishree, 5. Maharathi Tranakayir Kalalay and her younger sons 6. Bhayal and 7.Satavahana.

Naganika deliberately did not give any place to Krishna in the Naneghat caves. Also, her own image was placed earlier than that of her husband's which a unique feature. That's not all about Naganika. She has given a long list of eighteen Vedic sacrifices that were performed by the royal couple which was a normal practice.¹³ After the Ashvamedha sacrifice a special silver coin was issued bearing the names of Naganika and Satakarni. This is the first Indian coin bearing the name of any woman.¹⁴ This shows Naganika's immense importance in the statecraft. Another such coin is that of Gupta king Chandragupta I and his Licchavi queen, Kumaradevi. Even in this case the queen's maternal family was instrumental in helping Chandragupta to ascend the throne, which couldn't be a coincidence in both these cases.

What is unusual even today is that widowed Naganika performed certain sacrifices like Angirasamayana, Trayodashatiratra and Dashatiratra. The inscription uses a specific word 'sayam' or 'herself' for these sacrifices.¹⁵ This quote is again exceptional keeping in view of her widowed status and the possibility of a widow performing any sacrifices was not common at all, even today.

7. Gautami Balashri, True Successor of Naganika

Another amazing queen of the same dynasty lived after a century of Naganika's time. By then time had changed and for the worse. This queen was Gautami Balashree, wife of King Shivaswati who was almost eclipsed by the Saka intruder Kshaharata Kshatrapa Nahapana. The family had to shift their capital from Junnar to Pratishtan or Paithan. It was her son Guatamiputra Satakarni who twice decisively defeated Nahapana, first at Nasik and after a fortnight in the vicinity of Karla where a majestic Chaitya was excavated. Curiously enough to commemorate his victory Guatamiputra Satakarni donated a village called Kakhadi for the expenses of the monks staying at Karla.

This grant becomes more interesting when we know that Guatamiputra Satakarni took much pride in asserting himself as 'one and only one Brahmana or Ekabamma'. As queen mother she was alert enough to notice even after six years that Kakhadi was destroyed. Gautami Balashree gave orders to replace it by another village called Ajakalakiya. It's interesting that this order was taken down verbally by Lota¹⁶, the woman doorkeeper of inner chamber or Antahpura of Gautami Balashree, more so when her son was still reigning. All these details have been given in the long eulogy engraved in a large cave no. 3 excavated at Nasik which is commonly known as Devi lene or the queen's cave.

It's interesting that Gautami Balashree chose a Buddhist Cave complex to engrave this eulogy. This grand matriarch lived the long life. After her son's death, her grandson Vasithiputra Pulamavi became the next king. In his 19th regnal year Gautami Balashree noticed that the work of the cave was completed except for the decorative carvings, she asked Vasithiputra Pulumavi to donate the village called Pishachipadrak for the same purpose. It was donated to the Bhadavaniya community of Buddhist monks.¹⁷

It's a rare instance where one comes across a widowed mother, sailing through difficult times, ably guided her son and had a vision to excavate such a magnificent cave to immortalize the victories,

personal achievements and even physical features of her son. Without her vision we would not have known so much about her and her son.

Its interesting that the family of Nahapana who was responsible for the almost eclipse of the Satavahanas also donated at Nasik and Karle. Nahapana's son in law Rishabhadatta and daughter Dakshamitra made donations for the community of the monks staying at Nasik.¹⁸

8. Synthesis of Foreign Races

In the year 258 AD, a Scythian lay woman donated at Nasik, which is interesting in many ways. Her name is Vishnudatta Shakanika. She was the daughter of Scythian called Agnivarman and the wife of Ganapaka (accountant) Rebhila and the mother of Ganapaka Vishnuvarman. While Vishnudatta and her family bear very typical names of Vedic gods, she seems to be a devotee of Buddha. The Ganapaka title describes accountant as an occupation in ancient Deccan, there by confirming prevalence of trade, commerce and accounting. She donated 3500 karshapanas to provide medicines for the sick among the community of monks. In this endowment following amount was invested in cash in the prevalent currency called Karshapana.

1000 Karshapanas with the guild of Kularikas or potters.

2000 Karshapanas with the guild of Odayantrika or workers fabricating hydraulic machines

500 Karshapanas with the guild of Tilapippaka or oilmen.

The interest accumulated over this money was to be divided for the benefit of the monks at Nasik.¹⁹

Thus, this inscription gives an insight in the prevailing economic life around 1700 years ago as well as the very keen economic sense showed by Vishnudatta while planning and investing the money she donated for the benefit of the Sangha.

There was a considerable amount of foreign element present in the Deccan society. Deccan had always maintained political, cultural and trade contacts with the western world right from the heyday of Sindhu Sarasvati civilization. During the early centuries of Christian era, there was an influx of foreigners in Deccan society who came through land and sea routes. They blended well with the Deccan society and religion. There were Scythians, Huns, west Asians and also Europeans. *The fragrance of the spices and the viscosity of the Muslin and silk dragged them to the shores of Arabian coast with gold bullion.* Ptolemy complained of the drain of Roman wealth to India. The foreign families were slowly getting accepted in the Indian society by way of matrimonial alliances and adoption of local religions.

So, one can find a Huna queen Viradhyaka constructing a Shiva temple.²⁰ The family of Gautami Balashree, so proud of their Brahminical lineage had to accept a Scythian princess as her grand daughter-in-law. Kanheri, a huge Buddhist cave complex older than Mumbai by at least 1,000 years, records a donation of Shateraka a personal minister of this princess. She was the daughter of Shaka king Rudradamana.²¹

During the early centuries of the Christian era the Yavanas were also a prominent foreign group present in Deccan. This word is coined from Yona or Ionia in Greece. After the third Buddhist Council held at Pataliputra, Emperor Ashoka selected a Yavana called Dharmarakshita, who was then sent to Aparanta or coastal area of Maharashtra where he is said to have successfully converted a large number of people including women and nobles to Buddhism. Many Yavana traders living in Deccan were converted to

Buddhism and even adopted Indian names such as Yasavadhana and Sidhaya but retained Yavana identity a prefix to their names. In fact genetic reports of a community called Chitpavan Brahmins hailing from coastal Maharashtra strongly suggest a foreign origin, probably a Mediterranean one. A Yavana community from a city called Dhenukakat forms a group of major donors at Karla Chaitya but surprisingly enough there isn't any Yavani or Yavana woman donating any where.

9. The Hippalus Waves and Foreign Trade

In fact, the trader monk chemistry worked well in Deccan with its high rise Sahyadri Mountains dotted with large and small Buddhist cave temples where these traders donated generously. In fact, a closer survey reveals that these were not sporadically built but were carefully placed on the major trade routes that linked different ports that lined up on the west coast like Sopara, Baroach, Thane and Chaul and Kalyan.

Mumbai was centuries away to rise to fame as an international port. Even today there is in Kalyan an area called Gandharikabhami named after an ancient Greek colony. There was a Buddhist monastery in Kalyan to which two merchants Budhaka and Dharma along with their family donated an apartment. There is also a river, now much silted of the same name. There was flourishing trading class in Kalyan. Many families chose to patronize Buddhism. Lavanika,²² wife of Buddhist trader named Sethi Achala from Kalyan. Lavanika lived in the third century AD, almost two thousand years ago and centuries even before Mumbai was not even in the gestation stage. Lavanika gave three hundred Karshapanas for providing clothes to the monks residing in a Vihara or monastery called Ambalika Vihara.

10. Précis

A very large number of women were active in the intricate fabric of Deccan society. To just know their names, places of residence, family details are itself a rare anthology. Some of them actively engaged in trade. A first century B.C inscription states that a woman had her own seal and was probably working as dispatching authority.²³ Education as an aspect seen through inscriptions reveals that many women were not only themselves accomplished in different performing arts but also patronized education and arts by funding various schools.

A memorial stone was erected after the death of Savinirmadi because she was a literate woman of the town. It is specifically stated that she was proficient in all the shastras or the sacred texts.²⁴ Our ancestors from time immemorial have realized the importance of herbs, shrubs and trees to humanity and other living beings. Women in ancient Deccan displayed this environment concern. Shridevi, wife of Boppana Nayaka planted trees like mango, Nilgiri, Orange, Jackfruit, Date and Tamrind. When a beautiful orchard came up, it was converted into a tax-free charity fair (dharmasthane). The trees and the market were to be maintained by the local body and the income accruing from the sale of fruits was to be utilized for the worship of various deities.²⁵

Women have left their mark in the political arena too. There are many queens who acted as regents for their minor sons. They assumed the full responsibility as governors of certain districts. All six wives of Chalukya king Vikramaditya VI were given responsibilities as governors.

When Governor or the Nal Gavunda Sattarasa Nagarjunayya died, Rashtrakuta King Krishna II entrusted the responsibilities with his wife, Jakkiabbe. After seven years she became incapacitated due to some ailment. King Krishna made Jakkiabbe's daughter the next governor.²⁶ Akkadevi influenced the political scene of Karnataka for no less than half a century. She was a perfect ruler who defended her principality in the face of an attack, set the house in order, looked after the religious establishments and catered to the educational development of the society.²⁷ Women might have assumed political power but no one was duly crowned as a de jure ruler.

Inscriptions also point out to the existence of certain customs like Sallekhana or fasting unto death as per the Jaina traditions or putting up of the Veeragala in the memory of deceased warrior and the involvement of women there in. There are customs like Devadasi or temple attendants who are ritual specialists. Inscriptions refer to many such Devadasis. Sometimes these devadasis made donations to the temples to earn religious merit. There were occasions when women were donated to the temples as devadasis by other devotees to earn punya or religious merit for themselves.

Thus, a very large number of inscriptions scattered all over Deccan reveal different facets of lives and achievements of women in ancient Deccan. It becomes indispensable to rewrite the history of women in ancient India in general and Deccan in specific based on the factual content provided in the inscriptions.

END NOTES

[1] Corpus Inscriptinum Indicarum, Vol-II. I-II-VI-B, p. 159.

[2] The inscription reads as follows, "At the word of Devanam priya, the Mahamatras everywhere have to be told (this) what gift (have been made) hereby the second queen either mango Groves or gardener alms however or whatever else. They shall be registered (in the name) of that Queen. This is the request of the second queen the Mother of Tivala, the Karuwaki."

[3] Epigraphia Indica, II, no. 127, p. 370

[4] Ibid , X p. 31, n. 219

[5] Ibid, p. 45, no.385

[6] Ibid, p. 47, no. 417

[7] Hampa Nagarajaiah, A History of the Rashtrakutas of Malkhed and Jainism, Ankita Pustaka, Bangalore, 2000, pp. 25-26.

[8] Epigraphia Indica, X, n. 102, p. 19

[9] ibid, XX, p. 04

[10]ibid, XX, p.25

[11] Rao Hanumantha, Murthy Ramachandra, Subramanyam, E. Sivangi Reddy, Buddhist Inscriptions of Andhradesha, Ananda Buddha Vihara Trust, Securandarabad, 1998, p.190

[12] Naneghat is a mountain pass in the Western Ghats range near Junnar in Pune district of Maharashtra, India. During the reign of the Satavahana , the pass was extensively used as a trade route

between Kalyan and Junnar. Literally, the name nane means "coin" and ghat means "pass". The name is given because this path was used as a tollbooth to collect toll from traders crossing the hills.

[13] Mirashi V V, Satavahan Ani Paschim Kshatrap Yancha Itihas Ani Koriv lekh (Marathi), Pub. Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Ani Samskriti Mandal, Mumbai, 1979, pp., 5-7.

[14] Ibid, pp.228-229.

[15] Ibid, pp.10-15 (Index)

[16] Epigraphia Indica, Vol-X, n. 1126, p. 124.

[17] Ibid, pp.24-38.

[18] Mirashi V V Satavahan Ani Paschim Kshatrap Yancha Itihas Ani Koriv lekh, op.cit, pp.100-102.

[19] Epigraphia Indica, Vol- X, p. 127 and CII., – IV, p. cxiv., Karshapana was a silver coin weighing about thirty four grains.

[20] Satavahan Ani Paschim Kshatrap Yancha Itihas Ani Koriv lekh (Marathi), Pub. Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya Ani Samskriti Mandal, Mumbai, 1979.

[21] Epigraphia Indica, Vol- X, p. 102, n. 994, Kanheri Cave no.5, This queen has given more information about her parental family. Her husband also figures without any royal titles.

[22] Ghokhale Shobhana, Kanheri Inscriptions, Pub. Deccan College Post Graduate Research Institute, Pune, 1991. pp., 98-101. In the cave no. 3, another inscription dated 2nd century A.D., records various donations made by a donor at Kanheri, Sopara, Ambalika Vihara at Kalyan and Paithan. It is very interesting to note that these entire places link up the famous trade route and the existence of the monestries along with this trade route was not merely a co incidence.

[23] Journal of Epigraphical Society of India, Vol- XV, P.,98.

[24] This stone has been discovered at Margal is a small village about 8 kms from Kolar. Savinirmadi is depicted as seated on a couch and leaning cushion. The figure is neatly dressed in a sari with flowing pleats

[25] South Indian Inscriptions, Vol-XX, n. 175, Hiri Bevinur

[26] Moraes Kadamba Kula. (Original thesis.) University of Bombay, 1929, p.85

[27] South Indian Inscriptions, XI-I p 84, n. 88, Epigraphia Indica, Vol-XIII p. 173