



FEMININE REFERENCES AS GLEANED FROM THE EPIGRAPHIC RECORDS OF MAURYAN PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

Epigraphical records are of great importance to reconstruct the various aspects of the history of the Mauryan Empire. Asokan records are considered to be the earliest epigraphical records. The position of women is also one of the aspects reflected in the inscriptions. The notable thing about the Mauryan records is that some of the names of the personages as Karuvaki and some other aspects are not known from any other source. But most of the references to women are in context of religion as following Buddhist order. Royal ladies are said to have been engaged in the acts of donations. Some idea of the position of laywomen can also be traced. As Bairat inscription present them as upasikas or the follower of Buddhism. In an another inscription they have been said engaged in some religious ritual.



KEYWORDS: Edicts, Karuvāki, Devdasi, Sutrukā, Queen's edict, Bhikkhuni, Upāsika, Devī, Purdah, polygamy, Aavrodhan.

INTRODUCTION

Mauryan Empire was one of the vast and powerful Empire of Indian History. As a source of Mauryan History Epigraphic records are of great significance. These are the earliest epigraphical records. These throw light on his policy of promoting Dhamma. But along with religious life they throw light on the other facets of life also. In Aśokan edicts there are some references related to the position of women. Whatever information they provide is of great significance which is not known from any other source. Some of the records which bear the references to Women are as under:-

1. Queen's, Edict, Kaushambi¹
2. Pipharwā vase inscription²
3. Major Rock Edict I³

1. Rajbali Pandeya, Aśoka ke Abhilekh, p. 188

2. Sivasvaroop Sahai, Bhārtiya Purālekhon kā Adhyayan, p. 81-83.

3. E. Hultzsch, CII, vol.1 p. 27.

4. *Major Rock Edict V*⁴
5. *Major Rock Edict, IX, XII*⁵
6. *Bairāt Inscription*⁶
7. *Edicts of Sānchi and Sārnāth*⁷
8. *Jogimārā cave inscription etc.*⁸

In Asokan Edicts, some of the information is very unique as Devdasi system, evident from the Jogimara cave inscription, which is not known from any other source but in most cases they throw light on religious life of women.

ROYAL PERSONAGES IN EPIGRAPHICAL RECORDS :

Some inscriptions of Aāoka bear the references to Royal persons/ladies. In 7th Pillar edict of Delhi Toprā, it is said that both Mahamatras and other chiefs were occupied with the delivery of the gifts of Asoka himself as well as of his queen (Devī)⁹ and with his whole haram¹⁰. Again it is said that some were ordered to deliver the gifts of his sons and the sons of other queens in order to promote noble deeds of morality.¹¹

देवानापिये पियदसि लाजा हेव आहा -

एते च अने च बहुका मुखा दानविसगेसु वियापटासे मम हेव देविं च सवसि च मे ओलोधनसि ते बहुविधेन आकालेन तानि तानि तुठायतनानि पटी---हिद चेव दिसासु च दालकानं पि च मे कटे अनानं च देविकुमालानं इमे दानविसगेसु वियापटा होहंति ति'

The purpose of such donations was the welfare of people and to win the Heaven. As in 6th Rock edict from kalsi, it is said that for the purpose of winning heaven, this edict of the law of piety been caused to be written in order that it may long endure and that my sons and wives may take up work for the welfare of the people.¹² He wants to commemorate his deeds of promoting Dhamma so that his successors can follow him.

Then in 5th rock edict¹³ it is said that Mahāmātras had been employed in all the Harams of his brothers, sisters and also over those, who were relatives or kinsmen. Probably his brothers and sisters were given separate apartments. Barua¹⁴ has stated that if the queens were not kept in one place, in his palace at Pātaliputra, but at different towns, each having her separate establishment? The Pāli tradition¹⁵ about the Vidisā residence of Devi favours the idea of there being separate family establishment for individual wives at different towns. He says that although the king's orders were issued to the Mahāmātra everywhere it was engraved only on the pillar at Kauśāmbi, an outlying town¹⁶.

It shows that along with queens, his sister and other relatives too used to live in his haram. The single Royal lady whose name has been mentioned in epigraphical records is Karuvāki,¹⁷ second queen of Asoka. These records show that the Royal ladies too were engaged in pious works as donations.

The term Haram alludes to the separate apartments for women. In the Arthsāstra¹⁸ also there is a reference to Haram. He talks about Haram attendants as Kanchuki,¹⁹(presenter of King's Coat) Usnisi,²⁰

4. Ibid, p.33

5. Ibid, p.37, 43.

6. Shashi Kant, Hāthigumphā Inscription of Khārvēla and Bhābru edict of Asoka, p.79

7. CII, vol.3 p. 160- 161

8. I.A.R 1903-1904, p.138

9. Rajbali pandeya takes Devi as the Chief Queen. In later inscriptions the term for chief queens is found Mahādevī, as in the inscriptions of Satvahanas and Guptas.

10. E. Hultsch, CII, vol. 3. P. 136

11. Ibid.

12. Radhagobind Basak, Asokan Inscriptions, p.35

13. Ibid, p.27

14. B.M Barua, Asoka and his Inscriptions, p. 53

15. Ibid, p.53

16. Ibid, p. 53

17. Rajbali Pandeya, Asoka ke Abhilekh, p. 188

(Presenter of king's head dress) and other female attendants. Fa-hien in his Fo-ko-ki says that the palace of Asoka was made by the celestial beings which beckon to the prosperity of these times and it can also be said that the Royal ladies would have been living a luxurious life.

Polygamy:-

Asokan edicts show that polygamy was prevalent in society. It is evident by the epigraphical records too. In queen's Edict²¹, Karuvāki has been mentioned as the second wife of Asoka. It is testified by other contemporary records. Kautilya²² talks about it. He says that a person could marry many a wives but he would have to pay some money to his wife who got nothing as stridhana and it was popular in Imperial families. Megasthenese²³ too says that Indians were polygamous. Asoka had several wives, the names of his four wives are known from literary records. But the queen whose name is known only from the epigraphic records was Karuvāki, mentioned in Queen's edict of Kauśāmbhi. This inscription bears the record of the order to the Mahamatras that the donations made by his second queen karuvāki should be registered under the name, "second queen Karuvāki, the mother of Tivar". Here the name of Tivar is also very significant. Karuvāki wanted to be recognised by the name of her son Tivar. Perhaps a queen who gave birth to a male child was given more importance.²⁴ As kautilya says that one could remarry if his wife had only female children, testifies it.

Then the other names of his queens are known from literary records:

- Asandhimitrā
- Devī
- Tisyarkshitā
- Padmāvati

From Mahavmśa, the name of his queen Ansandimitrā is known. She died in 12th year afterwards planting the Bodhitree. She is said to be faithful follower of Buddhism. She is stated as *the Agramahisi* of Ashoka. Asoka deeply grieved at her death.

Another queen Tisyarakshitā is known from Kunālvadān. But she is mentioned in the Mahavamśa also. It tells about the sinful deed of uprooting the Bodhi tree by Tisyarakshitā who in Jealousy did such a condemnable act. Kunālvadān describes an another story about her. It tells about the story of her infatuation towards Kunāl. When kunāl refused to fulfill his amorous desires she ordered Kunāl's eyes to be plucked out. It throws light on the story of uprooting Bodditree also. Mahavmśa says that she was raised to the rank of queen after the fourth year of Asandhimitrā's death.

One of queen was Padmāvati, who is mentioned in Kunālvadān.²⁵

An another queen was Devī, who lived in Vidishā and the mother of Sanghmitrā and Mahendra.

Some Authorities Related to women:

There are some references which show that Ashoka had appointed some authorities to conduct the behaviour of women. In major rock Edict XII,²⁶ Shahbazgarhi version, there is a reference to striyadhakśa, Mahamatras who controlled the women. Probably they were the superintendent of women. In literary

18. Arthsastra, trans. by R.Samasastri, X, p. 23

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Rajbali Pandeya, op. cit., p. 188.

22. Arthśāstra, part.ii p.221

23. J.M. Mccrindle, India as Described by Megasthenese and Arrian, p. 70.

24. K.K. Thaplyal, op. cit., p.229

25. K.K. Thaplyal, op. cit., p.260

26. D.C. Sirkar, Selected inscriptions, Part 1, p. 32.

records, there is no mention of such a word. Bhandarkar²⁷ has stated that they were appointed to monitor the matters of their maintenance, transgressions and elopement.

The state also recognized the duty of providing subsistence to helpless women when they were crying and also the children they give birth to and the persons who were appointed for this purpose, was the Striyadhyakṣa.²⁸ Probably these authorities were appointed to conduct the moral behaviour of women and to control them, as Kautilya talks about *Ganikadhayakṣa*²⁹ who controlled the activities of prostitutes. These officers probably used to look at the problems of women or to solve them and to regulate their lives.

Devdāsīs :

In Mauryan epigraphic records there is an interesting instance of Devdāsī system. In Jogimārā cave inscription³⁰ it is said that a devdāsī named Sutnukā was in love with probably a person named Devadinnā, skilled in sculpture. Upinder Singh has written that, “*there is another possible translation of the jogimārā cave inscription: Sutnukā by name, a devdasi, made this resting place for girls, [perhaps actress who performed in the dramas enacted here], Devadinnā by name, skilled in painting, made the paintings in this cave*”.³¹ In other contemporary records there are no references to devdāsīs. Devdāsī was a girl who was dedicated to temple for the service of God. They were taken as a wife of the God. But this also was a kind of prostitution. There were three types of prostitutes in Mauryan times:- Ganika,³² Rupjeeva³³ and those who worked as a spy in service of the state.³⁴ Ganikas were also engaged in Imperial service. Rupjivas were those who worked freely. Kautilya has written a chapter on prostitutes. There is a reference to Samāj. In 1st major rock edict³⁵ there is a reference to samāj. Ashoka wants people to refrain from such ceremonies. Probably these were the means to spread immorality. There were two types of samāj in Mauryan times : In first type³⁶ of samāj people were treated to dainty dishes in which meat played most important role. And Ashoka was against slaughtering the animals. In second type³⁷ they were treated to Dancing, music and other performances. In the sense they were the synonyms of Ranga and preshagar. Ladies too took part in such social ceremonies. It can be said that prostitutes would have been an important part of such ceremonies. Kautilya³⁸ too talks about samajas. But Ashoka says these ceremonies should not be performed. But some other things which should be done as obedience to mother and father, gifts to friend, acquaintances, relatives, as well as to Sramans and Brahmins.

Purdāh system :

The epigraphic records refer to the purdāh system in Mauryan times.³⁹ In rock edict VI of Ashoka⁴⁰ Haram has been referred to as avrodhana (inner closed chambers) which alludes to purdāh system. Ancient drama also testifies to the observing of purdāh at least in the higher strata of the society as in the drama of Bhāsa named Vasavdattam.⁴¹ Arthashastra⁴² mentions Antahpura. The expression ‘asuryampaśya’ in the

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27. R.G. Bhandarkar, Asoka.
 28. R.G. Bhandarkar, Asoka.
 29. Arthashastra, part 2. p.4.
 30. Upendra, Singh, History of Ancient and Early Medieval India, p.50.
 31. Ibid.
 32. Arthashastra, Part.2. p.4.
 33. Ibid, P. 56.
 34. Ibid.
 35. Hultzsch, CII. vol. I, p.1
 36. Bhandarkar, op. cit., p. 20
 37. Bhandarkar, op. cit., p. 20
 38. Arthashastra, XXI. p.57
 39. K.K. Thaplyal, op. cit., p. 231.
 40. Hultzsch, vol. 3, op. cit., p.12
 41. Thaplyal, op. cit., p. 231.

Aśtadhyaī⁴³ of panini is explained as wives of kings, who are supposed as not exposed even to the sun, and thus is taken as an evidence for the prevalence of the purdah system. Rāmāyana too contains several allusions to this custom of secluding women.⁴⁴ But it was prevalent in the royal families and not in the ladies of lower strata.

Religious life:

Asokan edicts are basically religious in nature. His edicts are one of this efforts of promoting Dhamma. Inscriptions throw light on the various sects of time. They distinguished as Brahmins Sramans and other pasands⁴⁵ (different dissenting sects) and most prominent were: Nigranthas⁴⁶ and Ajivaks. Who have been singled out as receiving the special favour of the emperor by his grant of rock cut dwellings to them. The epigraphic record show that female Buddhist sangha was flourishing at the time of Ashoka.⁴⁷ Inscriptions of Bhabru,⁴⁸ Sanchi⁴⁹, Sarnath⁵⁰ testify that Buddhist community was existed in 3rd Cen. BC. The nuns had at that time to be reckoned with as equally powerful factors in the matter of unity and division in the Buddhist sangha. It is evident from the inscriptions of Sanchi and Sarnath. The information about Bhikkshuni Samgha which may be gathered from Asoka's edicts may be supplemented by the account of Sanghmitrā's mission to cylon. In the inscriptions of Sānchi and Sārnath, Ashoka admonishes the monks and nuns against breaking the sangha. He says that if any monk or nun tries to break the sangha, that yellow robed monk or nun would be caused to put on white clothes and banished from sangha.⁵¹

या भेत---(0) धे मगे कटे भिखुनं च भिखुनीनं चा ति पुतप-पोतिके चंदमसूरियिके (0) ये संघं भाखति भिखु वा भिखुनि वा ओदाता नि दुसानि सनंघाययितु अनावाससि वासापेतविये (±) इछा मे किं ति संघे समगे चिलथिति के सिया ति'

Literary records too prove that Ashoka gave white robes to the heretical monks whom he expelled.⁵² It shows that Ashoka was anxious to suppress schism for bringing about disunity among the members of Buddhist church. Intellectual Life centered chiefly in the monasteries and other institution associated with the different denomination of the country. Bairat inscription⁵³ too prove the popularity of Buddhism. In this inscription Ashoka recommended not only to the monks and the nuns but also to the lay followers both male and female, the seven most important scriptural passages. All these were addressed by Ashoka to frequently listen to and reflect on these scriptural passages. This inscription shows that some of the ladies had renounced the worldly life and joined sangha and some of them followed Buddhism being a householder. The nuns have been addressed as Bhikkhunīs⁵⁴ and layhearers as Upasika.

.... किंति बहुके भिखुपाये चा भिक्षुनिये चा अभिखिनं सुनेयु चा उपधालयेयू चा हेवंमेवा उपास का चा उपासिका चा एतेनि भले इमं लिखापयामि अभिप्रेतं मे जानतू ति ।

The term Upasika which can be seen in later epigraphical records too.⁵⁵ Bairat inscription shows that Ashoka had deep faith in the three jewels or Tri Ratna⁵⁶

42. Arthsastra, XXI, p.57.
43. Astadhyayi, III, 2.36.
44. Scolistica Kroze, Ramayana mein Nari p. 139
45. R.K. Mookherji, op. cit., p.101
46. This word has been used for the jains.
47. CII, Vol. 25. P.34
48. Shashi, kant opcit p.79
49. CII, Vol. 1 p, 160.
50. Ibid. p161.
51. CII, vol. 1, p. 161.
52. Rajbali pandeya, op. cit., p.186
53. Shashi, kant, op. cit., p, 76-80.
54. Ibid. p.79.
55. Shashi Kant, op. cit., p.79
56. B.M.Barua, op. cit., p.25

In the inscription of a relic casket from Pipharva⁵⁷ there is description of constructing a stupa by the brothers, sisters and sons of Sukirti or Buddha which alludes to the participation of women in religious activities.⁵⁸

Even it seems that royal ladies too followed Buddhism and made donations, probably to Buddhist sangha. As in queen's edict⁵⁹ it is said that her donations of mango gardens or alms houses should be registered under a particular name "second queen Karuvaki mother of Tivar" because such donation were considered of great merit.

देवानां पियषा वचनेना सवत महमता वतविया (ठ) ए हेता दुतियाये देवीये दाने अजावडिका, वा आलमे व दानगाहे व ए वा पि अंने कीळि गनीयति ताये देविये ये नानि (ब) हेयं---न---दुतियाये देविये ति तीवलमातु कालुवाकिये ।

The popular religious life of the times seems to have dominated by too many any trivial ceremonies.⁶⁰ In rock edict IX,⁶¹ Ashoka talks about the auspicious rituals performed by the ladies. It is said that such rituals are performed on the occasion of illness, marriage of the son and embarking on long journey; and that it is womankind in particular, performing various which are really vulgar and worthless.

Ashoka says that such auspicious rituals (mangals) are meaningless. But there is a mangal named Dhammamangal, about the efficiency of which no doubt, as it brings good result in this world as well as in the next, probably these rituals would have been worthless rituals. But he prefers Dhammanglas to these rituals.⁶²

धम्म मंगल देवानंपिये पियदसि लाजा-----पजुपदाये पवाससि एताये अंनाये च ----हेर्दिसाये जने बहुकं-----च मंगल करोति (क) से कटविये चेव खो मंगले अपफले ।

These Dhammamangals are :

Proper treatment of slaves and servants.⁶³

reverence to elders⁶⁴.

Restraint to living beings and gifts to sramans and Brahmins.⁶⁵

He says that even if the fruit of such auspicious rituals are not attained immediately, but endless merit is produced by their performance.⁶⁶ He wants all the people to follow his moral rules to lead to simple and pure life, including women.

Then there are some references to women scholars. An inscription from sānchi⁶⁷, in Mauryan Brahmi, bear the record of donation by a nun, who had knowledge of suttnipāta. Literary records too provide information about the scholarly women. The renowned Dharmapalā was Sanghmitrā's preceptress and Ayupalā was her teacher (Ācharya).⁶⁸ Both of them belong to the therāvād school of Buddhism.⁶⁹ It shows that nuns used to lead a considerable life.

CONCLUSION

Thus the inscriptions of Asoka provide much information about the position of women in Mauryan times. But in most cases they throw light on the status of Buddhist ordination. In context of position of women it can be said that women were the enthusiastic follower of Buddhism. Inscriptions throw light on

57. Sivasvaroop, Sahai, op. cit., p. 26

58. Ibid.

59. Rajbali Pandeya, op. cit., p. 188.

60. R.K.Mookherji. op. cit., p. 103.

61. D.C. Sirkar, op. cit., p.28

62. D.C. Sirkar, op. cit., p. 28

63. R.G. Basak. op. cit., P56

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

67. Burgess, EI, part 2, p. 105.

68. CII, vol. 25, p 34

69. Hirananda Sastri, CII. Vol. p 34

some other aspects of life as Devdasi system and purdah too was prevalent in the society. Royal ladies were enjoying the position of significance. Thus the epigraphic records are of great importance as most of the information is not provided from any other source.

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