



Engraved Identities, Female Agency and Visibility in Pre-Ashokan India: An Epigraphical Study

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the status and condition of women in pre-Ashokan period exclusively through the primary epigraphical evidences. Early inscriptions offer non-normative, contemporaneous data of early ancient Indian society such as that of traders and merchants' communities, royal authority in power, donors and patrons and religious figures and in monasteries. The primary sources comprise of Piprahwa Relic Inscription (c. 5th–4th century BCE), Sohgaury Copper Plate (c. 4th–3rd century BCE) and Mahasthan Brahmi Inscription (c. 3rd century BCE). These inscriptions often have multiple interpretations in political and economic contexts but can also be used in the feminine study perspectives. Explicit mention of females as donors or as a relative to the author of the inscription lead to multiple interpretations but also not mentioning them in certain context provides insights too. These inscriptions, though brief, provide concrete, non-literary and first-hand data on how women lived and their experiences in early historic India if looked from a multiple perspective. The epigraphical evidence shows that women actively contributed to religious patronages, thereby substantiate that women had access to independent economic resources and the legal right to donate in public. Altogether, these pre-Ashokan epigraphical records challenge the idea that women were marginalised in early Indian civilisation and instead show that women were clearly involved in the economy, religion and society in a hierarchical manner. The ongoing exclusion from property or administrative inscriptions showcases the prevalence of gender-specific discourse in early India. Collectively, the pre-Ashokan inscriptions alongside other epigraphical findings invalidate the stereotype of women's uniform marginalization and demonstrate how women's roles were individualized and determined by circumstances within the context of the social, economic and religious structures of early India, beyond purely being a dependent.

INTRODUCTION

The history of women in ancient India has been reconstructed mainly from the literary sources, which predominantly reflect the elite, royal, or idealized representations shaped by male authorship. Such texts mention women only when they conformed to or were in variance with social norms, thereby leaving everyday and non-elite experiences unrecorded. This paper contributes to overcoming such limitations by discussing women's representation as available in Pre-Ashokan epigraphical sources. Unlike literary texts, inscriptions were produced by diverse social groups: merchants, guilds and local communities. The epigraphic material thus provides us with a wider social perspective and allows us to reconstruct the presence of women through a history from below approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Altekar, A. S. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization\ : From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day. Delhi⁴: Motilal Banarsidass, 1938. provides a synoptic view of women's status in prehistoric and ancient, as well as medieval India, based on a wide range of Vedic, epic, legal, Buddhist, Jain, epigraphic, archaeological and artistic literature. The work also tries to show a gradual decline in women's status through historical epochs, albeit based more upon a normative approach. Altekar has necessarily employed epigraphic material in a limited sense as his analysis remains centered more upon institutions that governed women rather upon legal tenets related to women.

Upadhyaya, Bhagwat Saran. Women in the Rgveda⁵. Benares: Nand Kishore & Bros., 1941. remains an important book for understanding the position and ideological creation of the status of women in early Indian civilization through Vedic literature. The book provides an in-depth study and understanding of various female functions in religious, family and social life, based on the views promoted through idealist literature and epigraphy. Though the book is an important contribution to understanding the creation and establishment of patriarchal ideology and concepts of ideal feminine identities in early India, the general female experience and perspectives are still not well portrayed.

Shastri, Shakuntala Rao. Women in the Vedic Age. Bombay¹¹: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1954. provides a detailed literary analysis of the social, religious and domestic lives of women in ancient Indian society from the Rigvedic to the later Vedic periods. While the work underlines the involvement of women in ritual observances, weddings, learning and family governance, sometimes emphasizing the relative independence of the period's early Vedic age, the literary analysis remains text-oriented and mainly prescriptive through the largely idealized information presented within sacred texts authored by male members of the community.



Subba Reddy, D. V. *Glimpses of Health and Medicine in the Mauryan Empire*¹³. Hyderabad: Osmania Medical College, 1966. offers us an in-depth reconstruction of Mauryan system of administration through medical, sanitary, legal and welfare practices based mostly on the Arthaśāstra and allied literature. The presence of women is noted in the context of their social roles in the administration like labour, midwife, nurse, widows, prostitutes, etc., along with evidence of their receiving maternity allowance, suggesting that in the context of social life governed through this administration, women had achieved some place in the system of administration. These individual women have not been emphasized in this work but the text reflects their visibility in social life.

Tharu, Susie and K. Lalita, eds. *Women Writing in India, 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century*¹⁵. Vol. 1. New York: Feminist Press, 1991. is a significant anthology emphasizing the agency and voices of women through literary self-representation over a vast period. Although the anthology greatly restores the agency of women through literacy, it disadvantages the earlier periods such as Pre-Ashokan India in terms of marginal consideration. Furthermore, the absence of epigraphic inputs to the anthology demonstrates the gap in the methodology adopted to understand the history of women before the rise of classical literature by women authors. Indeed such an approach to the history of women eclipses the history based on textual authorship itself as a history from below.

Roy, Kumkum, ed. *Women in Early Indian Societies*¹⁶. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999. is a comprehensive and interdisciplinary study that undertakes a critical re-examination of the lives of women from the prehistoric to the early medieval periods through literary, archaeological and literary material. The essays together add a new dimension to a study on the lives of women in early Indian societies by questioning previous normative and decline narratives and focusing on diversity and regional and historical context on the socio-economic and religious lives of women.

Desai, Neera and Usha Thakkar. *Women in Indian Society*¹⁷. New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 2001. provides an extensive historical and sociological account of the status of women from ancient times to the present day in India. The work covers aspects concerning women's work, education, marriage and family life, legal position and their presence in the realm of politics from an overall viewpoint while highlighting their structural invisibility from society from an economic viewpoint.

RESEARCH GAP

1. The scholarly reconstructions of women's history in ancient India have generally relied on the literary and normative texts that privilege elite perspectives and marginalize everyday female experiences.

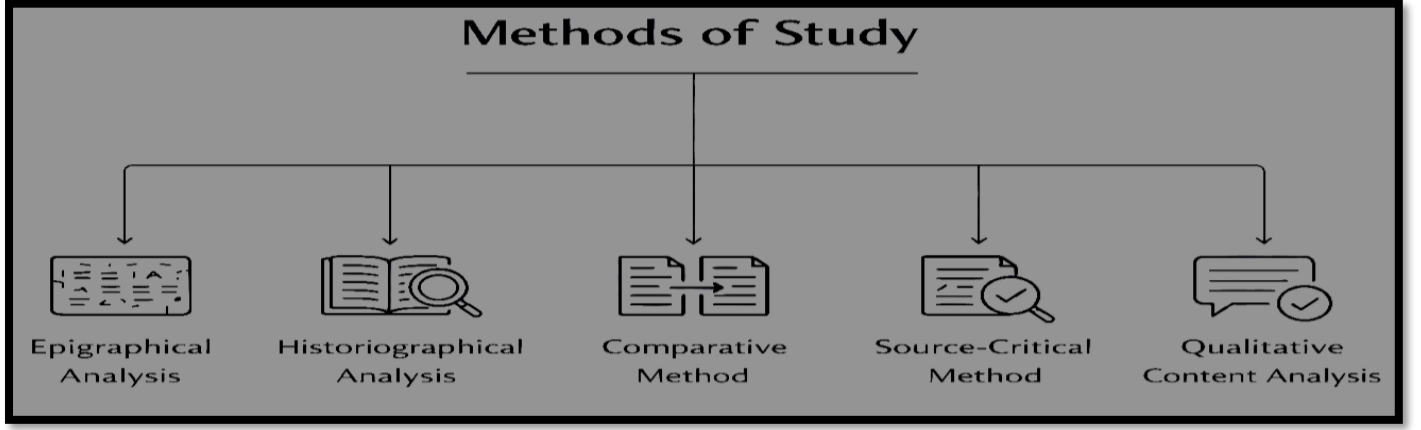


- Although women's social and religious roles are known from existing studies, there is a lack of systematic use of Pre-Ashokan epigraphical sources to analyse women's agency and visibility.
- Unfortunately, the early historic period before Ashoka has not received focused attention in terms of women's identities, despite a set of inscriptions recording female participation in religious, economic and communal activities.
- The current literature does not cover the experiences of the non-elite women, which is why the history from below approach has never been persistently applied within the study of Ancient Indian polity.
- The potential of epigraphical evidence to reveal engraved identities and reconstruct the condition of women beyond prescriptive literary norms therefore remains largely unexplored.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- To research the depiction of Women in Pre-Ashokan India, specifically how they are visible within epigraphical literature, including issues of agency, identity and inclusion within societal circles.
- To utilize alternative historical data offered by inscriptions that provide different perspectives from those found within literary and elite histories, so that an account can be constructed for women's histories at the local/community level.
- To evaluate the state of women during the Pre-Ashokan period by examining epigraphical materials in relation to available socio-political and economic circumstances within ancient Indian politics.
- To counterweight the existing historiographical notion of a relentless and uninterrupted deterioration in women's status throughout history, especially in post-Rig Veda, Later Veda and historic ages.
- To demonstrate that despite the lack of any formalized discourse of women's rights in society, female agency was still present in expressions in religion, economic activity, or social involvement.
- To make my contribution towards feminist historiography by re-evaluating early Indian social history using non-literary documents and using the history from below approach.

METHODS OF STUDY



STUDY

सुकृति-भतिनं स-भगिनिकनं स-पुत-दलनं [I*]

इयं सलिल-निधाने बुधस भगवते सकि [यानं] [II*]⁷

The Piprahwa relic inscription can be placed in the politico-ritual arena that followed the महापरिनिर्वाण of the Buddha, which is dated to 483 BCE in the Ceylonese Buddhist tradition, although later chronological re-evaluations have been suggested without conclusive reason. Following his death, in the literary tradition as represented in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (महापरिनिब्बान सुत्त), there was fierce rivalry between rival Mahājanapada republics and kingdoms, ending in the allocation of eight parts of the Buddha's physical relics, of which one part was assigned to the Śākya clan. The Piprahwa inscription, written in an archaic form of Eastern Prakrit, which antedated the standardized Mauryan Brāhmī script and did not contain any signs to indicate the lengthening of vowels, is an inscription of the सलिल-निधने or the deposition of these relics and is thus one of the earliest surviving material evidence for the Buddhist cult of relics. The Piprahwa inscription is far from being a simple cult inscription and encodes clan identity in a religious context. Crucially, the donor formula includes सभगिनिकनं (of the sisters) and सपूतदलनं (of the wives/spouses) side by side with the male kin, which not only shows that women were socially recognized but also that they were allowed to make religious donations and to act as recognized donors side by side with the men. Although some scholars have been debating whether सुकृति should be regarded as a proper name or as an epithet of the Buddha himself, the collective and familial character of the inscription clearly leans towards the interpretation that emphasizes the shared merit. In contrast to the later Vedic and early Dharmaśāstric traditions, in which the women's religious visibility, legal status and property rights progressively became more limited, this early inscription seems to indicate that the period of Mahājanapada allowed women a relatively higher degree of involvement in religious and familial



activities of merit (पुण्य). This can also be further seen as an extension of the inclusion of women in Sabha (सभावती) and Samiti in the early vedic period as mentioned in Rig Veda and Atharva Veda which later on declined during the later period.

Although the extant inscription does refer to women in relation to their male relatives, the grammatical patterns and logic of the donors in the inscription do suggest the rather interesting possibility that lone female donations may have existed but not survived. The Piprahwa inscription is thus an important material witness to female agency in Pre-Ashokan India and a crucial moment in which women's identities were inscribed into religious memory at a moment in which relic cults, clan-based republicanism and early Buddhist ideology were converging.

सावतीयानं महामा(तानं) सासने मानवासीतिक-
 डसिलिमते उस्सगामे व एते दुवे कोट्ठागालानि
 तिन-यवानि मंथुल्लोच-छम्मा-दाम-भालकानि(व)
 लं कयियति अतियायिकाय नो गहि(त)व्वाय³

In contrast to the Piprahwa relic inscription, the *Sohgaura copper-plate inscription*, which is usually assigned to the fourth century BCE and is often considered to be Pre-Ashokan or even pre-Mauryan on paleographic and linguistic criteria, presents a vastly different epigraphic situation. The Sohgaura inscription, which is of administrative character and composed in early Eastern Prakrit and inscribed in archaic Brāhmī, recording the founding and regulated use of state granaries for the purpose of seasonal distribution and times of need. The Sohgaura inscription refers to administrative officials such as the महामात्र (महामग्न), but does not refer to women in contrast to the Piprahwa inscription, which refers to women as sisters and wives in a kinship-based religious donor formula. This is hardly likely to be accidental.

On the contrary, it contends that women were intentionally left out in accordance with the institutional nature of the inscription. While the epigraphic record was centered on religious merit, lineage and commemoration, women could be mentioned and remembered but when the inscription was centered on state power and control, social agents were reduced to offices and commands and women were intentionally left out of the scene. However, the concern of the inscription with grain storage, distribution (वितरणं) and emergency provisioning (अकालिका) necessarily involves the household as the site where these policies were implemented where women played a central role in managing food and child-rearing during normal as well as in times of distress. Their absence from the record is therefore epigraphically but still socially significant.

It is also significant that while administrative positions are attested, the record does not specifically denote these positions as biologically male. This is of course, a cautious reading, but it does suggest that perhaps these positions were not yet strictly gendered, even if the subsequent normative tradition did assume them to be so. While there is no direct evidence to suggest the presence of female office-holders in this instance, the abstraction of power into positions rather than persons does suggest a re-evaluation of strictly assumed notions of early administrative gender roles. In conjunction with Piprahwa, the Sohgaura inscription points to a larger trend in Pre-Ashokan epigraphy, namely that women were present when kinship, memory and religious merit were inscribed, but absent when the early state spoke in its administrative voice and demonstrates that epigraphic silence can be a valuable resource for understanding gender structures in early Indian society.

नेन [।*] स[*]वर्जियं[।]नं [तल दन स-] सप्र दिन । [सु-
[गो]रो । सुलसिन्ते पुरणगाले^२ । ए[वो]
[नि*]वहिस्यति । संवरियानं [च] [दि*]ने * *
[घ] निं । निर्वहिस्यति । दग-तिसा[*]यके * *
*** [थि]कसि । बुध-तियाचिक[सि] पि । गंड[कि*]
*** [थि]कहिं एस कोट्ठागाले कोसि***
*****6

he broken stone plaque inscription from Mahāsthān, which dates to the fourth or early third century BCE and is in Eastern Prakrit with an early Brāhmī script and is another significant example of early administrative inscriptions from eastern India. The dating of this inscription has been variously assessed, with some palaeographic details pointing to a pre-Mauryan date, while others point to a connection with early Mauryan script, although there is a general consensus that the inscription is from the same administrative and cultural environment as the Sohgaura copper plate inscription. The Mahāsthān inscription is formally institutional in tone. It mentions the issuance of orders by the authority of high officials, usually reconstructed as महामात्र (महामग्न) and deals with the regulation and allocation of necessary commodities like grain and other provisions, especially during times of scarcity. Like Sohgaura, there is no mention of personal donors or any categories of kinship. Most significantly for the purposes of this research, there is no mention of women, despite the inscription's concern with public welfare, food security and crisis management. The lack of female representation within the inscriptions should not be viewed as proof of women's inferiority within society.

Rather, it should be viewed as a result of the administrative nature of the inscriptions, where government bodies command and groups have precedence over personal property (i.e., men and women) in defining authority and accountability. These inscriptions provide an abstracted view of the institution as an entity, as opposed to an individual within the institution and therefore women become "epigraphically invisible," even though women played significant roles in food production, meal preparation and survival during times of famine.

Although recorded administrative positions have predominately been confronted with labels, the terms of these titles are represented grammatically in a manner that identifies functionality rather than expressing a specific gender. The titles themselves, while using masculine grammatical forms, are grammatically masculine due to linguistic convention and not due to biological determination and nor does the inscription assert that men and only men, held those offices. While there is no direct or indirect evidence that women actually did hold those positions at the time covered by the inscription, there is also a lack of male individuals and no definitive indication of the use of abstract titles creates some ambiguity regarding the extent to which it is historically accurate to classify all early bureaucratic power as exclusively male.

The fact that the Mahāsthān inscription was concerned with famine and public welfare suggests that it was primarily intended to have an effect on the household, where state policy was actually implemented. Households in early agrarian communities were typically managed by women (or, at least, the majority of food storage, rationing, etc.), so therefore the inscription serves to re-affirm the status of women in early welfare systems as a critical yet unengraved portion of society who had no direct representation in any form of public inscriptional records. More importantly, the lack of any representation of any gender within this type of record should be viewed as an important historical indicator of the parity that existed between the government and the people under its jurisdiction during the early state period and how the administrative authorities of early states viewed the social world of those they were administratively managing in no terms of gender disparity.

The Piprahwa, Sohgauna and Mahāsthān records form an interpretative tool for understanding the dynamics of the changes in the roles of women through history. The Piprahwa inscription contains clear references to the gender identity of women as sisters and wives in the collective body of donors. By doing so, it recognizes and gives importance to their role and contribution to religious merit and lineage. On the other hand, the Sohgauna copper plate and the Mahāsthān stone contain no references to men or women at all; instead, they record documents pertaining to the role and function of storage, distribution and relief from famine through the recording of the function and offices of the state through administrative documents. In this case, the absence of reference to any gender is not arbitrary; instead, it is based on the purpose for which the documents were drawn up. The role and contribution of women could be recorded if the record was to commemorate a specific act of religious merit, take part in a collective memory and acknowledge kinship.



The absence of women in the epigraphical record was directly related to the need of the early state to communicate its authority through abstract office functions and logistical planning/organisation.

While these three landmarks indicate that women were present in India, as both reproductive labourers (visible in ritual inscriptions) and non-productive labourers (not mentioned) associated with administrative inscriptions (structured within social institutions). The combination of these three inscriptions highlights the fact that women's roles were placed on two distinct levels within society: first, women participated in community rituals; second, women's placement as part of the infrastructure of administrative representation.

The prevalence of female epigraphy – that is, female names inscribed in devotion to their families supports the thesis that female epigraphy should not be regarded simply as a lack of any supporting evidence related to how early political/religious models structured the historical record itself. Thus, this approach helps to provide a framework through which to evaluate how historical documents archive specific evidence concerning women, their role within early Indian society and provide support for that framework regarding how female epigraphy functions. As Upinder Singh has pointed out, the absence of women in the inscriptions does not necessarily mean their absence from social and economic life. Although there is no evidence that women held these offices, it does not rule out the possibility either in these inscriptions. This is an important reminder of the tentative nature of conclusions reached on the basis of a small corpus of inscriptions.

It is in this light that the Pre-Ashokan epigraphic method, as pursued in this research, assumes importance, since it provides an opportunity to tap into the engraved and therefore, material identities of women as expressed in different historical traditions. Although the lack of epigraphs may not provide as much information regarding the individual lives of women and their engagement at the community level as Pre-Ashokan epigraphs, the epigraphic evidence available does provide a unique window of opportunity into the social location of women. These epigraphs also suggest a very organized administrative system that controlled public health, labor, urban planning and social welfare, suggesting a governance structure that reached into various aspects of daily life. It is in this context that the research points out the structural invisibility of women in economic and administrative discourse even as it brings to the fore their crucial role in household, religious and social life. In examining Pre-Ashokan scripts there is a focus on the terminology surrounding identity, kinship and gender, as the inscriptions are examined as an important historical source that provides information on lived experiences rather than institutional power. Therefore, the method places epigraphic data within a larger socio-political and economic context, enabling a historically nuanced reading of the status of women in ancient Indian society.

KEY FINDINGS



1. By demonstrating how Pre-Ashokan inscriptions can be used to obtain insights regarding the status of women in early historical India, this work provides an important and largely unused resource for scholars studying women's roles and status in this period of Indian history.
2. Analysis of the Piprahwa, Sohgaura, and Mahāsthān inscriptions reveals that women's representation is shaped by inscriptional function and genre, not by consistent inclusion or exclusion.
3. For example, these findings suggest that women were mentioned explicitly in inscriptions that were related to kinship (as mothers, daughters and wives), religious patronage and for commemorating the deceased (the Piprahwa inscription has the clearest example).
4. These findings challenge the notion that women had no place in the public or religious spheres during this period.
5. Study of both Sohgaura and Mahāsthān records shows that all mentions of male and female were omitted through a systematic method of recorded data whereby they only used gender-neutral terms in their content.
6. Thus, the references to governance, the management of resources, and the authority of state only refer to the position held by an entity as opposed to being considered as being in an individual social role.
7. These findings challenge the previous assumption that the governance of the early historical state operated as a gender hierarchy and demonstrate that state policy was expressed in non-gendered and egalitarian terms on some occasions.
8. Thus, the research indicates that we need to consider blank pages within historical texts as valuable sources of data rather than a lack of information.
9. The study provides a complex view of gender relations in ancient India before the time of the Ashoka Empire, showing that women's roles were different and depended on where they lived and what happened there.
10. The focus on early epigraphical sources highlights how important it is to use multiple types of source-matter besides written texts to create an accurate representation of how women lived and operated in the society of ancient India and cautions against depending solely on later written texts as the best means of measuring the importance of women in those early periods.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to investigate the status and condition of women in Pre-Ashokan India by analyzing three early epigraphical texts: the Piprahwa Relic Inscription, the Sohgaura Copper Plate and the Mahāsthān Brāhmī Inscription. These texts, when analysed together, show that the presence of women in early historic India cannot be judged in a uniform manner. Rather, they show a complex pattern of presence and absence that cannot be judged in terms of empowerment or marginalisation. It appears that women were neither silenced

nor brought to the forefront but were present in the historical texts in a manner that depended on the purpose and genre of the texts. On one hand, the Piprahwa inscription provides positive evidence of the presence of women. The mention of women as sisters and wives in a joint religious offering provides evidence that women were recognized as legitimate contributors to religious offerings. The early religious inscriptions thus provide evidence that contradicts the views of later texts that have reduced the role of women in religious practices. The express mention of women as 'sisters' and 'wives' (members of a family unit with male relatives) in a collective (as opposed to individual) act of donation to the religion represents both an acknowledgement of and an acceptance of women within the context of family and symbolic participation in a communal religious structure. Such a conclusion supports the arguments made by historians such as Romila Thapar, who stressed the role of clan structure and the role of collective identity within early Buddhist contexts and indicates that women had the capacity to engage in visible and socially important roles within the context of early religious rituals. In this sense, early documentation of religious practice demonstrates interesting complexity to the increasing restriction of women's agency within later writings and practices of early religion. The Sohgauna and Mahāsthān inscriptions do not include and do not identify either male or female donors or participants that would relate to them having administrative or institutional power, as was the case with some of the inscriptions found in the other contexts mentioned previously. An interpretation based upon critical analysis of these inscriptions is that the absence of male and female donors and participants may imply that during the early phases of these states, women were excluded from the exercise of formal political and bureaucratic power. Furthermore, since there is no reference to any language that is gender-specific, it may be assumed that the administrative discourse expressed in these inscriptions was intentionally articulated in non-gender specific terms. Inscriptions often express concern for authority and governance and address very broad categories in concern for the authority of offices and procedures to carry these out rather than about individuals. In this light, the omission of gender-specific references to administrative procedures and offices does not necessarily indicate that there was selective marginalization of men or women. It is very likely that administrative language addressed entire communities as a whole, as it did with people living in these various regions. To summarize, when looking at the ancient Indian inscriptions that predate Ashoka, we see that the ways women show up in these records are really different and really layered. There are places where women show up as known participants in religious and family or kinship activities and shows of support for their family or kin's activities. There are places where they do not appear at all in the official records created by the administration and they were still a fundamental part of social processes that were governed by the early state. The inscriptions do not add to any story about early equality or about early marginalisation of women. They tell instead that women had different kinds of influence at different times and in different contexts and for different government institutions. Therefore, in order to be able to develop a fair understanding of gender in ancient Indian history, we need to have a nuanced understanding of evidence from different sources. This means looking at both presence and absence as having historical significance and not trying to arrive at global

conclusions about women based on only evidence that is from very early times and that is relatively limited, though still extremely useful.

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