

## Condition and status of women in Early Medieval India

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**Abstract:** *The medium of epigraphy will be used in order to research the socio-economic, political and religious roles played by women during early medieval India, stretching from 600 to 1200 CE. As such, we can set aside the traditional patriarchal clichés typically associated with this period from Anjali Verma's work; hence a wide spread diversified participation of women's presence is rendered in that period. The study discovers regional variations and differences in religious influences on issues such as the position of women in Hinduism and Jainism, rights over property, education, widowhood, and religious practices.*

**Keywords:** - women, religious practices, medieval India, roles

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### INTRODUCTION

This article is based on epigraphs, which are historical inscriptions, to understand the role played by women in early medieval Indian society. Epigraphs portray women's social, political, and economic activities better than literary texts, bearing patriarchal biases. Women's history, as recorded in inscriptions, was active in governance, religious activity, and landholding—all areas where literary sources reduce their activity. The study period is 600–1200 CE—an age of transition often described pejoratively as stagnant or regressive regarding women's roles.

In this context, the inscriptions reveal women's identities as multi-dimensional rather than being wives, mothers, or widows as commonly found. Hindu women's religious offerings were usually connected with family responsibilities. Women in religious organizations also held managerial positions. They were entrusted with responsibility for managing donated lands and temple matters. Through these roles, women

could gain some autonomy within a patriarchal system and negotiate religious hierarchies.

It stands opposite to the prevalent belief of traditional scholars that women were deprived of education in that period. Epigraphic sources present a contrast as girls received education in diversified fields during the early medieval period in India. Only girls belonging to certain classes with high social status, according to regional traditions and socio-economic norms of that age, were supposed to be educated.

Most girls were excluded from formal education, but again, in religious and administrative fields, the exceptions exist. Girls only received education in decentralized subjects moving from Vedic studies towards more practical knowledge fit for simple local governance and religious rites. This decentralization reflects a wider cultural adaptation towards regional needs typical of the early medieval period. Education involved religious teaching because the writings reflect

that religious education formed this activity. The same group of women later came as a donor in the temple and then education was given to bring about the social and personal transformation among those women.

### **Married, Widow, and Sati**

While such practices remained widespread throughout the early medieval period in India, and many of which were regional and caste-specific, the epigraphic evidence has a more complicated picture - bigamy and polygamy, prevailing among the elites but were held to be in disrepute, at least in the literary contexts for widows, which southern Indian evidence illustrates throughout a spectrum. While some such women become widows with being subjected to satī, in which they will burn themselves upon the funeral pyre of their husband, others develop religio-administrative importance. States like Tamil Nadu, who managed various religious affairs in temples drafted them for their participation in the religious performances. The result has marked an opposite set of cultural ethics that govern how the woman will conduct her life after marrying. Besides, inscriptions reveal that Jainism was the way out for the widows who were not fulfilled with orthodox spirituality; its philosophy is non-violent, after all. Religious development in this context showcases how Jainism was, in fact, a much better alternative to the strict Hindu strata, allowing more inclusive and practicable widows.

### **Women and Religious Roles**

It was one of the fewest regions a woman could change. Women, who formed high-ranking

orders in which she often involved even the prince and princess and noble-class donations

for grounds or financial contribution towards building a temple or providing for specific rituals, used such offerings in the gain of social standing against which rewards the quality in generating spirit among kin was developed. Inscriptions scattered all over India, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, reflect the participation of women in religious endowments. Jainism was always relatively more liberal towards the active participation of women in religious affairs; the female devotees are also found contributing to monasteries and temple-building activities in inscriptions. In this respect, the paper evaluates the complexity of these roles by looking into how women negotiated and contributed to social institutions in a very patriarchal society. The study, however, shows regional differences, influences of the religion in some, and experience according to castes and socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Administrative Capabilities**

The epigraphic evidence is at its most vivid in terms of the participation of women in governance and administration of the early medieval period. It is clear that from this stratum of elite females, charters were issued; estates were managed, and diplomatic activities were attended. The inscriptions in Orissa speak of governance on the part of the queens of Bhauma-Kāra who could, in their own rights, issue royal decrees.

These women were not mere figureheads but had played important roles in the maintenance of political stability and the carrying out of

administrative work. Other inscriptions from South India also record the participation of women in the administration of temple properties and the issuing of land grants. These examples undermine the conventional view of women having nothing to say in governance, and indications are that women held quite important political power at certain time and place within certain geographical regions. Inscriptions, which were etched or engraved on genealogical records of rulers, depicted the line of female succession who ruled when there lacked a male heir.

### **Rights in Property**

Women's rights in property in early medieval times were both regional and class-based, but also varied. Though parts of the Hindu law codes uniformly proscribed women's rights in inheritance of property, especial for the widow, epigraphs show that they did own property under certain conditions. Women property holders like devadasis-their own caste included temple dancers-kept reappearing in the inscriptions, particularly in South India.

These women owned lands, and huge portions of their property were donated to temples, thus showing them as economically independent and religiously devout. In most instances, the property rights of women were associated with religious institutions because they were endowed with lands to earn religious merit. The Karnataka and Tamil Nadu epigraphs suggest that women managed estates and granted land. This does not fit the narrative that women lacked a life in the economic sphere. These rights are not distributed evenly, nor was the spread of ownership of women's property uniform between regional and communal areas.

**Conclusion** In the epigraphic evidence about women in governance and religious and economic life of early medieval India, greater

and more dynamic roles than literature provides to women can be found. In literature sources, women are thus portrayed as passive objects behind the house, but epigraphy rather portrays women actively practicing their exercise in domain spaces. The inscriptions have exposed regional differences that depict how women's lives varied differently and according to regional political, religious, and cultural elements. A comparative study of epigraphic data with literary texts suggests that women have appeared more dominant and powerful in India during early medieval ages than believed so far. It calls for using epigraphy together with other sources to unfold sensitive knowledge about the roles of gender in historical contexts.

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