

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

**LOCATING FEMALE POWER IN ANCIENT & EARLY MEDIEVAL
INDIA**

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**Dr. SHRADHA , Locating Female Power In Ancient & Early Medieval
India. Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 18(8). ISSN 1567-
214x.**

Ancient Indian society was undoubtedly patriarchal in nature as we do not find much mention of women in power or position of power. We have no knowledge of who were the rulers of the first Indian civilization- the Indus Valley Civilization whether they were males or females, priests, warriors or merchants. We are still in dark as the Harappan script has not been deciphered yet. The Vedic Aryans had a patriarchal society with 'Kulapa' or father as the head of the family similarly the tribal chief was also a male. In Vedic Age, we hear of women slaves being given to priests as gifts apart from cow and cattle. This clearly indicates that women had an inferior position as compared to males from the Vedic period itself. However, many historians have termed the Vedic Age as a golden age for women due to a comparatively liberal atmosphere prevailing during the period. In Vedic Age, women were allowed to participate in the tribal councils like Sabha and the Samiti, allowed to study Vedic texts, undergo upanayana samskara, and had the liberty to choose their bridegroom and even to remain spinster. However, from the Later Vedic period onwards all these rights were curtailed to a great extent as the Smriti and Dharmashastras relegated women to the confines of the household and provided for stringent rules for them in case of education, marriage, widowhood, property rights etc. In early Medieval age, women's rights were further restricted through the observance of purdah as she needed to be protected from the evil eye of the invaders.

Such a conservative atmosphere was not conducive for development of women's political and administrative capabilities. A female ruler capable of ruling on equal terms with the male was largely unacceptable in a male-dominated society. Although we have certain references to capable and competent females in literature and inscriptions, who discharged their duties in

position of power as capable queens of incompetent or deceased husband with minor son. In a society where warfare or administration was considered to be the prerogative of the male, our history bears testimony to records of several female rulers who have excelled as administrators and have been at helm of state affairs contributed in exceptional ways. The intention, is not to merely locate important women figures in historical past but to acknowledge the agency of women in any context. Women wielded both power—the ability to enforce their decisions and authority—the formal, legitimate right to influence people's decisions.

Literary sources like Śāntiparva of Mahabharata talks about women rulers but accepts them in position of power only in absence of male heirs. Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra also gives provision for regent queens if a King died without a male heir to ensure continuity of rule in the same dynasty. Even the Dharmasāstras considered the married wife of a king as the de jure ruler. Although no written law prohibited women from political succession, but women's path to a political or administrative role was full of hurdles (Verma, 2018: 159). This paper makes an attempt to unravel such exceptions by locating feminine power in the ancient and early medieval Indian society believed to be highly conservative and patriarchal.

The story of Satyawati mentioned in the Epic Mahabharata is a story of one such women of extraordinary acumen, to deal with the politically difficult situation with exceptional character. Satyawati (paternal grandmother of Kauravas and Pandavas) grew up in a fishing community as her real father had rejected her. Thus, her upbringing was away from the center of Aryan power and she received no instructions in Aryan ways and lived a life of hardship ferrying people across the river. When Kuru King Santanu solicited Satyawati's hand, she kept a condition that her son would become the king of Kuru dynasty. Following which Santanusson Devavrata vowed to be brahmacharya till death so that his progeny would not stand in way of his father's marriage to Satyawati. Satyawati thus became the queen of Kuru Kingdom. She became mother of two sons, Citrarigada and Vicitravirya and her son was crowned but soon both of them died, thus Kuru Kingdom and Santanu's line was faced with extinction as Vicitravirya had died childless and Bhisma was a celibate. Although grief stricken, but being the reigning queen Satyawati set duty above sorrow as protection of integrity of the empire was urgent.

To preserve the Kuru dynasty, she found a solution for birth of one or more ksetraja sons— (daughters-in-law cohabit with a male solely for the purpose of bearing sons). Since Bhisma was celibate, a virtuous Brahmin was to be invited to produce children in wombs of Vicitravirya's wives. Satyawati decided that this brahmin would be her son great sage Kṛṣṇa Dvaipayana Vyasa, her own son by sage Parasara. This again shows her practical judgment, courage, ability to lead such a vast Kingdom and steer it through the crisis without getting lost in her personal loss. She upheld her dharma or duty as the queen, found solutions within the patriarchal norms and was a source of political stability for the Kuru Kingdom. This also suggests that a female was the decision maker, moreover, the customary ignominy of bearing a child out of wedlock is reversed in her case to lend power to her decisions. Not only Satyawati bears testimony to the power of women in state and society of that period, the Epic also speaks about feminine characters like Gandhari, Kunti, and Draupadi who on occasions had shown courage to oppose injustice of male world and also asserted their rights within the male dominated patriarchal society of later Vedic times (Jayatri, 2020: 56-67). Thus, even though females were not directly the ruler but they were crucial political figures with key decision-

making powers or had the ability to indirectly strengthen the power or rule of a Kings. This is clear in case of King Bimbisara of Magadha.

India's first King Bimbisara of Magadha (fifth century BCE) made a number of matrimonial alliances with neighbouring states to strengthen Magadha's position. Buddhist text Mahavagga speaks of Bimbisara's 500 wives. He married Mahakoshala, sister of Avanti's ruler Prasenjit second, Chellana Licchavi princess of Vaishali and Khema from Madra clan of Punjab (Raman, 2009: 67) This indicates that the wedding of these princess of royal families was crucial to the consolidation of power of Magadhan Empire. In addition to these, royal ladies were also known for helping the King from behind the throne.

In Kanauj, Harshavardhana's sister Rajyashri presence was essential for him to stake his claim to the throne of Kanauj. Chinese pilgrim refers to Rajyashri as a lady of great intellect with various accomplishments in singing and dancing (Thakur, 2017:272). Although used as a pawn in a strategic marriage alliance, her active presence in Harsha's court and her possible influence on his religious choices are pointers to the power she must have wielded (Rangachari, 2020: 18). Gupta records show that Prabhavatigupta, daughter of Gupta Emperor, Chandragupta II ruled the Vakataka Kingdom as regent queen following her husband Rudrasena II's demise. The Copper plate inscription at Poona depicts how well Prabhavatigupta administered the Vakataka Kingdom for a period of 25 years which demonstrates that she was well educated and capable enough to administer a Kingdom. We also find references to Licchavi princess Kumaradevi and Dhruvadevi who played an important role in the Gupta period. Gupta period coins bearing name of both King and queen, Chandragupta I and Kumaradevi indicates that queens and females of royal families enjoyed important place in the political life of Gupta period and they were generally well capable and well educated (Priyadarshini, 2015: 130).

Various inscriptions of Deccan and South India reveal that many of these royal ladies possessed a lot of wealth and were involved in large scale donations for religious and welfare activities. Inscriptions at Buddhist stupa, Nagarjuna konda indicate that Satavahana queens Camti Sri, Adavi Catisri, and six others donated money for the construction of the monument. Similar inscriptions from Amaravati stupa and Buddhist monastic caves in western India reveal that the donors were Shaka queens and wealthy women (Verma, 2018: 68).

Even travelers accounts of Megasthenes, 'Indica' mentioned that a Pandyan queen ruled over the territory in Malabar region. Sources also mention that women held various positions of power as Governors and officers under the Chalukya Kings, between 980-1160 A.D. Of all the leading feminine powers and able administrators of ancient India, name of great Chola queen Sembiyan Mahadevi finds special mention. She was widow of prince Gandaraditya who ruled for a short period (CE 950-57) after his father Parantaka-I (CE 907-50). As a regent queen, Sembiyan Mahadevi was the main guiding force behind several Chola monarchs and saw at least seven rulers in her lifetime (Raman, 2009: 170). Even Travancore queens were regents for underage sons, but few directly inherited the throne (Verma, 2018: 160).

Early Medieval India:

Historians of the 60s and 70s have interpreted the early Medieval period as 'dark age' as far position of women was concerned. However, recent research has shown that early medieval period is full of brave women who were familiar with administration and politics and played an active role in various Kingdoms. As early as eighth century, we have information that Rani Bai,

sister of Dahir, led her soldiers against the Arab General Mohammad bin Qasim. She however burnt herself to death when she saw no chance of escape following the death of her husband (160).

The Pratihara (AD 810-1085) genealogical lists accord clear visibility to royal women. The Gahalavala queens, Prthvisrika and Ralhaadevi, who seemed to jointly handle the administration in conjunction with the latter's son, Govindacandra (c. AD 1114-54), are examples of powerful women whose presence is documented not in genealogical lists but in donation charters (Rangachari, 2021:18).

In extreme North, Medieval Kashmir was headed by regent queens like Sugandha and Didda who had proved their capabilities as able administrators. The origin myths of Kashmir identify the land as Goddess Parvati's material manifestation. This was the justification for the rule of Yasovati of Gondana dynasty (dates unknown) who was probably the first female ruler of Kashmir. Even Kalhana's Rajatarangini revealed that female rule in Kashmir cut across time and dynasty and was culturally acceptable. However, this would have definitely posed challenges to the norms of succession that favoured a male successor (Rangachari, 2020:17).

Sugandha (904-6 AD) chief queen of King Shankarvarman of Utpala dynasty who ruled from AD 883 to 902 became the regent queen of her son Gopalavarman during his life time and after his death she again ruled for some time but was later deposed. Backed by strong public support and helped by her minister Prabhakardeva she ruled Kashmir following her husband's death. Her reign was marked by conflicts between rival military bodies, the Ekangs and the Tantrins interspersed with the growing influence of Prabhakardeva. Her abortive bid to regain power in 914 AD was thwarted and resulted in her execution (Rangachari, 2012:207)

Another powerful regent queen was Didda who ruled over Kashmir for 23 years in second half of the tenth century. Wife of Kshemagupta (950-8) of Yasaskara dynasty, Didda's formidable influence spans the rule of her husband and her son Abhimanyu (who died in CE 972) and grandsons-Nandigupta, Tribhuvan and Bhimagupta until she herself ascended the throne in AD 980-1. On account of her valour, political acumen and masculine traits she was styled by people as King Didda also named 'Didda Kshema' or mentioned as 'Di-Kshema' on copper coins issued during the period. Srinagar Buddhist image inscription dated AD 989 and 992 refers to Didda by masculine epithets of 'deva' and 'rajan' indicating an interesting reversion of gender. In post Didda period, prominent among powerful queens was Suryamati wife of Anantavarman of Lohara dynasty (AD 1028-63) who played an important role in ending financial crisis in Kashmir with her independent resources. (Thakur, 2017:271). Another prominent queen was Kalhanika, wife of Jayasimha of Lohara dynasty (AD 1128-49) who averted a rebel threat by her mediation and prevented an incipient Damara rebellion. All this indicates vigorous participation of women in politics of Kashmir was a striking feature of early medieval Kashmir (Rangachari, 2012:207).

Sultana Raziya of Delhi (1236-40) stands out as the most prominent Muslim woman ruler of the early Medieval period. She is an example of an extremely talented female ruler whose reign was short-lived due to the discrimination and prejudiced attitude towards a woman rule in a prejudiced and patriarchal society. During her ruling period (1236 - 1240), the Delhi Sultanate was further consolidated and strengthened in North India; however, due to the loss of support among the 'chahalganis' or Turkic nobles and power game in the royal court, led to

conspiracy against Raziya. She fell into the trap well-designed by her opponents and was finally captured and killed (Chen & Yang, 2017: 267).

A study of history of Medieval India reveals that not only Rajput prince were brave but even their princess were well educated, brave and courageous. Rajput princesses were adept in the use of sword and spear. They lead armies and directed Governments in hours of need (Sahgal,1951:15). They were educated even in the art of administration and defence as we find from Tod's annals of Rajasthan. We have many examples of brave Rajput princess. Kurma Devi, queen of King Samarasi, ruled over the Kingdom of Mewar after the death of her husband and repulsed the attack of Qutubuddin Aibak, the Muslim Ruler of Orissa (Sahgal,1951:15). The most famous is the story of Rajput princess Rani Padmavati wife of Raja Rawal Ratan Singh of Chittor. The Rani is known for her bravery and presence of mind when she is said to have rescued Rana with help of Gora and Badal from the captivity of Alauddin Khilji. Karpurdevi, a Kalachuri princess of Tripuri and wife of CāhamānaSomeśvara the throne of Ajmer following his death. He had two minor sons, namely Prithviraja III and Hariraja.. She picked up the courage and assumed the charge of administration. The description of prosperous conditions of Ajmer during her regency and coronation of Prithviraja III has been mentioned in Prithviraja Vijaya.

In Northern India, dowager or regent queens like Rani Katyayani of Kalinga in Orissa in early India. After the deaths of her husband Lalitabharana-deva and son, Katyayani became sovereign until her grandson's birth (Anatharaman, 2009: 160). Epigraphic sources from Orissa reveals the rule by six Bhauma-kara queens from mid eighth to mid-tenth century, four of them in succession. The Talatali plate inscription gives the genealogical table which suggests four female rulers successfully ruled the Bhauma Kingdom after Subhakaradevi III or IV, possibly left no male heir to the throne. This is reconfirmed by the Santigrama grant of Dandimahadevi found in Orissa's Cuttack district. Following Subhakar IV's death the throne passed to his queen Gauri who was succeeded by her daughter Dandimahadevi and the throne next passed to Dharmadevi, queen of Dandimahadevi's uncle Santikara III. Grants issued by these queens suggest that administration always remained in their hands and that people accepted their administrative qualities. Kings seem to be nominal head and queen the centre of power. This is also indicated by the high glossy titles such as Parameshvari, Parambhatarika attached to them. Moreover, their control over the mahasamantas, rajputrasantarangas, uparikas, vishyapatis and kumaramatyas is clearly noticeable. Probably a series of favourable circumstances like absence of a male successor, non-adoption of a male heir and pursuance of religious and administrative heads gave an opportunity to the queens of Bhaumkara dynasty to rule. The Bhaumakara queens were not only efficient in administration and revenue management but also shared military responsibilities. Their regular succession to the throne is significant achievement in a patriarchal society of early medieval Orissa (Verma, 2018: 159-168).

In Warangal, Rudramadevi ruled over Telugu Kakatiya kingdom (1259–95) upon whose feudal system was laid the foundation of Vijayanagar Empire (1336–1556). She is believed to be the fourth independent ruler of Kakatiya dynasty whose long reign ended with her death in 1289. From 1262 onwards Kakatiya inscription speaks of Rudramadevi as King and addresses to her as maharaja, using the masculine form of her name -Rudradeva, perhaps as per her father's wish. Rudramadevi a great warrior probably wore male attire and is believed to have successfully thwarted the attacks by Pandyas of Southern Tamil Nadu, Eastern Gangas of Orissa and Seunas

of Devagiri and won over several forts like Renadu, Eruva, Satti etc. Marco Polo the Venetian traveller, who visited her Kingdom spoke of her administrative qualities in high capacity. After her death, the throne passed to her daughter's son Prataprudra the last King in the Kakatiya line (Singh, 2009: 553).

There were some other queens who did mention for their contribution towards the development of their provinces was commendable. Various inscriptions from Karnataka mention names of Akkamahadevi and Mailaladevi as administrators of territories held by them. A Calukyan princess Akka-Mahadevi ruled over various divisions of Calukya dominions with her seat of power at Vikramapura (modern Arashibidi, Bijapur district). She married Kadamba chieftain Mayūrarman, and ruled Banavasi since 1037 apart from Kisukaḍu and Masavaḍi for nearly half a century (Anatharaman, 2009: 170). A number of inscriptions from Karnataka reveal female ruling various parts of the territory in early Medieval period. Inscriptions reveal that senior queen Ballidevi ruled over Karnataka's Challakeretaluq since 1087. Another inscription from Belurtaluq dated CE 1120 indicates Śāntaladevi had been crowned. Inscription dated CE 1190 states Hoysala queen Umadevi ruled over Dwarasamudra. A host of several such inscriptions indicating name of female rulers of female provincial heads ruling territories in various parts of Karnataka in early medieval period (Verma, 2018: 174).

Even Yadava queens' merit to be mentioned as capable administrators. Two Yādava charters from Devalali of Maharashtra's Ahmadnagar district dated to CE 1052 indicate that following Yadava king Bhillama II's death his widow queen Lachchiyavvā became the regent queen on behalf of her minor son Vasukathus saved the family from complete extinction (Verma, 2018: 171).

Western regent queens of early medieval period, mentioned Mynuldevi daughter of King Jayakeśee of Chandernagore who executed her duties excellently and exhibited rare courage through difficult times. She is believed to have constructed two reservoirs bearing her name Meenulasur at Veerugam and Monsur at Dholka. Naikidevi chief-queen of Ajayapala became regent queen following her husband's death as his son Mularaja II and Bhimadeva II were minor. She is said to have fought against the mlechhas at Gadurgarh with her child in her lap and also said to have defeated the Turks under her regency (Verma, 2018: 171).

Conclusion:

History writing has been dominated by only male rulers till recent times. Recent researches have unraveled the presence of a large number of royal and non-royal women in the political arena. We have already seen how these royal women were directly or indirectly involved in administration of various Kingdoms and provinces. Thus, the perception of women in ancient and early medieval period as largely powerless needs to be revised in the light of such evidence. Whatever be the reasons for holding power regency or succession etc. these royal women proved themselves as capable administrators, warriors amidst the highly patriarchal society. Undoubtedly, they were well educated and well trained to handle any situation. Although few queens were given masculine suffix or prefix like Didda or Rudramabuti it was their political maturity and capability which enabled their acceptability among the people as their ruler.

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