

## **Role of Women in Land Grants of Early Medieval Northern India: An Epigraphic Study**

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### **Abstract-**

The period between 600 A.D. and 1200 A.D. has been termed as the early medieval period in Indian history. During this period several changes occurred in social, religious, political and cultural sphere as well. These changes affected the status of women in contemporary society. Thus, this paper is an attempt to understand the status of women in early medieval north Indian society, based on inscriptional data and tries to analyse their role in land grants and its effect in social, political, religious and financial spheres.

**Keywords-** Inscriptions, peasantization, subinfeudation, feudalism, hierarchical, fiscal, donee.

History aims to study the social evolution of human society. A fact-based analysis of historical sources leads to a realistic reconstruction of historical events and helps us to build a better understanding of the development of human society. Among such historical sources, inscriptions are always considered an important and credible source of information. They do not provide information only about political events or genealogies of kings but also about the cultural aspects and socio-economic conditions of society of a particular period. Inscriptions give us much valuable information, such as the geographical expansion of any ruler's kingdom, linguistic development, administrative setup and social and religious aspects as well. For recording the events of historical importance, such as military expeditions, royal proclamations and the construction of monuments or buildings, epigraphs were engraved. These have been important tools for documenting events, presenting them to the public, receiving praise and making an impact. During the early medieval period, these epigraphs became an important source of information to understand historical changes and development.

The early medieval period in Indian history is marked by the rise of feudatory states and a self-sufficient closed economic system based upon agrarian expansion, in which land relations between rulers and the peasantry developed through land grants. This period is envisioned as the classical age of Indian feudalism. During this period, Indian society went through significant changes, such as the rise of feudatory states, agrarian expansion and the peasantization of tribes,

due to which ancient economic structure collapsed, the long-distance trade declined and traditional centres of trade were replaced by a self-sufficient closed economic system based upon the rural agrarian economy. Foreign invasions and the absence of a stable central authority led to the formation of a new socio-economic and political order. Under these circumstances, the practice of issuing land grants became increasingly popular. During the early medieval period, pieces of land were allotted by the kings in lieu of the services rendered by subordinate officials (whether political or religious) along with fiscal and judicial rights. Thus, it became a common practice. Several sources confirm that donees masterfully asserted their rights. They bore royal titles like independent rulers, kept their separate armies and subordinate staff, held their courts, collected taxes and behaved like monarchs in their jurisdictional areas. Such practices resulted in a process of subinfeudation, and resultantly a class of landholders emerged between the state and peasants. In this situation, land and associated rights became the main features of political and financial activities during the period under study. Thus, early medieval society was characterised by a rural and agrarian economy where the monetary system and long-distance trade declined which resulted in hierarchical feudatory land ownership system. On the other hand, there was a revival of Brahmanical ideology and institutions, and as well as a proliferation of castes and assimilation of foreign elements in social and religious spheres.

The early medieval economy revolved around the relationship between landholders and the landless class, and thus, rights over the land became the most essential factor in the growth and functioning of the state. The religious institutions, the priest class, government officials and royal kinsmen were granted pieces of land in lieu of their services and this practice of issuing land grants became a very popular tradition during the early medieval period, and till the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, the land grant system became a universal feature of the entire Indian political system. Under such circumstances, newly established feudatory states tried to expand their authority into the unreached areas, and to attest to their mark of authority, land grants (both political and religious) became the strongest medium for the expansion of the political realm. In the absence of paper, royal commencements for the allotment of land were inscribed on copper or stone. The land grants made by sovereign rulers or subordinate *sāmantas* mostly on copper-plates were engraved as to mark the authenticity and validity of such an agreement between the doner and donee, and therefore, these copper-plates were supposed to be the legal document of allotment and possession of the land. This practice of land grants encouraged several states to issue a large number of

political and religious grants. Thus, such inscriptions became an important source of information related to land rights and their role in the establishment of state administration and other important social, religious, financial and judicial aspects of the early medieval period. The mention of a large number of distinguished and qualified female characters in inscriptions indicates their administrative capabilities and their influence in the social, religious and political domains of contemporary society. Such sources reveal that females played a vital role in the formation of the early medieval social setup that was dominated by males.

So, the present paper throws welcome light on inscriptions consisting of events about several types of grants issued by females in major dynasties of northern India between the period of 600 A.D. and 1200 A.D. and deals with the issue of the participation of women in land grants and their political and financial rights in northern India. A critical analysis of such inscriptional data helps us to understand the role of women in the transforming socio-political environment of northern India during the early medieval period.

In Indian society, historical annals have always favoured a male-dominated socio-political structure along with governing the state and issuing royal orders have been a virtue of males only. But, surprisingly, when it comes to authoritative deeds like issuing grants of financial and political nature, a large number of epigraphic records provide numerous examples where women can be seen issuing various types of grants and tend to prove that women in northern India enjoyed considerable religious, political and financial rights and were an important part of the social structure along with their male counterparts.

The first recorded inscriptional evidence of a land grant belongs to a female named Nāganikā, who was the mother of Sātavāhana ruler Gautamiputra Sātakarṇi during the 2nd century A.D.<sup>1</sup> The *Poona Copper Plate*<sup>2</sup> and *Riddhapur Copper Plate*<sup>3</sup> belonging to Gupta period mention about Prabhāvatiguptā, wife of Vākāṭaka king Rudrasena II and daughter of Gupta ruler Chandragupta II Vikramāditya issued a grant of two villages. After the decline of the centralised kingdom of Guptas, several regional powers came into existence and ruled over the northern part of the Indian subcontinent till the advent of Turkish rule in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. These states were dominated by the feudalistic concept of power-sharing in which the tradition of issuing land grants became an important factor in every sphere of society. Various donations, including land, perpetual lamps and money for the construction or maintenance of buildings, were made by females and in this way, they played an important part in keeping the wheel of social evolution in motion. *Aphsaḍ*

*Inscription*<sup>4</sup> of later Gupta king Ādityasena (7<sup>th</sup> century A. D.) records the construction of a school by his mother Śhrimatī and a tank by his queen Koṇadevī. The *Buchakalā Inscription* of the reign of Pratihāra king Nāgabhaṭṭa II (805-833 A. D.) mentions about the construction of a temple in a village named Rājyaghaṅgakam made by queen Jāyavālī, wife of his chieftain Bhumbuvaka.<sup>5</sup> Another inscription from Ahār (Rajasthan) belonging to the reign of king Bhojadeva (836–85 A. D.) speaks about his two queens, Lachchhikā and Sampat, who paid the delinquent amount of rent over 98 years for the Kanchanaśrīdevī temple and also granted a house with the rent received from the property being used for the maintenance of the temple.<sup>6</sup> The *Bayānā Inscription* (955 A. D.) of the reign of Pratihāra king Mahīpāla<sup>7</sup> reveals about the construction of the Viṣṇu temple from the grant issued by queen Chitralkhā wife of a feudal lord named Maṅgalarāja. The Queen granted an area of two villages named Gograpura and Nāgapallī and ordered also to keep a separate amount of three *drammas* out of the tax collected from the market of Śrīpatha and one *dramma* from the sale of every horse in the market for the maintenance of the temple. The same inscription also describes a group of temple dancers who also made donations to the temples. These examples tend to indicate that the queens were not limited only to issue grants on a religious basis, but they were also capable of taking important financial decisions like taxation, and apart from royal houses, ordinary women were also involved in making financial donations.

The Paramāras were also among the major political powers that ruled over a large part of northern India during the early medieval period. The *Ujjain grant* of the Paramāra king of Mālwa, Vākpatirāja alias Amoghavarṣa, of the year 980 A.D.<sup>8</sup> records donation of a village named Sembalapura on the occasion of a lunar eclipse. This donation was made at the request of a woman named Āsinī, wife of Mahāsādhnika Mahāika. Merutuṅga in the *Prabandhachintāmaṇī* refers to the term Mahāsādhnika for a military commander. Thus, this event also records that apart from royal families, the wives of the subordinate officers also participated in donation activities. The *Vasantagarh Inscription* (1042 A.D.) of another Paramāra king named Pūraṇapāla describes the renovation of a Sun temple by her sister queen Lāhiṇī. She was married to king Vighraharāja. After the death of her husband, Lāhiṇī used to live in Vasantagarh or Vaṭapura under the protection of her brother. She also commissioned the construction of a stepwell for the public.<sup>9</sup> The *Kadambapadraka Grant* of Naravarmana of the year 1097 A.D. mentions a grant of four *halas* (ploughs) being given to a Brāhmaṇa by the queen Mahādevī, wife of Paramāra king Naravarmana.<sup>10</sup>

The *Jalore Stone Inscription* of Vīsala, 1118 A.D., speaks about a new house of Paramāras in the Jalore region of Rajasthan. It mentions queen Melaradevī, wife of Vīsala, who furnished the temple of Sindhurājeśvara with a golden cupola.<sup>11</sup> The *Jainad Inscription* of king Jagaddeva belonging to the first half of the eleventh century A.D., records the erection of a Sun temple named Nimbāditya by queen Padmāvatī, wife of Lolāraka, a minister, during the reign of king Jagaddeva.<sup>12</sup> *Bhinamāla Inscription* of king Jayatsīma of 1183 A.D. tells about a donation to a temple by her queen.<sup>13</sup> Two inscriptions of Paramāra king Bhojadeva too speak of the participation of females in such activities. *Jhāloḍī Inscription*<sup>14</sup> of the year 1198 A.D. records the donation of a garden to Mahāvīra temple by the queen Śṛṅgāradevī, wife of Dhārāvarṣa. The *Ajhārī Stone Inscription*<sup>15</sup> of Dhārāvarṣa also tells about a lamp donation to this temple by queen Śṛṅgāradevī.

Several inscriptions of the Kalachuri rulers of Tripuri, also known as the Kalachuris of Chedi (who ruled the parts of Central India during the early medieval period), record numerous examples where females can be seen issuing various types of donations. Such a reference tells us that during this period, women had access to financial and political rights. King Lakṣmaṇarāja II's (940-965 A.D.) *Karitalai Stone Inscription*<sup>16</sup> mentions a village named Chakrahraḍī, which was donated by his wife queen Rāhaḍā. The *Saugor Stone Inscription* of Śaṅkaragaṇa speaks about the religious work done by (probably the construction of a Śaiva temple) Kṛṣṇādevī in the memory of her parents. She was the wife of Deuka, a local king of Kaśapura.<sup>17</sup> The *Bilhāri Stone Inscription* of Yuvarājadeva II (980–990 A.D.) describes a grant of several villages to a Śaiva temple by queen Nohalā. She also constructed a Śiva temple and granted a village named Ambipātaka to the Śaiva ascetic Iśvaraśiva. The same inscription also tells that the king himself was deeply inspired by the queen and commissioned several monuments.<sup>18</sup> An inscription from Bheḍāghāṭa (Madhya Pradesh) of the reign of Kalachuri king Narasiṃha (1153–1163 A.D.) tells about his widow mother, Ālhaṇadevī, wife of Gayākarnadeva. She erected many temples, *maṭhas* and monasteries, and issued also a grant of two villages. Thus, the above mentioned examples show that during the Chedi-Kalachuri era, women not only built various monuments or issued various types of grants, but they also influenced and inspired the kings to engage themselves in religious activities.<sup>19</sup>

The Chandela rulers of Jejākabhukti were another political power along with their contemporaries, like the Paramāras of Mālwa and the Kalachuris of Tripuri. They reigned in the Bundelkhaṇḍ region between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and were famous for their love for art and architecture. They commissioned various iconic monuments at Khajurāho and many other in

Central India. The inscriptional records highlight their involvement in various activities of granting donations in which females can also be seen in an important role. The *Kuṇḍeśvara Copper Plate*<sup>20</sup> of the king Vidyādhara of 1004 A.D. holds record of the donation of village Jasauni in the Vārāṅgī-84 region. His wife, queen Satyabhāmā, along with her sons, issued this grant to the Brāhmaṇas on the occasion of the new moon (*Amāvasyā*). The *Bhāratakālā Bhawan Plate Inscription*<sup>21</sup> of king Madanvarma (1128–1165 A.D.) provides interesting information about the rights of women during the early medieval period. It mentions the transfer of pieces of donated land to the Brāhmaṇas for the sake of convenience. In lieu of his services, queen Lakhamīdevī granted a village named Valahauḍā to the priest Nādūka. Later on, his land was transferred to Ḍāvāha in Nandāvaṇa Pattal. Likewise another priest, Sahajūśarman, got his land transferred to Mahuāli village from Pipalahā-grāma. The inscription states that Nādūka was the personal priest of Lakhamīdevī and the transfer deed of Sahajūśarman was issued after the prior permission of queen Vālhaṇadevī along with the permission of king Madanvarma. These references show that women during this period not only had their personal staff but also played an important role in political and financial matters. Another inscription of the Chandela ruler, Vīravarma<sup>22</sup>, from Ajaygarh of 1245 A.D. tells about the construction of a Śiva temple in Nandipur village by her queen Kalyāṇadevī. She also built a well for public use. Though the inscription falls out of our period under study, but it shows a continuous involvement of females in the issuance of financial and political donations.

Govindachandra (1114–1155 A.D.) of Gahaḍawāla dynasty was an influential character in the politics of Central India during the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He married several princesses of neighbouring states to establish strong political alliances through matrimonial relations. According to inscriptional records, his queens were involved in political activities and issued various types of grant deeds. The *Sāranātha Inscription*<sup>23</sup> of Kumāradevī, mentions that queen Kumāradevī, wife of Govindachandra, ordered to repair a Jain monastery and appointed a lady officer named Jambuki to look-after the construction of another Jain *vihāra* and other important works. The *Machhliśahar Inscription*<sup>24</sup> mentions another grant made by king Govindachandra and his queen, Nayanākelī. She was the chief queen of Govindachandra and issued a grant of a village to a priest named Jaguśarman on the occasion of a solar eclipse. The *Bangavan Inscription*<sup>25</sup> speaks of the grant of a village by his another queen, Gosaladevī. The above mentioned references suggest that the females of the Gahaḍawāla dynasty enjoyed administrative and financial freedom, and



played an important role in the smooth functioning of the state in the volatile political environment of early medieval northern India.

Apart from the central and western parts of northern India, the Pāla and Sena kingdoms in the eastern parts (mainly the modern areas of Bengal and Bangladesh) also have several references of women who actively participated in the issuance of land grants and other donation related activities. The *Kurkīhāra Bronze Image Inscription*<sup>26</sup> of Devapāla (810-850 A.D.) records a donation of a bronze idol of Buddha to a monastery by the wife of the village-chief. Another inscription of 10<sup>th</sup> century, of the reign of king Rājyapāla, mentions another donation of a Buddha image to the Āpaṇaka monastery.<sup>27</sup> The *Barrackpur Copper Plate Inscription*<sup>28</sup> of Sena king Vijayasena (1096–1159 A.D.) mentions queen Vilāsadevī who performed a religious ritual, the *Kanakatulāpuruṣa-Mahādāna* and also donated a piece of land to a Brāhmaṇa, named Udayakaradevaśarman. The *Naiḥāṭī Inscription*<sup>29</sup> of Vallālasena (1159–1179 A.D.) refers to land grants issued by his queen Vilāsadevī. It states that the queen donated a village to a priest named Vāsudeva on the occasion of the solar eclipse.

The *Sāṇḍerāo Inscription*<sup>30</sup> of Chāhamāna king Kelhanadeva states that his queen mother, Analadevī, made a donation to a Jaina temple and also established a statue of Pārśvanātha along with her brothers. The *Nāḍlāī Inscription*<sup>31</sup> of Rāipāla (1134 A.D.) also speaks of a donation to a Jaina temple by queen Analadevī. She donated a certain amount of oil (2 *palikā*) from each oil machine (*ghāṇī*). Another important reference to a grant issued by a female belongs to the Bhaumakāra dynasty of Orissa. The Bhaumakāras present a strong example of female involvement in political affairs. From 736 to 942 A.D., six females ascended the throne, one after the other, in this dynasty. These female rulers not only ran the state successfully but also bore royal titles like male monarchs, commissioned several monuments and issued various kinds of grants. The *Dhenkanal Copper Plate*<sup>32</sup> of queen Tribhuvanamahādevī of the 8<sup>th</sup> century mentions several land grants issued by her.

Besides inscriptional evidence, several literary references also confirm the involvement of women in various types of financial and political donations. Anjali Verma has conducted a comparative study based on inscriptional data and highlighted the fact that females in southern India had more political and financial opportunities in comparison to northern India. An unstable and war grim political environment during the early medieval period, narrowed down the chances of female participation in mainstream political and financial activities. However, women seek an

alternative to this male-chauvinistic prohibition by participating in religious activities such as issuing land grants to priests and religious institutions, erecting temples, *maṭhas* and *vihāras* and continuing to play an important role in the formation of the early medieval society's social, political and financial order.<sup>33</sup> R.S. Sharma highlights the fact that grants issued by females were religious in nature and the idea behind them was to gain spiritual benefit. Such grants not only played an important role in the history of the land system but were also crucial for the monetary system, the growth and decline of trade and commerce and the conferring of political and judicial rights along with a piece of land affected the migration and settlement of population, agricultural activities and the rise and fall of the old and new urban centers.<sup>34</sup> Though the inscriptional data does not provide much information about common women, it does provide sufficient information about the females of the royal class. The involvement of females in such activities, as well as financial and political authority, attempts to demonstrate that females adopted alternative methods in restrictive, male-dominated and transitional phases of society and played a vital role in the formation of early medieval society.

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