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QUEENS, NUNS, AND COURTESANS: WOMEN AS LANDHOLDERS AND DONORS IN EARLY INDIAN INSCRIPTIONS, C. 200 BCE–400 CE

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Abstract :

Women’s agency in early India is conventionally assessed through normative Dharmashastra texts that restrict female property rights. This paper uses 62 donative inscriptions from 200 BCE to 400 CE to examine women as property holders, grantors, and public benefactors. Data from Sanchi, Bharhut, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Naneghat, and Nashik show Buddhist nuns, Satavahana and Ikshvaku queens, lay devotees, and courtesans endowing caves, pillars, irrigation works, and image houses. The Naneghat inscription of Naganika records a queen performing Vedic sacrifices and issuing grants in her own right. Gautami Balashri’s Nashik prasasti documents a royal widow donating a village with full fiscal immunity to monks. Ikshvaku inscriptions from Nagarjunakonda reveal women receiving villages from kings and re-granting them to monasteries. Sanchi records show nuns donating collectively and individually, sometimes with male relatives as co-donors, sometimes alone. The study classifies female donors by status and analyses grant clauses to assess legal and social autonomy. Three case notes—Naganika at Naneghat, Gautami Balashri at Nashik, and the nuns of Sanchi Stupa 1—demonstrate how inscriptional practice provided women a public, legal voice often denied in smriti literature. Findings indicate that donative epigraphy functioned as a parallel legal regime where women exercised property rights, transferred assets, and shaped public ritual. The paper frames ancient donations as an early form of gendered public participation, with implications for understanding property rights, voice, and welfare in public administration. While elite bias is evident, the inscriptions show that women could be fiscal agents, not merely dependents. The study concludes that stone inscriptions expanded the space for female action by making property and patronage public, verifiable, and legally defensible.

Keywords: women donors, inscriptions, Sanchi, Naneghat, Gautami Balashri, Nagarjunakonda, property rights, gender, ancient India, public participation, Buddhism

Introduction

The railing of Sanchi Stupa 1 carries a small inscription: “The gift of the nun Dhamarakhita, the pupil of Ayya Phaguna.” Nearby, another reads: “The gift of the courtesan Nagapiya.” At Naneghat, a monumental cave inscription records Queen Naganika performing agnyadheya and ashvamedha sacrifices, then granting land. At Nashik, Gautami Balashri, mother of Gautamiputra Satakarni, donates a village to monks with full tax immunity. These texts, carved between 200 BCE and 300 CE, present a puzzle. Dharmashastra literature of the same period declares that a woman should not hold property independently and must be under male guardianship. Yet inscriptions show queens granting villages, nuns endowing caves, and courtesans funding pillars, all in their own names. The contradiction is not merely textual. It is administrative. If women could not own property, how did they alienate it? If they lacked legal capacity, how did monasteries accept their gifts? This paper argues that donative inscriptions created a parallel legal regime. By making a grant public, verifiable, and incised on stone, a woman converted social fact into legal fact. The inscription became proof of ownership, intent, and transfer, enforceable by the king and the community. Thus epigraphy was not just religious merit. It was a technology that



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expanded female agency in property and public life. The study examines 62 such records to map the scope and limits of that agency, and to read them as acts of public administration.

Objectives

The paper catalogues female donors in early Indian inscriptions from 200 BCE–400 CE by region, status, and asset type. It analyses legal clauses in women’s grants to assess autonomy, including rights to alienate, tax immunity, and boundary definition. It compares inscriptional practice with Dharmashastra norms on stridhana and guardianship to identify convergences and contradictions. It examines the role of royal women in policy communication and public welfare through donative prasastis. It extracts implications for understanding gender, property, and voice in ancient public administration.

Review of Literature

Kumkum Roy’s *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power* (1994) used inscriptions to show that royal women exercised authority through kinship and patronage. Uma Chakravarti argued that Buddhism provided a “space” for women as nuns and donors, though within patriarchy. Vijaya Ramaswamy studied Tamil inscriptions and found women as temple donors and administrators. Upinder Singh analysed Sanchi donations and noted the high proportion of female donors, including nuns and laywomen. Devika Rangachari examined queenship in the Deccan, arguing that mothers and widows used patronage to legitimise sons. The administrative dimension is less studied. D.C. Sircar classified grants but did not theorise legal capacity. This paper brings property law and public administration concepts to the epigraphic data, treating inscriptions as contracts and women as fiscal agents.

Methodology

The dataset includes 62 inscriptions mentioning female donors from Luders’ List of Brahmi Inscriptions, Marshall’s Sanchi, Vogel’s Nagarjunakonda, and Epigraphia Indica. Each is coded for donor status: queen, princess, nun, lay devotee, courtesan; asset: land, village, cave, pillar, cash, water work; legal clause: immunity, boundary, re-grant rights; and male co-signatory: husband, son, preceptor, none. Textual analysis compares clauses with Yajnavalkya Smriti 2.115–2.146 on women’s property. Institutional analysis treats the inscription as a property title and the king as guarantor. Limits include survival bias toward Buddhist sites and elite women.

Typology of Female Donors

Royal Women: Queens and mothers issue grants independently. Naganika at Naneghat performs Vedic rites and grants land. Gautami Balashri at Nashik donates a village after her son’s death. Ikshvaku queens at Nagarjunakonda receive villages from kings and re-grant them to monasteries, acting as fiscal intermediaries.

Nuns: At Sanchi, nuns account for 18 percent of named donors. They give pillars, crossbars, and pavement slabs. Some are identified by preceptor, others alone. At Amaravati, nuns donate sculpture panels. The sangha thus enabled female property accumulation and disposal.

Lay Devotees: Housewives, daughters, and mothers appear with male relatives or alone. Bharhut records “the gift of the housewife Nagila.” These small donations indicate access to personal wealth.

Courtesans: Sanchi and Mathura record ganikas donating railings and images. Their wealth and public recognition challenge textual stigma.

The pattern shows that ritual and social status, not gender alone, determined donative capacity. Royal and monastic affiliation created space for female property rights.



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Case Note: Naganika, Naneghat, c. 70–60 BCE

The Naneghat inscription, engraved beside reliefs of Satakarni I, Naganika, and three princes, is issued by Naganika after her husband's death. It records the performance of agnyadheya, vajapeya, and two ashvamedha sacrifices, and grants dakshina to Brahmins.

The administrative significance is threefold. First, Naganika acts as head of state, listing sacrifices that only a sovereign could perform. She thus exercises political authority. Second, she grants land and wealth, demonstrating control over treasury. Third, she publicises the dynasty's genealogy and ritual status, which is policy communication. The inscription shows that widowhood did not terminate royal women's agency. Instead, it could amplify it, as the mother-guardian of minor sons. The cave location on a trade route addressed merchants and chiefs, making the queen's authority public.

Case Note: Gautami Balashri, Nashik Cave No. 3, c. 132 CE

Gautami Balashri, mother of Gautamiputra Satakarni, commissions a prasasti after her son's death. It praises him as restorer of varna and destroyer of Shakas. It then records her grant of village Pisajipadaka to the bhikkhusangha with full tax immunity and defined boundaries.

The grant reveals legal capacity. The queen owns or controls a village and alienates it. The immunity clauses—abhatapadesha, alavanakhadaka—are technical fiscal terms, showing knowledge of revenue administration. The boundary description makes the grant enforceable. The prasasti section functions as a political manifesto, communicating state policy to the western Deccan. Thus the queen is both fiscal agent and policy spokesperson. The inscription enables her to act without a male intermediary, using stone as legal proof.

Case Note: Nuns of Sanchi Stupa 1, c. 1st Century BCE–1st Century CE

Of 631 Sanchi donations, over 100 are by nuns. Examples: "Gift of the nun Dhamarakhita, pupil of Ayya Phaguna" on a rail pillar; "Gift of the nun Yakhi" on a crossbar. Some nuns donate jointly with laywomen or monks, others alone.

The pattern indicates that ordination created economic personhood. Nuns received stridhana before entry or alms after, and could dispose of it. The sangha did not confiscate property but allowed individual merit-making. The inscriptions give nuns public visibility and legal recognition. By naming preceptors, they also map monastic networks. The collective presence of nuns as donors shows that Buddhism expanded female access to property and public life, and inscriptions made that access durable.

Discussion

Dharmashastra texts limit stridhana to movable gifts and place women under guardianship. Inscriptions show women granting immovable property, villages, and making contracts with guilds. The contradiction resolves if inscriptions are read as a parallel legal regime. A woman's right was created or confirmed by public inscription, witnessed by the community and guaranteed by the king. The stone text became title.

Several mechanisms enabled this. First, ritual status. Queens performing Vedic rites or nuns within sangha had religious sanction to act. Second, fiscal utility. Kings gained merit and loyalty by allowing royal women to grant villages to monasteries, which maintained infrastructure. Third, publicity. Carving a grant made it common knowledge, reducing disputes and enabling enforcement.



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The limits are real. Most donors are elite. No inscriptions record peasant women alienating fields. The grants often occur in widowhood or monasticism, liminal states outside normal patriarchy. Yet within those limits, women exercised fiscal agency. They chose donees, specified uses, and set boundaries. They participated in public policy by funding tanks, ferries, and rest-houses.

For public administration, the lesson is that legal capacity can be expanded through publicity and institutional affiliation. Inscriptions gave women a voice in resource allocation. Modern analogies include joint land titles, SHG bank accounts, and female sarpanch reservations. All use legal recognition and public records to expand female agency.

Thus donative epigraphy was not merely piety. It was a technology that allowed women to be landholders, contractors, and policy actors. The rock face recorded their decisions and protected their will.

Conclusion

Early Indian inscriptions reveal women as queens, nuns, donors, and builders. They granted villages, endowed caves, and funded water works. They did so in their own names, with legal clauses and public visibility that Dharmashastra does not anticipate. The contradiction is resolved by recognising inscriptions as a parallel legal regime in which publicity created capacity. Royal and monastic institutions provided the space, and stone provided the proof. The result was a measurable expansion of female agency in property and public life. While limited to elites and special statuses, the pattern shows that gendered constraints were negotiable in practice. For ancient public administration, women were not invisible. They were grantors of villages, patrons of infrastructure, and authors of policy prasastis. Their names on stone are evidence of voice, property, and participation two thousand years ago.

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