

# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN EARLY INDIA

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The opening up of the novel vistas in social history has resulted in the illumination of the dim corridors of women's history, hitherto a sphere of relative scholarly indifference in Indian context. The last few decades have witnessed a spurt in the literary productions, locating the contours of women's position in terms of specific political and economic formations. However, the dominant discourse of women in early India has been marked by stereotyping of women as adjuncts to social and political processes. This article seeks to investigate the participation of women in political arena in early India, adding a sequel to the emerging fresh perspectives portraying women as active agents of social change.

The reconstruction of the women's position in early Indian political life calls for certain cautions while handling the source materials. The literacy texts, particularly the *Dharmasāstras* being the brahmanical normative texts, are afflicted with patriarchal biases, sometimes representing the personal opinion of the author. The epigraphic sources are full of hyperbolic expressions. Moreover, the sweeping generalizations about the position of women in early India require qualification, which is best done by focusing on the perspectival, spatial and chronological location of the sources on which the author bases himself /herself.

The saga of women's political participation in ancient India bears an evolutionary character unfolding over the spatial and temporal contexts. As far as functional aspects are concerned in the realm of polity, women's role extended over a vast range of activities. Not only women rulers but also there were many women administrators, governors, messengers and the

spies. It can be attributed to the social, economic and political milieu as well as the prevailing cultural ethos of the respective periods.

While visualizing the proto-historic period, the prevailing cult of mother-goddess in the Indus Valley civilization indicates the significance of female component in society. However, stretching this ritualistic cult to establish the political significance of women would tantamount to the grotesque distortion of the archaeological data. The fascinating enigma surrounding the Harappan landscape continues to survive until the mist hanging over the decipherment of the Indus script is settled. Notwithstanding this fact, there are clear references of women's political participation in the Vedic period. More particularly, the Ṛigvedic period witnessed the participation of women in Vidatha, hailed as the earliest folk assembly of the Indo-āryans. The Ṛigveda informs us that the Yosa went to the Vidatha.<sup>1</sup> Grown-up men are described as installing strong and social maiden for the sake of good in the Vidatha.<sup>2</sup> It appears that the women member was not a mute participant in the affairs of the assembly. Thus Sūrya is instructed to speak to the assembled people in the vidatha.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, a desire is expressed in the marriage ceremony that the bride may not only figure as a housewife but having control she may speak to the Vidatha (council).<sup>4</sup> Again it's said that she may speak to the Vidatha in her advanced age.<sup>5</sup> Regarding sabhā, the Ṛg Veda only once indicates the connection of women with the Sabhā. She is described as worthy of going to the sabhā.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, a reference in the Atharva Veda shows that women were also attended samiti.<sup>7</sup> Even in respect of the sabhā the Maitrāyani Saṃhitā shows that she ceased to attend it in later times.<sup>8</sup> This association of women in Vedic polity assumes prominence in the later Vedic period in case of the ratnahavimsi ceremony, which forms a part of the rājasūya coronation sacrifice. According to it, the sacrificing king went to the house of each ratnin and offered oblations to the appropriate deity there. The list given in the Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa<sup>9</sup> consists of twelve ratnins, of whom three namely, mahiṣi, vāvātā & parivṛkti, happen to be women, who were arrives of the king. It suggests that in this case one - fourth of those whose voice & support counts in the consecration of the king consist of women. Thus, a study of the available references reveals that in Rig Vedic

times marked by a pastoral & semi nomadic society where there was an absence of surplus, the gender distinctions couldn't be accentuated. On the other hand, the later Vedic age witnessed the emergence of a relatively complex political, social and economic organization in which tribal & matriarchal elements were being gradually submerged by class, territorial and patriarchal elements.

It is worthwhile to mention here that the Buddha<sup>10</sup> categorically stated that women are not suitable for administration and business. He<sup>11</sup> did not approve of women to become a monarch or an administrator. The only major exception was Visākhā who was asked to hold a judicial investigation and give judgment in a disputed matter. Moreover, the collection of verses known as the Therigāthā, supposed to have been uttered by individual Buddhist nuns, presents a living evidence of a set purpose inspiring courageous effort, of a fineness of accomplishment in the desired task, and of a synthesis and emergence of personality, which would all have lain dormant or fragmentary if benefit of the mains of expression. It is a pointer to the notable presence of women in the democratic order of the saṅgha, as a political entity. A review of the epic references reveals that the idea of women to rule was not averse even to sage Vaśiṣṭha in the Rāmāyana. He<sup>12</sup> recommended that Sitā could rule till Rāma returned from the forest. Even Bhīṣma<sup>13</sup> recommended to Yudhishṭhira to coronate the daughters of those deceased kings who had no son.

The Mauryan period is also not barren as regards the interplay of politics and women. It is reflected in the stories of the Asokāvadāna, a Buddhist text-where Tissarakkhā, one of the queens of Aśoka, demonstrates her power in a devastating manner.<sup>14</sup> **The story involves the prince Kunāla, the son of queen Padmāvati, and this queen, her attraction for the prince, subsequent advances and its rejection by prince and later her will to avenge** his decline where Aśoka promise acts as a catalyst. The queen later sends an order to the officials at Takhasilā, sealed with Aśoka's real (obtained as part of his promise to her), that Kunāla is to be blinded and put to death. The officials further carry out the first part of the order. This kind of

political mechanism clearly speaks of the influence of this queen in administration for reasons whatsoever.

Not only this, a second queen Kāruvāki is mentioned in the Queen's edict inscribed on a pillar at Allahabad, in which her religions and charitable donation are referred to.<sup>15</sup> This edict, issued towards the end of Aśoka's reign, ordered the mahāmattās (officers) to record whatever donations were made by Kāruvāki. It has been suggested that Kāruvāki was in fact the personal name of the queen Tissarakkhā, and that she assumed the latter name on becoming chief queen.<sup>16</sup> The reference to her being the second queen would agree with the fact that Tissarakkhā was the second chief queen. It would certainly fit the character of Tissarakkhā to demand that all her donation be recorded. The sources thus seem to suggest that she was an ambitious woman who had considerable control over the actions of the ageing Aśoka. Besides, women participated as spies and messengers in the Mauryan administration. The employment of women as spies-Bhiksunis (mendicants), Parivrājikās (wandering nuns) & Vrisaties is alluded to by the Kautilya's Arthaśāstra.

That the wheel driven by female force rolled over the political horizons in the Deccan region is vividly manifested in the system of matrilineal inheritance during Sātavāhana rule, which can be inferred from metronymics and other similar traces. Gautamiputra Sātakarṇi is described as one who rendered uninterrupted service to his mother. The stratigraphical positions in which the coins of Vāsiṣṭhaputra Vilivāyakura, Mādhariputra Sivalakura & Gautamīpura Vilivāyakura have been found at Brahmapuri in Kolhapur district in Mahārāshtra<sup>17</sup> attests that the matriarchal practices prevailed in the Deccan even before the advent of the Sātavāhanas. This also obtained among the Mahārathis, who were the contemporaries and vassals of the Sātavāhanas. Metronymics were common even among the ordinary folk, as would appear from the name of the household (gṛhapati) Kaunta (apparently son of Kunti) Sāmba.<sup>18</sup> Matrilineal inheritance seems to be the likely explanation of the metronymics and since in the dynastic rule the state was a larger version of the family the same system of inheritance prevailed there.<sup>19</sup> Metronymics suggest that princes didn't owe their throne to their father occasionally the queen

asserted her legal rights, as she did in the 24th year of her son's reign, according to the Nasik Cave Inscription of Gautamī Balasrī when she directly conveyed her orders to the governor of Govardhana regarding the grant of a field. This suggests that Gautamīputra Sātakarni looked after the kingdom inherited by his mother.

The long and impressive list of Vedic sacrifices performed by Nāganikā is an indication of the matriarchal influence over the Vedic & Brahmanical patriarchal tradition which didn't permit sacrifices to women. The argument that she did it in company with her royal consort is based on a forced reading of the Nanaghat inscription. It clearly mentions that after the death of her husband, Sri Sātakarnī, she ruled as regent to her minor sons-Vedaśri & Saktiśri. Although the two queens Nāganikā & Gautami Bālasrī give their antecedents in full, their land grants are not endorsed by the king. This is due to the very fact that these queens held villages not as maintenance grants but probably as portions of matrilineal inheritance. Not only this but the wives of the officials and vassals of the Sātavāhanas also bore the administrative designations held by their husbands, which shows that they claimed similar prestige and influence; the little mahāsenāpatni and mahātalavāri bear witness to this. This Sātavāhana legacy couldn't make serious impression, however, on the Gupta system of government, except in case of Prabhāvatigupta, the daughter of Chandragupta II who acted as regent in the Vākātaka kingdom to her minor sons. Divākarsena & Dāmodarasena.

It is interesting to note that the early medieval political landscape was teeming with the participation of women. The emergence of manifold regional states and kingdoms, notably in Orissa, Kashmir, Decan and the South India, provided a fresh lease of life to the dormant political and administrative acumen of the women. It is in this context that the first historical reference to an independent women ruler is noticed in Orissa. Queen Tribhuvanamahādevi of Bhaumakara dynasty was approached by the feudatories to ascent the throne owing to the absence of a male heir. Apparently they preferred her rule to that of an adopted heir, and consequently, this dynasty was a witness to six women rulers between the eighth and twelfth centuries A.D. Five of them were the wives of the reigning kings. The sixth women ruler was

Dandimahādevi, the daughter of the reigning queen Gauri, whom the various inscriptions refer to as a just and an able ruler. It's suggested that the mother of siddharāga Jaisingh, Mināladevi also ruled over some parts of Gujarat as an independent ruler. Another powerful independent woman ruler of this period was queen Diddā, who ruled in Kashmir after the demise of her husband. Her significance can be gauged from the fact that even during her husband's reign, the king issued coins jointly with her. Moreover, after her coronation, she styled herself in masculine gender as Diddādeva.<sup>20</sup>

A similar instance could be cited in case of the Kākatiya queen. Rudrāmba who bore the masculine epithet of Rudradevamahārāja.<sup>21</sup> She was trained as a son from childhood as her father had no son. Furthermore, Queen Ballamahādevi<sup>22</sup> of Alupa dynasty held sway over southern Canārā in the 13th century with the epithet to Maharājādhirāja Parabalasādhaka. Whether these queens simply used their discretion or the practice was sanctioned by the Dharmasāstras is a matter of further investigation. There are numerous cases in which the queens were coroneted along with their husbands even when they didn't rule in independent capacity.

The queen Ulaghmulududaiyāl, for example, was coroneted with her husband Vīrarājendra, and the queen Chattabarase<sup>23</sup> with Mayvannarasa. These incidences pose as to whether they were the chief queen or indicate a joint rule of the king and the queen. In a few cases it seems to be the latter for instance, Kadamba<sup>24</sup> king Harikeśārīdeva and queen Lachchaladevi probably ruled jointly. Similarly, Kadamba<sup>25</sup> feudatory Jayakesi II and the queen Mailaladevi also ruled together. All the above references pertain to southern India.

An exception in this regard is provided by the probable joint rule by Chandragupta I & Licchavi princess, Kumāradevi because she was a queen in her own right and the Licchavis were intent upon preserving their identity. However, this example is open to historical scrutiny. In most of such copes, it was the husband who ruled and not the wife. The principality of Rattā princess, Gauri<sup>26</sup> for instance, was ruled by the husband prince Mallikārjuna in Karnataka in

10th century A.D. Moreover, an inscription<sup>27</sup> of 9th century A.D. from Mysore informs us that in the absence of king Satyakākyā Permāndi, his queen was entitled to receive taxes which implies her active participation in the administration. The land grants of Sena dynasty, possibly of Kannada origin, effected a change in order to include the queens in the list of king's informants. A few significant queens issued coins in their own name. The coins of queen Somaladevi are, for example, found beside coins of her husband, Ajayrāja.

This magnitude of political participation of women is further enhanced by the incidences of some of the Indian queen, who were independent enough to issue grants without any sanction by the king, evident in cases of Rāṣṭrakūṭa queen Silāmahādevi<sup>28</sup> and Cālukya queen, Vijayamahādevi<sup>29</sup>. Probably the latter of the two also rule over a portion of her husband's kingdom. It 's important to note that the independent grants of queens are conspicuous by their presence in Southern India only. On the other hand in northern areas, the queens made grants with distinct approval of the husband, although a few of them adorned the grandiloquent title of samastarājaprakriyopetā (one endowed with all royal prerogatives) such as the Gāhadavāla queen Gosaladevi.<sup>30</sup> It can be fairly surmised that the queens enjoyed not an insignificant status in the court Often the sanction of the king and the queen was reciprocally required along with the sanction of important officers and the priest before making a grant. A grant made by Govinda III was sanctioned by Mahādevi, the chief queen. Another grant made by king Govindacandra of Kannauj<sup>31</sup> was sanctioned by queen mother Rālhadevi.

It appears that in certain territories, the queens performed the function of a registering authority. A number of inscriptions in Orissa & Mysore region mention the names of persons who wrote, engraved and registered the grant. Here in most of the cases the last mentioned authority was the queen. It's a quite significant that the queens in Orissa enjoyed a much higher status vis-a-vis the rest of India. They could rule independently and participated in administration in various capacities. Whether it could be associated with process of acculturation by Brāhmanas thereby indicating the impact of tribal antecedents, is a matter of scholarly concern. There are few exceptional cases where the registering authority was not a

queen but a female official. The Gumsur plates of king Nettekhanja Kalyānakalaśa were registered by Vargulikā Vacchikā. The term Vargulikā meant a messenger. Perhaps they performed an additional duty of ledger keeper as well. Another grant of Nettekhanja was registered by a female officer Cahikā.<sup>32</sup> It's worthwhile to note that the above examples also came predominantly from Orissa.

There occur manifold cases where after the death of the king in the battlefield, the queens continued the war. It reflects that the military training formed a part of education for most of the girls in the royal family. Dāhir's widowed sister Rāni Bāi fought against Muhammad-bin-Quasim in Sind. The traditions record that Samarasi's widow Kurmādevi defeated Qutubuddin Aibak near Amber. As points out Prabandhacintāmani, Nāyakidevi defeated Muhammad Ghori. Most of the above references, however, are historically not authentic. Nevertheless, Rudrambā's<sup>33</sup> campaign to conjeevaran after her father's demise appears to be a historical fact.

In all probability, the women of the nobility were also rendered military training. Sillā, the mother of king's General led a part of the army and was later killed. This text also mentions female landed aristocracy known as Dāmari that could fight in exigencies. The inscriptions<sup>34</sup> also refer to bands of woman who fought in the war. The literary texts<sup>35</sup> refer to women who rode horses, elephants and camels, besides being proficient in mountaineering. Sometimes female soldiers were employed by the queen to guard the heroine in dramas.

The queens were often actively involved in the administration. The queens Siriyādevi & Mahalādevi were in-charge of certain department in the state. Two ministers were also attached to them for cooperation. The matter<sup>36</sup> of Pṛthvirāja III, Karpūradevi was a good administrator. Some of the queens could even make alterations in the taxation policy. For example, the king's mother Padmaladevi<sup>37</sup> exempted a few trees from taxation in a certain case. The queens also ruled over different districts as governors. Queen Akkādevi<sup>38</sup> was governor of Banavāsi. Nāmareyanigala agrahāra was gifted to Somaladevi by Vikramāditya VI as kin-money (angabhoga). Whether it was a common method of acquiring political authority by the queens is



not clear. Moreover, Kautilya had permitted a salary of 48,000 panas for the queen mother and the chief queen, and 12,000 panas for other queens. It's not clearly understood whether this amount was given only for personal expenses or as salary for discharging various functions. Furthermore, whether this salary continued to be given during the period under review, demands a through probe.

It's interesting to mention that the post Gupta period bears evidence of many female officers associated with the administration. It has been suggested that the perpetual wars and distraction of male populace made it imperative for females to participate in the functions of the government. An important post often assigned to women was of *dūtaka*<sup>39</sup> or messenger-cum-ledger-keeper. The deed of gift in Nasik cave inscription of Gautami Bāla Sri was drafted by a female officer Lotā, who was also the palace guard. A female judge<sup>40</sup> is also known from the inscriptions. In the court of Mālava, female assumed the role of judges and palace officers. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, widows and nuns constituted a significant part of the espionage system in Mauryan times. However, there are few references to them in the subsequent periods. The *Parivrājikā* of Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* testifies to the existence of female spies and recalls Kautilya. *Mahāvīracarita* mentions women ascetics going on a political mission perhaps as a spy or messenger. *Surapanakaha* in a few texts is depicted as a spy who was sent to probe the purpose of Rama's visit. The above references are, however, exceptional in nature. In general, this significant activity was made inaccessible to women owing to common mistrust in their behaviour.

The retrospective exhibition of the available evidences demonstrates that the political fortunes of women in early India were marked by the vicissitudes of time and space. In the earlier phases, there was lesser participation of women in political arena due to the hegemony of patriarchal brahmanic ideology. The centralized structures of Mauryas & Guptas also failed to accommodate the political aspirations of women. Instead, these imperial structures limited their political significance. It was only in the regional & secondary states like that of Sātavāhanas in Deccan in Post-Mauryan period, that women assumed prominence in the political arena, with

certain limitations. The magnitudes of women's participation in polity were enlarged during the post-Gupta period. It's attributed to the formation of regional sub-units of polity, notably in Orissa, Mysore and certain parts of Southern India, which endowed with autonomous trajectories of social and political growth, attendant upon the geography and tribal imprints of the respective regions, provided a niche for nourishment of the political aspirations of women. This phenomenon attained its crest during the period stretching from 9th century A.D. to 12th century A.D.

Another important feature of the women's participation in polity lay in its exclusiveness, where the women of upper echelons of society and king's family called the shots. In this way, it was circumscribed by the hegemonistic patriarchal order, where few women by virtue of their individual position and acumen came to the helm of affairs & that also for a brief spell. The active participation of women in polity failed to evolve as a general norm.

Thus, on the whole, women's participation in political arena in early India was beset with limitations. They remained marginalized due to the infringement of their autonomy by male counterparts. The extent of their political participation was the function of a distinct class-based individual eligibility than a normative practice.

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