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Position of women as depicted in inscriptions at the time of early medieval Bengal (11th -13th centuries C.E.)

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1. Introduction

The status of women as revealed in Inscriptions is an important topic in the social history of ancient Bengal. But we can't draw a complete picture of the social life of women exclusively from epigraphic sources. It is needless to say, these epigraphic materials are corroborated by contemporary inscription of Assam are also referred to here to have a clear picture of the status and the position of Women.

Women played an important role in the settlement of marriages, managements of household affairs, proprietary rights, education and in the progress of fine arts etc. Most of the social custom in the society of ancient Bengal were almost like present day's customs. Being the source of all family relation marriage is the most important Saṁskaras of Indian Social life. It is instrumental in propagating human race, perpetuating family life and regulating sex relation ^[1]. The wife was considered to be man's half without whom he was not admitted to the privilege of performing sacrifices ^[2].

Matrimonial relationship was formed within the same cast and rank but normally not within the same gotras. The ethnic term like *Pārasava*, *ūgra*, *cāṇḍāla*, *Nisāda* and *śvapca*, which denote the offspring produced out of inter-caste unions ^[3] testify to the prevalence inter-caste marriage at that period. There are evidence from literary and epigraphic sources which shows that such marriage actually places.

At the time of Sena period in Bengal polygamy was prevalent due to the evils of Kulinism ^[4]. It refers to only the highest class of Brāhmaṇa in Bengal as classified by Ballālasena. They used to Marry many wives. But we shouldn't be carried away, however, by the notion that marrying many wives was either very common of was not looked down upon ^[5].

Instances of widowhood was one of the tragic incident in the life of a married women in Hindu Society. After the death of their husbands the wife had to live incomplete chastity and to avoid all kind of luxury and exiting food such as meat, fish ect ^[6].

Mention may, however be made in this connection from the literary data about the wiping out of vermilion of the wives of the enemies by the kings. In the *Adbhūtsāgara* ^[7], which is ascribed to Vallālasena it is stated that the heads of the enemies wives bearing vermilion marks were wiped out by the kings. Govardhana Ācharya ^[8], the court poet of Lakshmaṇasena, also speak of the hair on the heads of the lady giving the idea of a heart rent in twine by the vermilion mark.

The position of the widows in the society was not at all encouraging. They were looked down upon as inauspicious and were seldom allowed to take part in various rites and ceremonies. They were usually encouraged by the people to immolate themselves in the funeral pyres of their husbands ^[9].

We may now discuss the position of women in society. The traditional ideals of womanhood, namely unflinching devotion towards her husband, tenderness and modesty, grace and serenity, piety and chastity, affection and cordiality and above all, the will to live let live are like reflected in the inscriptions and in the old Bengali literature and they are really praiseworthy.

The birth of a daughter was equally entertained like that of male child in the ancient society of Bengal. So daughter may be regarded as the object of glory like the son to the family.

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Due to her adorable traits, the purity and integrity of her character, she is an object of joy to her parents as well as her husband.

In order to depict the character of women sometimes parallels are drawn in the inscriptions. It indicates that men and women of Ancient Bengal were very fond of these illustrations given below, which were mainly derived from Epic and Purāna. We may suppose that it represented the best public opinion of that time in respect of their king and queen. Vilāsadevi, the chief queen of Vijayasena ^[10] in the Naihāti Copper-Plate Inscription Vallālasena is referred to as the chief queen of the lord of earth, shines like a crest jewel in this female apartment just as a Laxmī the wife of Viṣṇu and Gourī of (the God) having the young moon on his crest (i.e. śiva).

There is a eulogy in respect of royal women in the inscriptions of this period. Yośodevī was referred to as the great queen of Hemantasena as referred to in the inscription ^[11]. Due to her devotion to her husband she acquired extensive eternal and bright fame. She also gained the hearts of the three worlds (*Tribhuvana*) by her (beautiful) form.

Several inscriptions further enlighten us about the performance of charitable works in which women do not appear to have lagged behind in the ancient days of Bengal. The offerings of charity on the eleventh lunar day (*ekādasi*) or the last day of the month (*samkrānti*) was considered as pious of the religious merit and glory of her son and daughter as the case might be.

The Barrackpore Copper-Plate inscription of Vijayasena further informs us that four patakas of land belongs to the village Ghāsambhoga Bhattabadā in the Khādivisaya of Puṅdrabhardanabhukti¹² were given to a Brāhmaṇa on account of performing Homa on the occasion of Kanaka Tulāpurusa Mahādāna ¹⁴ (i.e. the great gift of golden Tulāpurusa) of the Mahamahādevi (the great- great queen) Vilāsadevi during a lunar eclipse within the place of Vikramapura ^[15].

Similar instance of charity are also found in the Naihāti Copper-Plate inscription of Vallālasena. The same queen Vilāsadevi, mother of Vallālasena made a gift of a golden horse (i.e. performance of the Hemāśvadana ceremony) on the day of solar eclipse ^[16], on the bank of Ganges. As a fee for the performance of this ceremony the village Vallāhitta in the Uttara Rādha in the Vardhamāna Bhūkti was given by her son Vallālasena to the preceptor Vāsudevaśarman ^[17].

The Tarpandighi Copper-Plate Inscription indicates that king Lakshmaṇasena ^[18] offered a gift of golden horse and a chariot (of Hemaśvaratha Mahādānacārya) to a Brāhmaṇa named Srī Iśvaradevaśarman for the enhancement of the merit on behalf of his parents.

The Sāhaitya Parisat Copper-Plate Inscription of Viśvarūpasena speak of the grant of eleven plots of lands offered to the Brāhmaṇa, the Avallika pandita, Halayudhaśarman. The inscription further informs us that three of this plots ^[20], are said to have been granted on the occasion of lunar eclipse observed by the queen mother of Viśvarūpasena.

Women of ancient Bengal are also interested in taking initiation and were also found to have engaged themselves occult religious practices. The *Charyāpadas*, the earliest Bengali literature bear an interesting instance of practicing Tantric Buddhism in Bengal.

The version of epics are also highly appreciated by the women of ancient Bengal. People of all ranks used to listen with respect to the recitation and exposition of the texts of the epics. The recitation of epics was also considered a various rite by the women of ancient Bengal. The name Vālmīki is referred in the in the Deopārā Inscription of Vijayasena ^[21].

Seclusion women from public life is also referred to in the literature and inscriptions of Bengal. It appears from Dhoyi's description in the *Pavanadūta* ^[22], that women of Vijayapura were not much accustomed to use *pardah* as a curtain. Pandit Gousi Shankar Ojha ^[23], says that the *pardah* system was not in vogue before the coming of the Muslim. But in the inscriptions we find that respectable ladies were carried on a litter while going from one place to another, and were not exposed before the passerby in the public through fare. So the Edilpur Copper-Plate Inscription of Keśavasena ^[24] informs that the king Vallālasena carried away fortune Goddess of his enemies on Palanquins supported by the staffs made of elephant's task from the battle field. This inscription ^[25], further tells us that as Keśavasena passed through the city, the ladies saw him and behaved in a coquettish manner and was casting amorous glance at him. They gazed at him from the top of the sky-scraping houses.

A study of the position of women of this period would be incomplete without a reference of songs and dances. It will appear from the account of the consecration of divine mages that along with the sounding of musical instruments singing and dancing had also come to be regarded as necessary adjuncts of image worship. It may be presumed that singing and dancing and other festive observances were recommended for warding off the evil results from divine portraits. This indicates that the practice of engaging dancing girls (called *Devadāsī*) in the temple had come into existence. They also formed a musical choir ^[26]. In this connection we may refer to the employment of *Devadāsī*'s or female attendants in the shrines. The so called dancing girls were used to be engaged in the service of the deity of temple.

The Edilpur Copper-Plate Inscription of Keśavasena ^[27], mentions the prevalence of dancing and musing in ancient Bengal. It is stated also in the Calcutta Sāhitya Parisat Inscription of Viśvarūpasena²⁸ that the dulcet music arising from the anklets worn by courtesans in the evening was heard.

The cultivation of classical music attains the highest degree of excellence in this period. Wonderful musical feats are also ascribed to the female artists of Bengal in the work of *Seksūbhodayā*. In one of the verses of *Sadūktikarṇamṛta* Vidyutprabhā, daughter-in-law of known actor Gaṅgoka was renowned in the society for her musical feats in the royal court of Lakshmaṇasena. We may refer to another female artist Padmāvati in the court of Lakshmanasena. She was the wife of Jayadeva Mīśra the author of *Gīta Gobinda*. We may also refer to Budhana Mīśra, the celebrated musician of Orissa, who challenged Jayadeva and wife Padmāvati in the musical competition in the court of Lakshmaṇasena ^[29].

From the study of these sources it appears that women held a very responsible are silent regarding the position of the women belonging to the common folk. Thus inscriptions provide us only with a single window to understand the social position of women in this period.

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