

STATUS OF WOMEN AS DEPICTED IN PALLAVA SCULPTURE

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INTRODUCTORY:

Determining the status of women from sculptures is a challenging task, especially in this period, where secular sculptures are very few. A proper analysis can only be made by comparing the hypothetical interpretation of sculptures with known facts as revealed through other sources of the period, like inscriptions and literature. Most of the inscriptions of this period are donator in nature, recording the various objects gifted by the donor. Regarding the women donors, their status can be judged in many ways, like the way they introduced themselves, the object of donation, whether the object thus, donated is owned by them or procured through some other means, etc.

A study of woman donors through the available inscriptional data of this period shows that they usually identified themselves either as a wife or a daughter or a mother or a sister of a certain person. A married woman normally identified themselves with her husband and not with her paternal or maternal home. This reflects the social norms of those times and perhaps such an association is necessary in order to show the family to which they belong. Of course even in the modern times, in Tamil Nadu, the tradition of associating the name of the family members, be it male or female with the name of the male head, in the form of surname continues. Inscriptions referring to women as donors are limited and based on it only five categories of women with varied social status are known like: (1) Women of the royal family – Queens of the imperial Pallava dynasty and mothers or queens or daughters of chieftains or feudatories (2) Daughter, daughter-in law, sister, wife of the resident of a village (3) Brahman, a lady or wife of temple priest (4) Daughter of a Jaina ascetic and (5) Dancing girl¹. The inscriptions related to the women of the royal family gives us a hint that the queens also engaged themselves quite independently in the religious charities and in the construction of temples for their favorite deities. Earliest such information is known from an inscription of the early Pallava queen Charudevi (circa 4th century A.D)², who acted not only as an regent to her minor son, but also made an endowment of four nivartanas of land to a Vishnu temple at Dalura. It is interesting to note that the order was straightly addressed by the queen to the official at Kadaka. Minakshi³ rightly says that this inscription gives an understanding into the fact that this Pallava queen held an influential position in the state and that her commands were carried out in the same way as those of the king. Both inscriptions of Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha, at the Kailasanatha temple of Kanchipuram⁴, records the fact that his queens had also contributed in the construction

of the shrines within the temple complex. An inscription from the Muktesvara temple at Kanchipuram ⁵ records, that Dharmamahadeviyar, the queen of Nandivarman II not only constructed the temple but also made all provisions for its maintenance and daily rituals. An interesting inscription of Tirukkodikkaval⁶ of the reign of Nripatungavarman mentions, that his queen Vira-Mahadeviyar, performed Hiranyagarbha and Tulabhara ceremonies and presented 50 kalanju of gold from the wealth so weighed to the Sabha of Tirukkodikkavu. All these donatory inscriptions and others, which describe the queens in glorious terms, suggest the high respect and command they had in this period.

Few more inscriptions also give insight into the existence of property rights among women in this period. It can be seen that majority of the objects donated by them are in the form of kalanju (gold coin or gold equivalent to that weight). The reason for this is perhaps, due to the prevalence of the practice of giving gift (sridhana or angamanidravayam) to their daughter at the time of their marriage, in the form of gold, in cash or kind, which was allowed to be kept in their possession. Thus, the inscription of the Kampavarman from Uttirameru⁷ mentions about a brahman a lady, probably a widow as making an endowment of two plots of land for providing daily offerings to god Mahadeva in the temple at Mullavayil. It further mentions, that out of the two plots, she purchased one plot after selling her dowry jewels (Nagamanidravayam). However, no generalization can be made from this inscription and it can only be assumed that the practice of offering money as a gift to the daughter during her marriage was prevalent in this age, atleast among the upper strata of the society. However, another inscription from the place of the reign of Nandivarman II⁸ confirm that women in this period also inherited immovable property. It records that the madyastha of the village had purchased one padigam of land from a Brahman/ a lady for the purpose of donating it, as a devadana land to a temple. Through the inscription, it is known that she is a married woman, but the land was not purchased from her husband. This may show two possibilities: one is that, perhaps the lady got the land as part of her dowry or she could be a widow who has inherited the land after the demise of her husband. In both the cases, at least women of the upper strata possess, some immovable property and she possessed the absolute right to sell it⁹.

Apart from womenfolk belonging to royal and common households, the inscriptions also give evidence to the existence of special class of women known as dancing girls employed in the temples and in the royal court¹⁰. Sculptural representations of the same have been dealt with infra. An inscription from Chinnapalampakkam¹¹, recording the construction of a temple by a dancing girl, makes it known that there are also some among them, who are economically in a better position and are also pious minded. Minakshi after studying the inscriptions and the depiction of royal women in the panels of Adivaraha cave temple at Mamallapuram, concludes that “there was in this period a high ideal of womanhood and that feminine virtues were appreciated.”¹²

An examination of various sculptures depicting women in this period shows that, they can be grouped under five categories: (1) Religious depictions comprising of various goddesses, celestials and rarely as a saint (2) Secular depictions comprising of images of queen (3) Attendant figures like dvarapalikas , chamara - dharis , female-companion to the queen or goddess (4) Dancer in a temple or royal court (5) as a devotee or woman in a village.

From the sculptural depiction of woman as a goddess, it is understood that she received respect as a mother. From the British museum copper plate of Charudevi (circa 4th century A.D.)¹³ it is known that the widowed queen was given the right to act as a regent to her minor son, respecting her not only as a queen, but also as a mother of a prince. However, when depicted along with the male deity, as consort, she was always shown comparatively smaller in size, younger in appearance and relegated to a corner with the male deity occupying dominant position. This can be especially noticed in all the forms of Siva, like Umasahitamurti, Somaskandamurti, Gangadharamurti, Tandavamurti and in his various anugraha and samhara forms. The same can be noticed in relation to the other gods like Brahma and Vishnu. Such a contrasting depiction of gods and goddesses can be taken to be as an artistic convention and as per the rules of iconometric texts. However even in the formulation of these iconometric standards, with regard to the measurements of various deities, celestials and other demi-gods, there seems to be a sort of hierarchal display and an underlying influence of the then social norms. Thus, women and other members of a society, who are thought of as sub-ordinate are depicted in the art as smaller in size and are relegated to the background. This perhaps hints at the patriarchal set up of the society, in which the male member of a family always act as a head and assumes a dominant role.

Only once in Pallava sculptural art, that too of a late period depiction of women as a saint is noticed. On an architectural member from Kaverippakkam dated to 9th century A.D. (now preserved in Government Museum, Chennai) is depicted Karaikkalammaiyar, walking topsyturvy using her hands, towards Umasahitamurti. According to the popular legend, she, respecting the sanctity of Himalayas as an abode of Siva, travelled there using her hands. Whatever be the truth about the legend, it is known that there are women saints. The other example is Andal of the Vaishnavaita fame, though no sculptural representation of her is known in this period.

The depiction of chamara - dharis and dvarapalikas may suggest the actual employment of women in such services. Already the employment of women as dancing girls in temples and as courtesans in the royal court is well known, as discussed above through sculptural and epigraphical evidences. Apart from these types of dancing girls or courtesans, who mostly became bonded to their employers, there may also be professional dancers, who along with their male counterpart make a living through their skills. Such a depiction of a group involved in dancing can be seen in the panels from Thanthontrisvara temple and Vaikunthaperumal temple at Kanchipuram. One such panel from the Thanthontrisvra temple, depicting lively interaction among the different members, gives the impression that the group is engaged in giving a theatre

performance. If such an interpretation can be accepted, then it can be said that some of the women folk also eked out their living as stage artists. Depiction of a common village woman in the art of this period can be seen only from the Govardhanadhari panel at Mamallapuram . This panel, which depicts a scene in a pastoral setup, gives the impression that the rural women shared the day to day activities equally with the men of their household. Thus, in this panel one woman is seen carrying a bundle, probably haystack placed over her head with one hand and holding a carrier made of ropes consisting of three pots stacked one above the other in the another hand. Similarly, another woman is seen balancing two pots placed one over the other on her head with one hand and taking care of her son by catching his hand with the other hand. Both these women can be called representative of a typical pastoral or rural woman. Again two women are seen nursing or cajoling their child in their arms. They can be called a typical mother, who looks after the necessities of her child. Apart from these common pastoral women, there is also depiction of three women, who have royal appearance. Among them, the one by the side of Krishna was identified as his consort Nappinnai as per Tamil tradition and the remaining two are probably her companions. One more woman, who appears princely, is seen in the company of her child. It seems that the artist, through this varied portrayal of women engaged in different tasks tried to show the various activities a woman did in a rural household.

Polygamy: The inscriptions and sculptures of this period show that polygamy was in vogue. The portrait panels adorning the lateral walls of the ardhmandapa in the Adivaraha cave temple at Mamallapuram attests to this fact. These panels carry label inscriptions on them reading “Sri Simhavinna Pottrathirajan ” and “ Sri Mahendra Pottrathirajan ”, facilitating their identification as Simhavishnu and Mahendravarman with their respective queens¹⁴. Many inscriptions like the Velurpalayam plates of Nandivarman III¹⁵, while describing the geneology of the Pallava kings mentions the name of the queen with the title mahishi or chief queen. Thus it can be taken as an indicative of the existence of more than one queen for a king. For example the Kilur inscription of Nandivarman III¹⁶ Tiruvorriyur inscriptions of Aparajitavarman¹⁷ and Manampundi inscription of Vairameghavarman¹⁸ mention the seperate donations made by four different wives of Vairamegavarman alias Vanakovarayar. Similarly the Uttirameru inscription of Kampavarman¹⁹ clearly refers to a brahman a lady Taliccani as the second wife (Ilaiyal) of Sanakumarachaturvedi-agnichitta-sarvvakratukkal of Kumulur.

Notes and References

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