

Finding space for Upasikas in the annals of ancient Indian Buddhism: Inscriptional evidence of the lay female devotees

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ABSTRACT

The Four fold Sangha envisaged by the Buddha consisted of upasikas or female lay worshippers as one of its vital constituent. Textually the term upasika means 'one who sits close by.' A large number of donative inscriptions recorded by the laywomen in ancient India show that the cause of propagation of dhamma was upheld not only by queens, princesses and nuns but by ordinary women too.

This paper will explore the patronage by the lay women for the propagation of Buddhism and for the construction of various Buddhist sites across India.

KEY WORDS

Upasika, Buddhism, Inscriptions, Sanchi, Rock Cut Caves, Patronage

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Inscriptional evidence of the lay female devotees**

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The Four fold Sangha envisaged by the Buddha consisted of upasikas or female lay worshippers as one of its vital constituent. Textually the term upasika means 'one who sits close by.' A large number of donative inscriptions recorded by the laywomen in ancient India show that the cause of propagation of dhamma was upheld not only by queens, princesses and nuns but by ordinary women too.

Important Buddhist sites like Sanchi, Sarnath, Bharhut, Mathura in north India, the rock cut caves of Western Deccan like Karle, Bhaje, Junnar, Kanheri and Bhattiprolu, Guntapalli, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in the south bear epigraphical testimony to this fact.

In search for a space for Buddhist women in the annals of ancient Indian history:

The inscriptions were always a realm of the epigraphists. They preserve valuable data about women that is well stacked in the milieu of time and space. Mostly votive, administrative and eulogistic in nature they hold diverse information not only on the contemporary society, polity but also on the prevalent religious observances and the active involvement of women therein.

However the inscriptions were never adequately sifted by the historians in their quest for reconstruction of history of women in ancient India. There has been a sustained and fruitful involvement of women in the growth and development of Buddhism in ancient India that was unfortunately never highlighted.

After 3rd century BCE, various Buddhist architectural forms like the stupas, chaityas, viharas and the rock hewn caves came in vogue. The construction of these majestic sites necessitated procuring finances on a large scale. It was the cumulative effect of the believers in dhamma, belonging from royalty to laity, traders and also monastics. The art of engraving inscriptions

also became popular by this time. As such a large corpus of inscriptions allows us to understand the extent of involvement and endowment for the cause of propagation of Dhamma from various sections of the ancient Indian society.

The almswomen and laywomen well documented in various Buddhist texts has always drawn the limelight of the academics as well common people. However, the contributions and achievements of the upasikas amidst the prevalent social environs can well be understood by a careful sift and analysis of these inscriptions. It will be useful to offer them rightful place in the annals of Buddhist history.

The concern of the Buddha for the spiritual wellness of his lay followers can be clearly seen from the following quote.

"I shall not pass into final Nibbana until the lay-men and lay-women are accomplished and well-trained, learned and erudite, knowers of the Dhamma, living by Dhamma and walking the path of Dhamma, not until they pass on to others what they have received from their Teacher and teach it, proclaim it, establish it, explain it, promote it and clarify it, not until they are able to use it to refute false teachings and impart this wondrous Dhamma." (Diggha Nikaya-II-105). The inscriptions studied in this paper reveal that the teachings of Dhamma had adequately reached the grassroots of ancient Indian society just as desired by the Buddha.

The inscriptions from various Buddhist sites mentioned above divulge following aspects of the patron upasikas.

The Date:

Most of the inscriptions available from the sites mentioned above are undated and brief. However that does not deter them from furnishing vital information on many aspects. They range over a vast span of time. If the early Sanchi inscriptions can be dated to 2nd century BCE, then Sarnath stone inscription of King Kalachuri Karna recording the donation of a laywoman called Mamaka is dated 4.10.1058 A.D.¹ This long span also suggests active support and involvement of laywomen in the propagation of Dhamma.

Procuring Finances:

It is observed that the donations were given by the laywomen in their individual capacities. This fact indicates that the laywomen were able to hold property, in cash or kind as sole

owners. Literary evidences prove that laywomen have independently inherited the property. Therigatha records the story of Bhadda Kapilani, who although married was the sole owner of the property.² Inscriptions suggest that some of the devoted laywomen diverted part of this amount for the noble cause of propagation of dhamma. The Sui Vihar Copper plate Inscription during the reign of king Kanishka (11th regnal year) refers to the donor of the Vihara as, "Vihara svamini upasika Balanandi-Kutumbini Balajayamata." The connotation Vihara svamini clearly indicates some property owned by this woman donor.³ Inscriptions have recorded the donations by laywomen in form of Karshapana, a currency prevalent in the early centuries of CE in ancient India.⁴ This information confirms the spread and use of monetary economy in ancient India. It is very interesting to note that the pious laywomen showed keen financial acumen too. Juvarinika⁵, Lavanika⁶ and Vishnudata Shakanika⁷ have invested the principal amount of their donations with 1% interest Akshayanivi or permanent donation.

Joint Family:

Often there is a natural desire to share the punya or merit derived out of the donation with their family members, specifically mentioned in the inscription. An inscription from Nagarjunakonda is worth a mention. The second Apsidal Temple Inscription records the donation of Bodhishri. She donated a Chaitya hall provided with all necessities."⁸ She wished the merit achieved from this pious work to be shared among her no less than twenty-nine relatives.⁹ They have been mentioned as, Apano bhatuno (own husband), Pituno (her father), Matuya (mother-in-law), Bhatunam (brothers in law), Bhagini (sister in law) ,Bhatu putanam (nephews), Bhagineyanam (nephews) , Apano Chayakasa (own paternal grandfather), Ayikaya (grandmother), Matulakasa (maternal uncle),Mahamatukaya (maternal grandmother), Apano pituno (own father)¹⁰.Matuya (mother), Bhatuno (brother), Bhagininam (sisters), Dhutiya (daughter), Putanam (sons), Sunhanam (daughters in law).¹¹This long list of recipients of the merit brings out certain facts like large number of members in the joint family system, the omission of wives of brothers in laws and their children (if they had any), omission of maternal grandfather and overall priority enjoyed by the male members of the Society.

Attributes of identity:

A survey of laywomen donors at various sites reveals certain attribute of their identities. Some prefer to record their donations by their personal names leaving us clueless about their details. Examples can be cited of Upasika Vudina¹², Ejavati¹³ from Sanchi in this respect.

Familial attributes of identity:

Many women have chosen their familial attributes like wife, mother, daughter, sister and daughter in law and sister in law.

The Wife:

The wife has been variously addressed as gharini, pajawati.¹⁴ The reference of Pusa¹⁵ and Naga¹⁶ as lay donors as Sanchi offers an evidence of polygamy. They were wives of a banker from Kamdadi village. Thirteen upasikas addressed as 'wife' have recorded their donations at Sanchi.

The daughter in law:

Halanika introduces herself as the daughter in law of Grahapati and merchant Vishnunandi from Kalyana.¹⁷ Vasamananadata¹⁸ and Naja¹⁹ from Sanchi have also been addressed as daughter in law. These inscriptions very clearly show the influence of the grant patriarch in the family.

The sister in Law:

The Bodh-gaya, Buddhist stone inscription records the gift of Kuramgi, the sister-in-law of Imdagimita.²⁰ It is interesting to note that Kuramgi prefers to be identified as the sister in law and does not refer to her husband at all in the donation.

The daughter:

Very large numbers of upasikas have identified themselves as daughters in the donative inscriptions. Often the mothers and fathers have expressed the desire to share the merit with their children including daughters. Daughter of Chadumukha²¹ Samghi, the daughter of Bhadanti Bodhi²² are two examples where the 'daughters' have recorded their donations. In the first instance Chandamukha refers to her father whereas in the second inscription Samghi refers to her mother, apparently a Bhikkhuni of renown.

The sisters:

Many sisters have been recorded in the joint benefactions. Mention can be made of Subhaga and her sister²³, Nakha the sister of Damilakanha (Dravaida Krishna).²⁴

The grandmother:

A reference has already been cited of grand patriarch in the family. Inscriptions have noted the existence of some caring and influential matriarchs. One inscription records the grandsons of Kama²⁵ where as in another Cakradata,²⁶ has pooled in her grandsons while making donation.

Rise of Commercial Class:

There was a rise in the trade and mercantile activity in ancient India during the early centuries of CE. It has been observed that this newly emerged class often followed the path of Dhamma. Inscriptions reveal that many upasikas belonged to such professional families of Halika (a ploughman or farmer)²⁷ or Halakiya (ploughman)²⁸, Suvarnakara (goldsmith)²⁹, Negama (trader)³⁰, Kamara (blacksmith)³¹, veja (physician)³², chamara (leather worker), Mahanavika (master mariner)³³, lekhaka (royal scribe)³⁴. It is interesting to note that some upasikas have themselves been addressed as Vanikiya (merchant's wife), a female version of vanika (trader). It is uncertain to decide whether this attribute was used due to their active involvement in trade or simply denoting their family occupation. Vaniyini Nagacampaka from Amaravati³⁵, Vaniyiya Sidhiya³⁶ from Uppagundur Dhamma vanikiyina.³⁷ It curious to note that in this inscription only Dhamma has the title of vanikiyi where as all other female relatives are addressed with the personal name.

Objects of Donations:

It is interesting to find the objects that these laywomen have donated at various sites. It is observed that divalamba³⁸ (lamp post), two paduka (foot prints)³⁹ stambha (pillar)⁴⁰ udhamapata (upright slab), copies of the religious texts⁴¹, chata (Parasol) to the caitya⁴², mandapa (hall)⁴³ ayaka pillar,⁴⁴ cave,⁴⁵ a water cistern (paniya podhi),⁴⁶ a tank for bath (nhanpodhi)⁴⁷ ovarika (inner cell)⁴⁸ chheta (farm lands)⁴⁹ etc. are the objects commonly chosen by the upasikas as donations.

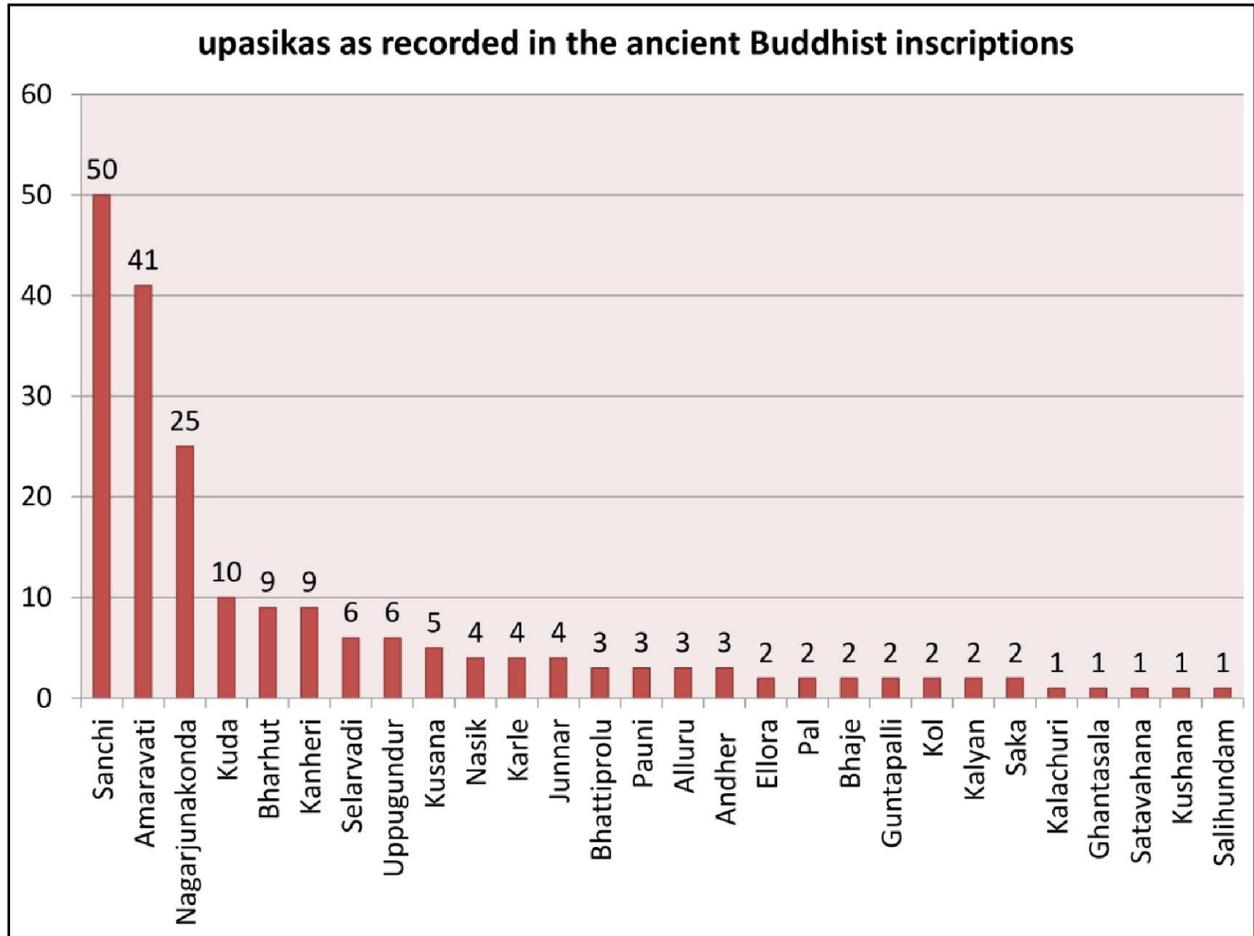
Place of Origin:

The donors have also mentioned the name of the place from where the upasikas hailed. Identifying the geographical locations of these places can help in identifying the extent of

Buddhism in India among the lay people. Some upasikas have given preference to their hometown. Dhamarakhita, the Venuvagamiya, the Kosambeyaka (inhabitant of Venuka grama, native of Kausambi) is an interesting example where Dhamarakhita not only provides us with their current place of residence, a village called Venuka but also their native town, Kausambi.⁵⁰ Inscriptions have recorded the names of some famous and familiar towns like Ujjain⁵¹, Vidisha.⁵² Donations of sixteen laywomen from Ujjain have been noted in the inscriptions at Sanchi. In fact Reva and Sirika have preferred to be recorded as Ujenika (hailed from Ujjain).⁵³ There are instances when the place of the lay donor cannot be identified, examples can be cited of Chekulana⁵⁴, Kodaka.⁵⁵ It must be remembered that some upasikas stayed in the vicinity of the place of donation but sometimes there seems to be vast distance between these two places. Whether they traversed this distance personally or handed over the donation to some trustworthy network is not known.

Précis:

Ancient Indian inscriptions, though religious in nature offer very valuable information about the personal, social, economic and political situation. It has been attempted to bring to light the various aspects of the lives of the upasikas as gleaned through the inscriptions that they have recorded. Such an effort would find a rightful space for upasikas in the annals of ancient Indian Buddhism.



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- 12 Epigraphia Indica, Vol-X, p. 29, n. 199
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- ¹⁴ Ibid, vol, II, ed. p. 387, n. 294
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- ¹⁶ Ibid, no. 207
- ¹⁷ Journal of Epigraphical Society of India, Vol., XXV, 1999, pp. 58-65.
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- ¹⁹ Ibid, p. 31, n. 219
- ²⁰ Ibid, p. 96, n. 944
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- ²³ Ibid, p. 27. n. 179
- ²⁴ Ibid, p. 147, n. 1243
- ²⁵ Rao *et al*, Buddhist Inscriptions of Andhradesha, p. 135
- ²⁶ Ibid, p. 72
- 27 Epigraphia Indica, Vol-X, p. 115, n. 1084
- 28 *ibid*, X, p. 122, n. 1121
- 29 *ibid.*, X, p. 102, n. 986
- 30 *ibid.*, p. 104, n. 1000
- 31 *ibid.*, p. 105, n. 1001
- 32 *ibid.*, X., p. 111, n. 1048
- ³³ Rao *et al* , Buddhist Inscriptions of Andhradesha, p. 130. This inscription is an excellent proof of the overseas trade in ancient India.
- ³⁴ Indian Antiquary, vol- VII, pp. 253-255
- 35 *Ibid*, n. 1292, p. 154
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 153 n. 1285.

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- 38 Epigraphia Indica., Vol. X., p. 147, n. 124
- 39 *ibid.*, Vol. X p. 143, n. 1219
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 155, n. 1302
- 41 Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum. Vol. IV-I, p. 276, n. 52.
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- 43, by, Rao, *et al*, Buddhist Inscriptions of Andhradesha, p. 131 The meaning of Ukha Siri is not clear
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- 45 Epigraphia Indica, Vol. X, p. 159
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- 47 *Ibid*, p. 114, n. 1073
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- 51 *Ibid*, p. 46, n. 415, n. 414
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- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 45, n. 385 and p. 46, .n.406
- 54 *Ibid*, p. 75
- 55 *Ibid*, p., 25