



# ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE DOMAIN OF TEMPLE PATRONAGE IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ODISHA

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## ABSTRACT

*Studying the role of women in the domain of temple patronage in early medieval Odisha is a fresh trend of analysis in Odishan art history. In that male-dominated early medieval society, less number of epigraphs gives an account of the role of women in the religious sphere managing certain ecclesiastic matters. However, handful of donative epigraphs entails about their role as a temple builder, donor, temple staffs etc., who patronised those temples. Some queens were patronised to construct numerous remarkable temples in Odisha. Some inscriptional records refer about donation to brahmanic deities by several women belonged from various social and geographical background of the then society being an integral part of temple life. So many royal ladies built various brahmanical shrines and donated cash and kind to support in maintaining those temples. Temples were associated with music, dance, marriage and festivals etc. Therefore the role of women was very vital to study to understand the socio-cultural history. We have got references of different types of devadasis or temple girls in Madala Panji, who was associated with various kinds of ritual performance inside the temple premises. Likewise, other women temple staffs were there to perform their temple assignments, they were lady garland maker or kaula maluni, sweeper and milkmaid etc. Worthy and wealthy women donated various necessary items such as perpetual lamp, gold, land, milch animals e.g., cow, buffalo, goat and sheep etc for oil and other milk products. Along with temples, the female patrons established local markets or hattas, mandapas, stepped wells or vapi, additional shrines, roads and gardens for the smoother function of temples. In the domain of gift giving to gods and goddess, we have seen a sense hierarchy among patrons of various class and caste. Hence, this paper is aiming to analysis the less highlighted part of temple patronage that is the role of women as patron in the process of maintain and upkeep those temples of early medieval Odisha.*

**KEYWORDS:** *women, patron, devadasi, kaula malani, queen, temple, music, dance, donation*

## INTRODUCTION

Early medieval period of Indian history saw various regional developments especially in the field of patronage to brahmanical religious institutions. Odisha also experienced the same trend of horizontal spread of brahmanical religious institutions, or else what we called 'temples' across all parts of India in general and Odisha in particular. Since, that was a male dominated-patriarchal society; a particular group of gender were the decision makers for all. The tally of Epigraphic records of temple patronage shows that most of the temple builders or temple patrons were male. They were kings, members of the royal family, elites of the lay society, officials etc. Most of them were male donors and temple caretakers. However, women played a vital role in patronizing the temples of early medieval Odisha. On the contribution of women Gerda Lerner<sup>1</sup> says, "Like men, women are and always have been actors and agents in history. Since women are half and sometimes more than half of humankind, they always have shared the world and its work equally with men. Women are and have been central, not marginal, to the making of society and to the building of civilization." Ironically, in the sphere of ecclesiastic matters, there were very small numbers of donative records which refers the role of various women as

temple builders, temple donor and associated with temples in up keeping temples in early medieval Odisha. Through inscriptional records, we can see that so many women were engaged in maintaining those temples, but, because of handful of sources we can only assume their key role as an actor behind the curtain.

In the light of donative records, we came to know that women also acted in all field of life like their male counterparts during early medieval period. They played vital roles in the domain of social, cultural, political and economic life. They participated in art, education, occupational and religious arena during this period. In early medieval Odisha, women were associated in managing various ecclesiastic matters e.g., building of brahmanical religious institutions or temple, donation to it, availing necessary things for its upkeep and maintenance, recruiting temple staffs, running certain temple rituals and establishing other additional set ups for the longevity of temple's life. During the Bhaumakara period, Odisha experienced the development of Saktism and Sakta art under its female patrons. Sakta temples built across the coastal belt of the then Odisha by the Bhaumakara queens. Subsequently, under the Somavasi rule a number of Saiva temples built by both the male and female patrons of the royal



family. Saivism reached its pinnacle under the Somavamsi Royal Patronage. Temple like the Lingaraja temple, Mukteswar, and Brahmeswar were the most decorated and flourished Saiva shrines developed under the Somavamsis. Followed to this, under the Imperial Gangas, Vashnavism flourished and reached in its apex during Narasimhadeva I (1238-1264 AD). The Jagannath temple of Puri, the Sun temple of Konarka and Ananta-Vasudeva temple etc., like grandeur shrines were the best example of Vaishnav art and architecture during this period. Women contributed actively in supporting those brahmanical temples through financial and material aid.

### ROYAL WOMEN AS TEMPLE PATRON

In this context, we see that Royal ladies played an important role in patronising those early medieval brahmanic temples of Odisha. Wives of kings, queens, mother or daughters of the ruling king also donated to support those brahmanical religious institutions. Royal ladies, elite women had their possession on tangible property i.e., land, gold etc. Hence, they had the choice or right to gift to anybody; religious institutions. In this context, the Hamesvara temple inscription<sup>2</sup> records that the temple of the god Bhava or lord Siva was built on behalf of the queen named Madhava devi, the queen of the illustrious King Subhakaradeva (*circa* 780-800 CE) of the Bhauma family. The deity installed in the temple was named after her as Madhavesvara. It further records the appointment of pontiff (*acarya*) for conducting the worship of the deity, the excavation of a *vapi* or stepped well near the temple and establishment of a market or *hatta* in the vicinity of the temple. Here the queen wanted to ensure the proper maintenance of the temple after its establishment. Therefore, all sorts of availability of water, food and other necessary things for the god had been arranged by the patron. Likewise, under the patronage of another Bhauma queen named Hira Mahadevi the 64 yogini temple was built at Hirapur, which is situated 10 kilometres away from the heart of Bhubaneswar.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the Chamunda image inscription<sup>3</sup> of Jajpur refers that object of the inscription is to record the works of the installations of the image of Chamunda by queen Vatsadevi of the Bhaumakara family. The Terundia plate<sup>5</sup> of the king Subhakaradeva II records that Mohini devi built the Mohini temple at Bhubaneswar in 687 CE. Even the temple is named after her. It was a sakta temple built in the heart of Bhubaneswar, north side of the Lingaraja Temple. The identity of Mohinidevi can be traced as a queen of the Bhaumakara dynasty. Probably, the the Vaitala temple of Bhubaneswar was built by Tribhuban Mahadevi in 775 CE.<sup>6</sup> Tribhuban mahadevi was also known as Katayani. It is believed that in order to worship katayani or durga she had ordered to build that sakta temple. She was the queen of the Bhaumakara dynasty who ruled Tosali. Goddess Chamunda is the main deity worshipped in Vaitala temple. The Bhaumakaras were the chief patron of Shaktism. It shows that most of the the Bhauma queens supported saktism. They exclusively patronised sakta art and architecture during this period.

The period of the Somavamsis had been experienced the growth of saivism under its male and female royal patrons from 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards. In this regards, the Brahmesvara temple inscription<sup>7</sup> refers that Kolavati, the mother of Udyotakesari, erected a lofty shrine of god Brahmesvara along with four miniature shrines at *Siddhatirtha of Ekamra*, which is the ancient name of Bhubaneswar. The temple was adorned with golden pinnacles. Queen Kolavatidevi also made over to the temple some beautiful maids. The eulogy was composed by Bhatta Purusottama who was well-versed in the Vedas, Grammar, Arthasastra, Poetry, Logic and other disciplines. The inscription further refers that the queen dedicated to lord Brahmesvara (Siva) three beautiful women, who were to sing and perform dance before the deity. The record of the donation made on the Regnal year 18, the third day of the bright fortnight of the month of *Falgun* probably 1058 or 1060 CE. From the donative record, it seems that Kolavatidevi was very much concerned about the decoration and attractive design of the Brahmesvara temple. She also availed all sorts of scopes and platforms for learning, education and knowledge. All sorts of happiness of the god siva was taken care of by providing *devadasis* to the temple, and making dance and music as a vital part of temple's ritual.

Imperial Ganga period experienced the horizontal spread of vaishnava art and architecture across Odisha. Royal ladies and non royal played significant role in nurturing vaishnavism. Kasturi Kamodini was the chief queen of the Ganga king Chodagangadeva (1078-1147 CE). After Chodagangadeva's death, she built a temple of lord Jagannatha at Tekkali, in Khordha District.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Mukteswar temple inscription<sup>9</sup> records that in the reign of Chodagangadeva of the Ganga family, his queen named Pracarimahadevi dedicated a perpetual lamp in favour of the god installed in the temple for accruing religious merit. The donation was made in *saka* year 1064 or 1132 AD, on the tenth day on Thursday, when the sun was in the *Tula-rasi*. This Mukteswar temple is traced at present Danpur, near Kodala, Ganjam district which co existed with a complex of other temple. Likewise, the Ananta-Vasudeva temple inscription<sup>10</sup> records that Chandrikadevi daughter of Anangabhimadev III who married the Haihaya prince Paramadri or Paramadrin, cause to built the temple of Visnu at *Ekamra-siddha-tirtha*, in the *Utkala visaya*, where flows the vicinity, the stream called *Gandhasindhu* and the *Bindu-saras* or the Bindu Sagar pond. She offered with great magnificence to Baladeva, Krsna with Subhadra in the said temple. The record of the donation is made on *Saka era* 1200 that is 1278 CE.

### NON-ROYAL FEMALE DONORS

There were references about women from lay society donated to temples during this period of study. They were elite women rich in class. Stray cases of local civilian or donation of a lady devotee found mentioned in those donative records of this period. Pertaining to this, an Inscription<sup>11</sup> found from the Nrsimha temple of Puri district refers about the gift of a perpetual lamp in favour of the god Purusottama by a lady named Klingamma, the wife of Narayana. She is also stated to



have donated to the temple treasury an amount of five *niskas* gold (*mada* in Telegu) and to have entrusted to a family of florist for the maintenance of the gift lamp and for supply of garlands of flowers daily to the temple for the worship of the god *Purushottama*. The record of the donation is made on *Mahadvadasi* day of the *Saka era* 1035 or 1113 CE.

Another 12<sup>th</sup> century Narsimha temple inscription<sup>12</sup> records the gift of a perpetual lamp in the shrine of the god *Krsna* to be burnt before the god *Cakrin* by a certain Mankani, daughter of Ammani, during the 61 regnal year of Chodagangadeva at the time of his presence in the holy place of god *Purushottama*. An amount of five *madhas* of gold was deposited in the temple for the maintenance and continuation of the burning of the said lamp. The gift was entrusted with one Sivadasa for supervision. The record of the donation is made on *Saka era* 1058 or 1136 CE. Likewise, the Lingaraja temple inscription<sup>13</sup> records the grant of a perpetual lamp in favour of god *Krttivasa*, by a lady named Madamadevi daughter of Kominayaka apparently for the merit of her parents and self during the victorious reign of Raghavadeva to cover the expense of the perpetual lamp, the lady purchased jointly with a leading merchant named Jayadeva who was the resident of a locality attached to Kurmapataka from the hands of a *sresthin* of Dasapura, a piece of land called Vahida-Khandakshetra situated at Devadhara-grama and granted it in favour of the said deity. The record of the donation is made on Wednesday the tenth day of a particular month during the time of the Ganga king Raghavadeva (1156-1170 CE). Here, Madamadevi can be identified as an elite woman, who had the capability to purchase land and donate it to god. Probably, she has done it for her parent's (father) salvation. So, keeping this instance in mind, we can presume that the elite women in early medieval Odisha were enjoying their rights on the possession on movable and immovable property *viz.* land, gold, jewellery, milch animals, etc. likewise, the Jagannatha temple fragmentary inscription<sup>14</sup> records the gift of a lamp by the daughter of a person whose name ends with Vira. The record of the donation is made on *saka* year 1156 that is 1227 AD, during the time of Anangabhimadeva III on the name of Anangabhimadeva II.

We are getting the evidence of the social background of another lady temple caretaker that was recorded in the Patalesvara temple inscription<sup>15</sup> during the reign of the Ganga king Anangabhimadeva III. The inscription records the grant of two pieces of land by the *Sri-Karana* Suru- Senapati in favour of the god *Purushottama* for making provision of the supply of 1 *mana* to the deity with cognizance of Mahadeva-Pathin. One of the two plots of land was situated at Alisana in Ravanga division. The other piece of land measured 10 *manas* ( $\frac{1}{2}$  *vati*) was apparently situated in the same locality and was granted for making provision for the supply of 10 *hala* that can be equated with 10 pairs of bundles of fragrant flowers apparently per day. This grant was made with the cognizance of one *Kalua-malani* or lady garland maker. So, here the lady garland maker as the supervisor of the grant made to the temple as the second person to maintain it other than her male counterpart. The record of the donation was made on *saka era* 1158 that was 1236 CE, on Friday, on the first fortnight of the

month of *Falguna*, in the thirty-first *srahi* or *anka* year of the reigning king Anangabhimadeva III.

The references of couple donation are also found from those early medieval donative records, from which we can estyablish the importance and impact of a 'husband-wife' joint donation to god. In this context, the Narsimha temple inscription<sup>16</sup> refers that the gift of a perpetual lamp to the deity *Krsna* by one *Rayana* along with his wife Ratnama along a village called Manda-grama of Vengi *desa*, during the reign of Chodagangadeva for the increase of religious merit. According to S.N. Rajaguru, the location of the village Manda-grama can be traced with the present Mandapeta in the Srikakulam district. In this donative record, Ratnama is stated to have donated five *madhas* of gold to the temple treasury for the maintenance of the gift lamp. This record of the donation made during the reign of Chodagangadeva(1078-1147 CE). So here the couple can be placed in the category of elite people from the lay society. Likewise, The another 13<sup>th</sup> century inscription<sup>17</sup> records an endowment of three *madhas* of gold and 32 *manas* of land, situated in the village of perpetual lamp donated in favour of the god *Purushottama* by a certain Surapota of the Bharadavaja *gotra* along with his wife, during the fifth regnal year of Kamarnavadeva of the Ganga family. The record of the donation is made on regnal year 5 probably c. 1151-1152 CE, on the first day of the dark fortnight of the month of *Asadha* of the *Mithuna lagna*. Here one thing is clear from the donation of the Brahmin couple that they were wealthy.

The religious scriptures of hindu civilization describes about the virtue and importance of couple donation. It refers that any religious donation made with wife is considered as more virtuous than the donation of single man or women. For example, in Ramayana we see that lord Rama has to do the *dana* along with Sita, without which it would not be fruitful. Therefore Ravana brought Sita back to Rama for sometimes to perform *dana* and *dakhina* to the priest during the *yagnya*. The story is related to the *setubandha pratistha* of the *Yuddha Kaanda* or *Lanka Kaanda* part. Likewise, when Rama was performing *Rajasuya yangya*, he was advised to do all the *dana* and *dakhsina* with his wife Sita. So a golden icon of his wife Sita made to perform the rest of the donation work described in the *Uttara Kaanda* of the Epic. Wife and husband are reciprocal to each other, and in Hinduism they are seen as complete with their partner, that is husband and wife. In Vedic ages also all the religious donations at *yagas* and *yagnyas* had been done with the collaboration of wife in order to get more *punya*. Now a days, if you go to the Jagannatha temple with your wife to donate the temple, then there is an account in where they accountant mentions both the couple names. Even, pilgrim to various sacred places in India with wife is also considered as virtuous and fruitful.

## FEMALE TEMPLE STAFFS

So many lady temple staffs were associated with brahmanical temples in early medieval Odisha. They were undertaking various professions which can be corroborate from the modern day temple activities. Grandeur shrines like Lingaraja, Jagannatha temple of Puri and Konakra etc temples were





associated with a set of lady staffs to perform temple's daily and special rituals. *Madala Panji*, the chronicle of Puri Jagannatha temple also mentions some of the lady temple staffs associated with the temple's life. They were *devadasis* or temple girls, dancers and musicians etc. in this context, the Meghesvara temple inscription<sup>18</sup> and the Brahmesvara temple inscription<sup>19</sup> refer about the donation of *devadasis* or maiden girls to the temple. Similarly, Karpura-sri named a temple dancing girl has mentioned by historian K.C. Panigrahi.<sup>20</sup> He states that Karnadeva (1100-1110 AD) the last Somavamsi ruler had granted a rent free village to Karpura-sri to increase his religious merit. There is was no reference in the grant that she was a *devadasi*. In the charter, her mother and grandmother's name find mention instead of her father and grandfather. This makes the scholars believe that she might be a temple dancing girl.

Similarly, we have found references of donation made by maids or temple maids to temples during early medieval period. These temple girls or temple maids were clearly having independent access to financial resources so that always there had been a choice that they can disburse them to whomsoever they wish. There was no competition or segregation between the royal ladies and non royal ladies for gifting temples. So it is interesting to see that these non royal female temple donors had a desire to find a place in that donative recodes along with their royal ladies counterpart during the time of Chodagangadeva, so that their future generation people could know about their religious adherence. In this regards, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Mukhalingam inscription<sup>21</sup> records that Ekkama, daughter of Cuttandi had gifted a perpetual lamp to the god Madhukesvara. She donated 5 *madas* of gold for the maintenance of the said lamp. The identity of lady Ekkama has been traced as a *sani* means she was a *devadasi* or temple girl of the god Vishnudeva. The above referred Madhukasvar temple is located in present Mukhalingam of Andhra Pradesh State.

Likewise, another maid named Siriya-Muduseli or Sriya-mudusuli from Varanasi Katak had offered a fan for waving during the daily offering of food at both times of worship of the deity Narasimhanatha found mention in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Laxmi Narayanaswami temple inscription.<sup>22</sup> Here the odia word *Mudusuli* means a maid of female servant in the royal household. The same inscription further entails that, a lady named Polama, who was the daughter of the maid tara *sani* was entrusted with waving the fan in front of the deity. Again, for this service she was granted *prasadam* that was consisting of baked cakes and betel from the said temple. She also deposited some amount of money known as *malla-mada* (in telegu) into the temple treasury for the provision of offering food to the deity. During the reign of Chodagangadeva, these temple maids and female servants of royal houses had been enjoyed the gift giving rights as well as keeping them as record for encoding their religious achievements for the upcoming generations.

The *Madala Panji* refers about five types of temple girls in the Jagannatha temple Puri. They were performing on the verses of *Geetagovinda* written by Jayadev.<sup>23</sup> The five types of *Devadasis* were 1. *Bhitara Gauni*; they sing in front of the

main deity, the inside the *Garvagriha* or Sanctum Sanctorum, 2. *Bahara Gauni*; they sing outside the inner sanctuary, in the *Natamandapa* or dancing hall, 3. *Nachuni*; she is a regular Dancer, 4. *Gaudasani*; they Dance during ceremonial procession of lord Jagannath, 5. *Patuari*; they negotiated in fanning the main deity. In other hand, generally *devadasis* of early medieval Odisha can be divided into two categories i.e., *Gani Mahari* or singer temple girls and *Nachuni Mahari* or dancing temple girls. They were integral part of temples' daily ritual as well as special occasions i.e., Ratha yatra, snana yatra, chandana yatra, hera panchami and badasimhara besa.<sup>24</sup> Dance and music became an inseparable part during the period of Imperial Gangas followed by Gajapatis in medieval Odisha. These *devadasis* had played a significant role in supporting those temples through timely donation and endowment.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I must assemble my arguments precisely to draw a larger picture to understand the key role played by women in supporting those brahmanical religious shrines in early medieval Odisha. Women, are majority half of human society and civilization. Generally we see that women associate with various activities in household and professional matters. Women have been participated and contributed in nurturing and nourishing every civilization in the past. In the context of early medieval Odisha, their activities in public domain were been limited. However, some of the elite class women were played key role in patronising various brahmnical religious institutions with various gifts and donation. Ironically, the sources are not recorded enough to analyse all the donations, and identify all the builders or patrons of those temples. Keeping in view of some handful of donative inscription, we can presume that lots of women from various class and occupation were associated with temple's life directly or indirectly, inside and outside of those temples during this period of study. For the anonymous women patrons, we can say that, the so called male society might not want to give credits or record them widely in any of the contemporary sources. However, some of the powerful and rich women of society made endowments to the temples. Women from various occupational communities were associated in supplying necessary diary and agricultural products to those temples. Some of them are rarely mentioned among those contemporary sources. Therefore, it is comparatively less conducive and challenging to reconstruct the history of lower class and caste women pertaining to temple patronage for a comprehensive study. On the other hand, the modern day temples are been largely donating by women donors, women worshippers and visible male and women temple staffs and workers. We can take a look to the Jagannatha temple of Puri to understand the role of women in temple's life. Therefore, because of that we can't simply exclude ourselves to see the role of women who played key role in making those temples that has been survived through ages.



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