

## Gender Identities in Mathura Inscriptions: Analysing the Interaction of Female Laity with the Jain Monastic Order

Kshitij Jain.<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*This paper will focus on the analysis of the Jain inscriptions at Mathura on the line of gender studies, especially concerning with the aspects of gender identities reflected in these inscriptions. The primary area of study of this research shall be the interactions which took place between the Jain laywomen and the Jain monastic order as depicted in Mathura inscriptions and attempts will be made to analyse how the Jain laywomen have identified themselves in such records in which they are seen mentioning their interaction with the monastic order that happened in the form of requests or commands for religious donations. Such an analysis will also shed light on the role played by women in the Jain religious order from a very ancient time and will present the history of Jain community from the lens of the women followers who formed the 'significant other' in the order of the lay followers as well as in that of the monkhood.*

**Keywords-** Jainism, Inscriptions, Gender Identities, munisamgha, laywomen

### Introduction

The Kankali Tila and other Jain excavations at Mathura hold a very significant place in the ancient history of Jainism and require a more sincere attention for the purpose of disseminating the historical information they possess. Over the years, the material remains of Mathura such as architectural reliefs and the famous Ayāgpattas (worship slabs); especially those of Kankali Tila have been proven instrumental in reconstructing Jain history.

The archeological findings at the Jain sites of Mathura also include numerous inscriptions which basically are votive donations made for various religious activities. As these inscriptions are votive in nature, they are short in nature without giving any large chunk of information. Even though they lack detailed information about their contemporary times, their historical value should not be underestimated for they provide several insights into the religious as well as social processes that were taking place in the Jain community.

---

<sup>1</sup>.32-A, Near Bank Of India, Kamla Nagar, Delhi

This paper will focus on the analysis of the available epigraphical records on the line of gender studies, especially concerning with the aspects of gender identities reflected in these inscriptions. The primary area of study of this research shall be the interactions which took place between the Jain laywomen and the Jain monastic order as depicted in Mathura inscriptions and attempts will be made to analyse how the Jain laywomen have identified themselves in such records in which they are seen mentioning their interaction with the monastic order that happened in the form of requests or commands for religious donations. Such an analysis will also shed light on the role played by women in the Jain religious order from a very ancient time and will present the history of Jain community from the lens of the women followers who formed the ‘significant other’ in the order of the lay followers as well as in that of the monkhood.

### **The Question of Women Identities**

Vijayalaxmi Pandit rightly points that gender identities have been a social construct rather than a natural state of affairs. The association of certain gender roles and identities with women was a social process depending upon the socio-cultural as well as in this case, religious phenomenons present in a particular time period. In this light, the predominant presence of women in the Jain votive inscriptions of Mathura is certainly indicative of the social processes that the community must have undergone. The women laity is seen making donations such as idols and setting up Ayāgpattas in the available epigraphs. Even though one should not take this presence as some evidence of large-scale economic freedom of women, the Mathura inscriptions certainly prove the freedom to engage and participate in religious activities enjoyed by the Jain women.

The larger question of women identities goes ahead of the female laity, and is also related to the presence of Āryikās in the monastic order. While shedding light on the relation with the samgha, female donors indirectly give details of the female section of the samgha and therefore indicating at the large scale presence of women in the religious order.

The present study about the interactions of Jain women with the monastic order and their subsequent association with certain gender roles will study the relevant inscriptions by dividing them into two types- the first type of inscriptions in which the women use the identity of shrāvika alone or use it prior to their familial roles; and the second type in which the female laity uses familial identities along with the identity of being a follower that is absent in some cases. The description of the relevant inscriptions will be based upon the

translations given by archeologists like George Buhler in his ‘Further Inscriptions from Mathura’ and W.A Smith in his ‘The Jaina Stupa and other Antiquities of Mathura’.

Through the detailed analysis that shall be performed, a reader will reach upon the following observations-

1. That the women actually played an active and significant role in the Jain religious order; contrary to the general belief. They were present in the monastic order from the very beginnings and the mentions of Āryikas (nuns) in the inscriptions prove that, as we shall see;
2. The laywomen were having constant interactions with the monastic order and interestingly, the female donors mention the names of Āchāryas more often which shows the significance they held in the community. These interactions were happening in the form of religious commands made by the samgha to the female laity for grants or donations
3. In terms of gender identities, the female donors use the identity of a ‘follower’ (shrāvika) along with other familial identities in these inscriptions. But in most cases as the study will outline, the identity of shrāvika apart from appearing independently; also appears ahead of familial attributes when both of them are used together. At the same time, the attribute of being lay follower is unmentioned too in some cases.

### **Women as Followers**

The first type of inscriptions includes those votive records in which women primarily use the identity of being a follower of a particular Āchārya or Āryikā. They either appear solely as a shrāvika or use this identity before mentioning their family backgrounds or roles. Understandably, this type is outnumbered by the latter classification but, the independent usage of the attribute of shrāvika is something that cannot be taken as a simple fact. A total of five inscriptions out of the available corpus will be analysed under this section.

#### **1. The Āryavatī of Amohini**

The first inscription under this category is the votive record of setting up of an Āryavatī by Amohini of the Kautsi gotra and is included in the works of Buhler, Smith as well as that of Luders. The donor doesn’t mention any request made from the side of the samgha but doesn’t miss out upon identifying herself as a disciple of the ascetics first of all. Then she goes on to name his husband and provides his matrilineal descent. Another interesting thing to note is that Amohini makes the donation along with her three sons- Palaghosha,

Proshthaghosha and Dhanaghosha. This can be interpreted into the adulthood and economic independence of her sons and at the same time, the mere mention of her husband made by Amohini can be an indicative of his death. Hence in the given scenario, it might be the case that Amohini was a widow situated in later years of her life and had embraced discipleship only after the adulthood of her sons. If this assumption is taken into consideration, It can be said that the role of follower became prominent in the life of Amohini only when she had ensured the fulfillment of her roles as a householder which is largely true in case of female followers in ancient times. The identity of a follower or disciple was important for women, but it came only after other familial identities as per the progression of life in various phases.

## 2. The Donation of Dharmaghoshā

A two line inscription inscribed on a broken Torana merely mentions a donation made by Dharmaghoshā who identifies herself as the disciple of Jayasena-an Āchārya present in the munisamgha. As the Torana on which it was found was broken, it seems that the epigraph is incomplete in most probabilities. The available details seem to have no peculiarities apart from the fact that the donor gives her identity of discipleship primary importance and chooses to use it solely. The only intriguing thing in this scenario is the name of the donor- Dharmaghosha; which is too peculiar for a common householder woman. A basic survey of the Jain records containing followers inducted in the samgha will suffice to show that such names were commonly given to the individuals who had reached the spiritual stage somewhat intermediary between the 'grihasthadharma' and the 'munidharma' (visible in the position of Kshullaka and Elaka along with their female counterparts in Digambara tradition) Hence, Dharmaghoshā must have been a part of the samgha itself and not a common laity. Such an assumption poses a problem because this part of the munisamgha was also prohibited from keeping personal properties or wealth? One can argue that Dharmaghoshā would have made this donation before entering the monastic order; we can't be certain. But, such arguments certainly propounds that the participation of women in the monastic order as ascetics would have been considerable by that time.

## 3. Donation of Dattā

This inscription, numbered as XX by Buhler in his article, mentions the donation of an image of Arhat Nandiāvarta by Dattā who first mentions herself as the female lay-disciple and then as a wife. She makes this donation on the advice of Ārya- Vriddhahastin whose gana and shākhā are duly mentioned.

The donor uses two identities in this votive record- the first one is the identity of a disciple while the second being that of the familial wifely role. In the votive inscriptions having female donors, the wifely identity is easily evidenced as the most common and prominent one but, Dattā consciously chooses to keep her role as a devote laywoman before her role as a wife which can be understood as an indicator of the religious freedom and participation available for the women of Jain laity.

#### 4. Interaction between Datā and Grahshrī

While the abovementioned records reflect the interaction between the Āchāryas and the laywomen, the present inscription shows an actual case of interaction between a female member of the samgha- Datā and Grahshrī in which the former inspires the latter for a donation. Adding to the scenario, Datā further even identifies herself as the pupil of Āryikā Jīvā and gives us a clear example of the presence of the institution of Āryikā (the highest position women could attain in the monastic order and which was the counterpart to the institution of Āchārya or Ārya as mentioned in inscriptions of Mathura.) We do not know the identities used by Grahshrī because of the unavailability of the record after that point.

The present inscription provides the case of dual identification- one done by the laywoman and the other done by the member of the monastic order. The point to note is that both Datā and Grahshrī derive their identities of discipleship from a female figure that is Āryikā Jīvā in this case. The presence of Jīvā in the inscription actually makes us agree to the assumption that women were being promoted to the highest possible position in the samgha and there was also a formalization of gender identity based roles within the monastic order by the time of this record. One can also argue that in the field of faith and religion, Jain women weren't entirely dependent on either their patriarchal family heads or even on the Āchāryas for deriving their religious identities. This argument should not be taken in a far-fetched sense but should be based upon such evidences even though their numbers are limited.

#### 5. The Gift of Female Pupils

Originally listed by Buhler as XI, this epigraph is another interesting case in which the female donors refer to themselves only as the pupils of their respective Āchāryas and not by giving their own names. The record mentions a collective religious gift made by the pupils of Simhamitra, Shashtisimha and Pushyamitra respectively. Out of these three, the pupil of Simhamitra is given the adjective of sadhachari which is translated as 'female convert' by Buhler. It is also mentioned that the three female pupils made the gift together

with Grahacheta and Grahadasa whose identities are in a serious ambiguity because of a lack of information.

This inscription provides a curious case in which the female donors not only use the identity of discipleship but even go on to abandon their personal names and retain only the role of being a pupil. The translation made by Buhler becomes a key issue here and the identification done by the three donors clearly shows their initiation into the monastic order during which an individual has to renounce their previously used worldly identities. We can assume similar to the case of Dharmaghoshā that this donation would have been made as a part of renouncing personal wealth and property. The self-identification done by the women therefore, seems to be a result of this transitional phase from a worldly identity to that of an ascetic.

### **Women in Familial Identities**

The second type of inscriptions that we shall analyse is the one in which women appear primarily in familial roles and identities; placing the aspect of discipleship secondary or even not mentioning it at instances. In such inscriptions, women donors are seen preferring their familial roles over pupil roles; which can be inferred as their lesser participation and involvement in the munisamgha.

#### **1. Fusion of Identities of Daughters and Wives**

An interesting aspect about the inscriptions belonging to the second type is the association of identities with two families by the women donors- the first one being their own paternal family and the second being the family of their husbands. Within such cases, there are records in which women appear both as daughters and wives of which we shall take a look at three cases.

The first example is that of Grahashri who identifies herself as the daughter of Buddhi and wife of Devila who made a gift on the request of Ārya Godāsa. Second such example is the donation of a fourfold image of Arhat made by Jitāmitrā on the request of Ārya Nandika. She appears as the daughter of Ritunandi, wife of Buddhi and a mother. Her son's name is not available but it is known that he was a perfumer. The donation of Shyāmādhyā serves as the third example in which she makes the donation of an image on the command of Dattilāchārya and identifies herself as the daughter of Bhattibhava and wife of ferryman Grahamitrapalita.

In all three cases, two things appear clearly- first, that the donors haven't shown any association with the disciple role in these records meaning that they did not relate with identities of discipleship and second, that they mention their daughterly identity before their

wifely identities. Why this was being done is a complex question and can be answered by speculating that they had made these donations either in the temples visited by their paternal families or had made these donations along with them i.e. for their merit (punya) One can also argue that the munisamgha played a role in keeping the familial relations connected and gave the women opportunities to maintain their association with their paternal relations.

## 2. Comprehensive Familial Identities

There are certain inscriptions found under the available corpus in which the women use comprehensive familial identities; mentioning their parents, their in-laws, husbands and even children. Were such inscriptions being inscribed to mark large-scale family occasions? Or were these grants made as parts of religious activities jointly done by both families? These remain possibilities which get an additional likeliness from the detailed mention of munisamgha and its figures in such comprehensive records that cover a number of identities associated with women.

The first case is the setting up of an image of Vardhmana by Jaya who names her father Navahastin, daughter-in-law of Grahasena and also mentions her three sons- Shivasena, Devasena and Shivadeva. She would have mentioned her husband in all probabilities but that part is missing now. She gives a detailed account of the munisamgha and says that she set up the image for the acceptance of Ārya Sandhi, whose two teachers are then mentioned. Those two teachers themselves are female pupils of Ārya Balatrāta. Dr. Buhler pays special attention to the word acceptance and compares it with the word 'Parigrahe' of Buddhist inscriptions. In his views, the ascetics had 'exhorted Jaya to make the donation' and the spiritual merit had been handed over to them. Going by the interpretation of Buhler, it becomes important to ponder upon that why the ascetics demanded any such 'transfer' of punya to them? What purpose did the setting up of the image serve in this case? In the author's personal opinion, this must have been a part of a large religious ritual performed by Jaya and her family under which the image of Vardhmana would have been established to acknowledge the blessings of the munisamgha. Does this show early signs of the Jain religious activities turning into social functions with active participation of munisamgha? We can only ponder.

The second example is the gift of Vijayshrī who goes on to enlist her detailed familial identities; that of the daughter of Bubu, first wife of Rajyvasu, mother of Devila and paternal grandmother of Vishnubhava. She goes on to further mention that she is obedient to a nun whose name is unclear. Similar to the previous inscription, the female teacher of that

Āryikā - Ārya Jinadasi as well as her teacher (name again unclear). Hence, the donor provides details about the familial and monastic institutions she is associated with. We can safely assert that this donation was made on the occasion of some large-scale socio-religious function as Vijayshri herself says that she fasted for a month and therefore, a donation would have been made to commemorate it. The extensive familial identities used by the donor indicate the trend of aged women of the household participating in religious activities as well as the involvement of the entire family in such an activity. Similarly, Vijayshri doesn't term herself as a disciple in explicit terms and contends by referring herself as a householder who follows the order of the munisamgha.

The final epigraphical instance that will be taken under this sub-category is the donation of a four-fold image by Sthirā upon the request of Ārya Kshairaka whose monastic lineage is given a lengthy description in the record. Sthirā identifies herself as the daughter of Varanastin and Devi, daughter-in-law of Jayadeva and Moshini as well as the first wife of Kutha Kasutha.

The trend of identification as the 'first' wife seen in this and also in the previous inscription indicates at the deeply-rooted patriarchal system that had grappled every social institution. In such cases as this, we find the women to be totally dependent upon their husbands for identification in a familial setup. As the main concern of this paper lies in the process of 'identification' done by Jain women, using the role of being one of the many wives as a mark of identity shows that how even the self-identification done by women was influenced by patriarchal values and beliefs. There can also be possibilities of this being done by women for the sake of social validation required in a major socio-religious occasion, again reflecting upon the relations between women identities and contemporary social values

### **The Donation of a Daughter**

The final inscription that shall be analysed under the second type appears as the only case when a woman identifies herself solely as a daughter and does not use any other gender roles while making the donation. The donor, whose name is not decipherable, identifies herself as the daughter of the goldsmith Deva. She donates an image of Vardhmana on the request of gani Nandi whose teacher's name is again undecipherable. In all certainties, the donor is an unmarried woman who is associated only to her paternal family.

This votive record as well as those studied above also pose yet another question- what about the munisamghas these women donors mention in their donations? For instance, would the daughter of Deva the goldsmith have continued her association with the samgha to which her



paternal family associated even after marrying into a different household? What about the married women placed in what we can call joint family systems but still mention their parents while making a donation? Were the munisamghas (implying as the various branches) mentioned by them the same they were associated with before marriage? Or the patronage shifted entirely to the associations of the family in which they married? Going one step further, could this have been a possibility that both the families linked through familial relations associated themselves with the same munisamgha. The monastic order did play a very influential role in the life of common Jain laity as depicted by..... And it is a strong possibility that it would have acted as a common linkage among kinship of a community that has historically been interwoven in nature.

### **Analyzing the Identities**

The thirteen epigraphical evidences presented in this paper make a few things very clear in an undisputed fashion. The notion that women did not have enough participation in the Jain fold is contradicted by the constant appearance of women donors and moreover by the interactions they had with the munisamgha or the monastic order. The ‘request’ or ‘command’ made by the munisamgha for a donation or a grant to the woman laity can be seen as a way to access the actual resources on which the male population would have large amount of control. The role of women in the religious history of Jainism is also affirmed by the large scale presence of female members in the order. They have been called as ‘Ārya’ or ‘Āryika’ and this institution has actually continued to live and thrive within the Jain monastic system. Even the identities used by them (as mentioned in the votive records by the householder women) provide for a curious case that needs to be disseminated in an independent work. This also corroborates with the accounts of Jain literature that mentions the presence of female ascetics in the samgha of every Tirthankara. Jain women were an important part of the laity as well as of the religious order; that being evident from the epigraphical records.

The main question explored in this paper was the gender identities used by Jain women in those votive records in which we find their interaction with the munisamgha in order to place the women identities within the broader scope of religious history and tradition of Jainism. These ‘interactions’ which the female laity had were mostly in the form of some or the other request or order for donation which were met with due fulfillment. Monastic order and the laity have been the two pillars of the Jain social order from a very ancient time;

and their interactions would have surely impacted the patterns of identification on the lines of gender.

The two types of inscriptions that we saw- those in which the women used their identity of discipleship as primary role and those in which the identity of pupil was subsided by the familial roles and identities; are actually reflective of how complex the phenomenon of identity can be. There is no denying the fact that the identities used by the women in both kinds of inscriptions are largely derived from a patriarchal head of the institution, whether it is the identity of wife being used by a householder or the identity of a pupil used by an Āryika that was used by a nun of the munisamgha; they all are based upon the relations these women had with the male heads or patriarchs. The identification of Vijayshri as the ‘first wife’ is a peculiar example in which the woman is dependent upon her relation with the male counterpart. This is also the historically dominant pattern in the human society that has always been a male dominated institution.

But, there come several intriguing instances which lie on the other side of the spectrum. The manner in which Datā- a householder and Grahshrī, a woman ascetic derive their identities of discipleship from Ārya Jiva who is a female institutional head shows that the female figures of both segments of Jainism did also affiliate themselves with a female head in some cases and hence based their identities in relation with them. The ample number of records in which women have prioritized their discipleship role suggests the freedom which they enjoyed in religious matters and in pursuing higher spiritual goals just like the male population. There were also followers who did not attach themselves to discipleship but continued their participation while being daughters, wives and mothers primarily.

The process of analyzing the issues of gender identity in the epigraphical records also lead to several questions about the social phenomenons that would have been present the Jain community of that time which would have also shaped the development and usage of gender roles. The presence of women in the munisamgha would have also meant a transition from household roles to the roles of an ascetic, disposal of the old worldly identities and new identities based on an entirely different role. The case of Dharmaghosha is somewhat related to this process of transition from one set of gender identities to the other. How would have this happened? What agency did the family and social background play in such a situation? Were women allowed to enter into monastic order while being associated with the responsibilities of family like the males or they could have made such a transition only when their household roles would have reduced to an extent? All these questions need to be

pondered and thought upon to understand the phenomenon of ‘gender identities’ applied by women in ancient Jainism.

One can say that this paper raised more questions than actually answering too many problems. But, in these questions lies the actual purpose of studying our past through complex sources such as the Jain inscriptions of Mathura and addressing issues like that of gender identities focused here. The presence of these questions and problems are reflective of the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the phenomenon of ‘identity’, that is as complex and intriguing as the very concept of history itself.

### **Bibliography**

- Buhler G, New Jaina Inscriptions from Mathura in: *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol.1, 1892
- Buhler G, Further Jaina Inscriptions from Mathura in: *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol.2, 1894
- Luders H, A List of Brahmi Inscriptions From The Earliest Times to about 400 A.D. with the Exception of those of Ashoka in: *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol.10, 1909-10
- Luders H, Seven Brahmi Inscriptions from Mathura and its Vicinity in: *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol.24, 1937-38
- Smith V.A, *The Jaina Stupa and Other Antiquities of Mathura*,
- Singh Vijay Laxmi, *Repositioning Women in Ancient India in the Context of Amravati Inscriptions in: Proceedings of the Indian History Congress Vol.64*
- Saxena, Kanika Kishore, *Before Krishna: Religious Diversity in Ancient Mathura*. Oxford University Press, 2021