

Women in Early Buddhist Inscriptions

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The lecture today

- Based on research for my next book
- 2 parts
 - General overview
 - One theme in detail
- Answering the questions
 - What can these inscriptions tell us about the lives of women from this time?
 - Do they confirm or challenge the textual evidence?
- Time period
 - (for the book) 300 BCE – 300 CE
 - (today) 200 BCE – 200 CE

Inscription sites - India

- Buddhist monuments, e.g.
 - Sāñcī
 - Amarāvati
- Cave sites
 - Western sites
 - Eastern sites



Sāñcī





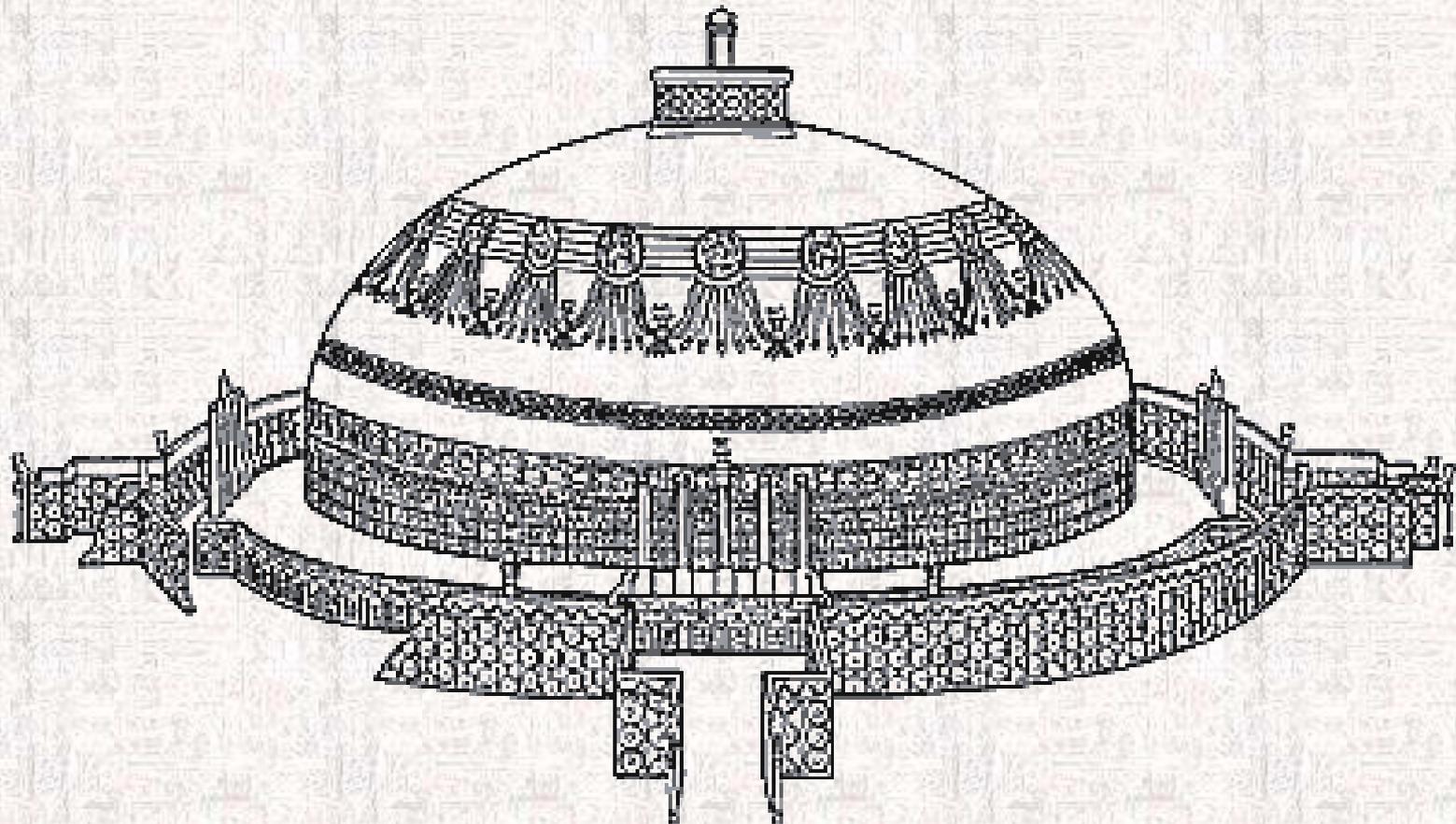


Amarāvati



Ruined Buddhist Stupa & Remains
Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, India





Types of inscriptions

- Royal edicts
 - Kings and queens
- Donor inscriptions
 - Making offerings
- Land grants and other legislative matters
 - Monastic and other property

Inscriptions by or about women

- Royal inscriptions
 - Not edicts
- Donor inscriptions
 - Cave sites
 - Monument sites
- Land grants and other legislative matters
 - e.g. land given to nunneries

A detailed look

- ...at one aspect/theme
- Women as teachers and pupils
- Does the epigraphic evidence contradict the textual evidence?

What do the texts say?

- Contradictions in the textual evidence

In the Pāli canon

- an earlier layer?
 - Venerated female teachers
 - Dhammadinnā
 - Khemā
 - On a par with exemplary male teachers
 - Teach men
- (a later) institutional clampdown?
 - An institutionalised schema
 - Every two weeks, a chosen monk must go to instruct the nuns

Evidence of inscriptions

- No evidence of the institutional clampdown
- Evidence of female teachers
 - A nun who makes a donation records she is the disciple of a named female teacher
 - Named teachers, like Dhammadinnā and Khemā:Yasilā, Gaḍā, Mitasiri, Dinnā, Puśahatini, Retī and Padumantikā
- Evidence of nuns who record they are direct disciples of male teachers
 - A nun who makes a donation records she is the disciple of a named male teacher
 - A nun and a monk make a donation recording they are the disciples of a named male teacher

A note on Prakrit grammar

- Salomon ‘unstandardized and inconsistent’ (1998, 72)
- Monumental and inscriptional Prakrit
- Stability of genitive endings
 - Regular/standard forms

Masculine and neuter nouns ending in -a

Gen sg -sa. Visadevasa, Mitasa, Kasapasa, Mahādevasa.

It is clear that in the large majority of cases in which this ending occurs it stands for -(a)ssa. But in three or four instances we find the preceding vowel a lengthened, and if these readings are correct then we may assume here a slightly developed tendency to pronounce the gen sg ending as a single consonant with the compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel asavānkāsa, Thupadāsāsa, bhadamtāsa, Bhutārakhit[ā]sa

Feminine nouns ending in ā

Gen sg. ~(ā)yā Kujarāyā, Nāgadevāyā, Samanāyā, Sakaṭadevāyā

~(ā)ya When frequently -yā is shortened to ya. Nāgasenāya, Sāmāya, Anurādhāya, -bhāriyāya, Idadevāya, Benākaṭikāya, Badhīkaya, Nagarikaya, bhāriyaya, Pusadevaya, Nadutaraya.

~āye Nagarakhitāye, Nāgarikāye, Ghosāye, bhayaye, Pusadataye, Nāgaye, Kamuchukaye.

(Luders 1963, xxv & xxvi.)

Historical Grammar of Inscriptional Prakrits, Mehendale (1997, 240-243)

Table 1: Masculine genitive singular a-stem

Period	West	N. West	South	Central	East	North
3 BCE (Aśokan)	-sa	-sa	-sa	-sa	-sa	-sa (-sā, -ṣā)
3 BCE			-sa (-ṣa)	-sa	-sa	
2 BCE	-sa (-(e)sa)		-sa (-āsa)	-sa (-āsa)	-sa	
1 BCE	-sa (-(e)sa)			-sa		
1 CE	-sa (-śa)		-sa (-sā)	-sa		
2 CE	-sa (-sya, -(e)sa)		-sa			
3 CE			-sa -ssa			
4 CE				-si, siṃ		

Table 2: Feminine genitive singular a-stem

Period	West	N. West	South	Central	East	North
3 BCE (Aśokan)				-ye (?)		-ye (?)
3 BCE	-ya			-ye		
2 BC	-ya		-yā	-ye		
	-yā			-yā		
	-ye			-ya		
1 BC	-ya			-ye		
	-va			-yā		
				-ya		
1 CE	-ya		1 or 2 CE	-e		
	-va		-ya			
			(-yā, ye, sa)			
2 CE	-ya		-ya			
	-a					

Typical use of the genitive

jethabhadrasa dānam (Lüders 1963: 49)

‘The gift of Jethabhadra.’

ghosāye dānam (Lüders 1963: 58)

‘The gift of Ghosā.’

...kasa rāño bhayaye nāgarakhitāye dānam (Lüders 1963: 15)

‘The gift of Nāgarakhitā, wife of king ...ka.’

Nuns with female teachers (Sāñcī)

yasilaya atevasini-sagharakhitāye dānaṃ (Marshall and Foucher, Vol. I [1939]
1983: 311)

‘The gift of Sagharakhitā, female pupil of Yasilā.’

mulāyā dāna thabho gaḍāya atevāsiniyā (Marshall and Foucher, Vol. I [1939]
1983: 367)

‘The pillar is the gift of Mulā, female pupil of Gaḍā.’

[dha]madevaya dānaṃ mitasiriya atevasiniyā (Marshall and
Foucher, Vol. I [1939] 1983: 363)

‘The gift of Dhamadevā, female pupil of Mitasiri.’

Nuns with female teachers (Mathurā district)

*Huviṣkasya[s](am) 30 1 [he 4] d(i) 20 dana bh(i)k(ṣu)ñiy(e) Dinnaye
ant(e)vāsinī[aṃ] khudāye [gra]...*

‘In the year 31 of Huviṣka, in the 4th month of winter(?), on the 20th day, the gift of Khudā (and) ... the female pupils of the nun Dinnā.’ (Tr. Lüders 1961: 149-50)

*(mahārājasya) [d](e)vaputrasa huv[i]ṣkasya sa[m] 30 9 va 3 di 5 etasya[m]
purva[y](aṃ) bh[i]khuñiye Puśaha[th]iniye [a](ṃtevāsi)ni[y](e) bh[i]khuñiye
Budhadevāye bodhisatvo pratihāpito sahā mātāpitīhi sarvasat[v]ahitasukh[a]*

‘In the year 39 of *mahārāja devaputra* Huviṣka, in the 3rd (month) of the rainy season, on the 5th day, on this date, the bodhisattva was set up by the nun Budhadevā, the female pupil of the nun Puśahathini, together with her parents from the welfare and happiness of all beings.’ (Tr. Lüders 1961: 166)

From other areas

From Amarāvati, in Andhra Pradesh

aya-retiyā atevāsiniya aya-dhamāya dānaṃ (Burgess [1886] 1996: 82)

‘The gift of Venerable Dhamā, female pupil of Venerable Retī.’

From a western cave site near Kuḍā, a small village on the banks of the Rajapuri creek

Siddhaṃ therāṇaṃ bhadata pātimitana bhadaṃta āgimita[na] ca bhāgiṇeyiya pāvayitikāya nāganikāya duhutaya pavayitikāya padumaṃtikāya dhammaṃ leṇaṃ poḍhī ca sahā ātevāsiniya bodhiya saha ca atevāsiniya asālhamitāya
(Burgess and Pandit 1881: 7)

‘Success, a cave and cistern the gift of the renouncer Padumantikā, daughter of the renouncer Nāganikā, sister’s daughter of the Elder Reverend Āgimita and the Elder Reverend Pātimita, and of her pupil Bodhi and her pupil Asālhamitā.’

Nuns with male teachers

From Amarāvātī:

*sidham kudūranivāsika bhaya-nāgasa atavāsikasa
daharabhikusa vidhikasa atevāsiniya cha budharakhitāya
natiya cha chūlabudharakhitāya cha utarāyake paṭo dāna*

‘Success, the tablet at the northern gate, the gift of the young monk Vidhika, pupil of Reverend Nāga, who resides at Kudūra, and of [his] pupil Budharakhitā, and of [her] granddaughter, and of the younger Budharakhitā.’

(Tr. Hultsch in Burgess [1886] 1996:93)

*[r]āyaselanivāsino vasibhūtaśa (ma)hatheraśa ayira-bhūtarakhitaśa
(a)(te)vāsikaśa chula-ay(i)raśa ara[ha]-[ta]śa ayira-budharakhitaśa
atev(ā)s(i)niya bhikhuniyā nadāya thaṃbho dā(na)* (Burgess [1886]
1996:104)

‘The pillar is the gift of the Venerable Chula, pupil of the great Elder, of self-controlled mind, Venerable Bhūtarakhita, resident of [R]āyasela – and of the nun Nadā, pupil of the Arhat, Venerable Budharakhita.’

*vinayadhiraśa aya-punavaśuśa atevāsiniya uvajhāyini samuḍiyāya
atevāsiniya malaṃyā pāḍakā dāna[m]* (Burgess [1886] 1996:37)

‘Gift of footprints by Malā, pupil of the female teacher Samuḍiyā, pupil of Venerable Punavaśu, a *vinayadhāra*.’

Nuns with male teachers

From Western cave sites

*Sidha || therāṇaṃ bhayata-sihāṇa ateāsiniya pāvāiti[k]āya ghapa[rā]ya
bālikāā saghāya budha(dhā)-a cha chetiya-gharo deya-dharma... (Das Gupta
1949-50:77-8)*

Success, the meritorious gift of a *chaitya* hall is made by Budhā and Saghā the daughter(s) of the renouncer Ghaparā, pupil of the Elder, Venerable Siha...

*Sidham therāṇa bhayata vijayāṇa ativāsiniya pava[yi]tikāya sapolāya
deyadhamam leṇam saha sā lohitali veṇhuyāhi saha ca ativāsiniya bodhiya...
(Burgess 1881: 18)*

Success, the meritorious gift of a cave by renouncer Sapolā, pupil of the Elder, Venerable Vijaya, with Lohitā and Veṇhuyā, and her pupil Bodhī...

antevāsinī– pupil/disciple

- In this context – being a pupil/disciple does not necessarily equate with being low status
- *antevāsinī* can have high status roles
- Example – Buddhamitrā, a *trepitakā*, pupil of Bala

Buddhamitrā

*mahārajasya devaputrasya huv[e]ṣkasya saṃ 30 3 gr 1 di
8 bhīkshusya balasya [t]repiṭakasya antevā[si]n(ī)y(e)(e)
[bhi]kṣuṇīye tre(piṭi)[kā]ye buddha[mi]tray[e]
bhāgineyīye bhikhuṇīye dhanava[t]īye bodhi[s]atvo
p[r]atithā[p]i(to) [mā]dh[u]raṇake sahā mātāpitihī....*

In the year 33 of the *mahārāja devaputra* Huveṣka, in the 1st (month) of the hot season, on the 8th day, a bodhisattva was set up at Madh[u]raṇaka by the nun Dhanavatī, the sister's daughter of the nun Buddhamitrā, who knows the Tripiṭaka, the female pupil of the monk Bala, who knows the Tripiṭaka, together with her father and mother... (Tr Lüders 1961: 55; also see Bloch 1905-6: 181, and LL 38)

Dates

- The inscriptions from Sāñcī come from the ground balustrades of stupa 1 (Yasilā) and stupa 2 (Mulā and Dhamadevā). These parts of the Sāñcī complex are dated to the Śunga period, and the script characters can be identified as early Brāhmī characters
- The inscriptions from Amarāvātī that can be dated (on palaeographic grounds) come from the first or second centuries of the Common Era, with one possible exception.
- Three of the inscriptions have dates, three from Mathurā. These inscriptions were made during the reign of Huviṣka, a Kuṣāṇa king, and so can be dated to the second century CE.
- The inscriptions from the cave sites are the most difficult to date.

Conclusions

- The geographical spread of the inscriptions studied here seems to demonstrate that neither the phenomenon of nuns with female teachers, nor that of nuns who considered themselves direct disciples of monks, was a region-specific aspect of early Buddhist communities.
- Some of the inscriptions contain dates, and others can be dated on palaeographic grounds, (with an awareness of the incumbent problems with doing so) and thus these two features of the lives of early Buddhist nuns in India appear to have existed over a period of four centuries.

- The epigraphic record provides us with names of female monastic teachers who would otherwise be occluded from history, and whilst the inscriptions do not reveal much about these women, in a milieu in which lineage and genealogy are important, for disciples to define themselves in relation to their female teachers is significant in itself.
- Also, those who declare themselves to be students of others, or are so described, need not be considered to be of low rank, as might be easily assumed from pupil status. The evidence suggests instead that *antevāsinī* is a marker of identity that demonstrates these nuns were important figures, interwoven into the social nexus of early Buddhist communities. Some were teachers, perhaps exalted ones, others establish themselves as actors within lineages, and others had defined roles that show they were significant figures in early Buddhist communities.

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