



# Finding Her Place: Nārī, Dhamma, and Śakti in the Aśokan Inscriptions

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## 1. Abstract

This paper explores the historical paradox of female agency within the Mauryan Empire by contrasting the prescriptive Brahminical traditions of Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* with the administrative reality captured in the Ashokan inscriptions. While theoretical texts sought to confine women to the domestic sphere, epigraphic evidence—specifically the Queen's Edict, the Schism Edicts, and Major Rock Edicts IX and XII—reveals a highly dynamic public reality. Through an epigraphic and biopolitical analysis, this study argues that Mauryan women, such as Queen Kāruvākī and the Buddhist *Bhikkhunis*, wielded undeniable economic and institutional *Śakti* (power/agency). In response, the fiercely pragmatic Mauryan state deployed an expansive bureaucracy, including the appointment of Superintendents of Women, to institutionalize patriarchal surveillance. Ultimately, these inscriptions serve as a surviving feminist archive, highlighting an ancient state that simultaneously needed and feared female power—a dialectic of empowerment and containment that strongly prefigures modern governmental gender policies.

**Keywords:** Mauryan Empire, Epigraphy, Gender Surveillance, Ashokan Edicts, Śakti, Biopolitics, Women in Early India.

## 2. Introduction

*“Whatever gift that has been given by the second queen ..... is to be registered in the name of that queen”<sup>1</sup>*

This royal command inscribed in the Allahabad-Kosam Pillar Inscription almost over two millennia ago is far more than a simple administrative record. It is a loud, permanent statement of women's public identity.

Yet when historians study about these ancient women they often hit a wall. The field usually relies on texts written by elite men, for example Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*. The main issue with these types of texts is they are highly prescriptive. They are basically rulebooks

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<sup>1</sup> Eugen Hultzsch, *Inscriptions of Asoka. Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, Vol. 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 158–159.

that paint a picture of what the patriarchal state builders want women to be: Remain Silent, be submissive and stand within their domestic sphere.

But if we want to know about the actual reality what these early historic women were actually doing we have to move from theoretical law books to inscribed texts in stone's and pillars.

To do that the most widely available materials are the Aśokan Inscriptions. The Rock and Pillar Edicts of emperor Aśoka carved in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE, are generally studied for their political and moral message of Dhamma. Yet these inscriptions also contain implicit clues about the women's lives under the Mauryan Empire. These inscriptions, by contrast, offer a contemporary glimpse. A close reading reveals that women were active religious patrons (śakti in society) even if the state appointed special officers to supervise them.

The Queen's Edict, Schism Edicts, and Major Rock Edicts IX and XII are among the Aśokan inscriptions which reveal a fundamental Mauryan paradox concerning female agency (Śakti). An anxious administration which created large bureaucracies to control this nāri power, even as royal and monastic women successfully asserted their economic and public influence. This historical conflict between recognizing women's autonomy and imposing paternalistic control offers a startling forerunner to contemporary government gender policies, where women's simultaneous empowerment and regulation continue to be defining characteristics.

### 3. Literature Review & Research Gap

Historians have long recognized the limitations of relying solely on prescriptive texts. Scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy have done foundational work in dismantling these traditional paradigms, revealing the complex intersections of gender, space, and statecraft in early Indian societies. Furthermore, historians such as Romila Thapar and Nayanjot Lahiri have provided exhaustive analyses of Ashoka's administration and the political machinery of the Mauryan Empire. However, a distinct research gap remains at the intersection of these two fields. While the economic agency of royal women and the administrative structure of the Mauryan state are often studied independently, there is insufficient focus on how the state specifically weaponized its bureaucracy as a direct, anxious response to female autonomy. This paper addresses that gap by framing Ashoka's bureaucratic innovations not merely as administrative expansion, but as a deliberate system of gendered surveillance reacting to the undeniable *Śakti* of early historic women.

### 4. Objectives of the Study

- i. To juxtapose the perspective gender norms of Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* with the epigraphic realities of the Mauryan Empire.
- ii. To analyze the economic and institutional agency (*Śakti*) of Mauryan Women, specifically Queen Kāruvākī and the Buddhist *Bhikkhunis*.
- iii. To examine Ashoka's administrative bureaucracy (e.g, Superintendents of Women) as a biopolitical instrument for patriarchal oversight and the restriction of female autonomy.
- iv. To reframe Ashokan inscriptions as a surviving feminist archive that highlights the state's dialectic of empowering and containing female power.

### 5. Methodology

To unpack this dynamic, this paper employs a dual methodology: epigraphic analysis viewed through a feminist biopolitical lens. By conducting a close reading of the primary lithic records—specifically the Queen's Edict, the Schism Edicts, and Major Rock Edicts IX and XII—this study shifts the historical focus from what the Mauryan state *idealized* to what it actually *legislated*. Furthermore, by applying Michel Foucault's framework of biopolitics,

this paper interprets the state's regulation of female morality, rituals, and physical mobility as a calculated effort to manage imperial security. This methodological approach allows the inscriptions to be read not just as moral decrees of *Dhamma*, but as active sites of negotiation between state control and female agency.

## 6. Summary of Research Outcomes

- Epigraphic evidence shows that Mauryan women were involved in the empire's social and economic life, going against the strict domestic limitations set by Brahminical texts like the *Arthaśāstra*.
- Queen Kāruvākī successfully utilized the state's administrative machinery to subvert patriarchal conventions, legally documenting public philanthropy under her own name to establish a distinct economic and public identity.
- The Mauryan state's deployment of an expansive bureaucracy was a direct, anxious response to institutionalize surveillance over this rising female autonomy.
- The state engaged in a biopolitical management strategy, demonstrating a historical paradox where the empire simultaneously relied on and feared female power (*Śakti*).

## 7. Findings

### 7.1 The Theoretical vs. The Epigraphic

To deeply grasp the agency of Mauryan women, firstly we have to essentially recognize what kind of rigid and stringent ideological order they had to face. The best way to understand this is the Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*, which was the ultimate blueprint for the early state builders. To take the word of Kautilya's, women in our ancient history had almost no independent public life in existence for themselves. They were mainly tied down with the household duties, functioning as biological gatekeepers for the lineage and for the later distribution of the material assets. Their move was strictly restricted and was under the watch of the fathers, husbands and sons.

Although He does talk about women moving around in the public spaces, but it was mostly on the state's term. The *Arthaśāstra* famously quotes how wandering ascetic women (**parivrājakas**) and courtesans were turned into spies for the crown. In the Brahminical view, the potency of a woman wasn't a sign of freedom; just a tool kept for the imperial surveillance.

But the epigraphic evidence shifts the paradigm at this point. While Kautilya depicts a totalitarian hierarchy where female public presence is either a strict social taboo or a state managed activity monitored by the king's pervasive spy craft; on the other hand, the Aśokan Inscriptions show a much messier but dynamic reality. The Rock and the Pillar Edicts show us how women's were not just pawns of the state or the household; but they were also active participants on the social and economic life of the empire. When the stifling social theories meet the tangible reality of the Aśokan edicts, the true, vibrant **Śakti** of the Mauryan women comes into sharp focus.

### 7.2 Nārī as Patron: Economic Agency and Queen Karuvaki

To understand this we must first look at the Allahabad Kosam Pillar in order to comprehend how these Mauryan women actually negotiated patriarchal structure and to anchor this tension within the epigraphic records. The Queen's Edict, a foundational lithic record that offers a masterclass in female economic agency, is located here. When this dialectic of empowerment and containment is broken down, the most striking manifestation of the negotiated autonomy is revealed: a text that operationalizes Queen Kāruvākī's bureaucratic

surveillance while simultaneously canonizing her philanthropy. In the end, it is an inscription, that immortalizes royal Śakti's economic power precisely by dictating how the state must record it, directly clashing with the strict cataloguing of the Mauryan administrative apparatus.

The following pillar edict records the philanthropic deeds of Aśoka's second queen (written in Pali in the Queens edict as **Tīvalamātu Kāluvākī**<sup>2</sup>) which translate to Mother of Prince Tīvālā; Queen Kāruvākī. This edict tells us about what she gave to the public, like mango grooves, gardens or alms houses. At first glance it might look like royal charity on the surface. But as the real meaning of this inscription isn't what she gave; it's about how she gained the ownership of it.

Queen Kāruvākī didn't just silently gave her wealth to her husband to give away on her behalf. Instead she commands the Mahāmātrās, who were state officials, to register all these public works in her name specifically. She legally circumvent the emperor. Kautilya's Arthaśāstra says that women had to be economically tied to their male guardians. But Queen Kāruvākī used her state's own administrative machinery to make sure she had her own economic identity.

This is a profound assertion of Śakti. She was making a very clear political and spatial claim by asking that her name to be carved into stone next to Emperor Aśoka's orders. She was using her power to move from the private, domestic space of the royal harem to the public and physical space of the empire.

Her actions actually shows that the royal women were not just pretty decorations in the background of the empire's court. Instead they had their own money, possessed some administrative leverage, and were actively involved in the state's economic of patronage. They were visible economic agents and didn't want the men around them to erase or take over their legacies.

### 7.3 The Bureaucracy of Gender: Institutionalizing Surveillance

However, this indisputable demonstration of female agency was not isolated. The fiercely pragmatic Mauryan state acknowledged this female autonomy and understood that it had be strictly regulated.

This brings us to the bureaucracy of gender. The Major Rock Edict XII contains an explicit list of high ranking officials of Aśoka's administration. The Strī-adhyakṣa-mahāmātras-which literally translates to Superintendents of Women<sup>3</sup>, are mentioned next to the officials in charge of public works and religious affairs.

Let's just take a moment to think about the sheer gravity it holds. The Mauryan empire actually established a whole, specialized branch of government, whose sole purpose was to keep an eye on their behaviour, morality and mobility of women. The state didn't disregard women or assume, as the Arthaśāstra suggests that they would inevitably stay silent at home quietly. Rather, they realized that surveying and controlling women was a crucial step to preserve the social and political stability of the empire.

This administrative anxiety reveals a deeply ancient form of biopolitics<sup>4</sup>. The state saw that controlling women bodies and spaces as an important aspect of imperial security rather than private family issues. In an effort to institutionalize patriarchal control, Aśoka's government deployed these Strī-adhyakṣa-mahāmātras, ensuring that the Śakti we witnessed with women like Queen Kāruvākī was kept within boundaries which benefitted the state.

<sup>2</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> line Allahabad Kosum pillar Queen's Edict

<sup>3</sup> Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 255.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 139.

## 7.4 Dhamma vs. Domesticity: Monastics and Rituals

Mauryan women's spiritual and domestic lives were deeply impacted by this state surveillance, which went beyond moral policing and physical mobility.

Major Rock Edict XII makes this ideological battlefield very evident. In this instance, Aśoka openly criticizes the customary folk rites that women regularly carried out. He specifically criticizes the rituals performed during births, marriages and illness, calling them pointless and insignificant. Rather, he urges his subjects to abandon these practices and adopt his state-sanctioned *Dhamma*<sup>5</sup>.

However, we must critically examine this. This was more than a monarch expressing his personal religious preference. It was a political ploy. In early historic times of India, these domestic practices were a primary source of female authority within the household. Aśoka was actively attempting to replace women's traditional domestic power with centralized, imperial ideology by invalidating them.

Yet, women still found strong institutional power outside of the state, despite the state's effort to reduce their influence at home. The Schism Edicts, which are located in places like Sanchi, Sarnath and Kosambi, provide the strongest proof. Aśoka gives a harsh warning in these inscriptions that; anyone who tries to divide the Buddhist Sangha will be clothed in white robes and banished.

Crucially, The Emperor directs this threat towards both *Bhikkunis* and *Monks - The Nuns* - equally<sup>6</sup>. The nuns are not viewed by him as secondary or marginal groups. Aśoka was formally acknowledging that female monastics were a powerful, well organized force by issuing this same warning to them. They had enough Śakti and collective power to possibly shatter the empire's religious cohesion. They became a political reality that the state couldn't ignore them.

## 8. Results

### Echoes in Modernity: The Enduring State Control of Women

But this ancient fear of female authority is not merely a relic of the Mauryan past. Aśoka's gender bureaucracy feels remarkably and perhaps uncomfortably modern when we examine it.

The state's aggressive attempts to co-opt female domestic practices and the appointment of *Strī-adhyakṣa-mahāmātrās* demonstrates that the state surveillance of women is a foundational, timeless pillar of statecraft. The Mauryan empire recognized that it needed to regulate women's autonomy in order to keep power, modern nation-states today still constantly struggle with the same exact Śakti.

This is currently reflected everywhere in the world, as the modern governments continue to enact broad legislation aimed at controlling women bodies, limiting their physical area, and policing their beliefs. The underlying political instinct is still the same, even though the tactics have changed from rock edicts to digital surveillance and modern legislation; a state that acknowledges the inherent power of women will unavoidably attempt to create a bureaucracy to contain it.

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<sup>5</sup> Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 253.

<sup>6</sup> Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, 266–67.

## 9. Conclusion

In the end, the Aśokan Inscriptions completely disrupt the submissive, idealized view of ancient Indian women found in theoretical text such as Kautilya's Arthaśāstra.

The women of the Mauryan empire were no silent, as evidenced by the actual administrative records carved into stone. They were active philanthropist, spiritual leaders and vibrant members of the society. We witnessed Queens like Karuvaki legally claiming public economic space and Buddhist nuns holding sufficient institutional power to fracture an empire.

These edicts are far more than administrative blueprints of an ancient kingdom or a moral decree of a great emperor. They are a feminist archive that has survived. They reveal a lineage of ancient women who, in spite of intense surveillance, refused to be erased and a state that both needed and feared female power.

As the famous verse in our ancient traditions say's – “या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्तिरूपेण संस्थिता” (Yā Devī Sarvabhūteṣhu Śakti-Rūpeṇa Samsthitā)<sup>7</sup> – recognizing the divine feminine that exists in all beings in the very form of Śakti and agency. This fact was well exemplified by the women of the Mauryan empire. They successfully carved their Śakti into the stones of history, negotiated with the system, and asserted their agency.

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<sup>7</sup> Devī Māhātmya, in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, trans. Swami Jagadiswarananda (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1953), chap. 5, verses 32–34.

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