

## STONE MEMORIALS COMMEMORATING SATI IN EARLY KARNATAKA

Dr. Priya Thakur

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Studies & Research in History and Archaeology Tumkur University, Karnataka

### Manuscript Info

Submission: 28-10-2019

Acceptance: 15-11-2019

Publication: 05-01-2020

### Keywords

Stone Memorials, Sati, Karnataka

### ABSTRACT

The tradition of memorial stones celebrating the bravery and zeal of men and women can be seen in Karnataka from early 7th – 8th century CE as reflected by various types of hero and sati stones and nishidhi stones scattered in the region. The tradition of Sati seems to exist since the prehistoric period but was not treated as a rule but exception, as reflected in varied literature. With the rise in political conflicts and socio-religious changes, the tradition became more glorified from the later sixth century CE. The memorial stone commemorating the act of Sati by the women reflect the socio-cultural context of the prehistoric period where this act had heroic and grand moral connotation attached to it. The sheer number of sati memorials in Karnataka testifies to the prevalence of this tradition in the region. The research paper highlights the stone memorials which commemorate the tradition of sati through erection of stone slabs with distinct iconographical features. The paper is also an attempt to survey the landscape in which the sati stones are presently located and the understanding of local population regarding the nature and significance of these memorials in terms of socio-cultural and subaltern memories of the past. The paper is based on field work and survey conducted as part of project funded by the ICHR, New Delhi.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The construction of sepulchral or mortuary and memorial monuments for the dead is a tradition seen since the beginning of the human social structure throughout the world. The megalithic tradition derived its nomenclature from the extensive use of stones marking the burial spots. This act of self-sacrifice was also deeply associated the religious fervor of the period. The tradition of satī seems to exist since the early historic period but was not treated as a rule but exception as reflected in varied literature such as the Mahābhārata, Padma Purāṇa and Harṣacarita. The term satī is referred to as sahaḡamana in the case of the wife joins the funeral pyre of her husband and anuḡamana when the immolation occurs after the husband's cremation. Another term also used is anvārohaṇa which graphically refers to the occasion when the widow ascends the funeral pyre of her husband and is burnt along with the corpse. (Sharma et. al., 1988) Sati or sahaḡamana was prevalent among a certain class of women, who either took the vow or deemed it a great honor to die on the funeral pyres of their husbands. (Kamat, 1980)

Strabo mentions a peculiar custom of the Kathaioi tribe where the wives burn themselves with their deceased husbands. (Jackson, 1907) Diodorus also mention Kathaioi (living in northern Panjab, around Lahore) as having this custom of widow-burning. Diodorus (Geer, 1947) describes in detail a case from the year 316 BC, ...when Ceteus, the commander of the Indian troops, died in a battle against the Greeks,... his two wives entered into a contest as to which should gain the privilege of dying with their husband.. the younger one was victorious... after taking leave of the household, she was assisted to mount the pyre by her brother, and while the multitude watched with amazement, she ended her life in heroic fashion...some of the Greeks pitied her, some praised her, but many considered the practice cruel and inhuman.

The Harṣacarita mentions the satī by the queen Yaśomatī, the mother of Harṣa, in Chapter five. (Kane, 1918) But the example from the Harṣacarita describes a very different context that the queen consigned herself to the flames in anticipation of her husband's death. (Kosambi, 1975) A vague reference of satī tradition is also seen in the Tamil epic Silāppadikaram, where the

foot note mentions that Senguttuvan, the Chera king brought a stone from the Himalayas, consecrated it in the Ganges and installed it with carving of his mother in honor of his mother Kannagi, when she committed satī along with other women, all of whose husbands fell slain in battle. (Dikshitar, 1939) The same information has been contradicted in other Sangam sources because of the variation in interpretation of the poem. (Pillai, 1932)

With the rise in political conflicts and socio-religious changes, the tradition became more glorified from the later sixth century CE. In Karnataka, this practice can be seen taking stronger roots from ninth century CE. The memorial stone commemorating the act of Satī by the women reflect the socio-cultural context of the early historic period where this act had heroic and grand moral connotation attached to it. They are called as Mā-satī-kallu i.e. MahāSatīkallu. The sheer number of satī memorials in Karnataka testifies to the prevalence of this tradition in this region. There is epigraphical and literary evidence to show that these satīs were worshipped, and the worshipping has survived even in present times.

#### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ibn Battuta (Gibb, 1929) tells about the prevalence of burning of wife after the husband's death and states that, 'it is regarded as a commendable act, but is not compulsory; only when a widow burns herself her family acquire a certain prestige by it and gain a reputation for fidelity.' The Italian traveller, Pietro Della Valle gives a graphic description of a 'satī' woman from Ikkeri (Shivamoga district) while visiting the city of Ikkeri in November 1623. He describes that,

...her husband being dead, the woman was resolved to burn herself, She rode on horseback about the city with face uncovered, holding a looking-glass in one hand and a lemon on the other....(Grey, 1892)

Colonel Mackenzie (Wilson, 1882) informs about the design and nature of the monumental stones and trophies found in various parts of the country from Cape Comorin to Delhi, called Veeracul and Maastiecul,

Aiyangar (1906) states that religion did indeed sanction self-immolation borne out of belief that such acts always forced open the gates of heaven to receive the performers.

Vogel discusses the sculptural representations from the so-called DraupadiRatha at Mahabalipuram site; Tamil Nadu related to self-sacrifice and suggests that the men sacrificing themselves to Goddess Durgā may be patron portraits. (1931).

Several articles published by generally the British writers, in the volumes of the Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research, from the late 19th century. These writings provide interesting insight of these writers about the memorial stones from socio-religious perspective. Several articles related to different aspects of memorial stones by Indian and foreign writers were published in a monumental work on memorial stones by Settar and Sontheimer in 1982. The journal *Ars Orientalis* brought out a themed volume titled *The Arts of Death in Asia* with papers presented at the 2012 Association of Asian Studies Annual conference in Toronto and published in 2014. The authors examined arts of death in pan-Asian visual cultures and in different media, from ancient times to the present.

Most of the recent works related to the region under study are in the form of published papers in proceedings and edited volumes related to various historical and archaeological aspects of selected site of the region.

#### ICONOGRAPHY

The simpler examples have only single stone slabs representing the usual iconographical feature depicting a woman's' right hand rising towards heaven holding a lemon in the palm facing outward with the couple depicted in the lower

section of this pillar. The other generic forms sometimes only show a woman with simply standing with hands next to her thighs or common versions with upraised right hand/ folded hands and the carving of the sun and the moon on the edges of the slab.

Generally the most elaborate example of Satī stones is a stone slab that is divided into three sections arranged horizontally; the lowest section provides the details of the hero and his wife in relief. This section commonly informs regarding the reason for his /her death. The middle section depicts the couple who sacrificed their life being carried away to the heaven (swarga) by heavenly nymphs (apsarās). The third and uppermost section depicts them sitting with folded hands in front of a God usually the ŚivaLinga (the aniconic form is always represented) with relief of Nandi in one corner. The top edge has carvings of the Sun and Moon thus indicating the continuation of the couples' fame till the end of time. There are other varieties depending on the way the satī is represented, such as, eḍkai (with both hands raised) and onkai (only one hand raised).

The depiction of various attributes such as a mirror; a lemon; or a citrus fruit; the arms of the satī decked with bangles symbolically represent marital bliss and indicate that she died as a married wife. The raised right arm of the satī, bent at the elbow at a right angle, with an open hand, whose palm face outwards is the most significant element of the sat. The aforementioned depiction is interpreted by scholars to represent the practice which involved the woman blessing the onlookers before entering the funeral pyre (Sontheimer, 1982) and thus represents the purity and the condition of the satī (Thapar, 1981). The representation of a pillar/pole from which the arm of the satī emerges is argued by Sontheimer (1982) to represent the wedding pole and further emphasizes upon the idea of the lasting bond of the couple in this world and the continuing bond of the couple based on marriage in the land of the dead.

There is combination type of memorial stones also which represent both the hero as well as the satī – in the same memorial and are termed as VīraM āstikallu. The composite type memorial stones with both hero and satī carved on the same stones follow the simplest idea that as the warrior or the hero attained eternal honour and heaven by his death performing the act of valour; the chaste wife chose self-immolation to claim the same honour and heaven. In any case, the incidents of māsti occurred only in certain situation when husbands had died in chivalry. The usual iconographical feature represented on these memorial stones is the woman with right hand raised towards heaven standing next to her husband. The vīra-māsti stones observed during this study also bring out the interesting examples of polygamy from the region as evident in the number of wives represented along with the hero who followed him to heaven by committing sat. Most of the instances show two wives flanking the husband on standing in one side, whereas the fallen hero is shown either standing with them or riding on a horse with his weapons.

One interesting example from Nidugal from Pavagudataluk of Tumkur district shows the narrative of the self-sacrifice and the attainment of Śivaloka by a man and woman. The lowest panel represents this couple seated in similar pose of lalita asana on two separate high pedestals – the man holds a dagger in his right hand raised above his shoulder level. The hilt of the dagger is held away with the blade facing the man. The scabbard is prominently visible hanging on his belt towards the right side of his waist. The woman is seated towards his left side and is represented holding an oval object – probably a citron in her right hand which is raised at her shoulder level and the left hand is resting on her lap holding a linga. The citron or lemon is generally associated with the satī tradition in Southern India. (Thakur, 2018) The stone represents the tradition of siḍḍitaleor bursting (cutting) of one's head as offering. The

man committed *siḍḍitale* and the wife performed *satī* – thus both attained heaven.

The memorial stones in the region under study are quite similar in the method of their preparation as well as erection. A stone slab of rectangular dimensions with rounded (or triangular in some instances) top edge was prepared out of naturally available material like granite and sandstone. It was erected in the flat ground surface by making a tapering bottom part to stand firmly in the ground. The underground part of the slab was usually in proportion to the visible part of the memorial stone so as to support the weight of the slab and to maintain the balance of the memorial. In some instances seen during the field work, the ratio is almost 50/50. The grander variations of the memorial stones have polished edges and beautiful high relief carvings represented as per the panels discussed in earlier paragraphs. The back side of the slab is roughly chiseled or dressed to give a flatter and regular surface. If the panel bears an inscription, then the surface is dressed for the purpose of writing. In the examples of the simplest type of the *māstī* stones, one could easily observe the lack of skill in dressing as well as sculptural work visible on the slab. The inherent uniformity in theme and content across the region highlights the well-established building practice.

### INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCES

One of the earliest inscriptions mentioning this act comes from Imperial Gupta period. The stone pillar inscription of *Gōparāja* who was a chief under *Bhōnugupta* dated 191 of the Gupta Era (=510-11 AD) from *Eran* in *Sagar* district of *Madhya Pradesh* records that *Gōparāja* came to *Eran* and fought a battle with the *Maitras*; that *Goparaja* was killed, and that his wife accompanied him, by cremating herself on his funeral pyre. (Fleet, 1888) The earliest attested practice of widow immolation in *Karnataka* is that of the fifth century wherein *Kadamba Ravivarman's* queen is said to have been liberated with him in the *Kavadi* inscription. From the end of the century we have the *Bennur* (*Sorabtaluk*,

*Shimoga* district) inscription of AD 972 which registers the death of a warrior named *Bidiyanna* in a skirmish. His wife, *Jakkarbe* is said to have died and risen to *suraloka* with him.

One inscription of *Mysore* region dated 1057 AD is a beautiful composition recording the death of *Dekabbe*, whose husband *Echa* was punished by death for killing his opponent in a wrestling match. *Dekabbe* decided to commit *satī* for the sake of fame for both her and husband's family (genealogical details for both sides provided). So, she made gifts of land and garden to the god for offerings and perpetual lamp and laid down her life. (Nayak, 1974) The *Mallandursatī* stone has an inscription dated 1386 AD which informs that a woman named *Bommakka* died as *mahasatī* on the death of her husband *Bayachisetti*. (Krishna, 1942)

An inscription from *Tumkur* region refers to the *agnipraveśa* (entering fire) by *Mallammā* and says that at that time she prayed for the prosperity of the *Seṭṭenoru* family born by the favor of the god *Mallēśvara* of *Miḍigēśi* and exhorted her relatives not to neglect the service of the god. (Sastri, 1955) A record tells about the death of *Gēreappā*, whose wife *Nāgamā* died with him. Before her death, she proclaimed that her father-in-law will come and set up a *vīragal* and according to this promise the stone was set up. (Rice, 1904) But the idea was not limited to *Śaivism* only as seen from a *Jaina* record from *Tipturtaluk*, dated c. 1174 AD which informs about a woman called as *mahā-satī Haryyaḷe* who died by entering the tomb, and entered the *Indraloka*. Hearing of her arrival, the celestial nymphs of the city of the immortals came forth, adorned her with garlands and jewels, and invited her to mount the car of glory. (Rice, 1904) Such lines represent the artists' depiction of same scenery in the stone medium. This record uses the term *mahā-satī* honorific title and also gives a graphic description of her death by burial.

The *sati* was not a prevalent tradition in the region and majority of women did not accompany their

dead husbands to the other world. (Kamat, 1980) A inscription from Tipturtaluk dated 1193 AD informs about a hero (name not clear) who slayed many enemies while protecting the cows and gained the world of gods and the vīragal was set up by his wife in his memory. (Rice, 1904)

### **SIGNIFICANCE**

The memorial stones are considered as one of the primary sources for providing information on the socio-political as well as religious framework of the history of region under study. Similar traditions of memorial stones dedicated to a satī can be seen in neighboring states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. These stones are sculpted in dedication to the women who committed satī or ritual self-immolation – have a long history in South India. They were typically commissioned by relatives or followers and placed in the precincts of Hindu and Jain shrines and along roadsides and transport routes throughout South India. They paid a public and visible tribute to the deceased. (Sinopoli, 2003) This shows the importance of these memorials as important social documents whose sculptors and composers were worthy of recognition as servants of culture, history and religious precepts, if not art. (Storm, 2016)

These memorials are found with and without inscriptions and as a result, most of them are dated on the basis of stylistic and visual evidences only. The concept of looking at a satī stone may lead to invariably to the shifting role of expectation, a hermeneutic stance that often inspected visual representation as a mode of fantasy, and equally, a re-enforcement of position and class. The memorials were commonly the work of several individuals – a sculptor or sometimes two and an inscription composer, if it had an inscription. (Settar and Sunkad, 1982) The lower strata probably imitated this act not only to secure heaven in the other world, but also to claim honor for their families in this world (Padma, 2013).

These stone memorials are visual messages that arose from a range of beliefs about divinity, death, and sacrifice. The images on the stelae present complex ideas in a vocabulary that is simple yet capacious enough to include the mystery of death. However, this ideal depiction of satī is not always matched by historical realities. Several ethnographic accounts reveal instances when women were forced into the fires, either physically or by the social pressures of a patrilineal system that offered limited options to a widow. (Machacek and Wilcox, 2003)

In the course of the field the survey, it was observed that many of the hero stones were placed according to the epigraphical records with religious and ritualistic values attached by placing them inside shrines. The satī stones also appear to be interesting examples of sources related to the subaltern history of this region. Inanimate objects communicate relationships and mediate progress through the social world; their diffusion bridges cultural boundaries and connects centers with peripheries. (Grassby, 2005) It offers a quasi-religious ritual of commemoration and celebration. The ritual belongs to the broad category of social mechanisms that Parsons has called ‘generalized symbolic media of social interactions.’ (Parsons, 1963) These rituals can be seen as a symbolic intercom between the level of cultural thought and complex cultural meanings, on the one hand, and that of social action and immediate event, on the other. (Munn, 1997) The satī memorial stones provide us the information about the beliefs and life of such populace.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This paper is based on some of the field work carried out by the author as a part of an on-going Research project of the author funded by the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi for a period of 2018-19, which inspired the formulation of this paper. The author duly acknowledges the council for the financial support.

## REFERENCES

1. Aiyangar, S.K. (1906). 'Self-Immolation which is not Satī', in the Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research. Temple, R.C. (Ed.). Vol. XXXV. 1985. Delhi: Swati Publications. (Reprint)
2. Dikshitar, V.R.R. (1939). The Śilappadikāram. Madras: Oxford University Press.
3. Fleet, J.F. (1888). Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum. Vol. III. Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors. Calcutta: Government Press.
4. Geer, R.M. (1947). Diodorus of Sicily. Vol. IX. Books XVIII and XIX 1-65. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
5. Gibb, H.A.R. (1929). Ibn Battuta Travels in Asia and Africa. 1325-1354. Chapter VI. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
6. Grassby, R. (2005). 'Material Culture and Cultural History,' in The Journal of Interdisciplinary History. Vol. 35. No. 4. 591-603.
7. Grey, E. (1892). The Travels of Pietri Della Valle in India. Vol. II. London: The Hakluyt Society.
8. Jackson, A.V.W. (1907). History of India. Vol. IX. Historic Accounts of India by Foreign Travellers Classic, Oriental and Occidental. London: The Grolier Society.
9. Kamat, J.K. (1980). Social Life in Medieval Karnataka. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
10. Kane, P.V. (1918). The Harshacharita of Bāṇabhaṭṭa. (Uchchvāsas I-VIII). Bombay.
11. Kosambi, D.D. (1975). An Introduction to the Study of Indian History. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
12. Krishna, M. (1942). Annual Report of the Mysore Archaeological Department for the Year 1941. Government Press: Mysore.
13. Machacek, D.W. and Wilcox, M.M. (2003). Sexuality and the World's Religions. ABC-CLIO: California.
14. Mackenzie, J.S.F. (1985). The Menhirs of the Hassan District, In the Indian Antiquary, A Journal of Oriental Research. Burgess, J.A.S. (Ed.). Vol. II. 1873. Delhi: Swati Publications.
15. Munn, N.D. (1997). Symbolism in a Ritual Context: Aspects of Symbolic Action, in Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology. Honingmann, J.J. (Ed.). Vol. I. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
16. Nayak, H.M. (1974). Epigraphia Carnatica, Vol. III. Institute of Kannada Studies: University of Mysore, Mysore.
17. Padma, S. (2013). Vicissitudes of the Goddess: Reconstructions of the Gramadevata in India's Religious Traditions. New York: Oxford University Press.
18. Parsons, T. (1963). 'On the Concept of Political Power,' in Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society; 107:232-62.
19. Pillai, K.N.S. (1931). The Chronology of the Early Tamils. University of Madras: Madras.
20. Rice, B.L. (1904). Epigraphia Carnatica. Vol. XII. Inscriptions in the Tumkur District. Bangalore: Mysore Government Central Press.
21. Sastri, K.A.N. (1955). Epigraphia Carnatica. Vol. XVI. Supplementary Inscriptions in the Tumkur District. Mysore: Government Press.
22. Settar S. and Sontheimer, G.H. (1982). Memorial Stones: A Study of their Origin, Significance and Variety. Dharwad: Institute of Indian Art History. Karnataka University.
23. Settar, S. and Sunkad, H. B. (1982). 'Vijayanagara: Artists of Memorial Stones,' in Sontheimer, G.H. and Settar S. (.....) Memorial Stones: A Study of their Origin, Significance and Variety. Dharwad: Institute of Indian Art History. Karnataka University.
24. Sharma, A., Ray, A., Hejib, A. and Young, K.K. (1988). Satī: Historical and Phenomenological Essays. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
25. Sinopoli, C.M. (2003). The Political Economy of Craft Production; Crafting Empire in South India, c. 1350-1650. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
26. Storm, M. (2014). An Unusual Group of Hero Stones: Commemorating Self-Sacrifice at Mallam, Andhra Pradesh,' in Ars Orientalis: The Arts of Death in Asia; 44: 61-84.
27. Thakur, P. (2018). A Study of relief Sculptures of Nidugal Region in Tumkur,

Karnataka.” in Proceedings of Indian Art History Congress, XXVI Session. Guwahati.

28. Thapar, R. (1981). Death and the Hero, in Mortality and Immortality: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death Humphreys, S.C. and King, H. (Eds.). London: Academic Press.

29. Vogel, J.P. (1931). The Head Offering to the Goddess in Pallava Sculpture,’ in Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies; 6 (2): 539-543.

30. Wilson, H.H. (1882). A Descriptive Catalogue of the Oriental Manuscripts, and other Articles Illustrative of the Literature, History, Statistics and Antiquities of the South of India Collected by the Late Lieut. Col. Colin Mackenzie. Calcutta: Higginbotham and Co. 2nd Edition.

A large, faint watermark of the journal's logo is centered on the page. It features the name 'Pratibha Spandan' in a cursive font, surrounded by the same concentric, overlapping rings seen in the top-left logo.