

## Gender-Based Violence in Ancient Karnataka

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### Abstract:

*Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Ancient Karnataka was shaped by the social, cultural, religious, and political structures of the period. Literary works, inscriptions, religious texts, and historical records reveal that women often faced discrimination, restrictions on personal freedom, forced marriages, domestic violence, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Practices such as child marriage, patriarchal control, and unequal inheritance rights contributed to various forms of gender-based violence. However, evidence also suggests that women in certain dynasties and communities enjoyed social status, educational opportunities, and participation in public life. The study examines the nature, causes, and manifestations of gender-based violence in ancient Karnataka and analyzes its impact on women's social position. It further explores the role of religion, law, and customary practices in shaping gender relations and highlights the historical roots of gender inequality in the region.*

**Keywords:** Gender-Based Violence, Ancient Karnataka, Women's Status, Patriarchy, Social History

### Introduction

Gender-based violence is a historical phenomenon that has affected women across different societies and periods. In ancient Karnataka, social norms, religious practices, and patriarchal structures significantly influenced the status and rights of women. Historical sources such as inscriptions, literary works, and religious texts reveal both the privileges

and restrictions experienced by women. While some women attained prominence in political, cultural, and religious spheres, many faced discrimination, social control, and various forms of violence. Gender-based violence was often manifested through unequal access to education, property, and decision-making power. Examining these issues helps us

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understand the socio-cultural foundations of gender inequality in ancient Karnataka. This study explores the nature, causes, and impact of gender-based violence and its implications for women's lives in the historical context of Karnataka.

### Objectives

1. To examine the status and position of women in ancient Karnataka society.
2. To identify the different forms of gender-based violence prevalent in ancient Karnataka.
3. To analyze the social, cultural, and religious factors contributing to gender-based violence.
4. To study the impact of patriarchal structures on women's rights, freedoms, and social participation.
5. To explore the historical roots of gender inequality through inscriptions, literary works, and other historical sources.

### Methodology

This study is based on both primary and secondary sources to examine the nature and manifestations of gender-based violence in ancient Karnataka. The primary sources include inscriptions from the Chalukya, Rashtrakuta, and Hoysala periods, which provide valuable information about the social, cultural, and legal status of women. Literary sources such as the works of Pampa, Ranna, Janna, Shivakotyacharya, and Nagachandra have also been utilized to

understand contemporary perceptions of gender relations and women's experiences.

The research adopts a multidisciplinary approach. Textual analysis is employed to identify references and representations of gender-based violence in literary and epigraphical sources. Historical contextualization is used to interpret these findings within the broader socio-political, economic, and cultural framework of ancient Karnataka. Comparative analysis facilitates an understanding of similarities and differences between Karnataka and other regions of South India regarding gender issues. In addition, feminist perspectives are applied to critically examine gender roles, power relations, and the structures that contributed to the marginalization and subordination of women in ancient society.

### Result, Discussion and findings

#### Epigraphical Evidence of GBV

##### 1. Savadaṭṭi Inscription (1228 CE)<sup>1</sup>

The Savadaṭṭi Inscription of 1228 CE provides a detailed account of the societal perception of women and their behavior, reflecting the patriarchal frameworks of the time. It lists a series of negative traits attributed to women, which were viewed as undesirable within the context of familial and social responsibilities. It says “ಮನೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಏನಿದ್ದರೂ ಇಲ್ಲೆಂದು ಹೇಳಿ ಹಣವನ್ನು ಬಳಸಿಕೊಳ್ಳುವ, ಮನೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಇದ್ದುದನ್ನು ಪತಿ ಮಕ್ಕಳಿಗೆ ಏನಿಯೋಗಿಸದೆ ಕಣ್ಣು ತಪ್ಪಿಸಿ ಮುಚ್ಚಿಡುವ, ಮನೆಗೆ

<sup>1</sup>South Indian Inscriptions (SII), Volume XX, Inscription No. 248: Rayabhaga (CE 1228).

ಅತಿಥಿಗಳು ಬಂದರೆ ಕಂಡೂ ಕಾಣದಂತೆ ಹೋಗಿ ಅಡಗುವ, ಒಂದು ವೇಳೆ ಅವರು ಎದುರಾದರೆ ನೀವಾರೆಂದು ಕೇಳುವ, ಪರಪುರುಷರನ್ನು ಮನ್ನಿಸಿ ಕಪಟ ನಡತೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ತೊಡಗುವ, ಅಸವನೆಗೆ, ಅಂಗಳಕ್ಕೆ ಬಾಡಿನ ಸನ್ನೆಗೆ ಬಾಯಿನಕ್ಕೆ ಹೋ ಪರಪುರುಷರೊಂದಿಗೆ ಬೆರೆಯುವ, ವಾಚಾಳಿಯರಾಗಿ ದುಶ್ಚರಿತದಿಂದ ಪತಿಯನ್ನು ನಿಂದಿಸುವ, ಪತಿಯನ್ನು ವಶಪಡಿಸಿಕೊಳ್ಳಲು ಹತ್ತಾರು ಔಷಧಿಗಳನ್ನು ಪ್ರಯೋಗಿಸುವ, ಅವರು ಪುರುಷಕ್ಕೆಯ, ಕಾಮಳೆ, ಪಾಂಡುಗುಲ್ಮದಿಂದ ಬಳಲುವಂತೆ ಮಾಡುವ, ಕುಟಿಲೆ, ಕುರೂಪಿ, ಕುಭಾಗ್ಯ ಕುಶೀಳ, ಜಿಹ್ವಾಲಂಪಟೆ, ಧೂರ್ತೆ, ದುರ್ಗುಣಿ, ದುರ್ಜನೆ, ದುಷ್ಟೆ, ಕಷ್ಟೆ ಎಂಬ ಅಟಮಟಕಾರ್ತಿಯರು”<sup>2</sup>

Which means Misusing household resources by concealing their availability. Hiding or hoarding assets without allocating them to husbands or children. Avoiding interaction with guests by pretending not to notice their presence. Engaging in deceitful behaviour with other men or maintaining duplicitous relationships. Being overly talkative and using harsh words to criticize or insult their husbands. Experimenting with various methods or substances to exert control over their husbands. Maligning their husbands by causing illness or manipulating them emotionally.

The inscription further lists derogatory labels such as crooked, deceptive, immoral, unfaithful, and corrupt, which were used to stigmatize women who deviated from prescribed roles. This inscription not only reflects the patriarchal

attitudes of medieval Karnataka but also highlights how gender-based control was systematically reinforced through social and moral codes. It serves as a historical document revealing the deeply entrenched gender biases and the societal mechanisms used to enforce them. According to the inscription, traits deemed undesirable in ordinary women are asserted to be absent in queens, representing the ruling class.

This characterization implicitly constructs an idealized framework of femininity for women in power, contrasting it with the perceived deficiencies of common women. Such delineation not only reinforces patriarchal norms but also legitimizes the imposition of restrictive societal frameworks on women, often serving as a justification for systemic gender-based violence.

## 2. Peṇbuuyyal Vīragallu (Hero Stones for Women's Honor)<sup>3</sup>

The Peṇbuuyyal Vīragallu represents a unique aspect of Karnataka's historical inscriptions, reflecting the social dynamics and moral values of the time. The term Peṇbuuyyal signifies "a woman's cry for help," often arising during invasions when attackers sought to violate women as an act of war, symbolically stripping them of dignity by seizing their garments or committing acts of sexual violence. In response to such atrocities, village heroes would rise to protect and liberate the women, often sacrificing their

<sup>2</sup> Pavate Chennakk. *Karnāṭaka Shāsanokta Mahile*, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Ravindranath, K. *Kannada Dhākalu Sāhitya*, p. 44.

lives in the process. These acts of valor and resistance were commemorated through *vīragallu* (hero stones), which stand as enduring monuments to the defense of women's honor.

Inscriptions on these hero stones, such as the phrase “*Peṇḍiraudeyurcuvali*” (“dishonoring women”), vividly document attempts by enemies to disgrace women and the heroic efforts to thwart such acts. These records not only underscore the importance of women's honor in medieval society but also reveal the community’s collective resistance against gender-based violence during times of crisis.

### 3. Mahāsatikallu (Sati Stones)<sup>4</sup>

The Mahāsatikallu or Māstikallu refers to memorial stones commemorating women who performed sati—the act of entering the funeral pyre with their deceased husband. This practice, known as *Satihōguvudu* in Kannada, is believed to have originated from the ancient notion that a deceased individual should be buried or cremated along with their cherished possessions, as suggested by Dr. M.M. Kalburgi. He identifies three practical reasons<sup>5</sup> for the evolution of this custom

Preservation of Male Prestige (*PuruṣaṇaPratiṣṭe*): The idea that a widow, if left alive, might be forcibly claimed by others led to the imposition of sati as a

means to protect the deceased husband's honor. Uncertainty of a Widow's Security: The societal challenges and threats to a widow's chastity and livelihood might have prompted women themselves to accept this practice as a means of maintaining their dignity. Exploitation by the Elite: Ruling classes or priests may have institutionalized this custom to seize the widow's property after her death.

The Māsti tradition can be categorized into two types:<sup>6</sup>

1. Sahagamana: The widow immolates herself on the funeral pyre alongside her husband's body.
2. Anugamana: If the husband died far from home, the widow symbolically held a cherished possession of his while entering the pyre.

These practices reflect the deeply patriarchal structures and societal pressures faced by women, as well as the manipulation of rituals for material or ideological control by dominant groups. Sahagaman and Anugaman refer to practices tied to battlefield valor and sacrificial loyalty. If a warrior died heroically in battle, he was believed to attain *Veera Swarga* (the celestial abode of heroes). In this context, if his wife chose to perform Sahagaman—the act of self-immolation or following her husband into death—it was believed she would join him in the afterlife and live blissfully with him in heaven. In Karnataka, numerous

<sup>4</sup> Bhagavati, S.S., and Melinamani, H.S. *Kannada Shasanagala Adhyayan*, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Ravindranath, K. *Kannada Dhākalu Sāhitya*, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Bhagavati, S.S., and Melinamani, H.S. *Kannada Shasanagala Adhyayan*, p. 134.

inscriptions provide insights into the practice of Mahāsati (self-immolation by widows) and its variations, reflecting its prevalence in the region. Among these:

1. The Kavadi inscription from the 6th century CE is one of the earliest records detailing the practice of Mahāsati.
2. The Kogali inscription from 10th century CE documents the Sāgamaṇa (sahagamana) of a woman named Bellakka, who entered her husband's funeral pyre.
3. The Balatūr Dēkhhbhaya inscription from 11th century CE records an instance of the Anugamana tradition, where a widow performed self-immolation holding a cherished object of her deceased husband.

These inscriptions, along with hundreds of similar Mahāsati records found across Karnataka, serve as crucial historical evidence of this ritual's widespread nature. They also reflect the deeply entrenched patriarchal values and social expectations placed on women, portraying sati as an act of ultimate loyalty and virtue. At the same time, these inscriptions invite critical examination of the societal structures that perpetuated such practices

#### 4. Devadasi System<sup>7</sup>

Ancient temples served as social institutions and were structured systems designed for governance. These temples

<sup>7</sup> Pavate Chennakk. *Karnātaka Shāsanokta Mahile*, p. 93.

involved various roles, including priests (pūjāris), caretakers (parekāras), dēsigas, hereditary members (vamśigas), drummers (maddalekāras), astrologers (jyotiṣyas), scholars (śāstrajñas), floral arrangers (paḷavigas), garland makers (mālekāras), potters (kumbāras), lime workers (sunnavesadavas), dancers (naṭuvas), garden caretakers (nandavanadātas), and courtesans (sūḷes). Here, the term sūḷe specifically referred to the devadasis. In ancient times, individuals associated with temple courtesans were identified as pātradavaru (devadasis). During the Chalukya and Hoysala periods, these pātradavaru gained prominence. For instance, in the Badami Chalukya period, the royal courtesans held an esteemed position, which transitioned into the pātradavaru associated with temples during the Hoysala era. Notable examples from the Hoysala period include Māḷavva, the pātradavaru of Hoysalēśvara temple's elephant; Nāgavva, Candavva, Būcaneya Makkalu of Hoysalēśvara's pillar; and Vissave, among others.

Under the guise of religion, the ruling elite exploited lower-class women by institutionalizing them as devadasis—sexual subordinates in the name of the divine. This practice served as a tool for perpetuating systemic violence and oppression against women.

#### Literary Depictions of GBV

##### 1. Kannada Epics

The Mahabharata and Ramayana are narratives deeply ingrained in every part

of India, including ancient Karnataka, where they served as the thematic foundation for the creation of great epics. In Kannada literature, prominent female characters such as Draupadi, Sita, and Surpanakha are often portrayed. These women, despite their distinct narratives, confront and resist various forms of gender-based violence (GBV) within their respective stories, highlighting enduring struggles against patriarchal oppression.

In the Mahabharata, Draupadi's narrative is marked by systemic gendered oppression. She is objectified and staked as a wager in the dice game, stripped of agency and dignity. Without her consent, she is compelled to share her life with five husbands, challenging her autonomy. During the period of Ajñātavāsa (incognito exile), she faces harassment and assault by Kichaka, further underscoring the persistent violence and injustice she endures. These incidents highlight the deep-seated patriarchal structures within the epic.

Sita, in the Ramayana, follows her husband, Rama, into the forest, enduring numerous hardships. She is abducted by Ravana and subjected to immense suffering during her captivity. Upon her return, after proving her chastity through the trial by fire (Agni Pariksha), she is still rejected and asked to leave by Rama, despite her divine purity and pregnancy. This act further highlights the societal and patriarchal pressures that force her to undergo abandonment, even after enduring significant trials. Surpanakha,

the sister of Ravana, desires to marry the man she loves. However, when she expresses her affection towards Rama and Lakshmana, they reject her. In response, her attempt to attack Sita leads to her mutilation, with her nose and ears being cut off by Lakshmana. This act of violence against Surpanakha emphasizes the harsh consequences faced by women who challenge societal norms or act outside prescribed gender roles.

## 2. Shivakotyacharya's *Vaddārādhane*<sup>8</sup>

*Vaddārādhane*, a 10th-century Kannada Jain work by Shivakotiacharya, is a collection of stories that reflect the socio-cultural ethos of the time. In the sub-narrative of Kārthika Rishi, we encounter the episode of Agni Raja, who, driven by his desire to possess the finest things in his kingdom, declares his own daughter, Kruti, as the most beautiful maiden. This leads to the disturbing instance where he marries her and seeks to have progeny with her. This episode highlights complex intersections of power, patriarchy, and moral transgressions depicted in ancient literary traditions.

## 3. Janna's *Yaśodhara Charite*<sup>9</sup>

In the 12th century, poet Janna, in his work *YaśodharaCharite*, narrates the story of Queen Amṛtamati, who becomes infatuated with her mahout, Aṣṭāvaṅka. She secretly meets him at night, avoiding

<sup>8</sup> Narasimhachar, D.L. (Ed.). *Shivakotyacharya Virachita Vaddaradhane*.

<sup>9</sup> Tekkunje Gopalkrishna (Ed.). *Jannakavi Virachita Yashodhara Charite*.

the king's attention. However, on one occasion, when she arrives late, Aṣṭāvaṅka rebukes and physically assaults her. This episode highlights the themes of forbidden desire, power imbalance, and violence, reflecting the nuanced social dynamics depicted in medieval Kannada literature.

#### Intersection of Caste, Class, and Gender

In Karnataka, gender-based violence (GBV) has manifested in varying forms across different social strata, often shaped by class and caste dynamics. The upper and ruling classes—namely Brahmins, Vaishyas, and Kshatriyas—exerted systemic control over the lower classes, including Shudras and the general populace, often perpetuating GBV as a tool of domination. Historical evidence suggests that GBV was more pronounced against women from lower castes and marginalized communities, reflecting the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Within the upper classes, GBV often took the form of patriarchal dominance by men over women within the same social group. However, exceptions to these patterns, such as Janna's portrayal of Amṛtamati and Aṣṭāvaṅka in Yaśodhara Charite, serve as significant reflections of society's underlying nature. This narrative highlights the complexities of human relationships and challenges the rigid frameworks of caste- and gender-based power dynamics, offering a nuanced view of societal behavior in medieval Karnataka.

#### Outcomes of the Study

1. The study reveals that gender-based violence in ancient Karnataka was deeply rooted in patriarchal social structures and cultural norms.
2. Historical sources such as inscriptions and literary works demonstrate that women were often subjected to social control, discrimination, and various forms of physical, psychological, and symbolic violence.
3. The research highlights practices such as sati, the devadasi system, and restrictions on women's autonomy as significant manifestations of gender-based violence.
4. The study shows that caste, class, and gender intersected to intensify the vulnerability of women, particularly those belonging to marginalized communities.
5. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the historical origins of gender inequality and provide valuable insights for contemporary discussions on women's rights and gender justice.

#### Conclusion

The study of gender-based violence in ancient Karnataka reveals that women's lives were significantly shaped by patriarchal social, religious, and cultural structures. Evidence from inscriptions, literary works, and historical records demonstrates that women were often subjected to various forms of

discrimination, social control, and violence. Practices such as sati, the devadasi system, and restrictions on women's autonomy reflect the unequal power relations that prevailed in society. Literary narratives further illustrate how women experienced oppression, humiliation, and limitations on their personal freedom. At the same time, these sources provide valuable insights into the resilience and agency of women within a restrictive social order. The intersection of caste, class, and gender further intensified the vulnerability of marginalized women. Overall, the findings highlight that gender-based violence was not merely an individual phenomenon but a systemic issue embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of ancient Karnataka. Understanding these historical realities contributes to a deeper appreciation of the roots of gender inequality and underscores the continuing importance of promoting gender justice and women's rights in contemporary society.

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