

First Inscribed Sati Stone of Odisha

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Abstract:

Sati stones execute an essential component in the Memorial stone traditions. The Sati system was a social custom that originated in the Vedic era and persisted throughout the Middle Ages. Sati stones were erected in observance of this Sati practice. Furthermore, they represented the self-immolation of women who sacrificed their lives to protect their honor, dignity, and purity. Besides, the Sati stones are both monuments and manifestations of the social and cultural customs of the time. These memorials offer insight about the social, political, and religious structures of the era and are often inscribed in Sanskrit or other regional languages. The present paper deals with an existing inscribed Sati stone discovered from Odisha, that has been deciphered first time. The finding and study of an inscribed Sati stone in Odisha for the first time is crucial for comprehending the religious beliefs, societal roles for women, and historical context of that period.

Keywords: Odisha, Diaton, Sati stone, Memorial stone, Self-immolation, Tradition.

Introduction:

Memorial stones persist as artifacts with immense socio-cultural importance that serve as evocative symbols of our collective past and anchored stories, memories, and feelings into the very fabric of our civilizations. They shed light on the values, beliefs, and customs of diverse cultures throughout history. The earliest representations of memorial stones for the deceased were found in southern India, and detailed information about the construction of memorial stones (*Menhir* or *Nadukals*) during megalithic culture can be found in Sangam literature such as *Tolkapiyyam*¹ and others. The construction of a commemorative sepulchral mound (*Tumulus*) over the skeletal remains or relics is described in the Vedic literature *Sthapatha Brahmana*². These megalithic cults (*Menhir*) evolved into the *Veerakals*/Hero stones tradition in the fourth century CE³. Hero stones were built even for fallen soldiers during this time, and the practice of Sati stones also developed contemporaneously. The present paper deals with the inscribed Sati stone of Diaton village of the Balangir district of Odisha.

Literature Review:

According to a brief review of the literature, Odisha is considered to be terra incognita in the study of memorial stone tradition. So far as the study of memorial stones (*Sati* and *Hero*) tradition of Odisha is concerned, no such major research is conducted to assess the significance of this culture. Even we found a little information regarding the inscribed memorial stones of Odisha. The earliest researchers to examine the inscriptions on Odisha's memorial stones were Dr. S.N. Rajguru and Dr. S. Tripathy⁴. They analyzed the Chandramatapur village's inscribed hero stone in the Khordha district's Kanasa block. Even both the eminent epigraphists deciphered the two inscribed hero stones of Junagarh, Kalahandi district, and Dumerbahal, Nuapada district, respectively⁵. A similar sincere attempt was undertaken by Dr. S. Acharya⁶ to examine the Sisupalgarh Hero Stone, which is currently on display at Ravenshaw University in Cuttack. Further, Dr. U. Mishra and Dr. S. Acharya deciphered the inscribed hero stones of the Viraja temple and Natuabara in Jajpur district⁷. Recently Mr. R.K. Rate and Mr. B. M. Adhikari (2024) deciphered an inscribed hero stone of Junagarh, Kalahandi district⁸. The aforementioned literature review revealed that the study on the *Sati* stones tradition is primarily neglected and that no such significant work is being done. Furthermore, the absence of inscribed *Sati* stones in Odisha makes it impossible to assess the historicity of this sculptural tradition

Methodology:

This study uses a qualitative research approach, relying on primary sources such as field surveys conducted in the Balangir district's Titlagarh and Patnagarh regions. The authors additionally collected information from books, district gazetteers, reviewed journals, and other publications for secondary sources. An analytical assessment of discourse is applied to study the Odisha Sati stone tradition and its impact on the Indian Memorial stones tradition.

Sati Stones Culture and its Origin:

Sati stones are memorial stones raised in honor of a woman who, following the death of her husband, invited her own death by self-immolation⁹. The Sati stones are categorized as either *Sahagamana* or *Anugamana*¹⁰ depending on whether the woman sacrificed her life with or without her husband's body. The entire silhouette of the woman who performed Sati typically shows her husband on her side, holding up his hand in *Anjalimudra*. Only a few Sati stones have the right adorned arm of the Sati etched in *Abhayamudra*, which represents blessings for everyone and ascends toward heaven.

The Vedic literature, Rigveda and Atharvaveda¹¹, contain the earliest known transcriptions of the Sati system, which suggest that the self-immolation of women after the death of their husbands is a socio-religious practice among the Aryans. The practice of the Sati system during the Epic era was further highlighted by Madri's self-immolation after Pandu's death and the self-immolation of Rukmani, Satyabhama, Jambavati, and others after Lord Krishna's death in the Mahabharata¹². The narrative from the Mahabharata also shows that the Yadava people who settled in Western India were practicing the Sati system.

In the Indian subcontinent, the northwestern boundary provides the earliest reliable documented evidence of the Sati system. During the Battle of Paraitakene in 317 CE, the Hindu general Keteus, who was under the Greek Satrap Eumenes, lost his life in combat against the Greek King Antigonos-I. Upon hearing of her husband's death, the younger wife committed to Sati. The first wife was not permitted to do this since she was pregnant¹³. In general, contemporary scholars consider that this event is an exception rather than a true representation of society. The Eran memorial pillar inscription¹⁴ from 510 CE revealed the first epigraphical evidence of Sati. This pillar was built in honor of Goparaja, the feudatory chief of Gupta ruler Bhanugupta, whose wife performed Sati upon her husband's death. The memorial inscription of Sangsi¹⁵, located in the Kolhapur district of Maharashtra, is considered to be among the earliest depictions of the Sati system.

Study Area:

Diaton lies at 20° 13' 01.0" N and 83° 02' 53.7" E, on the left bank of river Sundar¹⁶ in the Titlagarh block of Balangir district, Odisha, India. A brief evaluation of the literature indicates that the Sundar River Valley persists as terra-incognita. J.D. Beglar¹⁷ was the principal investigator of these areas and provided a detailed description of the archaeological remains at Titlagarh, Kumda, Ranipur-Jharial, Kansil, Ghodar, Sihini, Udeypur, Sindhekela, Chandotra, and other places. From pre-historic time to historic period Sundar river valley was the cradle of many civilizations and dynasties. Even the confluence region of river Sundar and Tel was the part of *Taitalika Janapada* (5th or 4th century C.E.) which was mentioned by Panini in his *Astadhayi*¹⁸. During the southern campaign of Samudragupta¹⁹, Sundar valley was the part of *Mahaantara* kingdom which was ruled by one *Vyaghraraja*. And from cultural point of view Gupta invasion was fruitful than political because the heritage of sculpture and temple art blossomed in this area after this time. One of the most prominent sculptural art traditions in the Sundar valley was military art, which is also represented by the memorial stones (Sati/Hero) tradition. In the Sundar River Valley, a total of 28 memorial stones were discovered; 18 of these are Sati stones. Along with an inscribed Sati stones, the authors discovered seven sati stones and other sculptures like- Ganesha and Kartikeya from the old Mahadev temple of Diaton.

The inscribed *Sahagaman*²⁰ Sati stone (Fig. 1 a, b) was discovered by the author Mr. Raj Kumar Rate on 3rd June 2023 and deciphered by the co-author and member of the Epigraphical Society of India Mr. Bishnu Mohan Adhikari on 8th November 2024²¹. It is a rectangular stone slab measuring 4.2 feet in height, 1.3 feet in width, and 5/6 inch in thickness. The upper panel depicts an upright female palm with bangles in *Abhayamudra*, while the symbol of the sun and crescent moon is engraved beneath the female palm. The middle section shows two human figures, a male and a female, worshipping a unique object that does not resemble a Shivalinga; it could be a *Khamba* or *Stambha*. At the lower portion, a three-line inscription is visible. Epigraphist cum co-author Bishnu Mohan Adhikari studied the inscribed Sati stones, and he reads the inscription as follows:

Line 1: *Kāñughalā devi*

Line 2: *Drate kka dyohna*

Line 3: *Pradāhya * mānah*



Fig. 1(a, b) Inscribed Sati stone

According to Mr. Adhikari, there are numerous lines engraved on the Sati stone, but only three of them are partially noticeable and readable. It is written in Eastern *Nāgari* characters of the 9th-11th century CE used in *the Dakshina Kosala* region of present-day Odisha. The undated Sanskrit inscription records the self-immolation of a lady named *Kānyugahlā Devi* by performing Sati rites. The first line of the inscription engraved the name of a woman as *Kānyugahlā Devi*. Where in the 2nd line we found the ritualistic practices of *Vrata* (rites) written as *Drate* may be its look like an engraving error. The third verse refers to the woman Kangulya Devi's self-immolation as *Pradahya manah*. Even the local peoples worshipped this Sati pillar as *Thakurani Devi*. The Sanskrit verse of the inscription is clearly noticeable in the second and third line, which is quite similar to early Somavamsi inscriptions of contemporary Odisha.

Observations and Discussions:

The Memorial stones of Odisha are extremely elaborate, with a variety of modest artistic expressions carved into the stone that depict both religious and secular activities in connection with the area's enormous military importance. Pertaining to Odisha's memorial stone culture, researchers have discovered several inscribed Hero stones; though, Beglar, in his report, mentions two inscribed Sati pillars of Patnagarh, Balangir district²². However, we were unable to find any engraved Sati pillars during our field survey on 10th November 2024 in the Patnagarh region. Even the locals of Patnagarh were unable to give us any proper information regarding the aforementioned Sati stones; this shows that the Sati pillar mentioned by Beglar has not existed for the past 50 years. Consequently, we may claim that the Sati stone of Diaton is the first inscribed existing Sati stone of Odisha that has been deciphered.

The finding of this inscribed Sati stone ushered in the beginning of a new era in Odisha's memorial stone history. The connection between tribal culture and Brahmanical heritage is evident even in this sculpture's iconography. In the lower or middle section of Sati stones, we typically see human figures (a male and a female) worshipping a Shivaling. However, in Diaton, we found that the human figures are paying homage to a strange object that does not resemble a Shivalinga but rather a *Stambha* or *Khmaba*, because its upper part is in oval shape, and this kind of wooden pillar is worshipped by the tribal people of southwest Odisha, especially by the Kandha tribe as *Nishan*²³ or *Dharni Khutta*, and the Titlagarh belt of Balangir is highly populated by the Kandha tribe. Even the Khambeswari or Stambheswari cult is very much widespread in western Odisha since the 5th/6th century CE²⁴. One of the Sati stones of Diaton is worshipped as the goddess *Chandi*, revealing how the memorial stone tradition eventually lost its inherent roots as it integrated with the Brahmanic cults through folk worship.

The other iconographical features carved in all the Sati stones of Diaton, along with the inscribed Sati sculpture, are the symbol of the sun and crescent moon, an upright female palm with bangles in *Abhayamudra*. The raised arm of the Sati facing forward in *Abhayamudra* and the bangles adorning the hand represent blessings to everyone as well as protection, bravery, altruism, and peace²⁵. Moreover, the bangles represent marital status, and the ceremonial act of a wife breaking her bangles signifies her transition into widowhood. The bangles remained on the hand to serve as evidence of the keeping of her wifely status, displaying that she has denied being estranged from her husband. The representation of the orb of the sun and crescent moon illustrates that the Sati's name and fame will endure as long as the sun and moon have existed²⁶.

The hypothesis put forth by the epigraphical study is that the Sati stones might be from the Somavamsi period. Since the Eastern *Nagari* characters engraved on Diaton's Sati stone are

often found in Somavamsi inscriptions. Even also from various epigraphic sources (Lodhia Copper plate of Mahasiva Balarjuna²⁷ and Patna copper plate charter of Yayati I²⁸), we came to know that Tel-Sundar river valley area (present day Balangir-Kalahandi) was the part Somavamsi rule during the 9th to 10th centuries CE.

Conclusion:

Women are explicitly included in the discussion of heroism, especially when it pertains to Sati or self-immolation of women. The notion that the women who committed sati are etched in stone endures beyond the course of time in which she lived and is evidence of her eternal legacy. The saga of Odia women's heroism is revealed by the discovery of the inscribed Sati stone of Diaton. Still the narrative of valor of Odia women could not be expressed due to the non-availability of inscribed Sati stones. The discovery of an inscribed Sati stone for the first time in Odisha has led to a fresh approach to the study of Odisha's memorial stone tradition. Women's worshipping a *Stamba/Khama*-like object is unique among the Sati stones found throughout Odisha, executing the inscribed stone of Diaton, a distinctive artifact in the state's historical context. Furthermore, in addition to being a historical record, the inscribed sati stone is an artistic representation of martial customs and social beliefs of the Sundar River Valley as well as early medieval Odisha. The epigraphical study of this memorial sculpture not only reveals the inscriptional reference practice of Sati in Odisha but also exhibits the development of Nagari script and the simplification of the vast iconographical tradition. It also displays a minor artistic endeavor, an assessment of gender equality, a commemoration of a heroic past, and an interesting category of regional forms of Sati stone tradition.

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