



Women, Society & Politics- Attributes of Medieval South Indian Womanhood - an Account of Hoysala Queen Umadevi

*¹Vidya H.N

¹ Associate Professor in History Government Arts College Hassan, India

Note: * Indicates corresponding author

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*Corresponding Author

Email: vidyasridha@gmail.com

(H.N Vidya)

ABSTRACT

The position of women in Medieval Indian society specially during Hoysala period was extraordinary. They were performing political, social, cultural religious and monetary activities through modesty & intelligence. Their responsive attitude was considered the highest among their elegant livelihood. They are always compared to Mythological heroines in their virtuous propensity. Women enjoyed freedom of movement and expression and were accorded a position of high dignity and respect in the family and society. This paper probes in detail about Hoysala queen Umadevi who was manifestation of traits of valor, courage, talent & scholastic temperament. This paper tries to bring out the various facets of her personality & attributes her disposition to the prevailing political scenario.

1. Introduction

Ballala II was an important Hoysala king who ruled South India for almost fifty years. His victories over Kongalvas and Chengalvas and his conquering of the fort of Uchangidurga in 1177 A. D. are worthy victories. His itinerant battles with the 'Sevunas' or yadavas of the Devagiri region were settled conclusively in a battle of Soraturu¹, (1190A.D.). Bhillama, the Sevuna king had to shift his capital to Lakkigundi². Ballala was ruling over many regions of North Karnataka such as Hanagallu, Belavola, Puligere, Halasi, Nalambavadi, Kelavadi, Bagadagi (Bagalakote) etc. his victories in Tamil regions and his diplomatic handling of the squabbles between the Cholas and Pandyas got him a lot of wealth and reputation.

Hoysala king Ballala II had many wives among them Gujjadevi Umadevi & Mahadevi were important. Queen Gujjaladevi is described as Bhagyavathi, Roopavathi, Gunavathi, Yogavathi, Bhogavathi, Yaashiavathi, Prabhavathi & Prjnavathi³ An inscription describes queen Umadevi as ruling from Dorasamudra⁴. This means Ballala II was away in the Battle of Soraturu She has been described as Piriya arasi or elder queen & Pattamahadevi meaning Chief queen⁵. The valor of Umadevi is known from several inscriptions. Inscriptions from Arasikere & Kanikatte describe her in glorious terms⁶.

¹ At present a village near Gadag in north Karnataka

² Sevunas were once the feudatories of the Rashtrakutas and then of the Western Chalukyas

³ Epigraphia Carnatica (EC) Vol. X Arasikere Ak 242

⁴ This inscription belongs to Ballala II & is dated 1190 AD

⁵ Epigraphia Carnatica EC Vol. X Arasikere Ak. 36

Queen Umadevi belonged to a royal family. She was the daughter of Keshavaiah who was the Rajyadhyaksha Heggade⁷ under King Ballala II. He was in charge both internal & external of administration. He was an important officer Under King Ballala.

Queen Umadevi imbibed many of the characters of her father as she developed interest in administration after she married King Ballala. She overviewed the political situation as she learnt about the threats from the other neighboring chiefs⁸. She was harsh against the Sindas of Belagutti, a neighboring kingdom & kept their chiefs under check. She could anticipate the political danger from the Sinda chiefs & she prevented their expansion. Unable to tolerate the humiliation of being subordinate to queen Umadevi the Sinda chief Ishwaradeva III transferred his allegiance to Sevuna Chief Singhana⁹. This was an important development in the Hoysala Sevuna political relationship.

The Hoysala kingdom was divided into several provinces called popularly as *Nadu* and *Vishayas*. Further division of province was called as *Kampanas* and *Deshas*. Under the caretaker commander were minister (*Mahapradhana*), treasurer (*Bhandari*), clerk (*Senabova*) and junior officers (*Heggades*). Queen Umadevi had her own officers as evidenced by an inscription¹⁰. When she was supervising the administration of Magara-300 province, she was assisted by Kumara Pandithayya who was her Mahapradhana¹¹.

Queen Umadevi was not only an administrator she was also a donor. A record refers to grants given by her to Neeleshwara temple of Kanikatte. She helped consecration of deities with three Matras of Gadde beddale for the service of Angarangabhoga meaning devotional decoration of temple deities¹².

There are numerous rationales behind effervescence flowering of women as embassies of cultural efflorescence during this period. Medieval south India reflected socio religious features contrasting to Northern India¹³. Hoysala period saw an efflorescence of socio-cultural activities. The period saw a great number of cultural centers coming up. The Hoysala Kings contributed immensely to building educational centers, Temples, Mantapas etc. The whole administrative machinery was involved in these socio-cultural activities. The very

⁷ Chief officer

⁸ Feudatory families such as [Alupas](#), Santharas, Chengalvas, Kongalvas, Sindas were allowed to continue to govern their respective territories

⁹ Singhana II 1200–1247 C.E. is considered the greatest ruler of the Sevuna Yadava dynasty. During his rule the kingdom expanded from [Narmada](#) to [Tungabhadra](#), reaching its zenith at the expense of [Hoysalas](#) in the south, [Kakatiya dynasty](#) in the east, [Paramaras](#) and [Chalukyas](#) in the north Epigraphia Carnatica EC Vol. X Arasikere Ak. 72

¹⁰ Epigraphia Carnatica EC Vol. X Arasikere Ak.72

¹¹ Epigraphia Carnatica EC Vol. X Arasikere Ak.72

¹² Epigraphia Carnatica EC Vol. X Arasikere Ak 86

According to B.P. Mazumbar, Northern India did not have any women administrators of provinces or kingdoms during this period. In contrast, Karnataka had women who administered villages, towns, divisions and heralded social and religious institutions

manifestation of Socio cultural life was made more vibrant by the women of this period because men were busy in political issues & warfare ¹⁴. Royal women & household women became conscious of the traditional & contributed opulently to the socio religious & cultural life ¹⁵.

This was a period when the north of India was suffering the destruction of temples and all the sculptors and temple artisans were out of work. They faced a choice of either working for the Islamic conquerors or migrating to the south where there was still royal patronage for temple construction¹⁶. These migrating sculptors and artisans found work in the Hoysala kingdom in Karnataka. They brought with them the north Indian style of temple architecture and blended it with the prevailing architecture of southern India. The prolific temple construction was not entirely for religious reasons. Temples acted as local courts or as surrogate courts, especially when built from royal endowments. They were seen as palaces and the rituals marking the daily routine of the deity imitated those of the king. Some temples also received local patronage from rich landlords. Temples built from royal patronage took on an aura of a leading ceremonial center.

Besides trade on the west coast brought many foreigners to India including Arabs, Jews, Persians, Chinese and people from the Malay Peninsula. Migration of people within Southern India as a result of the expansion of the empire produced an influx of new cultures and skills. there was a dire need to defend the traditional social norm & preserve the customary standard high.

Hoysala queens of this period assisted their husbands in internal administration as well as military expeditions. We have several epigraphic instances to prove their potency & courage¹⁷. There are references to several women like Piriya¹⁸ Ketaladevi, ruled three villages. A lady by name Lakkadevi was acting as a village headman¹⁹. Another lady Jakkiabbe ably administered seventy villages after premature death of her husband. Mailalladevi, a senior queen of Hoysala king Someshwara-I ruled the vital province of Banavasi comprising 12,000 villages. The historical sources of the period are abundantly filled with stories of accomplished women of the time²⁰. Shantaladevi, the Hoysala queen was an expert in singing, dancing and instrumental music. shows her in a graceful dancing pose. She also held durbar with her illustrious husband Vishnuvardhana. shows a rare carving where a woman is shown writing. Several women acted as temple trustees, priestesses, philanthropists, musicians, artists and scholars.

2. Conclusion

Thus queen Umadevi personified several virtues of womanhood. She portrayed all virtues of womanhood. Her lofty & inherent ideal of womanhood and feminine virtues were reflected in the epigraphs of this region. She is referred to as peerless on earth. Her role required her certain prescribed behavior and rights and responsibilities in

¹⁴ Dr. Suryanath U. Kamath (2001). A Concise History of Karnataka from pre-historic times to the present, Jupiter books, MCC, Bangalore (Reprinted 2002),

¹⁵ Bose Mandakranta- Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India Center for India and South Asia Research Director, and Lecturer in Religious Studies University of British Columbia Oxford university press London 2012

¹⁶ . Derret D.M . The Hoysalas', 1957, Oxford University Press, Madras

¹⁷ Nilakanta Sastri, K.A. (1955). A History of South India, From Prehistoric times to fall of Vijayanagar, OUP, New Delhi (Reprinted 2002), -- introduction 1-22

¹⁸ meaning elder queen

¹⁹ According to an inscription of 1148 A.D ¹⁹ Dr. Suryanath U. Kamath (2001) op cit pp 1-12

²⁰ Gupta Amit Kumar -Women and Society: The Developmental Perspective Criterion Publications, 1986