

## FEATURE ARTICLE

# 1

## Marginalised Women in the Life of Aśoka

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### Abstract

This is an attempt to understand how women were marginalised in ancient India, based on the life of King Asoka. The wives and mothers, the consorts, and the women in the harems and as servants were marginalised and less equal to the men in this society. We do not have the names of most of these women. We also hear of rich businessmen and high-caste fathers and how they allow their young daughters to “cohabit” with a young “prince,” who is allowed to abandon the young unnamed woman with two children and be “gifted” to the harem. The society and the women themselves would have accepted the situation in silence. If Ashoka’s claim to have shown respect and followed the teachings of the Buddha is true (he has never claimed to be a “Buddhist”), how could he abandon his first wife or consort and two children and also maintain a harem? This is a question that remains unanswerable.

King Aśoka’s consorts are mentioned in many historical and religious writings over the past two millennia, which has also enriched South Asian literature. However, if there had been any such historical characters, it is debatable because the historical Aoka has not yet been established. Dr. Ananda W. P. Guruge published *Asoka the Righteous: A Definitive Biography*, commissioned by the Sri Lanka Government, in 1993. Guruge quotes Robert Lingat: “In reality there exist two Aśokas: the historical Aśoka whom we know from his inscriptions, and the legendary Aśoka who is known to us through texts of

different origins, including Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan. To make history from legend is always blemished by arbitrariness and subjectivity.”

“So far as annals, king lists, chronicles, dates of important battles, biographies of rulers and cultural figures go, there is no Indian history worth reading. Any work where the casual reader may find such detailed personal or episodic history for ancient India should be enjoyed as romantic fiction (like some Indian railway time-tables!), but not believed.” (Kosambi. 1965. P 22).

Today we hear of seven Aśokas.

- i. from the inscriptions,
- ii. from the Sri Lanka Pali chronicles,
- iii. from the Sanskrit northern literature,
- iv. Taranata’s History of Buddhism in India,
- v. the real historical Aśoka, who may have been a totally different person, a truly humane ruler, or just another Indian Raja who had diverted his megalomania in a different direction.
- vi. The popular Aśoka, created by the commercial media.
- vii. The politicized Aśoka in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It has become a near-impossible task to see and identify the real Aśoka, through all the legends built around him and the misinterpretation of his inscriptions. Just as we do not know really anything about historical characters named Chandragupta, Aśoka and the Mayura dynasty, we do not know anything about their mothers, wives, or daughters. All that we know from early Greek writings, the Sri Lankan Pali chronicles, and later Sanskrit literature is as creative as the much later *Mudrarakshasa*, which raises strong doubts about the so-called wives, consorts, or queens of Aśoka. Even if Aśoka had been a ruler in the Indian subcontinent and his grandfather was Chandragupta, we do not know who his grandmothers were, either paternal or maternal, or if Aśoka knew them. We do not know about his relationship with his mother, or if he received his mother’s care and love, or if he was one more child in the palace, among many offspring of Bindusara. If he had 100 brothers and probably a similar number of sisters, he would have grown up

among all the women in his father's harem and with so many young girls, many of them probably his half-sisters. We have so many confusing and contradictory stories about Aśoka's consorts. About Aśoka's daughters, we only hear of Sanghamitta.

The so-called Maurya dynasty is believed to have been founded by a king named Chandragupta. We do not have any information about Chandragupta's birth. Romila Thapar considers him to be a *Vaisya*. His mother could also have been a *Sudra* woman or a courtesan of the Nanda king. It is the Mahavamsa that claims he was born of a family of *Kshatriya* called the Moriyas. This is said to be supported by the reference to a *Kshatriya* clan named Moriyas. But it was in the best interest of the Lankan chroniclers to claim *Kshatriya* descent so the Lankan kings, too, could find a link to them and even to the Buddha. We do not know how many wives Chandragupta had or who Bindusara's mother was. She could have been a Greek or Macedonian princess, or any other woman in the palace or the city. According to the 12th-century "*Parishista-Parvan*" by the Jain writer Hemachandra, the name of Bindusara's mother was Durdhara. [i] We do not have even a single name for Aoka's father, while Aoka had three names. Bindusara would have been a nickname to establish the legend about the spots (bindu) on his skin. Then the second king of the so-called Mayura dynasty is nameless. Just like the first or second "queen" of Aoka, known as Devi. The Jain work *Rajavali-Katha* states that his birth name was Simhasena.

Aśoka was a *raja* who used three names, sometimes alternately, sometimes all together, and now known today mostly by the name he himself had used only a few times. It is not often we meet kings who used several personal names. Most would be satisfied with one name once he became king. Only in the case of the children of Bindusara, to avoid confusion, each of the 200 or more children would have needed more than one name to identify them in the royal household. If we are to accept that Aśoka killed the 100 brothers, afterwards he could easily manage with one single name. We have even less information about Bindusara than we have about his father or his son. If there had never been a historical Bindusara, it would be very difficult to talk about his son. Aśokavadana does not mention Aśoka's mother's

name, but mentions that she was a Brahmin girl who was gifted to Bindusara and introduced into his harem. (Strong 205)

Aśoka as a sub-king or viceroy, also raises questions. Guruge does not agree about Aśoka being a viceroy of Taksasila, but he is convinced that Aśoka was the sub-king of Ujjeni. Perhaps he needs to establish this to support the story of Mahinda thera and Sangamittatherini, because only the Pali chronicles mention them.

The data on Aśoka's connection with Ujjaini come only from the Sri Lankan Pali sources. "The grandson of Candagutta, the son of Bindusara, (king Aśoka), whilst a mere prince, was subking of Ujjeni, charged with collecting the revenue (of that province). (Guruge 38)

"Mahavamsa leaves no room for doubt. In two places it says that the region was bestowed on him by his father. *dinnamrajjamujjeiyam*, (kingdom of Ujjeni given by his father) *Avantirathambhunjanatopitaradinnamattano*. (while enjoying the region of Avanti given to him by his father" (Guruge39)

Paranavitana in *The Greeks and the Mauryas* does not say much about Aśoka except about his taking over the kingdom. According to Paranavitana, Aśoka was the viceroy of Avanti when Bindusara died, and the eldest son Tisya succeeded to the throne. Aśoka may have worked on the rivalry of Avanti with Magadha, and mustered a large force, came to Pataliputra, slew his brother and took over the country. (68) The Mahavamsa was written about seven centuries after Aśoka in a country about 3,000 km, from Pataliputra, it could be the fertile imagination coupled with the need to establish the Mahinda-Sangamitta and Aśoka-Tissa connection. Until someday some archaeological proof is discovered, we can only speculate on the AśokaUjjeni connection.

If we believe these legends, when Aśoka turned eighteen, Samrat Bindusara made him the viceroy of Avanti, a region in Ujjain. It is interesting to note that Aśoka that time was known as a heartless general, and that was precisely the reason why he was sent to Avanti to curb an uprising. However, even the heartless general fell in love with a common girl and married her. The girl was none other than Samrat Aśoka's first wife, Maharani Devi. Aśoka's skin is said to be rough to the touch, and he was fat and ugly and had fainting fits. Though most writers accept these conditions, there is no evidence about Aśoka's appearance or health conditions other than what could

be inferred from the legends, which appeared many centuries later. Had he been so ugly to look at and his skin so repulsive, would the daughter of a rich merchant or any of the other “queens” or “consorts” agree to “cohabit” with him? That is a question we should ask ourselves. If Devi had been a woman acquired for his harem, we could understand her giving in to the king’s demands, but not a free woman (if she was a free woman) in the provinces, when Aśoka was only a young prince who was not even expected to be the next king. Unless Vedisa Devi had been attracted to Aśoka, who at the time was just a prince among 100 other royal princes, she may not have agreed to be his consort.

About Aśoka’s fainting spells and his skin condition, we are accepting what was written by people who had lived many centuries later and who had never set eyes on Aśoka or seen a true image of Aśoka. Based on these imaginary descriptions, we try to identify a figure in a carving made over a hundred years after Aśoka, by an artist who never set eyes on the king, and we use this carving as proof of Aśoka’s appearance and health. Today we read Charles Allen’s imaginary tale about how ugly Aśoka looked because of his skin condition that his father sent him away from Pataliputra. Allen has accepted that Aśoka fainted at Bodhgaya, when we do not even know if he had ever visited Bodhgaya. The next evidence is weaker still, as the Mahayana tradition goes back to previous lives of Aśoka, his previous karma, and the story about Aśoka burning to death some of his queens for making remarks about his skin.

Based on such flimsy evidence, Aśoka has been diagnosed as having suffered from neurofibromatosis type 1 (Von Recklinghausen’s disease). [i] Then a whole set of symptoms are ascribed to Aśoka, “cutaneous neurofibromas and pigmented skin lesions.” If Aśoka had suffered from such a grave illness, could he have performed his duties first as a vice-king, then ascended the throne amidst so much opposition, and then ruled such a vast empire for over three decades? How did he manage to command such a huge army, administer his country, manage so many ministers and officials, and propagate his Dharma while enjoying his time in his harem? It was not only Guruge; there were others who believed in legends, and Guruge quotes them. Also misleading is the adulation that often poured from the pens of many an intellectual and political

leader who admired Aśoka for what he is supposed to have said and believed. The Pāngurāriā inscription is an example of how the same inscription has been read and interpreted in many different ways.

The ‘introductory part’ of the Pāngurāriā inscription is

*piyadasi-nāma*  
*r[ā]jākumāra[sa]*  
*saṃvasamāne*  
*ma-des[e] [upunitha*  
*vihāra-[ya]tāy[e]*

It is taken for granted by many who read the Pāngurāriā inscription, that it was addressed to a prince named Samva. Sircar translated this as “The king named Priyadarsin [speaks] to Kumara Śaṃva from [his] march [of pilgrimage] to the Upunitha-vihāra in Mānema-deśa.” We are assuming that because the word follows “upunitha”, that “vihāra” means monastery. But the term “vihāra” had not been used for monastery or Buddhist religious place, anywhere else in Aśokan inscriptions. It has been interpreted at all other instances as “tour” or “pleasure tour”, “*viḥārayātāmanuyati*” (Girnar Rock Edict VIII) a “pleasure tour” (Hultzsc14) Talim (2010, 194-9) considers *saṃvasa* to mean “to associate with, to live together”. *Dīpavamsa* uses *saṃvasam* for the association of Aśoka with Vedisa devi “cohabited with him” (Oldenberg 1879, 147 VI: 15) and taking *māneas* Pali *mānavam* – “youth, young man”, *upunitha* as *pahinatha* – “going as messenger, being sent”. Thus her translation is “King named Piyadassi, was living with prince. He, the young man, was sent to Majjhima (MajjhimaDesh), sojourning the pilgrimage”. Even this translation is not very coherent and does not explain the need of such a statement to introduce this inscription, it shows how words could be read and interpreted in various ways, when the script is not very clear.

Harry Falk also comments on this inscription, giving it a totally different interpretation.

*piyadasi-nāma*  
*r[ā]jākumār[e] va*  
*saṃvasamāne (i)*  
*mamdes[m] (p)[ā]upunitha*  
*vihāra(y)atāyā*

“The king (who now after consecration) is callePiyadassi, (once) came to this place on a pleasure tour while he was still a (ruling) prince living together with his (unwedded) consort.” Falk adds, “The word order makes it tempting to assume that “living together with his consort” belongs also to the predicate “came to this place”. If this impression is justified, then the text says that Aśoka came to the rock shelter of Panguraria in the company of Vidisadevi: a genuine *abhirama* indeed. Aśoka tells us in RE8 (A-D) that his former *viharayatras* included *abhirama* and hunting”. If we accept this there was no prince ‘Samva’ or a temple named ‘Upunitha’, and also shows the sentimental side of Aśoka, who wants to leave a permanent record of his romantic alliance in his youth. However, since Aśoka does not mention the name of his ‘consort’, it could have been any young lady, (or a young prince named Samva) who was accompanying the young prince. There is no evidence that the young person was Vidisadevi. Perhaps this is a very good example of how an inscription written over two millennia ago, could be read differently, guessing at hardly decipherable letters and moving the spaces between words.

Langudi stone sculptures, were discovered in 2000-1 by Dr D. R. Pradhan. These two sculptures carry inscriptions in Brahmi lettering which appear to refer to Aśoka by that name. The smaller statue is the head and shoulders of a man with long piled-up hair and large earrings. According to Professor B. N. Mukherjee of Calcutta University, the accompanying inscription reads: ‘*Chhi* [shri, honoured] *karenaranjaashokhena*’. The word *karena* can be read as ‘bestowal’ which suggests that the statue is a portrait of a donor named ‘King Aśoka’. ...The second sculpture is slightly larger, shows a man seated on a throne flanked by two standing queens or female attendants. He sits with his hands on his knees, and wears a turban and pendulous earrings, with numerous bangles from his wrists up to his elbows. ‘*amaupasaka Aśokasamchiamanaagra eka stupa*’ Prof Mukherjee translation – ‘A lay worshipper Aśoka with religious longing is associated in the construction of a prominent stupa’. We do not know who the two female on the carving had been.

There are several consorts of Aśoka mentioned in literature.

### **Vedisa-Mahadevi Sakyakumari**

When the prince Asoka, while ruling over the realm of Avanti, that his father had bestowed on him, halted in the town of Vedisa, before he

came to UjjenI, and met there a lovely maiden named Devi, the daughter of a merchant, he made her his wife and she was (afterwards) with child by him and bore in UjjenI a beautiful boy, Mahinda, when two years had passed (she bore) a daughter, Sanghamitta. At that time she lived in the city of Vedisa. (Geiger XIII b-11)

Devī (/’dervi/; Sanskrit: देवि) is the Sanskrit word for ‘female deity or ‘goddess’ (Monier-Williams); the masculine form is deva. Devi and deva mean ‘heavenly, divine, anything of excellence’, and are also gender-specific terms for a deity in Hinduism. Or a “Hindu goddess and embodiment of the female energy of Siva “(Collins). Kumari (in Pali) is a young girl (Rhys Davis), a title mostly used for a princess, and as a personal name today. In ancient times ‘Devi’ would not have been a personal name, which means we do not know the name of the mother of Mahinda thero or Sanghamittatherini.

Who was the first queen? Was she the mother of Mahinda and Sangamitta? If not, was the first queen also a follower of Aśoka Dhamma or Buddha Dhamma? Why are the Pali chroniclers silent about her ‘religion’ or if she too had been ‘converted to Buddhism’? It is only in the Mahavamsa and Aśokavadana, we find the story of the ‘second’ queen Tissarakkha and the destruction of the Bodhi tree out of jealousy, such information is only in the Mahavamsa and Aśokavadana. Aśoka’s first wife Devi did not belong to any royal family. She in fact, was a daughter of a merchant of Vidisha. According to Mahabodhivamsa, Devi however belongs to Sakya clan making her a relative of Buddha. This link is however disputed. We do not have much data on Aśoka’s consort, Devi of Vedisagiri, or if at all she was the legal first wife of Aśoka. *Dipavamsa* only says she “cohabited with him” (*samvasam*) (Oldenberg 1879, 147 VI: 15). She is said to be a follower of Buddha Dhamma, but nowhere do we find any reference about her influence on the faith of Aśoka, or if he had gained any knowledge or familiarity of the Buddha Dhamma or the Saṅgha, during the period of his “cohabitation” with Devi.

Sri Lanka Buddhist tradition has Aśoka as sub-king of Avanti and Ujjain. There was a special reason why the Sri Lanka Pali sources should have taken special care to preserve the memory of the particular phase in the life of Aśoka. It is on his way to Ujjain that Aśoka enjoyed the hospitality of the guild-chief Deva of Vedisa, met his daughter Vedisdevi and married her. While the *Dipavamas* says

they ‘cohabited’, Guruge quotes from the *Vamsatthappakasini* which was written nine centuries later, to state “The marriage was contracted according to custom with the consent of the bride’s parents” (Guruge 1993, 40-41). We may never know what the real name of Aśoka’s consort in Vedisa had been or if there had been a historical person, who had ‘married’ Aśoka. If we accept this is a fact, then Vedisadevi was the first queen of Aśoka, and her son Mahinda would have been his eldest son and heir to the throne. We have to give credit to Guruge as he tries to be impartial wherever possible, even within the agenda he was trapped in. “Notice has been taken of the attempt which the Pali sources make to trace Devi’s ancestry to the Sakyas so that she could be given an added prestige as a relative of the Buddha. We have already discussed this same tendency as regards the Maurya dynasty. No evidence exists to support either or both of these assertions whose origin as faith-inspired accretion is obvious.” (Guruge 1993, 43)

### **Karuvaki**

A very interesting possibility has been raised by Amul Chandra Sen, that Vedisha Devi could have been Kāruvākī referred to in the Queen’s Edict. Aśoka might have been already married when he met the Vidisha merchant’s beautiful daughter who therefor became his second queen. What happened to her son Ujjeniya is not known and he might have died early. Mahendra and Sangamitta taking to the monastic life and when she gave birth to Tivara, she came to be known as ‘mother of Tivara’. Sometimes we try to produce an entire book from a few words in an inscription. The Allahabad /Queen’s Pillar Edict is an example. We try to identify the queen, and why Aśoka had this edict inscribed only in one place while it was addressed to Mahamatras everywhere. Sen comments that it was either not meant to be inscribed in stone, or the modest queen (assuming she is Devi of Vidisha), did not want it inscribed everywhere and stopped it after seeing the first inscription. Or it was not meant to be inscribed, but was one more set of instructions sent by Aśoka to his ministers, for their eyes only.

At the word of Devanampriya, the Mahamatras everywhere have to be told (this). What gifts (have been made) here by the second queen (*dutiyayedevlye*), (viz.) either mango groves, or gardens, or

alms-houses, or whatever else, these (shall) be registered, (in the name) of that queen. This (is) [the request] of the second queen, the mother of Tivala, the Kaluvaki. (Hultzsch, 159) Hultzsch in his footnote mentions that according to Buhler (1A, 19. 123) Kaluvaki is probably the name of the queen's family, and it may be connected with the Vedic *gotra* of the Karus. Sen considers it either as a modern caste Karwas, or the Queen's personal name (of sweet voice), based on the bird Kalavika from the Himalayan region, and linking her to the Sakyas who lived at the foot of the Himalayas. (Sen 156, 137)

The doubts raised by this inscription are because so far no inscriptions regarding the gifts made by this queen have been found. Either the officials did not establish them or they were inscribed on perishable material. The large charities of the 'second queen' would also agree with the religious disposition of the Vidisha queen...these charities were by a queen who was known to be as staunch a Buddhist as Aśoka." (Sen, 33) This is an attempt to interpret the inscription using unconfirmed legend, as so far no evidence has been found about Vedisha Devi or her children, another instance of trying to recreate history based on narrative. Another legend is "Rani Kaurwaki was a daughter of a fisherman who stayed in Kalinga (present day Orissa). According to the legends, Aśoka met Karuvaki and fell in love with her when he was living life in exile and had gone incognito.....Kaurwaki became the mother of Aśoka's second son Tivala or Tivara who later became the viceroy of Takshila. Both the name of Kaurwaki and Tivala are found in Samrat Aśoka's edicts." <sup>1</sup>

### QUEEN'S PILLAR-EDICT: ALLAHABAD-KOSAM

1. (A) *Devanampiyasha v[a]chanenasavata mahamata*<sup>1</sup>
2. *vataviya (B) e heta® dutiyayedevlyedane*
3. *arhba-vadikavaalameva dana-[gah]e [va® e va pi a]mne*
4. *kichhiganiyatitayedeviyeye she nani (C) [he]vam .. [na] .dutyayedeviyetiTxvala-matuKaluvakiye*

(A) At the word of Devanampriya, the Mahamatras everywhere have to be told (this).

(B) What gifts (have been made) here by the second queen, (viz.) either mango-groves, or gardens, or alms-houses, or

whatever else, these (shall) be registered, (in the name) of that queen.

(C) This (is) [the request] of the second queen, the mother of Tivala, the Kaluvakl\*

As stated by Buhler (IA, 19.123), this is probably the name of the queen's family, and it may be connected with the Vedic gotra of the Karus. . . (Hultzsch p 159 footnote)

Prinsep had read *dutiyayedeviye* as 'second princess (his) queen. He has also seen a *kichchiganyetitiye* as 'the third princess' (Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal vol. 6. 967)

### **Padmavati**

Nothing much is known about Rani Padmavati except the fact that she was the mother of Samrat Aśoka's son Kunala. Rani Padmavati died very early and so it is also not known whether the marriage was out of love or a political alliance....Though Kunala was younger than both Mahendra and Tivala, he was always seen as Aśoka's heir. This makes us believe that Rani Padmavati would definitely be from a royal background and would be next in line after Devi and Kaurvaki.<sup>3</sup> On the very same day on which King Asoka built the eightyfour thousand dharmarâjikâs, his queen Padmavati gave birth to a son who was handsome, good-looking, and gracious, and whose eyes were very bright. Asoka was overjoyed by this good news, and declared: I am filled with supreme delight for the greatness of the Mauryan line has been assured. A son has been bom to me. I ruled through Dharma, may he increase Dharma! And so the boy was given the name Dharmavivardhana (Dharma-increasing).....: "The prince's eyes are like those of a kunāla, let him therefore be called 'Kunāla! " (Strong, 268) Padmavati is also mentioned by Lahiri, as the mother of Kunala. (Lahiri 284)

### **Asandhimitra**

In a previous birth, "Then the (maid who) had pointed out the store wished that she might become the royal spouse of the (first), and (desired) a lovely form with limbs of perfect outline. (Adissamanasamdhi means literally with invisible joints ') Geiger V 59-60.

“While, both his earlier marriages (Devi and Kaurwaki) were purely because of love before he became a Samrat, Aśoka’s fourth marriage was an imperial decision after he became the third Samrat of the Mauryan dynasty. This time he married a princess with invisible joints ‘previous marriages and gave her all the royal rights. Her name was Asandhimitra and she belonged to Assandhivat, a little kingdom which finds its presence in the present day Haryana. Asandhimitra who married Samrat Aśoka (not prince Aśoka) became the chief consort of Chakravartin Aśoka Samrat and continued to remain so till she died her own death in 240CE. She did not bore any child but took care of Prince Kunala ever since he was a little boy because his biological mother Rani Padmavati died when he was very small. This is the reason why Rani Asandhimitra is often thought as Rani Padmavati, the biological mother of Kunala. However, Asandhimitra and Padmavati were two different individuals.”<sup>2</sup>

Allen (394) is basing all this on the later literature, when there is not a single scrap of evidence to support the story. Unless he could prove that these episodes had really happened, he should not have stated the following –

The favouring of Buddhism, cannot have gone down well with the Brahmans, Jains, Ajivikas and other non-Buddhist sections of the community. This favouring of Buddhism impacted most directly on the orthodox Brahmans because it was chiefly from their ranks that the Buddhist monks were drawn. Sakyamuni Buddha’s first disciples were Brahmans and this trend had continued, so that the more Brahmans who converted to Buddhism the weaker their community became. A reaction was inevitable. Aśoka’s quintessential festival ended with Aśoka mounting a special platform built around the Bodhi tree to bathe it ‘with milk scented with sandalwood, saffron, and camphor poured from 5000 pitchers of gold, silver, crystal and cat’s eye, filled with different kinds of perfumes. Outer panel east gateway Sanchi. This took place in 240 BCE. Next scheduled for 235 BCE – (Allen 2012, 391). The 2nd panchavarsika festival could not be performed. 239 BCE Asandhimitramother of Kunala died about 235 BCE Tishyarakshita became queen, both in Northern and Southern traditions she conspired against Buddhism, caused the Bodhi tree to wither, and had Kunala blinded. Samprati becomes heir-apparent. The new queen headed a non-Buddhist faction at court.

### **Thiysrakshita**

Padmavati is mentioned as a queen, while Aśokavadana calls Tishyaraksha to the position of Chief Queen (Strong, 270). John S.

Strong quotes a story from S. Mukhopadhyaya from the *Aśokavadana*. The term Bodhi indicates the Bodhi-tree itself, Buddha's achievement of enlightenment, while Aśoka's queen Tishyarakṣita believed Bodhi to be a new mistress of the king. If we are to believe this story, the queen did not know of the Bodhi tree, she had not heard the tree mentioned in the royal household and was so naive to have believed Bodhi was the name of a woman. After Samrat Aśoka's chief consort Asandhimitra died in 240CE, her favorite maid Tishyarakṣa took care of Aśoka. It is said that she attracted Aśoka by her charm, dance and beauty. Next, it is believed that Aśoka made her his concubine and even promoted Tishyarakṣa to the position of Chief Queen. The age difference between Tishyarakṣa and Samrat Aśoka was huge. It is believed that Tishyarakṣa was attracted to Aśoka's son Kunala – the presumed heir to the Magadh throne. However, Kunala regarded her as his mother due to her position in the Kingdom that time. Tishyarakṣa couldn't accept this rejection and this is the reason why she blinded Kunala whose eyes attracted Tishyarakṣa, the most. Though the attraction of Tishyarakṣa for Kunala does not have any historical evidence except that they are penned down in two Bengali novels, according to *Aśokavadana* it is known that it was Tishyarakṣa who was responsible for blinding Kunala, Aśoka's presumptive heir.<sup>4</sup> Succumbing to hatred and bringing about harm to herself, she had the great Bodhi-tree destroyed by means of mandu-thorn. (MV XX, 4-5) There is nothing more in any Sri Lankan source on this matter." (Guruge 1993, 272). This could only be a later addition to support the legend of Aśoka's veneration of the Bodhi tree, but it could also mean the helplessness of the king in later years.

### **Kāhcanamālā**

The only daughter-in-law of Aśoka mentioned in literature is the wife of prince Kunala. "By and by, the prince grew up, and was married to a girl named Kāhcanamālā." (Strong p. 270) We have no information of any other women associated with his sons.

### **Harem**

Asoka admits he spends a lot of time in his harem *orodhana*, which could mean he had many women as his consorts, in addition to the

few women mentioned in literature. Perhaps as many women as his father, who would have cohabited with so many, to be able to produce about 200 children. XI Rock Edict, Girnar.

Reporters are posted everywhere, (with instructions) to report to me the affairs of the people at any time while I am eating, in the harem, in the inner apart-ment, even at the cowpen in the palanquin, and in the parks. (Hultsch. RE 6. p. 57)

There would have been many unnamed women in his harem, as mentioned in Aśokavadana. By virtue of his name, Asoka also comes to be identified with the Asoka tree (*Saraca indica*). The text itself makes this clear in several instances. Just prior to his conversion, when Asoka goes out to the royal pleasure garden with his harem, he comes across an Asoka tree whose blossoms are at their peak. Thinking this tree is my namesake, he becomes sexually aroused; but, as we have mentioned, because he has rough skin the young women in his harem do not enjoy caressing him. And, out of spite, they express their contempt for him by chopping all the flowering branches off the Asoka tree while the real Asoka is asleep. When he wakes up and gazes upon his dismembered namesake, he is mad with anger. (Strong, 128) "Who did this?" he asked his servants who were standing nearby. "Your majesty's concubines," they answered. On learning this, Asoka flew into a rage and burned the five hundred women alive.<sup>1</sup> (Strong, 210) Aśoka's 'harem is also mentioned, where he had allowed. "When King Asoka began having faith in the Teaching of the Blessed One, it became his custom to invite monks to the palace where he made offerings to them and listened to their sermons on the Dharma. Occasionally he would set up a curtain behind which his wives could sit and listen to the Dharma, although they were strictly forbidden to approach the monks directly." (Strong, 296)

### **Women in Asoka's Society**

We would never know what would have been the place of women in the time of the Chandragupta dynasty. All we have from the inscriptions is that Aśoka had appointed an *ithijhakha-mahamata* Mahamatras controlling women. (Girnar RE XII) There is no evidence except from the fictional records by Greek visitors, and from the Arthasastra, which may or may not have been written during the

time of Chandragupta. If Ashoka's claim to have shown respect and followed the teachings of the Buddha, (he has never claimed to be a "Buddhist"), how could he abandon his first wife/consort and two children, and also maintain a harem, is a question which remain unanswerable. Based on all these writings, the woman would have been a slave, a commodity, temporary companion, under a service provider as *Ganikadayaksha*. (Supervisor of Prostitutes, Artasastra), or an instrument of political intrigue and even a *Vishkanya*, (*Mudrarakshasa*, by Vishakadatta). Then Aśoka, his father and grandfather would have known any number of women in each one of the above categories. In such a situation this study becomes an exercise in futility.

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### Notes

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4314928/> (accessed, Nov. 2, 2022)
2. <https://nationalviews.com/samrat-Aśoka-wives-devi-kaurwaki-sons-facts> (accessed, Nov. 2, 2022)
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