

*Reinstating the Power of a Queen:
Problems with Reading Inscriptions through a Textual Lens*

Alice Collett
Nālandā University

Nāneghāt is a mountain pass on a subsidiary route of the ancient North Indian trade route. At the apex of the mountain is a cave complex within which Prakrit inscriptions can be found. The longest of these – covering two walls in the largest cave - has historically been attributed to the Sātavāhana queen Nāgaṇikā. The inscription, which is badly damaged, was read as a record of a woman, a queen, performing Vedic sacrificial ritual independently. According to standard Brahmanical lore, as prescribed in the Sanskrit texts of the tradition, a woman should not perform Vedic sacrificial rituals independently, only jointly, with her husband, and in something of a minor role. Reading the inscription as discordant with Sanskrit textual prescriptions stimulated scholars who studied it to try to reconcile this apparent contradiction. In this paper, I survey past scholarship on the inscription, and demonstrate how the privileging of Sanskrit texts over the inscription led down some blind alleys. The different scholars who have studied the inscription each had recourse to *different* Sanskrit texts – the *Brāhmaṇas*, Jaimini’s *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* and Śabara’s commentary on it, even the *Rājataranjinī* – but each began from the same standpoint; if the core texts say this cannot happen, why and how was it allowed? In this paper, I challenge these ways of reading the inscription. In opposition to the viewpoint that a women would only do what was allowed, I suggest instead that a powerful queen unhappy with textual prescriptions that denied women full roles in religious activities may well have decided to disregard convention. Instead of reading the inscription through a textual lens, I turn the tables on previous scholarship and discuss the possibilities that not only may a powerful queen have gone against tradition, but in so doing may have herself become a progenitor of tradition. That is to say, I discuss ways in which the actions of such women may have affected or foregrounded the very *production* of Sanskrit texts, influenced which texts are produced, and shaped their content.