



Warriors And Civilization: A Study Based On Inscriptions And Hero Stones From Shimoga District

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ABSTRACT

Women have played a central role in strengthening civilization. Understanding the spirit and excellence of civilization is inseparable from understanding women's contributions to it. Throughout history, Indian women have broken barriers and achieved remarkable success in various fields. From the time of the *Puranas*, women have contributed to the progress of statecraft, war, peace, literature, and the arts. While some women gained importance through their social status, others achieved distinction through their deeds. Women who participated in wars and led armies to victory demonstrated that the hand which cooks can also wield a weapon. Examples include Chachaladevi, the queen of Ganga King Permadiadeva; Chagaladevi, the queen of Veerashantarasa; Bhairadevi of Gerusoppe; Rani Abbakka; Padumalladevi of Guttamalladeva; Chennammaji of Keladi; Rani Chennamma of Kittur; Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi; and valiant common women such as Nalgavundi Jakkiyabbe, Akkadevi, Nagiyakka, Vennilasettikavve, and Bommambe. This paper examines the role of women—both royal and common—who participated in wars, based on inscriptions and *hero* and *mahasati* stones dated between the 5th and 18th centuries CE discovered in Shimoga District, Karnataka.

Keywords: Hero stones, Mahasati stones, war, royal and common women, inscriptions, Jayavadhu, Keerthivadhu, Shimoga District.

INTRODUCTION

The study of women's roles in the making of civilization reveals the moral, cultural, and political foundations of human progress. Women have been central not only to the biological continuity of society but also to its ethical and intellectual development. The spirit and excellence of any civilization can best be understood through the position and participation of its women. In India, from ancient to medieval times, women have played multifaceted roles—as mothers, educators, rulers, warriors, poets, and reformers—contributing to the growth of culture, polity, and the arts.

Indian philosophical and literary traditions have long celebrated women's virtues and strengths. Ancient texts describe women as the embodiment of wisdom, endurance, compassion, and power. The oft-quoted Sanskrit verse—"Kaaryeshu Daasi, Karaneshu Mantri, Bhojyeshu Maata, Roopeshu Lakshmi, Kshamayaa Dharitri, Shayaneeshu Rambha"—encapsulates the idealized vision of womanhood in Indian thought: a woman as a servant in work, an advisor in counsel, a mother in care, a goddess in beauty, and an earth in forbearance. Yet, beyond this idealization lies a historical reality in which women have repeatedly demonstrated courage, leadership, and agency, often in the face of social constraints.

Throughout India's recorded history, women have broken barriers in politics, literature, science, and warfare. Their active involvement in the administration of kingdoms, peace negotiations, and defense of territories challenges the traditional assumption that warfare and governance were exclusively male domains. From the *Puranic* period through the medieval era, inscriptions, literary sources, and archaeological evidence attest to women's engagement in statecraft, art, architecture, and religion. Divine archetypes such as Durga, Kali, Chandi, and Annapoorneshwari symbolize feminine power (*Shakti*), courage, and sustenance—traits that historical women embodied in worldly realms.

Among these expressions of valor, the hero stones (*Veeragallu*) and *Mahasati* stones discovered across southern India, particularly in the Shimoga District of Karnataka, provide valuable insights into women's lived

experiences and their acts of bravery. These inscriptions, dating from the 5th to the 18th centuries CE, record the deeds of both royal and common women who participated in battles, defended their kingdoms, and made supreme sacrifices for their people. The presence of such monuments in large numbers indicates that the recognition of female heroism was both widespread and socially significant.

The Shimoga region, historically known as *Sihimogge*, has been a vibrant cultural and political center under the rule of dynasties such as the Satavahanas, Kadambas, Chalukyas of Badami, Rashtrakutas, Hoysalas, Vijayanagara kings, and Keladi Nayakas. The inscriptions from this region reveal not only the political developments of these kingdoms but also the social consciousness that honored valor and self-sacrifice irrespective of gender. The *hero stones* and *Mahasati* stones found here commemorate queens, noblewomen, and ordinary women who fought in wars, protected cattle from raiders, or performed acts of martyrdom motivated by duty and devotion.

This study situates these memorials within a broader cultural and historical framework to analyze the representation of women as warriors and defenders of virtue. By examining epigraphical records, poetic inscriptions, and oral traditions from the Shimoga District, the paper seeks to highlight how women's participation in warfare contributed to the shaping of regional and civilizational identity. In doing so, it re-evaluates the prevailing gender constructs of ancient and medieval India and foregrounds women as active agents in the making of history rather than passive subjects within it.

Prologue

Women have been central to the progress of civilization. The true spirit and strength of any society can be measured by the role of its women. Since ancient times, Indian women have played multiple roles within both family and society. Classical literature encapsulates this ideal in the phrase:

“Kaaryeshu Daasi, Karaneshu Mantri, Bhojyeshu Maata, Roopeshu Lakshmi, Kshamayaa Dharitri, Shayaneeshu Rambha.”

Indian women have excelled in diverse fields—political, social, economic, artistic, commercial, scientific, and medical. From the era of the *Puranas*, women have contributed to the development of governance, warfare, peace, literature, art, and architecture. Divine female archetypes such as Durga, Kali, Chandi, Rajarajeshwari, and Annapoorneshwari represent these ideals.

Objective of the study

The primary objective of this study is to understand the role of royal, noble, and common women in warfare and their sacrifices for societal well-being as evidenced through memorial stones found in the Shimoga region.

Methodology of the study

The research employs primary sources, including hero stones and *mahasati* stones, gathered through field visits and interactions with local communities. Epigraphical analysis was conducted to interpret inscriptions and identify references to women's participation in warfare.

Research Gap

Studies on women's contributions to ancient and medieval Indian society remain limited. The roles of women as warriors and leaders, particularly as depicted in inscriptions, have not been explored in depth. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on evidence from Shimoga District.

Historical background of Shimoga District

Shimoga, known historically as *Sihimogge*, serves as the gateway to Karnataka's Malnad region. Its terrain of hills, valleys, and rivers provided a natural stronghold for several dynasties—Satavahanas, Kadambas, Chalukyas of Badami, Rashtrakutas, Hoysalas, Vijayanagara rulers, Keladi Nayakas, Sode Kings, and the Santaras.

These kingdoms fostered a culture where women from both noble and common backgrounds contributed to society. Hero stones (*veeragallu*) and *mahasati* stones discovered across the region commemorate acts of courage, valor, and sacrifice—whether in battle, defense of cattle, or protection of virtue.

Inscriptions reveal that wars were fought for empire expansion, protection of cattle, defense of honor, or punishment of injustice. The prevailing belief that “the body is temporal, but fame is eternal” motivated both men and women to pursue heroic deeds.

Women in warfare: Royal and common participants

Royal women warriors: Inscriptions and literature record several royal women who directly participated in battles. For instance, Bachaladevi, queen of Ganga King Bhubala Permadideva, is described as *Jayavadhu* and *Kulavadhu*—titles celebrating her valor. Similarly, Chagaladevi, queen of Trilokyamalla Veerashantarasa, is praised for her role in achieving victory, as described in the Huncha inscription.

Bhairadevi of Gerusoppe, Rani Abbakka of Ullal, Chennammaji of Keladi, and Rani Chennamma of Kittur are other notable examples of queens who defended their kingdoms and people against invading forces.

Women from the common class

Hero stones also commemorate women from non-royal backgrounds who demonstrated remarkable courage. For example, the Bandalike inscription (912–918 CE) mentions Jakkiyabbe, wife of Nagarjuna, who led her army after her husband's death, defended her kingdom, and ensured peace.

Akkadevi, sister of Vikramaditya V, is recorded in the Hottur inscription (1037 CE) as a ruler who managed governance and warfare, earning the titles *Rana Bhairavi* and *Uchchandi Bhairavi*. Similarly, the Balligavi inscription (1067 CE) refers to Nagiyakka, who punished evildoers and upheld virtue.

In 1177 CE, Queen Padumalladevi of Guttamalladeva fought Kadamba Soideva to protect her subjects and their cattle. The poetic inscriptions of Vennila Settikavve portray her fierce battle for revenge following her husband's death—depicting her as a warrior embodying the spirit of Chamundeshwari and Mahakali.

During the Vijayanagara period (14th–15th century), Bombambe, wife of Mallandur Mahavira Madara Kala, fought and died alongside her husband. In Shikaripura, the hero stone of Harikka commemorates her bravery in avenging her father's death.

Later Period (16th – 18th Centuries)

Queen Chennabhairadevi of Bhatkal resisted Portuguese invasion in 1545 CE, defending her coastal kingdom successfully. Later, Chennammaji of Keladi (r. 1672–1696 CE) consolidated power, quelled internal revolts, expanded her territory, and defeated Mughal forces sent by Aurangzeb in 1706 CE.

Rani Veerammaji, another Keladi ruler, faced Hyder Ali's invasion in 1753 CE. Despite internal betrayal, she led her army with courage and fought valiantly before Keladi eventually fell.

Epilogue

Women are not mere reflections of men; they possess independent identities and immense strength. Throughout Indian history, women have fulfilled diverse roles—devoted spouses, wise advisors, fierce warriors, and compassionate nurturers. They have embodied *Shakti*—as Durga to the enemies, as Ganga to purify sins, and as Earth to sustain life.

Although warfare is often associated with men, history reveals numerous instances where women fought bravely and achieved victory. Hero stones, *mahasati* stones, and inscriptions from the Malnad region immortalize their valor. Both royal figures such as Bachaladevi, Chagaladevi, Bhairadevi, Padumalladevi, Chennammaji, and Rani Abbakka, and common women like Jakkiyabbe, Akkadevi, Nagiyakka, Vennilasettikavve, and Bombambe, exemplify courage and sacrifice.

The stories of these women continue to inspire future generations. It is the responsibility of historians and cultural custodians to preserve these monuments and convey their legacy. Recognizing these contributions helps build a society rooted in equality, free from gender and class discrimination.

Conclusion

- The historical evidence from the hero stones, *mahasati* stones, and inscriptions of Shimoga District provides compelling testimony to the courage, valor, and leadership of Indian women across social hierarchies. Whether as queens defending their realms or as common women safeguarding their families and communities, they actively participated in warfare and governance. Their contributions challenge the traditional perception of war as a male domain and illuminate the inclusive and participatory character of India's sociopolitical fabric through the centuries.
- These inscriptions do more than commemorate acts of heroism; they embody a deeper cultural consciousness that celebrated feminine strength as a divine and moral force. Women like Chennammaji of Keladi, Bhairadevi of Gerusoppe, and Vennila Settikavve illustrate the integration of courage, sacrifice, and righteousness—a triad that defined heroism in ancient Indian ethos. The recurring titles such as *Jayavadhu* and *Keerthivadhu* further reflect the recognition accorded to women who inspired valor through moral and emotional strength.
- In understanding these inscriptions, one uncovers a society that, despite its hierarchies, respected and immortalized women's heroism. The study thus underscores the necessity of reinterpreting Indian history through the lens of gender inclusivity—acknowledging women as agents of change rather than passive figures in the background.
- Preserving and documenting these monuments is crucial not only for reconstructing historical narratives but also for fostering social awareness about gender equality and empowerment. The valor and dignity of these women continue to resonate, reminding contemporary society that courage and leadership transcend gender, status, and time.

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