



COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES AND SOCIETAL STRUCTURES: INSIGHTS FROM EARLY BRAHMI INSCRIPTIONS IN SRI LANKA (3RD CENTURY BCE–1ST CENTURY CE)

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the communications found in early Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka, shedding light on the social, cultural, economic, and religious practices of the period from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE. The main data set for this study consists of 244 Early Brahmi inscriptions from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE. Using the compilation of Nandasena Mudiyanse, the texts from the Mihintale inscriptions to the Madabavita inscriptions were analyzed to reveal the communicative practices of the period. The methodology used in this study is epigraphical analysis with some critical components. The inscriptions taken into the study had been discovered from a range of areas of the island, and reveal kinship, family structures, and particularities of community organization of contemporary society. As communicative practices are strong evidence for a societal ontology and function, these inscriptions, as strong evidence that is still extant, can be used to unearth the bureaucratic functions, administrative systems, belief systems, etc., in ancient Sri Lanka. The major finding of the study is that the communications preserved in Sri Lanka's early Brahmi inscriptions (3rd century BCE to 1st century CE) suggest the society of the period had a complex web of religious practices, nascent bureaucratic institutions, and relatively egalitarian gender relations. By analyzing these inscriptions, this study aims to understand the communicative intentions of ancient Sri Lankans and their implications.

KEY TERMS: Communication, Early Brahmi Inscriptions, Ancient Sri Lankan Society, Socio-Cultural Practices, Religious And Economic Structures

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a country whose civilization is built on written evidence and has plenty of stone-carved inscriptions throughout the island, manifesting its literary traditions and communication prowess for thousands of years (De Silva, 1981). In this study, rock inscriptions with Early Brahmi inscriptions belonging to the period between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE are investigated as a form of communication. In any country, history is constructed through the written word, a remarkable invention of human communication (Corfield, 2007). Such communications provide profound context for the socio-cultural and economic processes in the stream of history. The written words found in rock inscriptions in Sri Lanka stand as physical evidence of the ancient past. Writing records the lives of a people and is thus the first necessary step in the written history of a culture or civilization.

Writing has been a defining characteristic of civilizations all over the world; for both ancient and modern advanced societies. Traditionally, the development of writing has been explained as a response to the administrative demands of early states, particularly for recording and reusing information, which highlights its role as an information technology. Yet, from its origins, writing also fulfilled diverse purposes that extended beyond administration, encompassing both secular and religious functions (Haarmann, 2020). Writing is among the pertinent properties of any civilization witnessed in world history. By and large all advanced societies, ancient or modern, have possessed a form of writing technology, and it has been repeatedly reaffirmed throughout the long history of studies in the domain of culture and language. Early systems of writing used pictographs to represent objects or ideas. More advanced and abstract forms of writing systems were invented in later stages of civilizations and they helped people to keep written records of their respective societies. Calendars which were useful for farming and for tracking the changing of seasons (Allen & Roberts, 2018). Cuneiform writing

developed by the Sumerians of Mesopotamia around 3200 BCE consisted of wedge-shaped impressions made on clay tablets. They used them to document trade, administration, literature, and law. Egyptian hieroglyphs also appeared in the same era of history and those Egyptians combined pictorial symbols with phonetic elements (Kingston, 2023). Such inscriptions are still found on monuments, tombs, and papyrus in Egypt. Such scripts served religious, political, and cultural purposes. When it comes to South Asia, the Indus Valley Civilization created earliest forms of writing around 2600 BCE and inscribed them on seals and pottery (Upadhyay & Pandey, 1993). They are still undeciphered and the scholarly belief is that the civilization had a sophisticated symbolic system for writing.

The history of writing in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the early Brahmi inscriptions. These inscriptions are found mainly in caves donated to Buddhist monks. However, the excavations in the *Salgahavatta* area of Anuradhapura have brought forth evidence that challenged widely accepted views on the history of writing in Sri Lanka (Coningham & Gunawardhana, 1999). The excavations conducted by Siran Deraniyagala (1942 - 2021), Sri Lankan archaeologist and historian, produced groundbreaking evidence of pottery with early Brahmi inscriptions, including phrases like "*biya anuradha*" and "*anurādha sa*," dating back to around 600–500 BCE, yielding salient insights into the early history and culture of Sri Lanka (Seneviratna, 1994).

Accordingly, the tradition of inscribing texts in Sri Lanka surely predates the 3rd century BCE and continues to this day with a clearly demonstrable evolution. According to the most established view of Sri Lanka's history of writing the evolution of letters can be divided into five periods: Early Brahmi period (3rd century BCE– early 1st AD), Later Brahmi period (late 1st AD –3rd AD), Transitional Brahmi period (4th AD –7th AD), Medieval Sinhala period (8th AD – 11th AD), and Modern Sinhala period

(12th AD – present) (Bandara, Wamajith, Minato, & Ozawa, 2012). This paper focuses on rock inscriptions written in pre-Brahmi script.

The Early Brahmi scripts used during the period between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century AD had an alphabet of 38 letters; in practice, people had used only 25 letters for communicative purposes. In some inscriptions, unusual symbols could be observed. At the same time, some letters are represented by multiple symbols (Gupta, 1970). For example, the Early Brahmi script corresponding to the letter "𑀠" had been written using various symbols. These differences are identified by the angularity or curvature of the strokes attached to the left of the vertical stroke. As the writing material changed at later stages, the shape of the letters also changed (Gunawardana, 1997).

Brahmi is an abugida, neosyllabary, or pseudo-alphabet, a segmental writing system that uses a system of diacritical marks to associate vowels with consonant symbols (Jain & Cardona, 2007). The origin of the script is still much debated, with most scholars highlighting that Brahmi was derived from or at least influenced by some Semitic scripts prevalent in contemporary societies. Some scholars favour the idea of an indigenous origin or connection to the much older and as yet undeciphered Indus script, but the evidence is insufficient at best (Karanth, 2003). When it comes to Sri Lankan inscriptions, they can be divided into four classes: cave, rock, slab, and pillar inscriptions. The inscriptions engraved on the drip ledges of caves are identified as cave inscriptions, and the inscriptions on natural stone are identified as stone inscriptions. The slab inscriptions and pillar inscriptions were found on slabs and pillars, as their very names imply. Archaeologists and historians of the country have been able to locate more than 3,500 stone inscriptions in Sri Lanka, discovered in various parts of the country (Bandara et al., 2012).

These Early Brahmi inscriptions are not merely records of text. They can be counted as strong witnesses to the social, cultural, economic, and

religious practices of ancient Sri Lanka. The inscriptions, found across the island, stand as testimony to identify patterns of kinship, family structures, and community organization, highlighting the communal orientation of ancient Sri Lankan society. Through the study of these inscriptions, this paper studies how people in ancient Sri Lanka managed their property and resources, and how their social life was structured. Particularly, the paper investigates their obligations to family, religious institutions, and the community. Women and their social and religious roles in contrast to modern assumptions of gender hierarchies are also studied. By analyzing these inscriptions as communicative acts, this study aims to unearth the bureaucratic functions and administrative systems in the early Sri Lankan society.

2. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

This study aims to provide an in-depth examination of early pre-Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka, and it serves as an original investigation into the social, cultural, economic, and religious life of the island between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE through primary evidence from written communications found in rock inscriptions. The study also throws light on kinship systems, family structures, community organization, bureaucratic practices, and religious institutions in ancient Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the social status of women in ancient Sri Lanka is primarily investigated, demonstrating that they enjoyed respect and agency within societal and religious contexts. The research also challenges assumptions of gender hierarchy prevalent in later periods. The work contributes to understanding how early communications in Sri Lankan civilization functioned as indicators of societal ontology and functioning.

3. LITERATURE SURVEY

The pre-Brahmi era inscriptions in Sri Lanka reflect a range of perspectives pertaining to the social organization and communal practices, and those

written communications are categorized from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE. The symbols serve as mnemonic devices or rudimentary records to the historical, social, religious, economic, and political fronts, and like in other civilizations in the world, the early Sri Lankan civilization had systems pertaining to kinship, property use, and devotion to religious institutions.

Iravatham Mahadevan, in *Tamil Brahmi Inscriptions*, notes that the Brahmi script was adopted in southern India from northern India to meet the linguistic needs of local languages (Mahadevan, 1970). Based on this perspective, undated Brahmi inscriptions found across India and Sri Lanka are compared with Aśoka's inscriptions, and their dates are estimated by examining the similarities and variations in letter shapes. The early inscriptions are free of poetic embellishments and merely record events without didactic or pedagogic objectives. Unlike the *Mahavamsa*, which was written for a particular purpose, these inscriptions provide a clear picture of the affairs of early society (Bandara et al., 2012). A salient feature of early inscriptional communication in Sri Lanka is the emphasis on kinship; most of the messages inscribed on these rocks depict systems of social organization based on real or putative family ties. They illustrate how Sri Lankan society between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE relied on organizational frameworks based on kinship and production, with group decisions made accordingly.

For example, the inscription found in *Vessagiriya*, *Anurādhapura* (Inscriptions of Ceylon (IC) 77), belonging to the pre-Brahmi era, mentions a woman named *Tissā* and her familial ties are particularly mentioned. She is the wife of *Sona*, the Cavalryman, [is given] (*Aṇikaṭa-Śoṇa-pitaha bariya [u]paśika-Ti[śa]ya leṇe*). The cave of the female lay devotee *Tissā* had been given to the *Saṅgha* of the four quarters, present and absent (*agata-anagata-catu-diśa-śagaśa*). Another inscription in *Vessagiriya* (IC 79), a woman named *Cittā* is particularly mentioned as the wife of the chief *Palikada* and daughter of the chief *Surakkhita* (*Parumaka-Palikada bariya - Parumaka-Śurakita-jhita upaśika-Citaya leṇe*

śagaśa catu-diśa). *Cittā* had also donated a cave to the *Saṅgha* from the four quarters. The other inscription in *Vessagiriya* (IC 88) highlights how *Sumana* had donated a cave to *Saṅgha*, and it is also mentioned that chief *Sumana* is the son of the chief *Visadeva* (*Parumaka-Viśadeva-puta parumaka-Sumanaha leṇe śaga-niyate*). The inscription in *Mihintalē* (IC 24) also highlights familial ties: *Uti* and *Somadeva* sons of the chief *Potimaśa* had donated the cave to the *Saṅgha* who are present and absent (*Parumaka-Potimaśaha puta Utiya ca Śomadevaha ca agatamagata śagaśa*).

The familial ties mentioned in rock inscriptions of pre-Brahmi era cannot be understood in the modern sense of ideological apparatuses, where the family acts as a unit of consumption. The traditional forms of families were leisure-based, and productive forms of capitalism were unknown. The factory system of production was not technically possible, and lifestyles and consumption patterns were different (Harris, 2021). Epigraphic evidence from this period shows that the family functioned as a fundamental social institution; kinship relations occupied a central and organizing role in societal life. The regulation and reproduction of social, cultural, and economic affairs were primarily mediated through this familial unit. The notion of belongingness found in inscriptions such as the cave of *Uti* or that of the female lay devotee *Varuṇadattā* cannot be equated with the capitalist conception of private property. Rather, property in such societies was conceived as a collective resource. Therefore, the organization of the family itself served as a testament to this communal mode of possession and social reproduction.

“The use of the term ownership” [in ancient Sri Lanka] raises a number of difficult, and in some cases unanswerable, questions. It is not clear how far the rights of these ‘owners’ extended.” (Gunawardana, 1979)

Within Lockean philosophy, liberty and livelihood are understood as linked to an individual's capacity to control and utilize private property (Hayek, 2011). In ancient Sri Lankan society, conceptions of liberty and livelihood can be understood as spiritual affiliation rather than a material possession. There is no evidence to suggest that labor was integrated with common land in order to transform it into private property for the purposes of individual wealth accumulation. Nevertheless, a number of pre-Brahmi inscriptions, in contemporary academic literature, have been interpreted through the prism of modern property relations, producing translations that misleadingly suggest modern notions of private ownership. For instance, an inscription discovered at Vessagiriya, Anurādhapura (IC 85), reads: *Gapati-Naga-puta-Tiśaha leṇe śagaśa*.

This inscription has been translated as “the cave of Tissa, son of the householder *Nāga*, [is given] to the Saṅgha.” Such a translation, however, relies on a possessive case interpretation of *Tiśaha*, which creates the misleading impression that the cave constituted Tissa's private property. Comparable interpretive issues arise in other inscriptions, where suffixes such as *-sa*, *-sha*, and *-ha*—appearing in terms like *Putasha*, *Mitasha*, and *Devaha*—have frequently been read as markers of possession. In early pre-Brahmi inscriptions, these suffixes also functioned in dative and instrumental cases (Dhammananda, 2018). Uncritical examination of linguistic constructions could complicate modern interpretations of certain ideas, for example, private ownership. In the *Vessagiriya* inscription, the phrase “the cave of Tissa, son of the householder *Nāga*” has decontextualized its historical meaning, and at the same time, obscured the communal and religious significance.

The centrality accorded to family and kinship in early Sri Lankan civilization warrants examination in relation to its underlying mode of production. The societal structures of ancient Sri Lankan society sustained and reproduced with an identical social order; within such traditional kinship systems, blood ties and communal obligations were instrumental.

This stands in sharp contrast to the individualistic and rationalized orientations characteristic of modern socio-economic relations (Angel & Angel, 2017). The early systems relied on the sense of community, cohesion, and shared identity, supported by family, religion, and customary practices. Social organization was premised on a solidarity of sameness. Therefore, collective well-being was prioritized over individual benefit. However, in early Sri Lankan society, some forms of bureaucracy can be identified through written communications on rock inscriptions. Since these inscriptions were frequently meant to communicate social positions and hierarchies, they indicate that Sri Lankan society between the 3rd century BCE and 1st century CE was bureaucratically organized, though not in the sense of modern capitalist bureaucracy. For example, an inscription found in *Situlpawwa*, *Korawakgala*, mentions a treasurer of a great king.

The inscription (IC 1035) “the cave of Chief *Cema*, son of Chief *Sumana* and treasurer of the great king *Pita*, has been dedicated to the Saṅgha of the four quarters, both present and absent, during the reign of King Tissa” (*Pita-maharajhaha baḍakarika parumaka-Śumana-puta parumaka-Cemaśa leṇe rajha-Tiśaha rajhiyaśi niyate agata-anagata-catu-diśa-śagaśa*) indicates the interconnection between administrative authority and religious patronage. It illustrates how positions of political and economic responsibility were depicted by epigraphic communication. Similarly, an inscription at *Piccaṇḍiyāva* refers to a minister serving under a sub-king (*Uparajha-amatiha aya-Mahaśenaha*). It provides evidence of the bureaucratic stratification of early Sri Lankan society, where the integration of political hierarchy into religious endowment practices is obvious.

Some inscriptions depict the bureaucratic and ceremonial dimensions of early Sri Lankan society. The *Aṭugoda* inscription (IC 797) mentions a person named *Batagu*, a minister, who was responsible for managing the royal kitchen. His role brings an idea that both administrative authority and monarchy were close (*Bata-Śiṇaha Batagu-amataha Gamika-Śivaha*

śagaśa). This inscription is translated as “The cave of Lord *Siṇa*, of the minister *Batagu*, and of the village-councillor *Siva*, [is granted] to the Saṅgha.” Similarly, an inscription at *Riṭigala*, *Karambāhinna*, mentions the name of *Kutaragaya*, a figure entrusted with performing specialized services at royal and religious events (*Parumaka-kutaragaya-Veluha leṇe*). While another inscription from *Periya-Puliyankuḷma* refers to *Velu*, designated as Superintendent of Horses. His wife *Tissā* is also mentioned (*Parumaka-aśa-adeka-Veluśa jhaya Tiśaya leṇe*). Collectively, these records highlight the manner in which royal service roles, ranging from culinary management to ceremonial functions and the supervision of cavalry, were connected to religious dedication. The administrative hierarchy had been embedded within the broader framework of Buddhist patronage.

In an inscription (IC 379) discovered at *Nācciyārmalai*, a Director of Dance named *Nacadaka* is mentioned (*Abagamiya Nacadaka-aḍi śagaśa*). The inscription mentions that *Nacadaka*, the director of dance had donated a canal in *Ambagāma* to the Saṅgha. The inscription depicts an act of religious patronage, and social recognition of performing arts and artists in early Sri Lanka. The intersection of artistic, socio-economic, and religious spheres is also represented by this inscription.

4. RESEARCH GAP

Though pre-Brahmi inscriptions are widely available in Sri Lanka, the majority of the literature to date has concentrated on their linguistic and epigraphical features, and scholarly attention has rarely been paid to the sociocultural aspects of early Sri Lankan civilization rarely paid. This study aims to examine how these inscriptions depict the roles and status of women in early Sri Lankan society and how they reflect the interactions between the family, community, and religious institutions. Reconstructing the communicative intentions and societal implications in these ancient texts is conducted by combining epigraphical, social, and cultural analysis.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do early pre-Brahmi inscriptions depict women's roles and status in ancient Sri Lankan society?

How do family structures, community groups, and religious institutions interact in these inscribed communications?

What can we learn about the developing administrative structures and bureaucratic functions of the era from the communicative practices found in these inscriptions?

6. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used here is epigraphical analysis with some critical components. It involved a detailed analysis of inscriptions produced between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century BCE in Sri Lanka. The main data set for this study consists of 244 Early Brahmi inscriptions from the 3rd century to the 1st century BCE. Using the compilation of Nandasena Mudiyanse, the texts from the Mihintale inscriptions to the Madabavita inscriptions were analyzed to reveal the communicative practices of the period. The study has also focused on linguistic features and sociocultural meanings in the communications. Additionally, attention has been paid to contextualizing the case, giving serious thought to its socio-cultural significance.

7. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

During the period under study, Sri Lankan society was based on cooperation with closely knit communities and administrative functions assisting one another. It is also demonstrated that people who lived in the period had strong relationships and common factors that contribute positively to social life, by providing identification, support and social cohesiveness. The inscriptions reveal two kinds of functions which prevailed in the society of that time: latent functions and manifest functions (Merton, 1968). Specific talents possessed by individuals were not considered less valuable in this society, as they

were granted highly respectable positions. For example, a director of dance was a respected figure in that society.

The cohesion and integration of society stemmed from the homogeneity of individuals, with people feeling connected through similar social circumstances and kinship ties within familial networks. They were held together by shared values, beliefs, and traditions, and it is confirmed by the reciprocal gifts given to the monks in return for their moral leadership (Cheal, 1988). Those who offered places for religious dignitaries recognized the social importance of religious structures in maintaining moral order and unity. The social organization, based on different hierarchies and categories, was intended to serve manifest functions, as it was designed to run social institutions. Some individuals like *Batagu*, *Nacadaka*, and *Kutaragaya* mentioned in those inscriptions were performing manifest functions by maintaining order in the society.

The religious institutions (cave monasteries) widely mentioned in these inscriptions also played a pivotal role in early society. These religious institutions had a latent function of sustaining the entire socio-economic process, with some hidden effects on social institutions. Since these written communications had considerable influence on social structures and categories, they highlight how Sri Lankan people at that time were serious about strengthening social integration and allowing people from different backgrounds to function together within the social setup. The inscriptions reveal a complex system in which different parts (institutions, roles, etc.) work together to maintain stability and meet the societal needs of that time. For example, an inscription found in *Vessagiriya*, *Anurādhapura*, mentions a goldsmith (*Taladara-Nagaya-puta-Devaha leṇe agata-anagata-catu-diśa-śagaśa* - IC 80). An inscription found in *Periya-Puliyankulma* highlights a copper worker (*Tabakara-Tiśa-puta Roṇigutaśa leṇe* - IC 350). Other inscriptions describe gem cutters (IC 546), iron workers (IC 301), potters (IC 1198), weavers (IC 807), and traders (IC 696). One

inscription even mentions a monetary system and currency (IC 791).

The epigraphic evidence points to a society that had moved far beyond mere subsistence, possessing an economy that could generate the surplus wealth required to fund extensive religious patronage. *Paranavitana*'s readings denote the occupational and administrative identities of the donors and reveal the social prestige accorded to specialized trades. For example, the metallurgical industry is well represented.

The *Vessagiriya* records show specific trades which extend into the military and defence infrastructure besides base metals. IC 84 explicitly names an armament or weapon manufacturer: *Upaśaka-vamakaraka-tiśaha leṇe* (The cave of the lay devotee weapon-maker Tissa). Military positions are also commemorated in stone, as in the case of the reference to an equestrian or cavalryman in IC 77: *Aṇikaṭa-śoṇa-pitaha bariya [u]paśika-ti[śa]ya leṇe agata-anagata-catu-diśa-śagaśa* (The cave of the female lay devotee Tissa, wife of the father of the equestrian Sona, to the Sangha of the four quarters, present and absent). *Paranavitana*'s translations reveal a thriving network of domestic commerce and artisanship, alongside heavy industry. The inscriptions frequently refer to merchants (*vaṇija* - IC 696) and mariners (*navika* - IC 94), implying a proactive participation in trade networks. The existence of specialized artisans such as gem cutters (*maṇikara* - IC 546), weavers like *Matta* of *Hakulavi* (*Hakulaviya pehekara-Mataha leṇe* - IC 1160) and potters (*kubakara* - IC 1198) indicates a diversified manufacturing economy. The mention of a monetised system and currency (*kahavana* - IC 791) implies an economy of transactions with a monetised system rather than a purely barter system. Inscriptions go beyond occupational identities and emphasize kinship in their communicative practices, which implies that the social structure was firmly rooted in family ties. Rarely do the inscriptions refer to an individual alone. For example, IC 83 proudly traces the lineage of the donor back through three generations to establish his pedigree: *Śoṇutara-kulaha marumakane śumanaha pute soṇutaraha leṇe*

(The cave of Sonuttara, son of Sumana and grandson of the Sonuttara family). Likewise, the high social status of the landed or wealthy property owner is explicitly recorded in IC 85: *Gapati-naga-puta-tiśaha leṇe śagaśa* (The cave of Tissa, son of the householder *Naga*, to the *Sangha*). The practice turned the rock caves into public archives of family history.

Most notably, the epigraphic record demonstrates a society where women held the economic agency to function as independent donors, frequently with the backing of their family ties to establish their social standing. The *Vessagiriya* records provide clear evidence of female patronage giving women the same formulaic permanence as male donors. We see donations by lay female devotees (*upaśika*) who had the legal and economic right to dedicate property to the monastic community. IC 79 shows how women marked their status through double lineages: *Parumaka-palikadasa bariya parumaka-śurakhita-jimjha ta upaśika-citaya leṇe śagaśa catu-diśa* (The cave of the female lay devotee *Citta*, the daughter of chieftain *Surakkhita* and the wife of chieftain *Palikada*, to the *Sangha* of the four quarters). Another example is *Parumaka-palikada-puta-harumaha jhaya tiśaya leṇe śagaśa* (The cave of *Tissa*, wife of *Haruma*, son of the chieftain *Palikada*, to the *Sangha*). These inscriptions demonstrate the development of a bureaucratic hierarchy, which was part of the life of the community. The recurring title *Parumaka* (chief or noble) indicates an established administrative class that controlled local resources and made decisions for the group. The *Vessagiriya* inscriptions show how this administrative power was often hereditary, laying out in detail the dynasty of one chieftain, *Parumaka Palikada*. IC 81 describes his son's possession of the elevated title: *Parumaka-palikada-puta parumaka-maha-harumasa leṇe catu-disa-śagaśa* (To the cave of the chieftain *Maha-Haruma*, son of the chieftain *Palikada*, to the *Sangha* of the four quarters). Analysis of this sample indicates that cave donation was a common shared cultural practice for people of all social strata, from local weavers and weapon makers to the high-ranking *Parumakas*. They had special skills and

administrative duties that were highly respected and forever etched in stone, a monument to a society that was unified, economically diverse and well-ordered. These inscriptions evidence the emergence of a bureaucratic hierarchy integrated into community life. The repeated use of the title *Parumaka* (chieftain or noble) in the sample shows an established administrative class that controlled local resources and directed group decisions. The analysis of this sample shows that the practice of cave donation was a common cultural practice shared by people from all walks of life, from local weavers and guild leaders to high-ranking *Parumakas*. They had specific skills and administrative duties that were deeply respected and forever etched into stone, a monument to a society that was unified and well ordered.

These social structures had been woven with a variety of domains in kinship; their classification of social functions had been a central aspect of culture (Eastwood, 2024). The way those people understood the family cannot be perceived through the lens of the modern Eurocentric and Victorian family that is manifested in many post-colonial fields including Sri Lanka. The modern family is viewed as an essentially private, domestic institution without wider political significance. But in the case of ancient society, Sri Lankan society gave pride of place to the family as those extant communications in the rock inscriptions confirm. Hence, family affairs in between 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE Sri Lanka were not subjected to relations within the household, the control of property, and the concept of privacy to a sustained analytic scrutiny. The notion of the “private” world of the family as a haven from the “public” world of work and competitive economic relations emerged in a later stage of human history, particularly in the European world, as an ideological construct that was itself a suitable object of analysis. According to Thorstein Veblen, the rise of private property cannot be attributed to any inherent right of possession, nor to the repeated use or accumulation of material goods (Veblen, 1961). Veblen argued that the institution of private property arose during early human societies when they captured human beings, specifically women through warfare. In the early, so-

called “savage” stage of human development, individuals lacked a notion of ownership; instead, they related to objects as if they were organic extensions of themselves, forming part of what Veblen terms the “*quasi-personal fringe*.” This conception transcends ownership, since ownership presupposes detachment: that which is owned must first be acquired, and thus stands apart from the owner (Tran, 2017).

The emphasis placed on the women’s community indicates that the difference between men and women did not necessarily imply inequality; rather, different roles of men and women varied. Neither group was considered superior or inferior. It is evident that both were valued and necessary for their communities. A semiotic reading of the inscriptions informs that female identity in early Sri Lanka was articulated through simultaneous affiliations to both family and religion. For instance, the inscription *Aṇikaṭa-Śoṇa-pitaha bariya [u]paśika-Ti[śa]ya leṇe / agata-anagata-catu-diśa-śagaśa* records that “the cave of the female lay devotee Tissā, wife of the father of Sona, the Cavalryman, [is given] to the Saṅgha of the four quarters, present and absent.” This formulation demonstrates that while women were situated within familial lineages, they were also recognized as active participants in religious patronage. The evidence suggests that neither kinship structures nor the institutional authority of Buddhism excluded women from significant roles in social and devotional life. Numerous comparable inscriptions across the island reinforce this observation; for example, one from Mihintale states: *Gapati-Vega-jihitaya upaśika-Viśa[kaya leṇe]*, translated as “the cave of the female lay devotee Visākā, daughter of the householder Vega” (IC 5).

Inscriptions from *Dīyatitta-vāva* (IC 165), *Brāhmaṇayāgama*, *Riṭigala: Marakkala-Ulpota* (IC 260), *Dimbulāgala of Māravīdiya* (IC 273), *Mutugalla* (IC 303), *Kurunākalu* (IC 319), *Erupotāna* (IC 331), and others are similar, mentioning how women were given a prominent place in society. This shows that women in ancient Sri Lankan society could enjoy certain rights, such as

owning property, engaging in social activities, and participating in religious activities. No hierarchical repression of women can be seen in Sri Lankan society during the period between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE. They were not considered a gender that had to remain subordinate to men. It implies that the Buddhist traditions did not impose strict gender roles, restricting women’s freedom.

No male supremacy can be identified or inferred from the social and economic relations that can be traced from inscriptions. Features of non-class societies—such as cooperation, reciprocity, solidarity, generosity, patience, and respect—are manifested in the communications of ancient Sri Lankans, and no violence is evident in those contents. This was an agriculture-based society, where activities were based on cooperation between men and women. The portrayal of women in these inscriptions is free from stereotypes and biological determinism, unlike in medieval Europe.

Parker (1981) suggests that the social position of women in early Ceylon can be inferred from the precedence given to their names over those of men, even kings, in the records of the period. He notes a case in the context of primitive religion where a woman’s name takes priority, followed about a century later by the reign of Queen *Anulā* (47–42 BCE), who ruled the entire island for five years. Supporting this observation, Dr. Davids has highlighted how Buddhist texts consistently list women before men.

The status of women in Sri Lankan society between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE was inextricably linked to the economic and social processes. The most salient feature of this society was that it was not organized to subordinate women, and men had not become the dominant sex. Men and women in kinship groups were equally respected and participated in socio-cultural processes. This implies that the agriculture-based society in ancient Sri Lanka was not associated with the accumulation, storage,

and distribution of surplus, which were typically held by men.

Hence, it can be argued that the theses of the "overthrow of matriarchy" or the "world-historic defeat of the female sex" cannot be universalized, given the particularities arising from the existence of such societies in the Orient (Mojab, 2015). Matrilineal priority still persisted and was undeniable. Presumably, communistic societies with well-defined social organizations, less hierarchical in nature, allowed people to belong to the same community, where the material foundation did not repress one social group over another. In these inscriptions, no evidence of social oppression can be found. Particularly significant is the respectful place accorded to women; they did not appear overburdened with social responsibilities and seemed to enjoy much more freedom.

Parker (1981) observes that the *Mahavamsa* indicates women in early Ceylon enjoyed considerable freedom and autonomy. Even if some narratives are embellishments by the chroniclers whose work *Mahānāma* drew upon, they nonetheless suggest that such conduct by high-ranking women was regarded as conventional. Unlike the seclusion depicted in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there is no evidence of similar restrictions in Ceylon. For instance, in a *Jātaka* tale, *Vaedda* women are described as openly approaching shipwrecked traders, an interaction presented without any indication of impropriety or surprise.

In most European societies, the political economy was controlled by men, but not all men—only some men from the class that controlled the factors of production (Broomhall & Van Gent, 2011). This scenario was different in ancient Sri Lankan society, where the idea of private property was alien, and the role of family and kinship was distinct. In Eurocentric systems, which have influenced modern Sri Lanka men have taken greater control of the political economy. They have also taken greater control of the family, with families being patrilineal. However, by the period between 3rd century BCE and 1st century

CE, many aspects of Sri Lankan society were still matrilineal.

Engels (1884) pointed out that while patriarchy in classical antiquity and later European society was structured around monogamy, it consistently upheld a double sexual standard that placed women at a disadvantage. In modern industrial societies, such as the United States, family property relations have evolved toward greater equality compared to earlier systems dominated by paternal authority; however, imbalances in both economic and sexual power dynamics persist. The objectification of women based on private property was not witnessed in the rock inscriptions found in Sri Lanka from the pre-Brahmi era. The community of women was not treated as communal or common property. In ancient Sri Lanka, it is obvious women enjoyed greater agency.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the communications found in early Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka throw a strong light on the social, cultural, and religious practices of the people from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE. These inscriptions, found in various parts of the island, paint a picture of kinship, family, and community in the formation of societal structures in ancient Sri Lanka. They have also given an idea of a culture that had been intertwined with religious practices, where collective identity was given high regard. The most salient and noteworthy characteristics of these communications are the respect accorded to women in the ancient Sri Lankan society, suggesting a more egalitarian view of gender roles. The communication practices of the time, which largely focused on religious and social organization, also underscored the early bureaucratic functions of society.

9. REFERENCES

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