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## The Practice of *Sati* in Early Medieval India (C.AD 700-1400) - An Epigraphical Survey

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### Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to trace out the *sati* inscriptions in different regions of India from c.AD 700 to 1400. The survey of the inscriptions reveals that the practice of *sati* had become widespread in India with the coming of Muslims. This custom has been evidently found mentioned in the literary sources since the later Vedic times but the absence of epigraphic data in this context before the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD puts a question mark on the authenticity of literary data. The dates of the literary compositions are also questionable and therefore full reliance may not be placed on them. The increasing cases of *sati* are undoubtedly linked with the Rajput tradition of chivalry and warfare, which resulted in heroic deaths of innumerable warriors. The wives of these heroes in order to prove their pious and loyal character burnt themselves either together with the funeral pyre of their husbands or followed them in to death on a separate pyre. These two trends in the practice of *sati* are being represented by the terms *sahagamana* (going together with husband) and *anugamana* (following in to death after the cremation of husband's body).

**Keywords:** *Sati, sahagamana, anugamana, Rajput, inscriptions, Muslims*

### 1. Introduction

The term *sati* is derived from the Sanskrit root *sat* which literally meant as virtuous. A *sati* is thus to be regarded a woman possessing such quality. There are different expressions for *sati* in Sanskrit such as *sahagamana* (going together with husband), *anugamana* and *upagata* (following in to death after the husband has been cremated). Literary accounts reveal the prevalence of the custom of the sacrifice of the widow throughout the ancient period of history; however it appears to become gradually popular from C.AD 400.<sup>i</sup> The earliest datable reference to self immolation as *sati* occurs in the Greek accounts of Alexander's invasion of India in 316 BC.<sup>ii</sup> The first epigraphic reference to *sati* in the form of a memorial, dated in 510 AD is found at Eran near Sagaur district in Madhya Pradesh. The inscription engraved on a pillar informs us that the wife of general Goparaja, who died while fighting for his country against the Hunas immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre.<sup>iii</sup> The practice was extolled by the Smriti Writers of the Gupta period by preferably guiding the ascetic life for the widows.<sup>iv</sup> The most determined and rational opposition to this practice was made by Bana. (C.625 AD)<sup>v</sup> Altekar assumes an increase in the number of *sati* cases from C.AD 700 onwards on the basis of the statements of Lawgivers and Smriti writers, who came forward to extol this custom.<sup>vi</sup> Kalhana regards the practice of self-immolation on the husband's death as a noble conduct for both royal and non royal women.<sup>vii</sup> It was so much widespread in Kashmir amongst royal classes that it is often shown to take the form of competition between the queens.<sup>viii</sup>

### 2. Survey of Inscriptions

Despite the abundance of literary data attesting the gradual popularity of *Sati* custom in northern India, the may not be traced out without a systematic survey of the epigraphic records of India. The present paper is, therefore, aimed to explore the epigraphic data in different regions in order to trace the actual cases of the self immolation of the widows during the concerned period. The inscriptions of different regions for this purpose are being presented as follows:

#### 2.1. *Sati* Inscriptions of Rajasthan

##### 2.1.1. Four *Sati* Memorial Inscriptions from Chhoti Khatu:<sup>ix</sup>

- Place: Chhoti Khatu. Didwana Tehsil, Nagaur District.
- Findspot: Memorial Stones to the north of the higher Secondary School.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit (corrupt); Siddhamatrika.
- No.1: Date: Chaitra Sudi 4, VS 743/AD 686.
- Contents: Partly worn out. Seems to record the death of a lady named Gadhima Devi, wife of Uvataka.
- No.2: Date: Kartik Sudi 7, VS. 745/ AD 688.

- Contents: Records the death of a lady named Mamma, the wife of a certain Bauda.
- No.3: Date: Pausa badi 10, VS 749/AD 692.
- Contents: Records the death of a certain Devi wife of Pallaka.
- No.4: Date: Pausa badi 4, VS. 827/ AD.770.
- Contents: Records the death of Mosa, wife of certain Nauk.
- Comments: These epigraphs appear to be earliest memorial pillar inscriptions after the Eran Inscription. The inscriptions nowhere refer to the term sati, rather it is referred as upgata, which literally meant following into death of the husband.

#### 2.1.2. Ghanav (Kanvana) Inscription:<sup>x</sup>

- Place: Kanvana, Jodhpur district.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari.
- Date: Asadh Sudi 6, VS 1194/AD 1137.
- Contents: Death of Khichi Laxmana and his wife
- Comments: Khichi was a caste in Kanvana.

#### 2.1.3. Bassi Inscription:<sup>xi</sup>

- Place: Village Bassi in Parvatsar Tehsil, Nagaur district.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari characters.
- Date: VS 1189/AD 1132-33.

Contents: Records that Maha (rajadhiraja) Ajayayapaladeva, who was an ornament of the Chahamana family, went to heavens (brahmaloka), together with his three wives; including the chief queen (pattamahadevi) Somalladevi.

Comments:

- Of the three queens, only the name of the chief queen Somalladevi can be made out without any doubt, while the name of the second queen appears to end in Sthhalade, the name of the third queen seems to be Sridevi. The Chahamana king Ajayapala of the inscription is no doubt identical with Ajayaraja, who is known to have married Somalladevi. That this queen was enjoying a high status during the rule of her husband is proved also by the coins bearing her name evidently issued by herself found side by side with the coins of Ajayaraja.<sup>xii</sup>
- No other inscription of the reign of Ajayaraja has been discovered so far.

#### 2.1.4. Anvalda Inscription of King Someshvara of the Chahamana dynasty:<sup>xiii</sup>

- Place: Anvalda, Udaipur district.
- Findspot: Slab in the Victoria hall museum.
- Language and alphabet: Local dialect, Nagari.
- Date: Bhadrpada Sudi 4, VS. 1234/AD 1177.
- Contents: Damaged. Records the death of Jindara, son of Singhara along with his wife.

#### 2.1.5. Pal Inscriptions:<sup>xiv</sup>

- Language and Characters: Local Dialect, Rajasthan.
- No.1.Place: Pal, Jodhpur district.
- Date: VS. 1200
- Contents: Refers to death of the mother of certain Jodhararya as sati .
- No.2. Date: Pausa badi 14, VS.1244/ Nov.30, 1187 AD, Monday.
- Contents: Records the death of one Samdhar belonging to Dharkat jati and his wife as sati.

#### 2.1.6. Gotia Inscription:<sup>xv</sup>

- Place: Gotia, Jaal Tehsil, Nagaur district.
- Findspot: White marble memorial pillar near the tank.
- Dynasty: Chahamana.
- Language and Characters: Sanskrit, Nagari.
- Date: Pausa sudi 1, VS 1232 / Dec. 15, 1175 AD, Monday.
- Contents: Records the death by starvation of Ra Dada, son of Ra Salakhana of Vachha gotra and Dahima jati together with his wives Tribhumvanadevi and Va (ga) ni.
- Comments: Ra Dada seems to be a feudatory of the Chahamanas in this region.

#### 2.1.7. Butali Inscription:<sup>xvi</sup>

- Place: Butali, Degana Tahsil of Nagaur district.
- Findspots: Memorial Pillar set up in the north-eastern outskirts of the place.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari.

- Date: Asada badi 2, VS 1245/AD 1188.
- Contents: Records the death of the Mokala, son of Ra Modha, together with his wives named Suriya Devi and (va) jaladevi.

#### 2.1.8. Manglod Inscription:<sup>xvii</sup>

- Place: Manglod, Nagaur district.
- Findspot: Dadhimatimata temple, west face; copies of the same record on north and south face of the pillar.
- Date: Jyestha badi 6, VS. (12) 49/ AD 1192.
- Language and characters: Sanskrit, corrupt Nagari.
- Contents: Records the death of a certain Rayasiha, son of Jagu belonging to Dahima clan of Kshatriya race together with his seven wives such as Bhogaladevi, Dhamdhaladevi, Abhayadevi etc.

#### 2.1.9. Panchota Inscription:<sup>xviii</sup>

- Place: Panchota (Sambhar, Rajasthan).
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari characters.
- Date: VS. 1244, Margasirsa badi 2/AD 1187.
- Contents: Records the death of the Chahamanas King Vatsaraja together with his wife Visaladevi of Guhila gotra.

#### 2.1.10. Bhadana Inscriptions:<sup>xix</sup>

- Place: Village Bhadana, Nagaur district.
- Findspots: Sati stones on the south-western outskirts of the village.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari.
- No.1 Date: Margasirsa badi 12, VS.1234/ AD. 1178, November 18.
- Contents: Records the death of Rajapala of the Chahamanas family and the performance of sati by his wife.(name not clear).
- No.2 Magha sudi 15, VS. 1248/AD 1191.
- Contents: Records the death of mahasamanta Palhana and his wife.
- No.3 Date: Asvina badi 13, VS. 1193 /AD.1135, October 7, Monday.
- Contents: Records the death of Rajputra Valhana and the performance of sati by his two wives.
- No.4 Date: Chaitra sudi 10, VS.1245/AD 1188.
- Contents: Records the death of Ralhanadevi, wife of Visara.
- No.5 Date: Asada badi 13, VS. 1236/ AD 1179.
- Contents: Records the death of Vayuraja and his wife.
- No.6 Date: Margasirsa badi 12, VS. 1220/ AD 1163.
- Contents: Records the death of a person (name lost) and his wife.
- No.7 Date: Pausa badi 13, VS.1198/AD 1141.
- Contents: Records the death of Chelhana, son of Vimma Raja and his wife Ja (ga) baladevi.

#### 2.1.11. Sati memorial Stone Inscription of Unstara:<sup>xx</sup>

- Place: Unstara, Jodhpur district.
- Language: Regional.
- Date: VS 1237/AD 1181.
- Contents: Records that after the death of Guhila king Tihunapala his three queens named Vodani, Palhandevi, and Matadevi became sati.

#### 2.1.12. Sati Memorial Inscription of Badalu:<sup>xxi</sup>

- Findspot: Badalu, Jodhpur district.
- Language: Sanskrit.
- Date: VS 1249/AD 1192.
- Contents: The inscription refers that Sonaldevi, wife of Nalha, son of Rana Baroon of Parmara clan became sati on her husband's funeral pyre.

#### 2.1.13. Sati memorial Stone inscription of Kinsariya:<sup>xxii</sup>

- Findspot: Kaivaya Mata temple near Parvatsar.
- Language: Sanskrit, Rajasthani mixed.
- Date: VS 1300/AD 1243.
- Contents: Records that after the death of Dadhichik (of Dahiya clan) Vikram, son of Kirtisingh, his wife Nailadevi became sati. The installation of this stone pillar was made by their son Jagadhar.
- Comments: The inscription indicates that Dahiya were ruling over this area as feudatories of the Chahamanas.

2.1.14. Chirwa inscription of the time of Samarasimha of Mewar:<sup>xxiii</sup>

- Findspot: Stone outside the door of new temple at Chirawa, a village situated eight miles to the north of Udaipur in Mewar.
- Language and alphabet : Sanskrit, Nagari characters.
- Date: VS1330/AD 1273.
- Contents: After mentioning the genealogy of the kings of Mewar the text refers about the genealogy of another family known as Tamtarada, which rendered conspicuous services to the kings of Mewar. In that family one Pamparaja was killed fighting with the army of *Suratrana* (Sultan) near Bhutala. From amongst his four sons one Balaka was died fighting for Jaitrasingh in a battle. His wife Bholi unable to bear the pain of separation from her husband became *sati*.

Besides, these following epigraphs recording the cases of *sati* have been noted by Dashrath Sharma.<sup>xxiv</sup>

- Inscription, (VS 977/AD 920)- *sati* Semvala devi, wife of Ranuka.
- Puskara Inscription: Wife of Thakura Guhila.
- *Sati* Kanahulta, mother of Chandamahasena of Dholapura.
- *Sati* . . . . . wife of Sindara Dod. VS. 1234/AD 1177.
- Nine *satis*: Wives of Bagadya Salakhana.
- *Sati* Hamiradevi, wife of Mangaliya Rava Siha.

2.2. Sati Inscriptions of Madhya Pradesh2.2.1. Gird Inscription:<sup>xxv</sup>

- Place: Gird, Gwalior district.
- Findspots: Archaeological museum, coin No.26.
- Date: Vaisakh sudi 14, VS. 962/ April 10, Thursday 906.
- Language and Characters: Sanskrit, Nagari.
- Contents: Fragmentary Records that a lady named Nanna, daughter of
- Doddhasiddha, burnt herself as *sati*.

2.2.2. Khaira copper plates of Yasahakarna Kalachuri:<sup>xxvi</sup>

- Place: Khaira, a village in Vindhya region about eight miles south-east of the Burhar railway station on the Katni Bilaspur branch of the Bengal Nagpur Railway.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari characters.
- Date: KE 823/AD 1071.
- Findspot: Two copper plates are held together by a stout ring passing through a hole.
- Contents: After mentioning the genealogy of early kings of the Kalachuri dynasty. The inscription mentions about Gangeyadeva, who became famous as Vikramaditya. Then it is referred that Gangeyadeva died with his 100 wives at the foot of Banyan tree at Prayag. The basic aim of the inscription is to record the royal donation of a village by Yasahkarna to a Brahman for gaining spiritual benefit. Yasahkarna is referred in the inscription as son of Karnadeva and grandson of Gangeyadeva Kalachuri.

2.2.3. Jabalpur Copper Plate Inscription of Yasahakarnadeva:<sup>xxvii</sup>

- Place: Jaulipattana or Jauli Patam, Jabalpur District.
- Date: Magha sudi 10, KE.874/AD/1122, December 25, Monday.
- Contents: Records that Gangeyadeva, the Kalachuri and son of Kokalla, who has become famous under the name of Vikramaditya, for striving after final beatitude . . . when fond of residing at the foot of the holy fig. tree at Prayaga, found salvation there together with his hundred wives.
- Comments: The Khaira copper plates cited above and the Jabalpur copper plate Inscription furnish the same evidence. The inscriptions in both cases are neither found on *sati* stone nor directly refer to *satis* but provide a significant evidence of *sahagamana* by the Kalachuri queens.

2.2.4. Bhadwar Inscription:<sup>xxviii</sup>

- Place: Badwar, Rewa Distt.
- Findspot: Stone slab locally called the image of Ansul Deviji, inside a small kuti.
- Language and alphabet: Local dialect, Nagari characters.
- Date: Saka. 1067, Pausa badi 9/AD 1145, December 10, Monday. The month was Purnimanta.
- Contents: Partly damaged. Records the performance of *sati* by a lady named Ajirmata of the village Vumtaha. The name of sutradhara Dejavati is also referred.

2.2.5. Sheorinarayan Inscription of Jajalladeva II: <sup>xxix</sup>

- Place: Sheorinarayan, a well known place of pilgrimage on the left bank of Mahanadi, thirty eight miles south-east of Bilaspur district.

- Findspot: Stone built into the plinth of the temple of Chandrachudeshvara.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari characters.
- Date: KE 919/AD 1167.
- Form of Inscription: Prashasti composed by Kumarapala of Kshatriya race.
- Contents: Prashasti belongs to the reign of Jajalladeva of Kalachuri dynasty of Ratanpur. The immediate object of the inscription seems to record the donation of a village by Amanadeva, descendent of collateral branch of the Kalachuri dynasty for the maintenance of the temple of God Chandrachuda's daily worship and the erection of a temple of Durga in front of the shrine by Vikannadeva, an uncle of Amanadeva. The lines 30-31 of the inscription refer that while Jajalladeva died fighting in the battle field, his wives took him to their home from the battlefield and his three queens being solely devoted to him followed him as sati in order to enjoy the celestial pleasure in the company of their husband.

#### 2.2.6. Sati Stone Inscription of Mahakumara Harishchandradeva:<sup>xxx</sup>

- Place: Hoshangabad.
- Findspots: Sati stone kept under a banyan tree near State Bank of India.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari characters.
- Date: Pausa sudi 5, VS.1253/ AD 1196, December 26, Thursday.
- Dynasty: Paramara of Malwa.
- Contents: Damaged at the end. Records the death of Talwa, the wife of Tamvasiha, the son of Rajagasih.

#### 2.2.7. Sati Pillar at Gurji:<sup>xxxi</sup>

- Place: Gurji, Jabalpur district.
- Language: Sanskrit, Nagari characters.
- Date: VS. 1399/ AD 1342.
- Contents: Records the death of a woman named Jasudevi by committing sati. She is referred as the wife of Vijayadeva of Srivastavya Kayastha community.
- Comments: There are seven sati pillars at the same place including this one but the contents of the rest ones are not clear and legible.

#### 2.2.8. Bamhangayan Sati Stone Inscription:<sup>xxxii</sup>

- Findspot: Stone slab.
- Place: Village Bamhangavan in Murwara subdivision of Jabalpur district
- Language: Sanskrit, Nagari characters of 14<sup>th</sup> century.
- Date: VS 1404/AD 1347.
- Ruler: Maharajadhirja Virahrajdeva of Uchahada (modern Uchahar, a railway station near Maihar).
- Contents: The inscription records that Raja Manigadeu (Manikyadeva), who was son of Raja Sahaju of the Somagauri gotra and was born in Agrawal vamsa was killed in battle fought at the village of Kalahara situated in the Milhiya vishaya and that his wife Rewa, the daughter of Suragachandra became sati on his funeral pyre.

### 2.3. Sati Inscriptions of Uttar Pradesh

#### 2.3.1. Son Stone Inscription:<sup>xxxiii</sup>

- Findspot: Memorial *sati* stone.
- Place: Son, Mathura district.
- Language: Local dialect, Nagari script.
- Date: Bhadra Sudi 7, VS. 1409/ AD1352.
- Contents: There is a carved figure of a warrior riding a horse with his wife sitting in front of him. The inscription consists five lines which are not fully readable as the stone is chiseled off and broken but the term *sati* is clearly referred. The widow who is found in carving with her husband is probably the one who burnt herself on the funeral pyre of her husband.

#### 2.3.2. Agra inscription:<sup>xxxiv</sup>

- Findspot: Stone built into the *sati* burj.
- Place: Tehra Rawat village in Agra district.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari Characters.
- Date: VS 1425/AD 1369.
- Contents: The inscription refers that during the reign of a Muslim ruler Sultan (name unclear) a lady named Uma, daughter of Vasudeva committed *sati*. The name of mason who set up the pillar is recorded as Sri Sirma.

2.3.3. Sati inscriptions at Ajayagarh fort:

- Findspot: Stone in Ajayagadh fort.
- Language and alphabet: Sanskrit, Nagari characters
- No.1- Date: VS 1346/AD1288.<sup>xxxv</sup>
- Contents: A sati inscription but the contents are not fully legible. The inscription records the name of Bhojavarman of the Chandella dynasty. Probably it was during his reign that a lady for whom the record was inscribed became sati.
- No.2- Date: VS1365/AD 1308.<sup>xxxvi</sup>
- Contents: Inscription refers to one Kucaladevi, who committed sati. Her husband's name is not legible.
- No.3- Date: VS 1368/1311.<sup>xxxvii</sup>
- Contents: Refers to one sati named Bal Subhatta during the reign of Chandella ruler Hammirvarmadeva.

2.4. Sati Inscriptions of South India2.4.1. Hero Stones of Hirekpur Taluk, Dharwar district:<sup>xxxviii</sup>

- Findspot: Hero stone set up near a temple.
- Place: Bhairavanapada, Hirekpur Taluk, Dharwar district.
- Language: Tamil.
- No.1-Date: Kartik Vadi 10, VS 1438/AD 1381AD.
- Contents: Damaged, records that two women wives of Paleya nayaka and Singana, committed sati. Their husbands were killed in some encounter.
- No.2- Next inscription in the same order belonging to same date lying near the same temple, in same language records that Abe Nagati, wife of Vobeya nayaka committed sati.

2.4.2. Tirukkurungudi Inscription:<sup>xxxix</sup>

- Findspot: Vyaghrapatishvara temple at Cheydanganallur.
- Place: Cheydanganallur, Tirunelveli Distt, Srivaikuntam Taluk, Madras.
- King: Maravarmana Srivallabh of Pandya dynasty, year 16+1 of a era which is unidentified.
- Language and alphabet: Tamil.
- Contents: Records the grant of land to God Mahadeva by Ambalakkuttan Anavaradanan alias Tennavan Murappunadu – Kilavan of Rajasrayanallur in Murappu – nadu for the merit of his daughter Purisandi on the occasion of her entering fire. The donor and his descendants undertook to pay the taxes on the land. Though, the donor does not give the reason it is obvious that she entered fire as sati.

2.4.3. Allur Inscription:

- Place: Allur in Tiruchirapalli district.<sup>xl</sup>
- Language: Tamil, characters of about the 10<sup>th</sup> century.
- Date: Third year of the reign of Parakesarivarmana.
- Contents: Records an endowment of money in favour of God Mahadeva at the temple of Nakkar in Allur in Uraiyur-Kurram by Gangamadekiyar, the queen of Virasola Ilangovilar, on the occasion of her entering fire.
- Comments: The inscription recalls to our mind the classical instance of Perungoppendu, the queen of Bhutpandiyam and of Vanavanmadevi, the queen of Sundarasola Parantaka II, who entered fire on the death of their husbands.<sup>xli</sup>

**3. Conclusions**

A careful analysis of the above inscriptions found at different places reveal some interesting points regarding the practice of sati which became widespread during the period under discussion.

- It becomes clear that the practice of sati was regarded as a kindly custom, which provided both him who had died and those offered themselves to a living death, with the assurance of the continuation of the long accustomed family life in the other world.
- It may be assumed that the custom was widely prevailed among the royal clans of northern India. The regional variations with regards to the practice of sati custom may safely be marked on the basis of the finds of the sati records in the form of inscriptions. The largest number of cases has been recovered from Rajasthan, where custom was deep rooted and practiced in a ceremonial manner since the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Besides, this custom had also been accustomed in Madhya Pradesh (Central India) since the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD probably as an influence of the custom practiced in Rajasthan. In Uttar Pradesh sati or self immolation of widow was practiced quite later in the fourteenth century. In case of south India sati does not seem to be a general practice owing to significantly better status of women as noticed by the Smriti writers of our period.<sup>xlii</sup>
- Thus, the cases of sati as revealed in the inscriptions appear numerous in Rajasthan. It may not be denied that sati was more commonly practiced in Rajasthan, which was the cradle land of the Rajputs and ruled over by different grades of feudatories under them. In the region of Madhya Pradesh or Central India the most significant areas such as Jabalpur, Gwalior, Rewa, and Vindhya Range were under the control of the Kalachuri kings and their feudatories. In Uttar

Pradesh the rule of Chandellas has been attested from the Ajayagadh fort inscriptions. The most logical answer to the popular practice of sati in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh (Central India) was that in this particular region the heroic deaths of warriors had become more common on account of fratricidal wars, internecine struggles and foreign invasions. The cases of jauhar from numerous literary Sanskrit sources and Muslim chronicles appear before us only in case of final victory of the Muslim invaders over a significant fort. Though, in general cases of death during the course of some wars sati was more commonly practiced. It may not be fully denied that the retrograded position of a widows in the upper class society might had also inspired them for choosing the option of self immolation or sati after the death of their husbands.<sup>xliii</sup>

The concentration of upper classes which more prominently included the royal clans of the Rajputs, their feudatories as well the officials becomes apparent towards the practice of sati, since practically only the members of this class would have several wives and therefore a head wife. It may also be accounted that the tendency towards ritualism is to be found mainly among the upper classes. For them the custom becomes a means of claiming and maintaining a social and political position. More than the other groups this class is in a position to stage an elaborate public ceremony aimed at establishing social boundaries.

- Sati was also marked out for honour as the dead widow being considered heroic. After her case was duly examined, an inscription in her memory was consecrated at public places including temples, forts etc. as a means to popularize her as a goddess or pious lady.

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37. Ibid.
38. ARIE, 1959-60, No. B. 541, p.78.

39. Ibid., 1959-60, No.B.363, p.83.
40. Ibid., p.25; South Indian Inscriptions, Vol.III, p.383ff.
41. ARIE, 1959-60, p.25.
42. For details see A.S Altekar, op.cit, p.12-29.
43. Ibid., pp.162-65.