

RUDRAMA DEVI : THE WARRIOR QUEEN

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Our history textbooks are replete with tales of powerful and brave Kings (read men), fighting hard in the battlefield to save their realm from threats within and outside the dominion. However, women are conspicuously missing from this 'valorous' narrative, where we rarely hear of female rulers and queens. Does this mean that not a single woman in history occupied the throne or ruled even one of the innumerable regional and nationwide kingdoms we hear of? Or even when historical sources highlight a few instances where women actually navigated through powerful positions, historians and writers of history



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chose to look the other way and subdue such narratives? Unfortunately, here, the latter seems to be the case. In this article I am going to introduce to you one such exemplary female who effectively ruled a kingdom in thirteenth century India and bravely fought a two-sided battle, the threat of territorial conquest from the outside and on account of being a woman, patriarchal oppositions from within her realm. She is Queen Rudrama-devi, the fourth independent ruler of the Kakatiya Dynasty of Andhra.

One of the most prominent rulers of the Kakatiya Dynasty, Rudrama-devi ruled the kingdom for a long period, roughly from 1262 to 1295 CE. The sway of the Kakatiya Dynasty (c. 1150 to 1323 CE) was spread over present-day Telangana region, with Orugallu (later Warangal) as its capital. We do not have much information on the early history of the Kakatiyas. Historians generally agree that they were the feudatories of

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the western Chalukya kings from around the eighth century, and it was King Rudradeva I who declared independence from the Chalukyas in 1163 CE. King Ganapatideva, who assumed the reign in 1199 CE, conquered some parts of coastal Andhra and played an important part in uniting the Telugu speaking regions. Ganapatideva had no sons to succeed him to the throne and it is in the lack of a male successor that he appointed his elder daughter Rudrama-devi as successor and heir to the Kakatiya throne. The father-daughter duo ruled jointly for several years, till Ganapatideva's death, when Rudrama-devi finally assumed the throne as an independent ruler in 1269 CE.

Despite being one of the longest serving dynasts of Kakatiya rule, Rudrama-devi has brazenly been neglected by most historians and writers of early Indian history. People knew very little about her, till historian Cynthia Talbot truly rescued "another daughter chosen as her father's successor from the historical oblivion,"[1] as she famously put it. In documents contemporary to her time, Rudrama-devi is frequently referred to as a 'male.' Talbot's inscriptional study shows that out of a total of 62 inscriptions, 52 (that is a significant 84 per cent) refer to her as mahārāja (King), using the masculine version 'Rudra-deva' as her name. An early fourteenth century text composed during the reign of her successor Pratāparudra, states that her father Ganapatideva took the decision to represent Rudrama-devi as a male and thereby call her Rudra. Some trace the roots of this complex arrangement to the putrikā ceremony,[2] whereby in the absence of sons, a man could appoint his daughter as 'male heir.' In the midst of intense opposition from the nobility, Ganapatideva resorted to this ancient observance. It is also widely believed that to keep up the appearance she actually wore masculine clothes in public and received training in martial and kingly skills from childhood. Although contemporary historical records are silent on how she reacted to this arrangement or how the concealment of her 'real' identity affected her emotionally, the famous Telugu movie (Rani Rudrama Devi, 2015) based on her life tries to capture the emotional turmoil she must have experienced. Quite early on in life she had to face the harsh reality of a patriarchal society where her identity as a woman was seen as the biggest obstacle in her claim to power. However, her long reign is testimony to the fact that she was not budged by all the opposition and discontent around, but instead proved her mettle as a successful warrior and administrator.

In spite of the popular belief that she was presented as a 'male', evidence from sources other than textual records indicates that in reality there was no actual attempt to deceive the public. Several visual sources discovered in Kakatiya territory portray her as a female and most importantly, Rudrama-devi chose to depict herself in feminine form on pillar brackets of the temples she constructed. Two sequential sculptures recently

discovered at Bollikunta village in Telangana's Warangal district show that Rudrama-devi died fighting a fierce battle with Kayastha chieftain Ambadeva. Interestingly, the portrait sculptures retained 'Rudrama-devi's commanding and imperial personality with characteristic gesticulation of a ferocious warrior.' According to the Superintending Archaeologist, D. Kanna Babu, 'the portraits also reveal her characteristic feminine qualities like 'oval face, soft cheeks, wide eyes, slender nose and a tender pair of lips.'[3]

Rudrama-devi's accession to the Kakatiya throne abounded with dissensions and protests. Warring neighbors like the Yadavas of Devagiri, the Gangas of Kalinga, and the Pandyas of Tamil region, to name a few, saw her as a weak ruler whose accession meant an opportunity for them to conquer and annex the Kakatiya territory. She chased the invading Yadava army back to Devagiri, defeating the Yadava king Mahadeva. Upon this important victory she adopted the title *rāya-gaja-kesarī*, meaning the 'lion who rules over the elephant kings', and built a commemorative pavilion in the Swayambhu temple of Warangal, choosing to depict herself as a woman warrior mounted on a lion, with her sword and shield in hand, evoking the image of the fierce goddess Durga. The Yadava records, however, present a different story, according to which their king Mahadeva 'spared' Rudrama-devi and 'allowed' her to win because she is a woman. When compared to other contemporary sources, this just appears to be king Mahadeva's tactics to save face, as defeat at the hands of a woman was considered even worse in those times. And what better way to gleam over it than create a false narrative of 'respect' and 'veneration' around it. The Yadavas were not her only opponents as in the year 1262 CE, the Ganga king of Kalinga Narasimha I marched into and occupied the Vengi region. It took Rudrama-devi a total of 15 years to recover back her territory, with the help of her commanders Poti Nayak and Proli Nayak. Moreover, the toughest challenge to her authority and rule came from the Pandyas.

People from the Kakatiya realm too rebelled against her. The feudatory noblemen vehemently opposed the rule of a woman. One of her rebellious feudatories, Ambadeva, who desired to become an independent ruler, joined hands with Kakatiya enemies like the Pandyas and Yadavas. As per legend and recently discovered visual evidence, Rudrama-devi died fighting his army like a true warrior. Not just Ambadeva, she had to face rebellion from her other own nobles also, including the famous Hariharadeva and Murarideva.

But though constantly entangled amidst the fear of political and territorial conquests, Rudrama-devi proved herself to be an able administrator. She started many new projects, like the completion of the Warangal Fort, the construction of which was started by her father. She increased the height of the walls, adding a second wall and a moat, rendering

it an extremely strong and impregnable fort. Rudrama-devi is also credited with the construction of a number of beautiful temples and buildings, with monolithic pillars and gateways (toranas) adding to the charm. Her initiation and contribution towards several welfare programmes is now being increasingly acknowledged. She is believed to have dug tanks aiming to bring several acres of land under cultivation, thereby enhancing agricultural productivity of the region. An inscription discovered at Chandupatla in 1994 by a soldier of Rudrama Devi's army Puvvula Mummadi, mentions a village tank, Rasamudram, built during the Kakatiya Samudram. Even before ascending the throne, she made it a point to familiarize herself with the people and places, frequently visiting several parts of her kingdom and pilgrimage centres. The personal connection Rudrama-devi sought to establish with the people she governed reveals her fine sense of politics and governmental capabilities.

Rudrama-devi introduced some radical changes in the administrative structure as well, for example, her new policy of recruiting people from non-aristocratic families into the army as commanders, was a significant development in those times and was highly objected too. Facing opposing from within her kingdom, this particular measure is believed to have been directed at gaining the trust of commoners and to win new loyalists. The art of warfare was integral to the establishment and success of Kakatiya dynasty from the very beginning. Taking this tradition forward Rudrama-devi introduced the nayankara system of military organization, which became extremely popular during the Vijayanagar rule. Under this system, the holders of nayankaras or Nayakas were granted a block of territory consisting several villages, in lieu of which they were expected to provide troops for the central Kakatiya administration, as and when needed. This system proved highly effective on several counts: it strengthened the organization of the Kakatiya army; resulted in building a loyal base of officers and simultaneously weakened the power of local nobles, who had become dominant by this time.

Rudrama-devi was married to Chalukya prince Virabhadra, a member of the Vengi Chalukyas, after Ganapatideva's conquest of Vengi in 1240 CE. Virabhadra is not heard of as discharging any significant political or administrative role. They had three daughters, Mummamma, Ruyamma and Rudrama, but none succeeded her to the throne. Instead Rudrama-devi designated her eldest daughter's son Prataparudra as heir.

Thus, ruling for close to four decades, Rudrama-devi strongly held her ground, and is now recognized as a great warrior, ruler and administrator of 13th century India. Venetian traveler Marco Polo paid glorious tributes to her for excellent administration

and rule, describing her as 'a lady of discretion, who always strove to achieve justice and equity.' But even he got her identity wrong, assuming that she is Ganapatideva's widow and not daughter, as in those times it was more common for widows acting as the King's regent, till a male successor assumed responsibility. Marco Polo is not the only one here as several other later historical texts from Andhra region described her as the Kakatiya king's wife and not daughter.

This extraordinary tale of bravery and courage clearly shows that it is not always that women were denied access to power; but even those exceptional circumstances when they did occupy the most powerful positions, their achievements and stories were often buried beneath the popular patriarchal narrative. The artificial but deep-rooted connections between the early Indian concept of kingship and masculinity rendered it necessary for even powerful and deserving women to adopt masculine identity. But at the same time, the very fact that this identity could be 'adopted' by embracing certain masculine ways poses a strict challenge to the biologically based ascription of social roles. It reveals the façade around the construction of feminine and masculine identities and the stereotypical social roles attached therewith.

Notes and References:

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2. We find a mention of the institution of putrikā in the Manusmṛti, during the discussion of property and inheritance rights. Scholars believe that the putrikā enjoyed all the rights and privileges of a son. Olivelle, Patrick., "Rhetoric and Reality: Women's Agency in the Dharmasāstras" in *Languages, Texts, and Society: Explorations in Ancient Indian Culture and Religion*. Anthem Press: 2011. p.252.
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