

Dresses and Ornaments of Women as revealed in Bengal Inscriptions

Jayanti Paul Choudhury

Ph.D Research Scholar, Calcutta University

Email - jayantipaulchoudhury@gmail.com

Abstract: Women possessed lofty position in society of ancient Bengal. We know very little about the actual lives of great women of ancient Bengal. Dresses and ornaments are regarded as reflection of society. Women loved to decorate themselves with fashionable dresses and precious jewellery. *Dukūla*, *Kṣauma*, cotton dresses were produced in Bengal. Women were habituated wearing necklaces, armlets, bracelets, elaborate girdles and anklets. The native women of countryside used to adorn ornaments of natural resources as flowers, buds, seeds, leaves etc. The wives of servants of town used to wear necklaces, ear-rings, anklets etc. Wearing of colorful

Key Words: *Dukūla*, *Kṣauma*, Cotton dresses, jewellery,

Food, clothing and lodging is the greatest necessary elements of life. If we want to make ourselves familiar with the cultural life of women in ancient Bengal, we should study dresses and ornaments wore by women of ancient Bengal. We acquire several significant indications from Bengal inscriptions about fashions of ancient Bengali women.

According to Kauṭilya, Bengal achieved great fame in textile industry in ancient times.ⁱ These wereⁱⁱ—

1. White and soft fabric [*dukūla*] manufactured in the country Vaṅga.
2. Black fabric as soft as the surface of a gem, manufactured in Puṅdra.
3. *Kṣauma* produced in Puṅdra. [North Bengal]
4. *Patrorṇā* produced in Puṅdra.
5. *Kārpāsika* [cotton fabrics]

So, it is significant that silk, cotton fabrics were well-used in ancient Bengal. *Dukūla* clothes were made from cotton that was produced in Gauḍa. *Kṣauma* and *dukūla* were synonymous terms as it is said in *Amarakoṣa*. It's a type of linen. The name of garment is *nicola* which was produced in Bengal. Clothes which were produced from silk was called *patrorṇa*. The great poet Kālidāsa refers *dukūla* dress in the poetry *Raghuvamśa*.ⁱⁱⁱ Women wore three pieces of clothes as their dress. The upper garment was called bodices i.e. *Kūrpāsakaḥ*. The lower garment was called *Nīvī* and the shawl was called *Nīvībandha*. *Nīvībandha* was a cord used by women.^{iv} In the third chapter of the *Kāvyaṁīmāmsā*, Rājaśekhara described the toilet of the women of Prācyā. Ladies were smeared with sandal-paste and embellished with necklaces. Married women painted their forehead with a mark of vermilion, a custom that existing even today.^v *Arthasāstra* mentions that *kṣaumavastra* was adorned and also named with their artistic designs.^{vi} The weavers of Bengal produced different types of fine clothes and muslins. *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, a famous novel of voyage praises the fine muslins of Bengal which were exported to Rome. Bengal was renowned for cotton. Bengali weavers also produced clothes from the thread of jute. These clothes are called as *Paṭṭavastra* which were worn for performing in ritual sacred rites and ceremonies.

Dukūla clothes were made from the cotton produced in Gauḍa in ancient Bengal. From the *Arthasāstra* we come to know three types of *Dukūla* had been produced in India. viz, *Vāṅgaka*, *Paṅḍraka* and *Sauvarṇakuḍyaka*. *Vāṅgaka* was produced in Vaṅga. The cloth was very much smooth and white. *Paṅḍraka* was produced in Puṅdravardhana. The cloth was green in color and glittered like pearl. It was made of cotton and was one of the best type of cloth of Indian people.^{vii} Women used to wear *śāḍīs*. The *śāḍīs* were much longer and generally reached upto ankle. The dhoti and *śāḍīs* were made of cotton. From the earlier sculptures of Pāhārpur we find that *śāḍīs* went round the lower part of the body, one end falling vertically behind the left leg in graceful folds. Modern Bengali ladies put on *śāḍī* to cover the lower part of the body. On that time the *śāḍīs* did not cover the upper portion of the body and it generally remained exposed, sometimes it was partially covered by a long narrow scarf i.e. *uttariya* or *oḍṇā*. A verse of the *Āryāsaptasatī* also show that the garment put on of the hips of woman.^{viii} The light and soft dress of a woman wore on the hips is mentioned in the verse 64.^{ix} A beloved lady wore a blue garment at the time of copulation at night.^x

We come to know scanty information from Bengali inscriptions about the indications of dresses and ornaments of Bengali women. Silken garment was used in ancient days in Bengal. In the Bāṅagaḍa Copper-Plate Inscription of Mahipāla I it is mentioned that Gopāla enjoyed earth like a devoted wife having for its variegated silken garments the four oceans tinged with lusts of numerous gems.^{xi} It is noticeable that Bengali ladies were very much

fond of adorning themselves with flowers. In the Bhagalpur Copper-Plate Inscription of Nārāyaṇapāladeva [v-16] it is stated that the garlands of Ketakī flowers placed on the tresses of siddha damsels.^{xii} Ladies were very much interested to decorate themselves from head to other parts of the body with flowers. The Edilpur Copper-Plate Inscription of Keśavasena throws light about decorating girls with blossoms.^{xiii} This inscription gives an idea that ladies embellished with colorful dresses and toilet in order to attract the mind of the people.^{xiv} From the Deopārā Inscription we learn that the king Vijayasena offered silken garments to the naked deity lord Śiva.^{xv} So, it is concluded that the use of variegated silken clothes by the Bengali women in ancient time was prevalent. Silk was woven with fine thread inscribed with precious stones in the Āmgāchi Copper-plate Inscription of Vīgrahapāla III . Women occasionally covered their breasts by a chauli or stanapaṭṭa and in a few cases by a bodice. In the poetry the *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* the poet Candracandra spoke about the simple and natural beauty of village women. Rural women did not choose the fine and luxurious fashions of the townswomen.^{xvi} A verse is indicated that a daughter of a villager wore yellow garment made by cotton thread.^{xvii} One of the poet Śubhāṅka delineated the picture of royal women adorned with flowers set with precious stones, necklaces, earrings, gold-plated bangles and anklets set with bells .They moved hither and thither and from the top of the sky-scraping palace they cast sensuous looks down on the handsome young men moving in the street below.^{xviii} In one song of *Caryāpada* reference is found that a śavarī girl wore peacock feathers and a garland of guñjarī on her neck and also kuṇḍalas in the ears.^{xix}

The ordinary people had no means to buy the fine clothes like Vāngaka and Paundraka. They put on clothes of cheaper quality. The poor women covered their body with ragged and torn clothes. In the book *Life in Ancient Bengal Before the Rise of the Pālas* it is signified the fact that "the women of the poor Brāhmaṇa families were forced to spin threads for their own clothes." ^{xx} The financial condition was miserable of the simple-minded village women made them satisfied with their simple dress and ornaments. The rich ladies of the town were passionate about to wear gorgeous dresses and ornaments. The Caryā songs throw light on the life of Śavaras. Śavara women liked to wear the garlands made of Guñja flowers. In one verse of the book *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* it is expressed that the village women used to put a mark of collyrium on the forehead and the bangles on their hands were made of the stalks of white lotus.

In Bengali inscriptions we find some references of toilets that were perpetual useful material for Bengali women decorating themselves. It may be stated that large number of tanks and lakes were to be excavated in front of temples as women could take bath easily before worshipping the God. In the Bhuvavaneśwar Inscription of Bhaṭṭabhadradeva there was a reference of a tank where lotus-faces beautiful damsels engaged in bath. The beauty of damsels causing infatuation to the poet that he penetrated the female bees attracted by reflections of the water.^{xxi} The Deopārā Inscription of Vijayasena refers to a large tank in front of the temple Pradyumneśvara , excavated by Vijayasena. Young virgins bathed in the lake .The poet fascinated their beauty that bees hovered about being attracted by fragrance of musk applied on the breast of city-damsels. They also applied Sandal powder on their body.^{xxii} We find some indications from Kṛṣṇadvārikā temple Inscription of Assam that Sandal wood paste, Sandal powder, aguru and camphor were used by women for garnishing themselves in ancient days.^{xxiii} After bathing camphor was often used as cosmetics for embellishment. In the Manahali Copper-plate grant of Madanapāladeva there was some indication that ascertained the fact leafy decoration of camphor applied to the cheeks of the women of eastern quarters.^{xxiv} It is stated in the Bhāgalpur Copper-Plate Inscription of Nārāyaṇapāla that Women were habituated for fashion using beautiful dresses and toilet. It was a custom that married women painted their fore-head with a mark of vermilion.^{xxv} It is a traditional usage for a chaste wife even today. They also reddened their low-lips with vermilion and used saffron as a cosmetic. They painted their feet with lac. In the Manahali Copper-plate grant it is cited that King Kumārapāla wiped away the vermilion marks of the wives of enemies at the time of conquering countries.^{xxvi} It caused widowhood. The use of vermilion is to be found in the old Sanskrit poetry *Pavanadūta*.^{xxvii} In the *Rāmacarita* the poet Sandhyākara Nandī referred some cosmetics like musk, black aloe, sandal, saffron, camphor etc.^{xxviii} The text *Govindalīlāmṛta* of Jadunandan Das gives a detailed account of toilet of a princess. Rādhā is going to an appointment of her beloved Lord Krishṇa. Lalitā, the maid of Rādhā decorated her that Krishṇa attracted to her. Here I give some description about her adornment. The princess Rādhā's hair was wet after her bath, was dried with the smoke of burnt dhupa and dhuna incense. After that her long curling locks were scented with soft-perfumed oil and with aguru. Lalita combed Rādhā's hair with a gold hair-comb and arranged it in beautiful braids. The braids were bound by a clip made of the precious stone called the Caṅkha-chuḍa. The braids were alternatively interwoven with a string of pearls and a garland of Bakul flowers. These all again were folded and bound into a knot by a fillet interwoven with golden threads. She wore a purple-coloured shift dress and over that a blue-coloured Sāḍī. The color of this Sāḍī was like that of a bee. It was called the meghāmbar or cloud-cloth and was made of very fine threads. A golden-threaded band was her girdle. The female attendant of Rādhā , Bishākā applied the perfumes of sandal, camphor and aguru for make-up. She wore pendant of blue stone-plated set in a golden leaf. She ornamented an emerald-plated necklace and the other pearl-necklace in the middle of which was a locket of gold studded with precious stones. For pleasing Krishna She garlanded a wreath of guñja fruits.^{xxix} Famous Bengali lyric poem *Gitagovinda* of Jayadeva has a reference of the dress of Rādhā. She wore a lower garment was *jaghanadukūlam* and a blue *nicola* apparently an outer garment covering her whole body.^{xxx}

Bengali women were very much fond of adorning their body with precious ornaments and jewellery. Women, probably married women decorated conch bangles. In the Deopārā Inscription of Vijayasena we came to know that the wives of Brāhmaṇas did not know how to use precious jewels and metals, so they were instructed by the city damsels on the proper use of it. They recognized the pearls from their similarity with seeds of cotton, pieces of emerald from their resemblance with leaves of Śāka, pieces of silver as bottle-gourd flowers. They also loved jewellery.^{xxxix} According to Ratikanta Tripathi the use of bracelet by women may be guessed from the description of the image of the earth as found in the Ghosrāvāñ Rock Inscription of Devapāla.^{xxxix} The rich ladies of the country used to wear ornaments made of valuable stones, sapphires, diamonds, pearls, emeralds, rubies, gold. Courtezans wore anklet bells that were tinkling and ornaments, were beautified with their bodies. It is stated that the wives of servants also decorated with precious stones. So it is concluded the fact that wearing of ornaments were one of the hobbies of women in ancient Bengal. In the forest the wives of fowlers used to wear necklaces made by Guñjā seeds. The Naihātī Copper plate of Vallālasena informs us that Vallālasena defeated the foes. After defeat of their husbands the wives of enemies moved about in the forest wearing the big pearl necklaces which was torn and marked with collyrium. It was used in their eyes. The wives of fowlers used the guñjā seeds as their necklaces.^{xxxix} So, it is considered that poor women who dwelt in the forest used forest resources for their decoration. The Deopārā Inscription throws the light on the use of ornaments of the wives of servants lived in city. The wives of servants of royalty decorated themselves with valuable stones, flowers, necklace, ear-rings, anklets, garlands and bracelets.^{xxxix} So, it is ascertained the fact that wearing ornaments was one of the prestigious hobby of ancient Bengali women. The young ladies loved to use lotus ear ornaments. We find in the Bādāl Pillar Inscription that ladies used girdles or waist chain.^{xxxix} The shell -bracelets worn by queen Maināmatī were very costly. Women used a large number bracelets as depicted from Pāhārpur Plate. In the poetry *Rāmacarita* of famous poet Sandhyākara Nandīn referred the ornaments of rich ladies set with diamonds, valuable stones, sapphires, diamonds, pearls, emeralds, rubies and gold.^{xxxix} In the book of D.C Sen *Glimpses of Bengal Life* revealed a local rumor story of queen Maināmatī. Here rich aristocratic men and women used to sit on golden couches, resting their feet on silver foot-stools. In the town the dwellers were opulent. The labour wage was Rs.6 per day. Even maid-servants did not wear cotton sādī but wore silk. People drank water from golden tumblers.^{xxxix} Bejoy Gupta, a well-known poet of the story *Manasāmaṅgalam* of 16th Century described a poor condition of Phullora who wore a garment of deer skin or bark lived in a wretched cot with her husband.^{xxxix} From this description it is stated significantly that the condition of local dwellers of remote area were not so good.

We come to know that Bengal society was famous for dancing and music. The courtesans wore close fitting tunic or pyjāmā and in addition a long oḍḍā which was loosely attached over the shoulder making of fine clothes, both arms were ornamented with gold, they were flower-garlanded, a lock of hair well-equipped by fragrance. The Edilpur Copper-plate Inscription mentioned that in the evening courtezans entertained royal people by pleasing notes emanating from moving anklets.^{xxxix} In the poetry *Saduktikarṇāmṛta* referred the dress and decoration of Bengal prostitutes.^{xl}

Here I ascribe some indications regarding the dresses and ornaments of Bengali women as revealed in Bengal inscriptions during the Pāla-Sena period. Women loved to decorate themselves and also beautified with make-up. Dresses and ornaments are the reflection of society of Bengal. Enriched women of the town accessorized their body with precious stones, jewelry. We find distinction between village women and town women. Village women were poor. They decorated their body with natural resources like flowers, fruits, seeds, leaves etc. The simplicity of ordinary women in respect of wearing ornament is corroborated according to their wishes. It is significant that the wives of the servants of the town wore precious jewellery. I have attempted to incorporate the status of women by studying the dresses and ornaments as revealed in Bengal inscriptions. We come to know that Bengal was famous for trading textile in ancient period.

ⁱ + "vāṅgakaṃ śvetaṃ snigdhaṃ dukūlaṃ, paunḍrakaṃ śyāmaṃ maṇisnigdhaṃ, sauvarṇakūḍyakaṃ sūyavarṇam"
[AŚ 2.11.17]

+ "tena kāśikaṃ paunḍrakaṃ ca kṣaumaṃ vyākhyātam" [AŚ 2.11.17]

ii SRABI of R.K Tripathi p 99

iii "Dukūlayugmaṃ" [*Raghuvamśa* - 7.18.19]

iv "Kūrpāsakaṃ" [*Rītusamhāra* 4.16.8]

v "Ādrādracandanakucārpitasūtrahārah
sīmanta-cumbisicayaḥ sphuṭabāhumūlah.
dūrvāprakāṇḍarucirāsvagurūpabhogād

gaurāṅganāsu cirameva cakāstu veśaḥ.. " [Kāvyaṁmāmsā 3.6]

vi "Life in ancient Bengal before the rise of the Pālas" of D.C Sen p 82

vii vāṅgakaṁ śvetaṁ snigdhaṁ dukūlaṁ, paundrakāṁ śyāmaṁ maṇisnigdhaṁ, sauvarṇakuḍyakaṁ sūyavarṇam" [AŚ 2.11.17]

viii "āgacchatānavekshitaḥ prṣṭhenārthī varātakeneva.

muṣitāsmi tena jaghanāmsukamāpi vodhuṁ naśaktena.."[Ās v-88]

ix "ambaramadhyani viṣṭaṁ tavedamaticapalamalaghu jaghanataṭam.

cātaka iva navamabhraṁ nirīkshamaṇo na tṛpyāmi .."[Ās v-64]

x "mṛgamadalepanamenam nīlanicolaiva niśi niṣeva tvam.

kālindiyāmindīvaramindindirasundarīva sakhī.. " [Ās v-456]

xii "ratnadyuti-khacita-catuh sindhu-citrāmsukāyāḥ"[Bānāgaḍa CP of Mahipāla I v-8]

xiii "siddhastrīṇāmāpi śirasijeṣvarpitāḥ ketakīnām.

patrāpīḍāḥ suciram-bhavan bhṛṅga-śabdānumeyāḥ"[Bhāgalpur CP of Nārāyaṇapāla v-16]

xiii "mañjarīparicītā dikkāminīḥ kalpayan pratyunmīlatu puśpaśāyakaśaśo janmāntaraścandramāḥ" [Edilpur CP of Keśavasena v 2]

xiv "sāyam veśavilāsinī-janaraṇamañjīra-mañjukhanairyenākāri vibhinnaśabdagaṭanā-bandhyantrisandhyam nabhaḥ" [Edilpur CP of Keśavasena v-9]

xv "uccitrāni digambarasya vasaṇānyardhāṅganāsvāmino ratnālamkṛtibhirvviśeṣitavapuḥ śobhāḥ śataṁ subhruvaḥ" [Deopārā Inscription of Vijayasena v-30]

xvi "bhāle kajjalavindurindukiraṇasparadhī mṛṇālānkuro

dorvallīṣu śalāṭuphenilaphalottamsaśca karṇātithiḥ.

dhamillastilapallavābhiṣavaṇasnigdhaḥ svabhāvādayam

pānthānmantharayatanāgaravadhūvargasya veśagrahaḥ.."[Saduktikarṇāmṛta 21.2]

xvii "yadavadhi vivṛddhamātrā vikasitakusumotkarā śaṇaśreṇī.

pītāmsukapriyeyam tadavadhi pallīpateḥ putrī.. " [Ās v-476]

xviii *History of the Bengali People* of N.R Roy p-259

xix "moraṅga pīccha parahiṇ savarī gīvat guñjarī māli"[Caryāpada 28]

xx *Life in Ancient Bengal Before the Rise of the Pālas* of D.C Sen p.82

xxi Bhuvaneśvar Inscription of Bhaṭṭabhadra v -26

xxii Deopārā Inscription of Vijayasena v-29

xxiii SRABI of R.K Tripathi p104

xxiv Manahali Copper-Plate Grant of Madanapāladeva v 16

xxv Bhāgalpur Copper-Plate Inscription of Nārāyaṇapāladeva v-7

xxvi "pratyarthī-pramadā-kadambaka-śiraḥsindūra-lopakrama....."[Manahali Copper-plate Grant of Madanapāla]

xxvii "yatra strīṇāmadhararucakanyastāsindūramudraṁ....."[Pavanadūtā v-40]

xxviii "kastūrī-kālāguru-malayaja-kāsmīra-karppūreḥ"[Rāmacaritam 3.35]

xxix *Glimpse of Bengal Life* of D.C Sen p 6

xxx "candanacarcita-nīlakalevara-pītavasana-vanamālī....."[Gītgovindam 1.4.1]

xxxi Deopārā Inscription of Vijayasena v-23

xxxii SRABI of R.K Tripathi p117

xxxiii Naihāṭī Copper-plate of Vallālasena v-8

xxxiv Deopārā Inscription of Vijayasena v 11

xxxv ".....mekhalāsyā jagataḥ"[Bādāl Pillar Inscription v-15]

xxxvi "vajra-vidūraja-muktā-marakata-māṇikya-nīlamaṇi-khacitaiḥ.

suradhāma-cāru-cañcan marīci-mañjarī-jālaiḥ.."[Rāmacaritam 3.33]

xxxvii *Glimpses of Bengal Life* of D.C Sen- p. 6

xxxviii *Ibid* p.8

xxxix Edilpur Copper-Plate Inscription of Keśavasena v-9

xl "vāsaḥ sūkshmaṁ vapuṣi bhujayoh kāñcanī cāṅgadaśrī-

mālāgarbhaḥ surabhimaṣṇairgandhatailaiḥ śikhaṇḍaḥ .

karṇottamaṣe navaśaśikalā nirmalam tālapatram

veśaḥ keśam na harati mano vaṅgavārāṅganānām .."[Saduktikarṇāmṛtam 20.5]

Abbreviation

AŚ - Arthaśāstra

Ās - Āryāśaptaśatī

SRABI - Social and Religious Aspect in Bengal Inscriptions

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