

# The Dharmaśāstric Proclamations in Odishan Inscriptions: A Study of Legal and Ethical Traditions in Epigraphy

Laxman Majhi<sup>1</sup>, Prof. (Dr.) Subash Chandra Dash<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Sanskrit, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.

<sup>2</sup>Adjunct Professor, Fakir Mohan University, Vyasa Vihar, Nuapadhi, Balasore, Odisha, Former HOD, Department of Sanskrit, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India.

**Abstract** – The legal and ethical traditions of ancient India are deeply rooted in Dharmaśāstric principles, which were frequently inscribed on stones, pillars, and other epigraphic materials in Odisha. These proclamations reflect a rich intersection of religious, social, and legal thought. This paper explores the Dharmaśāstric content of Odishan inscriptions, with a focus on land donation, protection, and its ethical implications as reflected in legal proclamations. Through a detailed analysis of select Sanskrit verses found in these inscriptions, this study examines the role of kings in upholding dharma (righteousness) through their stewardship of land and the consequences of unlawful land seizure. These proclamations offer valuable insights into the moral fabric of ancient Odishan society, emphasizing the significance of land as a divine gift and the ethical responsibilities of rulers and citizens.

**Keywords:** Odishan Inscriptions, Dharmaśāstra, Land Donation, Legal Traditions, Ethical Proclamations, Epigraphy, Dharma, Kingship.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Odisha, with its rich cultural heritage and religious significance, offers a wealth of inscriptions that chronicle the state's political, social, and legal history. These inscriptions, particularly those related to land grants and donations, provide valuable insights into the application of Dharmaśāstra ancient Indian legal and ethical texts in governance. The concept of *dāna* (donation), *rājadharmā* (the duties of rulers), and the moral consequences of actions such as land seizure are frequently depicted in Odishan inscriptions. Through a careful examination of select Sanskrit ślokaś from these inscriptions, this paper explores how the legal and ethical norms espoused by Dharmaśāstric texts were not only theoretical but actively applied in the governance and daily life of ancient Odisha.

The study focuses on the proclamations related to the donation and protection of land, highlighting the consequences for the donor and the recipient, as well as the penalties for those who unjustly seize land. These principles are central to understanding the intersection of law, ethics, and religious duty in the governance of ancient Odisha.

The Dharmaśāstric proclamations found in Odishan inscriptions often emphasize the sanctity of land and the moral responsibility of both rulers and subjects. The following verses highlight key ethical and legal principles surrounding land donation, protection, and the consequences of wrongful seizure.

### 1.1 Land Donation as a Virtuous Act

Several inscriptions from Odisha highlight the ethical significance of land donation, where both the donor and the recipient are considered virtuous individuals destined for heavenly rewards. The act of donating land is revered in Odishan inscriptions as a highly meritorious act. As stated in one inscription:

bhūmiṃ yaḥ pratigṛhṇāti yaśca bhūmiṃ prayacchati /  
ubhau tau puṇyakarmāṇau niyataṃ svargagāminau //1

(One who accepts land and one who donates land are both engaged in virtuous deeds and are assuredly destined for heaven.)

This verse emphasizes the spiritual merit attributed to land transactions, indicating that both the giver and the recipient of land are seen as performing an act of piety that ensures their entry into heaven. The exchange of land, in the form of a donation, is not just an economic transaction but a sacred act of virtue, with both the donor and the recipient considered virtuous and guaranteed a place in heaven.

### 1.2 Marks of Land Donation

The rituals and symbols associated with land donation are depicted in Odishan inscriptions, such as the reference to specific items that accompany land donations. For instance:

śaṅkhaṃ bhadraśanaṃ chatraṃ barāśvāḥ baravāraṇāḥ /  
bhūmidānasya cihnāni phalametatpurandaraḥ //2

(A conch, a noble seat, an umbrella, fine horses, and grand elephants are marks of land donation, and their reward is praised by the king of gods (Indra).)

This verse elucidates the physical and symbolic gifts that accompany the act of land donation, which, in turn, strengthens its ethical and divine significance. These marks are regarded as manifestations of the donor's commitment to dharma and their desire to attain merit.

### 1.3 The Consequences of Unlawful Land Seizure

Odishan inscriptions also serve as a cautionary tale against unlawful land seizure. Several verses detail the severe consequences faced by individuals who unlawfully seize land, with some stating that such actions lead to horrific punishments in the afterlife. One inscription highlights:

ṣaṣṭivarṣasahasrāṇi svarge vasati bhūmidāḥ /  
ācchettā cānumantā ca tānyeva narake vaset //3

(The donor of land resides in heaven for sixty thousand years, but the one who seizes or permits the seizing of that land dwells in hell for an equal duration.)

This statement illustrates the severe moral repercussions for those who seize land, positioning the act of land seizure as a grave offense with eternal consequences. The parallel with heavenly and hellish realms underscores the profound ethical dimension of land ownership and protection in Dharmasāstric thought.

#### Another such verse reads:

svadattāṃ paradattāṃ vā yo haret vasuṃdharām /  
sa viṣṭhāyāṃ kṛmirbhūtvā pitṛbhiḥ saha majjati //4

(Whoever seizes land donated either by oneself or others become a worm in excrement and sinks into hell along with their ancestors.)

In this verse, the act of land seizure, whether through wrongful possession of one's own or another's land, is met with severe spiritual consequences. The individual is condemned to a degraded rebirth, symbolized by being born as a worm, which signifies a state of humiliation and suffering. This punishment is not merely

physical but is also moral and spiritual, illustrating the Dharmaśāstric view that transgression involving land lead to profound karmic repercussions. The punishment is seen as a purification process, where the person undergoes a spiritual "fall," thus reflecting the view that land, as a vital resource, holds intrinsic sacredness and should not be taken unjustly.

**Another verse reinforces this idea:**

taḍāgānām sahasreṇa vājapeyaśatena ca /  
gabāmikoṭipradānena bhūmiharttā na śuddhyati //5

(Even by donating a thousand ponds, a hundred sacrifices (vājapeya), or a crore of cows, a person who seizes land cannot attain purity.)

This proclamation indicates that no amount of ritual or charitable deeds no matter how vast or significant can purify or absolve the individual who has committed the sin of taking land unlawfully. The verse emphasizes the gravity of land theft, portraying it as an offense that cannot be expiated by mere external acts of piety or ritualistic donation. It underscores the immorality of wrongful land appropriation, positioning it as a severe violation that demands more than just symbolic acts of atonement. The idea is that the foundational ethical and legal responsibility toward land is so crucial in Dharmaśāstra that it overshadows all other forms of merit.

Together, these verses reinforce the importance of upholding ethical practices in land transactions and highlight the lasting spiritual consequences for those who violate these sacred norms. The Dharmaśāstric perspective not only dictates legal consequences but also integrates ethical and spiritual dimensions, ensuring that violations of property rights are met with substantial karmic repercussions.

**1.4 Kings as Protectors of the Donated Land**

Another crucial aspect of the legal and ethical traditions in Odishan inscriptions is the emphasis on the protection of land once donated. A verse from the inscription reminds rulers of their duty:

svadattām paradattām vā yatnādrakṣennarādhipa /  
mahīm mahimatām śreṣṭha dānācchreyonupālanam //6

(O ruler of men, carefully protect land, whether self-donated or donated by others. For the greatest of the great, protecting land surpasses even the act of donating it.)

This instruction reflects the belief that the protection of land, especially land donated for religious or charitable purposes, holds greater moral weight than even the initial donation. It emphasizes the role of the ruler in ensuring that land donations are respected and preserved for future generations.

**1.5 The Divine Nature of Land and Its Protector**

Land, in these inscriptions, is often personified and considered a divine gift, a representation of Viṣṇu (the preserver god) or a manifestation of cosmic order. The relationship between the king and the land is one of stewardship rather than ownership, as seen in the following proclamation:

vārihīneṣvaraṇyeṣu śuṣkakoṭaravāsinaḥ /  
kṛṣṇasarpāśca jāyante devabrahmasvahārīṇaḥ //7

(In waterless forests and dry hollows, black serpents are born from those who seize the wealth of gods or brāhmins.)

This verse draws a connection between unlawful land seizure and the emergence of negative consequences, such as the birth of venomous serpents, symbolizing the spiritual decay that follows unethical actions.

## 2. FLEETING NATURE OF EARTHLY POWER

### 2.1 The Eternal Nature of Dharma

Several inscriptions emphasize the transient nature of earthly power and wealth, while dharma (righteousness) is eternal and provides lasting benefits:

vātābhrabhramamidaṁ vasudhādhipatyamāpātamātramadhurā viṣayopabhogah /  
prāṇāstṛṇāgrajalabindusamā narāṇām dharmah sakhā paramo paralokayāne //8

(Earthly sovereignty is as fleeting as clouds driven by the wind, and sensory pleasures are sweet but momentary. Human life is as fragile as a dewdrop on a blade of grass, and dharma alone is the eternal companion on the journey to the next world.)

This verse underscores the fleeting nature of worldly power and material pleasure, positioning dharma as the only enduring companion for rulers and their subjects. It reflects the deep-rooted belief that governance, at its core, is a duty to uphold dharma, rather than mere dominion over land.

### 2.2 Consequences for Unjust Seizure

The consequences for those who unjustly seize land are repeatedly emphasized in Odishan inscriptions. One verse warns:

anyāyena hṛtā bhūmir anyāyena tu hāritā /  
harate hārayec caiva sa hanyāt saptamaṁ kulam //9

(One who seizes or causes others to seize land unjustly destroys their own lineage up to the seventh generation.)

This severe warning reflects the societal belief that land is not just a physical asset but a moral entity that carries ethical weight. Unjust acts involving land have consequences that extend beyond the individual, impacting their descendants for generations.

## 3. CONCLUSION

The Dharmaśāstric proclamations embedded in Odishan inscriptions serve as a powerful testament to the deep ethical and legal traditions that governed the region. Through the careful regulation of land donations, the protection of these donations, and the punishment of unlawful land seizures, these inscriptions provide a detailed portrait of a society where dharma was central to governance and social order. The ethical and legal norms in these inscriptions are not only a reflection of the cultural values of ancient Odisha but also offer valuable insights into the broader Indian ethical and legal traditions influenced by Dharmaśāstra. Ultimately, these proclamations underscore the importance of righteousness, protection of property, and the long-term consequences of moral and immoral actions in the context of governance.

**Endnotes**

1. Bhubaneśvara Abhilekha, Pariśiṣṭa 2, abhilekhasṭha dharmasāstrīya ghoṣaṇā, śloka 1
2. Ibid, 2
3. Ibid, 3
4. Ibid, 5
5. Ibid, 6
6. Ibid, 20
7. Ibid, 7
8. Ibid, 9
9. Ibid, 26

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- [1] Kant, Shashi, The Hathigumpha Inscription of Kharavela and The Bhabru Edict of Asoka - A Critical Study, D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd. New Delhi, 1971. [https://www.jainfoundation.in/JAINLIBRARY/books/Hathigumpha\\_Inscription\\_Kharavela\\_and\\_Bhabru\\_Edict\\_of\\_Asoka\\_006726\\_HR.pdf](https://www.jainfoundation.in/JAINLIBRARY/books/Hathigumpha_Inscription_Kharavela_and_Bhabru_Edict_of_Asoka_006726_HR.pdf)
- [2] Mahāpātra, Kedāranātha, Bhubaneśvara Abhilekha, Kedāranātha Gaveṣaṇā Pratiṣṭhāna, Bhubaneśvara, 1998. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lzaSv\\_mEI7POb0wd5SYThu4yeuhnHcd/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lzaSv_mEI7POb0wd5SYThu4yeuhnHcd/view)
- [3] Rajaguru, Sri Satyanarayan, Inscriptions of Orissa (300–700 A. D.), Vol. I-Part ii, Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar, First Edition, 1958. <https://archive.org/details/inscriptionsofor01pt2oris/page/n5/mode/2up>
- [4] Rajaguru, Sri Satyanarayan, Inscriptions of Orissa (C. 600–1100 A. D.), Volume II, Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar, First Edition, 1960. <https://archive.org/details/inscriptionsofor02orisuoft/inscriptionsofor02orisuoft/>
- [5] Tripāṭhī, Śrī Kuṇjabahārī, Prācīna Oḍiā Abhilekha, Sāhitya Ekāḍemī, Bhubaneśvara, 2007. <https://archive.org/details/prachina-odia-abhilekha->
- [6] Rajaguru, Sri Satyanarayan, Inscriptions of Orissa, Vol. III-Part ii, Orissa Sahitya Akademi, Bhubaneswar, 1961. <https://archive.org/details/cu31924063477321/page/n3/mode/2up>