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Monika Raj

Research Scholar, Department
of Buddhist Studies, Nava
Nalanda Mahavihara,
Nalanda, Bihar, India

Life of women in Buddhist Era: An analytical study

Monika Raj

Abstract

The study of the Buddhist era attests to the occurrence of a transitional time in Indian history when trade and commerce developed, various types of kingdoms, including monarchical and republican republics, emerged and village culture was changing into urban culture. The Graha Sutta and Dhamma Sutta appear to place emphasis on the significance of the Saṅkhāra in order to uphold the cultural and religious identity that was a distinctive feature of the Vedic religion, whereas heterodox sects like Buddhism attempt to undermine the significance attached to Saṅkhāra and appear to teach the populace that a man (here, man is used in a universal sense meaning for women too) is the maker of himself. In this article I will try to analyse the status of women in Buddhist Era.

Keywords: Buddhist era, Life of women, graha sutta, saṅkhāra, urban

Introduction

The transformation of the agrarian economy of northern India into an urban economy paved the ground for the start of urbanisation in the truest sense as far as the advancement of civilization is concerned. The formation of kingdoms, oligarchies and chiefdoms in north India marks the beginning of Indian history as it emerges from myth and doubtful tradition in the sixth century B.C. ^[1] This time period saw dramatic changes that had a lasting impact on today's political, economic, social and religious landscapes. Such changes might be listed in terms of comprehending the salient characteristics of the nation's socio-economic and politico-religious systems. The emergence of sixteen mahājanapada may be the actual development in the political arena, but it is important to note that the majority of them were quickly captured and joined the rajantras kingdoms ^[2]. (This period also represents the commencement of imperialism in the modern political world. Another significant development in this regard was that the king was given full right to levy taxes and revenue during this time in exchange for upholding law and order and defending his citizens from any outside assault. As a result, the king acquired total political authority. Additionally, the kingship's connection to the deity principle expedited his authority.

The development of the idea of profit in the economy ^[3] contributed significantly to the transformation of the rural economy into an urban economy focused on trade and commerce, where for the first time the barter system was replaced by metallic money. The primary cause of the period's economic transformation was the widespread use of iron-made tools in agriculture and crafts, as attested to by the results of the excavations at Atrāṅjikhēra ^[4]. Gautam Buddha is the most well-known religious leader of this era because his religion had greater social acceptance. His philosophy was straightforward and in line with the needs of the populace's spirituality. The turning of the wheel of law (Dhamma-cakka-pavattana), his first discourse at Sarnath, served as the foundation for all of Buddhism ^[5]. He suggested an eight-fold path that is also known as the "Middle-Path" since it shunned both extremes of

Corresponding Author:

Monika Raj

Research Scholar, Department
of Buddhist Studies, Nava
Nalanda Mahavihara,
Nalanda, Bihar, India

¹ Thapar, Romila, Early India (From origins to AD, 1300), p. 137.

² Avasthi, Shashi, Prachin Bhartiya Samaj, p. 250

³ Ibid

⁴ Sharma R.S., Perspectives in Social and Economic History of Early India, p. 161

⁵ Jha D.N., op. cit., p. 35

opulent excess and depressing austerity.

Reformation of vaṇṇa-system

In terms of the vaṇṇa-system, Gautama Buddha did not advocate any novel ideas; rather, he simply repeated the fundamental principles of pre-modern Indian society. In reality, he just tried to change the traditional vaṇṇa system in order to make it a useful tool for the advancement of contemporary society^[6]. He advocated for a vaṇṇa-system based on kamma (actions) as opposed to janama (birth). The rigidity and intricacy associated with the vaṇṇa-system have diminished at this time, despite the fact that all four vaṇṇa-brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra are plainly visible in this era. As a result of this way of thinking, modern society started judging a person's social esteem based on his actions rather than his birth. When the establishment of the Buddhist saṅgha, which was leading from the front, was having such a significant impact on everyone, it was only natural that women, who made up nearly half of the population, would also be affected. These efforts were evident in various areas.

Childhood

Despite all the humiliations she experienced later in life, she was raised believing that a girl and a boy were on equal footing. At that young age, there was no gender discrimination, and she had nearly equal educational possibilities to boys from high class homes. The Vessantara Jātaka reveals that a girl receives the same level of parental care, love, and attention as a boy^[7].

Education

Buddha did not provide a new educational system but rather simply re-created the ancient concepts of education in a new light to match the altered conditions, education during this period was comparable to that during the preceding period. The cause of female education among the ladies in business and aristocratic circles received a significant boost with the admission of women to the Buddhist order. Several women in Buddhist families began to live a life of celibacy throughout the study time with the intention of comprehending and adhering to the everlasting principles of religion and philosophy, similar to the Brahmavādini in brahmanical circles^[8]. Furthermore, it appears that Lord Buddha would have been so impressed by the intellect and spiritual wisdom of these women scholars that he would have needed to request the creation of a separate saṅgha for women^[9].

Therefore, it is fair to say that the classical educational system was primarily restricted to men and women who had given up on the world. In this sense, the saṅgha appears to be the sole institution that supported women's education throughout the Buddha's lifetime. Additionally, a lady who had no interest in attending bhikkhunī saṅgha was never given the usual classical education. Furthermore, unlike contemporary institutions, the saṅgha did not provide women with any type of educational support in this area^[10].

⁶ Avasthi Shashi, op. cit., p. 253

⁷ Vessantara Jātaka, quoted in Avasthi Shashi, op. cit., p.278

⁸ Altekar, A.S., The Position of women in Hindu Civilization, p.12

⁹ Kulshreshtha Sushma., op. cit., p.238

¹⁰ Misra Urmil, Prakash, Prachin Bharat mein Nāri, p.3

Marriage

In the society of the time, a woman's duty to marry was a necessity. According to the Aṅguttara Nikāya, a man is a woman's treasure, refuge, and defender^[11]. According to a Jataka myth, even after being richly ornamented, a lady does not acquire beauty without a husband^[12]. When it comes to a girl's marriageable age during this time, Pali literature remains mute on child marriage. This theory proved to be untrue in practice because women continued to join bhikkhunī saṅgha after getting married because they were unhappy in their families and social circles. As a result, many women entered saṅgha without any real spiritual compulsion and occasionally even without the elders' consent, which had a major negative impact on social structures like marriage and the family^[13].

Forms of marriage

According to Buddhist scholars, the three forms of marriage-the brahma vivāha (arranged by the parents of both parties while taking into consideration the kūla, jāti, and gotta), svayaṃvara (where the girl chooses a husband from among those present on the occasion), and the gāndharvavivāha-where the bride and the bridegroom made their own choice without the knowledge of their guardian and were married^[14].

Remarriage

Remarriage of women was common in both the highest and lowest social levels, with the middle classes generally not engaging in it^[15]. The Pali literature reveals that, in most cases, husbands were terrified even of their wives remarrying after his death^[16]. There are accounts of some ladies promising their dying spouses they wouldn't get remarried so they could raise the children^[17].

Motherhood

As a mother, a woman had a respected position in society and was held in high regard. She was regarded as the family's pillar of support. Jataka legends are so replete with accounts of ladies who are eager to become mother. Because a barren lady was not respected by society, we often see ladies in modern literature praying to different deities to provide them a son^[18].

Position of widows

It was not acceptable for women to be widows, and widowhood was viewed as a curse. The practice of sati following a widowhood is not mentioned in any Buddhist scripture. One of the Jatakas describes the miserable situation of widows^[19]. Even though widow remarriage was not outright forbidden, it was not very common in society. Because of this, a widow was forced to rely on her relatives for support.

¹¹ Aṅguttara Nikāya, 4, 57

¹² Jataka No. 1.307

¹³ Altekar, A.S., op. cit., pp. 32-33

¹⁴ Jātaka No. 3. 93, 4. 219; Therigāthā 152; Jātaka No. 1. 134, (Hindi translation), 5. 426-7

¹⁵ Avasthi Shashi, op. cit., p. 282

¹⁶ Nanda-jātaka, No. 39

¹⁷ Aṅguttara Nikāya, 3, 295

¹⁸ Nayadhammakhao, 1.1.40

Dowry System

It won't be out of place to add that the dowry system was in full force in aristocratic and noble households during the time period under consideration. The township of Kāsi and its revenue was given to the Kosalā King Mahākosalā's son-in-law as pin money when he wed his daughter Kosala-devī to Bimbisāra, the king of Māgadha^[20]. Ruler Prasenjit, then ruler of Kosalā, reacted by seizing control of the Kasi township after King Bimbisār was assassinated by his son Ajātasattu. In order to regain control of Kasi, Ajātasattu had to engage Prasenjit in a series of conflicts. But it is unclear whether the same was true of the common and middle classes. However, it can be argued with certainty that the dowry system, in whatever form it may have been used at the time, had not yet become a social evil.

Married life or family life

Pāli literature provides evidence that current society's view of marriage was not very cheerful. Contemporary literature claims that a grihastha householder's family life was miserable, and it is apparent that heterodox sects used this information to encourage people to lead ascetic lives^[21]. During the time period under examination, married women's status significantly declined and she was now viewed as more or less of a luxury. However, it appears that Buddha's strategy backfired because society sincerely accepted his views on women, which opened the door for their continued decline.

Buddhism frequently refers to 10 different types of marriage based on environmental circumstances.

1. **Dhānkittā:** A Dhānkittā was a lady who was bought by a man for money and who later became his wife^[22].
2. **Chhāndvasini:** Chhāndvasini was a woman who lived with a guy of her own free will and accepted himself as his wife out of love and affection^[23].
3. **Bhogvāsini:** Bhogvāsini was the name given to a woman who married a man against his will in order to enjoy a luxury life.
4. **Patvāsini:** Patvāsini was the name given to a woman who married a guy but just lived with him to provide for his needs for clothing, shelter, etc.^[24].
5. **Audpatakini:** In accordance with tradition, a woman took a man's hand when they were submerged in a container and made a promise to coexist as water; as a result, she became his wife and was known as Audpatakini.
6. **Aubhatachumbatā:** A lady who became a man's wife after being helped by a man to unload a weight placed on her head in the shape of a genduri was known as Aubhatachumbatā.^[25]
7. **Dāsi-bhāryā:** Dāsi-bhāryā was the name of a woman who was once a slave but later welcomed as her master's bride.
8. **Kammakari-bhāryā:** The term "Kammakari-bhāryā" refers to a woman who was employed for pay in a family but was treated as the owner's wife.^[26]

9. **Dhajāhatā:** Dhajāhatā was the name given to a woman who was carried by a flagged army after winning a battle and later became the wife of someone.

10. **Muhutikā:** A lady who was granted the status of a person's wife due to the exigencies of the situation was known as Muhutikā^[27].

Purdāh System

There is no mention of the purdāh system at the time of Buddha. The key justification for making such a rambling remark was that exposing a beautiful woman to the public did not cause any issues with her modesty. Contrarily, males used to brag about the beautiful women kept in their harem and would occasionally show them off in public^[28]. A girl might participate in every social and religious activity with her other family members as a daughter and never wear a veil in public. In other words, and she had complete freedom to go wherever she pleased, free from any restrictions or duties as a mother. Therefore, it is evident from the analysis above that women did not practice purdāh during the Buddhist era^[29].

The custom of sati

The Aryans had lost interest in the sati tradition. It should be noted that there are no signs of it up to roughly 400 B.C., and the entire Brahmanical literature of that time is completely silent on the subject. Although there are many rituals and saṅkhāra described in the Graha Sutta (c. 600 to c. 300 B.C.), the practice of sati is not one of them^[30]. In terms of the same, Buddhist literature, it demonstrates little knowledge of this practice. In the event that such a practice had been prevalent during the time of the Buddha, he would have fiercely denounced it and led a campaign against it. He would have been incensed at a tradition that involved the burning of people alive. He condemned sacrifices to Gods because dumb animals were decimated therein.

Slavery system

A slave woman who chose slavery out of necessity and was given domestic responsibilities was typically referred to as a Paricārikā^[31]. Some of the women, however, who used to amuse their lords were also known by the moniker Paricārikā. In this context, it's important to keep in mind that both sorts of slave-women used enslavement as a source of income. The three types of slave women were Dāsi, Dāi (maid-servant), and Paricārikā, who used to amuse their owners. Following is a quick explanation of their obligations to the family they served:

1. **Dāsi:** A dāsi worked as a maid servant for her master's family on his command. She was also treated as a luxury item by her master, who was free to treat her however he pleased^[32]. Despite having lived with a wealthy family in the past, they were unable to obtain membership in the family or any other privileges. But on rare occasions, their masters or mistresses would let them go. It is crucial to mention that before being emancipated from slavery, she had a holy bath from her

²⁰ Rhys Davids T.W., *Buddhist India*, p.3

²¹ Avasthi Shashi, op. cit. p.285

²² Jain, Komal Chander, op. cit., p.89

²³ Parajika, p.201

²⁴ Jain, Komal Chander, op. cit., p.82 Parajika, p.201

²⁵ Parajika, p.201

²⁶ Ibid., p.201 also Jain, Komal Chander, op. cit., p.82

²⁷ Upasakadasanga, 1,44

²⁸ Ibid., p.216

²⁹ Nayadhammahao, 1.1.12

³⁰ Altekar A.S. op. cit., pp.118-119

³¹ Jain, Komal Chander, op. cit., pp. 133-34

³² Ibid., pp.134-35, Also Uttaradhyayan Sutra, 13/17

- master to signify her release from his shackles ^[33].
2. **Dāi:** (maid-servant): During this time, both royal and noble families kept dais to take care of and raise newborn children. There were five different kinds of them: (i) those who would give the infant milk; (ii) those who would bathe; (iii) those who would dress; (iv) those who would make the child play on her lap; and (v) those who would take him outside to play.
 3. There were other types of paricārikā in addition to the paricārikā, who were mostly domestic servants and employed to amuse their masters ^[34]. These Paricārikā were expected to be skilled performers in acting, music, singing, and dance so they could amuse their masters as needed. Although these kinds of slave-women were maintained for a specific person's amusement, they occasionally used to perform in front of the general public during a family celebration.

Asceticism among women

The bhikkhunī saṅgha played a crucial part in modern civilization. Due to this, the presence of the nunnery institution had an impact on all classes of women, whether directly or indirectly. The creation of the saṅgha and the appeal of it to regular women were the driving forces behind the women's adamant opposition to the established social order. Consequently, women started joining saṅgha in large numbers, and their numbers grew so quickly that Buddha himself had to create a unique set of guidelines to regulate these bhikkhunī saṅgha ^[35].

The life of a bhikkhunī also became more regular and used to a certain regimen as the institution of the nunnery became older and began to exhibit some rigidity. The society adjusted its overall attitude towards the nuns, which was initially rather narrow, and demonstrated some respect and tolerance for the institution.

The women who became bhikkhunī were required to live by the saṅgha's rules, which included dressing appropriately for everyday activities and doing other vital duties that were delegated to them. In other words, bhikkhunī had to lead a life that harmonised their social and saṅgha lives. If they lived a life that was significantly different from societal and saṅgha norms, they were harshly criticised by the public and the subject of social commentary. Additionally, this institution did not receive the respect from society that the Buddha himself had demanded of it at the time of its founding ^[36].

In brief, it may be said that the establishment and growth of nunneries in modern society helped women restore some of their lost religious freedoms. It is also possible to see the adoption of certain virtues and religious impulses by women in the common masses, particularly in the observance of the pañcasīla (five code of conduct), as a result of the formation of nunneries ^[37].

Conclusions

The period of transition in Indian culture during this time was marked by significant changes in politics, economy, and religion. Women, particularly women from the Buddhist

order, began to enter the saṅgha to become nuns and preachers of their beliefs. This shift led to a decline in education and a rise in asceticism among women, who were often forced into celibacy to avoid worldly pleasures. Supporters like Sukhā, Khemā, Dhammadāna, and Sanghmitra were appointed to responsible posts in the saṅgha, but traditional Indian society declined in quality due to the lack of work opportunities. As a result, many young people attended saṅgha without marrying, leading to a decline in education and the belief that the world was filled with miseries. The Dhamma Sutta states that if parents did not give their daughter in marriage when she reached puberty, they were responsible for the monthly murder of an embryo. This led to the development of the asrama system, which divided life into four distinct stages, each with a set of tasks to protect the social fabric from heretical groups. The asrama system was developed by traditional thinkers to address the pressure from heterodox sects and protect the social fabric from attacks from heretical groups. The Dhamma Sutta detail the responsibilities of brahmacārī, grihastha, vānaprastha, and sanyasi throughout their four stages of life.

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³³ Nayadhammakhao, 1/1/20

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³⁵ Bhagwat Durga, Early Buddhist jurisprudence, p.163

³⁶ Jain, Komal Chander, op. cit., pp. 183

³⁷ Therīgāthā, 2/7/31-32 & Saṃyuttanikāya, 1/209-210