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Women in the Sunga Age: Between Brahmanical Revival and Buddhist Influence

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Abstract

The Sunga Age (c. 185–73 BCE) represents a crucial transitional era in Indian history, bridging the decline of the Mauryan Empire and the emergence of new socio-political and cultural patterns. It was a time when Brahmanical orthodoxy reasserted itself after the relatively inclusive Mauryan state, while Buddhism and other heterodox traditions continued to maintain strong social and cultural influence. Within this dynamic context, the position of women was shaped by multiple, and often contradictory, forces. On one hand, Brahmanical texts and legal traditions increasingly emphasized domestic roles, ritual subordination to male authority, and the primacy of patrilineal inheritance, reinforcing patriarchal values.¹ On the other hand, Buddhist institutions offered women certain spaces for participation, whether as lay devotees, patrons of religious monuments, or even as members of the monastic order, though not without limitations. Archaeological evidence from the period, particularly the reliefs at Bharhut and Sanchi, provides valuable insight into the lived and symbolic presence of women. These sites depict women not only as donors and worshippers but also as central figures in narrative and decorative art, where fertility motifs, yakṣi figures, and auspicious female imagery played prominent roles in religious symbolism. Such representations suggest that women, despite social restrictions, retained a visible and active role in shaping religious and cultural life. This paper seeks to explore women's roles in the Sunga Age through the interconnected spheres of family, law, religion, and art. It highlights the tension between the Brahmanical revival, which sought to confine women within patriarchal frameworks, and the Buddhist ethos, which allowed comparatively greater spiritual and social mobility. By analyzing textual, legal, and archaeological sources, the study aims to illuminate how tradition and transition coexisted in defining the status of women during this formative period of Indian civilization².

Keywords: Sunga Age, Women in ancient India, Buddhist influence, Women and religion

Introduction

The history of women in ancient India is neither uniform nor linear; rather, it reflects shifting balances between tradition, transformation, and the coexistence of multiple ideological systems. The Sunga period (c. 185–73 BCE), which succeeded the decline of the Mauryan Empire, represents one such transitional phase marked by significant political, cultural, and religious changes^[3]. With the weakening of Mauryan central authority, regional powers emerged, and along with them came a reassertion of Brahmanical orthodoxy. Vedic rituals, sacrificial ceremonies, and caste hierarchies were revived with greater vigor, reinforcing patriarchal norms within family and society. At the same time, Buddhism-strengthened by popular patronage and community support-retained considerable influence, particularly visible in its art, architecture, and expanding monastic networks. Women in this era found themselves positioned at the intersection of these competing ideological frameworks, their identities and roles being shaped by both Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions^[4].

Brahmanical texts, including segments of the Dharma sastras and Gṛhya sutras, articulated a vision of womanhood centered on dependence and subordination. They prescribed that women remain under the guardianship of male relatives - father in childhood, husband after marriage, and son in widowhood. Their economic rights were circumscribed, as inheritance was largely restricted to male heirs, and their social worth was tied to their roles as dutiful daughters, obedient wives, and nurturing mothers. The emphasis was on domesticity, ritual subordination, and the perpetuation of patrilineal lineage, thereby limiting women's autonomy in both familial and religious spheres^[5]. In contrast, Buddhist traditions offered

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comparatively broader avenues for female participation, even if not fully egalitarian. Women were permitted to join the *bhikṣuṇī sangha* (order of nuns), engage in religious practices independent of male mediation, and accumulate spiritual merit through donations and pious acts. Archaeological evidence from sites such as Bharhut and Sanchi underscores women's presence as donors, devotees, and symbolic figures in Buddhist art. Female inscriptions recording donations indicate that women—whether from royal, elite, or merchant families contributed materially to the construction of stupas and railings, thereby leaving a visible imprint on the religious and cultural landscape of the period. The prominence of *yakṣī* imagery and fertility motifs in Sunga art further suggests the symbolic centrality of women to religious life, even as real social constraints continued to restrict their freedom^[6].

This article, therefore, seeks to explore the multifaceted position of women in the Sunga Age by situating them within the intersecting domains of family, religion, law, and art. It argues that the Sunga period should not be viewed simply as a phase of decline in women's status following the Maurya's, but rather as a complex moment of negotiation between Brahmanical revival and Buddhist inclusivity. By examining textual prescriptions, legal codes, and archaeological representations, this study highlights how women's roles were simultaneously constrained and enabled, reflecting a broader pattern of continuity and change in gender relations during early historic India^[7].

Women in the Brahmanical Framework

In the Sunga period, the Brahmanical framework played a decisive role in shaping women's social, legal, and cultural identity. Texts such as the *Dharma sūtras* and *Gṛhyasūtras*, which gained prominence during this time, reinforced patriarchal norms and emphasized the family as the central unit of social order^[8]. Within this framework, marriage was viewed as a sacred sacrament rather than a contract, binding a woman's identity almost entirely to her husband's. Her duty was defined in terms of service, loyalty, and reproduction, ensuring the continuation of family lineage. The practice of child marriage gained wider ground, significantly reducing women's opportunities for independent education or personal choice. Among the elite and ruling classes, polygamy was not uncommon, serving as both a marker of wealth and a means of consolidating political and social alliances, while ordinary women were largely confined to monogamous, patriarchal households^[9]. Education for women, which had already begun to decline in the Later Vedic period, remained limited during the Sunga age. The ideal woman was increasingly projected as a *gṛhīni* (housewife), entrusted with the responsibility of managing domestic affairs, performing household rituals, and upholding family honor. Religious texts stressed obedience and modesty, situating women within the private sphere of the home^[10]. Their access to Vedic learning was nearly absent, with only rare exceptions, and intellectual or spiritual pursuits were discouraged in favor of domestic devotion. Furthermore, the system of legal guardianship ensured that a woman's autonomy was minimal; she was considered dependent throughout her life, first on her father, then her husband, and later her son, reflecting the deeply embedded patriarchal structure of Brahmanical society^[11]. In matters of property and inheritance, women faced similar restrictions. The concept of *stridhana* (a woman's personal

property, usually consisting of gifts received at marriage or from relatives) did provide some recognition of women's material entitlement, but it was often limited in scope and closely supervised by male guardians. Women were largely excluded from independent inheritance rights, as Brahmanical law reinforced the patrilineal transmission of property, ensuring that land and wealth remained concentrated in the hands of male heirs. This system not only restricted women's economic independence but also reinforced their dependency on the male-led household structure. Thus, within the Brahmanical framework of the Sunga age, women were firmly positioned as dependents valued primarily for their roles as wives, mothers, and preservers of family honor, but denied significant educational, legal, or economic autonomy^[12].

Women in the Buddhist Sphere

In contrast to the rigid domestic ideal prescribed by the Brahmanical order, Buddhism in the Sunga period provided women with certain alternative avenues of participation, even though these were not entirely free from limitations. The *bhikṣuṇī sangha* (order of nuns) represented the most significant departure from patriarchal household structures. By joining the *sangha*, women could renounce domestic duties and pursue a religious life dedicated to discipline, meditation, and the quest for spiritual liberation^[13]. Buddhist canonical texts refer to the *therīs*, or learned nuns, who composed verses included in the *Therīgāthā*, expressing their struggles, renunciations, and ultimate insights into the impermanence of worldly attachments. However, despite this opportunity, the hierarchy within the *sangha* placed nuns in a subordinate position to monks, requiring them to follow additional rules (*garudhammas*), thereby reflecting the persistence of gendered inequalities even within a comparatively egalitarian framework^[14]. Beyond monastic life, women actively engaged in Buddhist religious practices through donations and patronage, leaving a tangible imprint on the cultural landscape of the Sunga period. Inscriptions at Bharhut and Sanchi record the names of women as donors who contributed to the construction and embellishment of stupas, railings, and gateways. These records are significant as they often mention not only the names of the women but also their family affiliations and social identities, thereby demonstrating that women whether from royal households, merchant families, or artisan groups possessed both the agency and the resources to act as independent religious patrons. Such contributions not only enhanced their personal religious merit but also affirmed their visibility in the wider public sphere of religious life^[15]. Buddhist thought further shaped ideals of womanhood in ways that contrasted with Brahmanical prescriptions. On one hand, Buddhism acknowledged the spiritual potential of women, affirming that women could, through discipline and practice, attain *nirvāṇa*, the ultimate liberation. This recognition marked a critical departure from Brahmanical orthodoxy, which largely confined women to domestic and reproductive roles. On the other hand, certain Buddhist texts continued to regard female birth as less favorable, often portraying rebirth as a man as more conducive to spiritual progress. Nevertheless, when viewed against the backdrop of Brahmanical patriarchy, Buddhism provided broader opportunities for women to participate in public religious life and to cultivate individual spiritual agency. Thus, within the Buddhist sphere of the Sunga age, women found

themselves negotiating a complex position constrained by hierarchical subordination, yet empowered through monastic inclusion, religious donations, and the acknowledgment of their potential for spiritual liberation [16].

Women in Sunga Art and Archaeology

The art and archaeology of the Sunga period, particularly at sites such as Bharhut and Sanchi, provide valuable insights into the social and cultural presence of women, complementing and sometimes challenging the restrictive ideals found in Brahmanical texts. The relief sculptures, though primarily religious in theme, depict women in a variety of symbolic and social roles. One of the most striking representations is that of the yakṣis, female fertility figures who embody abundance, auspiciousness, and the generative forces of nature. These voluptuous figures, often shown grasping trees or standing in dynamic postures, highlight the symbolic centrality of female energy within the religious imagination of the time [17].

Equally significant is the evidence of women as donors, recorded in inscriptions carved onto railings, pillars, and gateways. These inscriptions frequently preserve the names of women, sometimes along with their familial affiliations, indicating that women from royal families, merchant households, and even artisan groups contributed to the construction and adornment of Buddhist monuments [18]. Such records not only testify to their economic resources but also demonstrate their recognized agency in shaping the sacred landscape of the Sunga age. In addition to these symbolic and epigraphic roles, women also appear in artistic depictions of devotion, worship, and daily life. Scenes of processions, offerings, and ritual activities often include female figures, suggesting their active participation in communal religious practices. These representations underscore the visibility of women in public spaces, in contrast to the textual emphasis on their confinement within the household [19].

Taken together, the archaeological and artistic evidence suggests that women occupied visible and multifaceted positions in the religious and cultural life of the Sunga period. While Brahmanical and legal texts emphasized domesticity and dependence, the visual record portrays women as symbolic bearers of fertility, active religious participants, and acknowledged patrons of sacred architecture. This tension between textual prescriptions and artistic representations reflects the complex and layered realities of women's lives during the Sunga age [20].

Tradition and Transition

The Sunga period represents a complex and dynamic phase in Indian history, marked by a delicate interplay between continuity and change in women's roles. On one hand, the Brahmanical revival reinforced patriarchal norms, emphasizing women's dependence on male guardians, domesticity, and ritual subordination [21]. Legal codes and social prescriptions sought to confine women primarily to the roles of daughters, wives, and mothers, restricting their autonomy in education, property, and public life. Marriage and household duties became central to a woman's identity, while inheritance rights were largely limited to men, reflecting a consolidation of patrilineal authority [22].

On the other hand, Buddhism offered alternative avenues for women's agency, providing opportunities to participate in

religious life, pursue spiritual aspirations, and act as patrons through donations to stupas and monastic establishments. Women could join the bhikṣuṇī sangha, compose verses, and earn spiritual merit independently, challenging the purely domestic and dependent ideal projected by Brahmanical orthodoxy. Archaeological and artistic evidence, including reliefs at Bharhut and Sanchi, further attests to women's visibility as donors, devotees, and symbolic figures such as yakṣis, embodying fertility, auspiciousness, and creative energy [23].

Rather than viewing the Sunga age as a simple period of decline in women's status, it is better understood as a transitional stage, where women navigated multiple identities simultaneously. They were housewives and daughters, upholding family and domestic rituals; devotees and donors, asserting their economic and spiritual presence; nuns and scholars, pursuing religious discipline and intellectual engagement; and symbols of fertility, reflected in art and religious imagination. This duality between restriction and opportunity, dependency and agency captures the essence of tradition and transition during the Sunga period, revealing a society negotiating the coexistence of patriarchal orthodoxy with emergent avenues for female participation and recognition [24].

Conclusion

Women in the Sunga Age occupied a complex and multifaceted position shaped by the interplay of Brahmanical patriarchy and Buddhist inclusivity. Brahmanical norms confined women to domestic roles, emphasizing dependence on male guardians, household duties, early marriage, and limited property or educational rights, while Buddhist traditions offered avenues for spiritual engagement, monastic participation, and religious donations, allowing women some degree of autonomy and public visibility. Archaeological and artistic evidence from Bharhut and Sanchi, including depictions of women as yakṣis, donors, and devotees, further highlights their active presence in religious and cultural life. Rather than representing a simple decline in status, the Sunga period exemplifies a stage of tradition and transition, where women navigated overlapping identities as housewives, nuns, donors, and symbols of fertility. This dual reality of constraint and agency reflects the dynamic negotiation of gender roles in early historic India and provides crucial insight into the historical evolution of women's social, religious, and cultural positions.

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