

Life of Woman in the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Periods in India

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Abstract

From the evidence in the Rig veda, the earliest literature of the Indo-Aryans, women had an honourable place in the early Indian society. Women could participate in all religious ceremonies. However, later, as the priestly caste of Bramins came to dominate society, the status of women in India deteriorated. But during the Buddhist epoch there was a change. The Buddha could convert the view of ancient Indian society over women and promulgated new point of view. This research paper will present how Mahapajapati Gotamī, step mother of Buddha, tried to get permission from Buddha for women to enter the Buddhist Sāsana. The Buddha did not permit easily Bhikkhunī Sāsana. But the great endeavour and enormous gratitude of Mahāpajāpati Gotamī and reasonable offering of venerable Ānanda urged the Buddha to let the Bhikkhunī order. The eight rules for Bhikkhunī Order preached by the Buddha were intended not for discrimination between bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs but for promotion and propagation of Sāsana.

Keywords: Rig veda, Upanishad, Buddhist Period.

Introduction

In the early Pre-Buddhist Days the status of women in India was held in honour and respect. There were a few Rig Vedic hymns composed by women. Women had access to the highest knowledge and could participate in all religious ceremonies. In domestic life she was respected as well. In the later part of the Pre-Buddhist Period, when caste system emerged, the status of Ancient Indian women deteriorated. Caste system was the weak point of ancient Indian society.

The focus of this study is how the Buddha could convert the view of ancient Indian society over women and promulgated new point of view. In the long period of Indian religious history, the Buddha was the first leader who upgraded the status of women. The Exalted One worked to change the deeply rooted misperception over women on their spiritual and intellectual ability. He established, for the first time in the history of religion in the world, a monastic order for women (Bhikkhuni Sasana). Under the compassionate guidance of the Teacher, the nunnery order enjoyed the same status as its counterpart (Bhikkhu Sasana) in the Buddhist spiritual community. Led by Mahāpajapati Gotamī, the foster mother of the Buddha, many women entered the Order, strived to gain the essence of Buddhist life and attained Arahatsip. Furthermore, women in the Bhikkhunī Order attained spiritual achievements no less the attainments gained by the monks of the same Order. And this testifies the fact that women, a major portion of humanity, find their fullest dignity in the practice of the teachings of Buddha.

As an introduction the ancient times of India may be divided into two parts:

- (1) Pre-Buddhist Period (c. 3000 B.C- 600) and
- (2) Buddhist Period (600 B.C)

Then, the life of woman in Pre-Buddhist Period can also be divided into two parts:

- (1) Their life in the Aryan Society as found in the Rig-Veda
- (2) Their life found in the later period.

Pre-Buddhist Period (C.3000 BC-600 BC)

The Life of women in the Early Aryan Society as found in the Rig Veda.

Woman was held in honour and respect. Unlike the other primitive societies, the Indo-Aryans held marriage as a sacred bond. Polygamy was unknown among the humbler folk, and was generally confined to the royal and richer classes. The unhealthy custom of child marriage and the seclusion of woman behind the purda were also unknown. The name Sahadbharmini (wife) given to the wife of the householder testifies to her honoured position in society. The Hindu wife still retains that honoured name, but has lost the freedom enjoyed by her sister in the Vedic age, partly due to the selfishness of man and partly due to many extraneous circumstances. Women in the Vedic age prepared the Soma libation and joined their husbands in sacrifices, whether private or public. Woman had a considerable authority in the family, as she has today, and took her share in the religious rites and worship and exerted a benign influence over the household.

There is evidence in the Rig Veda, the primary source of Hinduism, of women seers and chanters of hymns. The Rig Veda shows abundant evidence pointing to the fact that women were fully equal to men as regards access to the capacity for the highest knowledge, even the knowledge of the Absolute or Brahma. It may be noted that the Rig Veda is a product of the highest religious thought, which dawned on the saints and seers as result of their contemplation in a life of complete asceticism and penance. It was to such meditative master-minds that Truth thus revealed in impassioned prayers called Suktas.

The entire Rig Veda is made up of such suktas and hymns. They were uttered in ecstasy by these seers, aptly called rishis who were capable of a direct vision of Truth and represented the highest degree of spiritual enlightenment.

The hymns of the rishis were inspired and not ordinary secular compositions. Every hymn of the Rig Veda is attributed to a rishi. Though the majority of these hymns were the work of male rishis, the Rig Veda contains hymns which were revealed by women seers also. The latter were called rishikas and brahmavādins.

It is, therefore, no wonder that the wife enjoyed with her husband full religious rights and regularly participated in religious ceremonies with him. In fact, the performance of such ceremonies would be invalid without the wife joining her husband as his full partner. Thus the Rig Veda accorded the highest social status to the qualified women of those days.

In such high honour most women have been held, that, a part from these holy women, who claimed man's reverence, belief in a number of goddesses goes to prove that women were well worthy of worship. Some of the most important deities of ancient India are goddesses and among whom is Sarawaiti, the goddess of learning, said to be the very personification of speech itself, or 'Vac'. This ancient honour still prevails in India and women, in their home are held in great esteem, for nothing perhaps can command more respect in the country than name of mother and wife.

Education for women was not neglected. There were learned ladies like Visvavārā, Lopāmudrā and Ghoshā, Sikatā Nivāvarā, who even composed the Mantras and rose to the rank of Rishis. Woman students were divided into two classes: Brahmavādinis and Sadyodvāhās. The former were lifelong students of theology and philosophy; and the latter used to prosecute their studies till their marriage at the age of 15 or 16. During the eight or nine years that were thus available to them for study, they used to learn by heart the Vedic hymns prescribed for the daily and periodical prayers and for those rituals and sacraments in which they had to take an active part after their marriage. There is ample evidence to show that, like men, women also used to offer regularly their Vedic prayers in both morning and

evening. For instance, in more than one place in the Rāmāyana, Sītā is described as offering the daily Vedic prayers. Brahmvādins used to aim at a very high standard in scholarship. Down to about the 4th century B.C. Vedic and philosophical studies attracted the main attention of society.

Women were given a good education, Institution of learning, especially the Ashrams, admitted women, who were known as Brahmācharinis. These girls lived in the hermitages with their teacher or Guru and his wife. The institutions were co-educational. The students usually studied for a number of years, living disciplined life. They imbibed deeply the knowledge of their teacher and also served him and his household. The Rig Veda even refers to girls marrying after completing their education.

In fact, while the boys were with their Guru, learning the Vedic science and solid principles for a way of life based specially on concepts of honour, the young girls were having an extensive literary culture implanted into them by pious tutors at home, or even by professors at a hermitage, where they might spend several years. They also learned various artistic accomplishments, such as painting and playing the vīnā. Their mothers taught them domestic arts of managing servants, cooking according to the rules of ritual, weaving and embroidery, and the supervision of family garden. They were brought up believing that a woman was only fulfilled in motherhood, trained to show respect and obedience towards their father and husband, assured that their parents wanted only to see them happy: so, when the moment for marriage arrived, they had already been trained as virtuous and modest, intelligent and cultivated young women, capable of making their husbands happy.

When a woman married, as she did after her days of Brahmācārini were over, she immediately became the right hand of her husband, helping him in his religious rituals and the performances of sacrifices, which consisted of giving offerings to the household god. From the time a woman entered as an honoured bride to her old age she was profoundly respected. Each home was a simple patriarchal unit, the father being regarded as priest and controller and the mother as his indispensable partner. The wife was the pivot around which the whole household revolved, as she still is today.

The Upanishads throw further light on the intellectual life of the times, in which men and women were equal participants. In the Upanishads, which were Hindu Scriptures of a later period, women vied their intelligence with the greatest rishis or seers of the time. They enquired into the mysticism of the vedantic philosophy and wished to delve into the ultimate truth of Brahma or God. The great king Janaka, for instance, held philosophical conferences for the sages, including women.

Rig Vedic society was based on monogamy and was patriarchal. The marriage hymn (X, 85) points to the practice of the bridegroom going to the bride's house, where he marries her, and whence, after the marriage, he conveys the bride to his own houses. In that new home, she has an honoured place as mistress of the household indicates that marriage was a sacrament and indissoluble, hence widows were not remarried. The wife took part with her husband in his religious ceremonies (VIII, 31). If a girl's parents died, her brothers look after her. The institution of monogamy is itself eloquent recognition of the high social status of women. According to the Vedas, which throw much light on the social organization of the Aryan-speaking tribes, the wife was mistress of the house and ruled over the servants and women members of the family.

In Mahābhārata, the great epic of India, the wife is described as 'half of man, his truest friend, a perpetual spring of virtue, pleasure and wealth...A sweetly speaking wife is a companion in solitude, a father in advice, and a rest in passing through life's wilderness'.

From time immemorial, the Hindu wife has shared her husband in pleasures and sacrifices. In the Rāmāyana when Rānā is banished to the jungle, Sītā, his wife, says:

My mother often taught me and father often spoke
 That her home the wedded woman doth beside her husband make,
 As the shadow to the substance, to the substance, to her lord the faithful wife,
 And she parts no from her consort till she parts with fleeting life.
 Therefore let me seek the jungle rangers rove,
 Dearer than the royal palace, where I share my husband is love;

The great epics of India, the Mahābhārātā and Rāmāyana, depict heroines, not so renowned for their knowledge perhaps but of type so noble, gentle, chaste, longsuffering and faithful that they became household words in the centuries to follow.

Examining the position in ancient India is clear from the evidence in the Reg Veda, the earliest literature of the Indo-Aryans, that women held an honourable place in early Indian society. There were a few Rigvedic hymns composed by women. Women had access to the highest knowledge and could participate in all religious ceremonies. In domestic life too she was respected and there is no suggestion of seclusion of women and child marriage.

Later when the priestly caste of Brahmins dominated society and religion lost its spontaneity and became a mass of ritual, we see a downward trend in the position accorded to women. The most relentless of the Brahmin law givers was Manu whose Code of Laws is the most anti-feminist literature one could find. At the outset, Manu deprived woman of her religious rights and spiritual life. "Sudras, slave and women" were prohibited from reading the Vedas. A woman could not attain heaven through any merit of her own. She could not worship or perform a sacrifice by herself. She could reach heaven only through implicit obedience to her husband, be he debauched or devoid of all virtues. Having thus denied her any kind of spiritual and intellectual nourishment, Manu elaborated the myth that all women were sinful and prone to evil. "Neither shame nor decorum, nor honesty, nor timidity. "says Manu," is the cause of a woman's charity, but the want of a suitor." She should therefore be kept under constant vigilance; and the best way to do it was to keep her occupied in the endless tasks of motherhood and domestic duties so that she has no time for mischief. Despite this denigration there was always in Indian thought and idealization of motherhood and a glorification of the feminine concept. But in actual practice, it could be said by and large, Manu's reputed Code of Laws did influence social attitudes towards women, at least in the higher rungs of society."

The Later Vedic Period

The later Vedic literature reflects a complete change in the social and religious life of the Aryans Society which became more complex. The worship of nature-gods and simple sacrifices by the head of the family in the Rig Vedic period were now replaced by the elaborate ceremonial and ritualistic worships conducted by a special class of men who were known as Brāhmanas. They were so-called because they learnt the minute rules of the sacrificial worship elaborated in the Brāhmanas according to which those sacrifices were to be conducted. Thus the sublime worship of the Rigvedic Aryans was thrown into the background by the new forms of ceremonial worships in which the house-holders took only a vicarious part. This religious change also marked the beginning of the caste system which in the later Brāhmanic period tended to become hereditary. For the Brahmins begin in custody of the spiritual life the people tried to retain their supreme position in society by giving an

authoritative explanation of their divine origin and introducing sāstric injunctions to maintain their exclusiveness from the rest of the Aryans. Thus the later Vedic Aryan society was divided into three distinct classes of men, the Brahman or the priests, Kshatriyas or governing and fighting class, and the Vaisyas which included the rest of Aryans occupied in order spheres of activity. Besides, there was a fourth class of people composed mostly of the non-Aryan conquered tribes whom the Aryans called Sudras. They were the Dāsas in the Rig Vedic times.

The position of women marked a slight deterioration from the Vedic age. Polygamy was almost a common affair among the royal and rich classes. The custom of sati of which we find no mention in the Vedic literature is seen practiced here. The peculiar custom of polygamy, evidently a Mongolian custom, still observed by some tribes in Tibet and Indian borders of the Himalayan region, was introduced by the compilers of the Mahābhārata to explain certain episodes of the central story of the great epic, or as Dr. Winternitz remarks, “to faithfully presume an old feature of the legend.”

At the time of Buddha

Position of women in early Buddhism also to have deteriorate from that in the Vedic times. In the Culla Vagga we find the Buddha refused to admit women to the Samgha when Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, his own foster-mother, approached him at Kapilavatthy to be admitted as a nun. Later when Gotama the Buddha was staying at Vesāli, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, accompanied by a large number Sākya women, again approached him with eyes full of tears and weeping with the request for admission, to the Samgha. This time Ānandā, the close disciple of the Buddha, intervened and successfully argued for the admission of women to the Samgha. The Buddha, while admitting them, enunciated eight rules which made a nun take up an inferior position to that of the monk, and her life a little harder than that of her brother in the Order. Such rules, among others, which made ‘a nun even of hundred years’ to first greet a monk, ‘rise up before him, salute him with folded hands and make obeisance even if he has only that day been ordained,’ and that ‘from this day forth utterance of the nuns to the monks is excluded; utterance of the monks who the nuns is not excluded,’ reflect the position of the women in society vis-à-vis men- a position which was sought to be maintained in the Order also. That the Buddha was none too happy at the admission of women to the Order is clear from the concluding portion of his discourse to Ānandā relating to that event which incidentally points to the rather low esteem in which they were held in society.

But as women have gone forth, now, Ānandā, the religious life will not last long... just as houses, where there are many women and few men, are broken into by burglars, even so, in that doctrine and discipline in which women receive the going from a houseless life. The religious life will not last long. Just as when the kind of disease called white-boned (mildew) falls upon a field of rice, the field of rice will not long... just as when the disease called crimson falls upon a field of sugar-cane, that field will not last long, even so Ānandā, in that doctrine and discipline in which women receive the going forth a house to a houseless life religious life will not last long. Just as a man, Ānandā, might in anticipation make a dyke for a great reservoir, so that the water should not overflow, even so, Ānandā, have I in anticipation prescribed these eight strict rules for the nuns, not to be transgressed white life shall last.

However an important place taken by women ascetics in early Buddhism is actually, for example, shown by the existence in the scriptures of a collection of verses known as Therīgāthā attributed to about a hundred nuns. That the education of women received a fillip since their admission to the Order admits of no doubt.

There is not the slightest doubt that the Buddha was the first religious teacher who had given women equal and unfettered opportunities in the field of spiritual development.

Although he had pointed out on several occasions, the natural tendencies and weakness of women, he had also given due credit to their abilities and capabilities. He had truly paved the way for women to lead a full religious life. They were able to develop and purify their minds and realize the bliss of Nibbāna in as much as men could. The testimonies of the Therīs (nuns) in the Buddha speak amply of this fact.

In the field of religious practices, the position which they once enjoyed, was denied to them. A woman was believed to be unable to go to heaven through her own merits. She could not worship by herself, and it was believed that she could only reach heaven through unquestioning obedience to her husband, even if he happened to be a wicked person. The food left over by her husband was often the food for the woman.

It was in the midst of such extreme social discrimination and degrading attitudes towards woman that the Buddha made his appearance in India. His teachings on the real nature of life and death-about Karma and samsaric wanderings, gave rise considerable change in the social attitudes towards woman in his days.

According to what the Buddha taught about the Law of Karma, one is responsible for one's own action and its consequence. The well-being of a father or grandfather does not depend upon the action of the son or grandson. They were responsible for their own actions. Such enlightened teachings helped to correct the views of many people and naturally reduced the anxiety of women who were unable to produce sons to perform the rites of the ancestors.

In early Buddhist period, an unmarried girl could go along, unabused, contented and adequately occupied in caring for parent and younger brothers and sisters. She might even become the owner of great possessions, of slaves, and rich fields; as did Subhā, the daughter of a goldsmith, during the time of the Buddha. But when the Dhamma was taught to her by Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, Subhā realized the nature of all fleeting pleasures and that silver and gold lead neither to peace nor to enlightenment, with the result that she entered the Order of Buddhist Nuns. This act was a great boon to the unmarried women.

The teachings of the Buddha had done a great deal to reduce many superstitious beliefs and meaningless rites and rituals including animal sacrifices, from the minds of many people. When the true nature of life and death and the natural phenomena governing the universe were revealed to them, wisdom and understanding arose. This in turn helped to arrest and correct the prevailing social injustices and prejudices that were rampant against women in the days of the Buddha thus enabling women to lead their own way of life.

Real religious freedom for women

As will be discussed in detail later, the establishment of the Bhikkhunī Samgha-the Order of Nuns, in the 5th year of the Buddha ministry, really paved the way for full religious freedom for women in the days of the Buddha. It was a splendid success. There arose many eminent nuns who shone brilliantly in the study and practice of the Dhamma. In the eyes of the world, Buddhism was raised to a very high level. The psalms of the Sisters (Therīgāthā) is one of the prides of Buddhist literature.

The Buddha did not place any restrictions on the matter of teaching and preaching of the Dhamma. The Bhikkhunī Order produced a remarkable number of brilliant preachers and exponents of the Dhamma e.g. Sukkā, Patācārā, Khemā, Dhammānā and Mahāpajāpit Gotamī (the foster mother of the Buddha). Buddhism never shared the brahmin's view that son was essential for the father's passage to heaven. Daughters became quite as good as and marriage was no longer a compulsory necessity. The Buddha by granting women an active share in the religious life, also helped to raise their status in life as well.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to mention how hard Mahapajapati Gotami tried to get the permission of Buddha to let the women enter into the Buddhist Order. The Buddha did not permit easily the Bhikkhunī Order as the Exalted One wanted long lasted Sasana. But the great endeavour and enormous gratitude of Mahapajapati Gotamī and the reasonable offering of Venerable Ananda urged the Buddha to let the Bhikkhunī Order. The eight special laws for Bhikkhunī Order preached by Buddha were intended not for classification between Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunīs but for promotion and propagation of Sāsana. The Anguttara Nikāya, there consists of a list of Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunīs who were awarded “pre-emiene” by Buddha. Moreover, Therī verses describes the daily routine of Therī and real religious freedom.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sense of gratitude to Ven. Dr Nandamālābhivamsa, Rector of International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University, for his valuable guidance and supervision.

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