

# The Rise of Buddhism as Experienced by Women



*“In freedom from three things—from pestle and mortar and from my hunchbacked lord...”*

BUDDHISM represents the earliest socio-religious movement in Indian history. Although primarily an ethical movement, Buddhism had an important social dimension too and was characterized by a more egalitarian and humane attitude towards society, in contrast to Hinduism’s hierarchical and inegalitarian attitudes. An analysis of the predicament of women in Buddhist society will therefore be significant in the context of Buddhism as a socio-religious movement, with a view to understanding the status of women in early Indian society.

Buddhist literature is rich in evidence and is somewhat unique because of its narrative style. It contains a great deal of material which includes specific information on women who interacted with the Buddha. It also contains passing references to striking features about women in society. For example it gives us the first account of women being assaulted in an act of revenge against their menfolk, as part of class tensions, along with references to institutions like dowry and bride price. A very valuable text called the *Therigatha* is particularly relevant for a study of women. It is a rare document by women who succeeded in breaking through the barriers set around them to leave a lasting record of woman’s self expression and of things as they appeared to her.

The historical context in which Buddhism was located is important and we shall therefore give a brief overview of society at the time of the Buddha. The most striking feature about society as reflected in Buddhist literature is the appearance of the institutions of private property and the family from an earlier tribal era. The genesis myth of the Buddhists describes the gradual fall of “man” from an earlier Rousseauesque communal society to the emergence of private property and the family, as well as the creation of a state to punish offences against these two institutions. Adultery and theft are repeatedly mentioned as the two major offences against which the king must be rigorous. The new society was based on land and it is the first agricultural society in India about which we have detailed information. It was an expanding agricultural economy which was surplus producing and this in turn led to the rise of urban centres. It was also a period of state formation in which petty states and small political units with a greater degree of collective participation were giving way to larger and more autocratic kingdoms.

Society reflected in Buddhist literature was clearly patrilineal. Land was controlled and transmitted from one generation to another through men. Women are sometimes depicted as contributing to the management of land by helping in the distribution of food and disbursing payments in kind to the workers on the land but the head of the producing unit was a male called the *gahapati* who was both the head of the family and the head of the producing unit.

Buddhist literature clearly indicates that women were subservient and under the control of men—either of the father, brother, son or the guild. It is stated that among the social disadvantages of woman was the fact that she had to leave home at a tender age and also had to wait upon men all her life. She could not sit in court, nor conduct business of any kind, nor earn a living by any profession. She could not become a bhikkhuni without the permission of her husband. Of course in contrast the bhikkhu was not required to take permission from his wife. The Buddha himself, as is well known, left home without telling his wife, who had just borne him his son.

The literature also reflects the image of a woman as living in a world revolving around her husband and her son. Her greatest ambition according to this image was to remain without a rival in her husband’s affection. Apart from this, in the eyes of the authors, her only other concern was with adornment. Significantly, the texts frequently display considerable prejudice against women. Buddhist literature keeps on emphasizing that women are dangerous, adulterous, passionate, easily angered, and envious. They are likened to black snakes and considered to be permanently on the lookout for an occasion to seduce men. This obsession with their alleged faults may itself be indicative of the fact that desperate attempts were being made to confine women within a straitjacket and make them conform to the virtuous woman image—one who is faithful and meek, obedient and slave-like in relation to her menfolk. The distrust displayed by the texts towards women may be taken to indicate that women resented this role which the social order was forcing on them and that many of them were not prepared to conform to the “good woman” image.

The husband had total authority over the wife. We have the example of an adulterous woman who fled her pursuing husband

and took shelter in the *bhikkhunisangha*. The husband had earlier sought the permission of his kinsfolk to kill her and, this had been granted to him. The obsession with punishing adultery must be seen in the context of the emergence of private property. Once property had come into existence and was to be transmitted from father to son, the wife's chastity was imperative in order to ensure succession.

The Buddha's own attitude to women is worth recounting. Although the wider culture of renunciation recognized that regardless of barriers of caste, class, or sex everyone had the potential for salvation, the Buddha was reluctant to admit women into the Buddhist *sangha*. Permission was finally (and grudgingly) granted because of the persistence of Buddha's foster mother Mahapajapati Gotami who travelled many miles through heat and dust in pursuit of the Buddha. A crucial part in the decision to permit entry of women into the sangha was played by Ananda whose attitude to women was in striking contrast to that of the Buddha. However Ananda's gestures of sympathy to women were not endorsed by other members of the sangha and Ananda was actually censured by the *bhikkhus* for his sympathetic attitude towards women. The Buddha himself gloomily predicted that the entry of women into the *sangha* would result in its quicker collapse.

Buddhist literature generally displays an antagonistic tone

towards women. Once grudging permission was granted to women to enter the *sangha* they were placed firmly under the authority of the *bhikkhus*. In fact entry of women into *sangha* had been allowed only upon Mahapajapati Gotami's acceptance of eight pre-conditions. One of these pre-conditions was a particularly offensive rule which demanded that no matter how old or senior a *bhikkhuni* was she must rise up and salute the juniormost of *bhikkhus*. Gotami's desire to join the *sangha* was so intense that she accepted these conditions. Subsequently she made a valiant attempt to rescind this particularly objectionable clause. But the Buddha quite emphatically declined to rescind the rule, on the ground that no other sect granted this privilege to women, and therefore the Buddhists could not do so either. Incidentally the argument indicates how far Buddhism was willing to go in its view of change. While they may have been more progressive than the *brahmins*, they did not want to deviate from the position adopted by the wider culture of renouncers. There is both dignity and pathos in this episode with the aged but spirited Gotami being denied her justifiable request by the Buddha whom she had nurtured as her own son, and it speaks volumes for the discrimination against women.

In addition the *bhikkhunis* were also subjected to a wide range of disabilities in relation to the *bhikkhus* and they were even required to offer their almsfood to the monks if they ran into

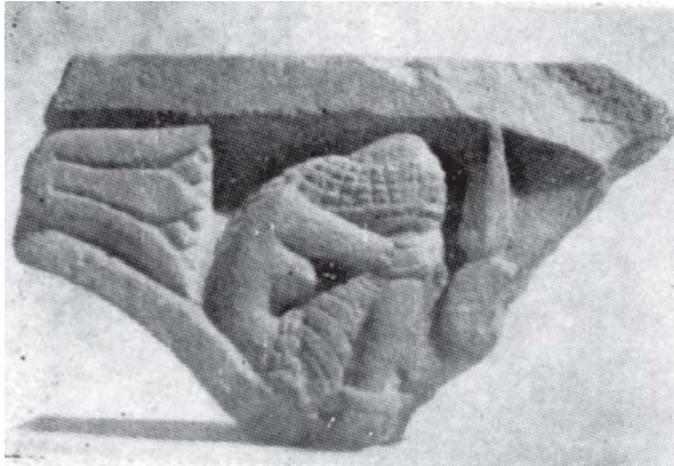


This bas-relief in marble stone from a 3rd century stupa at Nagarjunakonda, depicts a Buddhist legend. King Udayana of Kosambi having gone to sleep under the influence of drink, finds on waking that his wives are no longer around him. They have deserted him in order to go and listen to the preaching of the monk Pindola. The king is furious and prepares to attack the saint (the scene on the right) but his wives manage to calm him and he kneels down beside the monk (the scene on the left).

them. Of course no similar obligation was placed on the bhikkhus. It was also common for *bhikkhunis* to receive more severe punishments than the *bhikkhus* for exactly similar offences.

One of the few prominent women of the Buddhist texts to receive consistently favourable references was Visakha Migaramata. Visakha was the daughter of a wealthy *gahapati* and was married to another wealthy *gahapati* of Savatthi. She became a devotee of the Buddha and was responsible for persuading her father-in-law to accept Buddhism. She remained an *upasika* (lay-follower) all her life and was one of the biggest donors to the *sangha*. She interacted frequently with the Buddha who delivered many sermons to Visakha on a variety of occasions. Visakha was widely recognized as an influential figure and many rules were formulated for the *sangha* at Visakha's instance.

On the basis of an analysis of the references to women in the early Buddhist literature three alternative roles for women become apparent. The first was the role of wife and mother which was the



“Woman in Grief” : Sarnath, 2nd century B. C. (courtesy National Museum, New Delhi)

most common role for women envisaged in the texts. Most of the specific references to women would fall into this category. All women were expected to marry. The *Milindapanha*, a Buddhist text of the first century A.D. refers to a woman without a husband among ten kinds of disreputable individuals where she was lumped along with gluttons, sinners, and those who had no character. Within marriage woman was specifically associated with service. She rose early, served her family, managed the household, looked after the domestic budget and, if she was comfortably off, controlled the servants. If she was poor she slaved physically both at home and outside in the employment of a wealthy family. She could also be sexually exploited within marriage. Two kinds of wives referred to include the slave-cum-wife and the courtesan cum-wife. A woman is described as a “food minister”, and according to the Buddha himself the best kind of wife was one who ministered to her husband's needs best. It is also said that within marriage a woman who resembled a thief or murderer or master was bad and would go to hell. If on the other hand she resembled a mother, sister, or slave she was good and would attain bliss. A young daughter-in-law who is

described as having been haughty and obstinate and who paid no attention to her father-in-law, mother-in-law, and husband was later “tamed” by the Buddha. Her only wish thereafter was to be a wife of the slave type whose predominant characteristic would be obedience. The slave type of woman is elucidated thus:

*“ If fearless of the lash and stick,  
unmoved, all things enduring,  
calm and pure in heart, from anger free,  
let her be called a dasi and a wife.”*

However, even for the wife who existed in the “virtuous woman” image there was no guarantee that she would be well-treated or respected within the family and outside it. In spite of slaving all day, and adorning herself and physically pleasing her master at night, she could be spurned and cast off by him and sold again and again to different men by her father. We have the pathetic story of Isidasi whose experiences we may relate in her own words :

*My salutation morn and eve I brought  
To both the parents of my husband,  
Bowing low and kneeling at their feet,  
According to the training given to me.  
My husband's sisters and his brothers too,  
And all his kin, scarce were they entered when  
I rose in timid zeal and gave them place.  
And as to food, or boiled or dried, and drink—  
That which was to be stored I set aside,  
And served it out and gave to whom 't was due.  
Rising betimes, I went about the house,  
Then with my hands and feet well cleansed I went  
To bring respectful greeting to my lord,  
And taking comb and mirror, unguents, soap,  
I dressed and groomed him as a handmaid might.  
I boiled the rice, I washed the pots and pans;  
And as a mother to her only child,  
So did I minister to my good man.*

But all this was rejected by her husband and so Isidasi returned to her father who gave her away a second time :

*Then father gave me a second time as bride  
Content with half my husband's sire had paid,  
From that house too when I had dwelt a month,  
I was sent back though I had worked and served  
Blameless and virtuous as any slave.*

She was then handed over a third time and dismissed a third time after which she despaired of her life and in order to escape from her misery requested permission to become a *bhikkhuni*:

*And then I asked my parents' leave to die,  
Or that they suffer me to leave the world,*

The really significant point about the narrative is that society did not condemn such actions. Instead the question of Isidasi's predicament is rationalized and casually dismissed as the fruit of Isidasi's previous *Karma* - a punishment for her adulterous life in a former incarnation.

Within marriage and the family woman was merely a

substitutable commodity. One woman who wished to perform certain religious observances took drastic steps to secure at least temporary freedom from her “wifely obligations”. Since her husband would not consent to her absenting herself from him for a fortnight so that she might pursue her ethical goals by listening to the *dhamma* and distributing alms, she arranged for a substitute in the form of a courtesan. The husband then of course readily gave her permission. The incident not only shows how easily replaceable the wife was but also how desperate a woman’s need could be for pursuing her own freedom.

The second role within which women appear in Buddhist literature is that of the courtesan. Traditionally, one could opt

However the courtesan’s freedom was only partial because she was trapped by the socially conditioned role for women. If women are not wives and mothers they must be mistresses. If we look at the situations in which the courtesan was placed this is strikingly evident because she was still subject to male control and dominance. How did a woman become a courtesan, for instance? Not by choice, at least in the case of Ambapali. Ambapali was the most beautiful girl in Vesali. According to the literature, Vesali had a custom whereby the most beautiful girl in the city could not marry (this would make her the property of one man). Instead she was installed as a courtesan so that everyone could have free access to her (she then became the common property



*This is a 2nd century sculpture (Kushan) from Mathura. The front view (picture on the left) is a “scene in a courtesan’s house.” Here she is shown being held back. The back view (picture on the right) is a “courtesan fleeing from pursuing youths.”*

out of the stereotyped role of woman as wife and mother only by becoming a courtesan. In Buddhist literature she appears to be a woman who did not suffer from social condemnation. Her status was better than that of the wife. She had considerable independence, and since she had an income of her own she possessed a degree of confidence which the usual woman within the household did not. Unlike the married woman she owned and disposed off property. In certain situations she did not allow herself to be browbeaten by the men around her. Ambapali, the famous courtesan of Buddhist literature declined to give up her invitation to a meal for the Buddha in favour of the Lichhavi princes who wished to edge her out and host the Buddha themselves.

of all men in the city). Another version in the texts says that the princes of Vesali quarrelled among themselves about who should marry her and since they could not agree they set her up as courtesan instead. Apparently, when men cannot agree among themselves about who should have a woman, they agree to share her by installing her as a courtesan.

A courtesan was seen as someone who raised the “prestige” of a city. The citizens of Rajagaha came to the conclusion that Vesali was a flourishing city because of Ambapali’s presence so they decided to reproduce the same conditions in Rajagaha. The citizens of Rajagaha then decided to install Salavati as the courtesan of Rajagaha. Salavati’s narrative clearly indicates that the courtesan was under continuous pressure to fit into a

stereotyped role, so she could not have a child. When Salavati became pregnant she said “men do not like a pregnant woman” and went into hiding. After she delivered her child she abandoned it so that she could successfully return to her livelihood.

Sometimes the courtesan substituted for the housewife as we have described earlier. But most striking is the example of a courtesan who wished to join the *sangha*. She had to travel in order to be ordained but she could not publicly renounce her status as a courtesan, for fear of the men who would waylay her in order to prevent her from becoming a *bhikkhuni*. The courtesan’s “freedom” then was only relative and she continued to be trapped by the sex role imposed on her by society. She may have escaped drudgery and physical slavery but she had not escaped from the collective control of men.

The third role in which women appear in Buddhist literature is that of the *bhikkhuni*. It has been said that the courtesan and the nun have one point in common in that they are both “the outcome of the refusal of womankind to accept married relations on the basis of subjection imposed by the father age.” We have seen that the courtesan escaped the father age only partially. It was only in the third alternative role for women that an escape route was actually possible. It was only by the path of the renouncer, where one opted out of the household and the social world itself, that a woman could move beyond the confined and trapped role that had been assigned to her. The emancipation won by the *bhikkhuni* implied *Okasa*, or opportunity for developing and concentrating. It clearly implied a release from the bondage of the women. In fact many *bhikkhunis* saw themselves as being liberated from the drudgery of the “pestle and the mortar.” For example one *bhikkhuni* exclaims :

*Oh free indeed ! Oh gloriously free am I, in freedom from three things—from pestle and mortar and from my hunchbacked lord, and all that has dragged me back is hurled away or again*  
*O woman well set free ! How free am I,*  
*How thoroughly free from kitchen drudgery !*  
*Me stained and squalid among my cooking pots,*  
*My brutal husband ranked as even less*  
*Than the sunshades he sits and weaves alway.*  
*I dwell now, musing at ease beneath the shade*  
*Of spreading boughs—O, but 'tis well with me !*

As a *bhikkhuni* a woman had greater independence and greater mobility. She frequently delivered sermons and received social and political recognition. Within the *sangha* only 13 per cent of *bhikkhus* managed to reach the final goal of *arahant* ship whereas in contrast 23 percent of the *bhikkhunis* became *arahants* (travelling preachers). However inspite of this, Mara the evil one, but who is typically male, tries to restrain a *bhikkhuni* by saying :

*That vantage ground that sages may attain is hard*  
*To reach. With her two-finger consciousness*  
*That is no woman competent to gain.*

(two-finger consciousness refers to woman-assigned roles and skills where from the age of about eight or nine a woman uses her two fingers to test if the rice is cooked).

The *bhikkhuni* retorted :

*What should a woman's nature do to them*

*Whose hearts are firmly set, who ever move,*  
*With growing knowledge onward in the path ?*  
*To one for whom the question doth arise :*  
*Am I a woman in these matters, or*  
*Am I a man, or what not am I, then ?*  
 And liberated from her confined role she exclaims:  
*Freed woman I, discharged is all my debt,*  
*A bhikkhuni trained in the higher sense.*  
*All sundered are my bonds, the task is done.*



*A Buddhist Nun (courtesy National Museum)*

*And the great drugs that poisoned me are purged.*

Inspite of these rich attempts of women to give meaning to their lives, Buddhist literature reveals a lack of appreciation for the *bhikkhuni*. The most important woman in the Buddhist texts is not Mahapajapati Gotami or any other *bhikkhuni* but Visakha Migaramata, a matriarch who presided over a large family consisting of children and grandchildren, and was considered auspicious for these very qualities. It is ironical that it was the wife-mother role that was considered exemplary even in Buddhism which otherwise clearly postulated itself as a salvation religion wherein salvation was exclusively for the renouncer.