

Socio-Economic and Politico-Religious Transformations in the Buddhist Era: A Gendered Perspective

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Abstract

The historiography of the Buddhist era in ancient India reveals a profound transitional phase, characterized by the efflorescence of trade and commerce, the proliferation of diverse political entities—encompassing both monarchical regimes and republican oligarchies—and the inexorable shift from agrarian village societies to burgeoning urban centers. This epoch, spanning roughly from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE, marked a pivotal rupture in the subcontinent's socio-economic fabric, fostering an environment ripe for ideological contestation and cultural reconfiguration. In this milieu, canonical texts of the Vedic tradition, such as the *Grhya Sūtras* and *Dharma Sūtras*, underscore the paramount importance of *samskāras*—those ritualistic formations and life-cycle ceremonies designed to perpetuate the cultural and religious ethos intrinsic to Brahmanical orthodoxy. These rites served as bulwarks, reinforcing hierarchical structures and communal identities rooted in *varna* and *āśrama* paradigms, thereby ensuring the continuity of a sacral order that privileged inherited status and divine sanction. Conversely, heterodox movements, preeminently Buddhism, endeavored to subvert this entrenched valorization of *samskāras*. By positing that all phenomena are conditioned and impermanent (anicca), Buddhist doctrine, as articulated in the Pāli Canon, demystified these rituals, advocating instead a radical agency wherein individuals—irrespective of gender, for "man" here denotes humanity in its universality—forge their own destinies through ethical conduct, mindfulness, and the cultivation of wisdom.

Keywords: Samskāra, Heterodox Sects, Urbanization, Therīgāthā, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Enlightenment.

Introduction

The sixth to fourth centuries BCE in northern India marked a transformative epoch, characterized by a seismic shift from an agrarian to an urban economy, catalyzing the second urbanization of the Indian subcontinent. This period, often termed the Buddhist era, witnessed profound changes in political, economic, social, and religious landscapes, fundamentally reshaping the contours of Indian civilization. The emergence of sixteen *mahājanapadas*—semi-urbanized territorial states—signaled the crystallization of political structures, transitioning from mythic oral traditions to recorded historical developments. While many of these polities were swiftly subsumed into expansive monarchical *rājatantras*, the era also heralded the genesis of imperialism, with kings vested with absolute authority to levy taxes and maintain order in exchange for protection against external threats. This divine-kingship nexus, rooted in Vedic ideologies, further consolidated monarchical power,

intertwining sovereignty with sacral legitimacy. Economically, the period was defined by the advent of a profit-driven paradigm, propelled by the widespread adoption of iron tools, as evidenced by archaeological findings at sites like *Atranjikhera*. This technological leap facilitated surplus agricultural production, fostering the growth of settlements and the introduction of metallic currency, such as the *kārṣāpana* coin, which supplanted barter systems. The use of *hundi* (credit instruments) by affluent merchants underscored the sophistication of commercial networks. Artisans and traders organized into guilds (*srenis*), establishing specialized commercial wards (*vithis*) within urban centers, emblematic of a burgeoning mercantile economy. These economic shifts not only transformed rural landscapes but also laid the foundation for a dynamic urban culture.

Religiously, the period was marked by a profound ideological contestation. Vedic ritualism, particularly animal sacrifices, clashed with the emerging agrarian economy, as cattle-central

to plough agriculture-were decimated in rituals. This dissonance fueled the rise of heterodox sects, most notably Buddhism, which challenged the orthodoxy of the *Grhya Sūtras* and *Dharma Sūtras*. Gautama Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, introduced the Eightfold Path, a pragmatic "Middle Way" eschewing both hedonism and extreme asceticism. This doctrine resonated with a populace seeking spiritual alternatives to rigid Vedic *samskāras*, offering a path to liberation grounded in personal agency and ethical conduct.

Reformation of the Varṇa System

The Buddhist era witnessed a subtle reconfiguration of the varṇa system, with Gautama Buddha advocating a meritocratic ethos based on *kamma* (actions) rather than *janma* (birth). While not dismantling the fourfold *varṇa* structure-*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*-Buddhism mitigated its rigidity, prioritizing character over hereditary status.^[1] This ideological shift fostered a social environment where individual actions determined worth, challenging the entrenched hierarchies of Vedic orthodoxy and fostering a nascent egalitarianism, particularly evident in the Buddhist *saṅgha*.^[2]

Gender and Agency in the Buddhist Era

The status of women during this transformative period reflects a complex interplay of progress and constraint, shaped by the ideological currents of Buddhism and the persistent patriarchal frameworks of Vedic society. Buddhist doctrine posited that women, like men, could attain liberation through ethical practice and spiritual discipline, a radical departure from Vedic prescriptions that tethered women's roles to domesticity and ritual subordination. The establishment of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*-despite Buddha's initial reluctance, overcome through Ānanda's advocacy-provided women with unprecedented opportunities for spiritual and intellectual engagement. Figures like Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khemā, and Dhammadinnā exemplified female agency, achieving scholarly eminence and leadership within the *saṅgha*. The *Therīgāthā*, a collection of verses by *bhikkhunīs*, attests to their spiritual profundity and intellectual rigor, with women like Bhadra Kundal Kesha engaging in *śāstrārtha* (philosophical debates) and surpassing male counterparts in erudition.

Childhood and Education

In childhood, girls from elite families enjoyed relative parity with boys, receiving comparable care and educational opportunities, as illustrated in the *Vessantara Jātaka*.^[3] The Buddhist *saṅgha* furthered female education, particularly among women from mercantile and aristocratic backgrounds, who pursued Vedic and philosophical studies with zeal.^[4] The *bhikkhunī saṅgha* became a crucible for intellectual development, fostering a cadre of women scholars who mastered texts like the *Vinaya Piṭaka*.^[5] However, access to education remained stratified: while *saṅgha* women thrived, secular education for non-ascetic women was limited, often confined to domestic skills, reflecting societal biases that prioritized male education in arts and architecture.

Marriage and Family Life

Marriage remained a cornerstone of female identity, with texts like the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* portraying women as dependent on male protection.^[6] The ideal marriageable age was around sixteen, though some women remained

unmarried, drawn to the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* due to dissatisfaction with familial life.^[7] Three forms of marriage-*brahma vivāha* (arranged), *svayamvara* (self-choice), and *gāndharva vivāha* (mutual consent)-prevailed, reflecting diverse social practices.^[8] Remarriage was permissible, particularly among the elite and lower classes, often prompted by a husband's death or renunciation.^[9] However, Buddhist rhetoric, which occasionally depicted married life as a source of misery to promote asceticism, inadvertently diminished women's status within the household, casting them as objects of luxury rather than partners.^[10]

Motherhood and Widowhood

Motherhood conferred respect, with mothers revered as familial pillars, though barrenness invited social stigma. Festivals like *gārbha-pariṣkāra* celebrated pregnancy, underscoring its cultural significance.^[11] Conversely, widowhood was a marginalized state, with no evidence of *sati* in Buddhist texts, suggesting its absence or rarity. Widows faced social ostracism and economic dependence, with remarriage uncommon among the middle classes, compelling many to seek refuge in the *saṅgha*.

Dowry and Economic Agency

The dowry system, prevalent among aristocratic families, as seen in the marriages of Kosala-devī^[12] and Visākhā^[13], was not yet a pervasive social ill. While it underscored women's commodification in elite circles, its impact on middle and lower classes remains unclear. Women's economic roles were largely confined to domestic spheres, though mercantile women like Visākhā wielded significant influence, supporting Buddhist institutions through patronage.

Absence of Purdāh

Notably, the *purdāh* system was absent, with women participating freely in social and religious activities without veils. This openness allowed daughters and daughters-in-law to engage publicly, managing households and interacting with diverse community members, reflecting a degree of social freedom uncommon in later periods.^[14]

Slavery and Labor

The institution of slavery, encompassing *dāsī*^[15], *dāī*^[16], and *paricārikā*^[17], underscored women's subjugation. *Dāsīs* served as domestic workers or luxury objects, subject to their masters' whims, while *paricārikās* performed as entertainers, skilled in music and dance. Some slave women achieved emancipation through marriage, but their status remained precarious, highlighting the intersection of gender and class oppression.

Asceticism and the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha

The *bhikkhunī saṅgha* emerged as a revolutionary institution, attracting women across social strata seeking respite from familial and social constraints.^[18] However, strict regulations governed their conduct, and societal attitudes oscillated between reverence and suspicion. Young or attractive *bhikkhunīs* faced risks of exploitation, reflecting the limits of their social integration.^[19] Despite these challenges, the *saṅgha* empowered women to reclaim religious agency, fostering a sense of self-worth and spiritual equality.

Conclusion

The Buddhist era was a crucible of transformation, reshaping India's political, economic, and religious landscapes. The

shift from an agrarian to an urban economy, coupled with the rise of heterodox sects, challenged Vedic orthodoxy, creating spaces for social reconfiguration. Women, though still ensconced within patriarchal structures, benefited from Buddhist egalitarianism, particularly through the *bhikkhunī* *saṅgha*, which offered avenues for education, spiritual liberation, and social agency. Yet, persistent inequalities-evident in marriage, widowhood, and slavery-underscore the era's transitional nature. While Buddhism elevated women's religious status, societal norms often curtailed their autonomy, reflecting a tension between ideological progress and entrenched hierarchies. This period, thus, represents a critical juncture in Indian history, where women's roles were renegotiated amidst broader socio-cultural upheavals, leaving an indelible mark on the subcontinent's gendered history.

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