

Women in Ancient India

by

C. D. Weerasinghe

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Women in Ancient India

1. Mahā Pajāpatī Gotami

Within a week after the birth of Prince Siddhattha who was to become the Buddha, his mother, Queen Mahā Maya, died, and from his infancy the young prince was tended and cared for by his step-mother Mahā Pajāpatī Gotami who had become the consort of King Suddhodana, the ruler of the Sakya kingdom.

Mahā Pajāpatī's affection towards Prince Siddhattha was the same as for her own children and she took the greatest care of him. After the death of King Suddhodana she devoted her time to the study of the Buddha's doctrine. Her leisure hours were spent in getting up a suitable robe to be offered to the Buddha.

At the end of the fifth vassā period of the Buddha, spent at the Pinnacled Hall at Mahāvana near Vesāli, Mahā Pajāpatī Gotami brought the robe prepared by her to be presented to the Buddha. But when the robe was offered to him, to her great surprise the Buddha refused to accept it. Repeatedly she offered it to the Buddha, but each time it was refused by him. At this she was deeply grieved. She remembered incidents in Prince Siddhattha's life and how she had taken the place of his mother. Tears filled her eyes at the Buddha's refusal to accept her gift. But yet Mahā Pajāpatī persisted in her offer of the robe.

Seeing the embarrassment of the Queen, the Buddha explained that he would not wish to receive the robe as a personal gift but suggested to her that it should be offered to the Order, the Mahā Sangha, whose members come from everywhere in the four directions. This would be a still greater meritorious act. After this explanation, when the robe was duly offered to the Mahā Sangha, the Buddha accepted it.

Bhikkhunī Sangha

As time passed Mahā Pajāpatī realised more and more the truth of the Buddha's Doctrine, and as her son, Prince Nanda, had entered the Sangha, she too expressed a desire to live a life of renunciation, as a Nun. But so far no Order of Nuns (Bhikkhunī Sangha), existed, and therefore she begged permission from the Buddha to admit women to the Sangha. But the Buddha for several reasons refused such permission. Undaunted, however, Mahā Pajāpatī cut off her hair, donned yellow robes and accompanied by several Sakyan ladies, she walked from Kapilavatthu to Vesāli. Travel-worn and weeping she stood outside the porch of the Pinnacled Hall at Mahāvana, where the Buddha was residing, and repeated her pleading to the Venerable Ānanda who had seen her standing at the gate.

The Buddhist texts record how the Venerable Ānanda Thera, greatly moved by this pathetic sight, appealed to the Buddha on behalf of Mahā Pajāpatī and the other Sakyan ladies. Finally the Buddha granted permission to women to enter the Sangha, on certain conditions, which Mahā Pajāpatī gladly accepted. Thus was instituted the Order of Bhikkhunīs.

As time passed, this Order of Bhikkhunīs expanded and produced many noble and saintly members. In the same way that the Arahants Sāriputta and Moggallāna were the two chief disciples of the Order of Bhikkhus, similarly the Arahant nuns Khema and Uppalavaṇṇa were made the two chief female disciples of the Bhikkhunī Sangha.

The Order of Nuns founded in response to the pleas of Mahā Pajāpatī Gotami had far-reaching results. Women, who before the advent of the Buddha were placed in very unfavourable circumstances, found this Order of Bhikkhunīs a great blessing.

In this Order of Buddhist Nuns, queens, princesses, daughters of noble families, widows, bereaved mothers, helpless women, ex-courtesans and slaves could meet on common ground, irrespective of rank or caste. Even the lowly ones were thus elevated by the dignity of their religious quest, and they found consolation and peace. Many of those who otherwise would have passed their lives in oblivion, reached the very summit of human achievement—full emancipation in sainthood, as recorded in the moving and sublime stanzas of the Theri-Gāthā (“Psalms of the Sisters”), which form a part of the Buddhist Canon.

From that time 2500 years ago, the status of women in India rose considerably. People were made to realise the importance and dignity of woman in society. In the dispensation of the Buddha, women are given their rightful place in the family and in society.

Mahā Pajāpatī Gotami was indeed fortunate. In her worldly life she was the consort of King Suddhodana. She had the privilege of tending Prince Siddhattha when he was young. She was mother of Prince Siddhattha’s step-brother, Prince Nanda, who entered the Order and achieved Arahantship. She was the cause of the founding of the Order of Bhikkhunīs and not only did she herself achieve Arahantship, but made it possible for other women to breathe a free atmosphere in which they could seek emancipation just as men did.

2. Yasodharā

In the life of Prince Siddhattha perhaps no one showed him greater devotion than his consort, Princess Yasodharā. It was by proof of valour and strength that Prince Siddhattha won Yasodharā. But Buddhist stories show that she had been the consort of the Bodhisatta in countless previous births.

Both Prince Siddhattha and Yasodharā were of the same age and their married life was a happy one. They lived in luxury, blissfully unaware of the vicissitudes of life outside the palace. But before long it dawned on Prince Siddhattha’s mind that life was by no means as pleasant as it had been made to appear to him and that enjoyments in the royal household were but fleeting pleasures.

Prince Siddhattha severed himself from his beautiful consort, his newly born baby, and the countless pleasures of palace life to seek a way to end the miseries of life. Barefooted and bareheaded, wearing the yellow robes of an ascetic, he walked about in the scorching sun or piercing cold, begging his food. Princess Yasodharā too endured privations, though of a different sort. She bore the pangs of separation without a murmur. It was only after attaining Supreme Enlightenment that the Buddha visited Yasodharā again.

When the Buddha visited Kapilavatthu and came to King Suddhodana’s palace, all but Princess Yasodharā came to pay their reverence to him. She thought: “Certainly, if there is any virtue in me, the noble Lord himself will come to my presence. Then I will reverence him.”

And when the Buddha entered Yasodharā’s chamber in the company of the King and two of his disciples, and sat on the prepared seat, Yasodharā came, clasped his ankles and placing her head on his feet, paid reverence to him. The Buddha had given directions that she should be allowed to salute him as she wished.

King Suddhodana then commented on her great love and said: “Lord, when my daughter heard that you were wearing yellow robes, she also robed herself in yellow. When she heard you were taking only one meal a day, she also did the same. When she heard that you had given up lofty couches, she lay on a low couch. When she heard that you had given up garlands and scents, she also gave them up. When her relatives sent messages to say that they would maintain her, she did not even look at a single one. So virtuous was my daughter.”

The Buddha then said: “Not only in this birth, but in a previous birth too, she cared for me.” He then related the Candakiṇṇāra Jātaka.

Yasodharā proclaimed to the world her role as perfect consort to the Bodhisatta since the time of the Buddha Dipankara, who foretold what the ascetic Sumedha would become in the future. And it was this ascetic Sumedha who became Gautama Buddha, the Enlightened One of our present age.

According to the Pūjāvaliya, Yasodharā, on her 78th year, just before she passed away, said: “I have now reached my 78th year. I have been your inseparable shadow and obedient wife in countless births. Even so, in a few lives some of my actions might appear to have been shortcomings. But these were attributable to the frailties inherent in womankind and for them I beg your pardon now, my Lord!”

She further added: “Yet, however, their effect has been to foster your endeavours towards perfection. And, in this life, with my help, you achieved your objective in a far shorter time than other Bodhisattas.”

Then Yasodharā went on to say, “For me too, rebirth is now ended and I shall be no husband’s wife again. In keeping with the tradition of the Buddhas of former times, before age and decay afflict me, I must pass away before you. And now I take my leave of you, my Lord.”

Yasodharā, the consort of the Bodhisatta, was indeed an ideal partner. In her advice to young wives she described how self-sacrificing she had always been. She said, “I have submitted myself to his wish to be offered as an object of alms, without a murmur. I have for many births slaved for others to release him from difficulties and punishments. I have willingly allowed him to give away our children.” This was in reference to the Vessantara Jātaka.

She further added, “I have asked him to give away my jewellery and have abandoned all forms of royal grandeur and comforts when he sought forest life. Then I gathered forest foods, leaving him undisturbed in his meditations. Similarly, the Lord, in countless births gave his own life for my sake.”

The great devotion of the Bodhisatta’s consort, in their many births together, is a lesson to all womankind. Her sacrifices were such that Yasodharā can be classed as a peerless consort.

In her final birth Yasodharā submitted to her husband’s Great Renunciation without a complaint. She brought up her son Rāhula well and finally allowed him to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha and enter the Order. When she herself entered the Order of Bhikkhunīs she attained to final emancipation in Arahantship.

3. Visākhā

Visākhā, the devout daughter of Dhanañjaya, a millionaire of Sāvattī, can be classed as an ideal lay woman. Judged by modern standards, Visākhā remains an example to all womankind. She was not only intelligent, but was also gifted with all feminine charms. In addition to this, she was fabulously wealthy. She was able to win the love and esteem of Puñṇavaddhana, the son of another millionaire of Sāvattī, named Migāra. Her young husband did not hold the same religious views as Visākhā who, quite early, had become a lay follower of the Buddha. But nevertheless, due to Visākhā’s tolerance, there was always domestic happiness.

As a young girl she was so intelligent that she was able to grasp the Buddha’s teaching when he came, as he often did, to her home on her father’s invitation for an alms meal. It is said that when she heard the Dhamma from the Buddha for the first time, she attained to Stream-entry (sotāpatti), the first stage of sainthood.

According to tradition, Visākha in the prime of her life possessed not only beauty, but also great physical strength. Even in her youth she excelled both in worldly wisdom and spiritual insight.

The marriage of Puññavaddhana and Visākhā was a great event in the city. On her wedding day, in addition to her large dowry, Visākhā received from her father, as an heirloom, an exquisitely rich ornament, called "Mahālātā Pilandhana" (Great Parure). She also received ten admonitions from her father and it may be said that her following of these admonitions was the secret of her happy home life.

The admonitions of Dhanañjaya to his beloved daughter were:

"The indoor fire should not be taken outside the home."

(Troubles at home should not be discussed with outsiders, as such talk tends to increase troubles in the family.)

"The outside fire should not be brought inside."

(The talk of outsiders who speak ill of the family, should not be repeated in the house. Such tale bearing destroys family harmony.)

"Give only to those who give."

(One should lend to those who will return what is given.)

"Do not give to those who do not give."

(One should not lend to those who do not return the articles.)

"Give to him who gives as well as to him who gives not."

(Poor relatives and friends should be helped even if they do not repay the loan.)

"Sit happily."

(She should sit in a becoming way and consider status and seniority. In the presence of her parents-in-law and her husband, she should keep standing.)

"Eat happily."

(She should take food after seeing that seniors and husband are served, and also the servants provided for.)

"Sleep happily."

(Before a wife retires for the night, the needs of the seniors of the family should be seen to, and she should check that doors are locked and other household duties done.)

"Wait upon the household fire."

(The needs of husband and senior family members in the house should be well attended to as a sacred duty.)

"Honour the household divinities."

(Parents-in-law and the husband should be honoured as the divinities of the home.)

Visākhā's tact and patience made her husband's home an ideal one. Her father-in-law finally became a follower of the Buddha and her husband gave her complete freedom to carry on Buddhist activities.

At Sāvattihī she built the "Eastern Monastery" (Pubbārāma). The Buddha spent six Rainy Seasons in that monastery and delivered several discourses there which were of particular

interest to laymen. In the course of time she became one of the most prominent supporters of the Buddha and the Order. She was chosen to settle disputes that arose among the Bhikkhunīs. It is said that some of the rules for Bhikkhunīs were laid down at her suggestion.

In that distant age when women were not much esteemed in society, Visākhā, by her obedience and reverence shown to elders, won the respect of all and the prominence given to her in the Buddhist scriptures.

It is true that her great wealth stood her in good stead in helping her to acquire the highest place among women. She used her wealth for hospitality and for assisting her less fortunate sisters as well as in support of the Sangha.

4. Kisāgotamī

When the Buddha was residing in the Jetavana monastery, built by that famous lay supporter of the Sangha, Anāthapiṇḍika, a woman named Kisāgotamī came to him with a very sad tale. She belonged to the Gotama clan and therefore was a relation of Prince Siddhattha who had become the Buddha.

This Kisāgotamī was a remarkably beautiful woman. She had a delicate, tender and frail body. And because she was slender, she was known as Kisa (slender) Gotami. She was well married, her husband being a wealthy merchant. They had a lovely baby boy and were a happy and contented family.

But when the child was about a year old he fell ill, and before any physician could be summoned he died, causing untold grief to the parents. This was indeed a cruel blow to the delicate mother and she would not accept the fact that the child was dead.

Kisāgotamī, in her grief, ran about distraught, clasping the dead child's body to her breast; nor would she heed the sad counsel of those who told her that the dead could not be brought back to life. Kisāgotamī ran up and down the city sobbing and begging those she met to give her child some medicine. Some of the passers-by in the street, seeing this pathetic sight, did not contradict Kisāgotamī's belief that the child could be restored to life. At last, an elderly man understanding the woman's pitiful plight, directed her to the Buddha.

At that time, the Buddha was preaching the Dhamma to a group of eager listeners. To the amazement of all, Kisāgotamī thrust herself forward and placed her dead baby at the Master's feet, imploring him to bring it back to life.

The Buddha patiently listened to her and gazing at her with gentle eyes said, "Sister! There is an infallible medicine with which I can heal your affliction. Fetch me a few mustard seeds from a house in the town. But," the Buddha added, "you must get these mustard seeds from a house where there has never been a death."

The unfortunate woman failed to realise the significance of the words of the Buddha, and, with the hope of restoring her dear son's life, she immediately set out in search of the mustard seeds.

Still hugging her dead child, she went from house to house in search of the life-giving mustard seed. There was the mustard seed all right, and the pitying householders were only too glad to give it to the wretched mother. But when she told them that it had to be from a house that had never known death, they said:

Here it the seed, but we have lost our slave!
Here is the seed, but our good man is dead!
Here is some seed, but he who sowed it died
Between the rain-time and the harvesting!

The Light of Asia

Till late in the evening Kisāgotamī went from house to house in Sāvattthī in search of the mustard seed. But everywhere she heard the same pathetic tale—and at last she came to realise the universality of death. Truth dawned on her and she learnt to accept the fact that death was inevitable for all. Then she knew at last that her child was dead. She left the body at the charnel-field and returned to the presence of the Buddha.

She fell down at the feet of the Master and said: “Now, O Lord, I understand the great lesson you taught me, by asking me to get mustard seed from a house where there had been no death.” Then:

My sister! Thou hast found—the Master said—
Searching for what none finds—that bitter balm
I had to give thee. He thou loved’st slept
Dead on thy bosom yesterday; today
Thou know’st the whole wide world weeps with thy woe.

The Light of Asia

Kisāgotamī realised the truth of the Buddha’s words. She learnt that all existing things change and are subject to decay. And, as she learnt this universal truth, she attained the first stage of sainthood. She then entered the Order of Nuns (Bhikkhunī) and quite soon thereafter she attained Arahantship.

On that occasion the Buddha preached on the impermanence of all worldly things and declared that the aim of life should be to attain the Deathless State, Nibbāna.

5. Paṭācārā

When the Buddha was residing at the Jetavana Monastery in Sāvattthī, there lived in the neighbourhood a young girl named Paṭācārā. She was endowed with all the possessions of which a woman could be proud: she was exquisitely beautiful; her parents were rich; and she could have won the love of any young man of the country for purposes of marriage.

Nevertheless, Paṭācārā had a clandestine love affair with one of the household servants and as she was aware that her parents would never agree to her unequal marriage with this serf, she eloped with her lover and lived in a jungle den in a far-away forest. As time passed, Paṭācārā was expecting her first baby and she had a very keen desire to visit her parents in Sāvattthī.

But Paṭācārā’s husband was afraid to face his former master, as he thought that he would be punished for secretly winning the love of the girl and eloping with her. Paṭācārā, however, was determined to see her parents and when her husband was absent, she stole away from her forest abode. On the way, however, a baby boy was born and yielding to the pleadings of her husband who had followed her, she returned to their hut in the forest.

In the course of time, Paṭācārā was expecting her second child and she felt once again a very strong desire to visit her parents. For the second time she stole away from the hut and was on her way to Sāvattthī, this time accompanied by her first child. Once again her husband followed her, and while in the forest she gave birth to her second child.

On this occasion there was very heavy rain and her husband, wanting to provide a shelter for his spouse and the little children, went in search of some leaves. But, to Paṭācārā's great dismay, he did not return. Paṭācārā was worried and spent a restless night.

On the following morning, she set out in search of her husband, and to her untold sorrow she beheld her husband dead, close to an ant hill. He had been bitten by a snake when he was about to cut leaves. Nevertheless, Paṭācārā continued her journey to her parental home.

On the way, the unfortunate Paṭācārā had to cross a river which was in spate due to the previous night's rain. And as the current was very swift, she left the elder child on the river bank and crossed the river carrying the newly born infant. Reaching the opposite bank she left the infant there and started back to fetch the other child. She was almost mid-way across the river when she spied a hawk hovering over the infant on the bank she had just left. The hawk, thinking that it was a piece of meat, carried the baby away. Paṭācārā cried out in the hope that the hawk would leave the child. But it was of no avail. The elder child, seeing the mother waving her hands in the attempt to drive away the hawk, thought that his mother was calling him and walked into the river, where he was swept away by the current. Thus she had lost her husband and her two little children.

So Paṭācārā continued on her way all alone. But as she approached the place of her parental home, she saw a fire and anxiously inquired what it was. One of the passers-by told her, "Last night, owing to the heavy rain, a house came down and all its occupants were killed. In that funeral pyre the dead are being cremated." It was her parents' house and Paṭācārā realised that her father, mother and brother were all dead.

Under the weight of all these losses she had suffered, her mind's sanity broke down. She ran distraught, and in her mad flight her cloth fell off. People seeing that mad woman running naked threw stones at her, but she continued her flight until she came to the Jetavana Monastery where the Buddha was preaching.

Seeing Paṭācārā's plight the Buddha spoke to her. His kind and compassionate words brought Paṭācārā to her senses and to her great shock she realised that she was naked and covered herself with her hands. One of the assembly passed a garment to her and she covered herself with it.

The Buddha then gave a sermon pointing out that everything in the world changes and is subject to decay. These changes bring great sorrow to the mind and the only way to avoid that sorrow is to end the cycle of births by attaining Nibbāna.

Paṭācārā accepted the words of the Buddha. She entered the Order of Bhikkhunīs and in due course attained Arahantship. She was singled out by the Buddha as being foremost among the nuns in her knowledge of the disciplinary rules of the Order. After losing all, Paṭācārā ultimately won to the highest, final deliverance.