

**REPRESENTATION OF NON – ELITE WOMEN:  
THE BUDDHIST DISCOURSE  
(C. 300 B.C. TO A.D 500)**

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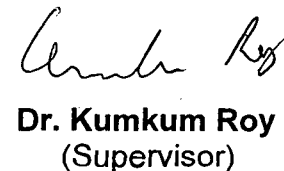
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To

*Manuj*

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## List of Abbreviations

EPW:	Economic and Political Weekly
ICHR:	Indian Council For Historical Research
IHR:	Indian Historical Review
NFDW:	National Forum for Dalit Women
VT:	Vinaya Texts

# INTRODUCTION

Women in ancient India have been the focus of scholarly attention since the nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>. Both Indian and Western Scholars undertook to study the position of women in early India, although from different perspectives. Women, like other subordinate groups in society are among the muted or silent voices of history. Although in general women have been invisible in historical writing, this invisibility too varies over time and space i.e. efforts have been made to 'represent' women time and again<sup>2</sup>.

Also, recognition of the importance of gender as an analytical category has helped in a better understanding of the power relations between men and women. More recently, the attempt has been on understanding gender differences and accepting greater pluralism rather than emphasizing on a universal meta-narrative.

This implies that the masculine and feminine characteristics are socially imposed and not biologically inevitable. At the same time the theory of gender difference due to genetic inheritance has been reiterated<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Chakravarti & Roy, 'In Search of our Past', *EPW*, April 1988, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> This would depend on the kind of issues raised.

<sup>3</sup> This is one of the many debates or dilemmas that feminists are going through.

An issue of prime importance to my work is that the difference between men and women are, not the only ones of significance. As important are the bases on which women are differentiated from one another. In other words there is inequality, i.e. between 'elite' and 'non-elite'. If 'women' are considered as a category then probably all women face the same problems. However women are fragmented in different groups based on caste, religion, occupation, cultural tradition, region etc.

Hence the focus of my work shall be to understand and probe into the diversities and polarities in our understanding of the term 'Women'<sup>4</sup> and also how gender intersects with caste and class.

Keeping in mind the theme we should look at the historiographical trends. Firstly we shall look at a few sociological, anthropological and historical works on non-elite or lower caste women<sup>5</sup>. We may then pay attention to the various works on women in Buddhism keeping in mind the category under study.

In this section we examine the works <sup>6</sup> of Uma Chakravarti, Gail Omvedt, P.S. Jogdand, Karin Kapadia, Leela Dube, Sharmila Rege, Anupama Rao, Gopal Guru and others, who in their works have

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<sup>4</sup> One needs to be sensitive to the meaning implicit in the term as used by different authors in different contexts (Roy ed. *Women in early Indian Societies*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2001, p.11)

<sup>5</sup> Term widely used in the literature.

<sup>6</sup> The work of Uma Chakravarti being the only one with a historical perspective. Also, I shall not follow a chronological order in respect to the years of their publication.



highlighted the difference between various categories of women, interplay of caste and class with gender, lower caste women's agency, their struggle and forms of resistance and much more.

Gopal Guru's article titled "Dalit women Talk Differently"<sup>7</sup> argues that difference which is now being vehemently highlighted between higher caste women and Dalit women essentialises our understanding of the specificity of Dalit women's subjugation, characterized by their experience of two distinct patriarchal structures/situations, one being the brahmanical form of patriarchy that deeply subjugates and stigmatizes Dalit women because of their caste status, the other being the intimate form of control exercised by Dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of "their" women.<sup>8</sup>

What one gathers from the work is that he applauds the formation of organizations like the NFDW, which questions the upper caste feminists for their hegemony in speaking for or representing "Indian" women. He also focuses on the need to understand patriarchal norms operating within the Dalit communities.

Another work *Dalit women in India: Issues and Perspectives* edited by P.G. Jogdand<sup>9</sup> is a collection of 19 articles centering on the theme as

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<sup>7</sup> EPW, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> This view is critiqued by S. Rege, whose work will be discussed in due course.

<sup>9</sup> Gyan Publishers, New Delhi, 1995. Also called an anthology by Anupama Rao (Rao ed *Gender and Caste*; Kali for Women, p.1). New Delhi.

suggested by the title of the work. A number of issues are raised throughout the book, however the dual – suffering of Dalit women, remains an underling theme of the entire work. Different scholars have used different kinds of methodologies. Some have used statistical data for elaboration, some compared them to census reports to highlight the deplorable state of Dalit women. Some are anthropological works. Vidyut Bhagwat's essay<sup>10</sup> in the work raised important points. According to her, by using the term "Dalit women" we are creating an 'imagined category', which for her is necessary to give new critical dimensions to the Indian feminist movement and to the Dalit movement.

She also highlights the common saying 'all women constitute a caste', i.e. '*Baichi jat*' which has been camouflaged by glorifying womanhood on Hindu patriarchal terms and dividing women into different castes<sup>11</sup>.

For her bringing up Dalits women's agential connectivity in a larger Indian feminist movement could help us in creating a new meaning to the reality of *Baichi Jat*'. But what we need to keep in mind is that the creation of such an 'imagined' category may also lead to further marginalization.

Other articles in the work like Punalekar's 'On Dalitism and Gender', Neelam Gorhe's 'Social development and Dalit Women', Kumud Pawade's

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<sup>10</sup> "Dalit Women: Issues and perspective some critical Reflections."

<sup>11</sup> Ibid; p.3

'Life of a Dalit movement' explore in various ways the deplorable state of Dalit Women.

Punalekar looks at the working conditions of Dalit women in the organized and unorganized sectors, the condition of women among construction workers and then goes on to explore rural and tribal women. The issue of the cultural domain<sup>12</sup> is also raised which needs further investigation. What is interesting is that in the conclusion he highlights the names of scholars who have worked on the areas that he points out in his essay. Neelam Gorhe divides Dalit women in 3 categories i.e. women from nomadic caste/tribe, non neo-Buddhist Dalit women and women in the Ambedkarite movement and goes on to look at various aspects of their existence.

Kumud Pawade's 'The life of a Dalit Woman' has tried to evaluate the life or trace lives of Dalit women in a general way. She looks at issues of women's position in the family. She uses statistical data for her analysis. Although her analysis emphasizes on the Dalit family system being patriarchal, she suggests that some categories among Dalit women progressed more in comparison to other. At the same time limitations of a survey/sample study should definitely be kept in mind.

Jyoti Janjewar's article 'Dalit literature and Dalit woman', traces the beginning of Dalit literature within Marathi literature, and then goes on to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid; p.16

highlight women's portrayal within it, which according to her is of a competent person and as capable of overcoming situations.<sup>13</sup> She does give a good account of the works in the Marathi Literature but remains confined to listing various works, looking at Dalit women in these as independent v/s controlled, rebellious v/s submissive, educated v/s literate etc.

The article by Sharmila Rege 'Gender and Caste: The violence against Women in India' highlights that violent practices show definite variations by caste. While upper caste women are subjected to controls and violence within the family, it is absence of such control that makes lower caste women vulnerable to rape, sexual harassment and the threat of public violence.<sup>14</sup> She also postulates that women's agency needs to be located in the context of the structural possibilities of class, race, caste and community. Though by and large her argument revolves around the 'difference' between upper and lower caste women<sup>15</sup>, she highlights the problem of 'survival' of women in general.

The biggest flaw in Jogdand's work is the absence of an introduction. Though the essays in the volume are around the theme suggested by the title of the work, an introduction would have threaded them together. Also most of the essays restrict themselves to the region of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid; p.191.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; 19.

<sup>15</sup> In looking at the aspect of violence.

Maharashtra, which makes it more of a region specific study, rather than 'India' as suggested by the title of the work.

With the exception of Rege's work, the other essays do not bring in any other historical perspective on the issue of caste and gender.<sup>16</sup> Sharmila Rege in another article 'Dalit Women Talk Differently: A critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint position'<sup>17</sup>, traces the processes by which 'difference' as a category came to occupy a central place in feminist analyses, traces the historically 'different voice' of Dalits and finally suggests a dalit feminist standpoint.

She argues that with the position of nominalism, the category of difference was put forward. According to her their plurality was highlighted without looking at structures of racism, patriarchies, international division of labour and capitalism. Therefore the analysis came to be focused on identities, subjectivities and representations<sup>18</sup>.

She calls for the dalit women's movement to go beyond naming of the difference and make a revolutionary epistemological shift<sup>19</sup> to a dalit feminist standpoint. Drawing on Marx, Engels and Lukacs she argues for a

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<sup>16</sup> This may also depend on the kind of questions the authors are asking and the data used by them.

<sup>17</sup> In *Feminism in India* ed. Maitreyee Chaudhary, Kali for women, New Delhi, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid; p.215.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid; 222.

standpoint theory focusing on what happens when marginalized people begin to gain public voice.

According to her emphasis should be placed on individual experiences within socially constructed groups. She focuses on how the hierarchical multiple changing structures of caste, class, ethnicity construct such a group.

From these one could also move further and take note that the category of Dalit Women is not homogeneous in itself. This opens up spheres of further research. Another scholar whose work shall be of great relevance is that of Gail Omvedt. She has two articles in Maitreyee Chaudhary's *Feminism in India*.

In 'Women's Movement: Some ideological Debates' she points out that in the 80's a vigorous women's liberation movement had been launched. For her defining the ideological differences and debates amongst women is essential.<sup>20</sup>

For her the women's movement in the 70's and 80's, was an international process following different rhythms in different countries resulting in new movements, new demands and new assertions within the social structure of India and it is in this context that the relationship between caste and patriarchy should be explored.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid; 185.

In another article titled "New Movements and new Theories in India" she traces the developments of anti-caste and Dalit movements of Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar. She then discusses the writings of Sharad Patel<sup>21</sup> who discusses the man-woman relations, kinship and family forms and then highlights new trends in feminist writing such as the eco-feminism of Vandana Shiva by and large arguing for new dimensions in the writings of both caste and gender.

In her latest work *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* she vehemently argues to look at Buddhism from modern light. Here she not only points that Buddhism was the main alternative to bramanism for Ambedkar but his interpretation of Dhamma was finally a major form of challenge to Buddhism itself.<sup>22</sup> The book accounts for the background to the rise of Buddhism to the defeat of Buddhism in its own land, to its impact, and its revival.

According to Omvedt, that Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism can find a genuine base in the teachings of Gautama is something that can be seriously challenged, on the grounds of Ambedkar's own interpretation for the issues at stake. Though questions of anti-Brahmanism and Dalit movement have been well looked into the question of women within the Buddhist tradition has been treated in a sketchy fashion

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<sup>21</sup> Founder of Satyashodak Communist Party.

<sup>22</sup> Omvedt; *Buddhism in India*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2004.

According to Omvedt both Buddhism and Brahmanism as the main ideological – philosophical doctrines of the times reflected the emerging patriarchal relations, they did so in very different ways – and in turn impacted on these in very different ways.<sup>23</sup>

Buddhism admitted women into the Sangha with a socially inferior status but as spiritual equals to men. Also the forms of patriarchy maintained by the Dhamma were far different from the life ordained for women in the Manusmṛti.<sup>24</sup> The notion of Buddhism as more open in terms of its Brahmanical counterpart itself is problematic.

Also to look at Brahmanical sources like the Manusmṛti and comparing it with the Buddhist Canonical literature further raises issues of comparing the prescriptive with the pragmatic or what actually was.

For her it was the anti-essentialism of the basic Buddhist philosophy that provided a fundamental equalitarianism that Brahmanism lacked.<sup>25</sup>

Anupama Rao's *Gender and Caste*<sup>26</sup> is yet another effort in the direction towards a newer understanding of both gender and caste. She examines<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid; p.82.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid; p.83.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid; p.85.

<sup>26</sup> Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> The essays are divided into these themes.



- (a) Dalit Bahaman's challenge against reigning paradigms. (b) Social reforms during colonial modernity had to negotiate overlapping structures of caste and gender. (c) Recently published Dalit women's testimonies exploring issues of agency and self-formations.

Gabriele Dietrich's essay in the volume titled;'Dalit movements and Women's Movement' suggests that not only Dalit women are targets of upper caste men sexually and property of their own men, but lower caste men are also engaged in a complex set of fantasies of retribution. Also Dalit leaders may have their own patriarchal interests in using or suppressing an, assault on a woman Dalit women being doubly dissented<sup>28</sup>.

Leela Dube's 'Caste and Women' in the same work suggests that the unequal distribution of resources and exploitative relations of production can be understood through an enquiry into the principles of kinship. Though unidirectional in her analysis, she highlights an important point that men have institutionalized mechanisms to escape the incurrance of pollution through sexual intercourse with lower caste women, while

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<sup>28</sup> Rao ed, Gender and Caste Kali for women, New Delhi, 2004, p.58.

women are deliberated by the performance of religious ritual that further confirms their caste status.<sup>29</sup>

Another fascinating work on the theme of gender, caste and class comes from Karin Kapadia called *Siva and her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India*. A sociological, anthropological work strongly contests the notion that elites dominate not only the physical means of production but the symbolic means of production – and this symbolic hegemony allows them to control the very standards by which their rule is evaluated.<sup>30</sup>

Kapadia with her work on "untouchable" Pallars in Aruloor Village argues that they did not share the Brahmanical values of elite groups. They reject and resist upper caste representations of themselves. Kapadia bases herself on two central and interconnected arguments.<sup>31</sup> Firstly she examines whether Pallar cultural values and consciousness can be said to mirror the values and consciousness of the brahmanical elite. Secondly both caste and class constructs of gender and gender in turn constructs both caste and class.

She deals with real life experiences such as the case of Uma who questions the legitimacy of the notion of her own female impurity or the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid; p.241.

<sup>30</sup> As put forward by pioneering works on caste – pervasive "Cultural Consensus".

<sup>31</sup> Kapadia, *Siva and her sisters*, OUP, 1996, p 8.

death of Thangamma which raises questions on lower caste sexuality – more voiced than upper castes. The work encapsulates beautifully the lives of lower caste more widely and helps us to avoid generalizations.

But a major critique of the work, can be that though the analysis of kinship or village communities is useful in producing detailed accounts of caste practices, matters of historical mediation or the changed form of political subjectivity are not adequately addressed. They solely rely on the method of analysis and the data produced.

The last work under consideration in this section is the recent work of Uma Chakravarti titled *Gendering Caste*. This is a work highlighting that caste is successful in dividing women – and erasing a possibility of sisterhood.

This is brought forth in the introduction itself where she makes us notice the anti Mandal agitation in Delhi University with women college student (upper caste) protesting with placards 'We do not want unemployed husbands'. This definitely had a deeper meaning.<sup>32</sup>

She writes that no feminist view point based on the understanding of caste came forth after the discussion and in the course of debate<sup>33</sup> following the Mandal episode. Uma Chakravarti in her work brings out the

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<sup>32</sup> New recruits (low-caste) in Bureaucracy could not be their husbands.

<sup>33</sup> Chakravarti; *Gendering Caste*, Stree, Kolkata, 2004; p.3.

triple burden borne by Dalit women (enumerating in 3 what others did in 2). as Dalits from the upper castes, as labourers from the landlord and as women from men of their own families and castes. A work with a historical perspective, she traces relations of caste, class and gender to the historical roots of Brahmanical patriarchy, diversities in patriarchal practices, pre-colonial structure with the example of 18<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra, caste during the colonial period and caste and gender till the present times.

At one level, it covers a broad historical framework, yet at the other end is able to engage with specific examples at a small level adding to the larger argument, the best contribution of the work being opening the arena for further research.

The interest in both history and the woman question in the Indian context were derived from the colonial encounter.<sup>34</sup> Also at the same time attempts on the part of western educated indigenous elite to reclaim and reconstitute their past is well visualized.

Also what is interesting to note is that the concerns with constructing and reconstructing women's history stems from a variety of agendas which are not necessarily women centred, as a result of which

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<sup>34</sup> Roy (ed), *Women in Early Indian Societies*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1999; p.2.

women's identities are constituted through processes which are complex and by no means bounded within the framework of a single logic.<sup>35</sup>

The dominant discourse on women in early Indian society, derived primarily from brahmanical normative texts preoccupied itself with religious and legal questions,<sup>36</sup> confined to seeing them within the context of family, the study of women within Buddhism being different if it held an option for an alternate way , only in a limited sense.

General writings on the social history, such as the works of Kosambi (1956), Sharma (1983) and Thapar (1975) and also previous works on women in early India have failed to highlight the issue of non-elite women. To begin with the work of B.C. Law (1927) titled *Women in Buddhist literature*, which he believed to be 'the first of its kind'<sup>37</sup> Although his work was less detailed and less focused, he felt that women had 'advanced' within Buddhism and this was the work of women themselves.<sup>38</sup>

His work like all works of its time focused extensively on the issue of marriage, female character, female education, also incorporated separate chapters on the slave girls and another on dancing girls and courtesans. These list the various duties performed by them, the degree of

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<sup>35</sup> Roy, 'Justice in the Jatakas' *Social Scientist* Vol. 24 Nov.6; p.10.

<sup>36</sup> Rights of widow remarriage, the rights of property for women, origin and development of Stridhan etc.

<sup>37</sup> Preface; Law; *Women in Buddhist Literature*. Indological; 1927

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, Introduction.

their subjugation and independence. The chapters lack any analysis and merely mention a few instances of the categories. He refers to slave girls like the Roman slave girls<sup>39</sup> as property of their master, the dancing girls usually belonged to that section of the 'fair sex' which had no place by the domestic fireside of the common householders. Though they belonged to the 'tender class' they had lost their inborn feminine qualities, etc.

He deals with the Bhikkhuṇī saṅgha in a separate section in which he traces the history of the setting up of this institution. He just enlists the rules as in the Bhikkhuṇī Vinaya and then highlights some prominent Buddhist women with which he ends his work. His effort centres around enlisting examples to argue for a better status of women within Buddhism. He fails to link his evidence to any larger issue. He also fails to highlight any form of women's agency from within the religion. What is interesting to me is that even a decade before the publication of A.S. Altekar's work (1938),<sup>40</sup> an Indian scholar considered women to be worthy of historical study.

Horner's work titled *Women Under Primitive Buddhism* is primarily based on textual sources, her categories of analysis being two fold (a) Laywomen (b) Alms women. though she focuses primarily on the latter. She introduces a new category of women workers possibly the first

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid; 23

<sup>40</sup> *Position of Women in Hindu Civilization.*

effort to analyse the role of women outside the kinship networks, attempting to see her as an independent entity in the context of wider society. But possibilities of sexual division of labour and its implication are not raised.

In the section on the women ascetics, she explores the various reasons for them to join the *Saṅgha*<sup>41</sup> and also forms of self-expression and experiences in the *Saṅgha*.<sup>42</sup> In one way Buddhism opened space for women, at another level women redefined the same space and also Buddhism to a certain extent. What comes across very evidently from her work is that the women within Buddhism acquired a higher position than in the pre-Buddhist days. She points out that the Buddha did not grudge women their entry to the order. He saw in them the potential good, the potential spiritual as he saw it in men.<sup>43</sup> Scanty references to the almswomen in the canonical literature and a purely “monkish outlook” is accredited to the distortion of the original ideas of Gotama by the later followers when they were actually put to writing. Hence the texts that have come down to us are an outcome of “monkish elimination”.

Works on women post independence have in a way tried to move beyond the earlier framework. Also they in some way attempt to locate the

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<sup>41</sup> Push and pull factors.

<sup>42</sup> Horner, p.104-105.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.3.

question of women in a wider perspective. Works over the past two – three decades have raised important issues.

The work of Chakravarti (1981) titled *Social Dimensions Of Early Buddhism* examines the relationship of Buddhism to its locus. It outlines the contours of the major social and economic groups that were the dramatic personae in this dynamic process especially the *gahapati*. She looks at the forces that govern the emergence of early Buddhism keeping in mind the agency of women in the larger socio-economic milieu of the time.

According to her *vaṇṇa* division constituted a purely conceptual scheme, which had no actual application, and *jati* was both a conceptual and actual scheme of categories based on ascribed status that actually mattered to the Buddhists.<sup>44</sup> Similarly there are no *suddās*, *nisādas*, *rathkāras*. *Vaṇṇa* does not exist as a category for identifying real people..

Narendra Wagle too divides the society at the time of Buddha in terms of functions.<sup>45</sup> i.e. social , religions; and political. From the study of his evidence he sees *vaṇṇa* as a two-category system, the first comprising of the Brahmins and the Khattiyas as the upper category and *vessa* and *sudras* the lower.<sup>46</sup> He argues for the absence of a strict caste system in

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid; p.106.

<sup>45</sup> Wagle; Society at the time of Buddha; 1966; p.77.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid; p.166.



Buddhism and highlights that the two most fundamental characteristics of the modern caste system: endogamy and commensality are absent. He argues for fluidity and states that the actual state of society was one in which class and blood relations were significant.<sup>47</sup>

Vivekananda Jha questions this and points out that it is not true that the Buddha set his face firmly against the institutionalised inequality of the caste system. He in turn argues for a highly stratified society, which used the *candalas* for its own ends and kept them at its bottom.<sup>48</sup>

Another work titled *Women Workers in Ancient India*<sup>49</sup> by Anil K. Tyagi (1985) is important. He brings up various aspects of women workers in the light of social formations in Ancient India. He uses various categories of women workers (a) engaged in agriculture (b) engaged in weaving, dyeing etc. (c) women slaves (d) engaged in services of espionage, maid servant, door keeper etc. (e) engaged in the professions of singing, dancing and prostitution<sup>50</sup>.

What is relevant to us is both the Buddhist sources<sup>51</sup> that he uses for his work and also the category under his study which encapsulates

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid; p.201.

<sup>48</sup> Jha; stages of Untouchability IHR, 1989.

<sup>49</sup> His PhD thesis, later published.

<sup>50</sup> Tyagi, *Women Workers in Ancient India*; 1985; p.3.

<sup>51</sup> Used on the basis of their time frame, answering to his arguments in a chronological pattern.

largely to the non-elite women in question. He not only highlights the paucity of work by ancient history scholars on the theme but brings out a variety of occupational tasks conducted by women, looking at the angle of economic and social structures at the same time.

Other works on women in Buddhism have, firstly moved beyond Horner's analysis, secondly have focussed on specific forms of Buddhism.

Diana Y Paul's work (1995) titled *Women In Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna tradition*, suggests that laywomen and nuns played an active role in the Buddhist religious practices, however, the text preserved in the Buddhist canon reveal a wide spectrum of views, most of which reflect male attitudes, the educated religious elite whose views do not often reflect sexual egalitarianism.<sup>52</sup>

She also highlights that the feminine is frequently associated with the secular, powerless, profane and imperfect. She has looked into the Mahayana texts, which offer a perspective on sexual role formation. One perceives a destructive complex set of images preventing women from attaining fulfilment within the Buddhist religion.

As the chapters progress she also moves from the theoretical and traditional attitudes towards women to more practical aspects, the

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<sup>52</sup> Paul V.Diana, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, Berkeley, 1985, xix.

soteriological paths. Miranda Shaw's work (1994)<sup>53</sup> on the other hand focuses on a specific form of Buddhism i.e. Tantrism.

Alan Sponberg in Attitudes towards Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism<sup>54</sup> highlights the underlying tension within Buddhist literature and identifies four distinct attitudes. He terms the first as soteriological inclusiveness, which refers to the distinctive Buddhist views that one's sex is no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering.<sup>55</sup> Second is institutional androcentrism, which posits that women could pursue a full time religious career but within carefully regulated institutional structures.<sup>56</sup> The third is ascetic misogyny where women are referred to as uncontrolled, weak in wisdom. The fourth is soteriological androgyny developed under Mahāyanism and later in Vajrayāna. According to him for the Buddhists themselves, the ideal offers much that is yet to be realised.<sup>57</sup>

Paula Richman in the same work looks into the account of a Tamil nun Manimekalai. Richman highlights the role gender plays in the process by which individuals renounce the world and commit themselves to religious discipline. To describe the process by which she becomes a nun,

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<sup>53</sup> *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* Princeton Univ. press.

<sup>54</sup> In Cabezon ed. *Buddhism Sexuality and Gender*, Satguru, Delhi, 1992.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid; p.8.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid; p.13.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid; p.29.

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a variety of cultural conceptions of both maleness and femaleness, are used for the sake of persuasion. This takes us to the region of the south, a largely neglected area in the whole theme.

The use of archaeological data for studying the position of women in Buddhism also remains inadequate. In her work V. Dehejia has raised issues of spectatorship, agency and representation for delight.<sup>58</sup>

*Woman In Early Buddhist literature*, by Meena Talim examines Pali literature. The use of 'Woman' in her title probably suggests her effort to look at the issue from the perspective of a single individual (in this case a woman). Her work dealing with a number of issues depends highly on the Vinaya especially in the first section where she tries to document the exhaustive disciplinary rules for the nuns and also the various aspects of a nun's life inside a *saṅgha* and also outside it.

She begins with general opinions on the origin of asceticism and the causes of renunciation, goes further on to look at the rules of discipline, comparing them to that of the monks. In her opinion it may not be right to view the Vinaya laws as being partial to women. For her if one was to

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<sup>58</sup> Dehejia, *Representing the body: Gender issues in Indian Art*, Kali for women, New Delhi, 1997; 1 to 18.

look at the nature of the rules the gender difference gets nullified.<sup>59</sup> These have no motive to degrade woman.

What must also be noted in her opinion is that the Pāli text never depicted the nuns as stooping down to the position of parasites. Though the writers of the Pāli canon do not assign dignified status to the nuns and have no words of praise for them, yet they never used any discouraging words for them either. This argument cannot be taken at face value. One agrees with the view that to degrade somebody (or a group) language could be used as a major tool. But one cannot deny subtle ways of doing the same that may not necessarily be apparent. Though her work is detailed and exhaustive her outright acceptance of a better place for 'woman' in Buddhism should be taken with caution.

After a survey of the literature on both Dalit / lower caste women and women in Buddhism (early India), we can be in a position to say that a great number of issues pertaining to lower caste women – their difference, their agency, their standpoint, their forms of resistance is being explored, this does not seem to have caught the attention of scholars of ancient Indian social history, early feminist history and women in Buddhism. An attempt shall be made to fill the lacunae.

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<sup>59</sup> p.52.

## Sources under Study

The sources under study in this work are diverse. I am studying the theme from different aspects of the early Buddhist tradition. I intend to bring forward the various representations of non – elite women from the normative and the popular traditions of early Buddhism.

The Buddhists put the Vinaya Piṭaka at the head of the canon which is also considered older than the Sutta Piṭaka. The Vinaya was actually the discipline governing and regulating the outward life of the monks and nuns who had entered the monastic orders, the foundation of which is attributed to Gotama. The term is thus used as a 'code of conduct' for the monks and nuns of the *saṅgha*.

A characteristic peculiarity of the Buddhist Vinaya is that it traces the formation of each rule to the master himself (which is notably missing in the Jaina order). The Buddhist order seems to be the first order which was organised based on the ideas of a corporate life, hence it is a comprehensive code concerning conduct and organisation. The following texts belong to it:<sup>60</sup>

1. Sutta Vibhaṅga, consisting of
  - a. Mahā Vibhaṅga (regulations for the monks)

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<sup>60</sup> Norman. *Pali literature*, Weisbaden, 1983, p. 18.

b. Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga (regulations for the nuns)

2. Khandaka consisting of

a. Mahāvagga

b. Cullavagga

3. Parivara

Pātimokkha<sup>61</sup> is the core of the Sutta Vibhaṅga, which is a list of transgressions against the rules of the discipline of the order. It has an independent existence but is embedded in the Sutta Vibhaṅga. Rules fall under 8 categories namely Pārājika, Saṅghāṭisesa, Aniyata, Nissaggiya, Pācittiya, Patidesanīya, Sekhia, and Adhikaraṇa sanātana dharma. These include 227 rules for the bhikkhus and 311 rules for the Bhikkhunīs. The pattern usually is that it begins with a story leading to the formation of the rule followed by the Pātimokkha rule (which may also include sub rules) followed by a commentary (Pada-Bhajanīya) and finally may/ may not have more stories to end with. Patterns do not always remain smooth; they do vary time and again.

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<sup>61</sup> Etymologically meaning bond., "binding promise".

The bhikkhunī-Vibhaṅga of the Pāli canon is somewhat misleading as it only includes those rules that are not already included in the rules of the Bhikkhus. It is actually in the Mahāsaṅghikā-lokattaravadin bhikkhunī-Vinaya (one that is the main source of study in this dissertation) that we find all the rules of the bhikkhunis even those that duplicate the rules of the bhikkhus. It gives the stories to explain the promulgation of the rules that may not be the same as in the Pali one. This indicates that the Mahāsaṅghikā-Lokattaravadin text in its present form is later than the Pali equivalent.

The Khaṇḍakā in 2 portions is based upon the rules of conduct for the Buddhist Sangha set in the framework of the biography of the Buddha. It comprises of 22 sections. The Parivāra is merely an accessory, appendix. Its place time and composition is not known. Some scholars think that it was written in Sri Lanka.

The date of the Vinaya is generally accepted by most scholars as at least 100 years after the death of Buddha (The controversy over the date of the death of the Buddha persists, some assign it to 486 B.C. while others as 483 B.C or even a century later.) The Vinaya of the Mahāsaṅghikā compared to that of the Sthaviras shows that both the versions are in close agreement regarding the main disciplinary rules. Other fragmentary Vinaya of different schools also point in the same



direction.<sup>62</sup> Also the present form of the texts and, where texts are not available, or available only in fragments, bear testimony to additions, interpolations and accretions. Therefore one cannot say that these disagreements affected the fundamental doctrines.

Though it traces all the rules to the master himself, the reading of the text leaves no doubt that it is a mixture of both old and new material. It is not possible that the transgressions occurred in the same systematic manner as these are given in the text. Yet at the same time it is indeed reasonable to hold that some of the rules belong to the earliest stages of the order and were devised by the Buddha and his contemporary disciples. Also common occurrence of some of the rules in the Vinaya as well as in the Nikāyās and the Āgamas, have led some scholars to believe that some of the Pātimokkha rules may be possibly traced to the Buddha himself.

Charles S. Prebish in his article 'Recent progress in Vinaya Studies'<sup>59</sup> presents a bibliographical survey on the primary and secondary Vinaya literature and highlights that one finds fully developed Vinayas of only a few schools like Theravāda, Mahāsaṅghikas, Mahīśāsakas, Dharmaguptaka and Mulasarvastivadin. According to him it is also not a

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<sup>62</sup> N.N. Bhattacharyya, *Buddhism in the History of Indian Ideas*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1993, p.7.

<sup>59</sup> In A.K. Narain ed. *Studies in Pali and Buddhism*, B.R. Publishing corporation, Varanasi, 1979.

mere coincidence that the schools with the fully developed Vinayas prospered while the others dissipated.

The reasons for the split and the emergence of a number of sects and further their spread to different parts of the subcontinent and outside are beyond the scope of this work. For this one will have to look at each sect within its own historical setting, which may vary to a large extent. Ours shall just be a humble effort to probe into the issues of gender, caste and class in the sources. For our purpose, we shall look at the Pāli Vinaya (of the Theravada tradition) part of the Sacred Books of the East series ed. by Max Mueller and tr. by T.W. Rhys Davids and H. Oldenberg and the Bhikkhūṅī-Vinaya of the Mahasanghika Lokattaravada tr. by Akira Hirakawa.

The Jātākas too constitute a significant part of the Buddhist tradition. The Jātaka stories are a set of Indian fables, which were adapted by the Buddhist monks and purport to tell us about the previous birth of Gautama Buddha. The Jātākas form a part of the Khuddaka Nikāya which in turn is one of the "collections" of the Sutta Piṭaka – the most reliable source for Dhamma, i.e. the religion of the Buddha and his early discipline. The Jātākas derive their name from their content – they are stories of the previous birth of the Buddha i.e. "Bodhisatta", who is destined to attain enlightenment (bodhi) i.e. to become a Buddha.

The first attempt at a translation was by Prof. Rhys Davids in 1880 but other engagements made him discontinue it. Other translations are by V. Fausboll (1877-96), E.B. Cowell et. al<sup>60</sup> (1895-1907)

The stories approximately 540 in number contain four elements. A very striking characteristic of the Jātakas is the unique use of time. The main story is preceded by an introductory story which is set in the Buddhist present i.e. the age of the Buddha – *Paccūpannavatthu* rather the story of the present and recounts where and in what circumstances the main story was told by the Buddha.<sup>61</sup> What follows the main story is called the *atitavatthu*, or the story of the past. It always begins by mentioning the place and the period when these events took place and is often set in a stock mythical past.

The *gāthā* or verse is the only portion of the text recognized as canonical. These as a rule form part of the story of the past.<sup>62</sup> Finally in the *Samodhana* or the connection personages of the story of the present are identified with those of the story of the past.

This huge narrative work in the form of a commentary, the *Jatākakatthāvāṇṇana*, or elucidation of the meaning of the Jatakas is the

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<sup>60</sup> He calls his band as a guild of Jataka translation.

<sup>61</sup> Fausboll and Cowell both contain 547, but some of those in the mahanipata contain more than one narrative and hence the total numbers of Jataka stories are difficult to establish.

<sup>62</sup> This is not necessary. Verses occur also in the story of the present and also in the *Samodhana* for e.g. Chaddanta Jataka (No. 541).

work of an unknown Sinhalese monk. The Gandhavamsa accords it to Buddhaghosa (5<sup>th</sup> century AD) but Rhys Davids questions this authorship.

To the Jātaka collection proper is prefixed the Nidāna Kathā that gives what is in effect a biography of the Buddha. This gives the Buddha's previous history both before his last birth, and also during his last existence until he attained the state of a Buddha.

Traditionally, the Jātakas have been classified according to the number of verses or gatha they contain. The entire book consists of 22 nīpatas. The arrangements of the gathas and the commentary provide broad parallels with the structure of the *Therā* and *Therīgāthā*. In both the cases, the shortest compositions consisting of a single gatha are grouped together, followed by an arrangement in the ascending order i.e. the first nīpata containing 150 stories of one verse each, the second of two verses, till the last section number 22 called the mahānīpata containing stories which run into hundreds of verses.

A.L. Basham (1954) places the Jātaka in the section on Pāli prose unlike the *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, which he categorises as Pāli poetry. In fact the majority of the Jātakas, belong to that type of literary work which consists of a mixture of prose and verse, a type which is such a favourite in Indian literature. In this way they also occupy a unique place amongst the sources of early Indian history. I would be exploring various

representations of non-elite women in these texts to see how they inhabit the fringes of our imagination.

The reason for exploring the category under study in some what different genres of early Buddhist tradition is to get a wider picture, which may lead to a whole set of interpretations helping to avoid generalisation. Above all the aim of the work to restore the category under study to a much-deserved visibility.

## **Chapterisation**

The main body of this work consists of two chapters:

### **Chapter one – Monastic Discipline: Questions of Access, Purity and salvation**

This chapter shall focus on issues of social stratification in the monastic order. The first section deals with the questions of access to the sangha with a special focus on Upāli (the master of Vinaya) , then we go on to locate markers and terms of reference of both caste and gender hierarchies in the text (i.e. Vinaya Piṭaka ) and then look at issues of female sexuality and women's quest for salvation as per the text,

### **Chapter Two – Portrayal of Experience, Activities and the Agency of non- elite women in the Jātakas.**

We will discuss markers of differences between elite and non elite women in terms of experiences, desires and activities as seen in the Jātakas. Secondly we will deal at length with the stories directly related to the Caṇḍālas or the *hīna jātīs* to examine difference with the other stories. And finally, we will look at the animal stories that are interestingly used to portray the human world focussing on symbols of differentiation and hierarchies.

## CHAPTER-1

### MONASTIC DISCIPLINE: QUESTIONS OF ACCESS, PURITY AND SALVATION

Any attempt to explore questions of caste and class in the Vinaya ought to begin with Upāli. The *Cullavagga* informs how after the death of the Buddha a council was held on the initiative of the Venerable Mahākassapa. The latter asked Upāli questions on the vinaya relating to different monastic transgressions which included the matter, the occasion, the individuals concerned, the principal rules (*pannatti*) and the amended rules (*anupannatti*).<sup>1</sup> Upāli answered the questions, which were finally agreed upon by the assembly and settled. This according to the tradition was the first codification of the Vinaya<sup>2</sup> along with the Suttas, the latter formed with the help of Ānanda.

Upāli as a personality is important because he was a barber (*nahāpita*) by birth who rose to such prominence in the Buddhist tradition. Another point one has to take note of is that he belonged to the Śākya clan (that of the Buddha). For the purpose of our study we shall divide the disciples of the Buddha under two categories: one belonging to the clan of the master himself and the other who did not. But firstly we shall examine the case of Upāli.

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<sup>1</sup> V.T. vol. 2, *Cullavagga*, chapter XI, pp. 370-376.

<sup>2</sup> The Vinaya of some sects also includes an upalipariprccha- a series of questions put forward to Upali.

In the story about the six Śākya<sup>3</sup> joining the saṅgha<sup>3</sup> (then later becoming seven along with Upāli), he is referred to as Upāli the barber and is not called a Śākya (though in the Buddhist tradition he is referred to as one belonging to the Śākya clan) although he lives in the Śākya territory. It is actually Upāli's fear of the 'fierce' Śākya<sup>3</sup> that propels him to go along with the other six. The others in their attempt to argue for the admission of Upāli in the Buddhist saṅgha say, 'We Śākya<sup>3</sup> are haughty', 'may the blessed one render him respect and reverence and thus the Śākya pride be humbled in us Śākya<sup>3</sup>'<sup>4</sup>.

This statement should be studied carefully. It was Upāli's fear of his death at the hands of the 'fierce' Śākya<sup>3</sup> that propelled him to join the other six. He also thought that why unlike the other Śākya<sup>3</sup> he could not join the Saṅgha. Also his admission into the order by the blessed one himself, after the request of the other six needs to be probed into. Firstly, preventing his death at the hands of the 'fierce' Śākya<sup>3</sup> goes well with the Buddhist doctrine of non-violence. Secondly, Upāli being a barber but of the Śākya clan may have made his entry easier than in the case of others of the same occupational category. Thirdly it also shows some kind of an underlying tension within the Śākya clan over the issue of joining "the" path of another fellow Śākya (especially that of renunciation).

At other places in the text Upāli is referred to as the 'Venerable' Upāli<sup>5</sup> i.e. he is at par with the other senior Bhikkhus as the same prefix is also used

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 228-229.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>5</sup> V.T. vol 2, p.360, vol. 3, pp.374-375.



for them. Once he joined the *Saṅgha* he carved a niche for himself because of his mastery of the Vinaya.<sup>6</sup> The Buddha himself taught him the Vinaya.

But if one was to seriously examine the social backgrounds of the bhikkhus one does not find many Upālis. Buddhism was primarily a religious movement of the ancient past but has been time and again hailed as a social movement both in its ancient and recent past. If one were to highlight the social background of the Bhikkhus / Bhikkhunī who came from the clan of the Buddha as mentioned in the Vinaya we find the following:

- |                  |                 |   |
|------------------|-----------------|---|
| 1. Anuruddha     | <i>Khattiya</i> | A prominent member of the Saṅgha <sup>7</sup>             |
| 2. Ānanda        | <i>Khattiya</i> | Closest associate of the Buddha <sup>8</sup>              |
| 3. Devadatta     | <i>Khattiya</i> | Buddha's cousin and extremely jealous of him <sup>9</sup> |
| 4. Nandiya thera | <i>Khattiya</i> | Features along with others <sup>10</sup>                  |
| 5. Kimbila       | <i>Khattiya</i> | who went with others to the Buddha <sup>11</sup>          |
| 6. Bhaddiya      | <i>Khattiya</i> | referred to as the Śākya raja <sup>12</sup>               |
| 7. Bhagu         | <i>Khattiya</i> | joined along with Ānanda, Kimbila etc. <sup>13</sup>      |
| 8. Rahula        | <i>Khattiya</i> | Buddha's only son <sup>14</sup>                           |

<sup>6</sup> *vinayadharanam*

<sup>7</sup> V.T. vol. 2, p. 309, p. 360.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid . pp. 43, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> V.T. vol. 3, p. 234.

<sup>10</sup> V.T. vol. 2, p. 218.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p. 229.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid .

<sup>13</sup> Ibid..

9. Mahāpajāpatī Khattiya Buddha's foster mother<sup>15</sup>  
 Gotami
10. Upāli barber(*nīca-kula*) Master of Vinaya<sup>16</sup>

(\* Though one is aware of the fact that a large number of Śākya men and women (along with Mahāpajāpatī Gotami) joined the Saṅgha we have taken only those who are mentioned prominently in the Vinaya Piṭaka)

The pretext of Upāli's entry into the Saṅgha (of him being a Sakya) does not seem to have worked for many of his kind. The entry of the '*nica-kulas*' seems to be limited and restricted if not absent is what appears from the text is representative. One exceptional as well as interesting privilege granted to the Śākyas by the Buddha comes from the *Mahāvagga* in the section on the Admission to the order of bhikkhus. This is in regard to the rules for those who formerly belonged to the Titthiya School and now wished to join the Buddhist order. In the very last passage the Buddha allows the person who belonged to the Titthiya school to directly receive the *Upasampadā* (initiation) without the *Parivāsa* only if one was a Śākya. 'This exceptional privilege I grant to my kinsmen'<sup>17</sup>What one gathers from the step wise formulation of the rule is that this particular school's doctrine was completely in contrast with that of Buddhism. Hence there seems to be a kind of hesitation regarding their entry into the order. (They fear that they might frequent the society of harlots, widows, and eunuchs and may lack the skills

<sup>14</sup> V.T. Vol. 1, pp. 208.

<sup>15</sup> V.T. vol. 3, pp 321.

<sup>16</sup> Discussed at length above.

<sup>17</sup> V.T. Vol. 1, p. 191.

and zeal of the others.<sup>18)</sup> But this seems to be done away with if one was a Śākya.

Now if we look at the Buddhist disciples who do not belong to the Śākya clans as mentioned in the Vinaya we see that the majority of them are from the upper stratum. Out of these brahmanas occur prominently. Apart from being a dominant group within the Saṅgha they were also significantly among the inner circle of the disciples of the Buddha whom he relied upon for the propagation of his doctrine. Uruvela Kassapa and his two brothers Nadi Kassapa and Gaya Kassapa<sup>19</sup> were *paribājakas* since they were *jaṭilas*<sup>20</sup> in the past. Their initiation along with 1000 mendicants is considered to be remarkable as far as the proselytising power of early Buddhism was concerned.<sup>21</sup>

Pindola Bharadvaja who is referred not only an arhant but someone who also possesses *iddhi*<sup>22</sup>, Mahāmogallana<sup>23</sup> who was already a *paribbājaka* when he entered the Saṅgha and later became prominent, Yasa Kakanda<sup>24</sup> who played a key role in the second council held at Vesali, Saṅgīputta<sup>25</sup> who was also a *paribbājaka* and later an important figure, Mahākasapa<sup>26</sup> who had the honour of exchanging the robes with the master himself and convenes the council at Rajagaha.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid p 118.

<sup>20</sup> are brahmancial vanaprasthas who wear matted hair ( *jaṭājīṇadhārā sabḅe* ) . They are mentioned in the Mahābhārata and the Mahābhāṣyā .

<sup>21</sup> Upasak , ' The role of Uruvell Kassapa in the spread of early Buddhism ' in Narain ed. op. cit. p. 372.

<sup>22</sup> V.T. vol. 3 p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> V.T. vol. 1, p144.

<sup>24</sup> V.T. vol. 3 p. 393.

<sup>25</sup> V.T. vol. 1, p. 144.

<sup>26</sup> V.T. vol.3 p. 374

N.N. Bhattacharyya<sup>27</sup> and others are of the opinion that the brahmanas played a much more important role than the Śākya faction during and after the lifetime of the Buddha and the Śākya faction in return were not favorably disposed towards them. According to him the anti-brahmanical passages from Buddhist sources derive their impulses not from the so-called ideological bankruptcy of the brahmanas but due to their own inferiority complex.

One gets a sense of dissent only from the Chapter on the council of Rajagaha. There arose a stirring controversy as to which rules could be taken as minor ones. Ānanda was admonished for his bad deeds.<sup>28</sup> One has to keep in mind that a century after the demise of the Buddha (when the text was composed) the factions in the past may not have remained in the same way. There would have emerged regional groupings and also certain groups within the Saṅgha who may have had new views as against the seniors.

Though most of the *Khattiyas* mentioned in the Vinaya are from the clan of the Buddha some others also existed. Kakudha<sup>29</sup> a Koliyan and was an attendant of Mogallana, Dabba the Mallian, regulator of the lodging place<sup>30</sup>, There is also a reference to a Malla (well known wrestlers) Bhikkhuni who knocked of the Bhikkhus<sup>31</sup>, Vaddha a Licchavi<sup>32</sup> and Sabakamin a Vajjian.<sup>33</sup>

Most of *Khattiyas* mentioned in the Vinaya are from the *gaṇa saṅghas*. This period is marked by the growth and spread of large territorial kingdoms,

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<sup>27</sup> *Buddhism in the History of Indian Ideas*, Manohar, Delhi, 1993, pp. 189

<sup>28</sup> V.T. vol.3 pp. 370.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid p. 344.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid pp. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid pp. 40.

which may have led to the disintegration of many *gaṇa saṅghas*. Hence ascetic life would have been a choice for many of them.

The category of the *Gahāpatīs* is interesting as one finds them mostly as lay followers. This may be due to their immense wealth and also their social system, which may not have created conditions for renunciation. Yasa, a *setthi putta* from Benares and his friends Punnaji, Subahu, Vimal, Gavampati also sons of setthis<sup>33</sup> take the path of monkhood after the consent of their parents. Sona kuttikana<sup>34</sup> and Sona Kolivisa<sup>35</sup> also joined the Saṅgha. (both being *setthi putas*).

If one looks at the lower strata apart from the Venerable Upāli we have reference of Subhadda, who was a barber (*nahāpita*) and joined the *saṅgha*.<sup>36</sup> He had two sons who went to collect alms from others in order to feed the *Saṅgha*. Such scanty reference to lower occupational groups (*nīca kula*) really makes us think whether Buddhism as a new religion was actually open to all? And theoretically if it was open to all how easy it was for non-elite people to join the *Saṅgha*. Our evidence shows that this component of the *Saṅgha* was small and disparate.

One really does not find references to terms like the "*hīna jati*" or direct references to *candalas*, *nessada* or *sudas* in the Vinaya texts unlike the *Jātakas* where evidence for the lower caste are plenty whereas *Khattiya*, *Brāhmaṇa* or *Gahāpati* is often used in both the categories of literature..

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<sup>33</sup> V.T. vol.2, p110.

<sup>34</sup> V.T. vol 2, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid pp. 140.

In the *Pātimokkha*, the core of the Vinaya with reference to *Pācītiya* rules involving forfeiture we read 'A *raja*, or a *Khattiya*, or a *Brāhman*, or a *Gahapati* should send by messenger, for a particular Bhikkhu, the value in barter of a set of robes.<sup>37</sup> Here we find the absence of any mention of the lower caste groups or for that matter of the any lower occupational groups as being capable enough to give robes to the Bhikkhus.

In the Mahasanghika version of the Bhikkhuni-Vinaya the term *Śūdra* has been found in a couple of places. Firstly in the 8<sup>th</sup> Samghāṭīśesa offence that deals with giving the *Upasampadā* Ordination to a woman who has committed crime<sup>38</sup> (*vādhyā*), and secondly in the 85<sup>th</sup> *Paccattika* offence that deals with entering a layman's "food" house without announcing oneself<sup>39</sup> (*sambhojanīyam*). In both these cases *sudra* has been used in order to explain terms like 'a relative' (who could also be a *śūdra*) and 'a house' (which could also be owned by a *śūdra* householder) by the translator and are originally not a part of the Vinaya text.

We find one interesting use of the term *Caṇḍāla* in the Bhikkhuni-Vinaya which occurs in the explanation of the 81<sup>st</sup> *Pacāttiya* offence relating to the giving of food to laymen or non-Buddhist nuns or monks with ones own hand<sup>40</sup> (*deti*). It is in response to placing the food on the ground for her relative to pick up (for she cannot deliver it by her own hands) that he says 'you treat us as badly as if we were humble *caṇḍāla*, don't you?'<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> V.T. vol. 1 p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Hirakawa, p. 153.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid p. 275.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid p. 268.

<sup>41</sup> *salohite kim asmakam caṇḍālehi viya prāvartasi* ( Roth, p.95).

Here nobody is really a *caṇḍāla* but the behavior towards the laymen or non-Buddhist (who may also be ones relative) suggests certain values linked to certain actions, which in this case may be about keeping the food on the ground. For the Buddha the understanding of purity is more important than regarding purity as primarily an indication of status. Though in this case the action does not directly involve a high caste and a *caṇḍāla*, it is symptomatic of notions of purity, which are introduced here in the garb of keeping oneself in accordance with the Buddha's precepts.

The term *San̄gha* at the time of the Buddha was applied to religious orders, and thus the Buddhist order came to be called a *San̄gha*. In its broadest sense of the term "*San̄gha*" might be used to refer to all four groups of Buddhists: however, when it was used in early Buddhist texts, it usually indicated the two orders of mendicants, those of the monks (*Bhikkhu-san̄gha*) and that of the nuns (*Bhikkhuni-san̄gha*). The orders were largely independent of each other and autonomous, with each responsible for maintaining its own monastic discipline. The four groups were of Buddhists not referred to collectively as a single order (*San̄gha*).

We shall now examine the laity. It may make our exercise more fruitful as we shall be able to place the *san̄gha* in a broader perspective i.e. also from outside. One may also keep in mind that though Buddhism offered an alternative path of asceticism this state of isolation too was socially linked. This is precisely where the laity fits in.

The use of the term laity in its widest sense would include all those who were sympathetic to the Buddha's ideas but who did not actually join the

*saṅgha*. The laity comprised many individuals who are described as *upāsakas*, having accepted the *triratnas* (triple gems) of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *sangha*. It may also include many people who are simply stated to have supported the *saṅgha*. Support might take many forms from donating land, gifting robes and medicines or simply feeding the monks. Thus an *upāsaka/ upāsikā* served mendicants by supplying items such as food and robes that they required for their religious lives. The mendicants instructed the lay believers about how to practice Buddhism while living as lay devotees. Those who were particularly zealous also observed the five precepts for laymen and laywomen.

Among the key figures of the *upāsakas* Udena<sup>42</sup> (of the Kosala country had a vihara built for the sangha, Roga<sup>43</sup> (a Malla who with initial hesitation became devoted to his doctrine, Siha<sup>44</sup> (the general in chief, who was earlier a disciple of the Niganthas), Jita kumara<sup>45</sup> (illustrious) were *khattiyas*. Anatha pindika<sup>46</sup> (most prominent *Upāsaka*, also a chief donor), Mendaka<sup>47</sup> (possessed psychic powers), Citta<sup>48</sup> (a learned man), Vishaka<sup>49</sup> (distinguished among laywomen) were all gahapatis.

Tapussa and Bhallika<sup>50</sup> (first lay disciples of the Buddha) were vanija, Bellatha kakana<sup>51</sup> (a sugar dealer), Yasa's mother (first woman lay disciple),

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<sup>42</sup> V.T. Vol . 2, p. 301.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid p. 137.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid p.108.

<sup>45</sup> V.T. vol.3, p. 188.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid p. 179.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid p. 126.

<sup>48</sup> V.T. vol.2 p. 359.

<sup>49</sup> V.T. vol 1 , p. 320.

<sup>50</sup> V.T. vol. 1, pp. 81.

<sup>51</sup> V.T. vol.2, p. 93.



Yasa's father and Yasa's <sup>52</sup>wife all belonged to *setthi* families. One finds very scanty reference to the laity belonging to the lower strata. We have reference to a tailor<sup>53</sup> who wished to build a *vihāra* for the *Saṅgha* but couldn't because of lack of expertise. In his annoyance he says 'these *śakyāputtiyas* teach only those who provide them with requisite clothes, food, lodging, medicines. No one exhorts or teaches me or helps me in my building.'<sup>54</sup> This statement itself highlights a kind of a hierarchy among the laity. Also there was a feeling of being ignored by the monks/nuns especially if the *upasakas* were poor and could not offer the monks much of the materials required by them. Hence one may even rethink on our understanding of a laity in terms of 'support' that they provided to the *Saṅgha*. Was it purely ideological? Or material? (The latter becomes more important with the establishment of monasteries).

The establishment of the Buddhist *Sangha* created a paradox. The everyday life of the *Saṅgha* involved two separate and distinct aspects, the spiritual and the mundane. The spiritual aspect demanded the monk or nun to spend at least a part of the day alone and away from the distractions of worldly life. But the life of the organized *Saṅgha* involved dependence on the householders who alone could supply the *saṅgha's* everyday needs. In order to secure sustained assistance from the householders the early Buddhist had to offer their patrons a distinct spiritual ideal such as that of 'merit making', which the *Sangha* alone could facilitate.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> V.T. vol .1 ,p. 110.

<sup>53</sup> V.T. vol, 3 p. 190.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid ,.

<sup>55</sup> Gokhale B.G. *New Lights on Early Buddhism*, Popular Prakasham, Bombay, 1994, p.14

These circumstances created a symbiosis giving the laity a much larger and vigorous role in the shaping of the *Saṅgha* than was initially conceived. This symbiosis eventually resulted in the socialization of an organization that had originally begun its career on an asocial basis. This interaction continued to influence the making of the Vinaya rules and through them the polity of the *Saṅgha* itself. Criticism when conveyed to the Buddha by the laity led to the laying down of rules to prevent errant behavior. On the other hand the constant danger of monks and nuns being in too much close contact with the laity came to be regarded as a lapse (*ananulomika gihisamsatta*). The distinction between the acceptable and the unacceptable in matters of buildings, their appurtenances, articles of furniture and location of residences raised a host of problems. Many an unguarded member of the *Saṅgha* was tempted to display avariciousness against which the lay criticism was not slow in making itself articulate. These reflected the fact that the *Saṅgha* had become a part of the larger society and could not escape the effects of the mores and attitudes of the host society.

Who joined the *saṅgha*? Who gave support to Buddhism? These are questions inherently hard to answer. We had also initially highlighted that Buddhism found a base in urban centers and hence was popular with the commercially oriented groups. We have also highlighted the social base of the *saṅgha* and the laity which pushed the 'low'-born groups to the peripheries of the compilers of the Vinaya.

It is possible that these numbers may be deceptive and in reality these groups may have been represented better. The Vinaya may be a small sample

of a vast corpus of Buddhist literature but one cannot forget that it *remains* a chief and important source for the study of early Buddhism. It regulates all aspects of the Bhikkhus'/ Bhikkhūnīs' relationship with one another, to the world they live in, common habits of courtesy, shelter, beds, clothing etc. But it fails to represent the non-elite in any substantial way.

Many sympathetic to the teachings of Buddhism believe it to be an egalitarian religion more supportive of women and other oppressed social groups than other religions. However texts preserved in the Buddhist canon reveal a wide spectrum of views, most of which reflect male attitudes, educated religious elites whose views do not often reflect social or sexual egalitarianism. With the kind of "image" Buddhism has one may think that it may not have derived its members and supporters primarily from the 'elite' but a careful study of the text give us a picture of ambiguity.

It is generally held that the Buddha treated women as individuals in their own right. Doctrinally also he considered them at par with men. While evaluating ancient Buddhist attitudes towards women, it needs to be kept in mind that most of our understanding is based on the functioning of the *saṅgha* and its members.

Also something we have to constantly keep in mind is that the Buddha or for that matter the *Saṅgha* had little control over the functions of society at a large. But on the other hand, the society could in a substantial way influence the decisions of the *saṅgha*, as the latter had to depend upon it for various kinds of support. Hence in the post *mahāparinibbāna* period, the influence of

the aggressive male dominated ancient Indian Brahmanical society may have been inescapable.

It also cannot be denied that with the founding of the Bhikkhuni *Saṅgha*, the Buddha granted a religious role to women that for a long time to come remained virtually without parallel in the history of the world. Were women in the Buddhist renunciatory tradition equal to their male counterparts? Were notions of sexuality viewed as compatible with the notions of the sacred? Were their forms of self-expression or sexuality curtailed? Was there any form of hierarchy among them? One may attempt at answering these questions.

Ananda under whatsoever doctrine and discipline women are allowed to go forth from the household life into the homeless state, that religion does not last long.<sup>56</sup>

This is the very statement that has raised widespread controversy right from the beginning of Buddhological studies. Horner views the prophecy of the decline of the Dhamma after 500 years as a later addition by monks.<sup>57</sup> Talim argues that the Buddha had thought that all his disciples would not be like Ānanda, Saṅgīputta or Mahāpajāpatī Gotami. Some would succumb to temptations.<sup>58</sup> Hence women were perceived as a danger to the integrity of the *Saṅgha* as they would distract the monks from their spiritual goals. Women were ill suited for the task for the simple reason that monks by

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<sup>56</sup> V.T. vol.3 , p. 326.

<sup>57</sup> Horner , op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Talim, op. cit, p.16.

definition had given up social responsibilities. Asceticism in other words meant living away from women whom they had left behind in their homes.

'Mahāpajāpatī Gotami cut off her hair, put on orange coloured robes, and set out with a number of women of the Śākya clan, towards Vesali<sup>59</sup> with swollen feet and covered with dust, sad and sorrowful, weeping and in tears, took her stand outside under the entrance porch<sup>60</sup>

There is also dispute a over Mahāpajāpatī being the first Bhikkhūnī, and her conversion being post her husband's death by which time many women had converted and that the woman really to make the order open for women was Yasodharā.<sup>61</sup>

The choice of Mahapajapati Gotami as the leader of the nuns may have been to due to the Buddha's great respect for her<sup>62</sup> Also her act of cutting her hair and wearing the robe, inspite of the Buddha's initial denial is in a way a challenge to the Buddha's authority on the one hand. On the other her acceptance of the eight chief rules marked her submission. She also remains the sole key figure in the Bhikkhūnī Vinaya unlike a number of male disciples of the Buddha mentioned throughout the Vinaya texts.

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<sup>59</sup> V.T. vol. 3 p. 321.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>61</sup> Horner, Ibid., p 123.

<sup>62</sup> The section of the *Cullavagga* was a later addition hence the choice of Mahapajapati Gotami may have been deliberate on the part of the author.

### The eight chief rules<sup>63</sup>

1. A Bhikkhuni even of a hundred years of age, shall make salutation (to a monk), shall rise up in the presence (of a monk), bow down even if he is newly initiated.
2. A Bhikkhuni is not to spend the rainy season in a district in where there is no monk.
3. Every half a month a Bhikkhuni is to await from the Bhikkhu-Sangha, two things, the fixing (as to the date) of the *Uposatha* ceremony, and the time (when the Bhikkhu will come ) to give exhortation.
4. After keeping the rainy season, the Bhikkhuni is to hold *Pavāraṇā* before both the *Sanghas*.
5. A Bhikkhuni who has been guilty of a serious offence is to undergo a *manatta* discipline in respect of both the *Sanghas*.
6. When a Bhikkhuni, as a novice, has been trained for two years in the six rules, she is to ask to leave for the *Upasampadā* initiation from both *Sanghas*.
7. A Bhikkhuni under no pretext, is to revile or abuse a Bhikkhu.
8. From henceforth official admonition of the by Bhikkhunis of Bhikkhus is forbidden, but is allowed vice versa.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> V.T. vol. 11, pp. 322-323.

<sup>64</sup> In the Mahasanghika version the fourth Vinaya is different from the Pali. (others are similar but in a different order). It reads" a Bhikkhuni must not receive food lodging, bedding or

All these eight rules presupposed the superiority of Bhikkhus over the Bhikkhunīs. All these assigned a subservient position to a woman who wished to join the Saṅgha. If according to rule<sup>65</sup> she was placed lower than the newest male entrant I wonder how was Mahāpajāpatī Gotami treated by the Venerable Ānanda, Upāli, Sarīputta and also by the youngest of the lot. Or was there any special privilege to some which may not be well apparent from the text.

Rules 7 and 8, which prohibit a Bhikkhuni from reviling or reproaching<sup>66</sup> a Bhikkhu and also admonishing them.<sup>67</sup> also put them in a subordinate position to their fellow brethren as these communications were only one way and the Bhikkhuni could not act in return. These probably show lack of courtesy. They also highlight the fear on the part of the Bhikkhus regarding loss of hegemony within the Saṅgha.<sup>68</sup>

Rule 2. brings out the concern for the safety of the Bhikkhunīs, which then became an issue of concern for the Buddhist order especially during the rainy season. This concern also gets highlighted in the provision for the explanation of the *Upasampadā* by messengers.<sup>69</sup> These clearly indicate that notions of female chastity were among the prime concerns of the Saṅgha.

Other rules seem to be disciplinary and pertain to the technical side of the Saṅgha. One should not forget that the Saṅgha opened doors for women

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cushions before a bhikkhu do." However it combines the seventh and the eight gurudharmas of the Pali which is their third.

<sup>65</sup> *Varṣā-śatā pasampannaye bhikṣuniye tadahopapannasya bhikṣusya pādā vanditvā* ( Roth, pp1-3)

<sup>66</sup> *Akkosītābbo or pañbhāsītābbo*

<sup>67</sup> *Vaṇṇa – patha*

<sup>68</sup> To women, whom they had left behind for reaching a " superior" state of existence.

<sup>69</sup> Hiraakawa op. cit., pp. 76-78 *dutosampadā-prātigraha* ( Roth, pp 71-74).

much later, hence some of the technical rules may have been formulated due to lack of knowledge on the part of the nuns about the elaborate and formal procedures. Hence it must have been the task of the monks to initiate and lead them. 'The Bhikkhunīs did not know how to carry out disciplinary proceedings.'

'I allow you to teach them'.<sup>70</sup> We find a number of references like these from the text. Hence rules, which may have been laid down initially due to lack of know-how on the part of the Bhikkhunīs, may have been made indispensable in order to ensure the supremacy of the Bhikkhus over the Bhikkhunīs.

Superficially it may seem that formal subordination, when combined with such similarity of treatment and protection from male demands and interferences, could hardly have any repercussions. However, in subtle ways this formal subordination did work to undermine the nuns. The eight chief rules mandated institutional subordination. Also a tradition that thrives and survives on the transmission of knowledge would be weakened by lack of voices and insights of a part of the whole.

The fourth gurudharma of the Mahāsaṅghikā school which we do not find in the Pāli-Vinaya reads ' a Bhikkhunī must not receive food, lodging, bedding and cushion before a bhikkhu does.'<sup>71</sup>

Hirakawa is of the view that one really cannot be sure as to which one is an earlier formulation. But if we were to accept that the Mahasanghika

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<sup>70</sup> V.T. vol. 3, p., 333.

<sup>71</sup> *Bhaktāgram śayyāsanam vihāro ca bhikṣuṇīhi bhikṣuto śadayi tavyo* ( Roth, p13)



version of the Vinaya is later, it will be interesting for us probe into the matter. With the spread of monastic life, there might have been greater dependence on the “support” of the laity. Hence during the times of pressure i.e. scarcity of resources in the monastery, this formulation would had been made to prioritize the claim of the Bhikkhus.

Now if we look at the various categories of rules which are not to be transgressed, we find:

	Bhikkhu-Vinaya	Bhikkhunī-Vinaya
a. Pārājika	4 (4)	8 (8)
b. Sanghāṭṭisēsa	13 (13)	17 (19)
c. Aniyata	2 (2)	-
d. Niḥsargika-pacattika	30 (30)	30 (30)
e. Pacāttika	92 (92)	166 (141)
f. Pratideśanika	4 (4)	8 (8)
g. Śaikṣa	75 (66)	75 (64)
h. Adhikaraṇanasamatha	7 (7)	7 (7)
i. Prakīrṇaka	-(14 vargas)	-(7 vargas)
j. Abhisamacārica	-(7 vargas)	-(5 vargas)

(Parenthesis indicates number of precepts of the Mahāsaṅghikā School).

In the Pali Vinaya we observe that the nun had to abide by 311 rules while the monk by 227 rules. This should not necessarily make us jump to the conclusion that the Vinaya text was partial to women by imposing more rules to them. By a simple calculation we see that 84 more rules were imposed on women. Talim's view <sup>72</sup> that there seems no motive to degrade women by way of introducing 84 extra rules should be checked.

One agrees with her to the extent that most of these rules are either a corollary to another or a mere clarification of a point. But something that needs to be seen is that the extra number of rules, which are not common to the monks, speaks of the Buddhist attitude towards women in two ways. Firstly, it speaks of an attitude of accommodation and providing space to the women for looking into matters, which were genetically and uniquely feminine (especially those relating to their robes, both inner and outer, their menstruation cycle, and others relating to ornamentation and living). Secondly, in a way it is symbolic of their underlying fears on matters relating to the same.

As per the kinds of punishments, they are almost the same for both the Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis. More precepts have been added in the case of the Bhikkhuni-Vinaya. The ones which are directly related to the chief principles of Buddhism are met with strict measures like *parbbajika* rules e.g. sexual intercourse (*maithuna*), Taking things which are not given (*adātādana*), killing a human being (*vadha*), the greatest falsehood (*mṛsa*), obtaining pleasure by rubbing against a man (*samsarga*), the eight things (*astavastuka*), to conceal

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<sup>72</sup> Talim, op. cit. p.52.

other's grave offence (*avadyapratichadika*), to persists in the company of a suspended bhikkhu (*utsipathnuvartika*).

Having looked at the differences between the monks and the nuns we shall now focus our attention on what differentiated women within the *saṅgha*. Who joined it? Let us see if we are able to answer these questions by examining the text. We have looked at the social origins of the disciples and the laity. We shall now examine the questions asked before the formal initiation.

Apart from the questions asked on health and diseases the instructor Bhikkhuni<sup>73</sup> asks 'Are you or are you not a female slave?'<sup>74</sup> the question then arises is whether she was a free person or she was owned by somebody. This directly is suggestive of the fact that slaves were not admitted to the order. They were not even permitted for the *parabājjika* ordination. One also finds reference to a run away slave being ordained (by mistake) and being driven away<sup>75</sup>

Lerner in her enduring efforts has tried to explore the relationship between gender and class in her analysis of patriarchal formations in early societies. She highlights that the development in enslavement led to the elaboration of notions of honour and freedom for those who were marked of as different from the slaves, that is among the "free".<sup>76</sup> She highlights that the concept of honour embodies autonomy and also the right to have that

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<sup>73</sup> *rāho nusasika* .

<sup>74</sup> *ma dasi nahī* (Roth, pp. 35-36.

<sup>75</sup> V.T.vol.1 p. 199.

<sup>76</sup> Lerner, quoted in Chakravarti, 'Of Slavery and Patriarchy: Mental constructs of enslavement' IHR, 1992.

autonomy recognized by others. Also free sexual access to slaves marks them off from other persons as much as the control over their services (especially in the case of women).

Their control (both economic and sexual) made them remain outside the realm of soteriological aspirations. From our text we find reference to nunnery servants (*kappiya kaṭṭikā*)<sup>77</sup> who are referred to as providing services to the nuns. In fact the formulation of the rule itself states that 'She must have a nunnery servant girl to give it to them'.<sup>78</sup> Hence this suggests that though they remain outside the philosophical realm of the *saṅgha*, their physical presence is noticeable. Also it is suggestive of a kind of hierarchy of privileges even in the *Saṅgha* that apparently stands for asceticism and equality.

We find an elusive reference to a lower caste man<sup>79</sup> called Candara. His reference in this Buddhist work comes in the context of a toilet, which was built by a Bhikkhuni<sup>80</sup> where she found fetuses disposed by the Buddhist nuns. This throws light on the sphere of human existence outside the *Saṅgha*. The use of the term outcaste in this context enables us to speak of their existence, which is otherwise argued against. Also his association with the menial task of cleaning the toilet speaks of caste based occupational hierarchy.

Coming back to who were allowed entry in the *Saṅgha*, this is evident from the thirty three questions in regard to the *antarayike dharma*. There were

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<sup>77</sup> Hirakawa, op.cit, p.250.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid .

<sup>79</sup> Ibid p. 407.,

<sup>80</sup> *Varca- kuti, Pratisamiyuktam* .

also worries about one owing debts to others<sup>81</sup> or being a female warrior<sup>82</sup> or conspiring against the family of the king<sup>83</sup>, or being bound to somebody or being free of worldly bonds. If they had committed crimes against the royalty etc.

They were also asked another interesting set of questions that were 'are you or are you not a woman', 'are you or are you not a barren woman' This certainly highlights attitudes towards the eunuchs and also those infertile. They failed to get shelter and acceptance.

The key problem then, which emerges, is whether in the Buddhist text (in this case the Vinaya) we see an absence of caste hierarchy. How does this correspond to the argument put forward by Chakravarti about Brahmanical patriarchy, which situates gender relations in the context of caste and class relations<sup>84</sup>

In my opinion the absence of references does not primarily signify that low caste men and women did not exist within the sangha. However the social background of the disciples clearly highlights Brahmanical dominance in the *Saṅgha*. Also the influence of wealthy "support" groups from outside is clearly evident.

In the outside world maleness was associated with control over the sexuality of womenfolk and also access to women of the lower caste groups. Now within the realm of the Buddhist *Saṅgha* the very definition of masculinity

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<sup>81</sup> *ṛṇa hārikā nahi.*

<sup>82</sup> *rājābhaṭi nahi.*

<sup>83</sup> *rājnah kilbi, sa kārīnī nahi.*

<sup>84</sup> Chakravarti, conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in early India', *Widening Horizons*, Delhi 1997, p.53.

is transformed. Here masculine celibacy comes in direct relation with the transcendental purity. Hence we find fear of the feminine.

In both the situations women's sexuality either as desire or as a threat are governed by male concerns (and especially of the higher caste or class groups). Hence if we were to delimit the *San̄gha* we find outside it, groups which are either scantily represented or are denied entry and within the *saṅgha* we find attempts to subjugate women with regards to their soteriological aspirations. Hence one finds notions of "purity", "territory" and "domination" in the Buddhist world inspite of its negation of the very same vis-à-vis its Brahmanical counterpart.

We shall just briefly look at some rules dealing with the portrayal of the feminine which is as much required as it is feared.

'Bhikkhuni denied to sit in the full lotus position( *sarvasti paryaṅka*) for a snake entered her vagina'.<sup>85</sup> 'hurting her urinary canal due to sitting on a bamboo mat'.<sup>86</sup> rules concerning 'breast covering (*samkaksika*)<sup>87</sup>, restriction on making dildos<sup>88</sup> (*jatu matthaka*) and relating to washing of pubic areas and concerning menstruation rags. There are remarks like 'a woman's pubic region smells bad'<sup>89</sup>,not allowing the bhikkhunī to flush her vagina out with flowing water or a stream.<sup>90</sup> (*udaka-dhārā*, *udaka-srota*).

These certainly suggest a constant and growing fear on the part of the masculine celibates. Also the text cannot be dismissed as misogynistic, what

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<sup>85</sup> Hirakawa ,p 385.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.,386.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid , 390.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 392.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid,

<sup>90</sup> Ibid 396-397,.

we lack, because of androcentric record keeping, are the corresponding opinions of women. Hence we see a kind of a three cornered position of the categories under study. One denied access to *Saṅgha* (lower class especially slaves, debtors, servants of the royalty) the other if not denied, their representation is disparate (lower caste or *nīca-kula* groups) and thirdly women<sup>91</sup> who were given an alternative, which was accepted and feared from within the newly transformed masculinity.

This is not to deny that Buddhism did not provide at all what it claimed and has been hailed for in the ancient and recent past. It definitely attempted to provide alternatives. What is important for us is how far it succeeded in doing so. Also its constant interaction with the Brahmanical religion needs to be further probed into.

Keeping in mind both the strength (a key work) and limitations ( does not represent religion of common people at large ) of the text one may argue for both willingness and denial, of acceptance yet subversion. Hence a picture of ambiguity is what one gathers.

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<sup>91</sup> To whom it gave the opportunity to not only break away from the institutions of marriage and kinship but also gave an opportunity to unionise.

## CHAPTER -2

### PORTRAYAL OF EXPERIENCES, ACTIVITIES AND THE AGENCY OF NON-ELITE WOMEN IN THE JĀTAKAS

Firstly it is essential to delimit the source in terms of time and space. The complexities in the dating of the Jātakas have already been mentioned. In terms of the geographical location it can broadly be categorised as North Indian. Most of the stories are situated in and around Banaras. The story of the past often begins with the phrase 'Once upon a time', such as such king ruled in Bananas. Other places like Pañcala, Mithila, Savatthi, Ujjain, Inderpatta etc. also find a number of references.

The fascination with Banaras<sup>1</sup> may be because most of the stories are often set in a stock mythical past where the association of the Buddha with Banaras becomes important because of his first sermon at Sarnath. Other cities mentioned were well known cities at the time of Buddha. Mention of places like Ujjain and Inderpatta shows at one level the spread of Buddhism to wider areas and also the incorporation of other literary traditions into this large collection i.e the Jātakas.

To begin with I shall highlight the differences that come out in the representation of lower caste women between the shorter stories and the

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<sup>1</sup> Varanasi also has an early archaeological beginning.



longer ones – especially the Mahānīpatas. This cannot be examined in isolation one will constantly keep looking into their placement in terms of their royal or superior counterparts, in relation to the Bodhisatta and also vis-à-vis their own men.

By and large the Mahānīpatas and also their subsections are kingly stories i.e. placed or situated in and around the royalty.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the chief queens, princesses etc women are not explicitly depicted in the longer stories. Women of the non-elite category very evidently form part of the royal retinue but even women of the royalty are often if not always portrayed in a larger framework of grandeur or splendour highlighting royalty. We find reference like 16000 wives<sup>3</sup>, 700 queens<sup>4</sup>, Canda's 700 wives<sup>5</sup>, 1000 wives<sup>6</sup> etc. The figures mentioned no doubt are exaggerated, but clearly show firstly the prime importance of the chief queen as she is always mentioned and secondly that the number of royal wives was itself a marker of glory.

The non-elite category of women as mentioned earlier formed a part of the royal retinue, for example 16000 dancing girls<sup>7</sup>, most beautiful dance girls seated with royalty during a great festival<sup>8</sup> etc. are different from royal women as they are mentioned primarily with reference to pleasure seeking activities. They suddenly come into the limelight when the Bodhisatta or

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of Sama Jātaka no. 540.

<sup>3</sup> Mugga –Paṅkha Jātaka no. 538.

<sup>4</sup> Mahājanaka Jātaka no.539.

<sup>5</sup> Khandahata Jātaka no.542.

<sup>6</sup> Vidhura Paṅḍita Jātaka no.545.

<sup>7</sup> Bhūridatta Jātaka no. 543.

<sup>8</sup> Mahājanaka Jātaka no.539.

any other royal man has to be prevented from renouncing the world. They become objects of grace and blandishments that are to entangle 'him' in their passion.<sup>9</sup>

These are not only a part of the commentary but are also present in the *gāthā*. If we were to follow the argument of the *gāthā* being the only portion of the text recognised as canonical what emerges is an argument that Buddhism perceived women as an extremely potent threat to the ascetic seeking salvation. Hence the *Jātakas* explicitly indicate that though Buddhism as a religion provided women with an alternative path, the monastic prejudices against women could not be ignored.

In the shorter stories, though these biases are not necessarily done away with, yet women are placed in a larger framework and are a part of a number of activities. A number of introductory stories also indicate the rigours of monastic existence and the difficulties of convincing men of the need for chastity and asceticism as practice to be followed.<sup>10</sup> Women of the unspecified classes are depicted as engaging in labour<sup>11</sup> and making efforts for existence.<sup>12</sup> This brings us to the question of the sexual division of labour. The examples mentioned should not be seen only in relation to a comparison between women of higher and lower categories but as possibilities of exploring questions on women's works.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.31.

<sup>10</sup> Mahāsupīna Jātaka no. 77.

<sup>11</sup> Bahiya Jātaka no. 108.

<sup>12</sup> Kundaka Kucchi Sindhava Jātaka no.254.

Vijaya Ramaswamy through her study of Sangam literature has made a significant contribution in understanding the role of women in the early South Indian economy<sup>13</sup>. Though the period and place in the two contexts are different what is important for us is to restore labouring women to a much-deserved visibility. Division of labour, sexual otherwise, can be either pragmatic or prescriptive, alternatively the two may also combine. The former may often rest on mutual convenience and also not necessarily fixed. Though divisions of labour are nearly universal, their specific form and content is subject to historical variation in different contexts.

The very depiction of women engaged in economic activities are significant. Although such references are not plentiful and are often not central to the story, it actually lies in the hands of scholars to pick them up for a longer and alternative narratives.

Women of the royalty on the other hand are depicted in a completely different manner. The narratives that represent women of this category usually describe them as prone to being lazy and gadding about.

Women of the royalty, wives of brahmanas and gahapatis are almost always associated with adulterous behaviour, seeking opportunities for such behaviour. 'Women shall lust after men and strong drink and finery and gadding abroad and after the joys of this world'<sup>14</sup> ; 'as greedy as cows,

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<sup>13</sup> "Women Workers in the Sangam Literature' in Roy ed. *Women in early Indian Societies*, Manohar, Delhi, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Mahāsupina Jātaka no. 77, p.189.

seek new pastures'<sup>15</sup> ; 'wrathful are women, slanders ingrates', 'feels little for one who has done a lot'<sup>16</sup>; 'There is no private property in women, they are common to all' <sup>17</sup>

In some cases, the queen herself initiates the relationship for e.g. Queen makes sin with the serving man<sup>18</sup>; makes love and sin with a robber<sup>19</sup>; makes sin with a number of king's messengers (64 mentioned in the story appears as an exaggerated account).<sup>20</sup> In the same story Bodhisatta says to the king that the queen is not to be blamed, passions of women are insatiable and she is bound to act according to her inborn nature<sup>21</sup>.

What I shall draw out is that there are considerable variations within these stereotypical images of women but firstly we shall dwell upon the very reason for such claims which not only are a part of the commentary but of the *gāthā* as well.<sup>22</sup>

The fact is that queens adultery and its implications are brought into sharper focus in the stories because kings in the ultimate analysis were responsible for the prevention of adultery and also violation by the queen

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<sup>15</sup> *Aṇḍabhūta Jātaka* no. 62, p. 155.

<sup>16</sup> *Takka Jātaka* no. 63, p. 158.

<sup>17</sup> *Anabhirati Jātaka* no. 65, p.160.

<sup>18</sup> *Parantapa Jātaka* no. 416, p 250.

<sup>19</sup> *Cullapaduma Jātaka* no. 193, p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> *Bandhanamokkha Jātaka* no. 120, p. 266.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Commentaries in the shorter stories are mere explanations of the *gāthā*.

were probably perceived as being particularly threatening to socio-political norms<sup>23</sup>.

In one instance the king himself ask his daughter to break the ascetics ritual<sup>24</sup>. Hence it was not always necessary that women of the royalty were inherently inviolable but they were exposed to other men (especially ascetics) by the king or royal men themselves.

But the fact remains that the Jātakas focus on the, theme of adultery at length. Even in the stories where women were not adulterous, the husband did not trust them. This highlights the innate fear in the mind of the husbands that their wives may commit sin. A husband laments 'truth among such is quite rarely, ways of sex are enough to perplex'.<sup>25</sup>

The over emphasis on the theme especially regarding women of higher birth, brings to light the innate fear in the minds of their men for it is through effective social control over such women that the maintenance of patrilineal succession and caste purity was possible.<sup>26</sup> Chakravarti clearly highlights the fact that the purity of women has a centrality in brahmanical patriarchy because the purity of the caste is contingent upon it. Also the honour and responsibility of men is protected and preserved through their women.

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<sup>23</sup> Roy, 'Justice In the Jātakas', *Social Scientist*, vol 24, no 4-6, p.35.

<sup>24</sup> Nalinika Jāta no. 526, p.101.

<sup>25</sup> Sambula Jāta no. 519, p.52.

<sup>26</sup> Chakravarti, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy In Early India' in *Widening Horizon*, Delhi, 1997, p.45.

Throughout the narrative though women's adultery is often ignored by calling it as an inherent part of their nature yet at the same time there is an underlying attempt to restrict women's movement which efficiently serve as a mechanism to safeguard the caste structure itself. Another possibility may be keeping in mind the audience, as the issue could have generated interest and hence was constantly employed and exploited as a part of a narrative strategy.

Notions of chastity and adultery, although primarily a part of the higher order, can also be seen among the common people. A good example is where a fish caught in the net fears that his wife may misconduct in his absence. The Bodhisatta later rescued the fish<sup>27</sup>. This clearly highlights the common man's concern with notion of loyalty to ones spouse(though in the story is concern of a fish).

A cursory look at most of the narratives on women clearly shows the mediation on the part of the Buddhist monk in the production of the Jataka literature. It more offer than smacks of the Buddhist notion which time and again insists on the need to continue the householder's life and abstain from worldly pleasure, which is in a way self contradictory as it allows women into the world of renouncers (something that we have already pointed towards).

Acts of adultery and the punishments that followed also enable us to draw differences between the women of the higher and those of the lower

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<sup>27</sup> Maccha Jātaka no. 34, p. 87.

strata. In most of the stories humiliation was considered to be sufficient for the adulterous queen. Yet at the same time the potential right to use coercion and physical chastisement of women who violated the norms established for them supports the authority of the male kinsmen. For example in a story the Boddhisatta advised a Brahmin to feed his wife pickle of cow dung.<sup>28</sup> Another alternative is where neither humiliation nor coercion is used.<sup>29</sup> The king considers his courtiers as a 'most useful servant' and the woman 'most dear'<sup>30</sup>. No elaborate mention of their adulterous acts is found.

Brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest caste<sup>31</sup>. And these are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion

Women of the lower castes are perhaps the most downtrodden and their oppression can be well understood in three ways: firstly as the subject of caste oppression at the hands of the upper castes. secondly as labourers subject to class-based oppression also mainly at the hands of the upper castes who form bulk of the land owners; finally as women who

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<sup>28</sup> Kosiya Jātaka no. 130, p.285.

<sup>29</sup> Pabotopathana Jātaka no. 195.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 88.

<sup>31</sup> Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste through a feminist lens*, Stree, Calcutta, 2003. p.34.

experience patriarchy as oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste<sup>32</sup>.

Hence the obsession with adultery is not as evident in their case as they fell prey to all categories of men just on the basis of their low birth. The protection of their sexuality was not necessarily of any concern (though it might have been for their respective men folk)).

There are cases where the queen or the noble lady offer themselves to holy men in the absence of their husband as in the Harita Jātaka where 'the Bodhisatta misconducts himself with her'<sup>33</sup> ( this is also one of the evidences of rape in the Jātakas). In other case the kings themselves present their wife to the guest as in the case of the Nalinika Jātaka mentioned before. In such cases neither is the noble lady humiliated nor is the ascetic punished. In all these cases the adulterous act forms a part of a larger narrative of Buddhist ethos which helps the ascetic to attain a higher state of realisation.

In one of the Mahānīpatas a scene depicting hell shows 'women bent and broken' who were of 'noble birth', left their husbands now bear the fruits of their sin<sup>34</sup>.

Hence within the same category one finds elements of variations. This may depend partly on expediency or partly on keeping the interest of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.143.

<sup>33</sup> Harita Jātaka no.431, p.296.

<sup>34</sup> Nimi Jātaka no.541, p.59.



the audience in mind. They may also very well relate to popular characters especially the members of the royalty etc.

At this point I shall try to examine representations of low-caste categories in our narrative. Perhaps most direct influence to the lower-caste<sup>35</sup> comes from the stories revolving around the candalas especially from the smaller stories primarily from Book II, III and IV. The stories of longer *gāthās* i.e. Book V and VI are primarily royalty based. Though the distinction in the *varṇa* is explicitly stated in the longer stories, the maximum number of stories with low caste protagonists as central figures is found in the shorter stories.

A large number of animal stories are based on difference in social structures. Animal stories in the *Jātaka* collection are the older stories and also clearly indicates direct appropriation of narratives from the folk tradition into the *Jātaka* collection<sup>36</sup>.

What one infers even from a cursory view of the animal stories is that they exclusively reflect norms and values, which prevailed in the world of men/women. They express the same anxieties and modes of conduct.

The division of Indian society into four castes is in no way unknown to Buddhist literature<sup>37</sup>. The evidence from one of stories., clearly states 'Brāhmins he made for study, for command he made the Khattiyas. Vessas

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<sup>35</sup> Also including the outcastes i.e. the untouchables or *Caṇḍālās*.

<sup>36</sup> Chakravarti, 'Women men and beasts: the *Jātakas* as popular tradition, *Studies in History*, Delhi, 1993, p.52.

<sup>37</sup> Fick, *Social Organisation in North East India in Buddha's Times*, University of Calcutta Calcutta, 1920, p.17

plough the land; Śūddas the servants made to obey the rest<sup>38</sup>. within the same gatha one also finds mention of 'We see no cattle asking to be slain, that may new and better life may gain'<sup>39</sup>

Hence we see both subversion and a reaffirmation of caste in the stories. Other caste groups like the Caṇḍālā and Pukkusa also find a number of references like 'Khattiya, Brāhmin, Vessa, Śudda, and Caṇḍālā, Pukkussa. All these can be virtuous, and all attain Nirvana Bliss"<sup>40</sup>.

Though the Buddhist ethos stressed on equality but it really did not work in terms of reality. We shall dwell upon it in a while. Although special measures were taken with respect to untouchable persons in a large variety of ways i.e. in a number of activities such as conversation, eating, business, rituals, occupation and so forth, there has been emphasis on two areas: spatial territories and kinship<sup>41</sup>. Hence measures concerning territories are manifest in rules of segregation and those concerning kinship in sanctions against sexual relations with untouchables.

A sense of territory or domain of lordship of the untouchable is clearly evident in the Jātaka narrations especially with reference to the caṇḍālās. "The great being was born outside the city,<sup>42</sup> as a caṇḍālā

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<sup>38</sup> Bhūridatta Jātaka no. 543, p.110.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Uddālaka Jātaka no. 487, p.298.

<sup>41</sup> Aktor, Untouchables, Women and Territories: Ritual of lordship in the parasara Smriti' in Mcgee and Leslie ed. Invented Identities: Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India, OUP, Delhi, 2000, p.134.

<sup>42</sup> 'Bahīthagara'

son"<sup>43</sup>; 'a Caṇḍālā village'<sup>44</sup> lay outside Ujjain and there the great being was born<sup>45</sup>.

Chakravarti has highlighted that the vanna division constituted a purely conceptual scheme which had no actual application and jāti was both a conceptual and actual scheme of categories based on ascribed status. She also points out what really seemed to matter to the Buddhist were the 'Kula' division.<sup>46</sup> Similarly these are also no śūdas, nesadas, rathkāras, venas and pukkusās who exist as real people<sup>47</sup>. Wagle<sup>48</sup> too divides the society at the time of the Buddha in terms of function i.e. social, religious and political.

Vivekananda Jha questions this and point out that it is not true that the Buddha set his face firmly against the institutionized inequality of the caste system. He argues for a highly stratified society, which used the Caṇḍālas for its own ends and kept them at its bottom on a subhuman plane. This he points out with the use of Jātakas corroborated by other Buddhist sources

But I would rather not take the extreme stand of the two arguments put forward. The Jātakas on the one hand provide not only visibility but also space to the lower caste, yet on the other hand this space may remain

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<sup>43</sup> Mātanga Jātaka no.497, p.235.

<sup>44</sup> 'Caṇḍālāgāmaka'

<sup>45</sup> Citta Sambhūta Jātaka no.498, p.244.

<sup>46</sup> Chakravarti, *The Social dimensions of early Buddhism*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1981, p.106.

<sup>47</sup> Caṇḍāla has been used to represent low status in an abstract sense. i.e. to indicate moral value and not to indicate low birth.

<sup>48</sup> *Society At the Time Buddha*, Popular Prakashan, Delhi, 1966.

at a specific level. Also within a caste category one finds difference in status. This may be because of class differentiation. Hence as a narrative it offers shades of grey rather than extreme polarities.

Apart from the aspect of domain or territory, which we have discussed, the other aspect of kinship also need focus. We have already discussed at length the attempt of Brahmanical patriarchy to safeguard female sexuality especially of the higher caste for maintenance of caste purity. Hence *anuloma* form of marriage was severally restricted as against the *pratiloma*, which otherwise avoidable was not regarded as permissible.

A direct reference to an attempt by a lower category male to marry a higher caste female is found in a story where a jackal<sup>49</sup> professes love for a lioness. The lioness in the story is aware of her status 'but I am esteemed to be one of royal issue'<sup>50</sup>. The jackal meets his death at the hand by the Buddhisatta. The mention of a crystal cave and the failure on the part of the jackal to enter it suggests territorial separation. The lowest caste (in this case the Jackal) is unfamiliar with the domain of the lion and hence probably meets failure.

Another instance of a similar kind but with a different ending is also found where marriage is sought for a Nāgā<sup>51</sup> prince and a royal princess<sup>52</sup>. Hence the Benares King clearly states 'My daughter is of a person blood,

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<sup>49</sup> Mean amongst beast, and like a man of low caste.

<sup>50</sup> Sigala Jātaka no.152, p.5.

<sup>51</sup> Here the example is not of high and low caste but Nāgās were represent people outside the Brahmanical or Buddhist domain. They too are looked down upon. This is clearly evident in the derogatory physical feature, with which they were associated.

<sup>52</sup> Bhūridatta Jātaka no. 543

let him not dream of child of mine<sup>53</sup>. But later due to the terror spread by the Nāgās the king gives up. Hence at one end it is very clear such marriages are generally restricted, but due to the need of strategy or expediency they can take place. The Jātākas as a narrative, time and again allow the bonds of the normative to be broken.

The image of the untouchables that is developed is ambiguous. They seem sometimes as protecting, sometimes as a threat to the domain which subordinates them. This ambiguity can be seen in the treatment of both untouchables and women. They are good when they contribute to the prosperity of the master and are evil when they jeopardise or negate it.

Of the two instances where the great being i.e. the Bodhisatta is born as a Caṇḍālā, in the first<sup>54</sup> the Bodhisatta gets to marry a daughter of a rich merchant – a clear example of pratiloma marriage, which probably was possible because he was the great being. Soon he undertook the path of ascetism. In the other narrative the Bodhisatta was first born as a Caṇḍālā, then as a son of a Chaplain and then took the way to the woods<sup>55</sup>

An interesting point to be noted is in both the stories Bodhisatta get a place in the abode of Brahmā i.e. heaven only after death (in the former) and after being re-born as a higher caste man (in the second case). This clearly highlights that at one level the Bodhisatta is said to be a caṇḍālā himself i.e. what gives the Jātaka narrative a 'popular' appeal but at the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.85.

<sup>54</sup> Mātāṅga Jātaka no.497

<sup>55</sup> Citta Sambhūta Jātaka no.498

other end clearly shows the inbuilt inequality in the Saṅgha. Only death and then rebirth were the means through which a caṇḍāla<sup>56</sup> could attain salvation. This stands in complete contrast to the Buddhist notion of equality.

There are a large number of animal stories with the jackal as the central figure. In one of them the jackal is reproved for intruding in an area where two geese were friendly with a tree-spirit. The sprite (Bodhisatta) asks him to 'go back to his hole'.<sup>57</sup> In the other the jackal attempts to play the part of a lion, undertakes to kill an elephant, but meets a fatal end<sup>58</sup>. A jackal after learning the spell of subduing the world, collected a great army of wild beasts, but at the end is discomfited.<sup>59</sup>

The point that one is trying to make is that what appears from the jackal stories is an attempt on the part of the jackal to make a place for himself in the wider world, and to challenge the roles that have been ascribed to it. Through the demonstration of valour to challenge the system that subordinates or segregates him, his final defeat in the stories points out that challenges to the existing norm though possible, may not have succeeded.

If one looks at the other means of segregation the Jātakas provide enough number of instances. We see this in reference to the Caṇḍāla

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<sup>56</sup> Also other lower castes

<sup>57</sup> Caṭumatta Jātaḅa no.187, p.74.

<sup>58</sup> Jambuka Jātaḅa no.335, p.233.

<sup>59</sup> Sabbadatha Jātaḅa no.241, p.170.

contaminating the atmosphere, polluting through sight and from a distance<sup>60</sup>

Sexual relationship with him cannot be imagined (something we have already discussed). Violation of the taboo on food, especially on ritual occasions from him are considered an absolute sin,<sup>61</sup> although there is a difference in degree of taboos that have been adhered to not only by the brahmanas but also by other high caste groups and the common folk. In a somewhat exceptional case a bond of friendship is shown between a lion and a jackal<sup>62</sup>. This probably throws emphasis on the bond of friendship between high and low.

With reference to moral and ethical issues the Jātaka narratives portray a picture of equality but at the other level, segregation cannot also be ruled out. Speech too has been used as an indicator of this. In one story the two protagonists were recognised as caṇḍālās<sup>63</sup> because of their language.<sup>64</sup>

Besides, there are indications of difference in status within a caste clearly mentions a brahmana<sup>65</sup> is mentioned who earned his living collecting deer skin in the forest.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jātaka no.498,p.245, Jātaka no.497, p.236, Jātaka no.377, p.154.

<sup>61</sup> Sattadhamma Jātaka no.179, p.58.

<sup>62</sup> Guna Jātaka no.157, pp.19-20.

<sup>63</sup> Citta Sambhuta Jataka no.498.

<sup>64</sup> 'Caṇḍālābhāṣa'

<sup>65</sup> He is referred to as an 'Outcast Brahmin'.

<sup>66</sup> Bhūridatta Jātaka no.543, p. 88.

If we were to examine the issue of justice, the Jātakas emerge as a unique case where justice was imparted and punishments given to all who committed sins irrespective of their caste or class. Even the royalty was not spared. We read 'condition of kingdom depends on a just or unjust ruler'<sup>67</sup>.

The Bodhisatta in a story as caṇḍāla trespasses into the king's garden to meet his wife's demand<sup>68</sup>. Having made the king realise the need to uphold the "proper" varṇa order<sup>69</sup> he gained kingship of the night. The story questions varṇa categories at many levels. Also the granting kingship of the night to the candala may suggest his access to women of royalty, which is completely negated by the norms.

At another level the attempt towards highlighting moral ethical values (an underlying theme of the Jātaka) can also place the lower category on the same footing as the upper. Hence we should highlight the element of variation. These should be carefully studied. The audience was kept in mind while developing the narrative strategies. Also the Buddhist ethos was conveyed through the narrative to large parts of the subcontinent with the spread of the religion.

Another aspect according to me deserves attention is the notion of slavery. A large number of references to both male and female slaves have been found in the text.

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<sup>67</sup> Rajovāda Jātaka no.334.

<sup>68</sup> Chavaka Jātaka no.307

<sup>69</sup> He highlights the supremacy of the priest over the King which is non in consonance with the Buddhist order.



Uma Chakravarti brings out the connection between slavery and patriarchy, drawing largely from the works of Gerda Lerner.<sup>70</sup> She highlights that one finds a predominance of female slaves over male slaves in sources available on early societies. Three characteristics are significant.<sup>71</sup> Slavery originated as a substitute for death and was particularly a conditional commutation. Slaves experienced natal alienation. And they were dishonoured in a generalised way.

The point of importance for us is that the dishonouring in the case of women would be combined with the final act of male dominance that being rape of captured women. Also the impact on the conquered people of the rape of the women was two fold. It dishonoured the women and by implication it served as a symbolic castration of their men.

A female slave provided services at two levels. Firstly she provided sexual services to the master. Secondly providing economic services to the mistress by performing menial labour.

While slavery of the European model cannot be accepted in the Indian context sexual abuse of the enslaved women is well noted even in the Indian situation. In the context of our study it is important to look into it

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<sup>70</sup> Her other works too draw attention of Lerner's works.

<sup>71</sup> Chakravarti, 'Of Slavery and Patriarchy: the Mental Construct of Enslavement', *IHR*, 1992, p.283.

for a wider representation of each category,<sup>72</sup> as well as for variations within these categories.

We find references to 1000 female attendants<sup>73</sup>; 700 favourite concubines<sup>74</sup>; 1600 dancing girls<sup>75</sup> 16000 Nāgā maidens<sup>76</sup>, 16000 female slaves<sup>77</sup> and many more such examples.

Though war has been given as a major reason for enslavement, what is most striking is that war stories do not form a significant part of the Jataka narrative. Even in the stories relating to royalty, war or conquest really do not form a central theme. One finds brief mentions of raids where the border people raided the countryside and having assailed a town, taken prisoners, they returned to the border<sup>78</sup>. One girl during the raid is aware that she would now become a slave<sup>79</sup>

What one should not forget is that the monks to reach to a wider audience used the Jātaka. Though the stories of warfare might have created interest but were in complete disharmony with the Buddhist ethos of non-violence. There has been a greater emphasis on common-sensual issues in the stories. Hence a large number of references to female slaves would definitely suggest warfare and conquest but the narrative is to some extent silent on it. In a large number of stories single female slaves are

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<sup>72</sup> Female slavery may or may not be of a lower caste. In our context they fall into this wider definition of non-elite.

<sup>73</sup> Mahājanaka Jātaka no. 539.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Bhūridatta Jātaka no. 543.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Viḍur Paṇḍita Jātaka no.454.

<sup>78</sup> Ullā Navāda Jātaka no.477.p.135.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.p.137.

also mentioned. This would be indicative of the status (social and economic) of the master.

The quality of life of the poor is also one aspect that the Jātakas capture. Women of the category under the study are shown as combining their sexuality with pleasure. Though there are not many references to corroborate this but it is very significant to have a glimpse of their relationship with their own men. A wife demands his husband for safflower coloured cloth to wear to the Kartik festival<sup>80</sup>. The demand for wine can be viewed as a typical symbol of insatiable female appetites also at another way a celebration of the physical, a desire to experience a few snatched moments of ecstasy. The end is fatal for the husbands pleasure in this case remained momentary and also ends up in a sad story. Similarly another story also throws light on some moments of celebration but unlike the above mentioned case turns out to be a blessing where the husband is given kingship for a night<sup>81</sup>.

On the other hand we can look at the example of Punna, a slave girl, who when granted a boon by the king asks for a pestle, mortal and winnowing basket<sup>82</sup>. This definitely shows the limits of her desires, which are limited to her daily requirements. In fact this is the only example of a boon given to a slave girl versus a number of references to royal women receiving boons.

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<sup>80</sup> Pupparāṭṭa Jāṭaka no.147, 313.

<sup>81</sup> Chavaka Jāṭaka no. 309, p34.

<sup>82</sup> Nana Chāṇḍa Jāṭaka no.. p.291

This also indicates the polarities in the wishes they want to be fulfilled. One is not trying to say that progeny was not at all the concern of the lower strata of women but their priorities differed. The Means of subsistence was probably not of any concern to the women of the royalty.

In the story of a courtesan Sama who is wealthy, attended by 500 female servants<sup>83</sup> saves the Bodhisatta's life of theft. The story ends with her renewing her old ways of life after the great being escapes from her. Unlike the women of royalty, the courtesan does not take up the path of asceticism. This can be to some extent due to the inbuilt gender bias of the sangha as women were considered as a threat to asceticism, a courtesan in this situation might have been seen as a greater threat.<sup>84</sup>

Before we conclude it is be important to highlight the inbuilt differences, which prevents us from formulating any kind of generalisation and enables us to look at elements of variations.

The theme most central to the Jātaka narrative is that of asceticism. Though one does not find any reference of self initiation on the part of the royal women to take the path of ascetism, the same reference for the category under study is even more negligible. Adoption of ascetic life by Queen Sivali<sup>85</sup> A group 16000 royal wives wanting to embrace ascetism<sup>86</sup>. Even this meagre evidence is not available for the lower strata.

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<sup>83</sup> Kanaveri Jātaka no.318.p 40.

<sup>84</sup> The courtesan in the case, though of high class was not of royal blood.

<sup>85</sup> Mahājanaka Jātaka no.539.

<sup>86</sup> Mugga Pakkha Jātaka no.538.

There are overlaps with other literary traditions. The case of Viḍura and Draupadī – characters of the Mahābhārata are worth a mention. The character of Viḍura has been placed effectively as a symbol of wisdom<sup>87</sup>. This is interesting because in the Mahābhārata his identity is shrouded in obscurity (son of a sage and a dāsi).

On the other hand Draupadī<sup>88</sup> has been used to epitomise female sexual insatiability. She had a double parentage, and five husbands yet her affection was set upon a sixth man<sup>89</sup>

In the former case Vidhur represents all the qualities of a virtuous, wise, loyal man whose obscure identity is not questioned. But in the case of Draupadī she fitted very well into the entire schema of female sexual insatiability.

The Jātaka as a popular narrative whose stories form a part of the oral tradition derived from the folktales can be very well compared to the body of Brahmanical texts composed roughly during the period when the Jatakas were assuming their present shape the latter represented a fairly unified ideology and bore a stamp of the traditional literate groups. The Jatakas on the other hand are marked by a comparative looseness of structure and a somewhat dispersed ideological content even though the various strands are gathered up and held together within an overall Buddhist world view

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<sup>87</sup> Vidhur Paṇḍit Jātaka no. 545, p 127.

<sup>88</sup> 'Kaṅha' in the story.

<sup>89</sup> Kunālā Jātaka no.536, p. 225.

The differences that emerge need not be interpreted in terms of a stark dichotomy between normative and narrative traditions.

A discussion on the Jātakas has made it clear that the narratives cloaked with Buddhist norms, may or may not diverge from the brahmanical perspective in numerous instances. Most striking differences between the two is that the normative literature enlist and codifies the rules and regulations but in the Jatakas one finds both the enactment of the rules and as well as severe violations.

Broadly, the representation of lower caste women was not uniform. The Jātakas are significance because they provide visibility to this category which a large gamut of ancient Indian sources have failed to do. We must also bear in mind that the text is a composite one, containing different chronological strata, which lends itself to a sedimenting of meanings.

The text does highlight an element of variations within the representation of lower caste women. At one end it not only provides visibility but also allows space for their emancipation yet at the same time fails to extend this possibility sufficiently.

What one eventually derives from a popular narrative like this is that a multiplicity of meanings co-existed at the same time. Representations of low caste women are marked by plurality. Ambiguity has also not been ruled out.

## CONCLUSION

The attempt in this work has been to explore and highlight the various representations of non-elite women from two different Buddhist literary traditions. The work has not restricted itself to the category of non-elite women but has also brought into light men of the lower order to corroborate one's arguments and also to look at the Buddhist world from the perspective of the groups belonging to the lower strata at large.

This work, which primarily stemmed from the issues of new movements both within Buddhism, the once honoured religion of the past and women studies attempts to address issues of gender, caste, class and religion in early Buddhism. The work has questioned egalitarianism for which Buddhism has been hailed not only at the time of its inception but also in the recent past. To what extent can this be realized?

In the chapter on the Vinaya Piṭaka the special case of Upāli points to the recognition he achieved in spite of his low birth. But as we explored the social backgrounds of the followers of the Buddha, that have been mentioned in the text, we do not find the lower groups being well represented. The doors of the egalitarian religion seem to have remained closed for a large section of the population. The work suggests that Buddhism has been hailed as upholding an ideal of egalitarianism both at the time of its inception and in the recent past.

The women in the Buddhist monastic order followed their spiritual goals but were placed at a subservient position vis a vis their male counterparts. Also, within the category of women, the access to the Buddhist order through rules of ordination as well as every day regulations hindered the spiritual ambitions of many women like the slave girls, prostitutes, barren women etc. Besides, the excessive concern with female sexuality evident in the large number of rules pertaining only to the women brings forth the innate fear on the part of the monks as a potent threat to their spiritual enlightenment.

The study of the laity indicates the emphasis on the part of the sangha to be associated with wealthy laymen and laywomen as they are the ones that are primarily mentioned. They also began to exert greater influence on the sangha leading to the socialization of the sangha and increasing dependence on the society at large. The Vinaya being a part of the prescriptive tradition does not offer fluidity in the narrative remains restricted in its approach.

The Jātakas being of a different genre altogether provide us with a large gamut of representations for the category under study. Our category does find a greater visibility in this chapter. A careful contrast has been drawn between the elite and the non-elite women to mark out symbols of differentiation between them.

The notions of chastity and adultery are primarily concerns of the higher order. By contrast the daily routine activities of the non-elite women. Though this trend runs across the narratives exceptions have also been



highlighted suggesting other possibilities. Though the Jātakas depict a large view of life, ascetism remains the underlying theme in them given the very Buddhist character.

Through the study of the stories on the animals one has tried to view them as symbols of social relations as operative in the human world. Also through the stories relating to the lower groups especially the candalas a large number of possibilities have been raised. On the one hand their vibrancy and abilities have been highlighted but at another level their failure suggests victory for the ever-prevailing brahmanical structure, here with a Buddhist cloak. The issues of their territory and ritual domain did raise interesting questions. Hence the chapter on the Jātakas suggests the co-existence of a large range of possibilities in the Buddhist world. But societal rigidities are not completely discarded of.

One has not attempted at interpreting two different genres of literature to suggest a stark difference between the normative and the popular traditions, but to unravel and highlight the various possibilities in the representation of non-elite groups, their various experiences, abilities, nuances of their existence, challenges etc. in order to link them with other issues. This has been attempted by studying early Buddhism, the religion that offered an alternative way of life. One has just tried to look into the possibility for women and other lower order groups to avail of the opportunity. What one gathers is a whole range of possibilities and not a single image. This I hope has helped in avoiding generalizations.

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