

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S STATUS AND LIBERATION IN ANCIENT INDIA: FROM VEDIC SOCIETY TO BUDDHIST REFORM

Kanchan Keshri^{*1}, Dr. Srida Jha², Dr. Champalal Mandrele (Bhante Chandrakitti)³

¹PhD Research Scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut-250002

²Assistant Professor, Department of Buddhist Studies, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University,
Meerut-250002

³Assistant Professor and HOD, Department of Buddhist Studies, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut-250002.

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***Corresponding Author: Kanchan Keshri**

PhD Research Scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut-250002

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ABSTRACT

The status of women in ancient India underwent significant transformation from the early Vedic period to the rise of Buddhism in the sixth century BCE. While early Vedic society accorded women a relatively dignified position in religious, intellectual, and social spheres, subsequent Brahmanical developments gradually imposed restrictions on female autonomy through patriarchal norms, ritual exclusion, and legal codification. Against this backdrop, Buddhism emerged as a reformative movement that challenged caste hierarchy and gender-based discrimination, offering women unprecedented opportunities for spiritual liberation and social participation. This article critically examines the changing status of women from the Vedic to the Buddhist periods, focusing on education, marriage, religious participation, and the concept of liberation (*mokṣa* / *nirvāṇa*). By comparing Vedic ideals, later Brahmanical practices, and Buddhist reforms, the study highlights Buddhism's significant contribution to the reconfiguration of women's spiritual and social roles in ancient India.

KEYWORDS: Women in Ancient India, Vedic Society, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Buddhism, Women's Liberation, Bhikkhunī Saṅgha.

INTRODUCTION

The question of women's status in ancient India is complex, multidimensional, and historically layered. Any attempt to understand it must avoid simplistic or linear narratives of either continuous progress or uninterrupted decline. Instead, women's social, religious, and spiritual positions evolved through distinct historical phases shaped by changing religious doctrines, socio-economic structures, political authority, and reformative intellectual movements. The Vedic period, the later Brahmanical phase, and the rise of Buddhism represent three crucial moments in this evolution, each articulating different visions of women's dignity, duty, and liberation.

In early Indian thought, religion and social life were deeply intertwined. The position accorded to women was not merely a social matter but was closely linked to philosophical conceptions of *ṛta* (cosmic order), *dharma* (moral duty), and the nature of liberation (*mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*). Consequently, shifts in metaphysical and ethical worldviews directly influenced women's access to education, ritual participation, marriage rights, and spiritual freedom. The Vedic worldview, particularly in its early phase, reflects a relatively inclusive outlook that recognized women as active participants in intellectual and ritual life. However, as Brahmanical orthodoxy consolidated its authority in later periods, women's autonomy became increasingly circumscribed through legal codes, ritual exclusions, and patriarchal norms.

Against this backdrop of gradual restriction, Buddhism emerged in the sixth century BCE as a powerful ethical and philosophical reform movement. By rejecting caste hierarchy, ritualism, and gender-based spiritual discrimination, Buddhism redefined the possibilities of liberation for women. The Buddhist recognition of women's capacity for enlightenment and the institutionalization of the *Bhikkhūnī Saṅgha* marked a radical departure from prevailing Brahmanical attitudes. Thus, the transition from the Vedic worldview to the Buddhist ethical framework constitutes a critical turning point in the discourse on women's rights, dignity, and liberation in ancient India. This article explores that evolution by emphasizing the contrast between early Vedic inclusivity, later Brahmanical restriction, and Buddhist reform. The present section focuses on the early Vedic period, highlighting the relatively elevated status of women in education, marriage, ritual life, and spiritual thought, thereby laying the foundation for understanding subsequent transformations.

Women in the Early Vedic Period

The early Vedic period (c. 1500–1000 BCE) is often regarded as a formative phase in Indian civilization, characterized by a pastoral economy, relatively flexible social structures, and a religious worldview centered on nature worship and sacrificial rituals. During this period, women enjoyed a social and intellectual status that was comparatively higher than in later Brahmanical society. Although the Vedic world was not entirely free from patriarchal tendencies, the available textual and historical evidence suggests that women were recognized as active participants in religious, educational, and domestic spheres.

One of the most striking features of early Vedic society is the acknowledgment of women as thinkers and seers. Vedic literature, particularly the *R̥gveda*, refers to women scholars known as *brahmavādinīs*, who were engaged in the pursuit of sacred knowledge (*brahmajñāna*). Renowned figures such as Gārgī Vācaknavī and Maitreyī stand out as exemplary intellectuals who participated in philosophical debates with male sages. Gārgī's dialogue with Yājñavalkya in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* demonstrates not only her mastery of metaphysical concepts but also the acceptance of women's intellectual authority within scholarly assemblies. Similarly, Maitreyī's inquiry into the nature of immortality and self-knowledge reflects a profound philosophical engagement that transcends domestic concerns.

Education in the early Vedic age was not rigidly gender-exclusive. While male students often pursued lifelong Vedic study (*brahmacarya*), women too had access to learning, particularly those who chose the path of *brahmavādinī* rather than that of householders. Even women who followed domestic life were expected to possess ritual and moral knowledge to fulfill their roles effectively. This educational access suggests that early Vedic society did not categorically deny women intellectual development, a fact that distinguishes it sharply from later periods.

Women's participation in religious rituals further illustrates their respected position. In Vedic sacrifices, the presence of the wife (*patnī*) was considered indispensable. Ritual texts emphasize that a sacrifice performed without the wife was incomplete, underscoring the symbolic and practical importance of women in religious life. Women chanted hymns, participated in sacrificial ceremonies, and shared ritual responsibilities with their husbands. This joint participation reflected the Vedic ideal of marital partnership, where husband and wife were seen as complementary halves working together to uphold *dharma*.

Marriage in early Vedic society was largely viewed as a partnership (*sahadharma*), rather than a strictly hierarchical institution. Women exercised a degree of agency in choosing their life partners, as evidenced by practices such as *svayamvara*, where a woman selected her husband from among several suitors. Although such practices were likely limited to certain social groups, their very existence points to a cultural recognition of female choice. Marriage was not merely a social contract but a spiritual collaboration aimed at fulfilling religious duties, raising offspring, and maintaining cosmic order. Within the household, women were respected as *grhiṇīs*—the managers of domestic life and custodians of moral values. They played a central role in nurturing family ethics, preserving oral traditions, and transmitting cultural values to the next generation. The household was not viewed as a space of confinement but as a vital arena of social and religious activity, where women exercised considerable influence.

The Vedic conception of spiritual liberation further reinforces the relatively inclusive outlook of this period. Although early Vedic texts do not systematize the doctrine of *mokṣa* as later philosophical schools did, they do not explicitly exclude women from spiritual realization. The Upaniṣadic emphasis on self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*) as the path to immortality suggests a universal spiritual potential transcending gender distinctions. Maitreyī's philosophical inquiry into the impermanence of material possessions and the nature of the self exemplifies this spiritual universality. Moreover, the symbolic representation of feminine power in Vedic thought is noteworthy. Goddesses such as Uṣas (dawn), Sarasvatī (knowledge and speech), and Aditi (cosmic motherhood) occupied significant positions in the Vedic pantheon. While the worship of goddesses does not automatically translate into social equality, it does indicate a cultural reverence for feminine principles associated with creativity, wisdom, and sustenance. This symbolic valorization contributed to a worldview in which women were not inherently viewed as spiritually inferior.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the elevated status of women in the early Vedic period was not absolute or uniform. Social stratification based on lineage and function was present, and male authority remained dominant in many spheres. Nevertheless, compared to later Brahmanical society, early Vedic culture offered women greater visibility, agency, and respect. The flexibility of social roles, the absence of rigid legal codes governing women's behavior, and the emphasis on partnership rather than subordination created a relatively open environment for women's participation. In sum, the early Vedic period represents a phase of

relative inclusivity in the history of women's status in ancient India. Women were recognized as intellectual contributors, ritual participants, marital partners, and moral agents. This foundational openness, however, would gradually erode with the institutionalization of patriarchal norms in later Brahmanical traditions. Understanding the early Vedic position of women is therefore essential for appreciating both the subsequent decline in women's autonomy and the significance of later reform movements, particularly Buddhism, which sought to reclaim and redefine women's spiritual and social agency.

Decline of Women's Status in Later Brahmanical Society

The later Vedic and post-Vedic periods marked a decisive shift in the status of women in ancient Indian society. As socio-economic structures became more complex and settled agrarian life replaced earlier pastoral patterns, social hierarchies hardened and religious authority became increasingly institutionalized. This transformation coincided with the consolidation of Brahmanical orthodoxy, which redefined social order through rigid norms of caste, gender, and ritual purity. Within this framework, women's autonomy and public participation experienced a gradual but significant decline.

One of the most important factors contributing to this decline was the monopolization of ritual authority by male Brahmins. Whereas early Vedic society permitted women to participate in sacrificial rites and intellectual discourse, later Brahmanical traditions progressively excluded women from Vedic study and ritual performance. The right to hear, recite, and interpret the Vedas became the exclusive privilege of upper-caste men. Women were increasingly portrayed as ritually impure and intellectually incapable of understanding sacred knowledge, a notion that stood in stark contrast to the earlier recognition of *brahmavādinīs*.

The codification of social norms in legal and ethical texts such as the *Dharmasūtras*, *Dharmashāstras*, and particularly the *Manusmṛiti*, played a central role in institutionalizing patriarchal control. These texts laid down detailed prescriptions governing women's behavior, emphasizing obedience, chastity, and subordination. The famous injunction that a woman should be protected by her father in childhood, her husband in youth, and her sons in old age symbolized the denial of women's independent identity. Womanhood was defined almost entirely in relational terms, leaving little space for personal autonomy or self-determination. Education, once accessible to women in varying degrees, became increasingly restricted. Formal learning and scriptural study were largely denied to women, reinforcing

their dependence on male authority for religious knowledge. The exclusion from education not only curtailed intellectual growth but also justified women's exclusion from ritual and philosophical domains. As religious authority was closely tied to social power, this educational marginalization had far-reaching consequences for women's overall status.

Marriage practices also underwent significant changes during this period. The earlier flexibility evident in *svayamvara* and late marriages gave way to more restrictive customs such as child marriage. Women's consent became secondary to familial and caste considerations, and marriage was increasingly used as a means of controlling female sexuality. Widow remarriage was discouraged or prohibited, while the ideal of female chastity (*pativrata dharma*) was exalted as the highest virtue. A woman's moral worth was thus measured by her devotion and submission to her husband rather than by her intellectual or spiritual capacities. Economic rights further reflected the declining status of women. Property ownership and inheritance rights were severely curtailed, making women financially dependent on male relatives. Even when women were granted *strīdhana*, its control often remained with male guardians. This economic dependence reinforced women's vulnerability and limited their ability to challenge oppressive social norms.

The concept of spiritual liberation in Brahmanical society also underwent reinterpretation in ways that marginalized women. While philosophical schools such as Vedānta articulated universal metaphysical principles, in practice women's access to liberation (*mokṣa*) was often mediated through their domestic roles. A woman's spiritual merit was believed to lie in her faithful service to her husband and family rather than in independent spiritual pursuit. Asceticism, renunciation, and philosophical inquiry—key pathways to liberation—were predominantly reserved for men. Thus, the later Brahmanical period represents a phase of increasing restriction, where women's identities were confined to domesticity and dependency. These developments were not merely social but were legitimized through religious and legal discourse, making patriarchy appear divinely sanctioned. It is against this background of systemic marginalization that the reformative significance of Buddhism becomes particularly evident.

Buddhism as a Reformative Movement

The rise of Buddhism in the sixth century BCE marked a profound ethical, philosophical, and social transformation in ancient India. Emerging in a context characterized by ritualism, caste hierarchy, and gender inequality, Buddhism offered an alternative vision grounded in rational

inquiry, ethical conduct, and compassion. By challenging the authority of the Vedas and rejecting the exclusivity of Brahmanical ritualism, Buddhism opened new possibilities for social and spiritual inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups, including women. Central to the Buddhist reform was the rejection of inherent inequality based on birth, caste, or gender. The Buddha emphasized that human suffering (*duḥkha*) was universal and that the path to liberation was accessible to all who followed the Noble Eightfold Path. This ethical universalism directly undermined prevailing assumptions that spiritual attainment was the exclusive privilege of upper-caste men. In doing so, Buddhism created a conceptual framework in which women could be recognized as moral and spiritual agents in their own right.

One of the most revolutionary aspects of Buddhism was the establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha*, the order of fully ordained nuns. Although the decision to admit women into monastic life was accompanied by certain institutional constraints, the very recognition of women as capable of renunciation, discipline, and enlightenment was unprecedented in the religious history of India. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's foster mother, played a pivotal role in this development, symbolizing women's determination to pursue spiritual liberation beyond domestic confines. The presence of accomplished women practitioners further strengthened the legitimacy of women's spiritual potential. Figures such as Khemā, renowned for her wisdom; Uppalavaṇṇā, celebrated for her meditative attainments; and Paṭācārā, whose life story reflects both suffering and awakening, exemplify the transformative power of Buddhist practice. These women were not merely followers but respected teachers who contributed to the transmission of the Dhamma.

The *Therīgāthā*, a collection of verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns, provides invaluable insight into women's lived experiences within the Buddhist tradition. These verses articulate themes of suffering, social oppression, renunciation, and ultimate liberation, offering a rare female perspective in ancient religious literature. The *Therīgāthā* stands as powerful evidence that Buddhism enabled women to articulate their spiritual journeys in their own voices, challenging the silence imposed by patriarchal norms. Importantly, Buddhism did not define women's spiritual worth in terms of marital status or domestic roles. Unlike Brahmanical ideology, which tied women's virtue to obedience and chastity, Buddhism evaluated individuals based on ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom. This ethical

reorientation allowed women to transcend socially imposed identities and pursue liberation as autonomous individuals.

However, it is also necessary to adopt a critical perspective. While Buddhism challenged gender hierarchy at the doctrinal level, it did not entirely dismantle patriarchal structures. The *Garudhammas*, special rules imposed on nuns, institutionalized a degree of subordination within the monastic order. Nevertheless, even with these limitations, Buddhism represented a significant departure from the rigid gender norms of Brahmanical society and provided women with unprecedented opportunities for spiritual growth and social recognition.

Concept of Liberation: From *Mokṣa* to *Nirvāṇa*

The contrast between Brahmanical and Buddhist conceptions of liberation is central to understanding women's emancipation in ancient India. In Brahmanical traditions, *mokṣa* was often conceptualized within a framework that privileged ritual purity, ascetic renunciation, and scriptural knowledge—domains largely controlled by men. Although philosophical doctrines such as Advaita Vedānta articulated universal metaphysical principles, social practice frequently limited women's access to the means of liberation. For women, liberation in Brahmanical society was commonly reinterpreted as indirect and derivative. The ideal woman attained spiritual merit through service to her husband and family, reinforcing the belief that domestic duty was her primary religious obligation. Independent renunciation or philosophical inquiry by women was often viewed with suspicion or disapproval. This gendered interpretation of liberation effectively constrained women's spiritual aspirations.

Buddhism fundamentally redefined liberation as *nirvāṇa*, an inner transformation achieved through the eradication of ignorance, craving, and suffering. Unlike *mokṣa*, which was often associated with metaphysical speculation and ritual practice, *nirvāṇa* was presented as a practical and experiential goal accessible through ethical living (*śīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). This tripartite path did not presuppose gender, caste, or social status, making liberation theoretically universal. By emphasizing impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anattā*), and suffering (*duḥkha*), Buddhism dismantled essentialist notions of identity, including gender identity. If the self itself is a contingent and impermanent construct, then biological sex cannot serve as a basis for spiritual hierarchy. This philosophical insight had radical implications for women's emancipation, as it undermined the ideological foundations of patriarchy.

Furthermore, Buddhist ethics emphasized compassion, non-violence, and mindfulness, fostering a moral vision that valued inner transformation over social conformity. Women were encouraged to cultivate awareness and wisdom rather than merely fulfill prescribed social roles. In this sense, Buddhism offered not only institutional opportunities but also a transformative ethical framework that enabled women to reconceptualize their identities and aspirations. The Buddhist recognition of women's capacity for enlightenment stands as one of its most enduring contributions to Indian thought. While social equality remained imperfect, the philosophical affirmation of spiritual equality challenged entrenched norms and laid the groundwork for later discussions on gender justice and religious reform.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of women's status in ancient India mirrors the broader transformations in religious ideology, social organization, and ethical thought. Early Vedic society, though not entirely free from patriarchy, offered women a relatively dignified position marked by access to education, participation in ritual life, and recognition of intellectual and spiritual potential. Women such as Gārgī and Maitreyī symbolize this early inclusivity, where philosophical inquiry and spiritual aspiration were not exclusively male domains. Marriage during this phase was conceived as a partnership, and women played an integral role in sustaining religious and social life.

However, this relative openness gradually diminished during the later Vedic and post-Vedic periods with the consolidation of Brahmanical orthodoxy. The codification of social norms through texts like the *Dharmasūtras* and *Manusmṛti* institutionalized gender hierarchy and reinforced women's subordination. Education, ritual authority, property rights, and independent spiritual pursuit were increasingly denied to women, confining them to domestic roles and lifelong dependence on male guardians. Liberation for women was reinterpreted narrowly, emphasizing devotion to husband and family rather than personal spiritual realization. These developments marked a significant contraction of women's autonomy and agency.

Against this backdrop, Buddhism emerged as a powerful reformative movement that fundamentally challenged prevailing structures of inequality. By rejecting caste privilege, ritual exclusivism, and gender-based spiritual discrimination, Buddhism articulated a universal ethical vision grounded in compassion, rational inquiry, and moral discipline. The establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* and the acknowledgment of women's capacity to

attain *nirvāṇa* represented a radical departure from Brahmanical norms. Texts such as the *Therīgāthā* preserve women's voices expressing suffering, resistance, awakening, and liberation, providing rare testimony to female spiritual experience in ancient India. Although Buddhism did not completely eliminate patriarchal constraints in practice, its philosophical redefinition of liberation as an inner transformation accessible to all laid the foundation for a more inclusive understanding of spiritual freedom. By dismantling the notion that gender determines spiritual worth, Buddhism contributed significantly to the discourse on women's emancipation. The legacy of this reform continues to resonate in modern discussions on gender justice, spirituality, and social emancipation within South Asian thought, making Buddhism a crucial reference point in the historical evolution of women's status in India.

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