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Re-evaluating the status and roles of Courtesan in Buddhist Literature with special reference to Jatakas in Early India

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Abstract

Women have gained a new arena of visibility as a topic of historical discussion in recent times. The exercise of rewriting the past has been confined to invisibilising women; their presence has been registered only negatively, mainly through an extensive silence. However, here, an attempt will be made to re-evaluate the status and roles of the Courtesan with special reference to the Jataka. Courtesans in early Indian Buddhist literature were wealthy, strong and independent, often acting as key patrons of the faith. They held a high status for being cultured, educated artists who were outside domestic constraints, thereby challenging traditional gender roles. While often depicted as tempting, their conversion signifies the triumph of Buddhist teaching over worldly desire. In early Buddhist literature, courtesans played an important role. Many courtesans were rich enough to give groves, food, houses, and wealth to Buddhist monks and even to the Buddha. However, in this article, an attempt will be made to re-evaluate and rethink the position of courtesans, the reality of society, and their place within the collective control of man.

Keywords: Courtesan, Independence, Stereotype, Passive, Prestige, Control

Introduction:

Vedic literature provides some source material for reconstructing India's social history. Extracting information from this literature requires significant effort and explanation and lacks widespread acceptance. However, Buddhist literature, though wordy and repetitive, yields important insights into the society of ancient India. The picture that they portray of the urban society, of the rising cities, human beings of all castes and occupations, merchants, storekeepers, rulers, and their officials is both original and convincing. In Buddhist literary sources, women get full attention. Here, we find a courtesan. Traditionally, one could opt out of the stereotyped role of woman as wife and mother only by becoming a courtesan. In Buddhist literature, she appears to be a woman who also suffers from social condemnation, but in other ways. Her status was better than that of the wife in some cases. She had a relatively high level of independence, and, as she had her own remuneration, she possessed a confidence that the common woman in the house did not. So, an attempt will be made here to re-evaluate the role and status of Courtesans in early India in Buddhist literature, with special reference to the Jataka.

Courtesan in Buddhist literature:

Buddhist literature includes an extensive collection of sacred texts that originate in the teachings of Gautam Buddha. Here we find the Tripitaka (Three Baskets): the foundational Pali texts, including the Vinaya Pitaka (describes discourses), the Sutta Pitaka (describes monastic rules), and the Abhidhamma Pitaka (doctrinal philosophy). There are also important Sanskrit texts that emphasize the Bodhisattva path, such as the Prajnaparamita Sutra and the Lalitavistara (Life of Gautam Buddha). There is also some narrative and historical literature, such as the Jatakas, the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa. Actually, Buddhist literature covers a vast range of textual traditions, scriptures, many commentaries, and other literary and poetic texts. Buddhist literature is written in Pali and Sanskrit. It is important to understand that early canonical texts, for example, the Tripitaka, were written in Pali. Sanskrit is used for later texts, especially in the case of the Mahayana textual tradition. Actually, Buddhism spread widely across Asia, so Buddhist literature was translated into various regional languages; as a result, the teachings of the Buddha reached diverse cultures. We also find a vast collection of later Buddhist texts. Another important text was Therigatha. It is a compilation of poetry which was written by monks and Bhikkhunis. The name of this text comes from one of the purest forms of Buddhism, which is called Theravada.

Buddhist texts uniquely portray courtesans. The courtesan could own property. In certain situations, she did not allow herself to be browbeaten by the men around her. Ambapali, the famous courtesan of Buddhist literature, declined to give up her invitation to a meal for the Buddha in favour of the Lichhavi princes who wished to edge her out and host the Buddha themselves. However, the courtesan's freedom was only partial, as she was constrained by the socially conditioned role for women. If women are not wives and mothers, they must be mistresses. If we look at the situations in which the courtesan was placed, this is strikingly evident: she remained subject to male control and dominance. How did a woman become a courtesan? Not by choice, at least in the case of Ambapali. Ambapali was the most beautiful girl in Vesali. According to the literature, Vesali had a custom whereby the most beautiful girl in the city could not marry. Instead, she was installed as a courtesan so that everyone could have free access to her. Another version in the texts says that the princes of Vesali quarrelled among themselves about who should marry her, and since they could not agree, they set her up as a courtesan instead. Apparently, when men cannot agree among themselves about who should have a woman, they agree to share her by installing her as a courtesan.

A courtesan was seen as someone who raised the "prestige" of a city. The citizens of Rajagaha concluded that Vesali was a flourishing city because of Ambapali's presence, so they decided to replicate those conditions in Rajagaha. The citizens of Rajagaha then decided to install Salavati as the courtesan of Rajagaha. Salavati's narrative clearly shows that the courtesan was under continuous pressure to fit into a stereotyped role, so she could not have a child. When Salavati became pregnant, she said, "Men do not like a pregnant woman," and went into hiding. After she delivered her child, she abandoned it so that she could successfully return to her livelihood.

Sometimes the courtesan substituted for the housewife, as we have described earlier. However, most striking is the example of a courtesan who wished to join the sangha. She had to travel to be ordained, but she could not publicly renounce her status as a courtesan,

for fear of the men who would waylay her to prevent her from becoming a bhikkhuni. The courtesan's freedom then was only relative, and she continued to be trapped by the sex role imposed on her by society. She may have escaped drudgery and physical slavery, but she had not escaped from the collective control of men.

Representation of the Courtesan in Jatakas:

The Jataka stories are an integral part of Buddhist literary sources. They describe Buddha's previous births and depict them in both human and animal forms. Each story offers a moral lesson, emphasizing compassion, empathy, and a moral code of conduct. In these Jataka stories, we find that the Buddha possesses all these qualities and always guides others to understand the real meaning of our lives. These stories are preserved in various forms of art, such as paintings, and in ancient sites like Sanchi and Ajanta. Through these paintings, we can understand their cultural impact. Actually, Buddhist literature has a deep impact, has vastly shaped the Indian textual tradition, and always offers an extensive collection of texts. It always tries to inspire other literary sources globally. Actually, the Sutta Pitaka is a summary of the conversations of Gautam Buddha with his disciples. It can be considered one of the three Pitakas. The Sutta Pitaka has five parts: Digha Nikaya, Majjhima Nikaya, Samyutta Nikaya, Anguttara Nikaya, and the Khuddaka Nikaya. The Jataka stories are part of this Nikaya. The Sutta Pitaka was compiled at the first Buddhist council, held in 483 B.C.E. The Digha Nikaya is a long collection,

It contains a significant number of historical Suttas. We find from the Samannaphala Sutta that at that time, people were experts in various crafts and professions. Actually, various occupational groups were described, such as potters, basket makers, weavers, etc. Here we find the mention of Bimbisara, who was murdered by his son Ajatasatru. Another important Sutta mentions the king Prasenjit of Kosala, who was a contemporary of Buddha. From this Sutta, we understand the social position of the four Varnas. Another important Sutta is the Mahaparinirvan Sutta, which gives us important information that Ajatasatru made a plan to eradicate his rivals, who were from Vajji. Here we find another mention of Ajatasatru, who was advised by the Buddha that till the time when Vajjians were united, nothing can be done with them. But after this, Ajatasatru became very cautious and created dissensions among them; as a result, Vesali was annexed by the Magadha kingdom. Majjhima Nikaya comprises the middle length of the collection. It is a collection of information about the life of Buddha. Ariyapariyesana Sutta is a very important sutta that deals with different parts of his life and activities done by him. From this work, we find that in the course of his visit, he stayed at various places like Rajagaha, Campa, Nalanda, Mithila, Kusinara, Kosambi, Vesali, and other places. Here we find the historical references of the Vijjis and Mallas, the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, and the Magadhas. It also mentions that Vajjis and Mallas were establishing sanghas and ganas, which were governed by responsible corporations. Here we also find that the political relations between the Licchavis of Vesali and king Prasenjit of Kosala were cordial. Samyukta Nikaya comprises the connected discourses of Buddha. Here we find the mention of King Prasenjit of Kosala, whose capital was Shravasti. Here we find Kosala-Samyutta, which is mainly devoted to the king. It also mentioned the war that was fought between the king of Magadha, Ajatasatru, and Prasenjit. Finally, Prasenjit married his daughter Vajira to Ajatasatru and granted him the town of Kashi.

Anguttara Nikaya comprises various numerical discourses. Khuddaka Nikaya comprises a small collection. The Khuddaka Nikaya also includes the Dhammapada, a very popular collection of the Buddha's teachings on how we should live our daily lives, with great meaning. Actually, Buddha gave the monks meaningful advice to teach in different languages, so that common people could understand the way of life. There is another Buddhist text named Milindapanha. This is a compilation of questions of King Milinda. This book was written by Buddhist monk Nagasena. Menander, an Indo-Greek king, and this book is named after him. It is written in prose form. It is a kind of critical text that critiques the problems and controversial points of Buddhism. It is written in Pali. Actually, it is a conversation between the Indo-Greek king Menander and the Buddhist monk Nagasena. So, we have a major storehouse of Buddhist Literature. This literature helps us understand ancient society and economy effectively.

The Jatakas are a collection of stories about the Buddha's former births. Here we find 550 stories. This is a very important text to understand ancient Indian history. Here, we can see a mention of a courtesan. Many Jataka stories mention courtesans in society. Prostitution shows an economy where surplus was available. It also shows the rise of big or joint families and strict rules on women. Here we find a class of educated and cultured courtesans who were very prosperous economically. Jataka stories consistently show that courtesans were very wealthy. They owned so many things, like a large number of servants, jewellery, dresses and more. They have also made relationships with important men who were in a relationship with the ruler. In a Jataka story, we find that a courtesan was removed from her position, but after some time, by the king's order, she regained her position. Here we see that their presence was controlled by the state. In another story, we find that a ganika freely speaks to the village head and relays the words to the ruler; we say that they can put their words on important matters of the state. Actually, the description of courtesans differs significantly from that of other categories of women mentioned in the Jatakas, particularly in their association with wealth and participation in economic sectors. There are so many categories of courtesans in the Jatakas. Here, we find the presence of ganika, Nagarsobhani, and Shilpakaraka through the stories. Courtesans could charge for their status. In her home, she became the head, and her decision was final. This story is present in the Atthana- Jataka. Here we find that a merchant's son always gave a courtesan in Benares sufficient money. He was her visitor. One day, he visited her house without money. Though he made so many requests, the courtesan did not permit him. She said that, as a ganika, she could not favour anyone when it came to matters of money. She ordered her maids to turn the man away from her home. Here, we find a contradictory situation: we saw the powerful presence of a courtesan, yet she was never allowed to form a responsible relationship. We find that in the Kanavera Jatak and Sulasa Jataka, the ganika lost her money and fell in love with a man. Interestingly, the presence of courtesans is always found in contradiction to other categories of women in society. Jatakas show that the courtesan's presence clearly indicates that society consistently discouraged her from forming a happy, prosperous family life. The description of the courtesan shows her independent presence. Despite that, the discouragement of having a relationship with a ganika opens before the audience a matter of interrogation.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, silence always has a voice we should hear. Silence does not mean an absence. We should learn to listen to such silences. Attempts could be made by understanding the description of suppression. This kind of silence may be a plan devised by society. In the Jatakas, descriptions of women have always been initiated by men. So, Ganika's passive presence and deep silence should be understood. The Jataka stories show us various features of daily life. We see various events of daily life, and the stories of courtesan's show that they follow the teachings of the Buddha; beyond that, they show us the daily matters and confrontations of human beings. Prostitution originated a long time ago in the world scenario. So, the presence of a prostitute should be considered as a subject matter of history. In Buddhist literature, we find courtesans playing various roles, including artists skilled in various arts. Actually, she possessed various abilities, such as singing and writing poetry. After studying Buddhist literature, we can say that sometimes courtesans are seen as assets to a state, as they have sometimes served as mediators, and this kind of story we find in the Jataka. Another quality that underscored the importance of their role and status was their knowledge. In Jataka stories, we find courtesans who possess good knowledge about various languages. But we should take the initiative to understand the silences of these categories of women, who play diversified roles without receiving sufficient appreciation. We should also understand their silences, as silence does not mean a complete absence. If we want to analyse the soul of any civilisation, acknowledge its high quality, and realise its constraints, we must study the history of women and understand their position in it. Human nature many times wants to try to control and suppress these kinds of embedded voices of women.

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