



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper tries to delineate the similarities and differences between the three religious institutions Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism. The focus would be to see similarities in areas of monastic life, grant of entry to monastic life, and aspects of reality versus life portrayed according to the prescriptive texts. Another question that would be discussed is the idea of mokṣ a, nibbāna and kevalya. Was the path to liberation/salvation accessible to all humans or was it gendered?

Keywords: religion, institutions, gender, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, salvation, renounce, identity, agency



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Introduction

This paper focuses on gendering of religion and one finds that the perception on human resource and development is not the same when one considers the prescriptive texts and the inscriptional evidence. The paper has been divided into three segments: in the first segment I will examine the similarities/differences between three faiths; in the second I look at the question of salvation for men and women and in the last segment I try to bring out the difference between the prescriptive and inscriptional evidence.

The notion of gender identity is related to social, cultural and religious ideas. The study of gender is a study about challenges to social, economic, and religious structures. What seems to be important is that the concepts and models of gender are not static and must be understood in reference to their particular economic, social, and historical contexts.

I would try to analyze the space assigned to men and women in the three religious' faiths, viz, Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism. On the surface one finds that Buddhism and Jainism attributed space required for women to enable them to acquire spiritual merit in their own right as both these religious faiths stressed on the concept of individualism. Lay people could also make spiritual progress by earning merit through making donations.

Let us first examine Brahmanism where it is known that the *āśrama* system existed. The traditional Brahmanical society upheld the fourfold system of *āśrama* with *sanyāsa* being the last *āśrama* but the it never approved of the *sanyāsa āśrama* for women instead making marriage mandatory for all women. One can thus derive that the traditional Brahmanical society only permitted women to enter the *grhastha āśrama*. Moreover, Brahmanism has the unique feature of having no *sanyāsa*/monastic order for women. Thus, within the Brahmanical institution even the idea of *sanyāsa* was denied to women (Deo 1954:505). It was only after the death of her husband, a woman of the Brahman caste (also applicable for kshatriya caste) was expected to lead the life of a nun by observing chastity, shaving her head, and sleeping on the floor, yet she was not free to leave the household and join a mendicant order composed of other women like her. According to Jamison (2006:204-5) a widow was one whose role in life was over by definition, therefore in widowhood something resembling individual and personal religious practice seems to be allowed to women, rather by accident. However, pure the life of a widow, the law books promise her nothing more than a rebirth in heaven, implying that is the highest goal a woman can reach (Jaini 2000:189). Thus, they were unable to follow a path for salvation/*mokṣ a*.

Unlike Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism allowed a path of salvation to women as they were allowed to renounce the world and join the monastic order. In both Buddhism and Jainism, it is said that the reason for women to take to the monastic order was due to some traumatic aspect in life unlike men who renounced for salvation. It may also reflect the state of mind that salvation could be achieved only by renouncing (Chakravarti 1981: 9) which was not an easy option open for women. For men a desire to escape from the bonds of the world was recognized as a major reason for transition to homelessness but for women the same did not hold good. For women homelessness was often envisaged as being triggered off by traumatic experiences, personal tragedies, which were ideally universalized and then transcended (Chakravarti 2002: 83-6). Despite these hurdles one finds that women had succeeded in breaking the barriers set around them by becoming *bhikkhunīs* and also left a lasting record of women's self-expression and of things as it appeared to them (Chakravarti 1981: 1).

Another aspect that needs to be highlighted is that even though women were allowed to enter the *sangha* yet one finds differential treatment within the *sangha*. Eight rules were laid down by the Buddha himself where an experienced nun also had to bow before a male novice. Paul (1985: 79-80) highlights the hierarchy that existed within the *sangha* for the community of

nuns and their subsequent deprivation of power to define their religious obligations along that they themselves had established (Paul: 1985: 106). In Jainism the mendicant law stipulates “a nun ordained for a hundred years must pay homage to a young monk, even if that monk had been ordained that very day” (Jaini 1991: 20, Deo 1954: 467).

A similar kind of law finds echo even in Buddhism where “an almswoman, even if of a hundred years standing, shall make salutation to, shall rise up in the presence of, shall bow down before, and shall perform all proper duties towards an almsman, if only just ‘initiated’ (Horner 1990: 119). The monks were always given superiority over the nuns. A nun was supposed to pay respect to a monk and her duty was chiefly to instruct the laity and to present them a picture of pure life (Deo 1954: 496-500). Despite the fact that the nuns were not treated at par with the monks yet one finds that they were well-versed in the *Angas*, and there are several instances of Buddhist nuns also who were masters of the *Tripitakas* (Deo 1954:504).

Gutschow (2004: 6-7) believes that even though women were accepted into the monastic order by the Buddha, yet they faced obstacles and constraints from the start. Buddhist monasticism was structured around the same division of labor and dualities of sex that lay communities faced and it was their subordination within the monastic order which prevented them from reaching the highest status or attainments. Monks were the preferred ritual officiants because they had greater purity and tantric prowess than nuns. The practices of merit making produced a circular logic, in which wealth and merit remain firmly associated with monks rather than nuns, an idea enunciated by Falk (1980: 209-210) as well. Both historical and current patterns of patronage systematically favor monks over nuns in the Buddhist economy of merit. The preference for making donations to monks determine past endowment as well as present resources for ritual training and status (Gutschow 2004: 83).

Thus, a similar strain of thoughts and actions seem to bind the different religious faiths. On one hand where Brahmanism does not allow women entry into the monastic order one finds Buddhism and Jainism despite allowing men and women entry into *sangha* do not award them the same space.

II

When one deals with the question of salvation the first thought that occurs is that salvation is neither male nor female yet one learns that it was the monks who had the authority of passing down the oral tradition of the scriptures in Buddhism and Jainism. There is a similarity that can be found with Brahmanism as with in this tradition the authority of the scriptures and the

passing down of the scriptures is with the monks. This also explains why monks were able to obtain more patronage than nuns.

Gross (1991: 113) believes that gender is irrelevant in Buddhism because liberation involves mental and spiritual composure and insight—traits not particularly linked with male anatomy. She further adds that ‘dharma is neither male or female’ (ibid: 115) as Buddhist doctrines provide no basis for gender privilege. According to Diana (1985: 106) one does not discover gender bias prevailing in the ‘state of spiritual perfection’. The state of spiritual perfection is one wherein the social and sexual distinctions are removed through the universal practice of compassion for all beings. Yet Gross does not deny that the eight rules which were formally laid down subordinated nuns to monks, but says, that it did not undermine the essentially liberating potential of the nun’s lifestyle as the basic institution of nunship or the *bhikkhunis-sangha* (added by me) was intensely liberating (Gross 1991: 115).

According to Jaini (1991a: 3-7) *mokṣa* was based not on biological condition but on spiritual development alone. Women embodied the three jewels therefore there was no deficiency with regard to them attaining *mokṣa* according to the Śvetāmbaras. Thus, the Śvetāmbaras seemed to be more liberal as they held the view that a woman could attain *mokṣa* unlike the Digambaras (Jaini 2000:497). According to the Digambaras, the holy life of a *sādhavī* fell a great deal short of complete renunciation and thus was ultimately comparable to the religious life of a lay person. Therefore, like the householder, she might be admitted to heaven, but she would be unable to attain *mokṣa* in her present life. Unlike the Śvetāmbaras sect in the Digambara sect the position of the *sādhavī* was inferior to that of the monk. Secondly, a woman may rise no higher than the status of an advanced laywoman (*uttam-śrāvikā*), even though she was given the title of nun (*sādhavī*) out of courtesy. Her position technically and in practice, was inferior to that of a monk, though superior to that of lay people (ibid.:19). Thus, Śvetāmbara nuns enjoyed a better status than their Digambara counterpart. As a result, it is common to encounter Śvetāmbara nuns who both preached to the lay and lived as mendicants since, according to the rule, "a nun ordained for a hundred years must do tribute to a young monk, even if he was consecrated that very day itself" (Jaini 1991:20, Deo1954: 467).

It is known that the Jain belief was divided into two sects, the Śvetāmbara and the Digambara. Within Śvetāmbara sect the *gacchas* (endnote2) were organized as spiritual lineages, descent being traced from guru to disciple and authority was exercised by its most senior member. When a renouncer acquired disciples of her own, she could travel with them as a separate group and only then would she live more or less permanently apart from her guru. Attracting disciples

raises the status of a renouncer, and gives her relative autonomy within the *gaccha* structure (ibid:53). The female teaching lineages constituted virtually the sole institutional base upon which Jain religious women's central social and religious definition rested (Orr 1998: 198-9). While there were Śvetāmbara nuns of some *charisma* whose preaching attracted large audiences, there is nonetheless a general feeling among the laity that interaction with a monk was more meritorious than with a nun. Observation suggests that the life of nuns was for practical reasons often more difficult than that of monks (Dundas 1992:52). Therefore, one can state that it was their role as independent teachers which brought them into prominence and by which they acquired their status and identity.

Secondly, it has always been held in the Śvetāmbara tradition that female renouncers have always outnumbered the men and are not marginalized nor systematically redefined as men (Dundas 1992: 56). [The reason for the greater numerical strength for women had social reasons. In Jainism men are more heavily discouraged than women from entering an order. Dowry among Jains is extremely high, and young women from impoverished Jain families chose renunciation in a situation where finding a respectable husband was proving difficult. By contrast, the loss of a son is a financial, organizational, and emotional calamity for the typical Jain family]. Thus, in theory there is still a categorical subordination of all female to male renouncers.

The Jain laywomen were not only predominant in almost all domains of religious practice, but were also the principal agents of its transmission and reproduction. Whether as renouncers or among laity woman were in Babb's term 'soteriological agents'. But only for renouncers can this agency be exercised with any degree of autonomy from men. Among the Śvetāmbara Jains the female ascetics were considered to be spiritually equal to the monks, but in terms of temporal power they were subordinate. For example, the head of the nuns in a *gaccha* (the *pravartani*) must submit the travelling arrangements which she made for the nuns to the *ācarya*, the head monk of the *gaccha*. Moreover, it was the *ācarya* who performed the final initiation ceremony for the nuns rather than the *pravartani*. In terms of gender differentiation, the basis seems to be nearly the same for both the institution. In Buddhism also the monks were given the task of ordination for nuns and monks while the nuns were denied this privilege in totality.

III

The ideology that surrounds the idea of gift-giving is the same for all three faiths, the idea of merit-making was the same amidst the donors. The main objective of *dāna* seemed to be to

gain merit either for oneself or for some near and dear ones. Giving away possessions in order to earn merit is a perfect rationale and it has the motivational basis for giving (Brekke 1998:288).

Dāna was a vital institution whereby a layman gave alms to an ascetic and through that action gained merit. In Jainism it is confirmed that the numerical strength of female ascetics and laywomen had always outnumbered that of male ascetics and laymen (Dundas 1992: 49). Gender had no relevance for religious life, just as it had none for liberated souls. Secondly, the scriptures say nothing against the possibility of female enlightenment (ibid: 51). The *charisma* of the nuns had also been noted as some joined the monastic order because they were spiritually drawn by a prominent female teacher, while some were spiritually drawn to a particular nun (ibid:132).

Donating was important for both, Jain and Buddhist religious institution and was practiced on a large scale by men, due to male control of economic resources within the family but the evidence from Mathura does not corroborate this. The Jain women seem to be far more involved in overt religious activities and practices than men folk (Reynell 1991: 54) which is well demonstrated from the inscriptions from Mathura. One finds laywomen gifted alms from their earnings at Mathura, which shows that laywomen, were as important as laymen in taking heed of their welfare and by keeping the religion going by the gift of alms, thereby earning spiritual merit for themselves.

In theory there is still a categorical subordination of all female to male renouncers. On the practical level a difference is seen as nuns are seen organizing and running a parallel *gaccha* separately and independently. In these *gacchas* the pupillary descent was traced through the leading nuns, of which there are a few instances from Mathura. The evidence from Mathura helps one realize that the order of nuns seemed to have been well-organized and well supported as they played their part in including the laywomen to dedicate images and votive tablets. Most of the donations were made because on the request of the *āryikā* which attested to their influence on the laity and also gave us evidence of their numerical strength.

Where women were concerned one finds a similar line of thought running through the three different institutions/religions which prevailed during this time. Jamison (2006) points out that women had the capacity and desire to act independently. It was this 'official recognition that women are capable of acting and thinking on their own cannot have been entirely comfortable or welcome' (ibid:192-200). Thus, one can realize that a number of changes were taking place

where women were emerging as individual women with their own agency despite the different rules being laid down by the three religious institutions.

Moreover, giving was the most strategic form of merit making, because it provided public prestige or status along with visibility and even an identity to the donor who could be remembered for posterity. One finds that *dāna*

shifts away from the valuation of traditional duty and obligation of Vedic religion to a greater celebration of individual choice in Buddhism and Jainism. It is in this scenario where one finds women portraying themselves as individual entities.

In the *śrauta*/vedic setting the ritual wife was seen as guardian and manager of the household property. It was essential for her to give her consent to ritual offerings as well. Thus, the housemistress was the representative of the hospitality of the domestic fire. In contrast to the Vedic paradigm, there was a shift in the Buddhist relationship from household obligations toward the renunciant to individual patronage. Instead of obligatory hospitality now there was voluntary patronage. Thus, one finds a new autonomy for women in matters of *dāna*, which reflected a wider involvement of women in economic matters and it had its immediate roots in the gift of food by the *grihpatni* of the Vedic household to the renunciant petitioners who appears at the door of the household. Hence, one finds women taking the initiative and they appear as individual agents in the process of making donations, which were essential for the monastic order. Their contribution as individual donors needed to be recognized which was essential for the upkeep of the monastic order. Secondly, they needed to be recognized as individuals and not as an extension of the family. Thus, matronage needs to be differentiated from patronage.

The *permission* of the woman who was the ‘mistress of the household goods’ was needed to give away gifts (household goods) to a guest required for ritual efficacy can be seen in the Vedic religion. In Buddhism and Jainism, one finds women developing more autonomous, individualized roles in terms of religious giving in which their own personal decisions and commitments were at stake. Thus, what seems to be emerging is that in this new changed scenario women were seen as individuals with freedom and selectivity to choose whether ‘to give or not’. One can also say that in this process of *dāna* gender did not matter. In practice, it meant that women’s identity was not bound by an accident of birth but open to redefinition through individual actions (ibid: 132-138) and the woman donor could gain merit through *dāna* for herself.

What one does realize is that the prescriptive texts give a model formulation which should be followed but according to the evidence of inscriptions one realizes this was what was expected from the society but did not exist in accordance. The evidence found from Mathura for instance one finds women were seen as an important agency for biological and social reproduction especially in Jain philosophy. Women were also prominent donors at Mathura as most statues of Bodhisattvas and Tirthankaras were donated by women. Similar kind of evidence has been found from Sanchi and Bharhut (discussed in another article). An aspect that cannot be overlooked is that men definitely had control of more resources than women which can be witnessed from the glaring differences in the gifts given. A parallel of the present-day monastic order which finds an echo of the past is from Zangskar. It was very difficult over here for nuns to meet their daily needs as monks were preferred as ritual officials. It's obvious in the tussle for resources between the monks and nuns it was the monks who were preferred in getting resources by the common people. What I wish to highlight by these two examples is that there is evidence of regional differences. Secondly, any structure should not be seen in a monolithic manner as there are divergences as changes within society and the study of gender tries to highlight it. According to the Dharmasutra women were not allowed to alienate property but in reality, one finds that women were making donation even if they were not big gifts like pillars etc. which were gifted by men. Thus, what is important for us is that women alienated property in whatever form. This highlights the importance that gift giving was important for both men and women.

Notes:

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1. The four *āśrama* are *brahmacharya*, *grhastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*.
2. groups which form the smallest division within a sect. it has its own religious head and religious buildings. It traces the pupillary descent.
3. Bodhisattva is one who postpones his nirvana to try and help many more to achieve salvation
4. The Jaina philosophers.

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