



FEMALE EDUCATION IN ANCIENT BUDDHIST INDIA

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Education in Ancient India

A singular feature of ancient Indian or Hindu civilisation is that it has been moulded and shaped in the course of its history more by religious than by political or economic influences. The fundamental principles of social, political, and economic life were welded into a comprehensive theory which is called Religion in Hindu thought. The total configuration of ideals, practices, and conduct is called Dharma (Religion, Virtue or Duty) in this ancient tradition. From the very beginning, the inhabitants came, under the influence of their religious ideas, to conceive of their country as less a geographical and material than a cultural or a spiritual possession, and to identify, broadly speaking, the country with culture. Nowhere is this distinctive tendency of Hindu thought more manifest than in the sphere of learning and education.

Learning in India through the ages had been prized and pursued not for its own sake, but for the sake, and as a part, of religion. It was sought as the means of self-realisation, as the means to the highest end of life, viz., Mukti or Emancipation.¹ Whatever the discipline of learning, whether it was chemistry, medicine, surgery, the art of painting, sculpture, and dramatics, or principles of literary criticism or even dancing, everything was reduced to a systematic whole for passing it on to the future generations. University education on almost modern lines existed in India as early as 800 BC or even earlier. The learning or culture of ancient India was chiefly the product of her hermitages in the solitude of the forests. Indian civilisation in its early stage had been mainly a rural, sylvan, and not an urban, civilisation. It is these sylvan schools and hermitages that have built up the thought and civilisation of India. As Annie Besant says: "The very word 'aranyaka' affixed to some of the ancient treatises indicates that they originated in, or was intended to be studied in, forests.

Education of Vedic Women

In Vedic times, there was no discrimination of sex in the field of studies. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad prescribes a specific mantra to beget a learned daughter,³ In the same Upanishad, we find Gargi and Maitreyi distinguishing them in Brahmaidya, the highest knowledge. In the Grihyasutras we find several mantras to be recited by women and the commentary on GobhUagrihyasutras, states that the female-folk should be taught, for without such studies they cannot perform agnihotra sacrifice.⁴

The history of most of the known civilisations shows that the further back we go into antiquity, the more unsatisfactory is found to be the general position of women. Hindu civilisation is unique in this respect, for here we find a surprising exception to the general rule. The further back we go, the more satisfactory is found



to be the position of women in more spheres than one; and the field of education is most noteworthy among them.⁵ There is ample and convincing evidence to show that women were regarded as perfectly eligible for the privilege of studying the Vedic literature and performing the sacrifices enjoined in it down to about 200 BC. This need not surprise us, for some of the hymns of the Rig Veda are the compositions of poetesses.⁶ Women were then admitted to fulfil religious rites and consequently to complete educational facilities. Women-sages were called Rishikas and Brahmavaddins. The Rig Veda knows of Rishikas like ROmasa, LCpamudra, Apala, Kadru, Visvavara, Ghosha, Juhu, Vagambhrini, PaulOmi, Jarita, Sraddha-Kamayani, Orvasi etc.

The Brahmavadins were the products of the educational discipline of brahmacharya for which women also were eligible. Rig Veda refers to young maidens completing their education as brahmachSrtnfe and then gaining husbands, A very catholic passage in Yajurveda enjoins the imparting of Vedic knowledge to all classes, Brahmins and Rayanyas, Sudras, AnBryas, and Charanas (Vaisyas) and women.⁷ The Atharvana Veda expressly refers to maidens undergoing the Brahmacharya discipline⁸ and even the Sutra works of the 5th century BC supply interesting details. Even Manu includes Upanayana among the sankSrQs obligatory for girls. Music and dancing were also taught to them. Discussing about the education of Vedic women, eminent historian R. K. Mookerji has noted: "An important feature of this educational system should not be missed. The part taken in intellectual life by women like Gargi who could address a Congress of philosophers on learned topics, or like Maitreyi, who had achieved the highest knowledge, that of Brahma, The Rig-Veda shows us some women as authors of hymns.,,"⁹

The trend of liberal female education set by the Vedic period, however, declined in the period that followed. The right of women for initiation to Vedic studies by way of upanayana samskSrS seems to have receded slowly, though we find mention of women in the RSmSyana and MahSbharata. By the time of the smritis, their education came to be limited to domestic and vocational studies only, which enabled them to become good housewives. However, the study of the fine arts like dance, music, painting and practice of innumerable crafts continued. Vatsyayana lists sixty-four arts which were to be mastered by women that included planting rows of trees, flower and fruit plants and medicinal herbs, cooking, spinning, reading of books (pustaka-vSchanam), recitation of difficult sldkas (durvachakayOga), knowledge of dramas and stories (natakSkhySna darSanam), knowledge of languages of different countries (deSabhasha vijnSnam) and knowledge of science of physical exercise and development of body (vyayamikanam vidyanamjnanam).

It may be noted that all available material regarding education of women pertains to three classes viz., women of royalty or nobility, the courtesans and the nuns. Hence Vatsyayana can be taken as an important source for our knowledge about the accomplishments of women of the middle class. The courtesans occupied a special status in the society and cultivated various types of arts and crafts to distinguish themselves in their profession. At a very young age, they were carefully instructed in



the arts of dancing, acting, playing musical instruments, singing, painting, preparing perfumes and flowers, in reading, writing and expressing themselves with elegance and wit, even in outlines of grammar, logic and astrology, They were also taught to play various games with skill and dexterity, how to dress well and show themselves off.11

Against this backdrop of declining importance for female education, let us now survey the status of female education during ancient Buddhist India, the central theme of this article.

Buddhist Education and Effect of Buddhism

The history of the Buddhist system of education is practically that of the Buddhist Order or Sangha. Buddhist education and learning centred round monasteries as Vedic culture centred round the sacrifice, Buddhist education, as such, can be rightly regarded as a phase of the ancient Hindu system of education. Buddhism, itself, especially in its original and ancient form, as has been admitted on all hands, was rooted deeply in the pre-existing Hindu systems of thought and life. The Buddhist world did not offer any educational opportunities apart from, or independently of, its monasteries. All education, sacred as well as secular, was in the hands of the monks. They had the monopoly of learning and of the leisure to impart it. They were the only custodians and bearers of Buddhist culture.

Parallel with the Bhikshu-Sangha of Buddhism, there developed the Bhikshuni-Sangha or Order of Nuns. But, according to the tradition, the very scheme and philosophy of life proposed by Buddhism would only regard women as objects to be shunned by the religeux and hence the Buddha was reluctant to allow women to go forth into the homeless life. But the eventual permission accorded with considerable reluctance by the Buddha, under the pressure of his foster-mother, Mahapajapati, and his favourite disciple - Ananda, 12-gave an impetus to the spread of education and philosophy among the ladies of the aristocratic and commercial communities. Like BrahmanSdlns, several ladies in Buddhist families also used to lead a life of celibacy, with the aim of understanding and following the eternal truths of religion and philosophy. The Order of Nuns opened up avenues of culture and social service to the women of Buddhist India for which some of them became very distinguished. Besides producing some remarkable characters among the laity of the other sex, Buddhism produced numerous remarkable women within its own fold, who played a prominent part as leaders of thought in that religious reformation. The Order of Nuns was the training-ground of these women.

From Asokan times we find that a few of them even went outside India to countries like Ceylon and became famous there as teachers of the Holy Scriptures. Brief biographies of many ancient Indian women are found in Then GStHs (Psalms of the Nuns). These Gathas reveal the paeans of joy uttered by nuns who, by being ordained, received freedom. The best evidence of the freedom achieved by some Indian women because of the Buddha is this collection of paeans by the nuns - the Then GStHs. When so large a number of women were leading a life of celibacy, in



pursuit of religion and philosophy, it is but natural that the average level of intelligence and education among them must have been fairly high according to Altekar.¹³

The most distinguished amongst the then, according to the commentary called Manorathapurana of Buddhaghosha in Anguttara Nikaya, was Dhammadinna, whom Buddha regarded as one of his chief disciple for her merit. Her husband, resolving to renounce the world in the interests of his spiritual life, offered her as much treasure as she desired in taking her leave. She proudly rejected the offer and herself took to the religious life and in due time became fit to be a teacher of the Doctrine. The commentator then describes how the tables were turned when her husband sought spiritual wisdom from his wife who solved all difficult metaphysical questions with ease. Further information regarding the women leaders of the Buddhist Reformation is given in the commentary of Dharmapala on the TherTGatha.

Bhikshuni Kisa Gotami was known for her progress in virtue and philosophical learning which made the Buddha appoint her as the superintendent of the Convent at Jetavana. Some of the Thefts, when they advanced in spirituality, did not give themselves wholly to the subjective, meditative life in cloistered seclusion, but took an honourable share in social service and missionary work for their faith. The noted one among such women was Patachara, a bereaved mother, who was sought for solace by 500 other bereaved mothers. Some of them are mentioned as being successful speakers and preachers. There was Sukka, to hear who speak the people would flock out of the city and not feel tired of listening to her. It will thus be apparent from these examples that the Buddhist Convents opened out to the women opportunities for education and self-culture and varied spheres of social service in which they made themselves the equals of men, supplementing their work in the spread of their faith.¹⁴

Hiuen Tsang has observed that Rajyasri, the sister of Harshavardhana, was of great intelligence and distinguished for her knowledge of SammatTya school of Buddhism. She sat along with the king and seemed to appreciate the learned discourse of Hiuen Tsang on the Mahayana doctrine.¹⁵

This brief study shows that women of Buddhist faith had comparatively more freedom to pursue the path of knowledge because womanhood was no bar to salvation as per the Buddhist precepts.

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