

# The Religious and Seductive Role of Women in the Early Buddhist Society: Evidence from Art and Literature

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## Abstract

*This paper talks about the women's religious and seductive roles, how society welcomed them, and how their contribution shaped society. This study discovers why women left the life of comfort, leisure, and family to adopt the holy pathway of Sangha. We also explore the effects of Buddha's teaching on treating women and how women's role as nuns, prostitutes, and courtesans affects the specific era. However, the descriptive research method analyzes the pre-Buddhist and early Buddhist periods and the ancient and modern literary sources to understand women's religious, seductive, and political roles and positions. An attempt has been made using secondary data to identify Gandhāran Buddhist art to help us conclude and distinguish women's roles and status discussed in this research. Even though women's groups have undergone different progressive phases, each phase is better at recognizing women's rights and importance in society. However, we still trail men personally and professionally.*

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Gandhāra art, Legal, Political, Women, Religious, Seductress.

## Introduction

The role and status of women have been a subject of considerable intrigue from ancient times. In every society, women are integral to all aspects of life. In almost all aspects of human development, women have been part of society, including social, religious, and entertaining roles. This study examines women's stereotypical roles in the pre-Buddhist and early Buddhist periods and probes whether the position of women has improved or declined. This study also shed light on the women's involvement in religious, seductive, and political matters in the pre-Buddhist and early Buddhist periods of India and Pakistan. Women are portrayed in many spiritual and sensual practices that affect society's perspective and cause confusion. This article discusses women's status in the community and compares characters in ancient and modern texts. We will also examine how women were treated or viewed based on their role in society and the norms of the culture they were expected to follow.

## The Religious Role and Status of Women in the Pre-Buddhist and Early-Buddhist Period

The tradition of worship was started with the creation of the human race in the world. People of every community and era worshipped according to their faiths and beliefs and followed

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different worship methods, but these differences are not based on gender patterns. In every religion, worship is obligatory for all genders without any discrimination. Women are also forced to perform their religious rituals according to their reliance and trust; not a single religion can stop women from their right to worship and devotion. Similarly, in ancient India, females played a significant role in their husbands' company's religious ceremonies. There was no inequity on gender basis and diversity of class in spiritual matters. In the holy sacrifices, husband and wife equally participated; even the religious deed was incomplete without the woman's participation. Females were more advanced in this aspect of spiritual life than men mentioned in the Rig-Veda. Brahman literature also cited women's involvement in compulsory religious sacrifices. In the Upanishads' age, women enjoyed equal religious status with men in sacred performances (Indra & Pandit, 1955, p. 121-125). However, the spiritual quality of women passed through different phases throughout history. In some religions, they enjoy more prominence in religious ceremonies, but they are avoided at a high level in other places. However, women's position is represented differently in various religious texts. Brahmanas show women's inferiority by comparing them to Shudra, the dog and the crow. Conversely, the Grihya-Sutras<sup>6</sup> (ca.800-300 BCE) Women dominate family rituals during birth, confirmation, marriage, pregnancy, and death (Raman, 2009, p. 36-37).

Therefore, Gandhara art represents the accurate picture of this statement. We can see the domination of women in various episodes related to the birth of Buddha. Gandhara art abundantly portrayed women in the seizure of Queen Maya's dream, Birth of Bodhisattva Siddhartha, the Bath of Bodhisattva, and the Great Departure of Bodhisattva Siddhartha (fig 1, 2 & 3). Apart from this, women also faced ascetic restrictions in various religions due to their impurity. For example, the Brahman text indicates women's impurity during menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth; the bath counted as an interruption in an ascetic life of yogic meditation. An Ascetic's restrictions on women are mentioned in various religious texts like Upanishads (700-300 BCE), in the secondary Sanskrit text (s) like the epics, and in the heterodox texts, Buddhist and Jaina texts (Raman, 2009, p. 39). Similarly, in pre-Buddhist society, men performed religious ceremonies because women were regarded as unclean and impure due to various reasons.

The Aryans, Iranians, and the Vedic age also regarded women as untouchable during their monthly period. Hindu society still considers women impure and untouchable during their menstrual cycle (Altekar, 1938/1959, p. 194-207). Thus, until Buddhism's rise, women were excluded from social and religious activities that reflected women's lesser position. Though the natural process of the menstrual cycle and childbirth are the signs of reproduction and fertility, women were considered unclean, untouchable, and unworthy during these days, which is a sheer disrespect and insult to women. Similarly, most anti-feminist literature deprived women of their religious and spiritual life. The people of low profile, like Shudras, enslaved people, and women, were not allowed to read the Vedas. A woman cannot attain heaven through her devotion and merits; she can only achieve this stage through her husband's obedience. According to Manu, all women are sinful and prone to evil. Women should be reserved for domestic duties so they could not find time for immoral activities and mischief (Dixit, 2008, p. 137). Manu's code of law did influence the social attitude in Indian society. However, despite all these, in India, there is always a glorification and idealization of motherhood.

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<sup>6</sup> The sutra, namely, Grihya, Shrauta and Dharma Sutra, constitute the Kalpa sutra that is a collection of scriptures that emerged during various Vedic schools. It was composed during the same period when Hindu law books were written. The Grihya Sutra deals with sixteen "Samskaras ceremonies" and daily yajnas "sacrifices" that mark different household life stages. The Grihya Sutra describes ceremonies of special occasions, seasonal rituals, and five daily sacrifices, mainly starting from the inception of life to reaching the final destination, i.e., death. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324633937\\_Grihya\\_Sutras](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324633937_Grihya_Sutras).

Conversely, minor religious rituals like the jātaka Rma, Namakarana, Chuda, etc., were performed by girls. However, the Upanayana discontinuation was because women had a disastrous effect on their general societal position. Manu declared that the pious Brahman should not attend a sacrifice performed by women (Altekar, 1938/1959, p. 15). Though parallel to these texts, the Buddha was reluctant to admit women to his Sangha. Mahavira did not keep community life as the exclusive privilege of men. He also permitted it to be a right for women. He organized his followers into four orders: Monks, Nuns, laymen, and laywomen (Hornor, 1930, p. 95). Likewise, when the Sangha was established in Buddhism, Buddha granted women a religious role, which was prohibited in history. Women quickly took advantage of this opportunity. These women were wise, creative, gentle, and compassionate. Many women were recognized as fully and equally enlightened, and the Buddhist literature agrees that women could become arahants.

The sacred text is filled with examples of the renunciation of women of the worldly life for the religious life. According to Ananda, to attain the arahanship<sup>7</sup>, There is no barrier to sex; both almsmen and almswomen can achieve it and fall from the paths. Some historians considered Buddha anti-women from the religious perspective when he rejected the offer to join the Sakayan ladies' order. However, he did not teach the difference between men and women (Dixit, 2008, p. 153). In this way, Buddhism began a new horizon for women with the establishment of the bhikṣuṇī sangha, which provided a platform for women to participate in religious life (Dixit, 2008, p. 39). In contrast, Gandhara art is silent on this enormous event. The Prajapati incident entering the religion and women's admission to the Sangha were considerable events in Buddhist history. It is neglected in Gandhāra art, and we can't find a single sculpture showing Prajāpatī requesting Buddha to accept them in the religion.

A general review of women in a Buddhist society shows that they were enjoying a much better position than other contemporary organisations. In Buddhist records, women are presented with a negative image. The most important example is the lower level of nuns in the Sangha than the Monks. Most of the written record is produced by the male members of society, so they are biased in their viewpoint, promote the men's position, and intentionally ignore and leave out the women's. Moreover, all the sacred texts were written after Buddha's death so there are chances of mistakes because Buddha believed in human equality without gender discrimination. The Buddhist society appreciated women in the Sangha because the Sangha largely depended on women for donations and support, which may have been a big concern for the Buddhist priests. The eight-noble path for the nuns shows that it was a later addition to society's rules. However, apart from this, it was a significant change that first-time women had joined an influential organization in India (Verma, 2000, p. 69-75). According to the Bhagavad Gita<sup>8</sup>, women's admission into the Sangha is not a supporting element for the family. If women joined the religious life, it would destroy the family unit, and spiritual life in Sangha can also become complicated because women can be vulnerable to seduction and raping attempt by male counterparts. The well-known story of that era is Draupadi, also mentioned in the Mahābhārata<sup>9</sup>. This situation presents women's insecurity in a Buddhist society, and it was not

<sup>7</sup>In Buddhism, an *arhat* or *arahant* (Sanskrit: 'who is worthy') is a perfect person who has gained insight into the true nature of existence and has achieved nirvana (spiritual enlightenment). The *arhat*, having freed himself from the bonds of desire will not be reborn (Encyclopedia Britannica, Arhat (Buddhism)).

<sup>8</sup>The Bhagavad Gita is a dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, narrated in the Mahabharata Bhishma Parva. It comprises eighteen discourses of a total of 701 Sanskrit verses. A considerable volume of material has been compressed within these verses. On the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Sri Krishna, during His most instructive and interesting talk with Arjuna, revealed profound, sublime, and soul-stirring spiritual truths and expounded the rare secrets of Yoga, Vedanta, Bhakti, and Karma. Sivananda, S. S. (1996). Bhagavad Gita for Busy People.

<sup>9</sup>Mahabharata is one of the greatest epics of the Hindus classified under "Itihasa" in Sanskrit literature it is an epic history of the Kurukshetra war and the Kaurava and the Pandava princes' outcomes. One such story was of

free of violence against women (Verma, 2000, p. 77). When it came to religious sacrifices, women were no less than their counterparts. Gandhāra art also represents ample examples of women worshippers, their spiritual sacrifices, and generous offerings towards Buddhism. (see Fig 4-episode women worshippers in Gandhāra art). Tantric Buddhism has an uncompromising attitude of honor and homage to women. Yogini-tantra (a significant tantric scripture) has emphasized women's place in society; "One should honor women because women are heaven, women are truth, women are the supreme fire of transformation, women are Buddha, women are a religious community, and women are the perfection of wisdom" (Mirinda, 1994, p. 39). According to the same text, men have great respect for women, including social and ritual aspects of life. Honourable men always respect women, including their families, wives, relatives, and females in general. The *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa-tantra*<sup>10</sup>, scriptures are the primary source of information about the female Buddha, a source of the improvement of men's attitude towards women. These scriptures dictate the contemplation and recitation of men in the company of their female companions. Likewise, it is evident in Gandharā art that males worshipped alongside their female companions (see Fig 4, episode women worshippers in Gandharā art). Past and present eras have shown us women are life-givers and auspicious of true bliss and a source of tenderness and protectiveness (Mirinda, 1994, p. 39-47). Women were treated respectfully in Buddhism because, like men, women are also an essential part of society. Subsequently, it can be said that every status of a human being is not ascribed; similarly, Women improved their position in every culture through their positive roles and contributions. They are regarded as in a better place in every world's community based on their constructive role. The status of women can be analyzed based on their role in different relations. Similarly, women are not behind men in religious sacrifices. The Therigāthā's descriptions inform us about the sacrifices of women for religion. Addhakasi implies her former wealth by referring to her massive wages as a prostitute; Sakula refers in passing to her abandonment of money and grain. Canda describes her poverty as a lack of food and clothing (Rhys & Norman, 1989, p. 97). Sujata alludes to her former wealth by describing her clothing, ornamentation, food, and servants (Rhys & Norman, 1989, p. 60-61). Anupama explains a suitor willing to pay her father eight times her weight in gold and jewels. He added women joined Sangha when they understood the reality of life entirely. In the Therigāthā, ten poems refer to ageing or illness (Rhys & Norman, 1989, p.145-146). In the case of Sumedha's long speech with her parents on the evil of sensual pleasures, she states that all births are bound up with old age and sickness. Sumedha's long argument provides clear evidence of women's understanding of religion (Rhys Davids & Norman 1989: 141-152). In Gandhāra art, the prostitute Amrapālī gifted a mango grove to Buddha and devoted her property to religion. Utpalvarna also renounced the life of luxury and joined the religious life (figs 5 & 6 Amarpali and descent of Bodhisattva Siddharta from Trayastrimsa heaven and Utpalvarna).

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Draupadi; Draupadi is the heroic princess of Mahabharata, King Drupada of Panchal's daughter, and five Pandava brothers' compassionate queen. She is also considered the sole reason behind the great Mahabharata war. However, she symbolizes the binding of the five chakras in the human body. [www.speakingtree.in](http://www.speakingtree.in). Thakur, Pallavi (Fascinating Facts about Draupadi I Bet You Did Not Know).

<sup>10</sup>The Tantra of Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa represents the flowering of the Yoginī- tantra genre. The tantra offers instructions on how to attain the wisdom state of Buddha Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa through the practice of the four joys. The tantra covers a range of practices and philosophical perspectives of late tantric Buddhism, including the development stage, the completion stage, the use of mantras, and several magical rites and rituals. The text is unique with its tribute to an apotheosis of women and, in this regard, probably has few parallels anywhere else in world literature. The Tantra of Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa (2021). Translated by Dharma chakra translation committee under the patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of Buddha.

The efforts, saying, and conducts of the bhikkhunis are noted in many places in the Pali canon, remarkably in the Therīgāthā<sup>11</sup>, for instance, women can maintain social interaction with each other in Sangha. The Theras spend much of their time alone, and they do not have any interaction among themselves. Blackstone says this perspective has important implications for the self-image of the Theris and Theras (Blackstone, 1998, p. 58). In the Smṛiti text<sup>12</sup> (1000 BCE-600 CE), The chief Smithies of this period were Ramāyāna, Mahābhārata, and the Bhagavad-Gita, which shows that few women could study the Vedas or pledge public rites. Men also composed the non-Hindu text; if women wrote them, their names were perhaps removed later. In the later Vedic era, Smṛities (CA. 1000-300 BCE), the epics were communicated by educated and ordinary folks like women and Shudras. Apart from these, women also participated in oral traditions according to the Sanskrit literature. The Srāuta Sutras state that women can study Vedas and participate in sacrifices. They laid bricks for the altar, pondered rice for the ceremony, lit the fire, and chanted Vedic hymns (Raman, 2009, p. 48-49). In Buddhism, women were allowed to participate in religious sacrifices and donated different material things in the name of religion. The Nagarjunakonda Buddhist stupa in the Deccan designated Shatavahana queens Camti Sri, Adavatisri, and six others donated money for the monuments. The Shaka queen exposes similar inscriptions, and prosperous women are presented at Amaravati stupa and Buddhist monastic caves in western India. The Chola queens, like Sembian Mahadevi, built Hindu temples in the south (Raman, 2009, p. 68). The order members belonged to all walks of life, and some were former courtesans like Ambapāli and Vimala; others were of royal lineage like Sumeda and Sela. There were distinguished exponents of the Dhamma like Dhammadinnā, scions of noble or merchant families like Bhadda Kundalkesa, Sujāta, and Anopama humbler origins like Punnika the slave girl, or Chanda, the daughter of a poor Brahmin (De Silva, 1994).

The women donors are also depicted in Gandhāra art. These depictions portray an accurate picture of their generosity and their affiliation with the religion. One such episode is found in Dīpamkara Jataka, in which Gopa agrees to sell five blue lotus flowers out of seven to Sumedha<sup>13</sup>, provided that Sumedha will marry her in a future lifetime (Rahman & Khan, 2020, p. 67; see also Coomaraswamy 1916). So, the episode of the women worshippers represents the same spirit of women in Buddhist society. The episode of the women worshippers represents the same spirit of women in Buddhist society (Fig 4). Women also actively propagated India's religion as King Asoka's daughter helped spread Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and Shatavahana queens (c. third century CE) maintained Buddhist monasteries. In the modern era, the lower caste Tantric and Dalit Buddhist women and men have saved their religion, and new monastic groups have developed due to their efforts. The wealthy Jaina and Buddhist women offered generous donations to propagate their beliefs and their communities of Monks and Nuns. Apart from monks and nuns, some laywomen and laymen adopted the renunciant's life to help the public and returned to domestic life humiliated by the ascetic experience, thus serving to assimilate the Sangha (Raman, 2009, p. 76-77; Jamison & Brereton, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>Theragātha and Therīgāthā are respectively the eighth and ninth books of the *Khuddaka Nikaya* which is the fifth of the five divisions of the Pali Sutta Pitaka.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315857379\\_Thera-\\_and\\_Therigatha](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315857379_Thera-_and_Therigatha)

<sup>12</sup>Smṛiti, sacred Hindu literature based on human memory, is distinct from the Vedas, a divine revelation product. Smṛiti literature elaborates, interprets, and codifies Vedic thought but, being derivative, is considered less authoritative than the Vedic Shṛuti. The text includes the essential religious manual known as the Kalpa-Sutras, the compilation of ancient myths, legends, and history. [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)

<sup>13</sup>According to Buddhist canonical literature, the historic Buddha Gautama Siddhartha once lived as an ascetic named Sumedha in one of his previous lives, who succeeded to pay homage to Dīpamkara Buddha by tossing lotus flowers on him in the city of *Dīpāvati* or *Paduma*. While Yaśodharā, the wife of the Bodhisattva of our times, lived in the city of *Dīpāvati* named Gopa, from whom Sumedha purchased lotus flowers for five hundred gold pieces (Rahman and Khan 2020: 67-68).

Therefore, joining the Sangha was not a matter of spiritual satisfaction. However, it was also a significant reason for getting respect and honour in society for the women who were rejected by society for different reasons. Raman described this in the following words: Women joined the Sangha for social, psychological, and spiritual causes. Some women were fed up with domestic life and frustrated wishes; some took it as a source of bitter sorrow, and some wanted to join the company of religious women.

However, Buddha's teachings moderated them all (Sastari, 1988). Some women joined the Sangha because they lived without the support of their husbands and family; servants and aged women joined the Sangha under Parajapati's guidance. Mothers, sisters, and widows also became nuns because of their homelessness and cheating on the family's male members. Polygamous marriages were among the leading causes of joining the Sangha because co-wives led a miserable life of jealousy and distrust. Courtesans also found a respectable position as laywomen and nuns in early Buddhism, so they became nuns and lived peacefully and passively in society (Raman, 2009, p. 91-92). Prajapati Gotami wishes to become a Bhikkhuni, aspiring many women to become one. Perhaps they saw Bhikkhuni as a path to freedom they could not find in the secular life, where they were bound by the rules of a society that accorded them little importance.

Despite all these, there may be different reasons for joining Sangha. However, after entering the Sangha, women played a very constructive and pivotal role in the progress of religion. The Buddhist attitude towards women is not consistent because of the complex history of the texts transmitted from time to time. However, the history of Buddhism is not limited to those voices only. There is a space for further clarity in the form of Gandhāran art. This art is a significant source for visually examining and analyzing women's roles (Deheja, 1997; Behrendt, 2007). Gandhāra art represents ample examples of women's participation in religious services and sacrifices in the company of their husbands and separately. The Gandhāran sculptures show that women from all societal groups equally participated in religious ceremonies without discrimination (Fig 4 and 7, episode women worshipper in Gandharān art). Gandhāra art portrayed the equal religious status of a Queen, a courtesan, a prostitute, or a devotee without prejudice based on caste, creed, and social condition in all the religious ceremonies, which shows that there was no discrimination in the religion on the factors as mentioned earlier (Nisa et al., 2023, p. 1252-1253).

The most traditional societies of the world do not forbid women from worship. In every religion worldwide, women are portrayed as worshipping together with men equally (Olivelle, 2005). However, not daily, but on many occasions and events, women get an equal chance of worship with men. It is beautifully portrayed that women worship along with male members, especially monks, freely and equally in Gandhāra art. The representation of women worshippers on various occasions and in multiple assemblies portrays their better position in Buddhist society. It also highlights the religious spirit of women in the concerned community. The extraordinary carving of these worshippers also defined the social acceptance of women's participation in the religious ritual in the company of their husbands and even in the presence of the monks (Fig 7, episode of women worshippers).

### **The Role and Status of Women as Tempresses and Seductresses in the Pre-Buddhist and Early Buddhist Period**

In the past, women were considered an instrument of evil. Just like any other human, a distinction must be made between different personalities of women, such as sensual, dark, or emotional, and a woman as an individual. In religion, a woman is also considered as the temptress and seductress, which is a common theme across the board. That same woman is Eve, the precipitator of man's fall, and Pandora, who wreaks havoc on the world. The examples of women as the embodiment of evil in Buddhist literature reflect the weakness of Adam and

the human condition, continuous suffering, and rebirth-samsara (Paul 1985: 4). Women are always considered seductresses and temptresses in almost all ages of human development while completely overlooking their sacred social and religious roles. The early myths represent women as a temptress to male members of society, even to spiritual yogis and Divine followers (Raman, 2009, p. 53). Apart from the Mahābhārata, the Vedic hymns also describe women's desires and sexual wants in various manners. In the Vedic hymns, women are revealed to express their sexual urges openly. The conversational hymns between divine, semi-divine, and usual women and men elect desire and denial. Nymph Urvashi rejects her lover Pururavas for sex and criticizes him for forcibly 'penetrating her with his "rod three times a day" (Jemison & Brereton, 2014). Ancient texts provide ample examples of women's sensual desires for their beloveds and husbands; that is why women are considered temptresses. However, despite all this evidence, this literature also appreciated women's worthy and commendable potential.

Furthermore, the non-Vedic texts often show seductive nymphs who tried to frustrate and divert the meditating sages. Like Buddha, only a few of them could struggle with the tricks of the vixen Mara. Gandhāra art also represents the seductress role of women in various episodes of the life of Buddha. For instance, the palace life of Bodhisattva Siddhārtha, the Temptation of Mara and his daughters, and the Great Departure of Bodhisattva Siddhārtha (Nisa et al., 2023, p. 1250) (figs 10, 9, 8, and 3). These episodes talk about the seductive role of women to distract Prince Siddhārtha from the way of salvation. According to Mahāvastu, these women have many skills and looks; they are perfect, adorable, and can play five musical instruments. However, Prince Siddhārtha felt that worldly beauty was temporary, so he did not find any attraction in these women. In the episode of Great Departure, when these women fell asleep and were in unattractive and deformed postures, it made him uncomfortable (Gibson & Burgess, 1965/1901, p. 13-14). To this extent, the use of women to represent a materialistic life entirely of sexuality provoked negative views about women (Young, 2004, p. 5). In these episodes, women were used to stop Buddha from following the path of salvation. Overall, women were considered more of a hindrance than a help in males' path to liberation. Later, a few of these women renounced the worldly life and joined Sangha in the company of Maha Prajāpati.

Moreover, there are minor legends regarding the seductive role of women in the Mahābhārata and the Ramāyāna. These women try to seduce the sages with their loveliness and tricks, like the gorgeous princess Shanta seduces the sage Rsyasringa. The nymph Senaka sparked the sage Vishvamitra's moral intents, and they spend extended time in each other's company. The rishi begat on Menaka a daughter named Sakuntala (the Mahābhārata). Due to these actions, Manu also viewed women as morally inferior creatures to men. He says, "It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason, the wise are never left unguarded in the company of females." He added, "Women can lead astray in this world, even a learned man, and make him a slave of desire and anger" (Indra & Pandit, 1955, p. 14).

However, it is also a fact that if women are morally inferior creatures, that is the reason they are used as instruments by male members of society to gain their worldly benefits and fits of hunger, as Mara used his daughters to seduce Buddha for his gains. Arthaśāstra, considered an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, also describes women's aptitudes differently. Still, this discussion's crux is the same, and he believes that the company of women is worse than any other immoral conduct. The author says that the addiction to women is worse than the gambling addiction. The concentrations of the rajas can be diverted from gambling but not from women. He gets insane in this habit and is consequently unable to perform all his political tasks, becoming addicted to dozing (Indra & Pandit 1955, p. 13; Kangle, 1909, p. 246).

The Buddhist myth, the Aganna-sultan, like the myth of Genesis, and Greek mythology, specifically the Pandora myth, is similar to that of Eve. However, it is more explicit in its representation of a woman as the perpetrator of all existential suffering. In Indian mythology, the representation of women as evil is continued, but we have a more complex form of Eve's

myth. The dominant and invincible goddess is Devi, who slays the gigantic buffalo in the Puranas. Buddhists inherited the Indian mythological structure in which tension existed between the maternal and destructive aspects explicitly illustrated by Kali.

In contrast, Kali represents both the maternal and destructive forces of the cosmos. The Buddhist representation of women as evil is one traditional attitude. The two representations are not combined in one image as in Kali (Paul, 1997, p. 5).

In Buddhism, the woman's prototype as evil is found in the Theravada scriptures known as the Pali canon when the Buddha was on the enlightenment threshold. Mara, the sovereign of the desire realm, attempted to thwart the great enlightenment of the Buddha. To tempt the Buddha, Mara dispatched his three daughters, personifications of lust (Raga), aversion (Arati), and craving (Trina), to appear before the Buddha. The ultimate feminine seduction was embodied in these three, but they utterly repelled the Buddha. A derivative of Mara's daughters' prototype developed early in the Buddhist literature in the description of hell. As cosmic physical energy, women were perceived as temptresses and seductresses and were associated with spiritual beings' death (Danial, 1970, p. 10-17). The episode of Mara's temptation with his daughters' support has been depicted in detail in Gandhāra art (Fig 9, episode the temptation of Mara and his daughters) and has also been mentioned in the ancient Buddhist canonical texts like the Lalitavistara and the Mahāvastu.

Conversely, in early Indian Buddhism, a general theory of women's sexuality was that they utilized it to their advantage and, through their insatiable sexual appetites, lured men away from their virtuous path. However, *Samyutta Nikāya*<sup>14</sup> (Chapter on Buddhist nuns) mentions that Māra approaches nuns and attempts to sexually seduce them, but every time they recognize Māra and do not fall into his trap. The same text mentioned that Māra disguised himself and asked the nun Vijayā;

*You are young and beautiful,  
And I am a young man.  
Come, noblewoman, let us rejoice  
With the music of a fivefold ensemble  
While Vijayā replied to him in these words;  
Forms, sounds, tastes, scents, and tactile objects  
That is pleasing to the mind  
I give them back to you, Mara,  
I do not need them*<sup>15</sup>.

The portrayal of women as seductresses is a controversial topic, and the example in early literature is indicative of women who attempt to seduce and trap men away from their chosen path. The wife of Vira in the *Theragāthā* commentary tempted her husband to return to materialistic life. However, later, she was impressed by his selflessness and religious devotion and decided to join him (Hornor, 1930, p. 182). Apart from these reliable and ancient texts, women's secular and sacred roles are also depicted in various ancient arts with their- dual nature. They are given divine and blessed roles, but on the other hand, they are also described as seductresses and temptresses. Likewise, the Indian secular erotic art is very ancient, confirmed by further explorations at Harappa. This art's substances are cult objects, fertility

<sup>14</sup>The Samyutta Nikāya is the third great collection of the Buddha's discourses in the Sutta Pitaka of the Pāli Canon, the compilation of texts authorized as the Buddha's Word by the Theravada school of Buddhism. Within the Sutta Pitaka, it follows the Dīgha Nikāya and Majjhima Nikāya and precedes the Anguttara Nikāya. Like the other Pāli Nikāyas, the Samyutta Nikāya had counterparts in the other early Buddhist schools' canonical collections. One such version has been preserved in the Chinese Tripitaka, where it is known as the Tsa-a-han-ching.

<sup>15</sup>Samyutta Nikāya, 5.4. 165; Collett 2009, 108-109.



divinities, and mother goddesses, which may have been worshipped in a primitive way. The same also appears true for the terracotta of the Ganges Valley.

However, the figural art of the pre-medieval age saw modification in the erotic feelings towards women. The art without depicting female figures was completely losing its sensuous charm. Although it became more submissive, on the other hand, women were also appreciated because of their attractiveness and kindness as the great dramatists and poets like Kalidasa frankly described the physical grace of their heroines (Mehta, 1972, p. 12-13; Thapar, 1999, p. 16-43). Thus, women are abundantly discussed in ancient texts and art because of their nature and beauty. Likewise, we can also observe different roles of women with the help of text and art, so it will be safe to say that women's positions can be identified in the concerned societies based on their depiction in the art and text.

The religious art of Gandhāra is an excellent source to identify women's beauty, grace, role, and status. Gandhāra art provides ample examples of female beauty and their sacred role in Buddhist society during Prince Siddhārtha's life. Siddhārtha also resided with his wife Yaśodharā and a significant number of female musicians and dancers in the palace of King Śuddhodana before he departed for religious services. The Great Departure episode in the art of Gandhāra is a prominent example of Siddhārtha's stay with his wife in his palace built by his father for his comfort and luxurious life (see Fig 10, episode the palace life of Siddhartha). The second dark aspect of women's nature is their seductive behaviour observed in Gandhāra art and the Buddhist text. Therefore, with the support of Gandhāra art, one can easily understand the second aspect (seductive) of women's nature that will help recognize the complete picture of women's conduct and behaviour.

### **The Role and Status of Women as Courtesans and Prostitutes in the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Period**

In the early historical period, courtesans, domestic enslaved people, nautch-girls (dancing girls), and women musicians also existed. The women who did not gain their livelihood or were not supported by anyone were courtesans. They were also experts in dancing, singing, and lute-playing. Although the extent of the courtesan in ancient India is disputed, it had existed before the Buddhist days, despite the importance of marriage in the Vedic age. However, during Buddhism, the courtesan Amrapāli and Utpalvarana had Buddha's respect. A courtesan who comes under the spell of Dhamma was Bindumati in the time of Aśoka (Hornor, 1930, p. 90-91). They paid tribute to Buddha, who had passed away, confirming their alliance and sincerity to Buddha and showing the world that respect can change anyone regardless of how impossible it seems (Mohan, 1983). The Ramāyāna is an excellent example of royal recognition and the prevalence of prostitution in Indian civilization. The remedy for drought in the kingdom of Romapada was to entice Rasyarnga, son of sage Vibhandaka, from his ashrama into the realm of Romapada. Rasyarnga was a non-cultured hermit youth, ignorant of worldly pleasures. The Purohita (of Romapada) suggested that courtesans of comely presence clad in ornaments should be sent to lure the young ascetic. They entrusted the actual task of selection and dispatch of the courtesan to the ministers.

It indicates that even people in high and respectable positions knew details about courtesans. The state etiquette of the period and proverbial Indian fondness for ritual necessitated the employment of a large entourage of courtesans and nautch girls as escorts of honour. It should be remembered that these ladies were quite distinct from common prostitutes and that their services were requisitioned in all royal festivities. When Rama was to be consecrated as a crown prince, Vasistha directed preparations for the purpose, a band of a well-decked dancing girl drawn up within the royal palace's second apartment. The courtesans were considered inauspicious. It is clear that when Rama returned to Ayodhya from his exile in the forest, Bhartha ordered a host of ganikas to go out to accord him a fitting reception (Vyas, 1967, p.

120). It shows that these women were appointed to entertain the male members of society. However, they were considered ominous and menacing society members on the same footing (Fig 3 & 8, episode of the palace life of Bodhisattva Siddhārtha and the significant departure of Bodhisattva Siddhārtha).

These women performed the same duties to the kings as Apsaras for the Indra. Princes mainly took delight in them and were often attached to the courts. They had to sing and dance to entertain kings and their guests. Some of them used to be concubines and lived among the members of the royal families. Maybe these were songstresses who sang in the palace to awaken the prince in the morning, a custom referred to so often. In the Epics narrative, they are mentioned among other auspicious objects, such as the maidens, to welcome the heroes. As mentioned, they go along with the girls, which would be unthinkable by our current standards (Jayal, 1966, p. 120). Likewise, the cities of Kaushambi, Varanasi, Vaisali, and Rajagriha attracted female courtesan. The rich people used these females for entertainment and amusement. Some scholars state that the breakup of the tribal clans during urbanization led to some women's 'alienation.' The Buddhist texts said Amrapāli, appointed by the king, supervised the courtesan of Visali, who charged high rates. The male authors of the Hindu sutras prohibited the Brahmans from admitting food from them. However, Buddha accepted the invitation of Amrapāli and was overwhelmed by her kindness (see Fig 5). Amrapāli was a respected woman and became a Buddhist nun. She was not a disreputable prostitute; her wise poem is included in the Therīgāthā. In the later era, courtesans danced and sang for their clients' pleasure regardless of their class and society, as their living depended on fees (Raman, 2009, p. 67). The episode of the Amrapāli and Utpalvarana is beautifully depicted in the art of Gandhāra and reflects these women's status in Buddhist society (Figs 5 & 6).

Buddhist king Aśoka was fully aware of women's suppressed condition in the society of his time. Aśoka appointed a particular group of mahamattas, who would be concerned mainly with the welfare of women. The term used for these officers was *ithijhakha-mahamattas*, literally, the superintendents of prostitutes. It seems hardly feasible that officers of the rank of mahamattas would have been appointed merely to supervise the city's prostitutes. Still, they would also be concerned with other duties connected with the royal harems (Thapar, 1961, p. 7).

Signe Kirde and Moti Chandra mention eight *jātaka*<sup>16</sup> stories in which prostitutes play a more or less dominant role, e.g., Gamani-Canda- *jātaka* and Atthana- *jātaka*. In these *jātakas*, the courtesans are shown as businesswomen, motivated to earn as much money as possible. Vattakajātaka, a courtesan, was employed as a temptress for the son of treasure, but he refused her. Ultimately, she saves him from the death penalty and is portrayed as a positive and helpful character (Kirde, 2004). The Kanavera- *jātaka*, the courtesan Sama, fell in love with a thief and used a person who was in love with her to pay a bribe to the police chief. After bringing the thief to her in a covered carriage, both spent intimate time together. The thief distrusts her, that if she falls in love with another man, she will kill him. He takes her out into a park, and after drugging her, he takes off her clothes. After knowing this, she continues her usual way of life. Pali narrative texts (early part of the First Millennium CE) provide evidence of the start of prostitution. First, prostitution might have developed from the group marriage and clan-wife system common to nomadic tribes (Kirde, 2004, p. 43-45). The courtesan in the Buddhist Sanskrit literature classifies the role and images of the courtesans into three categories. First is the heroine, in this case, a courtesan who is moved by a strong feeling (worldly or spiritual),

<sup>16</sup>Jataka is a Pali term meaning birth story which relates an episode in the past life of the historic Buddha. Jataka stories have been mentioned in all canonical literature of Buddhism and are considered among the most prevalent stories, based on the accounts of the moral deeds and accomplishments of the historic Buddha in his previous lives as a Bodhisattva. Buddhist literature of the Theravada Canon mentioned more than five hundred Jataka stories, i.e. variously 550, 540 and 555 (Rahman & Khan, 2020, p. 66).

unaware of her destiny, and undergoes a psychological development. She finally becomes inclined to the law of the Buddha. In the second category, the prostitute or courtesan merely symbolizes the world of sensual pleasures, and her part is more or less the role of a temptress or an actress. The courtesan is portrayed without individual features and as a member of urban culture living among kings, ministers, merchants, and thieves. The third category depicts a female law teacher (dharma) as a courtesan. In the Mahāyāna Gandavyuha-sutra, the beautiful Bhagavati Vasumitra is described with the attributes of a ganika, and she knows all the arts (Kalas) and has many lovely female servants (Kirde, 2004, p. 49-51). So, it shows that women were used for pleasure; they were considered precious artefacts for decorating palaces, courts, camps, and cities. They also play a positive and helpful part in society and religion (Nisa *et al.*, 2023, p. 1246). Gandhara art represents an accurate picture of prostitution's participation and sacrifices for religion. Amrapali and Utpalvarna played an exemplary role in society and bestowed their life and wealth on religion (Fig 5).

### **Political and Legal Role and Status of Women in the Pre-Buddhist and Early-Buddhist Period**

In Indian society, the text and art abundantly portray women's social and religious roles. However, there are fewer examples of women's depiction in their legal and political roles in society, as India's political matters remain entirely in the hands of male community members. Women's share in administrative issues was infrequent. The affairs of the throne were in the hands of males only. The Aryan history, Vedic and post-Vedic literature is silent regarding female contribution to the affairs of the state. Examples of female sovereigns were present in Kashmir, South India, and Ceylon only. In Mahābhārata, only three queens have been mentioned, governing in Ceylon (Indra & Pandit, 1955, p. 146). Even in Gandhāra art, the depiction of women's political role is missing or negligible. If she has been depicted as equal to the man, she only portrays the limit of family matters.

According to the epigraphic record, the political position of women is categorized in three ways. First, some women ruled independently because they attained the reigning rights by their marriage. Some women gained the ruling right by birth because they were born into royal families. They are those who share the rules and cooperate with their husbands. Nevertheless, in Vedic times, women lost their status. They were deprived of their right to counselling in Sabha or assemblies due to distrust of their mental calibre because women were unable to keep the secrets of the Government and were incompetent to deal with complicated state affairs (Indra & Pandit, 1955, p. 148-149). The political status of women in the Vedic ages was inferior and substandard compared to men. The Rig-Veda stated some examples of female warriors and soldiers participating in the fighting in the field. The women's participation in the battlefield is also found in the age of the Ramāyāna. For instance, Kekayi is involved in the battle against his enemy, Indra. Mahābhārata is silent regarding women's participation in the historic war (Indra & Pandit, 1955, p. 154).

According to Manu, women were granted the right to give evidence without a qualified male witness. The political status of women was limited in ancient India. In the Buddhist period, it is pretty clear from the statement of the Buddha he detected to Ananda; "women have soon angered Ananda; women are full of passion Ananda, women are envious Ananda, women are unintelligent Ananda, which is why Ananda is the cause women have no place in public assemblies and do not earn their living by any profession" (Indra & Pandit, 1955, p. 240).

During Buddha's time, there was no example of a female figure performing any noticeable or unnoticeable place in the state's administration. During the reign of Aśoka, a large number of Bhikṣuṇī spread the teachings of Buddha in far and comprehensive sites. However, there is little evidence that women ever occupied any office of significance because women were undeserving of being entrusted with any matter of prominence (Indra & Pandit, 1955, p. 244).

The art of Gandhāra also provides clear evidence of the non-participation of women in political and state affairs. Queen Māyā, Parajāpatī, and Yaśodharā enjoyed respect, honour, and righteousness in the royal palace of King Suddhōdana (Jayal, 1966, p. 129). These women of the royal family are portrayed on various occasions in their husbands' company. However, under the light of these sculptures, there is no single piece of evidence available that shows their participation in the state's administrative matters (see Fig 1, 3, 8, the episode of Interpretation of the Dream of Queen Māyā, Horoscope of the child, palace life and the Great departure). Prince Siddhārtha was the only heir of his father's state. After he departed from the palace searching for eternal peace and salvation, he left a little son and his wife, Yaśodharā. In present-day society, if such an event occurs, his wife will take over his reign's responsibilities, mainly when King Suddhōdana becomes old. However, no evidence is available in the Buddhist text and in Gandhāran art that represents the political role of Yaśodharā after the renunciation of the Bodhisattva.

The pre-Buddhist and Buddhist approach toward women was not constant. Only some of the literature speaks with the same voice regarding women, and neither do scholars in Buddhist study (Faure 2003: 3). As stated above, there are two different groups of scholars with very different opinions. The first group believes that women competed in pre-Buddhist and Buddhist history in social and religious life. Foley stated that "Buddhist nuns have laid down all social prestige and gained the austere joys of an asexual rational being, walking with the wise men in recognized intellectual equality on the higher level of thoughts" (Foley, 1893, p. 348). The second group of scholars take the opposite way and indicate women are considered as substandard citizens, inferior to men. Paul points out "this subordination of the women's authority to that of man's reflects both the social order of India at that time and the monastic hierarchical structure of the community wherein even the most senior nun must be deferential to the youngest novice monk" (Paul, 1985, p. 170). These two groups of scholars specify a contrary understanding of the position of women in Buddhism.

The most impartial and unbiased approach to this matter is by Alan Sponberg. He understands the history of Buddhist literature and talks about the fickle attitude towards women in early Indian Buddhist literature from various opinions. He lists four of these opinions, three of which occurred in the early era. The first opinion is soteriological inclusiveness, which shows that women follow the same religious route and achieve the same goals as men. This statement coincides with the original group of scholars, such as Arhatship, who emphasized Buddhism's sacred path, which was open to both men and women (Sponberg, 1992, p. 9). However, another frequent Buddhist literature voice states that "sexual differences are real and the male sex is by nature superior to the female sex, both socially and spiritually" (Sponberg, 1992, p. 12). It takes us to the second voice of institutional androcentrism, which claims that men have the community's superiority and that women are inferior to them on a social and institutional level. Women threaten the monastic institution's integrity (Sponberg, 1992, p. 15-16). This assertion relates to Paul's on the secondary treatment of nuns in the Buddhist community.

Moreover, the risk created by women is portrayed differently in the third voice, ascetic misogyny, which is intimidating to women and identifies them as a menace to male celibacy (Sponberg, 1992, p. 24). Gross also focuses on this vice when she determines that Buddhists are misogynistic. Therefore, it looks like when a cluster of scholars claims a specific opinion in Buddhism explains its mindset toward women. Moreover, beliefs like egalitarianism, androcentrism, and misogyny only shed light on one (Gross, 1993, p. 34).

## Conclusion

Women's religious and social roles have always been met with controversial views because of the complexity of pre-Buddhist literature history. History speaks for itself; no society can flourish if women are not given the respect and liberty they deserve. The various roles of

women in pre-Buddhist and early-Buddhist society give us a picture of the strength and significance of women; the spiritual status of women has also gone through different phases as time has progressed. Women played significant roles and made sacrifices to promote their religion and were just a little behind male members when it came to collecting religious donations and performing rituals. However, women did face ascetic restrictions in various religions because of physical impurity, which was not their fault and holds to this day. Also, it is worth noting that women are portrayed only as worshippers and devotees. However, the influence and services of the nuns are ignored in Gandhāra art.

Women's role as a courtesan and an entertainment tool is also evident in pre-Buddhist and early-Buddhist society. Even though women in these roles were not considered respectful, some of them changed their path by following the teachings of Buddha and playing a paramount role in spreading the teachings of Buddha. There are many episodes in Gandhāra art where women are depicted with disgrace and as objects in the context of entertainment. Women were treated as tools by male members of society to gain personal advantages, and they considered women to be a source of delight and pleasure and expandable. In this context, women did not enjoy a respectable and trustworthy place in society. Also, it is worth noting that women's representation in the legal and political realm in every era is almost non-existent. In every dynasty, women had some say in domestic matters, but when ruling a state or country, they were not given any importance, and their opinions did not matter. It was not only evident in pre-Buddhist and early-Buddhist times, but it holds to this day in every country and religion. This research shows that the Buddhist society and Gandhāra art had opened a new horizon in the status and respect of women. They gave women respect and honour at a level comparable to other conventional religions and societies. So many faces of women worldwide can be observed during the different periods of history, but that does not mean women were given high positions or equal status to men.

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## Figures

**Figure 1: The Dream of Queen Maya, Provenance, unknown, Schist, Dimensions: Ht.11.3cm, Wd. 36.0 cm, Source Katsumi. Tanabe.**



*Source.* Gandhara Art from the Hirayama Collection. 1984, Accession no, 100142. Fig. 6. P.1

**Figure 2: Birth of Bodhisattva Sakyamuni, Provenance, possibly Swabi, Green Schist. Dimensions: Ht. 65 cm, Wd. 64 cm.**



*Source.* Private collection England. I. Kurita, *Gandhara Art*. 2003, Vol.1. Fig. 37. P.33.

**Figure 3: Renunciation and Great Departure of Bodhisattva Sakyamuni, Provenance, Jamrud, Grey schist, Dimensions: Ht. 62 cm, wd. 52 cm.**



*Source.* National Museum of Karachi, Pakistan, Accession no, 507.

**Figure 4: Women worshippers of different age groups, Grey schist, Dimensions: Ht. 49 cm.**



*Source.* Taxila Museum, Pakistan. Book reference I. Kurita. *Gandharan Art.* 2003. Fig. 548

**Figure 5: Buddha approaching to Bodhi tree in Gaya and a woman worshipper**





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*Source.* Accession No G-79, Displayed in the main hall of Lahore Museum.

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**Figure 6: The gift of Amarpali, Provenance, unknown, Grey Schist.**

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*Source.* Spink and Sons Ltd. London. I. Kurita, *Gandhara Art*. 2003, Vol. I. Fig. 477.P.230.

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**Figure 7: The descent of Buddha from the Trayastrimsa heaven and Utpalvarna, Provenance, unknown.**

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*Source.* Zwalf. W, *Gandhara Sculptures in the British Museum*, 1996. Fig. 208

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**Figure 8: Women worshippers Provenance Takht-I- Bahi, Mardan. 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D. Schist, Dimensions: Ht. 36.85 cm. Wd, 48.29 cm. Wt, 18.2 Kg.**

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*Source.* Excavation of Archaeological Department 1909-10. Displayed in the main hall of Peshawar Museum.

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**Figure 9: The Great Departure and palace life, Provenance, unknown, Schist, Dimensions: Ht. 22.87 cm, Wd. 66.08 cm, Wt. 18.6.**



*Source.* purchased by the Director General Archaeology in India 1903. 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D. Accession no PM-02754, Displayed in the Peshawar Museum Pakistan.

**Figure 10: Temptation by Mara and his daughters, Grey Schist, Provenance, unknown, Dimensions: Ht. 42.2 cm, wd. 47 cm.**



*Source.* Private collection Europe, © Mr. Sherrier, London, Kurita, I, Gandhara art, 2003. Fig. 212.

**Figure 11: Palace life and Great departure. Schist. Ht.22.87 cm. Hd. 66.08 cm. Wt. 18.6.**



*Source.* purchased by the director General Archaeology in India 1903. 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D. accession no PM- 02754. Displayed in the main hall of Peshawar Museum Pakistan. Book Ref: Ingholt. H, Gandhara Art in Pakistan, 1957. Fig.45

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**Figure 12: Palace life and four signs, Provenance: Swabi 2<sup>nd</sup>- 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D, Schist, Dimensions: Ht.13.98 cm, Wd. 59.73 cm. Wt. 5.1 Kg. Accession no Pm-02751.**

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*Source.* Displayed in the main hall of Peshawar Museum.

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