



Women in Primitive Buddhism

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Abstract

This paper analyses the social status of woman on the basis of the *Jataka* stories. It also attempts to explore whether the *Jatakas* reinforce the *Dharmashastric* discourse of Brahmanic Tradition (which consists of the *Dharma sutras* and the *Smriti* texts) or they have a different perspective towards women. In the focus of the study are the women of the well-born (the queens and the princesses). *Jatakas* are part of the canon of sacred Buddhist literature consisting some 550 anecdotes and fables which depict earlier incarnations of Buddha. The tales have been dated between 300BC -400AD. These stories are stories of wisdom and morals originally written in Pali language, which were later translated and distributed to people across the world. The stories are ment to teach the values of self-sacrifice, morality etc. to common person. At the core of the stories is condemning the evil.

Keywords: *Jataka*, *Bodhisatta*, Queens, Princess, Wicked women.

1. Introduction

Most of the literature related to ancient India is normative, which codifies the standards of conduct, behaviour and penalties for the members of the different classes of society. This literature has, therefore, been used to comprehend the social construction and stratification of the ancient society. Scholars have been deciphering the experiences and the sensitivities of the people on the very basis of the standards of conduct, behaviour and penalty prescribed for a particular society. But the everyday life of the ordinary people finds no mention in the normative literature. This is applicable to both the Vedic literature (*Atharva Veda* being an exception) and the *dharmashastras*. The Jain and the Buddhist literatures, too, do not touch upon the daily life of the people. The content of these books is confined to the conduct-behavior-penance paradigm.

In this context, the *Jataka** are entirely different from the normative literature. These tales are woven around the expectations, aspirations and daily life of the common human. Unlike the normative literature that seeks to 'regulate' the everyday life, the tales present a candid 'narrative' of the same in the folk tradition. The *Jatakas* thus constitute a different category of the

ancient Indian literature. These tales give us a glimpse into the life of the common folk for whom the code of conduct had been formulated in the normative literature.

The *Jatakas* are 550 in number. The plots of most of the stories have been developed against the backdrop of the monarchy and set in the early urban society of north India after the second urban revolution of the 600 B.C. The "Jataka scenes are found sculptured in the carvings on the railings round the relic shrines of Sanchi and Amravati and specially those of Bharhut, where the titles of several *Jatakas* are clearly inscribed over some of the carvings. These bas-reliefs prove that the birth-legends were widely known in the third century B.C. and were then considered as part of the sacred history of the religion." (Cowell, 2001, preface, p.viii) The attitude of this society towards its women can be very well understood through the *Jataka* stories. The *Jataka* women come from different classes and the stories reflect not only their status in society but also the perspective of the Buddhist religion towards them. The king and queen are often the protagonists of the *Jatakas*. Many tales throw light on the thought, behavior, administrative difficulties, and family

problems of the royals. The same stories acquaint us with the status of the queen wife and the expectations the royal household has of her. The stories rarely speak of praise for women. Instead, they are usually presented as the prime cause of a variety of problems. The favorite phrase with which the *Jatakas* address them is the 'wicked woman' which is symbolic of the prevalent ill-will towards them. (See notes no.2)

2. The 'wicked woman'

The stories and anecdotes, curses and reproaches relating to woman's sexuality and its expression are common to all patriarchal societies. The *Jatakas*, too, are not free of them. A number of the *Jataka* stories have been woven around the unsatisfied sexual desire of the queens who have been presented as adulterous women perennially hungry of extra-marital liaison. In this context, the Bandhanamokkh, Cullapaduma, Pabbatupatthara, Parantapa and Maha-Paduma *Jatakas* are notable.

The Bandhanamokkha *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.I pp. 264-67) is the story of a wicked queen who seeks single-minded devotion from her husband and yet ditches him herself. She makes love with the sixty-four messengers sent by the king to make for his absence. The king's chaplain (Bodhisatta) exposes the queen before the king. Analyzing the nature of the womenfolk, he states, "the passions of women are insatiate, and she does but act according to her inborn nature." (Cowell, 2001, Vol.I p.266) So the queen is granted pardon at the end of the story.

The Cullapaduma *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.II, pp.81-5) is the story of seven exiled princes and their wives. They are the sons of Brahmadata, the king of Benares. The king exiles the sons fearing their growing popularity in his court. Obeying the king's order, the princes along with their wives leave the state and wander into the forests. Struck by hunger and thirst, the brothers decide to save their own lives at the cost of their wives. Beginning with the youngest brother's wife, they begin to kill them one by one for necessary food. Even as the killings go on day by day, the eldest prince (Bodhisatta) and his wife manage to save half of the meat of their share. On the seventh day, when the turn of the Bodhisattva's wife comes, he hands over the saved meat to his brothers promising to find food for the next day. Believing him, the brothers grant his wife one more day's life. In the night, the Bodhisatta flees along with his wife. The story then narrates a number of difficulties that Bodhisatta braves depicting his tremendous love for his wife. He carries his tired wife on his shoulders and quenches her thirst, in absence of water, with the

blood extracted from his knee. Later, the couple comes across a man (a dacoit) devoid of limbs, nose and ear and struggling to survive in a river. Bodhisatta decides to save his life and bring him home. Living together, the Bodhisattva's wife falls in love with the dacoit and in an attempt to get rid of her husband she pushes him down the hill. Bodhisatta somehow survives the murder attempt and, disappointed with wife, returns to Benares where he succeeds the king who is no more. His estranged wife, too, reaches Benares carrying her invalid lover in a basket on the head, struggling and begging all the way. The Bodhisatta insults and exiles them.

The story is evidently full of hyperbole. It is strange that a prince's wife could fall madly in love with a dacoit who had been deprived of his limbs and other body parts as award of punishment. The *Jatakas* repeatedly refer to women as cunning, selfish and clever. What 'self' could the woman of royalty have served in a liaison with a bundle of repulsive flesh and in dragging herself from pillar to post? She appears to be a perfect fool instead of being cunning or clever. Besides, the killing of the wives for food and no mention of any resistance from the victims is another important feature of this *Jataka*. Can this be interpreted as the women's devotion towards their husbands or a lack of courage and self-confidence? Why do the seven women accept one another's killing without verbal or physical resistance?

The Pabbatupatthara *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.II, pp.88-9) tells the story of the king of the Kosala state. This *Jataka* says the king's most favorite queen had an affair with a minister of the kingdom. Seeking a solution to this problem, the king comes to Jetavana to meet Gautama Buddha. Telling a story of a previous birth, the Buddha advises the king to pardon them, if the king loves his wife and believes the minister can be of use in politics. The king pardons both. It can be noted that the king's magnanimity is inspired by political considerations.

The story of the Parantapa *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.249-52) is that of a love relationship between the queen and her servant. Attacked by an enemy state, Brahmadata, the king of Benares, finds refuge in a nearby jungle along with his pregnant wife, royal chaplain Bodhisatta and a servant called Parantapa. Whenever the king and the chaplain went deep into the woods to hunt and gather the daily needs of food, servant Parantapa was left behind to take care of the queen.

In the privacy of the jungle, the queen and the servant get attracted towards each other and develop

a physical relationship. To escape the king's wrath in the event of an expose, the queen conspires with her paramour and gets her husband killed. The chaplain, who is a witness to this heinous crime, keeps his mouth shut out of fear. Later, the queen gives birth to a son. When the prince attains the age of 16, the chaplain tells him the whole story. The prince kills the servant and reviles the mother and, finally, returns to Benares along with the chaplain and the mother. Like the Bandhanamokkha and the Pabbatupatthara *Jatakas*, the 'wicked queen' is spared in this story too.

The Maha-Paduma *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.IV pp.116-21) is another story of illicit relationship, this time attempted by the queen with her step son. When the attempt fails, the queen accuses and step son, Paduma (Bodhisatta), and prompts the king to order his execution. Prince Paduma is thrown upside down from a vertical rock but is saved by a local god who respects his truthfulness and integrity. The prince then adopts the life of an ascetic in the Himalayan forest. A wood-cutter of Benares recognizes the prince-turned-ascetic and informs the king. When the king gets to know the truth, he repents his action and orders the queen's execution.

In the context of the punishment awarded to the queen, the Maha-Paduma *Jataka* is different from the other *Jatakas* and is nearer the code of the *dharmastras*. In most of the *Jatakas* the adulterous queen is castigated, warned, reviled and pardoned, which is a special characteristic of this folk genre.

In some stories, the woman has been shown as a sign of danger to the ascetics. In these *Jatakas*, the women prompt the hermits to stray from the sacred path. The encounter between the queens and the ascetics usually takes place inside the royal palace in the absence of the king. The queen with her retinue is supposed to look after the needs and comforts of the ascetics in the absence of the king. In the Mudulakkhana *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.I, pp.161-4), an ascetic succumbs to the tempting beauty of a queen during the warm reception awarded by her. To make the ascetic aware of his fault, the king hands over his wife as a gift to the mendicant. In accordance with the king's scheme, the queen harasses the ascetic with new demands every day. When the ascetic fails to fulfil them, she ill-treats him. Finally, the ascetic realizes his mistake and apologizes to the king.

This is a story of a queen who is devoted to her husband and does not disobey him even in a difficult situation. What deserves attention is the husband's decision to gift a good-hearted wife to another man in

this *Jataka*. The personal will of the queen – whether or not she likes to go with the ascetic – finds no mention in the story.

In the same context, the Samkappa *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.II, pp.189-93) mentions a queen's attempt to arouse an ascetic and lead him astray from the path of religion. The Buddha's statement in this story reveals the then prevalent social perspective about women: "O Brother, it has happened before that these women have caused impurity to spring up even in pure beings whose sins have been stayed by the power of ecstasy. Why should not vain men like you be defiled, when defilement comes even to the pure? Even men of the highest repute have fallen into dishonor; how much more impure! Shall not the wind that shakes Mount Sineru also stir a heap of old leaves? This sin has troubled the enlightened Buddha himself, sitting on his throne, and shall it not trouble such a one as you?" (Cowell, 2001, Vol.II, p.189)

Many *Jatakas* conclusively state that the women cannot be controlled or saved. The Mudu-Pani and the Kakati *Jatakas* can be mentioned in this context. In the Mudu-Pani *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.II, pp.224-26), a princess elopes with her paternal cousin when the king gets to know about their relationship. Since the princess defies the entire security apparatus around her while running away with her lover, the *Jataka* asserts that it is not possible to keep women safe and secure or on leash. The restrictions on the princess, too, are noteworthy. The story ends with the king accepting the relationship and declaring his daughter's husband (instead of the daughter herself) as his successor. This, too, fits well into the patriarchal mode of thinking.

The Kakati *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.60-2) is a tale of Kakati, a nymphaean beauty and chief queen of Brahmadata, the king of Benares. An eagle king, who comes in the guise of a human to play dice with Brahmadata, falls in love with the beautiful queen and stealthily takes her along on way back home. The task of finding the queen is assigned to Nat musician Kuber who raises the curtain over her disappearance, whereupon the eagle king returns queen Kakati back to the king of Benares and never comes back to play dice. This *Jataka*, too, is completely silent over the personal will or opinion of queen Kakati – whether she opposes or acquiesces to, is angry or happy over, her exchange between the kings. Despite being a protagonist, she is virtually absent in the whole story. Used like a commodity, she is stolen at will and returned quietly under social pressures. She does not seem to be unhappy in any

situation. If she was happy with the eagle king, as the *Jataka* says, why didn't she express any unwillingness while being sent back to Bhrahmadatta?

"By reason of sinful passion," the message of the tale is plain and simple, "Woman cannot be guarded. There is no keeping her safe. Sages of old placed a woman in mid ocean in a palace by the Simbali Lake, but failed to preserve her honor." (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, p.60)

3. Woman as a pawn

In certain *Jatakas*, the queens and princesses have been used as a means to attain political objectives. The Cullakalinga and the Nalinika *Jatakas* reflect clear attempts to achieve political ambitions through the princesses. In the Cullakalinga story (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.1-05), the king of Dantapura (Kalinga), a brave and skilled warrior in command of a strong army, is spurred by an irrepressible desire to fight a battle. Asked to suggest a suitable target, the ministers advise the king to send all four of his beautiful daughters, dressed in attractive clothes and jewellery, on an excursion in a covered carriage escorted by an armed contingent. The king should fight whoever tries to take the princesses to his harem. The war-hungry king loses the battle and, therefore, the daughters to the king of Assaka who forces the defeated king to cough up the dowry too.

The princesses in this story appear like the sacrificial horse of the Ashwamedh yagna. The use of the veiled carriage for women, the demand for dowry, and the commissioning of charming daughters to provoke a mighty king to fight are noteworthy features of a society that underscore the status of the upper class women in ancient India. The Mahajanaka *Jataka*, too, indicates the prevalence of the veil.

In the Nalinika *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.V, pp.100-06), the king's daughter is used to invade the morality of an ascetic. The jealous king of Sakka conspires against the Bodhisatta and uses his own daughter to distract him.

In the same context, we can also cite the Abbhantara *Jataka*. (Cowell, 2001, Vol.II, pp.267-72) In this tale, king Sakka (Indra) deploys his chief queen in pursuit of the jealousy he nurses against the Bodhisatta. The queen is so driven by an intense desire to bear a son that she eagerly lends herself to be used as a pawn in the mutual rivalry between men, leaving behind any reason or sensitivity. It's a different matter that her wish is not fulfilled even by eating the magic fruit on the king's advice.

Whereas several *Jatakas* talk about childless

kings and queens dreaming of and praying for a son, no *Jataka* tale ever shows any couple desiring a daughter. The childless kings of the Culla-Palobhana *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.II, pp.227-29) and the Kusa *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.V, pp.141-64), too, aspire for a male child.

4. Devoted Queens

Several *Jatakas* – like Puta-Bhatta, Harita and Kummasapinda – tell stories of kind and virtuous queens. In the Puta-Bhatta *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.II, pp.142-44), even the extremely neglected and ignored queen of Benares remains respectful and sincere towards the king. To make the king aware of his ill behavior towards her, the Bodhisatta, a minister, deliberately enters into a conversation with the queen in the very presence of the king. Why is it that the queen never offers any alms or donations to anybody, he asks. She does not have enough to eat or cover herself, the queen replies. Is she not the chief queen? There is no meaning of being the chief queen living in demeaning conditions, she says. Under the circumstances, the minister opines, she would rather leave the king. She must not live with a person who could not reciprocate her love and respect. The Bodhisattva's words let good sense prevail upon the king who then decides to treat the queen with due respect and love in the most pleasant manner.

What is noteworthy in this story is the king's change of heart. This can be juxtaposed with a large number of *Jatakas* wherein the woman, who is presented in a negative role, remains unchanged till the end of the story because of her supposedly 'natural trait'.

In the Kummasapinda *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.244-48), the goodness and the decency of the queen is the result of her commitment to Buddhism!

In the Harita *Jataka*, a devoted queen has to go to the extent of letting an ascetic deprive her of sexual morality lest the latter feels scorned. Behaving like an obedient pet, the queen just seems to be following the king's instructions. Not only this. On his return, when the king is apprised of the ascetic's felony, he does not believe the queen and goes to check the truth with the ascetic. The ascetic as a category of humans is obviously shown to be more trustworthy than the woman which reflects on the latter's relative status in the society.

The Katthahari and Sujata *Jatakas* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.244-48) are about the beautiful women of poor families entering the royal harem by marrying the kings. In the Katthahari *Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.I, pp.27-09), a king makes love to a charming young

woman gathering wood in a grove. The king gives her a ring saying that if she gives birth to a girl she could sell the ring to bring her up. And if she is blessed with a son, she must take the ring and the child to the king. Needless to say, the girl child is of no value to the king. When the woman gives birth to a son, the king ultimately accepts the child and elevates the poor woman to the rank of the chief queen. Evidently, an ordinary woman, too, can raise her status through her physical beauty and a male child. In the *Sujata Jataka* -No. 306 (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.13-15), the king marries the beautiful daughter of a fruit seller and makes her his chief queen. Enjoying the privileges of the well-born, the queen turns arrogant whereupon the king decides to leave her. The king's trusted minister, Bodhisatta, says the women are 'by nature' arrogant and, therefore, advises the king to pardon her.

In the *Bahiya Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.251-02), the king marries a woman of the labor class. But this *Jataka* is entirely different from the *Katthahari* and the *Sujata Jataka* (No. 306) because this woman is made a queen due to her qualities rather than her physical beauty and charm.

The *Asatarupa* and *Alinacitta Jatakas* are about the queens who are committed to the kingdom. In the *Asatarupa Jataka* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.242-43), the king of Kosala attacks and kills the king of Benares, Brahmadata, and marries his wife. Brahmadata's son, prince Bodhisatta, who has managed to escape, later challenges the king of Kosala. Meanwhile, Bodhisatta's mother, who is now the queen of Kosala, sends him a message advising him to cut the supplies to the Kosala state before the battle. Bodhisatta lays siege to the Kosala kingdom for seven days whereupon the people rise in revolt and assassinate the king. In this tale also, the woman is no more than a property of men. Still she remains committed to the state. The *Alinacitta Jatakas* (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.13-17) is the story of the defence of Benares by the widow of Brahmadata from the king of Kosala and her effort to keep her son secure through the help of an elephant.

The *Sujata Jataka* -No. 269 (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp.239-42), which is different from the tale of the same title at No. 306 is the story of a crooked, haughty, violent and cruel queen who is admonished by her son Bodhisatta. This *Jataka*, in its contemporary context, mentions seven kinds of wives. (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, pp. 239-40) Gautama Buddha categorizes the kinds of wives and foretells their fate before Sujata, the daughter-in-law of Anatha-pindika, and asks her what kind she belongs to. The first kind is a heartless

one who hates her husband and squanders his hard-earned savings; the second has the nature of a thief; the third is a careless, lazy, amorous, harsh and nasty one. The fourth is a caring wife with qualities of motherhood; the fifth has the qualities of a sister; the sixth conducts herself like a friend; and the seventh is like a slave. The first three take rebirth in the hell. The rest four go to the heaven. But the last one is the greatest of all. When Sujata calls herself the slave-wife, the *Jataka* declares that the Buddha had "tamed the shrew". (Cowell, 2001, Vol.III, p.240)

The very categorization of wives and their fate itself betrays what the society expects of women and what status it accords them. Equating slavery with wifehood definitely ends all possibilities of socially-authorized decision-making by women. The ancient society clearly saw an ideal woman in the role of a slave. This 'ideal' deprived the secondary sex of its civil rights for ever.

5. *Buddhist Jatakas & Hindu dharmashastras*

The *Buddhist Jatakas* are considerably supportive of the Hindu code in the portrayal of women as crooked and uncontrollable beings. The *Hindu dharmashastras* call for harsh restrictions on women. The oldest of the *smritis* – *Manusmriti* – believes that the very nature of women necessitates strict controls over them. "Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age; (thinking), '(It is enough that) he is a man,' they give themselves to the handsome and to the ugly. (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p.198)

"Through their passion for men, through their mutable temper, through their natural heartlessness, they become disloyal towards their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded in this (world). (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p.198)

"Knowing their disposition, which the Lord of creatures laid in them at the creation, to be such, (every) man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them." (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p.198)

The *Manusmriti* and the *Jatakas* hold the independence of women in utter contempt. Both texts assert that the innate nature of women itself makes them wicked. Manu seeks to protect the family genealogy, purity of blood and legality of descendents by imposing a variety of restrictions on women. Says he, "The production of children, the nurture of those born, and the daily life of men, (of these matters) woman is visibly the cause." (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p.200)

And women who "bear children, who secure many blessings, who are worthy of worship and irradiate (their) dwellings" are like "the goddesses of

fortune (*striyah*, who reside) in the houses (of men)". (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p.200)

In the Hindu religious discourse, adultery is unpardonable. *Manusmriti* says an adulterous woman throws her guilt on her husband. (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p.186)

How a woman is to be disciplined and punished? "If a wife, proud of the greatness of her relatives or (her own) excellence, violates the duty which she owes to her lord, the king shall cause her to be devoured by dogs in a place frequented by many." (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p.191)

"Let him cause the male offender to be burnt on a red-hot iron bed; they shall put logs under it, (until) the sinner is burned (to death)", the *smriti* adds. (Doniger & Smith, 1991, p.192)

The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, too, puts adultery in the category of a serious offence and provides for severe punishment. "A relative, or a servant of an absentee husband may take the latter's wife of loose character under his own protection (*samgrihniyat* = may marry her). Being under such protection, she shall wait for the return of her husband. If her husband, on his return, entertains no objection, both the protector and the woman shall be acquitted. If he raises any objection, the woman shall have her ears and nose cut off, while her keeper shall be put to death as an adulterer." (Rangarajan, 1992, p.68) Adds Kautilya, "A Kshatriya who commits adultery with an unguarded Bráhmán woman shall be punished with the highest amercement; a Vaisya doing the same shall be deprived of the whole of his property; and a Súdra shall be burnt

alive wound round in mats." (Rangarajan, 1992, p.487)

The comparison between the *Jatakas* on the one hand and the *Manusmriti* and the *Arthashastra* on the other assumes higher significance in view of the fact that all these texts are almost contemporaneous. (Roy, 2010, p.295)

6. Conclusion

Unlike the *Manusmriti* and the *Arthashastra*, the *Jatakas* do not prescribe harsh punishments for an adulterous woman. She is usually pardoned in the *Jatakas*, after being humiliated and warned. Developed on the lines of the Buddhist ethics, the *Jatakas* are enormously influenced by the ascetic life style. Accusing woman of all kinds of misconduct and felony, the tales project her as an obstacle to the life of an ascetic who is advised to keep a distance. In most of the *Jatakas*, the male protagonist adopts the life of a hermit by the end of the story.

The Hindu *shastras*, by contrast, are very much concerned with the worldly life which is not possible without a female companion. The *dharmashastras*, therefore, seek to keep the woman on leash through an elaborate code of conduct. Beyond the spiritual-worldly contradiction, both the *Jatakas* and the *shastras* maintain a negative perspective towards women. The woman's supposed sinfulness has been interpreted as her 'innate nature' in the *Jatakas* as well as the normative literature, which is in keeping with the patriarchal mindset of the ancient Indian society, both Hindu and Buddhist. If the women of the royal families were discriminated against, what could have been the fate of the ordinary ones?

Notes

1. *The *Jataka* stories cited in this paper are from *The Jataka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* (Volume I to VI) edited by E. B. Cowell and translated by Robert Chalmers, W.H.D. Rouse, H.T. Francis & R.A. Neil; first published between 1895 and 1907, reprinted by Low Price Publications, New Delhi in 2001.
2. See Durjana Jataka (No. 64), Mahasupani Jataka (No. 77), Kosiya Jataka (No. 130), Ucchitha-Bhatta Jataka (No. 212) and Radha Jataka (No. 309).

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