



Qamar-un-Nisa<sup>1</sup> Sarfaraz Khan<sup>2</sup> Ziauddin<sup>3</sup> Imran<sup>4</sup> Zahid Nasir<sup>5</sup>

**Abstract:** *Since women are an integral and prime part of society, their role has been of key importance in shaping society. Women have been discussed in various roles and positions in the Indo-Pak subcontinent's ancient times and were later depicted in art. Buddha thought that Women were considered equal to men in their contribution to society and could attain Nirvana to become a member of the sangha or bhikkhuni as well. Using descriptive research methods, this research analyses the ancient literary sources on Buddhist society and how it is intertwined with the Buddhist art of Gandhāra to identify women's various roles – pre-wedding and post-wedding familial standing. Based on academia's diverse opinions, this study explores Buddhist attitudes towards women in a historical context with a re-appraisal of discovered sources so that continuity can be traced. It is found that in the Buddhist period, the status of women improved educationally, religiously, and socially.*

**Key Words:** Status of Women, Wife, Mother, Widow, Society and Religion, Early Buddhist Era,

## Introduction

Women have multiple roles in every society and religion; as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and grandmothers, they accomplish various religious and social duties and challenges. It would be safe to say that women make the world civilized, but unfortunately, the importance of their role has never been lauded. For centuries, women have been fulfilling their ascribed roles, which are parts of their life and their achievements, but to this day, they face undue hardships in every position compared to men. In the Buddhist period, the status of women improved educationally, religiously, and socially, after which women were deprived of the caste system introduced by Hinduism. In the Hindu cult, the woman was controlled by his father, brother, husband, and son as per condition, respectively. On the death of her husband, she used to remain unmarried, and in other cases, she used to be burnt alive with her husband. The woman's role is described in Manu's Code of Law as a woman, whether infant, young, or old, is in chains and can't exercise her pleasure even inside her house. In infancy, she depends on her father, being young on her husband while being a widow on her son. If she has a daughter and has no son, then she, in that case, is dependent upon her husband's near kin.....still, she can't exercise her life liberally in society (The Dharmaśāstra: 195, Buhler [1886](#); Olivelle, [2005](#)).

Even though women are irrefutable in the transformation of society, they have always been ignored in each role consistently. It is worth noting that women's role was crucial in every aspect of life, whether positive or negative. Were women appreciated in each of their roles? For example, in their personal lives as daughters, sisters, wives, or mothers, were they valued for their contribution to their households? Also,

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages Islamabad, Islamabad, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor of Pakistan Studies and In-charge, Center for Caucasian Asian Chinese and Pakistan Studies, University of Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer in Islamiyat, Department of Islamic and Arabic Studies, University of Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

<sup>4</sup> Assistant Professor of Sociology and Head, Department of Social and Gender Studies, University of Swat, Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

<sup>5</sup> Lecturer in Pakistan Studies, Center for Caucasian, Asian, Chinese, and Pakistan Studies, University of Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.



did women have any say in their families in a social context or merely obey and complete the assigned tasks? It is challenging to render judgment on the treatment of women in pre- and early Buddhist societies because the circumstances following changes in women's rights and the developments in women's roles throughout history differ significantly. Hence, it leads to the question: Does the collective information from art and texts by artists and authors in each society portray a fair picture of women's roles, status, and responsibilities?

This pre and early Buddhist era research is argument-based and explores gender dynamics, the status of women in pre-Buddhist culture, textual studies, and Buddhist attitudes toward women. This research also examines women's role and status in the early Buddhist period in the context of literature and Gandhāra<sup>6</sup> art (in the time frame of the 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). Gandhāra art is an unparalleled and thorough portrayal of the actual life that visually manifests the Women's role and status through sculptures, reliefs, and panels. The art of Gandhāra is critical visual evidence of the social, religious, political, and economic ways of the Buddhist society (Rahman and Khan 2020: 64; Nisa and Khan *et al.* 2023: 1250).

### Women's Status as Adults and Children in the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Period

The position of a daughter has been discussed with salient differences in ancient literature. The status of women in India was low and without honor before the arrival of Buddhism. Whether married or unmarried, a daughter was a financial burden and cause of anxiety for her family (the Mahābhārata, vako-vadha: 330, Ganguli). Girls have been considered an obligation from ancient times. They were deprived of equal opportunity to acquire knowledge. People used to prefer male babies over girls. According to Atharvaveda, Ramāyāna, and Mahābhārata, a son is observed as a means of liberation from hellfire for his parents (Dixit 2008: 132-33).

Vedic studies are replete with instances where women sacrificed for the pleasure and fondness of the gods as an essential sacred duty, like tresses (Altekar, 1938: 1-4). It shows that male babies were more beloved than daughters. Conversely, the rank of a daughter is not measured as unhappy and humiliating in society. For instance, fathers said that they could not bear their daughters' grief because they were very dear to them; they manifested their love for their daughters (The Mahābhārata, Sumbhavaparva: 175, Roy & Ganguli).

Buddha preached that women were equal to men in their contribution to society, were given a high seat of respect as mothers, and could also attain Nirvana and become members of the Sangha or Bhikkhuni. Raman stated that the Saṁskṛta (Sanskrit) epics praised the daughter as a cherished gem regardless of the patriarchal behavior in the society. As Raja Kuntibhoja and Raja Durapadi took great care of their daughters and valued them, King Janka also adored his daughter Sita (Raman 2009: 59). However, significant pieces of evidence found in the sacred literature show that the sons' mothers enjoyed more respect and status. The baby girl and mother both become the victim of loathing and disrespect in society (Raman, 2009: 52). At the same time, an example of unhappiness is that King Pasendi of Kosala was dissatisfied with the birth of a daughter (Honor 1930: 9). However, daughter's adoption was a common tradition. Sita, Kunti, Sakuntala, and Pramadvara were adopted, and their parents treated their sons-in-law as equal to their sons. Some societies considered girls a burden and a source of worry, while others gave them honor and respectably treated them. In the age of the Mahābhārata, it was common practice to sell the daughters. However, the royal sage Bhismha and Manu condemned this practice by saying that the purchase and selling of daughters and wives are not permissible (Gupta 2009: 38-39).

The question arises: why were the daughters miserably treated then? Indeed, daughters were considered a source of discomfort as it was expensive to get them married. The wedding of a young girl was a moral onus for a father who had to find a suitable partner for his daughter and was a matter of great strain for him. When the father cannot find an entitled match for her daughter, the situation becomes a

<sup>6</sup> The Sanskrit word Gandhāra is representing the geographical entity as well as the civilization, flourished in the Northwest regions of Pakistan (Peshawar and Swat valleys including Buner and Bajaur) and Eastern parts of Afghanistan from 6th century BCE to 5th century CE, left an everlasting mark on the art and cultural milieu of the region, is still visible. Successive waves from Central Asia and the advent of Islam resulted in the complete vanishing of the Buddhist faith of Gandhara, its art, and the resultant civilization in the region known to the world as "Gandhara Civilization" in the 2nd millennium CE (Khan 2018: 96; Rahman and Khan 2020: 61-62).

source of anxiety and anguish for him (Jayal 1966: 16-17). Young girls had the choice to pick their marriage partner in ancient times, but it was still considered the father's duty to find a suitable match for their daughters (Bala Kandam (the Ramāyāna): 163-164, Dutt 1891).

The tradition of self-choice, or the Svayamvara, was mutual in Kshatriya groups. Simultaneously, this matter failed to get extensive acceptance in society because the Dharmaśāstra literature is quiet on self-choice. According to the Saṁskṛta literature, it is not satisfactory for girls to choose their spouse without their parents (Altekar 1938: 65). Gandhāra art also depicted the role of self-choice of a spouse as the father of Princess Yaśodharā assembled people to select the best partner for his daughter, i.e. his son-in-law. The Buddhist literature and Gandhāra art also indicate the self-choice of Siddhārtha as well (Figure 1-2).

### Figure 1

Royal chaplain introduces yasodhara, provenance, mardan, schist, 2<sup>nd</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D, dimensions: Ht. 33.04 cm, Wd. 34.31 cm, Wt 11.8 Kg,



Source/Ref: Donated by guide mess Mardan, accession no PM- 02745. displayed in the main hall of the Peshawar Museum.

### Figure 2

The royal chaplain introduces Yasodhara, provenance, Mardan, and Schist, 2<sup>nd</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D, dimensions: Ht. 33.04 cm, Wd. 34.31 cm, Wt 11.8 Kg,



Source/Ref: Donated by guide mess Mardan, accession no PM- 02745. displayed in the main hall of the Peshawar Museum.



Another example is stated in Lalitavistara and Mahāvastu, that a father ornamented her daughter in the character of Queen Māyā (The Mahāvastu: vol.II: 16, Jones; the Lalitavistara: 130, Bays, [Figure 5,) the birth episode of the Bodhisattva Siddhārtha]).

### Figure 5

*Birth of bodhisattva Sakyamuni, provenance, unknown, grey schist, dimensions: Ht. 69 cm, Wd. 74 cm.*



Source/Ref: National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi.

In the Rig-Vedic Period, women had more freedom to select their life Partner (The Rig-Veda, X.27: 12, 1416, Jamison and Brereton 2014). Parents used to gift dowry to their daughter at the time of her marriage. In Gandhāra art, it is evident in the case of Queen Māyā (Figure 3).

### Figure 3

*Return to kapilvastu, provenance, swat, greenschist, dimensions: Ht. 30cm.*



Source: The British Museum, I.kurita. Gandharan art. 2003. Pl-IX. P.1

However, all the modern holy writings indicate the two-fold approach towards the daughter in both the worldly and spiritual life. However, women as daughters enjoyed a better position in society after the advent of Buddhism. As stated above, King Pasendi of Kosala was displeased with his 2<sup>nd</sup> wife when she gave birth to a son by saying that a woman is better than a male son if she is faithful (Hecker 1982: 6).

### Property Rights of Daughter and Sister in the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Period

Deprivation from property rights has been a critical issue among human civilizations. In patriarchal societies, either the male or the first child is conferred with the bequest, while the rest of the children,

whether male or female, used to be deprived of it. A rich, influential father of a daughter feels equally insecure as a poor man. Both were similar to losing their assets in money in marrying their daughter (Altekar 1938: 5).

Sons are preferred by parents when it comes to property. Sometimes, in the absence of a son, daughters inherited the property. On the marriage of a daughter, parents of daughters paid the price in gifts; the daughters of wealthy families brought luxurious gifts from their parents to their husbands' homes. However, the dowry was frowned upon in ancient India. Yet, by 200 BCE, most theologians were against women's right to inherit property as daughters and wives. Two epics of Mahābhārata talk about loving fathers who were concerned about giving property to their daughters (Raman 2009: 59). The dispossession of women in inheritance illustrates that women being daughters, sisters, and wives were poorly dealt with.

On the other hand, Buddhism not only encourages women's freedom of education but also inspires its disciples to give a share to their daughters as per their financial status (Jayal 1966: 21). Keeping in view the pre-Buddhist cult, the birth and wedding of the daughter and sister was considered ashamed and burden on the family (Vyas 1967: 100-101). In the Vedic literature, women had no right to inheritance. Rig-Veda states that a daughter with no brother cannot inherit her patrimonial share because women do not inherit their father's property (Rig-Veda, X.27: 12, Jamison and Brereton 2014).

Some authors (Hornor 1930; Jayal 1966; Vyas 1967) quoted supporting a daughter's right to inheritance, but others favor a son's right to the estate. In the presence of a brother, a sister was deprived of getting a share in the inheritance in Hindu society (Altekar 1938: 241). Dowry was given to a daughter known as "Kanyadhana." "Gyatideyam," and the portion of wealth given to the daughter by the great king/father, was a symbol of affection. 'Dana' was known as "Dakshina," which was a gift given as a religious duty (Jayal 1966: 65). These valuable gifts were given, almost in every society, to their daughters for successful marital life (Vyas 1967: 86).

Sisters also enjoyed respect and value in the family in ancient India. According to Manu's code of Law, brothers shall give their sisters a portion out of their share, which is one-fourth of each share; those who disagree will be considered outlaws. In Buddhism and Gandhāra art, parents play a pivotal role in the arrangements of marriages, as portrayed in the wedding ceremony of Siddhārtha and Yaśodharā (Fig. 4).

#### Figure 4

Marriage of Siddhartha and Yasodhara, provenance, sahri- bahlol, 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D, dimensions: Ht. 13.98 cm, Wd. 20.33 cm, Wt. 2.1 Kg, accession no PM- 02748,



Source/Ref: Displayed in main in the Peshawar museum.

#### Married Women's Role and Status in the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Period

Keeping in view the significance of marriage in molding social responsibilities, this tradition was given a sacred and traditional place in the Vedic period (1500 – c. 500 BC) as well (the Rig-Veda, X. 85: 1-7, 1520,



Jamison and Brereton [2014](#)). Alterkar (Alterkar [1938](#): 29–35) and Kangle (Kangle [1909](#): 115) emphasized on the marriage for better social obligations. The role of women after marriage is automatically enhanced. As Megasthenese says, Indians used to marry several women, and at the moment of marriage, the yoke of oxen used to be given, and those who could not possess it used to pay its equal amount in value (Thapar [1961](#): 87). Selection of life partner with care was considered as prime duty. Women of reputable or same status and equal rank were preferable, as the marriage of Queen Māyā and Parajāpati with King Suddhōdana and the wedding of Siddhārtha with Yaśodharā (Fig. 4). While doing a second marriage, woman of low rank was acceptable. Marriage with a woman having chastity, virginity, and of the same rank shows the dignity of women in society. Manu Smriti believed that marriage was the only means of salvation for women. Many social problems like divorce and domestic violence can be prohibited by this practice. Brahmanical society had a patriarchal and joint family system, and the lower status of wives was considered a guarantee of a blissful marital life (Dixit [2008](#): 145). The lower status or caste of women is considered a symbol of success because the women from lower ranks can quickly be suppressed by their husbands and in-laws to spend a happy and prosperous life (the Dharmaśāstra: 371, Buhler [1886](#)).

However, unlike other religions, marriage is not a pious obligation in Buddhism and is neither holy nor unholy. However, the Buddha never spoke against married life and gave advice to married couples, and he said, "It is fortunate if a man can find a suitable and understanding wife and a woman can find a suitable and understanding husband" (Dhammananda [1987](#): 4). The Buddha also pointed out the problems, difficulties, worries, responsibilities, rights, and duties of husband and wife for a happy married life (Dhammananda [1987](#): 3–11). It shows that Buddhism emphasizes mutual understanding and focuses on the husband's and wife's rights and duties, which became the source of security and contentment between them.

### Women's Role and Status as Wife in the Pre-Buddhistic and Buddhistic Period

Women have been enjoying different ranks in the family and society since early historic times. In all positions, they performed different responsibilities while simultaneously possessing various distinctions in the family. As a mother, she has been responsible for the growth and training of her children. Conversely, she has secured the most respectable place in the family as a decision-maker for her children. As daughter and wife, she has been enjoying a prominent position in the family, but at the same time, she must be obedient and dutiful to her parents and husband. Dharmaśāstra, the 'Law of Manu,' mentioned that a wife must be obedient to her husband in his life and after his death. A faithful wife worshipped her husband like a god. A devoted and sincere wife will remain with her husband after her death. A woman must beautify herself with pure flowers, roots, and fruits for her husband's desire. After her husband's death, the faithfulness of a woman is an assurance that she will enjoy the pleasures of heaven in the company of her husband. However, if she ignored her duties, she would be placed in the womb of a jackal as a penalty for her sins (the Dharmaśāstra 160–69, Buhler [1886](#)). In Vedic and post-Vedic literature, women became only the means of sustaining man's physical requirements and lost honor and respect in society, as mentioned in the Atharva hymn. In the Upanishads, women were taken as a source of appeasing man's instinct of desire and pleasure. The women's position was weakened even in the later age of Dharmaśāstra (Indra [1955](#): 10–11).

Women's status as wives was considered inferior because of various marriages prevalent in ancient societies. During the Vedic and Buddhist periods, the method of marriage was grounded in monogamy. Kings, elites, and nobles followed polygamy while polyandry was infrequent; there is only one example of polyandry wherein Princess Kanha, in the Kunala-jātaka, had five husbands. Two opinions of polyandry marriages were found under Buddhism. Some say that this system ended with the growth of Buddhism, while Pali classics negated this opinion and said that this system flourished under Buddhism. An example of polyandry under Buddhism is when Kisa-Gotami was worried about her husband's other wives; she did not want to share her house with them. The second example is when Utpalvarana left her home and the baby because her mother had an illicit relationship with her husband; she couldn't bear the thought of sharing her husband with another woman, let alone her mother (Indra [1955](#): 69). It indicates that such a marriage system became a source of anxiety and sorrow instead of pleasure and happiness.

According to epic literature, if a man had several wives of the same caste, the eldest wife had more rights over her husband than the junior wives (Indra 1955: 62). However, women enjoyed a loveable and delightful place in the lives of their husbands. Still, the caste system was prevalent in Indian society that split a wife's position according to her caste, which was degrading and humiliating for women. Women enjoyed protection, maintenance, property, and conjugal rights. Particularly in Indian society, the husband feels pride in fulfilling his wife's desires and wishes to do it at his best. The word *Bharata* used for a husband means 'supporter,' 'nourisher,' or 'pati,' and 'protector.' For the wife, the word *Bhārāya* is used to nurture him by husbanding all the family assets. Therefore, these words prove that a husband must be responsible for esteeming his wife. Also, he must provide her with all the ease of life according to her wishes and desires and pay attention to his wife's conjugal rights during the good season (the *Mahābhārata Sambhavarparva*: 220: Roy & Ganguli 1983). The titles used for husbands like 'Pati' or 'master of the house' show him as a protector, not a dictator. Also, women are called 'Patni, *Gr̥hapatnī*,' and 'Indrani,' which show their authority and splendor in their houses (Bader 1925: 49-50).

Despite all these positions of wives, the *Arthaśāstra* allows men (Kangle 1909: 117) to remarry if the wife is infertile or bears only daughters or dead children. Still, he will wait for some years; however, the period of wait is different in changed conditions, but in violation of the rule, he has to hand over the woman's property, dowry, and a fine of twenty-four *panas*. After paying this, a man can be a polygamist because women are there to bore sons. A man cannot approach an infertile woman, a woman eager for religious life, a mother of a dead offspring, or whose menstruation has stopped or is leprous or senseless. Similarly, a woman can leave her partner if he is characterless, overseas, powerless, commits a transgression against the ruler, or is unsafe for her life.

### Women's Role and Status as Mothers in the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Period

In the Rig-Vedic society, motherhood was highly appreciated, and women enjoyed equal rights with men. As mothers, women were treated with respect because they were the prime preceptors of children. She was greater in coaching and uplifting her children than their father (Raman 2009: 27; Indra 1955: 3). In Buddhism, a woman, as a mother, enjoyed an unassailable position and was treated with great honor and reverence. Under Buddhism, she can enjoy her individual life independently until her death; her complete dependence on men gradually diminishes; hence, she can enjoy her own identity and place in society. Motherhood is their sole and natural function. Women became respectable after getting married. When they bore sons, they got an important place in society (Hornor 1930:3-4). *Māyā*, *Parajāpatī*, and *Yaśodharā* also enjoyed a respectable position in *Gandhāra* art as mothers in various episodes of the life of Buddha. We can ascertain women's status as mothers from the Buddhist epoch, where men used their mothers' names for their identification (Hornor 1930: 7). *Gandhāra* art also provides ample examples of the love of a mother. In the episode of the return of Karnataka and Chandaka, *Parajāpatī*, the foster mother of Buddha, became unconscious in her son's grief. She also used all her potential to stop him from renunciation. Also, *Yaśodharā* sacrifices her whole life for her son *Rāhula* when her husband leaves the palace; she does not marry again for her son and husband (Figure 8).

#### Figure 8

*Return of Chandaka, provenance, unknown, schist, dimensions: Ht.33, Wd. 55,*



Source: Swat Museum, Pakistan



A mother is equally treated, and her kids are loved without discrimination of son and daughter. The story of the Anjulimala/ Angulimala is an excellent example of a mother's love for her son. He was a robber, so his father disowned him, but his mother accepted and loved him and tried to stop his son from his illegal activities. Ubbiri tells the story of a mother's love for a daughter when her daughter dies. Another example is the grief and worry of Sumedha's parents when she decides to enter religious life; even her father, who loves her a lot and wants to see her get married is stunned (Hornor 1930: 13). It is interesting to mention here that Sumedha has been mentioned as a Brahman ascetic in Dīpamkara Jataka and has been depicted in Gandhāra art as paying homage to Dīpamkara Buddha (Rahman and Khan 2020: 67–68). The Buddhist art of Gandhāra also depicts such other examples. The father of Queen Māyā decorates the Lumbinī grove for the ease and convenience of her daughter. Similarly, the father of Yaśodharā arranges a competition to choose the best man for his daughter in the presence of Yaśodharā (Figure 1).

According to the Mahāyāna Buddhist text, society does not allow pregnant women to renounce familial responsibility in the name of religion. Motherhood is not religious because women want to become mothers for societal purposes, not as an ethical obligation. The Hindu text mentions the sacred status of a woman through her functions as a mother. Nevertheless, the Mahāyāna Buddhists considered motherhood an element of pain, suffering, bondage, and dependence, while religion freed human beings from these situations. These women/mothers are out of faith due to the suffering and hardships that accrue to motherhood. In comparison, Hinduism and Confucianism consider motherhood as holy and sacred because of the difficulties and sufferings a woman bears to become a mother (Paul 1997: 61).

Mothers in Indian society enjoyed a very respectable position because they bore hardships for their children. This act of the Indian woman presents her heroic and self-sacrificing womanhood (Hornor 1930: 14). Women became respectful from the first step of their motherhood as the expecting women enjoyed extra care, respect, and attention, not only in the family but also in society. Māyā is also depicted in Gandhāra art as a pregnant mother with great care, love, and adoration (Figure 5 Above).

Mother is also considered important in family matters, particularly in affairs related to her children, such as Prince Sudāna/Sudatta/Viśvantara's wife, Madrī (Khan 2016: 58–60). Gandhāra art also represents examples of women's participation in family matters. Queen Māyā and Parajāpatī share the identical seat with King Suddhōdana in the royal assembly in the episode of interpretation of the dream of Queen Māyā and the horoscope of Boddhisatva Siddhartha (Nisa and Khan et al. 2023: 348; Figure 6&7).

## Figure 6

*Interpretation of the dream of Queen Maya, provenance, sikri, schist, dimensions: Ht. 18 in, Wd. 14 in, Dt 2 in, accession no G-16.*



Source: Displayed in the main hall of Lahore Museum.



### Figure 7

The horoscope of the bodhisattva Siddhartha, provenance, unknown, schist, dimensions: Ht. 13 in, Wd, 8 1/2 in, Dp. 2 in, accession no: G-32.



Source: Lahore Museum, Pakistan.

### Women's Right to Divorce in the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Period

According to Hindu religion, after marriage, a woman transfers bodily and spiritually from her paternal family to her husband's home. From Aryans to the Epic Age and Mahābhārata, there is no evidence of divorce. The term was first introduced in the Arthaśāstra but not in all conditions, only in extraordinary emergencies. In case a woman hates her husband, has passed seven menstrual cycles, and loves another man, she must insistently return the endowments and ornaments to her husband and allow him to live with another woman. Similarly, if a man hates his wife, he must take her wife to a sage woman, her parents or guardians. However, where a man denies having physical relations with her wife, and any witness or spy attests to the relationship between them, the husband has to pay twelve pannas as a penalty. A wife having a conflict with her husband cannot nullify the marriage without the husband's will and vice versa. However, if they both have a conflict, they can divorce each other. If a man feels any insecurity regarding her wife and wants a divorce, he has to return everything he received at marriage. If a woman feels any danger from her husband and wants a divorce, she has to forego all his property and rights. The alliances which took place under the first four conditions cannot be nullified (Kangle 1909: 118-9).

The Smṛiti literature also negates the right of divorce to women (Indra 1955: 94). The Dharmasāstra literature allows a man to remarry even when he is currently married. He can completely disown the first wife. It shows the prevalence of divorce before the Christian era. The Atharvaveda also attests to the remarriage of women (Altekar 1938: 38). In the light of this text, we know that divorce was not common, and it was allowed in cases of infidelity or unfaithfulness.

In Buddhism, woman was never considered a creature of burden, and they did not run the danger of being put away because they were wicked workers. Divorce was settled between the husband and wife because the marriage did not require ethical or legal approval. Affection and care are the main objects of marital life. When husbands and wives hate each other and are not eager to live with each other, then divorce is allowed (Hornor 1930: 62-63). In such circumstances where the relationship between husband and wife is not working, divorce is considered a blessing because otherwise, the whole family suffers due to the husband and wife. However, despite that, Altekar (Altekar 1938: 85) states that apart from the Buddhist culture, divorce was not a common practice among the particular cultural segments of the society. Divorce was non-existent in some cultures, and once a woman was married, there was no way out of the relationship in previous eras. It is still considered taboo in today's times, but women can choose to get a divorce if they are unhappy in the marriage. However, the label of divorce does bring other societal



challenges, such as raising kids, finding another suitable partner, and the toll it takes on their self-esteem and confidence.

### Women's Role and Status as Widow in the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Period

The subject of the unmarried girl was not as sensitive as the subject of the widow's marriage in ancient societies. Ancient cultures had numerous social and religious concerns regarding the position and remarriage of the widow. In the case of widowhood, she was not allowed to remarry by her own choice. If she wanted to remarry, she had to choose her consort among her in-laws (Thapar 1961: 88-9). After the growth of Hindu society, this tradition/practice led to severe arguments on the subject. Women were allowed to remarry under severe circumstances of suffering and pain. The Vedic text also contains examples regarding women's remarriage. The term Punarbhū refers to a woman who has remarried. Apart from the Vedic version, the Dharmaśāstra and Smṛiti texts also accepted the remarriage of women.

Marriage was considered compulsory for widows because men's deaths were frequent due to clashes among Indo-Aryans and non-Aryans. There is clear proof of the widow's remarriage in the hymens that reflects respect for women's reproductive power, essential for the community's existence. A funeral hymen advised a young widow on the grief of her husband's body to spend a healthy life, perhaps even remarry. Apart from this, Rig-Vedic Aryans did not force their widows to sacrifice themselves on their husband's funeral pyre (*Sati*). This custom was established in the fifth century CE (Raman 2009: 33). Many evidences are found in the Mahābhārata that negates the tradition of *Sati*, and women were allowed to remarry and spend a peaceful life. However, the practice of widow remarriage was also recognized in the Arthaśāstra. After the decline of the joint family system, widows were considered a burden in their in-laws' homes but even intolerable in their parents' houses.

Thus, widows led a depressed life, and in such circumstances, the remarriage of widows became tolerable. In the Vedic age, widows lived with their husband's younger brothers or other men to produce a son. This custom is still prevalent in some parts of India. There is no reference to the widow's remarriage in the Rig Vedic age in the Atharvaveda (Indra 1955: 103-4). According to the Mahābhārata, a widow spends her life in sadness and sorrow. She has no purpose in life after the death of her husband. She spends her life in mental agony and a broken heart in the pain of separation. The theory of lousy karma and rebirth is associated with widowhood and states that she has spent a sinful former life. That is why she spends a torturous widow life (the Mahābhārata Sambhavaparva: 248, Roy & Ganguli 1983).

Mahābhārata also illustrates the veritable attitudes towards widows. They are dependent on their in-laws or male members of their parents or in-laws' family. The tradition of polyandry (*Niyoga*) is found in the first Saṁskṛta text. This custom was introduced in Indo-Aryan society. For instance, in the epic of the Mahābhārata, the heroine Durapadi was married to five Pandava brothers (the Mahābhārata Adiparva: 20, Roy & Ganguli 1983). However, polyandry allowed some sexual liberty to women and allowed them to remarry and lead a respectable life in society (Jayal 1966: 157). Widowhood was considered a disgrace in Indian society (Ziauddin 2020: 153).

The Mahābhārata presents the widow Kunti as a custodian of her sons. However, in the classical era, the family's male members considered widows a threat because they could be dependent upon them and could reduce their share by taking their husband's property. They were also considered a burden and menace to family's respect because they were a source of attraction for outside males. Despite these characteristics, *Sati* was not commonly practiced in society, and there are examples of widows remarrying (Raman 2009: 62-3). These pieces of evidence represent the low standard of widows in families and society as well.

The Vedic texts declared women to be incapable of inheriting any property, and widows' rights to receive their share of a husband's assets were unrecognized. In early times, the custom of *Niyoga* was widespread, so there were fewer widows without sons. The majority of widows were able to get their husband's share, if not as their heirs, but at least indirectly because of their minor sons. Most of the Dharmaśāstra writers adopted the Vedic opinion that a widow cannot have ownership of the husband's property, which usually a wife acquires after marriage; this right is nullified when the husband is deceased (Altekar 1938: 250-51). After the death of their husbands, women became socially weak, and they had to

renunciate all the colors and joys of life. In ancient times, widows preferred to join the Sangha to maintain their respect and status.

The widowed mother was considered the estate's sole controller, though the son was the legal inheritor and owner. Mothers enjoyed a very high admiration in Hindu culture, so their rights were recognized much earlier than those of wives or widows (Altekar 1938: 272). Widows and divorced women joined the Sangha in Therīgāthā. There is a story of Isidasi, a woman who married a wealthy merchant. She provided him her best services of cooking and clothing, approaching him respectfully and dressing him as would a servant. Despite all her services, her husband rejected her. She then married twice more but was rejected subsequently. Later, she joined the Sangha and learned the triple knowledge (Therīgāthā: 400-432, 34-143: Rhys Davids & Norman). The women become downtrodden when their husbands and their families treat them as inferiors and try to harass them. Utpalvarana and Amrapāli are two primary examples of such malicious behavior. In Zoroastrian Law, the childless widow has to remarry first to beget an heir for her husband. Unlike the Hindu Niyoga, this second marriage is called Cakar or Cagar. It is a valid marriage but a sin in Manu smṛiti because the widow remains the first husband's property in the afterlife. The children of the cagar-marriage would all belong to the first husband. The "chaste" Niyoga prevalent in the dharma texts must have been frustrating and humiliating for both partners. The next moral step was the prohibition of the Niyoga altogether, which left the childless widow, whether she was an adult or still a child, at the mercy of her in-laws without the prospect of consolidation and support that she might find in a child. She had no choice but to live a chaste and ascetic life. She waited to go to heaven and join her husband, whom, if she had been betrothed as a small child, she might not even have known in this life (Schmidt 1987: 68-75).

Widows were hapless creatures and objects of pity. Thus, all the utterances of the widow are full of self-pity. In the great Epics, a widow's sorrow is compared to the sadness of a person who has lost his son, and this statement is forwarded by an enumeration of eight other types of pain. Therefore, the widow's grief was not considered the greatest sorrow of society. She may believe in the theory of her "karmas." However, it is significant to note that she has not been enumerated among the sinners (the Mahābhārata Sambhavarpa: 247-248, Roy & Ganguli 1983). The happiness and the success of the married life depended upon her karma. If a woman's husband died, it was considered the result of her bad karmas, and she was regarded as a sinner and a bad omen. Conversely, if the wife died before her husband, then the man did not forgo anything in his life and enjoyed the same position and honors of experience. He was not considered a sinner or bad luck in the Vedic age. Widows used to follow funeral processions in carriages. Step by step, certain restrictions were imposed on their freedom, and women became more delicate, dependent, and emotional for academic education. It became impossible for them to attend the funerals, and this practice was entirely abandoned. According to Manu's code of Law, the King should protect the estate's inheritance to infertile women. Women without a son or family are devoted to their husbands. If their in-laws usurp their property in their life, a righteous King should discipline them with the punishment befitting of a thief (the Dharmasāstra: 28, Olivelle 168).

Apart from this, if a widow did not commit *Sati*, she could not enjoy her life like a married woman in society. She was not permitted to wear colorful clothes or jewelry, and she ate and fasted at specific times and slept on mats on the floor. In Hinduism, a widow's presence was considered a bad omen in the event of birth, naming of a child, marriage, and death. However, in Buddhism, she was not swamped with such rituals (Hornor 1930: 72-3). Not only this, but women being widows were deprived in other Semitic and Non-Semitic religions (Ziauddin 2021:82-83).

## Conclusion

All the contemporary sacred writings indicate mixed attitudes towards women in both worldly and spiritual spheres. There are various opinions in society regarding women's status; some consider them unholy and a burden, while others give them a respectable place not only in the community but also in religion. Before the advent of Buddhism, women's position in India was grievous, and women's well-being and respect were not considered necessary. Women's rights in the cycle of life, right from the moment they were born as daughters to becoming mothers, changed considerably, and they always had to depend on males. Women's rights as daughters, wives, mothers, stepmothers, daughters-in-law, and widows were non-



existent or were barely considered or enforced as compared to men. Consequently, women had no place in society from the ancient period due to men's overwhelming dominance. The whole literature is filled with opposing and differing views regarding women's social, domestic, religious, and inherited roles and positions.

Women were not given autonomy in the social order of Indian society, and the deprivation of women in inheritance and ascetic restrictions in various domestic matters indicated the petty and slight position of women in society. However, some pre-Buddhist epoch texts suggest that women were measured as inferior and honourless to men.

However, after the arrival of Buddhism, women were treated more humanely than in other societies. When Buddhism flourished, women's lives changed for the better because Buddha's teachings provided equality for all human beings regardless of their gender. These norms are still in practice. Times have changed, but the thinking of every generation of each era has remained the same. Society has always given preferences to males in every role, and without them, every household has been considered incomplete because they are the heirs to their lineage. Such discrimination exists even today in Indo-Pakistan culture, as seen during the distribution of wealth between males and females after marriage, where the females often do not get their share fairly. Either their share is considered paid in the form of dowry to the groom, or if they demand or receive their share, they are not treated with respect and do not have any say in parental family matters. Even in present times, when society has flourished, and gender equality and rights are at the forefront of each society and religion, women are still not considered equal to their male counterparts in many aspects of Indian and Pakistani society. Even though we are heading in the right direction, there is still plenty of work to be done to spread awareness about women's rights and equality.

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