Journal of Research and Development
A Multidisciplinary International Level Referred and Double Blind Peer Reviewed, Open Access
ISSN : 2230-9578 | Website: https://jrdrvb.org Volume-18, Issue-8| August-2026

Original Article

Property, Profession, and Patriarchy: Women's Economic and Social Life in India during Age of Buddhism

Kavita Bhartiya[1], Dr. Sunil Kumar[2]
[1]Research Scholar, U. P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Prayagraj
[2]Assistant Professor, U. P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Prayagraj
Email: bhartikavita689@gmail.com

Manuscript ID:
JRD -2026-180803
ISSN: 2230-9578
Volume 18
Issue 8
Pp. 24-27
August- 2026
Submitted: 15 July. 2026
Revised: 25 July 2026
Accepted: 10 August 2026
Published: 31 August. 2026

Abstract-

One of the best ways to understand a civilization, appreciate its strengths, and see its weaknesses is to study the history of women's position and status in that society. Civilization largely depends on how well a society can control the strongest and most selfish human instincts. In the early stages of society, no other group as important as women was made so completely dependent on men. The extent to which that dependence was willingly reduced over time is a good way to measure how much a community values justice and fairness. Marriage laws and customs show us whether men treated women as things to be bought and sold or as war prizes, or whether they understood that a wife is truly her husband's valued partner. Her cooperation is essential for a happy and successful family life. Rules about sexual morality show us the moral standards of a society. They also show how willing men were to be judged by the same standards they set for women. How much voice women were given in choosing their marriages, running their homes, and owning property shows how well men were able to control natural human desires for self-interest, money, power, and ownership. How a community treats its widows shows how much sympathy and compassion it has.

Keywords: *Women, Economic, Stridhana, marriage, inheritance*

Introduction-

The study of the evolution of the proprietary rights of women is a very fascinating subject. It has a vital importance to the historian of the woman, for economic independence and prosperity have usually an important bearing on the well-being of a class. He will now be surprised to learn that, in spite of this general setback, their proprietary rights were gradually becoming more and more extensive in course of time. In early times proprietary rights of women were recognised very tardily in almost all civilisations. This was the case specially in patriarchal societies. For a long time there was no question of the woman holding any property; she herself was an item in the moveable property of the husband or the patriarch. In India too in very early times women were regarded as chattel. They were given away as gifts in the Vedic age, as would appear from several hymns, which glorify the gifts of generous donors.[1]

Proprietary Rights of the Wife

Let us now consider the proprietary rights of the wife, vis-à-vis her husband. The theory approved by the Hindu culture as early as the Vedic age was that the husband and the wife should be the joint owners of the household and its property. The husband was required to take a solemn vow at the marriage that he would never transgress the rights and interests of his wife in economic matters. The theory of the joint ownership of the couple should have led to a number of important corollaries, and fortified the position of the wife against an unreasonable or vicious husband. This, however, does not seem to have taken place. One Dharmasutra writer concludes from the joint ownership theory that the wife is entitled to incur normal expenditure on the household during her husband's absence. Another concedes to her a third share of the husband's property in case she was superseded unjustly.[2] But no further deductions were drawn. The theory of joint ownership helped the wife only in securing a number of minor rights and privileges. It invested her with an absolute right of maintenance against the husband.

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)
This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work noncommercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations ae licensed under the idential terms.

Address for correspondence:
Kavita Bhartiya, Research Scholar U.P. Rajarshi Tandon Open University, Prayagraj

How to cite this article:
Kavita B & Sunil K. (2026). Property, Profession, and Patriarchy: Women's Economic and Social Life in India during Age of Buddhism. Journal of Research and Development, 18(8), 24–27. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22893204

Quick Response Code:
Website: https://jrdrvb.org/
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.22893204
OPEN ACCESS

Journal of Research and Development
A Multidisciplinary International Level Referred and Double Blind Peer Reviewed, Open Access
ISSN : 2230-9578 | Website: https://jrdrvb.org Volume-18, Issue-8| August-2026

A verse attributed to Manu, but not to be found in the extant Manusmriti, goes to the extent of declaring that the husband ought to maintain the wife, even if there were no family property. He may have recourse even to questionable means, if there was no other alternative. The husband could not proceed on a journey without making proper provision for her maintenance and the household expenditure. If he married a second wife, the first one had to be properly provided for. If the wife had the misfortune of being assaulted, the liability of the husband to maintain her did not come to an end. Early jurists no doubt held it improper for a wife to vindicate her claims against the husband in a court of law; later jurists like Vijnnesvara, however, differed from this view and maintained that if a husband abandons a virtuous wife, or wilfully misappropriates her property and refuses to restore it,[3] she can move a court of law to get her grievances redressed.[4] It was only with reference to immoveable property that Hindu society was for a long time unwilling to invest the wife with full or exclusive ownership.[5]

Stridhana or Womens Special Property

As far as moveable property like ornaments, jewelry, costly apparel, etc. was concerned, women's right to own it was recognised at a very early date. All this property went under the category of Stridhana or Women's Special Property. The story of its development is a very interesting chapter in the history of Hindu law. It is very difficult to define Stridhana precisely; Hindu jurists only proceed to describe its different varieties. Suffice it to state that the term is used to denote property over which women are allowed to have their own more or less absolute sway in normal times. In its origin, Stridhana was vitally connected with the custom of the bride-price (sulka). We have already shown that this custom is of hoary antiquity, and that it continued to persist for a long time in spite of its vehement denunciation. The custom was no doubt a bad one, but it had one relieving feature. It helped the development of Stridhana. Owing to the affection, which parents naturally felt for their daughters, they used to return usually a part, and sometimes even the whole, of the bride-price to the bride, to be enjoyed by her as her separate estate during her own life. If she died leaving some children behind, her father would not object to the property devolving upon them, as they were also his own grandchildren. If, however, the daughter left no issue behind, her father would claim the property back from the son-in-law, who was expected to contract a fresh marriage in due course.[6] The Vedic literature is silent about the precise scope of Stridhana. We get an idea of its scope only from the Dharmshastra works. Manu is the earliest writer to give a comprehensive description of Stridhana. According to him it consists of six varieties; (1-3) gifts given by the father, the mother and the brother at any time; (4) gifts of affection given by the husband subsequent to the marriage; (5-6) and presents given by anybody either at the time of the marriage, or at the time when the bride is taken to her new home.[1] Gifts under most of these categories would consist usually of ornaments and costly apparel, and Manu is very vehement in denouncing those who would deprive women of these presents after their husbands' death.[7] The very conception of Stridhana shows that women could normally get property only by way of gifts from their relations at or subsequent to their marriage. There was no possibility of their acquiring any estate either by inheritance or by partition.

Womens Right of Inheritance-

Among the female heirs the brotherless daughter was the first to succeed in establishing her right of inheritance. Circumstances were more favourable for the recognition of her right than that of the wife or the widow.[8]
A brotherless daughter to inherit her father's estate continued to be recognised down to c. 400 B.C. In the Therigatha we come across an interesting incident. We find a mother trying to dissuade her daughter Sundari from entering the nunnery by pointing out that she had become a full heir to her father's extensive estate as the latter had become a monk; she should therefore think of marriage and pleasure, and not of nunnery and penance. It is clear from this story that a brotherless daughter was recognised as an heir in north-eastern India during the 5th century B.C.[9]

Womens Position in Political and Public Life-

In the Vedic times also women seem to have been excluded from Sabha or assemblies. In the enumeration of ministers for a King's Council which generally performed functions of advisory nature, we do not come across a suggestion by the ancient law-givers that women too should be appointed as ministers in the Council. Of the eight executive officers of the Crown mentioned by Shukra as well as Manu not one of them is suggested to be a woman. The reasons, for the exclusion of women, as given by the latter, are that they divulge secrets of the state and are incapable of offering any sound advice on complicated problems of government.[10] Chanakya, the reputed authority on ancient Indian Polity also, does not make any specific recommendation that women should be confided with duties of the state.[11] The truth is, that in ancient India, women were never thought fit for any other sphere than the household life. The intricate questions of administration and government were held to be beyond their comprehension. All that they could understand and grasp, was the management of homes where they were supreme rulers, governors, sovereigns and what not. Beyond the four walls of their houses they had no duty to perform, no business to meddle in. This is the verdict of the sacred texts—a reference to the hymns on marriage in Rigveda and Atharva Veda can make the point clear. The repeated word garhapatya in connection with the married life of a woman amply bears out the idea that the home was the only sphere wherein activities of women were primarily centred.[12]

Journal of Research and Development
A Multidisciplinary International Level Referred and Double Blind Peer Reviewed, Open Access
ISSN : 2230-9578 | Website: https://jrdrvb.org Volume-18, Issue-8| August-2026

Womens Condition under Buddhism-

Women's condition under Buddhism, we need only add a few words about the legal aspect of the question. Though the Buddha did not lay down Specific rules with regard to women's proprietary or inheritance rights, yet from certain practices, it appears that the legal privileges enjoyed by the fair sex in ancient Hindu ages, were kept intact to considerable extent. Thus we meet with ample testimony in the canonical literature to the effect that women as wives with their householders' had co-equal authority over all property, could make a gift of anything independently without seeking approval of any Second person. As for instance, Vishakha, who owned fabulous riches distributed a large amount of them in charity among almsmen and women. In this exercise of her legal rights, she felt restricted by no sense of any iniquitous treatment, even widows were allowed to inherit property of their husband and manage it till the end of their life.[13]

Womens Education and Professions-

The great grammarian, Panini, who lived before 500 B.C., in his work named Ashtadhyayi cites illustrations of his grammatical rules to show how women were going in for regular Vedic studies like men. Thus the formation kathini means a female student of the Katha Sakha of the Veda in that particular recension. Similarly, the term bahvrichi means a female student who is well versed in many hymns. Learned ladies of those days naturally figured and functioned as teachers. Katyayana, the commentator on Panini applies the epithets adhyapika, upadhyayi, upndhyaya or acharya to them. Some grammatical passages show that women had other careers open to them apart from a mere literary career. The great grammarian, Patanjali, author of that monumental masterpiece known as Mahabhashya, uses the formation saktiki to indicate a female bearer of a spear. In this connection, we are reminded of the Amazonian bodyguard of armed women employed in his palace by the Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, as described by Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador to his Court. Similarly, Kautilya in his Arthasastra, which is also taken to be a document of Mauryan history, refers to women soldiers armed with bows and arrows (striganaih dhanvibhih). Lastly, it may be noted that there is a sculpture at Bharhut of about the 2nd century B.C. which represents a woman carrying a standard on horseback as belonging to the vanguard of the cavalry.[14]

Women in Buddhism

Buddhism kept up the traditions of Brahmanical religion in according to womanhood an honoured place in social life. Women were made eligible for admission to what was known as the Bhikshuni-Sangha, the Order of Nuns, which opened to them avenues of culture and social service and ample opportunities for public life. The young Buddhist Church of those early days was also able to attract the sympathy and generosity of many a lay lady. The munificence of the matron Visakha is equalled only by that of the merchant prince Anathapindika. Visakha was the head of an illustrious band which included names like Ambapali of Vaisali and Suppiya of Qanaras. The Buddha fully appreciated the hospitality and offers of financial support from individual women of sincere religious devotion. But apart from these remarkable characters among Buddhist lay women, the Order of Nuns was the nursery which produced many learned women, some of whom became teachers of junior nuns on account of proficiency in the sacred texts. For instance, the Chullavagga (x, 8) mentions that a bhikkuni was the pupil of another bhikkhuni named Uppalavanna. Some Buddhist nuns achieved great distinction by the prominent part they took in the work of the early Buddhist Reformation. In the commentary called Manorathapurani of Buddhaghosha on the Anguttara Nikaya there is an interesting chapter concerning those ladies whom the Buddha regarded as his chief disciples. Among them were several who entered the Order and were known as theris. Thirteen such theris were specially mentioned by the Buddha for their spiritual merit. The most distinguished of them was Dhammadinna. Her husband, on renouncing the world offered her untold wealth. She proudly declined and herself took to religious life, later becoming a teacher. It is stated that she attained such spiritual wisdom that her instruction was sought by her husband himself. She would solve difficult metaphysical questions with the ease of "one who severs the stalk of a lotus with the sword."[15] Some of these women leaders of the Buddhist Reformation are mentioned in the commentary of Dharmapala on the Therigatha. They are Soma, whom the Buddha converted at Rajagriha; Anupama of peerless beauty, daughter of wealthy parents who, "cutting off the glory of her hair, entered on the lonely paths of life and wandered forth to lose the sense of home"; Queen Khema; Sujata, the wife of a wealthy citizen who in the quest for Truth renounced worldly happiness; Chapa, who by her conduct drove her husband to be a monk till she herself, chastened by the separation, followed her husband to the Order; Kisagautami, whom the Buddha found to be fit enough for appointment as Superintendent of the Convent at Jetavana; Sundari, a beautiful heiress, who renounced the world on her brother's death. Some of these theris after attaining enlightenment took to missionary work for their faith.

The most renowned of these women leaders was Patachara, the bereaved mother who gave solace to 500 other bereaved mothers. One day, as they were having a meal, a wretched woman approached them for alms, a homeless, childless widow disowned by her people on account of an infectious disease. Immediately the Sisters of Mercy, "the saviours and good shepherds of the heedless and the lost", adopted her as one of their own. Some of these nuns are mentioned as being successful speakers and preachers, for example Sukka, to hear whom people flocked. It will be apparent from these examples that the Buddhist convents opened out to women opportunities for education, self-culture and varied spheres of social service, in which they made themselves the equals of men, supplem-enting their work in the spread of their faith.[16]

Journal of Research and Development
A Multidisciplinary International Level Referred and Double Blind Peer Reviewed, Open Access
ISSN : 2230-9578 | Website: https://jrdrvb.org Volume-18, Issue-8| August-2026

Widow Tonsure-

The custom of the tonsure of widows, which is a very ugly and unfortunate one, is of recent origin and growth. The motive underlying it was to make the outward appearance of the widow in harmony with the ideal of renunciation (sannyasa), that she was expected to follow. Monks and nuns used to shave their heads; it was felt that widows should do the same. It was hoped that this would help in creating an ascetic atmosphere around her, so necessary for her resolution to lead a celibate life. The procedure was calculated to destroy the beauty of face; it was thought that it would incidentally afford the widow a greater protection against the unwanted attentions of undesirable characters. Niyoga and remarriage were permitted to the widow down to c. 500 A.D. The custom of tonsure could obviously have not arisen up to that time. Among the duties of widows which are described at great length in early Smritis, the shaving of the head does never figure.[17]

Economic Independence and Womens Well-Being-

The study of the evolution of the proprietary rights of women is a very fascinating subject. It has a vital importance to the historian of the woman, for economic independence and prosperity have usually an important bearing on the well-being of a class.[18]

Conclusion

This article offers a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted roles and rights of women in the Buddhist era. It examines how social norms and dhamma teachings influenced women's lives, from their access to education and spiritual development to the opportunities and constraints that shaped their experiences. The study delves into family and community dynamics, addressing women's roles and rights within the household, their marital relationships, and their pathways to renunciation. It also explores the legal and institutional aspects of marriage, celibacy, divorce, and property ownership, while considering women's rights to inheritance, maintenance, and independent wealth known as stridhana. The article emphasizes the progressive elements of gender relations in early Buddhism, including the establishment of the bhikkhuni sangha that granted women the right to ordination, spiritual training, and leadership within the monastic order. It also briefly discusses women's roles as lay patrons, teachers, and guardians, and their rights to adoption and maintenance. Overall, it provides a thorough overview of the legal and social status of women in the Buddhist era, revealing both the egalitarian ideals and the complexities of their position in society.

Reference

1. Altekar, A. S. (1938). The position of women in Hindu civilization: From prehistoric times to the present day (p. 253). Culture Publication House, Banaras Hindu University. (Reprint: Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987)
2. Altekar, 1938, p.255
3. Altekar, 1938, p.256
4. Altekar, 1938, p.257
5. Altekar,1938, p.258
6. Altekar,1938, p.259
7. Altekar,1938, p.262
8. Altekar, 1938, p.280
9. Altekar, 1938, p.282
10. Indra, M.A. (1940). The status of women in ancient India (p. 177) The Minerva Bookshop , Lahore
11. Indra, 1940,p.178
12. Indra, 1940,p.179
13. Indra, 1940,p.298
14. Mookerji, R. K. (1958). Women in ancient India. In T. A. Baig (Ed.), Women of India (pp. 6). Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
15. Mookerji, 1958,p.7
16. Mookerji, 1958,p.8
17. Altekar, A. S. (1938). The position of women in Hindu civilization: From prehistoric times to the present day (p. 159). Culture Publication House, Benares Hindu
18. University. (Reprint: Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987)
19. Altekar, A. S. (1938). The position of women in Hindu civilization: From prehistoric times to the present day (p.212). Culture Publication House, Benares Hindu
20. University. (Reprint: Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987)