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Approach to the Study of Women in Sanskrit Buddhist Narrative Literature

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- 1.0. Investigations and deliberations depicting the position and characteristic features of ancient and mediaeval Indian women have gained a wide currency in the last two centuries. Literary art of a period perhaps is the best apparatus in tracing the real historical perspective. Character of every social being, irrespective of gender, is often monitored by one's socio-cultural and economic status. Moreover, individual's characteristic features pave the way towards the shaping of one's future social status. Therefore, owing to the diversity of status and character no average evaluation could be anticipated regarding the state of women of ancient India. Although the position of women in ancient India is yet a debatable issue, it is beyond doubt that sincere thoughts on the psychological aspects and characteristic features, especially of women are reflected almost in every form of Indian literary creation.
- 2.0. The earnest endeavour of the Buddhist story-tellers in portraying several women characters is clearly revealed through the Buddhist narrative works, like *Jātakas* and *Avadānas*. That the narrators were faithful enough in documenting the real facts could be assumed by dexterous characterization of women. As we go through the courageous character of Yaśodharā on one hand, on the other hand, we also meet the cruelest character like Tiṣyarakṣitā. The examples of women, who silently acquiesced the so-called commendable decision of their husbands being treated as the gift items are widely available; at the same time, references of the women, regularly betraying their husbands are also prevalent. Furthermore, the Buddhist narratives always aim at the emphasizing on the sublimation of the concerned characters. Therefore, the so-called condemned persons including women often are seen to be reformed under the compassionate support and grace of the then Buddhist teachers.
- 2.1. *Lalitavistara*, acclaimed to be the earliest biography of Lord Buddha, represents the dauntless character of Gopā, the wife of Sarvārthasiddha or Siddhārtha. The personality of Gopā may be treated as a feministic icon even at the wake of present century. *Śilpasamdarśanaparivarta*, the twelfth chapter of *Lalitavistara* narrates the marriage affair of Sarvārthasiddha. Siddhārtha wished to marry a pretty, well-educated, cultured, graceful,

modest and companionable lady¹. The priest, who was deputed to look for the suitable match, was almost taken aback by the prompt inquiry of the daughter of Śākya Daṇḍapāṇi about the reason of his arrival. Furthermore, learning about the choice of Siddhārtha, the lady confidently declared herself to be the best match for Siddhārtha². Later king Śuddhodana arranged a programme for presentation of bejeweled *aśoka*-bouquets to the maidens of Kapilavastu by Siddhārtha with an intention to read his mind. Though Gopā attended the programme, yet she was, as it were, out of focus. And when the bouquets were exhausted and not a single one was left to offer, she amusingly approached Siddhārtha asking him to state her fault for which she had been deprived of the valued presentation. Siddhārtha embarrassingly offered his own ring instead. But Gopā instantaneously refused the offer by pronouncing an apparently impudent statement to the prince. Her bold and upright utterance may be taken up, even in modern times, as a sensational slogan in favour of women empowerment. She said, — *na vyaṃ kumāraṃ vyalaṃ kariṣyāmaḥ/ alaṃ kariṣyāmo vyaṃ kumāraṃ/* (We will not strip the prince of ornaments. We shall ornament the prince).

Even after marriage, as Gopā hardly used a veil to cover her face which was a standard custom in then society. Questions were raised regarding her discourteous attitude. Gopā, in her defense, firmly asserted that ideal persons shine in every situation and veiling can never be expected of a good person as an essential prerequisite because the converse instances are there in plenty³.

Thus the characterization of Gopā in *Lalitavistara* is a unique work of literary art which at once enables the contemplative reader to have a glimpse of the then Indian society characterized by the women figures having self-esteem, sharp intellect, courage and ready wit.

Lalitavistara, the *Vaipulya-sūtra* of the Buddhists is supposed to be originated at least before 1st century AD. Although the historicity of Gopā is a controversial issue, yet such a powerful characterization in the pre-Christ era is really commendable.

Not only in the pre-Christ era, portrayal of Gopā as an enterprising lady could be noticed in the literary creations even of the later centuries of the Christian era. *Bhadrakalpāvadāna* is one of them, where we get Gopā or Yaśodharā as the wife of Siddhārtha. After the renunciation of Gautama, Devadatta, his envious cousin repeatedly proposed to marry Yaśodharā, the pregnant wife of Sarvārthasiddha. But Yaśodharā was always careful to

¹ Cf. *Lalitavistara*, 12/5-12.

² Cf. *Ibid.* 12/16.

³ Cf. *Ibid.* 12/34-44.

protect her sanctity. She felt distressed to hear the lascivious proposal of Devadatta and expressed her anguish before her friend Manodharā. Manodharā tried hard to dissuade Devadatta from committing the sinful act of seeking Yaśodharā as his life partner. She reminded him about the sanctity of the noble relationship and asked never to even dream her as his spouse.

yā janair mānitā nityaṃ māteva hitakāriṇī/
śuddhodanamahīpasya mānanīyā priyā vadhū//
tādṛśyāṃ mānanīyāyāṃ rāgas te katham utthitaḥ/
svapne 'py abhāvanīyo yaḥ saddharmasukhahīnakṛt//
yasyā prajāvatyā vandanīyau padāmbujau/
tasyāṃ api katham jāto rāgavyākulamānasah//
mithyādṛṣṭimate mā mā gaccha śākyakulodbhavaḥ/
navīnavardhitam samyak svavaṃsam mā vi ghātaya// (BhKA 2/215-218)

Being thwarted in his attempt to persuade Yaśodharā in establishing a carnal love, he became vindictive and conspired several plans to kill her. In spite of repeated threats from Devadatta, Yaśodharā never surrendered to his unscrupulous proposal.

Although Gopā, both in *Lalitavistara* and *Bhadrakalpāvadāna*, has been characterized as a bold woman having integrity and self-respect, a remarkable dissimilarity may be read between the lines. Gopā of pre-Christian text *Lalitavistara* never felt upset and she was courageous enough even to confront the prince and senior kinsmen, whereas, Gopā of *Bhadrakalpāvadāna* of late centuries is frequently noticed to get shattered, worried of her ill fate. She could not even reproach Devadatta after his offensive offer; rather she left the place at once in humiliation covering her ears—

ity uktamātre datte 'sau kaṇṇau pidhāya satvaram//
namo buddhāya dharmāya saṃghāyeti namo namaḥ/
bruvantī prakṛtisuddhā koṣṭhāgāre drutaṃ yayau// (BhKA 2/147 cd- 148)

Such a timid nature of Gopā is diagonally opposite to the character of Gopā as revealed in the *Lalitavistara*.

- 2.2. Contrary to the virtuous characters like Gopā, Buddhist narratives simultaneously display appalling characters like Tiṣyarakṣitā, the impious wife of the king Aśoka, who daringly once seduced her handsome stepson Kunāla. Being refused she swore to take revenge on the prince. In course of time, she pleaded for her dominion over the kingdom for a week exploiting an offer of a boon from the king. Immediately after acceding to the royal position, she heinously commanded to blind the lotus like eyes of Kunāla and to drive him away from Takṣaśīlā with his wife.

This legend belongs to the *Kunālāvadāna* of *Asokāvadāna*, one of the narrative collections of early Christian era. The unbiased and upright nature of the Buddhist story-tellers is also revealed in their instance of characterization which depicting f the evil queen of the legendary king Asoka. Vāsavadattā and Śyāmā are the other two disgraceful women of Buddhist Literature, who committed murder even in order to win the love of their beloved guys.

- 2.3. There are a large number of Buddhist legends elucidating the principle of *dāna-pāramitā*, the perfection in donation, which concurrently show that the laudable donors were never concerned about the psychological state of their wives, who were reduced to mere gift items for the perfect execution of *dāna-pāramitā*.

In the *Mañicūḍāvadāna* of Kṣemendra's *Bodhisattvāvadākālpalatā*, the hero Mañicūḍa is seen to give away all kind of wealth including his wife and child to the sage Marīci in the name of a sacrifice —

pra yacchāmi mune tubhyam īpsitāṃ gurudakṣiṇām/
sahitāṃ yuvarājena jīvitābhyadhikāṃ priyām// (AKL 3/89)

Later, the king incidentally met his wife Padmāvati in the hermitage of Marīci. Despite being aroused by Kāmadeva, he restrained himself from gratifying his passion-driven wife. He simply appeased her by imparting the knowledge of the momentariness of the worldly pleasure.

After a long time she was given back to the king, which surprisingly was accepted by the king perhaps again for the sake of some *dharma*. And Padmāvati, who without a second thought had left her in the name of a righteous deed, unhesitatingly accepted the decision as the tolerant lady was still devoted to her husband.

Although, this narrative aims to unravel the generosity of the king Mañicūḍa, the message of Padmāvati's loyalty and patience is also accentuated here. And that very fact by no means could be ignored by the narrators of the legends.

- 2.4. Beyond a few suggestive expressions of the benevolence of the women, any comprehensible appraisal for womankind in general can hardly be noticed in the Buddhist narratives. On the contrary, the practice of condemning the entire womankind as the most corrupt class is prevalent.

Kṣemendra's *Bodhisattvāvadākālpalatā* offers a number of legends where long portions have been incorporated to sketch the fraudulent nature of the entire

womankind in course of condemning an immoral activity of a particular woman.

E.g.,

In *Devatārāvadāna*, we come across a king, who even had many wives. When he had come to know about the adultery of his wives, he married again in order to bring a chaste lady into his family. But suspicion and panic regarding the sanctity of character even of the new bride started vexing his mind within a few days. Hearing about his anxiety, instead of cheering him up his brother made him aware of the futility of such angst by stating the utter absurdity of purity in women—

klīvaḥ kāmī sukhī vidvān dhanī namraḥ prabhuḥ kṣamī/
arthī mānyaḥ khalāḥ snigdhaḥ strī satīti kathaiva kā// (AKL 14/71)

Viśākhāvadāna gives so many verses to condemn the womankind by indicating their unstable character—

snigdhā strīti pravādo 'yaṁ nirvyājeti matibhramāḥ/
satīti vyomapuṣpāptiḥ pāpā strīti na saṁśayaḥ//

niṣphalāś cāgnirohiṇyaḥ saralā janasaṁgame/
nāryo vetasavallarya iva nirmūlabandhanāḥ//

bhedadrohaikaśīlābhyo duḥśīlābhyāḥ svabhāvataḥ/
namaḥ strībhyo namaḥ strībhyo namaḥ strībhyo namo namaḥ// (AKL 32/45-47)

It is noteworthy that although Buddhist narratives have documented also a large number of criminal male characters, no generalized comment indicating the evil nature of the whole male community has ever been made. But very often even a single sinning act of a woman has become the issue for accusing the entire womankind. However, it is also exemplary that author like Kṣemendra sometimes became conscious about the said tendency of criticizing women. Therefore, in *Kalyāṇakāryavadāna*, when the blind king Kalyāṇakārī expressed his distrust about the character of women community, we see her wife advising him not to evaluate all the women with an instance of a fault in a woman, earlier seen —

dṛṣṭadoṣaḥ kva cin nāryā yadi tvam atīśāṅkitaḥ/
aduṣṭāpi tvayā nāma tadvyāptā kriyate katham// (AKL 31/61)

- 2.5. Moreover, the Buddhist teachers had the noble endeavour of uplifting the social pariahs including women through the act of dissemination of knowledge. Vāsavadattā, the courtesan, who was once in company of a young merchant, was offered more valuable gifts by a richer client. Out of inordinate rapacity, Vāsavadattā killed the young merchant in order to entertain the new one. Being convicted of slaying a person she was punished at the behest of the king by the way of banishing her from the kingdom severing her beautiful limbs.

Upagupta, deemed to be the potential Buddha, who earlier refused Vāsavadattā at the peak of her youth, appeared as her saviour. She was rehabilitated compassionately by him and was introduced to a higher plane of life.

- 3.0. Sanskrit Buddhist narrative works thus demonstrate almost all types of women characters. Women in many Buddhist texts are categorized into seven types, such as, destroyer, thief, cruel, motherly, sisterly, companionable and slave-like.⁴ Broadly speaking they may be put into three groups, – cruel, affectionate and submissive. It is true that praising words about good women are not widely available in Buddhist narratives. However, the authors of the Buddhist legends carved a large number of characters of degenerated women; as idealistically, they did not believe in absolute degradation of humankind. Rather a positive stance has been taken by them in regard to the infinite possibility of their total transformation. The philosophical underpinnings of these Buddhist narratives are based on the highest ideal of Self-enlightenment, and as such, life is considered to be an adventurous journey towards the abode of Supreme Truth. The experience of the revelation of Truth is not the sole prerogative of a privileged few, but is universally attainable by all having sincere aspiration and uncompromising zeal. The driving force, which makes for a pleasant and successful journey to the kingdom of Truth, is the unique faculty of discrimination, *Viveka*. I fervently believe that these Buddhist narratives, characterizing both good and evil figures, aim at evoking the power of discrimination in the thoughtful readers wending their way towards the supreme Truth.

⁴ Cf. *Bauddharamaṇī*, pp. 61-65.

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