

An Outline of Women Asceticism in the Three Indian Religions- Namely Jainism, Buddhism & Hinduism

Debapriya Ghosh

Visva-Bharati University

E-mail: debapriya.ghosh88@gmail.com

Abstract—Today when the studies on women is an important issue of worldwide it is opportune that we should look at it from the perspective of religion. Here the concern is on women asceticism in three Indian religions, namely Jainism, Buddhism & Hinduism. Asceticism is a way of life in which every action or non-action as the case may be, is religiously meaningful and significant. Each of the three main religions which originated in India - Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism, developed an ascetic tradition of considerable importance in which women also played a role. The earliest groups of nuns or women ascetics are found in Jainism. Buddhist community of nun was contemporary to Jainism. Although there seems to have been less disinclination among Jainas than on the Buddha's part to admit women on an equal basis from the start, Jaina ascetics or nuns has the similarities with Buddhist nuns in terms of requirement that they must follow additional and stricter rules than monks. For several centuries, Buddhism and Jainism had a leading role on the scene of Indian institutional asceticism, their religious order established special monasteries for women which were extremely well run institutions organized according to the rules laid down in the Buddhist and Jain codes of monastic life. Hindu feminine asceticism, by contrast has not developed within a strictly famine version of monastic organization. For this reason it is a phenomenon difficult to grasp and still very little known. However, this paper will try to give an outline on women asceticism among these three religious order.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word 'Asceticism' means- practicing training or exercise for spiritual progress. Followers of asceticism try to escape from the worldly life to achieve the enlightenment and liberate themselves from the circle of birth. This ascetic

World Congress on Interrelationship among Arts, Culture, Humanities, Religion, Education,
Ethics, Philosophy, Spirituality, Science and Society for Holistic Humane Development

ISBN: 978-93-85822-32-2

85

tradition historically associated with the Indian religions. Both the theistic and non-theistic tradition of Indian religions has developed the well established ascetic order. Here this paper will try to sketch an outline about women asceticism in three Indian religions.

The presence of Buddhist female ascetics was there in ancient India. Mahavira, the Jina also did not keep the ascetic life only for the men. He accepted it to be a right for women. He divided his cohorts into four groups. These were monks, nuns, laymen and lay-women. Jainism had two sects- one is *Digambaras* (sky-clad) and other is *Svetambaras* (clad in white). *Digambaras* differ from the *Svetambaras* in five main views and do not allow women to enter their Order. *Digambaras* think that women are not able to achieve liberation or *moksha* and this is the reason behind not allowing women to their path. Accepting all the difficulties, amounting to a slight on their divine adeptness, thirty-six thousand women to fourteen thousand men became nun and left the worldly life under the *Svetambara* sect. The picture was clear to show the crying need of women of that time to leave the worldly life and set themselves in such a place where they can get mental independence and the expectation of security and freedom from transmigration. The *Svetambara* sect claims that the head of the women monastic order was Canda, it is known she was the first cousin of Mahavira, according to other source she was Mahavira's aunt.

The earliest groups of nuns or women ascetics are found in Jainism. Community of Buddhist nuns was contemporary to Jainism. Even though there seems to have been less disinclination among Jainas than on the Buddha's part to admit women on an equal basis from the beginning, Jaina nuns has the similarities with Buddhist nuns in terms of requirement that they must follow additional and stricter rules than the monks. *Svetambaras* and as well as some sub sects, all have different groups of nuns. Among the *Svetambaras*, nuns far outnumber than the monks. A data based account was provided in a case studies (Vallely, 2002; Shanta, 1985).

On the other side Buddhism does not restrict the religious freedom of women. Buddha acknowledged that women are capable of realizing the Truth like men. However he was not in favor of the admission of women into the monastic organization. He thought their admission would make problems in the *sangha*. Buddha allowed the admission of women into the order after the repeating request of Ananda and the Buddhist order of Nuns began with Mahaprajapati, Buddha's aunt and step mother. Buddha clearly said that allowing women into the *sangha* would cause his teachings to survive only half as long – 500 years instead of 1000.

The order of women existed and flourished for many centuries in India and later spread throughout southern, south east, central and East Asia. The *Therigatha* contains various stanzas that clearly express the feeling of joy experienced by saintly *bhikkhunīs* at their ability to enter the Order and realize the Truth. Nanda, who had been infatuated with her physical appearance at her early age, became free by following the rational way of insight and put emphasis on the experience of tranquility. The other famous woman Patachara, was able to change from a frivolous young girl to a *Sangha* Elder. Buddha praised some of the chief disciples in the entire fourfold Buddhist community. From the list of the *bhikkhunīs*, there were 13 names of Arhattheris who received praise and recognition from the Buddha in various abilities.

Monastic rules for the Buddhist nuns or *bhikkhunī Patimokkha* has a prime significance. In the *Vinaya Pitaka*, *Patimokkha* has been acknowledged as one of the oldest texts in the Buddhist canon. *Patimokkha* includes a list of rules for training to be observed by the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*. The study of *bhikkhunī Patimokkha* is necessary as it proves to be one of the ways to understand the historical growth of the *sangha*. The early *sangha*, is the embodiment of the teaching of the Buddha and the development of Buddhism place within it.

There are six schools of *bhikkhunī Patimokkha* which have been preserved in the Chinese *Tripitaka*. At the time of King Asoka eighteen schools were mentioned, but the monastic code of conduct of the rest is not available, because of this reason, the monastic rules of the six remaining schools became even more significant and valuable. They are almost the only accessible way to trace the various communities of *bhikkhunīs* in past history. There are six schools, namely *Theravada*, *Mahasanghika*, *Mahisasaka*, *Sarvastivada*, *Dharmagupta* and *Mula-Sarvastivada*. These six schools has its own set of *Patimokkha* rules, the main body is that set of original rules which every school share. As its school developed in various geographical areas, more rules are formulated in addition to the original rules handed down from the Buddha's time. The translation of the monastic rules of *bhikkhunīs* in six schools done by Chatsumarn

Kabilsngh is a stepping stone to understand the community of *bhikkhunīs*.

Buddhist Canonical texts provided us material only up to the First council. The history of the *bhikkhunīs* was neglected and not recorded; they were not even mentioned at the time of the First council. But we still have a glimpse of their existence here and there. There are archaeological findings in various places in India to prove their existence up to as late as 11th century A.D. there are names of

well-known *bhikkhunī* teachers inscribed on the base of stupas and Buddha images. There were names of *bhikkhunīs* who sponsored the carvings of the Buddha images, etc. They seemed to have vanished together with the *bhikkhu sangha*, with the incursion of Turkish Muslim through Indian land in that period.

The status of women in Buddhist monasticism is varied. Patriarchal societies and gender values took their toll on women's institutions. Though according to mainstream doctrine women can be enlightened, but in the canonical versions of Buddhist monastic literature women are often cast in unflattering roles. The number of vows nuns must follow is larger than that for men, and there are specific rules that establish the subordinate status of nuns. There are some early literary collections, the *Therīgatha* hymns, and later writings, yet there were few women writers. Women most often did not have access to monastic learning. Moreover, in many countries women's ordination lineages did not survive. As in modern Tibet and in parts of Southeast Asia, there are no unbroken lineages of full ordination from nun to nun, but nuns are able to take only a brief list of vows. However, it is also true that women in Asian Buddhist cultures had extensive and important roles in local communities in addition to positive, historical human and divine role models. The status of women varied, depending on specific cultural contexts, economies, and historical periods. There were successes for Buddhist women, including women's ordination lineages. For example, modern scholarship gives evidence of well-established and well-known nunneries in India in the Gupta dynasty, though these went into decline in the following centuries. In China, women's ordination lineages were preserved intact.

When women's monasteries were in decline, women reestablished monastic life as per their ability. In Tibet, for example, where there was no lineage for full ordination, there were nonetheless many nunneries. Women did not have the educational opportunities that were available for men, but they were able to engage in Buddhist meditations and rituals in the monastic institutions. In Tibet there were traditions of women pilgrims, ascetics, and even community leaders and teachers who were recognized by the community at large. Thus, whereas women's monasticism was not preserved in Tibet according to ancient Indian models, there are still vibrant women's communities throughout Tibetan history. Educational standards and facilities were not as developed as in men's monasteries, but women built and maintained strong traditions of meditation, ritual, and community solidarity. Indeed, in twentieth-century Amdo, Northeast Tibet (modern Gansu province), the greater Labrang Monastery community supported women's monasteries even without full ordination.

It is clear in Hinduism that a woman has the same religious and spiritual freedom as men. Like men, women can attain the same heights of spiritual awakening by taking the path of asceticism. The Sanskrit language possesses a female equivalent to the male renouncer: there is the *sadhvi* as well as the *sadhu*, the *sannyasin* as well as the *sannyasini*. However, throughout time there have been many women ascetics in Hinduism who have been greatly respected.

In the Vedic period there were as many as twenty women among the authors of the Rig Veda, known as *brahmabadini*. They were the composer of Vedic hymns. They were 'seer' to whom the Vedas were originally revealed through states of higher consciousness. They were: Ghoshsha, Godha, Vishwara, Apala, Brahmjaya, Aditi, Indrani, Sarma, Romsha, Urvashi, Lopamudra, Yami, Shashwati, Sri, Loksha and many others. Maitrayi was another name who was a wise woman according to *Upanishad*. In the Vedic period women were free to enter into *Brahmacharya* and become *sannyasini*. There is mention in the Mahabharata of many women who became *sannyasini*. For example, Shrutavati, a daughter of Rishi Bhardwaj remained a *brahmacharini* all her life and enter into deep study of the Vedas. Shrimati, a daughter of Mahatma Shandilya, led a similar life. But at the time of Manu there was prohibition on women and non-brahmans to study Vedic texts or perform Vedic rites. Women were effectively barred from taking vows to pursue renunciation (*sannyasa*), except as members of unorthodox sects.

Hindu ascetics follow basically two modes of life. One is to keep moving around the country, travelling from one pilgrimage centre to another, and practicing begging for one's survival. The other is to settle for more or less long period in a fixed place. This in turn implies two choices; either to live independently, with some attendants, or to belong to a monastic community. But the monastic order within various sects in Hinduism, especially for women came into existence in later period. There was no female Hindu monastic order until the foundation of "Nari Math" in 1895 by *Sannyasini* Gauri puri Devi, the prominent woman monastic disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. While Gauri Ma was living at Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna gave her the ocher robes of a *sannyasini* and made arrangements for the accompanying rituals. Before this, Gauri Ma had worn a *sannyasini's* robes as an external sign of renunciation, but she had not taken any formal vows. After this ritual, he gave her a new name Gauriananda. The first female monastic order started this time following the thought of Sri Ramakrishna and His able counterpart Sri Saradmoni Devi. The *Math* had been dedicated by her to the name of "Universal Mother" and named "*Shri Shri Saradeswari Ashram* and Free Hindu Girls' School. Later on in 1954 the modern foundation of the *Sri*

Sarada Matha as a similar to the Ramakrishna Order developed within the Hindu tradition. In the past, individual monk may occasionally have accepted female monastic disciples, and individual women ascetics may sometimes have become gurus, but these remained exceptions, whereas women gurus have grown much more prominent during the twentieth century. In the past, female ascetics usually did not take monastic vows but lived away from home, in holy cities such as Varanasi. They used to live either alone or in groups, retaining lay status so that no organized order of Hindu nuns existed in earlier times (Ohja, 1981, 1984).

There were women saints in India who appeared utterly indifferent to society, such as Mira Bai, the eighteenth century Gujrati saint Gauri Bai, the devotional mystic Mahadevi, and the tantric mystic Lalla and so on. The very well-known woman of sixteenth century North India, Mira Bai, who is universally admitted among the greatest saints of India. She became widowed at young age and refused to go for sati. Then instead of becoming sati she decided to marry the object of her religious devotion, the Lord Krishna. Whatever the context of her mysticism may be, Mira Bai is the quintessential ecstatic in the worldly mystic.

There are other significant female personalities of Ramakrishna Order in Hinduism. Such as, Sarada Ma, Yogin Ma, Gopal Ma, Gopaler Ma and so on. Sarada Ma, who was the wife and spiritual counterpart of mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa. At the age of five she was betrothed to Ramakrishna, whom she joined at Dakshineswar Kali temple when she was in her late teens. According to her traditional biographers, both lived lives of unbroken continence, showing the ideals of a householder and of the monastic ways of life. The disciples of Ramakrishna regarded her as their own mother, and after their guru's death looked to her for advice and encouragement. The followers of the Ramakrishna movement regard Sarada Devi as an incarnation of the Divine Mother.

Swami Vivekananda had an idea of starting organizations for women. He knew that there would be no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women was improved. In one of his letters, he said, "Hence it is that my first endeavor is to start a *Math* for women." He also wrote, "With Holy Mother as the centre of inspiration, a *Math* is to be established on the eastern bank of the Ganga. As *Brahmacharins* and *Sadhus* will be trained in this *Math* (Belur *Math*) so in the other *Math* also, *Brahmacharinis* and *Sadhvis* will be trained."

It is found that there are two groups within the female ascetics in Hinduism, those are *Sanatani* or orthodox and *Santanpanthi* or unorthodox. In *Sanatani* or orthodox, there are divisions like, Vaisnavas, Saivas and Independent or non-sectarian ascetics. Anandamayi Ma Sangha, Akhanda mandala, Sharada Kutir,

those are belong to the non-sectarian side. On the other side in Santanpanthi or unorthodox ascetics there is only one division called Brahma Kumari Ishvariya Vishvaivdyalaya.

However, in spite of the growing interest in the comparative study of female asceticism and nuns, the phenomenon of women renouncers in the Hindu tradition remains too little researched; only a few studies of the varieties of contemporary Hindu female ascetics exist including *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* by Denton, Lynn Teskey and *From East to West: A History of Monasticism* by Mayeul de Dreuill, Khandelwal, 2004 etc.

REFERENCE

- [1] Anandkar, P. Bahina Bai. In Women Saints of East and West Sri Sarada Devi (The Holy Mother) (1955) Birth Centenary Memorial. The Rama Krishna Vedanta Centre of London.
- [2] Chakraborti, Haripada Asceticism in Ancient India in Brahminical, Buddhist, Jaina and Ajivika Societies. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak (1973).
- [3] Denton, Lynn Teskey (1991) Varieties of Hindu Female Asceticism, in Leslie, I. Julia (ed.) (1991).
- [4] Denton, Lynn Teskey Female Ascetics in Hinduism. Published by State University of New York Press, Albany (2004).
- [5] Deo, Shantaram Bhalchandra, History of Jaina Monachism from Inscriptions and Literature Deccan College Dissertation series; volume 17
- [6] Handoo, C.K. (1955) Lalleswari or Lal Diddi of Kashmir. In Women Saints of East and West Sri Sarada Devi (The Holy Mother) Birth Centenary Memorial. The Rama Krishna Vedanta Centre of London
- [7] Holt, John Clifford , Discipline: The Canonical Buddhism of the Vinayapi _aka, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass (1981).
- [8] Horner, I. B. Women under Primitive Buddhism. 1930. Reprint. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1975, pp. [xxiii] [101-102]
- [9] Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn , The Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha of the Six Schools, transl. by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Bangkok: Thammasat University (1991), pp. [11-12]
- [10] Sethi, Manisha, Escaping the World: Women Renouncers among Jains, South Asian History & Culture series; volume 8 Routledge Taylor & Francis Group; London, UK and New Delhi, India; 2011
- [11] Shanta, N. The Unknown Pilgrims: The voice of the sadhvis the history, spirituality, and life of the Jaina women ascetics, translated by Mary Rogers, Sri Garib Dass Oriental series; volume 219 Sri Satguru Publications; New Delhi, India; 1997

- [12] The English the of the Pi-ch'iu-ni chuan, compiled by shih Pao-ch'ang, Translated by Kathryn Ann Tsai Lives Of The Nun –Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from Fourth to Sixth Centuries. Sri Sat Guru Publication.

WEBLINK

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarada_Devi, as on 15/09/2016

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gauri_Ma, as on 15/09/2016

www.vivekanandaashram.org/saradeswariashrama.php, as on 15/09/2016