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FINANCIAL AUTONOMY AND GENDER: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TRACING THE ROLE OF BUDDHIST WOMEN IN EARLY INDIA'S ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

Unlike today's patriarchal culture, ancient Indian Buddhist women were economically equal. This study found that Buddhist teachings have affected religious and secular women's economic independence by analysing epigraphical data. Women could possess land, inherit wealthy families, and work due to Buddhism's focus on equality and personal effort. Buddhist Bhikkhuni Sangha lets women handle their own money, accept gifts, and distribute them. Unlike Hindu traditions, Vinaya Pitaka and Sutta Pitaka gave women legal succession and property ownership rights to promote economic equality. As bhikkunis and lay followers, Buddhist women helped monasteries grow and survive. Despite these achievements, societal and institutional hurdles precluded economic parity. This study reveals that Buddhism has given economic freedom in patriarchal cultures to Buddhist women. A comparison of Buddhist women's economic duties to those of other ancient faiths and civilisations shows how inventive and inadequate these rights are. Women's economic freedom and Buddhist teachings' legacy conclude the essay. The study aims to understand how Buddhism's idea of gender and economy shaped ancient Indian discourse and helped women attain economic equality.

KEYWORDS: Economic Rights, Buddhist Women, Bhikkhuni Sangha, Inheritance Rights, Gender Studies, Ancient India, Archaeology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ancient Indian patriarchy severely restricted women's economic power and income. Buddhism became a social movement that challenged traditions to promote equality and ethics. This fight for women's economic freedom was unique. All ancient Indian women, who had minimal property rights, were fed by male relatives. Still, within the framework of Buddhism, women like the Bhikkhuni Sangha (a society of Buddhist bhikkunis) were able to attain more autonomy (Carpenter, 1890). This religious movement, according to (Altekar, 2016) was groundbreaking because it expanded women's access to property ownership, inheritance, and economic and religious opportunities. When women became monastics in Bhikkunineries, they could give and control resources. Lay Buddhist women's monastic patronage provided them with economic power. These developments required the Buddha's patriarchal-contradictory Vinaya Pitaka and Sutta Pitaka teachings.

Despite these positive developments, Buddhist women nevertheless encountered many obstacles on their way to economic parity. Institutional bias, patriarchal ideology, and societal resistance all worked against historical Indians' efforts to assert their economic rights.

Buddhism, on the other hand, had a lasting impact on women's economic agency. Religious restrictions enabled women to manage wealth and property, and they were also encouraged to participate in trade and the arts, which led to an increase in women's salaries (Zepa, 2022). By placing Buddhist women's economic rights within the larger socioeconomic systems of ancient India, this introduction aims to lay the philosophical and historical groundwork for future research.

To better understand how Buddhism has impacted discussions of gender and economics, this study will examine the monetary responsibilities of Buddhist women and compare them to those of women from other historical religions and civilisations. We get our modern views on gender equality from examining past paradigms. The article delves into how Buddhist ideas might be incorporated into contemporary discussions about women's economic empowerment. Buddhist teachings can influence women's rights and society at large, according to this study. Through an analysis of texts, historical contexts, and societal impacts, this book explores the intricate interplay of gender, religion, and economics in ancient India.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Economic Conditions of Women in Pre-Buddhist India

The Rig Veda Samhita slightly covers women's economics. In Brahmana culture, daughters were cursed and sons were blessed. In various holy teachings, virgins can sell, mortgage, or claim their father, brother, or relatives' inheritance. The mythical 'brahma-charini,''samkrtyayani,' and 'panditakausiki' come from Upanishadic 'brahmavadini,' who valued land ownership, sale, and Property ownership is conceivable, although Atri does not mention donating it (Zepa, 2022). Madens can be sold with parental approval. Changing a virgin's reputation wouldn't simplify marriage. Bad brides cost husbands 225 panas. Women may occasionally attend Vedic lectures but not study them. The Bharadvaja Grihya Sutral advises marrying a wealthy, beautiful, clever, and family-oriented woman. The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad describes a wise daughter. Yajnavalkyal called "stridhana" the "gifts given to a woman" from family, friends, and brothers. A lady might acquire it at the wedding or after her spouse marries. In the Kushana period—the original Manu Samhita—Sanskritization accepted 'varapana,' formerly frowned upon. The dowry—not a "bride price"—measures social wealth because of its unfairness, instability, and unpredictability. Several social changes may have produced bride price aversion (The Jataka: The Birth Stories, 1880 – 1907). Hypergamy, money-based social mobility, the return of dowry payments to the bride's father upon his son's wedding, and the end of the extensive conflict, which lowered the male population, are examples.

All ages and cultures deliver advice. Unfortunately, she held her husband's property after their second marriage. Some literature concerns "stridhana," women's property rights. Her "sulka" wealth came from marriage, "saudayika" from family, and "yautaka" from her husband's second marriage. Marriage manages family finances and property in "stridhana". Families usually share money 50/50. No additional "stridhana" concepts spring to mind. Women should own all their riches, say many. Especially inherited bridal stones are tricky. Despite Manu's 2,000 panas limit, she cannot utilise her possessions and house as "stridhana," because she cannot transfer them to her in-laws. Jaimini believes a bride can carry six items, including parent and brother gifts and procession goods. The pair gains "yautaka" jointly, and even a nasty spendthrift lady cannot control her "stridhana," says the scripture. If they can prove she spent money, bad

in-laws can adopt her (The Jataka: The Birth Stories, 1880 – 1907).

Barmhavadinis and communal leaders were exceptions, but women were progressively excluded. Many religious texts formalised these restrictions, diminishing women's economic and social autonomy and rendering them economically reliant (Milligan, 2019). Systematic marginalisation and cultural norms promoting male lineage and property heirs hurt women economically. Women and men worked together in crafts, business, and more unnoticed. Urbanisation and agrarian surplus transformed economic status and reinforced patriarchal households between Vedic and pre-Buddhist ages (Walshe, 1995). Poor women conducted menial farm and craft work. Before Buddhism, cultural, religious, and economic barriers limited women's economic independence. This allowed Buddhism's radical norm-rethinking.

2.2. Rise of Buddhism in Early India

Buddha awakened in northern India in the 6th century B.C.E. Buddhahood—realizing the universe's essence and every living thing's ultimate freedom was enlightenment for Gautama. He knows and has experienced Buddhist concepts like dependent creation (Walters, 2016; Jeste, 2008) and its elimination (Nibbana). The Hindu-Brahmanical school and the Sramanic movement had several theological and philosophical positions when Buddhism came to India. In the 6th century B.C., India had both religions when Buddhism emerged. Both faiths inspired Buddhist mysticism. Buddhism was often indistinguishable from other ascetic movements. Buddhism developed as an independent faith with substantial room for growth during the Mauryan time. During the reign of Menander, Buddhism gained prominence among the Greeks, primarily facilitated by transferring interactions. Consequently, a novel form of Buddhist art emerged and thrived in the province of Punjab and the remainder of northern India. Kanishka's reign represents a significant chapter in the annals of Buddhism, portraying him not merely as a prominent benefactor of the faith but also linking him to the esteemed lineage of Buddhist masters who influenced the evolution of Buddhism in subsequent eras. During this era, the Indo-Greek school of Buddhist art reached its pinnacle of development, as Buddhist bhikkus from India disseminated Buddhism to China and Central Asia. A novel iteration of Buddhism, known as Mahayana, emerged concurrently, bearing significant implications. The emergence of the Gupta dynasty marked a significant revival of Buddhism, a phenomenon that is distinctly evident in the exquisite paintings of Ajanta (Chakravarty, 1981).

2.3. Role of Women in the Advancement of Buddhism in Past

Many aspects of early Buddhist women's roles are examined. Social and literary roles for women will remain separate. The contributions of women throughout history can reflect a civilization's peak. Gender equality demands "separate but equal". Let literature, sculpture, and inscriptions describe ancient women's situation. Women's land, property, and house ownership reflect society's lifestyle. Brahmanic stories degrade women. Female duties trump money for Buddhists.

The bhikkhus, bhikkhunis, laymen, and laywomen are vital to the functioning of the entire Buddhist system. Those who took refuge and were ordained under the Tri-Ratna are the classic four-fold assembly members of the Buddha. However, there has been a continuing disagreement over whether or not the scriptures are authentic and communicated by the Buddha (Patnaik, 2019). Before writing, Buddha taught verbally. Several bhikkhus edited it. Women's desire and seduction were forbidden in early Buddhism. Naomi Appleton disputes the idea that negative karma produced earlier births. Buddha felt, like other males, that women were spiritually powerful and promising. Buddhism isn't Brahmin. Giving and compassion are Buddhist. The Buddhist moral precepts propose that kuśalakamma might enhance certain attributes. Good karma increases births, thus value counts. Tilakkhana Buddhism encourages 'No-Self,' therefore self-awareness and rejection are beneficial. Meditation, ethics, and compassion underpin kindness. Buddhism celebrates the first pāramita, dāna, for its benevolence and charity. Dāna and the active spiritual teachings of Buddhism might have played an important part in the growth and preservation of the faith for quite some time (Patnaik, 2019).

The Pali Vinaya is the primary source for comprehending dāna in the Mūlasarvastivāda Vinaya, initially taught there. Risk, location, economy, and Buddhism's spread may have altered legislation. Many found Buddha's dhamma comfortable. Buddhism introduced a four-tiered social system called saṅgha. The saṅgha and laities share a mutually beneficial relationship based on dānadhamma and its practice. Dhamma decreases striving, greed, and clinginess via reciprocity and compassion. In Pāli traditions, dānadhamma (nissaya) involves offering food, clothes, medicine,

and lodging to laypeople. The Asokan Edicts say monastics teach morality through dhamma. According to the Indian nissaya myth, asceticism gave non-ascetics family health, money, and status. For this, India advocated abstinence.

In Dānadhamma, achieving sotapaňňa, sakadagāmi, anagāmi, or arahat is a virtue deserving of praise and sacrifice. Major issue: Ananda may allow female Buddhist bhikkunis. After gentle reminders of his "mother's debt," the Buddha unwillingly paid his aunt Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī for her love, care, and support throughout infancy. The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta recounts a meeting between Buddha and bhikkhus in the Ambapālis mango grove in Vesāli. The lichchavi's were offended by Ambapāli's hospitality of Buddha and bhikkhus for supper. The prostitute's hosting irritated them. There were attempts to bribe Ambapāli to prevent her from accepting the offer. Despite getting Vesāli property and more from the lichchavis, she wanted a lavish feast (Anālayo, 2020). The followers of the Buddha, Dhamma, and saṅgha assimilated the dāna practice during Buddhasāsanā, as demonstrated in this case. This was accompanied by the inculcation of the three attributes of a giver indicated in the Dāna Sutta: an attitude of great joy, thankfulness, and clarity of mind (Patnaik, 2019).

The Sutta states that for a donation to be considered successful, three things must be present in the donor's and the recipient's respective establishments. It also acknowledges a laywoman called Nandamātā Velukandaki, who had provided all six elements to the saṅgha. The qualities of a generous contributor and the benefits of a good donation are described by the Buddha in the Sapurissa Dāna Sutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya (Bodhi, 1970). What does the sender want from a present, other than positive actions? When the Buddha enquires about Visākhā Migāramātā's expectations regarding her donation, she gives a comprehensive list. She claims that a bhikkhu or bhikkhunī who has gone to Sāvatthi and gained the blessings of the recluses has regularly consumed the offerings she makes. Mental satisfaction and contentment can be achieved through practising dāna, a virtue that brings about great joy and a more selfless and loving attitude.

2.4. Female Patrons of Early Buddhism

The role of women in what is called "early Buddhism," a period that begins with the Buddha's time and ends with the early decades of the Christian era, is the subject of this study. We shall start the analysis of Buddhist social organisation and literature with what one can call "gender pairing." This is a useful lens through which to examine the responsibilities of Buddhist women. The earliest Buddhist texts and lithic records of India both originate from the time of King Asoka, who flourished about the middle of the third century BCE. Two female Pāli-language specialists, Caroline Rhys Davids (1857–1942) and Isaline B. Horner (1896–1981) translated the Therīgāthā and six Vinaya-Piṭaka volumes, prominently underlining women's role in early Buddhism (Milligan, 2019). Twenty accessible translations of the whole Buddhist vinaya are crucial, along with well-edited Pāli versions. A reworking of the lesser-known Therīgāthā, with 73 poems from the third century BCE to the sixth century CE, is significant in its own right. Twenty-one The sisters' literary collection covers enlightenment and reunion, including leaving home to become a Bhikkuni. The poems are significant as they represent some of the earliest poetry in South Asia, predominantly authored by women (Milligan, 2019). Gender investigations of women in Buddhism aimed to eliminate outdated affectionate and legendary concepts by explicitly addressing misogyny and androcentrism in the written corpus (Paul, 1985; Gross, 1993). They re-emphasized focused analyses of individual texts, groups, and ideas, providing interpretations grounded in updated measurements that may or may not align with those of other writings, considering the extensive variety of papers, authors, and partisan views. Under this revitalised academic network, multiple published volumes by various researchers arose to establish the trajectory for the research of women in earlier India, especially in ancient Buddhism, for the time being. The collections included a wide range of subjects, despite the articles providing rigorous microanalyses of certain texts and concepts (Collet, 2013).

During the Mauryan period, when there was a lot of space for growth, Buddhism first gained notoriety as a separate faith. Inscription etching became famous in India after Emperor Ashoka invented the technique. One way to better understand the Dhamma followers, particularly women, is to examine the inscriptions left by Buddhist donors. More than 300 women, including bhikkunis and laywomen, contributed to the spread of Dhamma, according to inscriptions found in Deccan in the early centuries of the Christian era. Due to space constraints, this article will only provide a cursory overview of a few famous women from various social classes in ancient Indian culture who helped propagate Buddhism in the early centuries of the

Christian period, even though their efforts were immensely important.

Karuvaki, the second main queen of Emperor Ashoka, is mentioned in the Allahabad pillar inscription (Milligan, 2019). Her name is written on the renowned Ashokan pillar in Allahabad, commonly known as the 'Queen's pillar edict.' This makes her the first Buddhist woman to do so (Figure 1). The structure and contents of the record are instructions from the king to his Mahamantras, who were then requested to record the presents bestowed by the queen. As Buddhism flourished and trade with the West accelerated, new architectural forms evolved. In the period after the second century BCE, the Deccan region included the cities of Karle, Bhaje, Nasik, and Junnar, in addition to the Vihara, Chaitya, and Stupa in the Sahyadri mountain ranges. They expanded rapidly to meet the urgent need for housing for Bhikkus and bhikkunis and a place of worship (The Five Nikayas: Discourses of Buddha: An Anthology: Khudakka Nikaya, 1978). The inscriptions attest to the fact that women from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds contributed to the realisation of these architectural achievements.

Figure 1: Queen's Edict: Allahabad.
Source: Https://Picryl.Com/Media/Allahabad-Queen-Edict-E94b9b

Dated to the early third century CE the Lavanika inscription at Kanheri is housed in Cave. Located close to the ancient port town of Kalyan, this intriguing inscription states that Lavanika bestowed two presents at two locations: the Kanheri caverns and the Ambalika vihara. In the Kalyan ascendancy,

devotee Sethi Achala tied the knot with Lavanika. She built Lena, a cave, a cistern, and a bath tank (nanapondha) to help support her family. Part two of her will states that 300 Karshapanas will be given to the Bhikkus of the Ambalika vihara. Chivaraka was meant to be given to the local monastic community as a gift from the funding. References to "near Kalyan" in the inscriptions pinpoint exactly where this vihara is located. Unfortunately, the precise location could not be located (The Five Nikayas: Discourses of Buddha: An Anthology: Khudakka Nikaya, 1978). If Lavanika's gift were written in Ambalika vihara, more devotees would know about Kanheri, she reasoned, because it was a famous site. The cave at Kanheri contains an inscription that mentions an extra monastery at Kalyan (Figure 2). Among these writing systems is Brahmi, which has been in use at least since the second century CE. Dharma, the Kaliyanaka, was a merchant from Kalyan and the son of Sivamitra. He gifted Budhaka and his family a vihara in the Gandharikabhami region of Kalyan. The vihara had two apartments (vibhaga) and a dining hall. XII, twelve Greek and Roman merchants from all over West Asia flocked to Western India during its booming trade in the early centuries. The inscriptions attest to the fact that numerous non-Brahmin women have adopted the Dhamma as their code of behaviour (Mokashi, 2022).

Figure 2: Kanheri Caves: Donor Couple.
Source: https://puratattva.in/kanheri-cave-complex/

Inscriptions mention Bhikkunis. Buddhist ascetics built underground temple rails and pillars with alams due of landlessness. Theology must have been approved. Writing about themselves is common among Buddhist bhikkunis. Religious laypeople donated, however, Jain bhikkunis were not the major recipients, according to the inscriptions. Bhikkunis like Bhikhuni Damila and Ponakisana contributed greatly (Mokashi, 2017).

Female arhats, lay followers, regular women, and aristocratic and noble women donate religiously to all Buddhist places. Kanheri caves record women's contributions. Satvahana queen Gotami Balasri and Nahpana's daughter Dakhamitra left donations at Nasik (Figure 3). Bhikkunis and lay followers exist.

Another significant site is Nagarjunikonda in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. The location is unique because the Ikshavaku dynasty royal ladies created nearly the whole structure. Aunt of King Siri Virapurisdatta is the complex's main donor. Women are included in nine dedicatory pillars (Trivedi, 2005).

Figure 3: Sanchi Plaque: Anonymous Donation Made by Women (Self Photographed).

The Sanchi plaques also include some female teachers and sages with their followers. Personality is one of the main reasons women were drawn to Buddhism. It held the fact that he naturally embodied the "Most High, the Best, and Divine". A person must select their destiny. Buddhism helped them achieve their aims. Spiritual awakening requires realising one's faculties and strength. Buddha told his disciples that everyone who followed the Dharma may achieve enlightenment like him. Buddha desired Gotami and her fellow bhikkunis to become Bodhisattvas, Tathagats, Arhats, etc. by discipline excellence (Trivedi, 2005).

Ashoka's sazghabheda proclamation mentions bhikkhu/bhikkhuni. Kausambi, Sanchi, and Sarnath issued edicts. The Sarnath inscription mentioned bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. All people, including Bhikkus, bhikkunis, laymen, and laywomen, are requested by the King in the "Calcutta- Baira... "edict to listen to and ponder upon the dha'mapaliyaya, one of the teachings of the Buddha, every month. Our objectives are informed by two things that these decrees state. Above all else, they demonstrate that Asoka cared for the well-being of the two sanghas and recognised the bhikkunis' order as a significant social group, comparable to the Bhikkus. Inscriptions also show that the monastic ordination lineage that the Buddha created was bisexual, with men becoming bhikkhu-s and women becoming bhikkunis. Any gender could be a lay follower (upasaka or upasika). The early Buddhist movement's two leading figures might have been male and female or a combination of the sexes, depending on the details of Asoka's decrees. The Bible describes a dual vision in which the "four assemblies" stand in for the two factions. The Buddha initially intended for the four groups to be able to learn, teach, and explain his teachings independently from the beginning of his career.

The Buddha himself recounts this tale in the Theravadin Mahaparinibbana-sutta (Vajirā, 1998). Because she was worried about losing power if the Blessed One taught the dhamma, Mara pleaded with him to enter the final Nibbana as soon as he became enlightened. "Evil One, I will not enter parinibbana until my bhikkus, bhikkunis, laymen and laywomen have become auditors who are intelligent, trained, confident, learnt, who practise by dhamma, who

follow dhamma; who, drawing on what they have learnt from their teacher, will announce, teach, proclaim, establish, reveal, explain and clarify it; who, when a dispute arises, will admonish correctly, following the dhamma; and until the holy-seven (Anālayo, 2020). Although the terminology used in (Mula)-Sarvastivadin's) two similar works, the Divyavadana and the Central Asian Mahaparinirvna-sutra, are different, but they both emphasise the equal intelligence and competency of the four divisions (Singh, 2019).

The Buddha lays out the requirements for what he terms the "holy life" (brahmacharya) in this section of his teachings. All conditions have been satisfied, according to Mara, who brings up the claim when the Buddha is 80 years old. With his promise to attain Nibbana in three months, the Buddha obliquely implies that Mara is correct in her assessment. In the Pasadika-sutta, the Buddha reports to Cunda that in his later years of teaching, he encountered "senior Bhikku disciples who are intelligent, trained, confident, who have attained release from bondage; who can proclaim properly the holy dhamma; who, when a dispute arises, can admonish correctly, following the dhamma, and, having admonished, to teach the marvellous dhamma. "His flock consists of senior and middle-ranking bhikkunis, laymen and laywomen householders (both celibate and non-celibate), newly-ordained bhikkus and bhikkunis, and the holy life is successful, flourishing, widespread, popular, and well-proclaimed among humans, he proclaims. He then elaborates on the other members of his flock. The Sobhanasutta also makes sure that the four assemblies are on level ground. The four members of the order (sangha) that the Buddha describes in this chapter are an intelligent Bhikku, a Bhikkuni, a layman, and a laywoman. They are all authentic Dhamma practitioners who have received adequate instruction, radiated confidence and known a great deal. On the other hand, the Sutrasamuccaya cites an Ekottaragama and the Theravadin Sangiti-sutta, which state that barbaric border regions commonly do not let religious travellers. (Singh, 2019).

As a result, the four gatherings in one place were considered a sign of "civilisation" since they made it possible to spread and practise the dhamma. Another way that the movement's participants were categorised was by their gender. "Savaka" (man) and "Savika" (female) were the usual terms used to describe the Buddhist adherents. Ordination at lower levels was referred to as samaneri-s and samanera-s.

2.5. Archaeological Analysis of Contemporary Epigraphic Evidences

Literary and epigraphic material shed light on women's roles, status, and economic circumstances in ancient India, especially before and throughout the Buddhist era. Literary works like the Rig Veda, Upanishads, and Dharmashastras, together with epics like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, have narratives that depict the evolving role of women in connection to wealth, property, and economic activity (Altekar, 2016). During the early Vedic period, texts like the Rig Veda emphasised women's roles as caretakers of household wealth, agricultural economy contributors, and intellectual and spiritual community members. Gargi and Maitreyi are figures that represent women's intelligence. Regardless, subsequent texts, such as the Dharmashastras, progressively limited women's rights to inherit wealth and property (The Play in Full: Lalitavistara, 2013). Norms stipulated in these writings linked women's economic agency to their responsibilities as mothers, spouses, and daughters (Anālayo, 2020). These normative writings institutionalised patriarchal customs and practices, limiting women's access to economic resources and highlighting their reliance on male relatives. At the same time, artefacts such as inscriptions on stone pillars, stupas, and copper plates offer tangible proof that women were involved in both religious and commercial pursuits. These inscriptions, which are often votive, attest to the labours of women who have laboured in sacred places like temples and monasteries. Contributions can come in the form of land, money, or other assets. Sanchi and Bharhut are two examples of early Buddhist sites whose inscriptions frequently identify female donors, who can range from laywomen and bhikkunis to monarchs and princesses. The contributions of female contributors to religious institutions and the growth of Buddhist monasticism are shown by these inscriptions. As an example, the inscriptions discovered in the Mahabodhi Temple detail the presents given by both noblewomen and commoners (Altekar, 2016). In the religious sphere, this shows that women are increasingly seen as economic agents. Similarly, the Emperor's inclusive policies are mirrored in the Asokan edicts.

These edicts recognise men and women as equal members of the Buddhist Sangha and invite them to engage in charitable and secular endeavours alike. Epigraphic evidence shows that women overcame social constraints to become influential and economically active by supporting religious organisations. Inscriptions also highlight the idea of dāna, which means to give to charity (The Play in Full: Lalitavistara, 2013). Legacy is crucial to analysing their successes and failures. Gifts can help

women attain social and spiritual virtue and economic success within religious and cultural norms. Jain literature and inscriptions depict women as ascetics and benefactors, showing their global religious and commercial engagement. Literary and epigraphic evidence show women's economic diversity. This graphic shows how personal choice, religious rituals, and social norms interact. Epigraphic documents show women's behaviour, unlike literature. Documents show how women rejected the convention for economic independence. These books show ancient Indian women challenged patriarchal business, religion, and politics. Thus, their legacy was huge.

The epigraphic data provided here establishes an early financial past of Buddhist women at some of the oldest and biggest archaeological sites for recorded history in South Asia. Nonetheless, the discipline of fiscal history concerning Early Historic or earlier South Asia remains nascent, despite significant contributions from academics like as Monica Smith, Kathleen D. Morrison, Carla Sinopoli, and Mark Kenoyer (Milligan, 2019). Inscriptions provide more direct information about previous people in their own words than eloquent 'virtuoso' message writers, hence contemporary studies on the financial history of faith in South Asia mostly use them. Epigraphy studies politics and society. Conditions influenced Old South Asian economic religion studies. According to Himanshu P. Ray's Monastery and Guild (Ray, 2008), Buddhism in the Sātavāhana era was appealing to traders, associations, and people dissatisfied with the community. This view was echoed in numerous texts, including the Divyāvadāna, which included the mercantile ethos. Salomon identifies 'private donations' as the main inscriptional type found in early Indian Buddhist sites like Sanchi (Salomon, 1998). For almost a century, academics have referred to private gifts as 'donative inscriptions', particularly in Buddhist writings like Sanchi. These donations are often religious and more prevalent than other types of writing (Milligan, 2019).

At Sanchi, Marshal's 827 inscription includes 346 female participations. Many writings are broken and include just one or two words or sentences. A greater proportion of female contributors may result from removing unreadable writing. Regular women give the most, bhikkunis, and female followers of preachers and lay believers (Trivedi, 2005). The giving to bhikkunis and women in Buddhist memorial offerings is very puzzling. They are Sanchi's second-largest female donor group. Women joining the order had to live by a strict code of conduct. Devotion was the Samgha's main goal. A bhikku or bhikkunis could only retain eight items. These are the three garments, alms bowl, razor, needle girdle, and water strainer. Bhikkus and Bhikkunis couldn't receive gold or silver or make transactions with money (Trivedi, 2005).

Some Amaravati women's groups functioned in cities. Women owed the family patriarch, gahapati. Wealthy women governed slaves, servants, and poor women. Nine engravings show spouses, mothers, daughters, and daughters-in-law's gahapati duty to propagate Buddhism. In Mathura, gahapati or kin gifts are rare, but Amaravati inscriptions emphasise them. It highlights the significance of Amaravati as a farming hub, while Mathura was a renowned urban centre (Singh, 2003). In the Amaravati inscriptions, female lay worshippers of the Buddha supported his Samgha financially and built stupas for themselves and other Buddhists to honour the Buddha. According to the Buddhist Chhatta inscription in Amaravati, Chandra, the mother of Buddhi, gave a parasol to the chaitya of a renowned {airä) Utayipabhahis. Another plaque describes Upasika Siva's sons and daughters contributing Buddhist sculptures. Five hundred inscriptions of laywomen's gifts to Buddhist monuments and samghas in India have been found by archaeologists (Singh, 2003). A script exists that alludes to the offering of a Buddhist rail by upasika Samgharakshita, the progeny of the gahapati Mariti, accompanied by her siblings and all three kids: Chandra, Arjuna, and Chandramukha of Bhutiyana (Singh, 2003). Information exists of an individual named Sivaka, a resident of Sresthavada, who was the son of a gahapati. Alongside his wife Munurj, as well as his sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, he contributed two patukas (footprints) to the Sangha (Singh, 2003).

There exist no fewer than six engravings that reference vaniya (traders) whose spouses or other female relatives contribute substantial offerings at Amaravati. Another notable connection appears in the Amaravati engravings; however, contributions remain modest in scale (Figure 4). A work of art references a list vaniyani Nagachampaka, Chandrasri, and Buddhila. Yet another piece commemorates the offering made by Nakha, the spouse of the upasaka and vaniya Nagatisya, a resident of Narasala, along with his sons, the heranika (treasurer), Buddhi, and Mula (Singh, 2003). The third level of female benefactors comprises family members of Aavesani (artisans). There exists a singular message that alludes to the contribution of a thaba (pillar) by Nanda, the offspring of the craftsman Nandabhu. The fourth group of

supporters comprised the gandhika, or perfumer, who, along with his sons and daughters, contributed a chetiyakhambha, also known as a chaitya pillar (Singh, 2003).

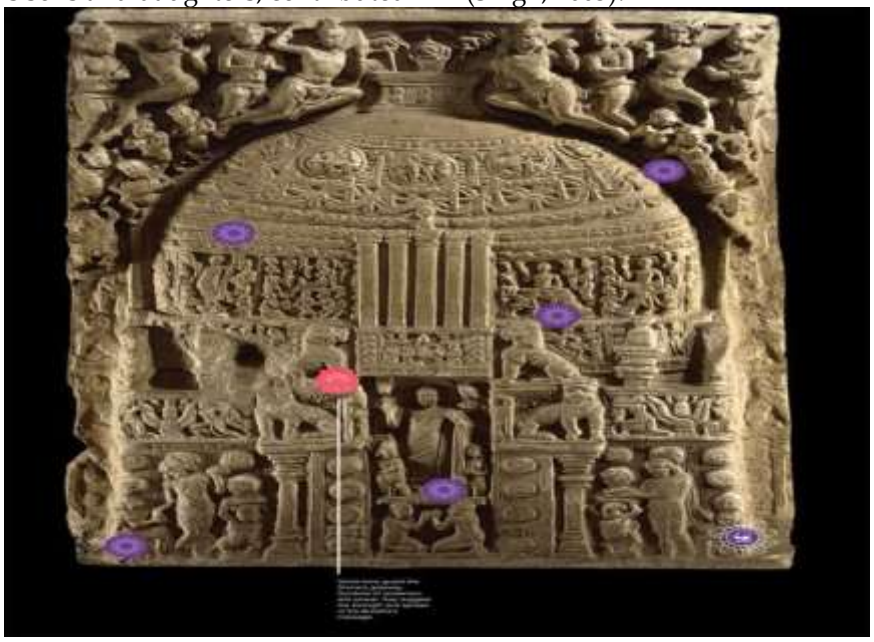

Figure 4: Amaravati.
Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/power-patronage-great-shrine-amaravati

The Nasik engravings of the Satvahana queens articulate their feelings in a remarkably profound way. The Satvahana rulers served as staunch proponents of Brahmanism. The esteemed monarch of the dynasty, Gotamiputra Satakami, is referred to as a 'unique Brahman' and is celebrated as a sovereign who halted the contamination of the four Varnas. Nonetheless, his mother, Gotami Balarsiri, was a significant supporter of Buddhism (Trivedi, 2005).

3. CONCLUSION

Buddhist women's economic rights in ancient India illustrate how religion, communal standards, and human activity gave women new options. Buddhism upended patriarchy. Its principles let women own property, manage wealth, and participate in religious and secular life. Bhikkhuni Sangha institutionalised these rights, giving women a religious and economic voice. While canonical texts such as the Vinaya Pitaka and Sutta Pitaka offer direct evidence of the Buddha's support for gender equality in monastic and economic contexts, inscriptions and epigraphic records further corroborate the active participation of women in financing and sustaining Buddhist institutions. These records underscore the significant contributions of women, from lay patrons to Bhikkhunis, in the establishment and growth of monasteries, stupas, and other religious edifices. Their acts of dana (charitable giving) not only demonstrated their financial acumen but also reinforced their social and spiritual status within the Buddhist community. Despite the progressive nature of Buddhism, the economic rights of women remained constrained by broader societal and institutional biases. Patriarchal ideologies, societal resistance, and institutional limitations often hindered the full realization of economic equality. However, the flexibility within Buddhist teachings allowed women to navigate these challenges and carve out spaces of empowerment. By providing women with legal and social mechanisms to own property, participate in trade, and make philanthropic contributions, Buddhism fostered a degree of economic parity that was unparalleled in many other contemporary traditions. The legacy of Buddhist women's economic roles extends beyond ancient India, offering valuable lessons for contemporary discussions on gender equality and empowerment. The integration of spiritual principles with economic agency provides a model for addressing modern challenges related to women's rights and socio-economic participation. By examining the historical narratives of Buddhist women, we gain insights into how religion can act as a catalyst for social change, empowering marginalized groups to overcome systemic barriers. In conclusion, the economic rights of Buddhist women in ancient India represent a nuanced interplay of progress and limitation. While societal and institutional constraints persisted, the teachings of Buddhism laid the groundwork for significant

advancements in women's autonomy and agency. These historical developments continue to inspire contemporary efforts toward achieving gender equality and social justice, highlighting the enduring relevance of Buddhist principles in fostering inclusive and equitable societies.

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