

Women in Buddhism: A Systematic Review of Their Entry, Role, and Empowerment from Ancient to Mauryan Period

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Abstract

The role of women in Buddhism represents one of the most significant social transformations in ancient Indian history. Buddhism, emerging in the sixth century BCE, became the first major world religion to formally admit women into a religious order, thereby challenging the patriarchal social structure of the time. This paper presents a systematic review of scholarly literature examining the entry of women into the Buddhist Sangha, their religious and social roles, and their contribution to Buddhist literature and propagation, spanning from the ancient period to the Mauryan era. A total of 25 relevant historical and religious studies were analyzed across five dimensions: pre-Buddhist status of women, conditions of admission into the Sangha, the Eight Garudhamma, literary contributions through the Therigatha, and the Mauryan period contributions of Sanghamitra. The review reveals that women's entry into Buddhism was not merely a religious concession but a revolutionary social movement that provided women education, autonomy, and spiritual equality. This review provides a structured synthesis for historians and gender scholars seeking to understand women's empowerment in ancient Indian religious traditions.

Keywords

Buddhism, Women, Bhikkhuni Sangha, Mahaprajapati Gautami, Therigatha, Sanghamitra, Eight Garudhamma, Mauryan Period, Women Empowerment, Ancient India.