



# Women as Gleaned in Samantapāsādikā and Divyāvadāna: A Comparative Study

Dr. Manisha Sharma <sup>1 \*</sup>

1. Associate Professor, Deptt. of History, JDMC, DU, Delhi, India  
manishasharma@jdm.du.ac.in

**Abstract:** The changing norms of society in ancient India leading to the change in the status of women played an important role in the increasing involvement of woman in Buddhism. The Buddhist texts not only tell us about the status of those women who adopted Buddhism but also about the women in society at large during the period of their composition. The present paper is about a comparative study of the treatment of women of the time when the two texts were composed. We find some differences between status of women in both the texts. Through the study we are also able to compare between the woman of the high and low classes.

**Keywords:** hrīmanti, gunvati, Vasiyagochro Rupajivika, Mahavidyadhari

----- X -----

## INTRODUCTION

The focusing of social structures in the two texts stresses the basic linkages between the literature and society. Like all great literary masterpieces, Buddhist texts primarily deal with social issues, mirroring the multitudinous aspects of the contemporary society at large. The interplay of various social dynamics – hierarchy, trade, commerce, festivals, religion, culture to name the few there by pointing the variety and complexity of Buddhist literature.

### *SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ*

A commentary on the Vinayapitak, ‘*SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ*’ was written by Buddhaghosa. It was written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Language used by Buddhaghosa for writing his commentary literature was Pali.

### *‘DIVYĀVADĀNA’*

‘*DIVYĀVADĀNA*’ is a compilation of 38 legendary stories.. These stories cover a period from the early stages of the Common Era to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or the start of 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. The ‘*DIVYĀVADĀNA*’ emphasizes on Karma, moral discipline and the concept of *punya*. The stories of ‘*DIVYĀVADĀNA*’ also highlight the socio- economic, political, cultural and religious condition of India of the period when it was composed.

*SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ* and ‘*DIVYĀVADĀNA*’ are the text which directly and indirectly refer to the socio-economic, political, cultural and religious condition of India during their times. ‘*SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ*’ is an Atthakatha (commentary) on the VinayPitaka. It was written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and refers to the socio economic & political condition of India during the time of VinayPitaka whereas the ‘*DIVYĀVADĀNA*’ covers a period from the second century to the end of third or the beginning of fourth

century A.D.

Therefore, through these texts the socio-economic scenario of India from the time of Buddha till the third century A.D. can be studied.

## WOMAN

From the '*SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ*' we come to know that sons were preferred over daughter in the society. In The '*DIVYĀVADĀNA*' also we find that when a son was born it was rejoiced with grand celebrations in the households .however at some places in the text we even find that when a daughter born it was also an event of celebration.However this was not a general norm.

Sine subordination of women to her husband was a general norm in the society Both the texts consider the position of women to be as subordinate to men. The '*DIVYĀVADĀNA*' refers to *hrimanti* as a righteous woman. The one who follows sincerely all the restrictions imposed on her by the family are *hrimanti*. The texts clearly points towards a woman to have curbed her priorities for the sake of the family if they came in the way of following the orders of her family epecially her husband. From the Parajik we get reference to nine types of women.It is also noteworthy that both the texts refer to the marriageable for girls to be after attaining puberty. From the Anguttarnikaya we come to know that marriageable age of girls was around 16 or 17 years old.

Both the texts do not refer to any right of women over property. However, the '*SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ*' does refer to *stridhana* which included jewellery, clothes, household articles etc. Categories of women mentioned in the '*SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ*' includes

1. Sapridanda
2. Sarakha
3. Chhandavasini
4. Bhogavasin
5. Palavasine
6. Bhogvasini
7. Dastbhariya
8. Nuhuttika

The texts refer to an inferior status of women but from The '*DIVYĀVADĀNA*' however makes a distinction between the rights enjoyed the woman of a lower class and woman of a higher class.we even come to know that the women of lower and middle class were much more independent than the women of higher class. Since the woman of lower classes had to earn a living and support their spouse in daily life , a certain level of indepenence was necessarily given to them.

The text also refers to women who attained knowledge in the society. Before marriage a girl acquired

knowledge of many fields. Prakrti in Sardulkarnavadana was considered to be *gunvati* as she had attained knowledge of various fields. The queen of Ronika was a very good dancer. Women were also educated in the field of medicine. However, the SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ does not refer to any such knowledge attained by the women in the society.

1. Sapidanda
2. Sarakha
3. Chhandavasini
4. Bhogavasin
5. Palavasine
6. Bhogvasini
7. Dastbhariya
8. Nuhuttika

## MARITAL SYSTEM

From both the texts we come to know that marriage took place with the consent of parents in the family. It was necessary for both the bride and bridegroom in the family to be chaste. From the 'SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ' there is reference to *ahavah* which means accepting the bride of other family and *vivah* which means giving away of daughter in marriage

“akaradisuharaha it darkass

Parkuttodarikayahran.

Vivaho it AttanodarikayParkul plears”<sup>1</sup>

Similarly in 'DIVYĀVADĀNA' the consent of the parents was foremost in marriage, however from the text we even come to know that in the absence of parents any elder member from the family could act as parent in selecting the bride. In The 'DIVYĀVADĀNA' we also get reference to the qualities of a bride for marriage. The Sardulkarnavadana refers to physical signs that signify the qualities of a girl however the 'SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ' does not refer to any such qualities of girl.

Furthermore the 'DIVYĀVADĀNA' refers to *GandharvaVivah* & *SvayamvarVivah* and from The Vinayapitak and SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ we get ten kinds of union between a man and woman.

“Adapattakani, Desinama, Dhajahala, Kammakari, Muhuttika, Bhogavasin, Patavasini, AdapattaKani, Obhatachumbat, Chhandavsini, Dhanakkhita Amongst these except chhandavsini all other unions had an economic exchange for women.”<sup>2</sup>

From the 'SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ' we also come to know that for marriage *nakshatra* and *muhurat* were very important however we do not find such concepts in the 'DIVYĀVADĀNA'.

## POLYGAMY

From the 'DIVYĀVADĀNA' references tell us that polygamy was practiced in the society especially amongst the higher sections of the society. However Buddhism does not approve of polygamy According to Shundo Tachibana:

*“The PrabharaSutta states that a man who is not satisfied with one woman and seeks out other woman is on the path of decline. Other fragments in the Buddhist scriptures seem to treat polygamy unfavorably leading some authors to conclude that Buddhism generally does not approve it.”<sup>3</sup>*

From the SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ we get reference tobhariya here it refers to a woman who looks after and takes care of the family. This makes it significant that women took care of the family. A woman who took care of the house, about their needs and gave priority to the family was considered to be wise.

“Susasusasethabhariyanyo

Chputtanamashwoo

Komarosethabhariyanyo

Ch puttanamashwoo”<sup>4</sup>

## PRACTICE OF POLYGAMY

During the days of 'DIVYĀVADĀNA' polygamy was practiced in the society. The kings had more than one wife. A large 'harem' was maintained by the king. It seems that amongst the elite class polygamy was practiced.

The practice of polygamy also led to enmity amongst the wives of the king. In the 'DIVYĀVADĀNA' we find reference where the wives of Bimbisara became jealous of the new wife of Bimbisara. It is also referred to in the 'DIVYĀVADĀNA' that jealousy was inherent infemale behaviour. “Irsyaprakritmatrgramah” The 'SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ' also refers to the practice of polygamy in the society. The males of the upper class society usually kept many wives. Both the texts refer to polygamy being practiced by the elites .

## WOMEN AS PROSTITUTES

There are many references to the women working as prostitutes in the society. 'SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ' refers to terms like Vasiyagochro and Rupajivika for prostitutes. These worked as prostitutes in the society. Mahavagga also refers to a prostitute named Ambrapali who was famous prostitute of Vaisali. The Mahavagga also refers to the word ganika for prostitute. Women were considered as a source of entertainment in the society.

The 'DIVYĀVADĀNA' also refers to the existence of prostitutes in the society. From the Pamsupradanavadana we come to know that prostitution was the norm of the society. The courtesans or

prostitutes were known as *ganikas*. The text further refers to the prostitute receiving payment for her work. It reveals that they were readily paid for their services. Even slaves worked as concubines of their master, the child born of such relation did not have any right over the property of his father.

## FAMILY SYSTEM

Father was the head of the family. He took all decisions on behalf of the family. Father selected the bride for his son. The girl who was good in all aspects was selected by the father for his son. Mother also had a respectable place in the family. Serving the mother was considered to be very pious for the children “*Satpunisairmatharah susrsusaniya*”<sup>5</sup>

Sons always showed respect to their mother. It was considered that if a person committed any offence against their mother it would lead them to hell.

“mataryapakarinahpraninah

Ihaivavyasanaprapata

Patalalambino b habantiti”<sup>6</sup>

## SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

Unlike the *SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ* in the days of *DIVYĀVADĀNA*’ education was imparted to women. They possessed knowledge to fine arts, dance & music. Tisyasakrita<sup>7</sup> possessed the knowledge of curing ailments like diseased caused by germs women who had knowledge of various hymns, was called ‘Mahavidyadhari’<sup>8</sup>

However, in the ‘*SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ*’ we do not get any reference to education being imparted to women.

## ORNAMENTATION

The ‘*DIVYĀVADĀNA*’ refers to ornaments worn by both male and female. We even get reference to ornamentation of animals. Whereas the ‘*SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ*’ refers to ornamentation usually used by women. The ornaments worn by women were called. *Ithalankar*. The Mahavagga refers to an incident as mentioned in where Sudama receives jewellery from his mother to be given to his wife. Women during those times were conscious of their beauty and so they took great care of their clothing and ornamentation. “ten hi ..... Sudinnasapiya.”<sup>9</sup> Men were also conscious of their look, Men kept long hair and beard to look good. As mentioned in chapter 4. King Bimbisara kept a female barber to maintain his hair. “Sanapita Karma .....Sanvrata.”<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The ‘*SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ*’ and ‘*DIVYĀVADĀNA*’ are the Buddhist texts through which we can get the social structure of ancient India from the time of the Buddha till the third century A.D. The texts also provides information about the attitude of Buddhism towards the society. The kind of treatment woman

received after adopting Buddhism is also known by studying the two texts and other Buddhist texts. Although the purpose of both the text is different one refers to the Avadana stories whereas the other in a commentary, both are different from each other but they are similar as they give references to the socio-economic and political history of their times.

---

## References

1. Sharma Birbal, (ed.), SAMANTAPĀSĀDIKĀ, NavNalanda Mahavihara Granthamala, Nalanda, 1964, II p. 511.
2. Ibid., III p. 1052.
3. Tachibana, Shuno, The Ethics of Buddhism, Routledge, London, 1992, p.32
4. Sutta – Nipata, Khuddaka Nikaya, Vol 1, ed., Bhikkhu J Kashyap, Nalanda Devnagari Pali Series (Bihar Government), 1959, part-1, p. 66.
5. Divyavdana (ed.) Vaidya, P.L., The Mithila Institute of Post Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, Darbhanga, 1959, p.512.
6. Ibid., p. 512.
7. Vaidya, P.L., Divyavdana Ibid., p. 263.
8. Ibid., p. 314.
9. Ibid., p. Parajika p. 20
10. Vaidya, P.L., Divyavdana, op. cit., p.232.