

Illustrious Jain Women in Ancient and Early Medieval India

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Jainism in some ways liberated women. Its attitude towards women was for more liberal as compared to many other contemporary religions of the time. In this paper some illustrious Jain women from ancient India will be discussed. These women lead ordinary lives, infact they made their ordinary lives extraordinary through their actions. These women showed exemplary courage, wisdom and fortitude in the face of grave adversity. Some of these women used their position to promote Jain art & literature and thus through their philanthropic work enriched Jainism. Some of the women, discussed in the paper came from royal families and others from ordinary background but there is a common thread that unites them and that is their indelible contribution to Jainism.

Priyadarshna

Priyadarshna was Mahavira's only daughter like all other royal princes she was given an education and trained in various arts. She was married to Jamali who was her paternal cousin. They both enjoyed good married life but once when Mahavira was visiting their hometown both of them heard Bhagwan Mahavira's discourse, and they both decided to renounce the life of ordinary householder and they both became Jain monks. Jamali is supposed to have embraced Jainism along with 1500 men whereas Priyadarshna is supposed to have joined along with 1000 other women. Both Jamali and Priyadarshna mastered the eleven angas. Priyadarshna is supposed to have joined the Samgha under the guidance of Arya Chandana.

Both she & Jamali practised all the austerities. Once a dispute arose between Bhagwan Mahavir and Jamali. Bhagwan Mahavir had said that action that is going can be said to be complete but Jamali believed that only when the action is complete, it will be considered completed. It is said that Jamali had grown very proud and obstinate as he had participated in many disputations and discussions and won most of them. Priyadarshna is supposed to have sided with Jamali initially, but later on a Lay follower named Dunh Kumar reasoned out with Priyadarshna that what Bhagwan Mahavira is saying is correct and she realised her mistake and again joined the Samgha.

Jyestha

She was the wife of king Siddharth of Kshtriyakunda and was the daughter of head of Vaishali republic king

Chetaka. She was brought up like other princes of the time and was trained in various arts & skills. Both her parents had been followers of Bhagwan Mahavir. So Jyestha right from childhood had been influenced by Jainism. Jyestha was known throughout her kingdom for her beauty and intelligence. She along with her husband had been lay followers of Jainism. After reaching her midlife she began to lose interest in the worldly affairs and decided to join the Samgha. After taking permission from the husband she joined the Sangha in the presence of Bhagwan Mahavira himself and became part of Arya Chandna's Samgha.

Padmavati

She was the daughter of Raja Chetaka and wife of king Dadhivahan. She made Champanagar an important centre of Jainism. She had a daughter named Vasumati. Padmavati was a good painter & sculpter and also an authority on Jain religious texts. Once king Dadhivahan's kingdom was attacked by king Shatanika. King Dadhivahan fearing defeat at the hands of king Shatanik, fled the kingdom leaving behind his queen and daughter. According to folklore the king Shatanik wanted Padmavati to become his wife but Padamavati refused and cut off her tongue. King Shatanik was moved that he decided to treat Padamavati's daughter Vasumati as his own daughter and he too embraced Jainism.

Chellana

She was also daughter of Raja Chetaka and she was the wife of King Shrenik. Once she went for a walk in the city and she saw a mendicant without clothes in freezing cold temperature meditating, she was impressed by his strict penance. Though she did not join the Samgha and continued to follow the life of a householder but she tried to strictly follow Jain teaching in her life. Even in the face of great adversity she showed great forbearance.

Her husband King Shrenik jealous of her devotion to Jain mendicant even tried to get her killed but she remained loyal to him till he and Chellana's son king Kunik got his father imprisoned. It was Chellana who sided with her husband and tried to talk sense to her son king kunik. So even though she did not become a Jain nun but through her exemplary life and through her strict adherence to Jain teachings she became a role model for other Jain women.

Chandanbala

Chandanbala is considered a Mahasati in Jainism and hence she has a unique place in Jain history. She was the first nun to head the women's Samgha. Chandanbala's real name was Vasumati. She was the daughter of King of Champa Dhadvahan. Her mother's name was Dharinee who was a very spiritual and intelligent woman. It was due to the strong values instilled in her by her mother—that Chandanbala right from her childhood showed great forbearance, religious & spiritual temperament right from her childhood. She had decided not to get married and to dedicate her life to her spiritual upliftment. She was able to convert more than 36000 women to Jainism. Throughout her life, through her pious deeds and strict adherence to Jain principles she became a role model for Jain women and immortalised herself.

Sulsa

She belonged to Rajagriha. She was the wife of King's charioteer. She is supposed to have been always calm, composed and soft spoken lady. She and her husband could not have any children. Sulsa instead of turning bitter about the fact that she was sterile began to turn her attention towards religion and started following all the instruction laid down in Jainism for householders. She eventually gave up all food like milk, ghee, curd oil & sweet. She began to perform strict penance just like Jain monks even before she had become a nun. Soon her name and fame spread throughout the kingdom. Among the lay followers of Bhagwan Mahavir Sulsa's name is taken with utmost respect. She donated generously to the cause Jainism and followed all the 12 vows.

Revati

She belonged to Shravasti. She had been a follower of Mahavir for a long time. She is supposed to have had a good knowledge of Ayurveda and herbal medicine. Lot of people who were suffering from many diseases would come to her for medicine soon her fame spread far and wide. Many monks also used to come to her when they fell sick. Once she made a pumpkin dish and Mahavira had come to Shravasti and had fallen sick. He suffered from high fever and was unable to eat anything. Revati is supposed to have offered this to Bhagwan Mahavira as it was considered good for a person stretcher with fever. Bhagwan Mahavira after eating it is supposed to have recovered. After this she spread far and wide. From Revati's story we come to know there were women in ancient India who had deep knowledge of Indian herbs and medicines. It also shows that women were allowed to work as healers and had good knowledge of traditional medicines.

Bradra

She belonged to Rajagriha and her husband's name Gobhadra. Gobhadra was a well known merchant of Rajagriha but he had an untimely death and left behind a son & daughter.

After Gobhadra's death Bradra, his wife not only had to look after her son and daughter but she also had to look after the business of her husband. She was very protective towards her son and did not want to unnecessarily burden him with running a day-to-day business. Bradra showed extraordinary skills and intelligence in handling her husband's business. Under her their business kept growing and their family became one of the wealthiest families and their fame spread far and wide. Her son even after getting married showed no interest in Business and he indulged in a lifestyle but Bradra led a pious and a disciplined and spiritual life. She became a follower of Jainism and generously donated to Jainism.

Once when Bhagwan Mahavira visited Rajagriha her son also becomes a lay of Jainism along with his many wives. Eventually he son's interest deepened in Jainism and he began to perform seven penances and became a Jain monk and joined the Samgha.

If one analysis the life of Bradra we will realise that even in ancient times women had good knowledge of intricacies of trade and commerce so trade & commerce even those times was not the exclusive preserve of men and women would & did participate in it whenever they got the opportunity and Bradra's example also proves that women were equally adept at handling trade and commerce and also had good knowledge of intricacies of trade.

Akimabbey

She belonged to the 10th century. Due to her special qualities and his sacrifices Jains in south India hold her up to the highest esteem. Her husband was a commander in the Chalukyan army. She converted to Jainism after death of her husband. She refused to perform Sati as it was against Jain principles and infact became a Jain Sadhavi. Her only son Annigadera was also a commander in the Jain army. She devoted her entire wealth to the cause of spreading Jain dharma. She got one lakh copies of Shantipurana written by Kannada poet Pana made and distributed. This helped in popularising Jainism amongst Common people. There was no printing press at that time and all the copies had to be handwritten which was time consuming & expensive press. She got many other rare Jain texts copied and translated into Kannada. In this way she helped in preserving and popularising Jain literature. Apart from literature, she also got many statues of Jain Tirthankara made and donated them.

Ratna has praised Atimabbe's this great contribution and love for Jainism. In Karnatha region we come across many inscriptions praising Atimabbe's contribution in popularising Jainism and praising her role in spreading Jainism.

Alkaden

Alkaden belonged to Chalukyas dynasty of Badami. She was Satyashree's daughter and dastavarman daughter.

She was good managing administrative affairs. She was incharge of one of the provinces of Chalukyas Kingdom. She had a council of ministers assisting her. During her time nay land donation were made to Jain temples and monasteries. Some part of the revenue was reserved for donation to religious purpose. So, we can see how during her reign Jainism received a lot of state patronage.

Chandravallabha

Chandravallabha was a princess of Rashtrakuta dynasty. She played an important role in spreading Jainism throughout the length and breadth of her kingdom. Under the guidance of Guru Shuba Chandra Siddhantadera she got a huge Jain statue in her kingdom. She strictly adhered to all the Jain rules and regulation for Lay followers. She became nun and more spiritual as she got older & eventually gave up all worldly pleasure. She ended her life by practising Sallekhana.

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