The Androgyny of Enlightenment:
Questioning Women’s Status in Ancient Indian Religions.

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Introduction:

This paper examines the relationship between women’s role in early Indian religions and the concept of androgyny found in ancient Indian texts. In many ways, the practices of early Indian Religions (Buddhism and Vedic Religions), were extremely andocentric and patriarchal. However, when further examining some of the textual foundations and principles of these religions, it becomes clear that a number of their fundamental teachings are neither sexist nor patriarchal. Indeed, they possess concepts and principles that are exactly contrary to patriarchy and sexism. Therefore, although early Indian religious institutions were often patriarchal and discriminatory towards women in practice, many of the fundamental principles of these religions were egalitarian.

Scholars almost uniformly agree that Vedic and Buddhist texts were interpreted, translated, and recorded by men. This fact is referred to as androcentrism, which is, viewing the world from a male perspective, whilst women are viewed and treated as passive objects, rather than active, subjects of history. For that reason, the examination of women in ancient Indian religions texts is important for an accurate and complete history.

This paper bridges Mahayana Buddhist Sutras, (a section of) the Hindu epic Mahabharata, and the concept of androgyny to illustrate that sexism and patriarchy are contrary to the fundamental teachings and beliefs of ancient Vedic and Buddhist philosophies. The above will be analyzed via a feminist perspective, the theory of the equality of the sexes, and feminist research methodology will be utilized (see Appendix A for Methodology).
Prior to Buddhism

Women’s Status in early Vedic India:

Rather than using the term ‘Hindu’ to refer to the spiritual traditions of pre-Buddhist ancient India, the term *Vedic* Religion(s) will be utilized throughout this paper\(^1\). For purposes of succinctness, this study will only briefly examine the time period from 2500 B.C.E to about 400 B.C.E (about the time of the rise of Buddhism). This era will be referred to as *Vedic* history, however let it be noted that Vedic history covers various distinct religious traditions, including but not limited to, Hinduism.

Early Vedic history can be divided into two major periods, The Formative Period (2500-800 B.C.E.), and The Speculative Period (800-400 B.C.E.). The Formative period began with the Indus Valley Civilization. Although many aspects of this civilization remain vague, this civilization was most likely patriarchal. However, many female sculptures have been found, so it is possible that goddesses were worshiped in connection to fertility and regeneration (Kinsley 1993).

In approximately 1000-1500 B.C.E. the Indus Valley Civilization was invaded by a group of nomads known as Aryans, who had more advanced weapons than the native population; as a result, Aryans became the dominant force in the Indian subcontinent. The Aryan culture had a distinct social hierarchy headed by Brahmin priests, who purportedly maintained communication between gods and humans. Thus, the Aryans brought with them the Indo-European tradition of the patrilinealism, patrilocalism, and patriarchy.

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\(^1\) This will be for purposes of accuracy, as the term ‘Hindu’ is often erroneously used for a variety pre-Buddhist/pre-Islamic Indian religious histories. As noted by Giti Thadani (1996), “…the pre-Vedic, the Vedic, the Brahmanic and the Shaktic are [often] all lumped together, their differences obscured as if to portray a glorious, static single tradition. The earlier autonomy of the Shaktic or goddess tradition is subsumed under a classification that privileges masculine theologies and cosmologies. The goddesses simply become the property of these traditions hence the labels such as Hindu goddesses, Buddhist goddesses, Jain goddesses…”
Gender hierarchy was established from a very young age as Brahmin boys usually obtained an extensive education, while young women rarely received any education beyond domestic skills. This became significant as knowledge of religious etymology, grammar, and ceremony largely defined an individual’s social and religious status, and those with this knowledge established themselves as the highest social caste. As such, women were subordinated to Brahmin men in religious organization and in society. Additionally, institutions such as were established to control female sexuality, such as the burning of widows, prohibition against widow remarriage, prohibition of women’s initiation of divorce, purdah (veiling), and child marriage. This was partially in response to the fact that a man could influence his social standing through his wife’s or daughters’ supposed chastity. Thus, women were often controlled by elite Brahmin men through denial of education and the vigorous ideal of chastity.

The sacred literature of the Aryans was the Vedas (1200 B.C.E.-400 B.C.E.) and was available primarily, if not entirely, to Brahmin men. The oldest of the Vedas is the Rig Veda, which was recorded ca. 1000-800 B.C.E. Although the Rig Veda was authored by men, one of the “concerns” addressed in the Rig Veda is women; as stated by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty (1981), “The Rig Veda is a book by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men; one of these concerns is women, who appear throughout the hymns as objects, though seldom as subjects.” This illustrates a limitation in studying women in ancient Vedic religions, which is that ancient Sanskrit texts have a prevailing Brahmin, androcentric bias, while women’s voices and perspectives are seldom paid attention to. As noted by Giti Thadani in *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India*, “The construction of this [female] invisibility results in an almost total lack of any kind of historical-social-cultural context and identity.” Although Thadani
is primary referring to lesbian invisibility in ancient India, the same could be said about the general disregard for women’s voices in ancient Indian histories.

Additionally, male deities were more dominant in the Vedic pantheon than female deities, although the Rig Veda does contain metaphors describing the attributes of goddesses. These images often refer to the goddess as being strong, powerful, and supportive (Vivante 1999). However, it is generally understood that there is not necessarily any correlation between the presence of goddesses and the status of women in a given religion (Young 1987).

During The Speculative Period, philosophical and metaphysical concerns come to dominate Vedic religion and philosophy, especially in the sacred literature of the Upanishads and the Mahabharata. Although the different Upanishads vary in their teachings, all tend to concur that there exists an underlying reality, or spiritual essence, called Brahman. Brahman is thought to be The One unifying essence, which is present in all manifest creation, including in all humans. The individual, eternal, essence is referred to as Atman, a person’s enduring Spirit or Soul. It is believed that Atman does not take the form of female or male, that it is without sexual distinction (Vanita 2003). The ultimate goal in of existence as stated in the Upanishads is the realization of the fundamental identity of Brahman and Atman and the understanding that the True Self transcends individual distinction, time, and even death. Here we see Vedic thought clearly approaching a genderless or androgynous principle of Ultimate reality.

According to Ruth Vanita (2003), Hindu texts typically portray men as ascetics and possessors of knowledge. Nevertheless, female aesthetics do appear in some ancient texts, as will be demonstrated later through the highlighted debate between the female aesthetic Sulabha, and King Janaka (Vanita 2003). Two prominent women of the Upanishads, Maitreyi and Gargi, who engage in dialogue about the nature of Atman, never actively sought enlightenment themselves.
through renunciation or asceticism (Young 1987). Nevertheless, the fact that there is textual evidence of women in the Upanishads and the Mahabharata discussing Atman, may suggest that women’s status might have improved somewhat during the speculative period.

Conclusion: The Indo-European Aryans contributed to and heightened the hierarchical, patriarchal, social structure of ancient India. The Brahmin society established educational disparity between women and men, as well as among people of different castes, or social groups. The restrictive ideal of female purity also increased the social distinction between women and men. This was the general social and religious context under which Buddhism arose.

Women’s Status in Ancient Buddhism:

Buddhism was founded approximately 2,500 years ago in Northern India by Siddhartha Guatama (c. 563-c. 483 B.C.E.), an upper-class male of royal descent (Reilly 2000). Early in his adulthood, Guatama left his home, his family, and his privilege in pursuit of enlightenment and spiritual liberation. In time, Guatama succeeded and became enlightened, wherein he realized the ultimate goal of Buddhism: escape from suffering due to continual incarnations (this cycle of incarnation is known in Buddhism as Samsara). Shortly after Guatama’s enlightenment, many other world-renouncers became his followers; Guatama’s achievement and message quickly spread across India, Nepal, and a great portion of Asia and developed into an entire religion known today as Buddhism.

It is argued by some historians that Buddhism was actually a great step forward for women’s status. As Ann Klein concludes, “When Buddhism arose in the fifth century B.C.E, the sanction of female clergy was itself a radical departure from centuries of [patriarchal] tradition (Owen, 1998).” Although women’s status might have improved with Buddhism, this is not to say
that Buddhism was without its own forms of patriarchy and perhaps even misogyny.

Interestingly, in her essay *An Image of Women in Old Buddhist Literature: The Daughters of Mara*, Nancy Falk points out that it is generally agreed that the Buddhist attitude toward women declined in the years following the appearance of written Buddhist literature. When written texts appear, we can find anti-female warnings such as the ones found in the *Anguttaranikaya*:

Monks, a woman even when going along, will stop to ensnare the heart of a man; whether standing, sitting, or lying down, laughing talking or singing, weeping, stricken or dying, a woman will stop to ensnare the heart of a man.

{And}

Womenfolk are uncontrolled, Ananda. Womenfolk are envious, Ananda. Womenfolk are greedy, Ananda. Womenfolk are weak in wisdom, Ananda. (Falk 1973)

The *Therigatha* also contains excerpts that a female birth is difficult and regrettable:

Woeful is woman’s lot…
Woeful when sharing home with hostile wives,
Woeful when giving birth in bitter pain,
Some seeking death, or e’er they suffer twice,
Piercing the throat; the delicate poison take,
Woeful too when mother-murdering embryo
Comes not to birth, and both alike find death.

In this excerpt we find women’s lives not only depicted as unfortunate, but so much so that suicide becomes the final resort.

The simplest and most obvious evidence of gender inequality in Buddhism is the fact that Buddha himself was male and all successive Dali Lamas have been male, thus setting the stage for a patriarchy in the most fundamental definition of the word: a general complex of male domination that pervades ideas, institutions and personal expectations throughout society (Reilly 2000). Buddha’s early followers were primarily, if not entirely, male. Some years later, Buddha’s aunt (who raised him from birth), approached Buddha and asked him if she and her female companions could join the monastic community. Initially, Buddha refused their request, but
eventually a nuns order was established under certain conditions, known as the Eight Chief Rules. Additionally, the comment was made by The Buddha himself that since women had been permitted to join the order, the dharma (Buddhist teachings) would not last as long as it otherwise would have (Gross 1993). This comment is found in the *Cullavagga* in the following translated excerpt:

> If, Ananda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the dharma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the Brahma-faring, Ananda, would have lasted long, true dharma would have endured for a thousand years. But since, Ananda, women have gone forth...in the dharma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, now Ananda, the Brahma-faring will not last long, true dharma will endure only for five hundred years (Horner 1963).

Even so, Buddhism was the first religion to officially establish organized female asceticism (Vanita 2003). The conditions under which the nuns order would be permitted were spelled out in the Eight Chief Rules found in the *Cullavagga Vinaya* as cited in I.B. Horner’s, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*:

I. An almswoman, even if she is of a hundred years standing, shall make Salutation to, shall rise up in the presence of, shall bow down before, and shall perform all proper duties toward almsmen, if only just initiated. This is a rule is to be revered and reverenced, honored and observed, and her life long never to be transgressed.

II. An almswoman is not to spend the rainy season in a district in which there is no almsman. This is a rule...never to be transgressed.

III. Every half-month an almswoman is to await from the Chapter of the Almsmen two things, the asking as to (the date of) the Uposatha ceremony, and the time when the almsman will come to give the exhortation. This is a rule...never to be transgressed.

IV. After keeping the rainy season (of Vassa), the almswoman is to hold Pavarana (to inquire as to whether any fault can be laid to her charge) before both Sanghas—as well as that of Almsmen as that of the Almswomen—with respect to three matters, namely what has been seen, what has been heard, and what has been suspected. This is a rule...never to be transgressed.

V. An almswomen who has been guilty of a serious offense is to undergo the Manatta discipline towards both the Sanghas (Almsmen and Almswomen). This is a rule...never to be transgressed.

VI. When an almswoman, as novice, has been trained for two years in the Six Rules, she is to ask leave for the Upasampadainitiation from both Sanghas (as well as that of the Almsmen as that of the Almswomen). This is a rule...never to be transgressed.
VII. An almswoman is on no pretext to revile or abuse an almsman. This is a rule . . . never to be transgressed.

VIII. From henceforth official admonition by almswomen of almsmen is forbidden, whereas the official admonition of almswomen by almsmen is not forbidden. This is a rule . . . never to be transgressed.²

Clearly, these rules subordinated the nun’s order (Bhikkhuni order) to the monk’s order (Bhikkhu order). Even as one could argue that The Eight Chief Rules were simply produced in response to the prevailing social and cultural norms of the time, this does not entirely eliminate Buddhism’s responsibility, nor does it lessen the oppression that women must have faced in the monastic community because of these rules.

The Doctrine of Woman’s Incapability is another overtly anti-female script found in the ancient Buddhist text, The Pali Nikayas. In the translation from the Asian Journal of Women’s Studies the excerpt reads:

Monks, it is impossible that a woman can be an arahant, a fully enlightened one; this status cannot be found. But, monks, it is possible that a man can be an arahant, a fully enlightened one. Monks, it is impossible that a woman can be a wheel-turning-king; this status cannot be found. But monks, it is possible that a man can be a wheel-turning-king. Monks, it is impossible that a woman can be sakka, a Mara, a Brahma. But is possible for a man to be a Sakka, a Mara, a Brahma (The Anguttara-Nikaya)

The Doctrine of Women’s Incapability raises the question of how much of the script and texts of early Buddhism were the direct result of Buddha’s actual message, and how much of it was the result of translation, rendition, and interpretation of Buddha’s followers. Regardless of the original source of The Doctrine of Women’s Incapability, no doubt this doctrine negatively affected the situation for many women in ancient Buddhist societies.

² The Eight “Special” Rules as noted by Lisa Owen (1998): 1) Any nun, no matter how long she has been in the order, must treat any monk, as her senior) 2) Nuns should not take up residence during the annual rainy-season in any place where monks are not available to supervise them 3) Monks set the dates for the biweekly assemblies 4) During the ceremony at the end of the rainy-season, when monks and nuns invite criticism from their communities, the nuns must also invite criticism from the monks 5) Monks must share in setting and supervising the penances for the nuns 6) Monks must share in the ordination of nuns 7) Nuns must never revile or abuse monks 8) Nuns must not reprimand monks directly.
The Eight Chief Rules and The Doctrine of Women’s Incapability apparently did not deter women from entering the ascetic community, or sangha. In fact, when considering the other options available to women at the time, joining the monastic order might have been preferable, even with the Eight Special Rules and The Doctrine of Women’s Incapability in place. In fact, in the Therigatha we find a Buddhist woman’s record of delight to be free of her house and husband:

O woman well set free! How free am I
How thoroughly free of kitchen drudgery!
Me stained and squalid ‘mong my cooking pots
My brutal husband ranked as even less
Than the sunshades he sits weaving always.
Purged now of all my former lust and hate,
I dwell, musing at ease beneath the shade
Of spreading boughs—Oh but ‘tis well with me!

A final instance of Buddhism’s misogynistic doctrine is the account of Siddhartha’s final challenge before he achieves enlightenment: the God Mara tries to defeat the Buddha-to-be with his demonic armies, which fails miserably, so Mara utilizes his final weapon; his three lovely and voluptuous daughters. Mara’s daughters try to seduce Siddhartha (or the Buddha-to-be), however, they do not succeed and Buddha achieves final enlightenment (Falk 1973). This account could be read as an objectification and sexualizing of women’s inherent nature; the female figure being the final obstacle to Buddha’s enlightenment.

Conclusion: Although Buddhism might have been a step forward for women in some regards, such as organized female asceticism, ancient Buddhism certainly has a patriarchal and andocentric record of its own. However, a religion that is patriarchal need not necessarily be fundamentally misogynistic or inequitable. In the next section, I will analyze some of the texts of early Vedic religion and early Buddhism that are contrary to patriarchy and sexism.
Androgyny in Ancient Vedic and Buddhist Texts:

The concept of androgyny is a distinctive, yet sometimes subtle, theme that arises when analyzing ancient Buddhist and Vedic texts. Androgyny refers to possessing the characteristics or nature of both the female and male sex and/or gender; it also is sometimes used to refer to a state of neither femininity nor masculinity. This concept can be associated with the Vedic/Buddhist ideals of egolessness, emptiness, and ultimately, to knowledge of Atman and/or Enlightenment. To illustrate how the theme androgyny is expressed in ancient texts and how it might help a feminist analysis of ancient Buddhism and Vedic Religions, three sets of text will be examined, a section of the Hindu epic Mahabharata, The Isidasi Sutra (found in the Therigatha), and The Mahayana Sex-Change Sutras.

The Mahabharata example: In the Shanti Parva, part of the Hindu epic Mahabharata, we see a young female ascetic, Sulabha, who has chosen to opt out of the traditional Hindu female role of obedient wife. Being an ascetic, Sulabha decided to visit to King Janaka, who was known for his knowledge of asceticism. Sulabha uses her keen knowledge of yoga to assume the form of a young, beautiful, mendicant and presents herself to King Janaka. King Janaka welcomes Sulabha and offers her a seat and a meal. Questioning the King’s genuineness, Sulabha examines King Janaka internally by means of her yogic powers. King Janaka is very uneasy about this examination, as he is not used to being challenged; and, the nature of Sulabha’s challenge suggests that Sulabha’s spiritual ability and knowledge surpasses his own. Perhaps most troublesome, however, is the fact that a woman is daring to contest him as an equal.

King Janaka then interrupts Sulabha and demands to “know her thoroughly,” who she belongs to, and where she is going. He states that he is the only one capable of educating her on
emancipation, claiming that he has attained knowledge of Atman (knowledge of the oneness of the individual and the divine universal) and is free from all attachments. He even claims that he is superior to all ascetics. Paradoxically, however, he also announces that he is free from the arrogance of Kingship.

Janaka then asserts that Sulabha’s behavior contradicts the ascetic way of life, claiming that she is too shapely and youthful to have subdued her senses. Here, Janaka seems to be suggesting that a woman like Sulabha would be incapable of controlling her bodily and sexual desires. Janaka also compares Sulabha’s act of scrutinizing Janaka via her yoga powers to a sort of rape, and that by attempting to show her supremacy, she has actually exposed herself as a sinful woman. Finally, Janaka finishes his diatribe by stating that a woman’s power lies in her physical appearance and marital position, thereby demeaning Sulabha’s yogic, spiritual, and philosophical abilities.

Sulabha replies to Janaka’s criticisms calmly and intelligently. Sulabha affirms that her intellectual examination of Janaka is not sinful, nor is it an act of rape, and to regard it as such is inappropriate. Sulabha also states that if Janaka truly were emancipated, he would not place emphasis on gender difference, nor would he question who she is, from where she came, and whose she is: for if Janaka truly had knowledge of Atman, he would understand that she and he are essentially the same, and as such, he would have no need to ask such futile questions. Sulabha also establishes that although her body is different from Janaka’s, there is essentially no difference between her Self or Spirit (Atman) and Janaka’s Self or Spirit.

As pointed out by Ruth Vanita (2003), this debate clearly illustrates the Vedic belief that sex difference is not an essential or fixed human distinction. Accordingly, regardless of her gender, Sulabha demonstrates to be closer to the knowledge Atman than even King Janaka;
illustrating that a woman may achieve liberation just as well as any man. Most importantly, however, this debate illustrates that there truly is no essential difference between being incarnated as female or male; that is, according to the basic Vedic belief in Atman, the Self is not gendered.

**Isidasi Sutra—the Reincarnation Example:** Another example of the notion of androgyny, occurs in the *Therigatha* in the Isidasi Sutra. In this Sutra, a female “mystic,” (or presumably, a female ascetic) recounts the saga of her past lives to another inquiring female ascetic. As Isidasi concentrated her efforts on reaching enlightenment, she was able to reflect on her past lives, and understand the cause of her failed marriages in her current lifetime. Isidasi explains,

"I learned of my own last seven births; I shall relate to you the actions of which this misfortune is the fruit and result; listen to it attentively. In the city of Erakaccha I was a wealthy goldsmith. Intoxicated by pride in my youth, I had sexual intercourse with another's wife. Having fallen from there, I was cooked in hell; I cooked for a long time; and rising up from there I entered the womb of a female monkey. A great monkey, leader of the herd, castrated me when I was seven days old; this was the fruit of the action of having seduced another's wife. I died in the Sindhava forest and entered the womb of a one-eyed, lame she-goat. As a goat I was castrated, worm-eaten, tail-less, unfit, because of having seduced another's wife. Next I was born of a cow belonging to a cattle-dealer; a lac-red calf. I was castrated after twelve months and drew the plough, pulled the cart, and became blind, tail-less, unfit, because of having seduced another's wife. Then I was born of a household slave in the street, neither as a woman or a man, because of having seduced another's wife. In my thirtieth year I died; I was born as a girl in a carter's family which was poor and much in debt. To satisfy the creditors, I was sold to a caravan leader and dragged off, wailing, from my home. Then in my sixteenth year when I had arrived at marriageable age, his son, Giridasa by name, took me as a wife. But he had another wife, virtuous and possessed of good qualities, who was affectionate towards her husband; with her I stirred up enmity. This [my misfortunes] were fruit of that last action, that men rejected me though I served like a slave girl. Even of that I have now made an end." (Therigatha 400-447)
Thus, Isidasi’s karmic consequence for having committed adultery in a past life was being reborn as afflicted animals, a slave-girl, and finally as a wife who could not satisfy her husbands. Although it is certainly of interest that Isidasi was reborn in the human form only as a female after committing adultery (perhaps indicating female rebirth as penalty for the earlier misdeed), what is more significant (at least in regard to this analysis) is that Isidasi’s enduring identity, or Self, transmigrated through more than one gender. In fact, Isidasi was not only was reborn as a female after her male incarnation, but also an androgynous human being;

“Then I was born of a household slave in the street, neither as a woman or a man, because of having seduced another’s wife.”

This Sutra is also noteworthy in that the original offender was a male adulteress, and not a female. Additionally, it was Isidasi, a woman who ultimately achieved Enlightenment. What is most remarkably, however, is that The Isidasi Sutra provides us with an insight into the fact that, in addition to early Vedic culture, early Buddhist cultures also recognized the concept of the ungendered Self.

**The Mahayana Sex-Change Sutras:** The origin of Mahayana Buddhism is unclear, but it is believed to have formed about 1 B.C.E., or within 500 years of Buddha’s death. The idea androgyny is presented multiple times in what are often referred to as the ‘Sex-Change Sutras’ (Owen 1997).

One example, found in the *Lotus Sutra*, is in the form of a conversation between a goddess and the reputed monk, Sariputra. In this conversation, Sariputra inquires as to why the goddess does not change her female sex. The goddess replies that after twelve years of searching, she has not been able to find the innate characteristics of the female sex; that indeed all things are without innate characteristics. Then, the goddess magically changes the monk into the form of a
woman and changes herself into the form of a man. The goddess then explains to the monk that just as he now only appears to be woman and she only appears to be man, so all people exhibit the traits of a sex, but essentially possess no sexual distinction. The goddess then transforms the monk back into a male and herself back into a female and inquires, “Where are the female form and innate characteristics now?” The monk, now liberated from sexual dichotomy, replies that, indeed, innate sexual characteristics do not exist. This Sutra is significant in that it dismantles any basis for sexism, as it illustrates that innate sexual characteristics do not even exist.

Another example of a sex-change Sutra is in the “The Appearance of the Stupa,” also found in the Lotus Sutra. This is a conversation between the monk Sariputra and a young princess who wishes to become a fully enlightened being (Bodhisattva). This Sutra differs from the previous example in that, ultimately, the princess chooses to transform herself into a male in order to demonstrate to Sariputra her enlightenment and spiritual ability. As Lisa Owen (1997) points out, “One reading of this Sutra, the andocentric one, relies on the implicit assumption that a woman cannot overcome the limitations inherent in her female sex, and that there is something incompatible between the female form and enlightenment.” However, another reading of these Sutras is that one should not depend on transient characteristics, such as gender, to determine one’s true identity. Additionally, the women in these Sutras did not necessarily change their sex because they had to in order become enlightened, but because they were capable of doing so in order to demonstrate their spiritual competence in a patriarchal religious society.

Interestingly, these above examples illustrate that although Vedic and Buddhist religious societies often instilled and enforced inequitable gender roles, they nonetheless recognized and rewarded independent women who dared to break those norms.
Androgyny as a Means of
Examination of Ancient Vedic and Buddhist History

As has been illustrated through the previous textual examples, ancient Vedic religious
philosophy and ancient Buddhism both possess the concepts of the ungendered, or androgynous,
self. In The Mahabarata example, the concept of Atman is used to challenge the notion of sexual
duality. In the Isidasi Sutra, we see that, according to Buddhist thought, the individual can
manifest as a female or as a male, but the individual’s fundamental identity remains unchanged;
illustrating the Buddhist concept of emptiness. Finally, in the Mahayana Sex-Change Sutras, we
see that sexual distinctions are not fixed, inherent, qualities, but are fluid and changeable;
illustrating the Buddhist concept of impermanence. It is also noteworthy that these texts
encompass the concept of the inherent androgyny of being in present (e.g. the Sulabha-Janaka
debate), past (e.g. Isidasi Sutra), and future (e.g. The Sex-Change Sutras) terms. The core
teachings of these (and undoubtedly other) religious texts present the inherent, or true, self (or
lack thereof) in a sex-neutral manner.

The concept of androgyny can also be used to contest discriminatory aspects of these
religions, such as the Doctrine of Women’s Incapability (discussed earlier). According the Asian
Journal of Women’s Studies (2002) this doctrine is problematic, questionable, and even anti-
Buddhist in a number of ways: The Doctrine of Women’s Incapability contradicts the major
doctrines of Buddhism (i.e. egolessness), the Buddha ultimately did not exclude women from
practicing his doctrine, and classifying human beings in terms of male and female is not the way
the Buddha discussed different forms of human beings. Also, the Doctrine of Women’s
Incapability contradicts the principle of Right Speech, one of the components of the Eightfold
Path (Owen 1998).
The widely accepted Buddhist concept of egolessness also has implication for a feminist analysis of ancient Buddhism. According to Buddhism, egolessness is one of the three basic qualities of existence (along with suffering and impermanence). Unlike the concept of Atman, the Buddhist concept of egolessness denies that there is any permanent, abiding, unchanging essence or ‘True Self.’ Thus, linking Vedic philosophy and Buddhism, neither the existence of a fundamental ‘True Self’ nor the absence of such a Self provides any basis for gender hierarchy.

**Conclusion**

**Sex and Gender: Socially Important, Though Not Inherent**

Clearly, the concept of androgyny is useful for a feminist evaluation of ancient Vedic and Buddhist philosophies; however, this does not discount the importance of sex and gender as socially important variables of study. Since Vedic and Buddhist texts were typically interpreted, translated, and recorded by men, women’s experiences in these histories have not been sufficiently recorded. Consequently, andocentric records cannot be completely accurate because they are filled with oversights and exclusions of important data regarding half of the population. As Rita M. Gross (1993) points out, “An androcentrist is content with a record that focuses on men; the androgynous scholar, on the contrary, will seek ‘a history that redresses omissions and recasts interpretations.’” While the concept of androgyny is critical to the ideas presented in this study, this does not displace the importance of gender as a socially important variable of study.

In conclusion, the fundamental teachings of early Indian religions can be compatible with a feminist ideology, or the belief in sexual equality. Although these philosophical/religious organizations eventually established a patriarchal social order, the fundamental teachings of these religions do not provide philosophical or theological basis for patriarchy or gender inequality. Finally, if ancient Vedic religions and Buddhism were truly in alignment with the
Dharmā, or the central teachings, they would transcend the gender inequalities presented in this study. Finally, by examining and reevaluating women’s position early Indian religions, we come closer to an accurate and inclusive past.
Appendix A

Feminist Research Methodology:

In Margrit Eichler’s *Non-Sexist Research Methods* (1987), seven common “sexist problems” in research methodology and analysis are enumerated and described. The following have been kept in mind and avoided while collecting and analyzing the data utilized in this research:

*Androcentrism*: involves viewing the world from a male perspective, whilst women are viewed and treated as passive objects, rather than active subjects of history. Two acute forms of androcentrism include *gynopia*, or women’s invisibility, and *misogyny*, or hatred of women.

*Overgeneralization/ Over specificity*: Overgeneralization occurs when a study presents itself as if it were applicable to both (or all) sexes, but in fact deals with only one sex (most often male). Over specificity occurs when single-sex terms are used when members of both sexes are involved (e.g. mankind versus humankind).

*Gender Insensitivity*: Ignoring sex/gender as a socially (or historically, in this case) important variable.

*Double Standard*: Evaluating, treating, or measuring identical behaviors, traits, or situations by different means.

*Sex appropriateness* (a type of double standard): occurs when so-called “appropriate sex roles” or “appropriate gender identity” are deemed as the only appropriate role for a given sex/gender. This occurs when human traits or attributes are assigned only to one sex/gender.

*Familism* (a type of gender insensitivity): treating the family (or in this case the Sangha, or community of nuns/monks) as the smallest unit of analysis, when it is actually the individual members of the family (Sangha) that are the smallest units of analysis. Familism also occurs
when the family (Sangha) is assumed to be uniformly affected by an event or condition, when
the same event or condition may have different effects on different members of the family
(Sangha).

Sexual Dichotomism (a type of double standard): is the treatment of the sexes as two entirely
distinct social, psychological, and biological groups, when in actuality, much overlapping does
occur among women and men.

Given the aforementioned common problems of sexism in research, how might one conduct
non-sexist, cross-cultural, feminist research? According to Davidman and Reinharz in Feminist
Methods in Social Science Research (1992), some principles in conducting cross-cultural
feminist research include:

The importance of cultural specificity: Although female subordination is virtually universal, it is
unreasonable to talk about women’s status as a universally fixed entity. Rather, it is important to
examine each case of women’s status within its particular cultural context. Therefore, rather than
analyzing women’s status in ancient Buddhism exclusively from contemporary feminist
standards, this study attempts analyze women’s status in early Indian Buddhism in relationship to
women’s status in pre-Buddhist India, in early Vedic religion.

The necessity of intensive study: Poses that researchers must comprehensively explore the
relation between women and their (historical, in this case) context in depth, before suppositions
or conclusions can be made about their lives or their quality of life.

The possibility of commonalities among women of different cultures [and times]: Feminist cross-
cultural research explores how women's lives in different times and seemingly different societies
actually have much in common. This proves to be true of women in pre-Buddhist and Buddhist
societies, as well as in ancient Buddhism versus contemporary Buddhism.
The need for a critical examination of study materials: Entails careful evaluation of available materials given the scarcity of accurate records by and about women in various [times] and societies.

Although I claim no exemption from research error, nor do I claim that this research is bias-free, I have endeavored to utilize the aforementioned principles of feminist research methodology as a general guide.
Appendix B
Considerations, Limitations, and Areas of Further Study

It is important to note that, although the issues and ideas presented in this paper remain applicable and significant to a feminist examination of Indian religious histories, modern feminists (and by extension this study) are certainly not the first to grapple with the question of sex/gender roles in ancient Indian religious societies. As stated by Ruth Vanita (2003), “modern debates do not sufficiently recognize the fact that there was an on-going debate about women in ancient Hindu [and Buddhist] texts. The often seemingly self-contradictory pronouncements about women found in accretive ancient texts may reflect that debate…” This study is only part of an on-going discussion about sex/gender roles in ancient Indian religious societies.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that this study used primarily examples of literary or mythological women, rather than narratives or accounts of actual, once-living women. Although this is undoubtedly a limitation, I trust that this method is also a useful approach, since the figures presented were likely inspired by (or inspirational to) living women of the time.

Finally, this study is obviously not an all-inclusive analysis of women in ancient Indian cosmologies. On the contrary, a much more thorough examination of various aspects of this study would greatly benefit an analysis of women’s status in ancient Indian religions. The following is a brief and incomplete list of possible future areas of study:

- Analysis of the varying early Indian cosmologies and religions (and women’s/men’s roles therein).
- Analysis of how different early Indian cosmologies/religions might have influenced one another.
How and if women’s status differed in various early Indian cosmologies/religions.

How caste and sexuality issues might have affected gender roles/women’s status.

How governments and other social institutions might have influenced early Indian religions, thus impacting gender dynamics.
Bibliography


