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Pannesi

Ph.D Scholar, Department of  
history, BBAU, Lucknow (U.P.)  
India

## Mahapajapatigotami: The one who paid the way to women-hood into the order of Buddhist nuns (*Bhikkhunis*)

**Pannesi**

**Abstract:**

Now a day women all over the world are protesting to their respective society, culture and government to enjoy so called gender equality. By learning thorough Buddhist literature and culture we learn that the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, had given gender equality not only in social but also spiritual.

**Keyword:** Mahapajapatigotami, women-hood, Buddhist nuns, *Bhikkhunis*

**Introduction**

Women have been playing the most important role in every society without creed or color but some society which based on caste system considered women as inferior to men especially in India over and men dominated every affairs in such society over two thousand six hundred years ago even today. After Siddhattha Gotama Buddha appeared in that society, the situation totally challenged and changed for women-hood. Women who confessed their faith to Him and His Doctrines could enjoy gender equality both secular and spiritual. We traced the life of Pajapati Gotama, the step-mother of Siddhittha Gotama who paid the way for women-hood to have a chance in the Dispensation of Buddha (Buddha Sasana) as a bhikkhunis, female monks.

**The past life of Maha Pajapati Gotami**

*Mahapajapatigotami* was born into a worthy family in the city of *Hamsavati* during the time of *Padumutara Buddha*. On one occasion she was listening to a discourse taught by the Buddha when she happened to see a female monk (*bhikkhuni*) who was honored by the Buddha as the foremost among the *bhikkhunis* who were enlightened earliest. The *Pali* word '*Rattannu puggala*' means the one who was enlightened earliest. This is a technical term which means the *bhikkhu* who is the senior most in the Order. It also means the *bhikkhu* who understands the Four Noble Truth earliest. It also may mean the *bhikkhu* who attain Arahantship earliest. She aspired to the same distinction in a future existence. So she made extraordinary offerings to the Buddha and expressed that wish before the Buddha. The Buddha predicted that her aspiration would be fulfilled.

**Her work as the Head of Water Carriers in the past**

That worthy woman led a life of charity and observed the moral precepts and at the end of her life she was reborn in the deva realm. When she passed away from deva existence, during the interval between the two Buddhas, she was reborn into the slave caste in Baranasi as the head of water carriers.

Then when the rains-retreat period was drawing near, five hundred *Pacceka Buddhas* (Independently Enlightened One) who lived in *Nandamu Cave* descended at the Migadaya forest near Baranasi from their travelling in the air and went into the city to gather alms-food. They stayed at the *Isipatana* forest after the alms-round and discussed about seeking help in making small dwelling places for use during the rains-retreat.

The five hundred *Pecakkabuddhas* who had to fulfill the need for a dwelling, arranged their robes in the evening and entered the city of Baranasi to seek assistance. Their going into the city was noted by the chief of the water carriers.

**Corresponding Author:**

Pannesi

Ph.D Scholar, Department of  
history, BBAU, Lucknow (U.P.)  
India

The *Paccekabuddhas* stood at the door of the rich man of Baranasi but when they told him about their need the rich man said, “We were not prepared to help. May the revered ones go elsewhere.”

The chief of water carriers met the *Paccekabuddhas* as they came out of the city at the city gate and putting down the water pot, she made obeisance. Then she asked the purpose of the revered ones in going into the city and coming out soon from it. The *Paccekabuddhas* told her that they were seeking assistance to have a small dwelling built for use during the rains-retreat period. And also on further inquiry, she learned that the need was still unfulfilled. She asked them, “Is this dwelling to be the gift of only well-to-do donors? Or is it proper for a slave like me to donate one?” “Anybody may do so, lay female supporter,” they replied. “Very well Venerable Sirs, we shall donate the dwellings tomorrow. Meantime, may the Venerable Ones accept my offering of food tomorrow.”

After making the invitation she picked up her water pot and instead of returning to the city, she went back to the water-hole and gathered her company of water carriers there. Then she said to them, “Now girls, do you want to be slaves to others all the time? Or do you want freedom from servitude?” they answered in unison, “We want freedom from servitude!” “If so, I have invited the five *Paccekabuddhas* to an offering tomorrow. They are indeed of dwellings. Let your husbands give their hands for one day tomorrow.”

“Very well,” they all said. They told this to their husbands in the evening after the latter had come home from the forest where they worked. The men all agreed to help and made an appointment at the door of the chief of the male slaves. When they had assembled there the head of the water carriers urged them to lend a hand in the building of dwelling for the five *Paccekabuddhas* for use during the rains-retreat period, extolling the great benefits of such contribution. A few of the men who did not agree to help at first were admonished by her and persuaded into the task.

The next morning, the head of the water carriers offered food to the five *Paccekabuddhas*. After that she signaled the five hundred slave men to start work. They promptly went to the forest, cut down trees, and each group of a hundred men built a modest dwelling unit for one *Paccekabuddha*, complete with an adjacent walk to it. They filled the water pots and saw to the bare essentials in five dwellings for the five *Paccekabuddhas*. They offered them to the *Paccekabuddhas*, requested them to dwell there during the rains-retreat period, got the consent of the revered ones and they took turns to offer daily food to them.

If there was some poor water carrier who was unable to prepare a meal for the five *Paccekabuddhas* on her appointed day, the head of the water carriers gave her the necessary provisions. The three months of rains-retreat period thus passed. Near the end of the period the head of the water carriers asked the five hundred slave girls each to weave a piece of rough cloth. The five hundred pieces collected from them were exchanged for five sets of fine robes for each of the five *Paccekabuddhas* which were offered to them. The *Paccekabuddhas*, after receiving them, rose to the sky in the presence of their donors and went away in the direction of *Gandamadana* Mountain.

Those water carriers slave girls spent the rest of their life in doing meritorious acts. On their death they were reborn in the deva realm. The head of the deva girls, on her passing away, was reborn into the family of the chief weaver in a weaver’s village near Baranasi. One day the five hundred sons of Queen *Paduma devi*, all *Paccekabuddhas*, went to the door of

the royal palace at the Baranasi on invitation. But there was no one to attend to them to offer seats or to offer food. They had to return to the abode. As they left the city and were at the weaver’s village the chief weaver had much devotion for them and after paying obeisance to them, offered food. The *Paccekabuddhas* accepted her offering of food and after finishing the meal, left for the *Gandhamadana* Mountain.

### **Her last existence, the present life**

On the eve of the arising of *Gotama Buddha*, she was reborn into the Sakyan royal family as the younger daughter of King *Mahasuppabuddha* in *Devadaha*. She was called *Gotami* and was the younger sister of Princess *Mahamaya*. Court astrologers learned in the Vedas and adept at reading human forms and marks (physiognomy) and palmistry, after scrutinizing the distinctive bodily features of the two sisters predicted that the sons born of the two sisters would become a Universal Monarch.

When the two sisters came of age they were betrothed to King *Suddhodana* and they were taken to *Kapilavatthu* where Princess *Mahamaya* was made the Chief Queen. Later, after the *Bodhisatta* had passed away from *Tusita deva* realm he was conceived in the womb of Queen *Mahamaya*. Soon after the Queen had given birth to her son on the seventh day, she passed away and was reborn in *Tusita deva* realm by the name of *Santusita*. On the death of Queen *Mahamaya* King *Suddhodana* made the younger sister Queen *Gotami* the Chief Queen.

After Queen *Mahamaya* had given birth to prince *Siddhattha*, three days later, Queen *Mahapajapati Gotami*, the step mother of Prince *Siddhattha*, gave birth to a son, Prince Nanda so by the time Queen *Mahamaya* died *Siddhattha* was only seven days old and *Mahapajapati* nursed him leaving her own son Nanda to be nurtured by nurses. She devoted her whole attention to bring up of her little nephew.

### **Siddhittha Gotama Return Home**

Later, after *Siddhattha* renounced the world and attained Enlightenment and then all well known as Buddha, He made his first visit to *Kapilavatthu*. On the next day after the arrival there, He went into the city collecting alms-food. His father King *Suddhodana* had opportunity to listen to the Buddha’s discourse while still on his alms-round and attained Stream-Entry knowledge (*Sotapanna*). Then, on the second day Prince Nanda was admitted into the Order. On the seventh day *Rahula*, the Buddha’s son, was admitted as a novice.

### **Pajapati Gotami appealed to join into the Order of Bhikkhuni**

The Buddha spent his fifth rains-retreat at *Kutagara* monastery in the *Mahavana* forest near *Vesali*. During that time King *Suddhodana* had already attained Arahantship under the regal white umbrella at the court of *Kapilavatthu* and passed away the same day. Then, Queen *Mahapajapati Gotami* was keen to renounce the world and become a *bhikkhuni*, female Buddhist Order. Later the five hundred queen consorts, of the five hundred Sakyan princes who had already become *bhikkhus* on the occasion of expounding of the *Mahasamaya Sutta*, unanimously decided to become *bhikkhus*. They made *Mahapajapati Gotami* their spokeswoman to request the Buddha for admission into the Order.

The first attempt by *Pajapati* failed and then five hundred Sakyan princes shaved their heads, donned dyed robes and marched on foot from *Kapilavatthu* to *Vesali*. They sought Venerable *Ananda*’s support in pleading for their case for

admission. At last the Buddha admitted them into the Order as *bhikkhunis*. *Gotami* was admitted by administering the Eight Principal vows (*attha garudhamma*). The five hundred Sakyan princesses were admitted by an assembly of *bhikkhus* only. Later under normal procedure, a *bhikkhuni* had to be admitted by an assembly of both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. *Gotami* attained Arahantship after hearing the *Samkhitta sutta* and the five hundred *bhikkhunis* attained Enlightenment at various levels after hearing the *Nandakovada sutta*.

On a later occasion when the Buddha was residing at the *Jetavana* monastery and designating foremost *bhikkhunis*, the Buddha declared “*Bhikkhus*, among my *bhikkhuni* disciples who are of long standing in the Order, *Mahapajapati Gotami* is the foremost.”

### The passing away of *Gotami Theri*

When *Gotami theri* was of 120 years old, she was residing at a *bhikkhuni* monastery which was in the city of *Vesali*. The Buddha was then staying at the *Mahavana* monastery near *Vesali*. One morning after collecting alms-food in the city and finishing her meal, *Gotami Theri* entered into the attainment of *Arahata phala* for a predetermined period. After rising from the *Jhana* attainment she remembered the long series of her acquisition of merits in her past existences and felt very delighted. Then she reviewed her life-span and she saw that it had come to an end. She thought it proper to inform the Buddha about her approaching death, as well as bidding leave of her passing away to his colleagues who had been a source of her inspiration such the two Chief Disciples and co-resident noble persons. Then only she would return to her monastery and pass away.

The Buddha’s step-mother, *Gotami Theri* thought “I am not going to live to see the passing away of my son, the Buddha, nor that of the two chief Disciples, nor that of my grandson *Rahula*, nor that of my nephew *Ananda*. I am going to predecease than all. I shall seek permission to pass away from my son now.” At that moment the earth quaked violently unseasonable rains thundered in the sky. The guardian spirits of the *bhikkhuni* monasteries wailed.

Then, casting her last glance at the monastery, *Gotami* their uttered this verse: “I shall now proceed to the unconditioned (*Nibbana*) where there is no aging or death, no association with beings or things one dislike, no separation from beings or things one holds dear.”

The Buddha asked *Gotami* Their in the following verse to display her supernormal powers: “*Gotami*, for the sake of those fools who have doubts about female devotees attaining Enlightenment in my teaching, to enable them shed those doubts, display your supernormal powers.”

*Gotami* performed her supernormal powers as she was asked such as from being one to become many; from being many; to become one, to become visible and to become invisible, etc. so the audience asked her what was the extent of merit she had performed to be endowed with such power and capability. She related the successive acts of merits what she had performed since the days of *Padumuttara Buddha* down to the last existence.

At that time many male and female lay disciples gathered around to pay their last respect to *Gotami Theri* by beating their bosoms in great sorrow. She consoled them as follow “daughters, lamentation leads only to Mar’s domain and is in vain. All conditioned things are impermanent; they end up in separation, they cause endless agitation.”

Then, she entered into *Jhanas* step by step until realization complete cessation of the aggregates just as a lamp goes out

when the oil and the wick become exhausted. Ven. *Ananda* collected the relic of *Gotami Theri* and uttered as follow “Gone now is *Gotami*. Her remains have been burnt up. And soon the passing away of the Buddha, the much anxiously awaited event, will take place.”

### Conclusion

Every noble person either a man or a woman has to fulfilled perfections to gain the life that wanted to occupy. This event was mentioned in Buddhist literature. Pajapati *Gotami* had to fulfilled perfections for long to gain the foremost one as she wanted ‘*rattannu puggala*’ which means who occupy the enlightened earliest. She had to perform perfection life after life to gain that noble task and due to her great effort, women in Buddhist society could enjoy social and spiritual equality.

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