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**WOMEN, FAITH, AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE
KUSHAN EMPIRE: A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS INTEGRATION AND
HIERARCHICAL CHANGE**

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ABSTRACT

The Kushan Empire, which flourished between the first and third centuries CE, occupies a significant position in the socio-cultural and religious history of ancient Asia. Emerging from Central Asian origins, the Kushans established a vast empire extending across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northern India. Their strategic location along the Silk Road transformed the empire into a center of trade, cultural exchange, and religious interaction. One of the defining characteristics of the Kushan period was its policy of religious inclusiveness, which encouraged the coexistence of Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Hellenistic traditions. This atmosphere of pluralism deeply influenced social structures and contributed to gradual transformations in gender relations and hierarchical systems.

Women during the Kushan period participated actively in religious patronage, artistic production, economic activities, and social institutions. Buddhist monasteries, urban centers, and trade networks provided women with opportunities to engage beyond domestic roles. The rise of Mahayana Buddhism and the spread of devotional practices created new avenues for female participation in spiritual life. Artistic representations from Gandhara and Mathura further reveal changing perceptions of femininity, fertility, prosperity, and religious devotion.

This research paper examines the relationship between women, religion, and social

transformation during the Kushan Empire. It explores how religious integration contributed to changes in social hierarchies and expanded the visibility of women within public and spiritual spheres. By analyzing historical records, inscriptions, sculptures, literary sources, and archaeological evidence, the study argues that the Kushan era played a crucial role in redefining gender participation and reshaping social structures in ancient India and Central Asia.

Keywords

Kushan Empire, Women in Ancient India, Religious Integration, Social Transformation, Gender and Religion, Mahayana Buddhism, Social Hierarchy, Kanishka, Gandhara Art, Mathura School, Silk Road, Cultural Syncretism, Ancient Indian Society, Women's Patronage

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kushan Empire represents one of the most dynamic and transformative phases in the history of ancient India and Central Asia. Founded by the Yuezhi tribes who migrated from Central Asia into Bactria, the Kushans gradually established political authority over a large territory stretching from Central Asia to the Gangetic plains of northern India. Under rulers such as Kujula Kadphises, Vima Kadphises, and Kanishka I, the empire emerged as a major political and cultural power connecting East and West through trade and diplomacy.

The geographical position of the Kushan Empire along the Silk Road enabled extensive cultural interactions among Indian, Persian, Greek, and Central Asian civilizations. These interactions contributed to the growth of urbanization, artistic innovation, and religious diversity. Unlike many earlier political systems that emphasized rigid social boundaries, the Kushans adopted a comparatively inclusive approach toward religion and culture. Their coins, inscriptions, and monuments reveal the coexistence of multiple religious traditions including Buddhism, Shaivism, Zoroastrianism, and Hellenistic cults.

This environment of cultural pluralism significantly influenced the social order of the empire. Traditional hierarchies based on birth and occupation began to experience gradual modifications due to economic expansion, urban development, and religious mobility. Women, who were often confined within patriarchal family systems, found opportunities for participation in public and religious life through trade, patronage, and monastic institutions.

The rise of Mahayana Buddhism during the Kushan period was particularly important in

reshaping women's social roles. Buddhist teachings emphasizing compassion, moral equality, and spiritual accessibility encouraged broader participation among lay followers, including women. Female devotees, donors, and nuns became increasingly visible in inscriptions and religious art. Sculptural depictions from Gandhara and Mathura illustrate women not only as symbols of beauty and fertility but also as active participants in devotional culture.

This paper seeks to analyze how religion and faith contributed to social transformation during the Kushan period, particularly with regard to women and hierarchical change. It examines the interconnected roles of Buddhism, urbanization, trade, and artistic expression in redefining social identities and gender participation within Kushan society.

II. MAHAYANA BUDDHISM AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

The rise and expansion of Mahayana Buddhism during the Kushan Empire marked a transformative phase in the religious and social history of ancient India and Central Asia. Emerging as a major branch of Buddhism around the first century CE, Mahayana Buddhism emphasized universal salvation, compassion, devotion, and the spiritual potential of all individuals regardless of social background. Under the patronage of Kushan rulers, especially Emperor Kanishka I, Mahayana Buddhism spread widely across northern India, Central Asia, and China, becoming one of the defining cultural and religious features of the Kushan age. This development significantly influenced women's participation in religious institutions and contributed to broader social transformation within Kushan society. Unlike earlier rigid social structures that confined women largely to domestic responsibilities, Mahayana Buddhism created opportunities for women to engage actively in religious, economic, and public life. Through acts of patronage, monastic association, devotional participation, and artistic representation, women emerged as important contributors to the Buddhist religious sphere and gained greater visibility within society.

One of the most significant aspects of Mahayana Buddhism was its emphasis on inclusiveness and spiritual accessibility. Earlier social systems in ancient India were often shaped by patriarchal norms and hierarchical divisions that restricted women's opportunities for independent participation in public and religious life. Mahayana teachings, however, promoted the idea that all beings possessed the potential to achieve enlightenment through devotion, ethical conduct, and compassion. This spiritual framework reduced the importance of birth-based status and opened new avenues for women to participate in religious activities. Women were increasingly recognized as capable of earning religious merit through donations,

prayer, pilgrimage, and acts of devotion. Such teachings encouraged greater female involvement in Buddhist institutions and helped reshape perceptions regarding women's spiritual capacities. Although gender inequalities did not disappear entirely, Mahayana Buddhism introduced more flexible attitudes that challenged certain traditional limitations imposed upon women.

The Kushan Empire provided favorable conditions for the growth of Mahayana Buddhism because of its cosmopolitan and multicultural environment. Located along the Silk Road trade network, the empire became a center of interaction between Indian, Persian, Greek, and Central Asian cultures. Urban centers such as Mathura, Taxila, and Purushapura developed into important religious and commercial hubs where Buddhist monasteries flourished under royal patronage. These monasteries were not merely religious institutions; they also functioned as centers of education, charity, cultural exchange, and economic activity. Women participated in these institutions both directly and indirectly. Many women became lay followers of Buddhism and contributed to monasteries through donations of money, jewelry, sculptures, railings, and land. Inscriptions discovered at Buddhist sites reveal the names of female donors, including merchants' wives, noblewomen, and ordinary female devotees. These records demonstrate that women possessed a degree of economic independence and social recognition within Kushan society. Their ability to make donations in their own names indicates participation in religious patronage and public religious culture.

Mahayana Buddhism also promoted devotional practices centered around Bodhisattvas, who were revered as compassionate beings dedicated to helping others attain salvation. This devotional aspect made Buddhism more emotionally accessible and attracted broader participation from various social groups, including women. Female devotees could engage in acts of worship, prayer, and ritual offerings without necessarily joining monastic life. The emphasis on compassion and universal welfare resonated strongly within society and created a spiritual environment where women could express religious identity more openly. Women's participation in festivals, rituals, and pilgrimages increased during this period, enhancing their visibility within public religious spaces. Religious gatherings became important social events that encouraged interaction among people from different social and cultural backgrounds, thereby weakening certain rigid hierarchical divisions.

The role of women within Buddhist monastic traditions also expanded during the Kushan period. Although Buddhist monastic institutions remained predominantly male-oriented,

evidence suggests that women participated as nuns and spiritual practitioners within certain communities. Buddhist teachings acknowledged the possibility of women achieving enlightenment, even though debates regarding gender and spiritual attainment continued within religious literature. The presence of female monastic communities offered women an alternative to traditional domestic roles and provided opportunities for education, meditation, and spiritual discipline. Monastic life enabled some women to gain intellectual and religious authority within Buddhist society. In this way, Mahayana Buddhism contributed to gradual changes in women's social status by recognizing their capacity for religious learning and spiritual progress.

Artistic representation during the Kushan period further illustrates the growing importance of women within Mahayana Buddhist culture. The Gandhara and Mathura schools of art, which flourished under Kushan patronage, produced numerous sculptures depicting female devotees, attendants, queens, and divine figures associated with Buddhist themes. In Gandhara art, influenced by Hellenistic realism, women were portrayed with elegance, elaborate drapery, and expressive features. In Mathura art, women symbolized fertility, prosperity, devotion, and spiritual beauty. Female figures frequently appeared in scenes associated with Buddhist worship and ritual activity, demonstrating their integration into religious life. These artistic representations reveal that women occupied visible and respected positions within the cultural imagination of the Kushan period. Their portrayal as patrons and devotees reflected broader social acceptance of female participation in religious institutions.

Another important aspect of Mahayana Buddhism during the Kushan age was its contribution to social mobility and hierarchical change. Traditional social systems in ancient India often emphasized caste divisions and patriarchal authority. However, Buddhist institutions encouraged participation based on ethical conduct and religious devotion rather than solely on hereditary status. Women from different social backgrounds could gain prestige through acts of religious patronage and moral virtue. Donations to monasteries and stupas became important expressions of social identity and public recognition. By supporting Buddhist institutions, women enhanced both their spiritual merit and social standing within the community. This process contributed to gradual transformations in social hierarchy and expanded opportunities for women to participate in public religious culture.

The support of Kushan rulers played a crucial role in strengthening Mahayana Buddhism and encouraging women's involvement in religious life. Emperor Kanishka is particularly

remembered for his patronage of Buddhism and his role in promoting Buddhist councils and missionary activities. Under Kushan rule, Buddhist institutions received royal support that enabled the construction of monasteries, stupas, and artistic monuments. This environment of religious prosperity created spaces where women could contribute actively to religious and social development. The cosmopolitan nature of the Kushan Empire further encouraged cultural interaction and religious tolerance, making Buddhist institutions accessible to diverse populations, including women.

In conclusion, Mahayana Buddhism significantly influenced women's participation and social transformation during the Kushan Empire. By promoting spiritual inclusiveness, compassion, and devotional participation, Mahayana Buddhism challenged aspects of traditional patriarchal and hierarchical structures. Women became active contributors to religious institutions through patronage, ritual participation, monastic association, and artistic representation. Buddhist monasteries provided spaces for social interaction, education, and spiritual engagement, allowing women to expand their roles beyond domestic boundaries. Although complete equality was not achieved, the Kushan period marked an important stage in the evolution of women's religious and social status in ancient India. The integration of women into Mahayana Buddhist culture demonstrates how religion could serve as a powerful force for social change and cultural transformation within the ancient world.

III. ART AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

The Kushan Empire occupies a remarkable place in the cultural history of ancient India and Central Asia because of its extraordinary achievements in art, architecture, and religious expression. Flourishing between the first and third centuries CE, the Kushan period witnessed the growth of powerful artistic traditions that reflected the multicultural and cosmopolitan nature of the empire. Due to its strategic location along the Silk Road, the Kushan Empire became a meeting ground for Indian, Greek, Persian, and Central Asian cultures. This interaction produced a unique artistic environment where diverse styles, religious beliefs, and social values merged together. Within this evolving cultural framework, the representation of women gained significant prominence. Women appeared frequently in sculptures, paintings, religious monuments, coins, and decorative art as symbols of beauty, fertility, prosperity, devotion, and spiritual power. The artistic portrayal of women during the Kushan period not only reflected aesthetic ideals but also revealed broader social transformations related to gender roles, religious participation, and hierarchical change. Through the study of Gandhara

and Mathura art, inscriptions, and religious imagery, it becomes evident that women occupied an increasingly visible and meaningful position within Kushan society.

One of the most important artistic developments during the Kushan period was the emergence of the Gandhara and Mathura schools of art. These two artistic traditions flourished under Kushan patronage and became major centers of religious and cultural production. The Gandhara school, centered in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, reflected strong Hellenistic and Greco-Roman influences. Sculptures from Gandhara displayed realistic human forms, detailed drapery, curly hair, and naturalistic facial expressions. Women in Gandhara art were often portrayed with elegance, grace, and sophistication. They appeared as attendants, devotees, queens, celestial beings, and mother figures associated with Buddhist narratives. Their clothing and ornaments reflected the influence of foreign artistic traditions while simultaneously preserving Indian cultural symbolism. These representations reveal that women were considered essential components of religious and social life within the Kushan cultural imagination.

The Mathura school of art, centered in northern India, developed a more indigenous artistic style rooted in Indian traditions. Women in Mathura sculptures were portrayed with strong physical forms, elaborate jewelry, and expressive gestures symbolizing fertility, prosperity, and divine beauty. Female figures such as yakshis, mother goddesses, and attendants became prominent motifs in religious architecture and sculpture. Yakshis were often depicted standing beside trees, holding flowers, or displaying symbols of abundance and fertility. These representations reflected the association of women with nature, creation, and prosperity within ancient Indian cultural beliefs. The prominence of female imagery in Mathura art suggests that women occupied an important symbolic role within society and religion during the Kushan period.

Religious integration during the Kushan age further expanded the cultural representation of women. The Kushan rulers supported multiple faiths, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and local cult traditions. This atmosphere of religious pluralism encouraged the blending of artistic motifs and spiritual symbols from different cultures. Women appeared prominently in Buddhist and Hindu religious art, reflecting their growing visibility within sacred spaces. In Buddhist sculpture, female devotees were shown participating in worship, offering gifts, and attending religious ceremonies. Such representations demonstrate that women were not confined solely to domestic roles but were active participants in public

religious life. Buddhist art emphasized ideals of compassion, devotion, and moral virtue, qualities that were frequently embodied through female imagery.

The rise of Mahayana Buddhism during the Kushan period also contributed significantly to women's artistic representation. Mahayana Buddhism emphasized universal salvation and devotional worship, making religion more accessible to ordinary people, including women. Female figures associated with compassion, generosity, and spiritual devotion became increasingly common in Buddhist iconography. Women appeared as patrons and worshippers within scenes carved on stupas, railings, and monastery walls. Inscriptions found at Buddhist sites reveal that many women donated money, sculptures, and architectural elements to religious institutions. These acts of patronage not only reflected women's spiritual commitment but also elevated their social status within the community. Artistic depictions of female donors further reinforced the idea that women were respected contributors to religious and cultural life.

Another significant aspect of Kushan art was the portrayal of royal women and elite female figures. Queens and noblewomen were represented in sculptures and coins with symbols of authority, elegance, and dignity. Their presence in artistic and political imagery suggests that women of elite backgrounds held influence within courtly and ceremonial life. Royal patronage of religious institutions often involved queens and noblewomen participating in acts of charity and temple construction. Such activities strengthened the association between women, religion, and social prestige. Artistic representation therefore served not only aesthetic purposes but also political and ideological functions by highlighting the role of women within imperial society.

The cultural representation of women during the Kushan period also reflected changing social attitudes toward femininity and beauty. Sculptures portrayed women with elaborate hairstyles, ornaments, flowing garments, and graceful postures that emphasized both physical beauty and spiritual significance. Female figures symbolized abundance, fertility, prosperity, and auspiciousness within religious and social contexts. These ideals were closely connected with broader concepts of harmony and cosmic order. The depiction of women as nurturing and life-giving beings reinforced their importance within family and community structures while simultaneously elevating them to symbolic and divine status.

Architecture during the Kushan era further demonstrates women's integration into cultural and religious life. Buddhist stupas, monasteries, and temples incorporated numerous female

motifs in decorative carvings and sculptural panels. Women appeared in scenes depicting music, dance, worship, and daily life. Such representations reveal that women contributed to the cultural vibrancy of urban society. The inclusion of female imagery in sacred architecture also indicates acceptance of women's presence within religious spaces. These artistic forms reflected the cosmopolitan environment of the Kushan Empire, where cultural interaction and religious coexistence encouraged broader participation in public life.

Trade and urbanization also played an important role in shaping women's cultural representation. The Kushan Empire controlled major Silk Road trade routes connecting India with Central Asia, China, and the Roman world. Economic prosperity led to the growth of urban centers where merchants, artisans, monks, and travelers interacted regularly. Women from merchant and artisan families likely participated in economic and cultural activities within these cities. Artistic representations of richly dressed women adorned with jewelry may reflect the influence of urban prosperity and expanding commercial culture. The growing visibility of women in art suggests that economic development contributed to changing perceptions regarding women's roles in society.

At the same time, the representation of women in Kushan art must also be understood within the limitations of patriarchal social structures. Although women gained greater visibility in religious and artistic spheres, many depictions continued to emphasize ideals of beauty, fertility, and domestic virtue. Women's identities were often associated with their roles as mothers, wives, devotees, or symbols of prosperity. Nevertheless, the Kushan period marked an important stage in the evolution of female representation because women were increasingly portrayed as active participants in religious and cultural life rather than merely passive figures confined to household spaces.

In conclusion, the art and cultural representation of women during the Kushan Empire reveal significant social and religious transformations within ancient Indian society. Through the Gandhara and Mathura schools of art, women emerged as central figures symbolizing beauty, fertility, devotion, prosperity, and spiritual power. Religious integration and the spread of Mahayana Buddhism expanded women's participation in sacred and public life, while artistic representations reflected their growing visibility within society. Women appeared as donors, devotees, attendants, queens, and divine beings, demonstrating their multifaceted roles within Kushan culture. The cosmopolitan environment of the Kushan Empire encouraged cultural exchange and artistic innovation that reshaped perceptions of femininity and social identity.

Although patriarchal traditions remained influential, the Kushan period created new opportunities for women's participation and recognition within religious and cultural institutions. The study of women's artistic representation during this era therefore provides valuable insight into the dynamic relationship between gender, religion, art, and social transformation in the ancient world.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Kushan Empire represents one of the most significant periods of cultural interaction, religious integration, and social transformation in the history of ancient India and Central Asia. Flourishing between the first and third centuries CE, the empire emerged as a powerful political and economic force that connected diverse regions through trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. Located strategically along the Silk Road, the Kushan Empire became a meeting ground for Indian, Persian, Greek, and Central Asian civilizations. This multicultural environment contributed to the development of a cosmopolitan society in which religious tolerance, artistic innovation, and economic prosperity reshaped existing social structures. Within this changing social order, women occupied increasingly visible and meaningful positions in religious, cultural, and economic life. The study of women, faith, and social transformation during the Kushan period therefore reveals how religion and cultural interaction influenced gender relations and hierarchical systems in the ancient world.

One of the most important characteristics of the Kushan Empire was its policy of religious inclusiveness. Unlike many earlier political systems that emphasized rigid religious authority, the Kushan rulers supported multiple faiths simultaneously, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and local cult traditions. This atmosphere of pluralism encouraged coexistence and interaction among different communities and weakened certain social barriers that divided society. Religious institutions became centers not only of worship but also of education, charity, economic activity, and cultural exchange. The spread of Mahayana Buddhism under rulers such as Kanishka I played a particularly important role in transforming social attitudes and encouraging wider participation in religious life. Mahayana Buddhism emphasized compassion, universal salvation, and devotional practices, making spiritual life more accessible to ordinary people, including women and marginalized groups. These

teachings challenged aspects of traditional hierarchical systems by focusing more on moral conduct and religious devotion than hereditary status.

Women benefited significantly from the changing religious and social environment of the Kushan period. Although patriarchal values remained deeply rooted within society, women gained greater opportunities for participation in religious, economic, and cultural activities. Buddhist monasteries and urban centers created spaces where women could engage in acts of patronage, devotion, and social interaction. Inscriptions discovered at stupas and monasteries reveal that women from different social backgrounds donated money, sculptures, railings, and other forms of support to religious institutions. These records demonstrate that women possessed a degree of economic independence and public recognition within Kushan society. Female patronage of religious establishments also reflects the growing importance of women in shaping spiritual and cultural life during this era.

The rise of Mahayana Buddhism further contributed to women's visibility and participation. Buddhist teachings recognized the spiritual potential of all individuals and encouraged women to pursue religious merit through acts of charity, worship, pilgrimage, and ethical conduct. Women participated in festivals, rituals, and devotional practices that connected them to broader religious communities. Although women still faced social limitations and were not granted complete equality, Buddhism offered alternatives to strictly domestic roles and enabled greater female engagement in public religious culture. The presence of female donors, devotees, and possibly nuns within Buddhist communities suggests that religion became an important avenue through which women could achieve social respect and spiritual recognition.

Artistic and cultural developments during the Kushan period also reveal important transformations in the representation and perception of women. The Gandhara and Mathura schools of art flourished under Kushan patronage and produced sculptures and monuments that reflected the multicultural nature of the empire. Women appeared prominently in these artistic traditions as queens, attendants, dancers, mother goddesses, yakshis, and devotees. In Gandhara art, influenced by Hellenistic traditions, women were portrayed with elegance and realism, while Mathura art emphasized fertility, prosperity, and spiritual beauty through indigenous Indian symbolism. These artistic representations demonstrate that women occupied a central place within the cultural imagination of the Kushan period. Female

imagery was associated with abundance, devotion, compassion, and divine power, reflecting changing social attitudes toward femininity and women's public roles.

The growth of trade and urbanization during the Kushan era also contributed to hierarchical change and social mobility. The Silk Road connected the empire with distant regions such as Rome, China, and Persia, creating economic prosperity and encouraging cultural interaction. Urban centers became cosmopolitan spaces where merchants, artisans, monks, and travelers from different ethnic and social backgrounds interacted regularly. This environment weakened certain rigid social divisions and created opportunities for broader participation in economic and religious life. Women from merchant and artisan families likely benefited from these developments through increased involvement in commercial and cultural activities. Economic prosperity and religious patronage became new sources of social prestige that could sometimes transcend traditional hereditary boundaries.

Religious integration within the Kushan Empire also promoted cultural syncretism and social cohesion. The coexistence of multiple faiths encouraged mutual influence and artistic fusion, resulting in a rich and diverse cultural landscape. Kushan rulers demonstrated political wisdom by supporting religious plurality rather than enforcing a single orthodoxy. This policy helped maintain stability across a vast and culturally diverse empire while simultaneously encouraging social interaction among different communities. Women participated actively within this integrated environment through religious patronage, artistic representation, and devotional activities. Their increasing visibility reflects broader transformations in the structure of Kushan society.

Despite these advances, it is important to recognize that patriarchal and hierarchical systems were not entirely dismantled during the Kushan period. Social norms continued to define women primarily through familial and domestic roles, and opportunities for participation were often influenced by class, wealth, and social status. Elite women and women associated with merchant families likely enjoyed greater freedom and recognition than those from lower social groups. Nevertheless, the Kushan period marked an important stage in the evolution of women's social and religious participation because it introduced new possibilities for female agency and public involvement.

The study of women and religious integration during the Kushan Empire therefore provides valuable insight into the dynamic relationship between faith, culture, and social transformation in ancient history. The Kushan period demonstrates how religion could

function as a powerful force for social change by creating spaces for interaction, mobility, and participation beyond traditional boundaries. Through Buddhism, artistic innovation, trade expansion, and cultural exchange, women gained increased visibility within religious and public life. Their contributions as donors, devotees, cultural symbols, and participants in social institutions reveal the gradual transformation of gender relations during this period.

In conclusion, the Kushan Empire was not merely an era of political expansion and economic prosperity but also a significant phase of social and cultural evolution. Religious pluralism, Mahayana Buddhism, urbanization, and artistic development collectively contributed to reshaping social hierarchies and expanding women's participation in society. Although inequalities persisted, the Kushan period laid important foundations for broader inclusion and social interaction within ancient Indian civilization. The experiences of women during this era highlight the complex ways in which faith and cultural integration influenced the transformation of social structures in the ancient world.

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