

Amrapali - A Journey from Concubine to Celibate

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Indian art and culture is filled with tales of several musicians and dancers, many of who left an indelible mark on the very psyche of this vast and diverse nation. Amrapali is one such character. She was one of the best ever court dancers that India has produced. She ruled the roost for many years, till one day, she decided to give it all up to lead the life of a celibate.

Amrapali, also commonly referred to as Ambapalika or Ambapali, was the famous royal courtesan or nagarvadhu of Vaishali. Vaishali was a republic of ancient India, dating around 500 BC. An extremely attractive woman and one of the greatest dancers that ever lived, she ruled her field till she finally decided to give up her luxurious life; follow the Buddha and became an arahant.

Here is the story of the alluring Amrapali.

Early Life

Amrapali was born around 600-500 BC. There is no proper record of her birth, parents and early life. She was given this name because she was found under a mango tree in the royal gardens of Vaishali. Etymologically speaking, the name is derived from the two roots, "Amra" (meaning mango) and "Pallawa" (meaning tiny sprouts or leaves). Incidentally, her legend originated in the Jataka Tales, which were penned about 1500 years ago.

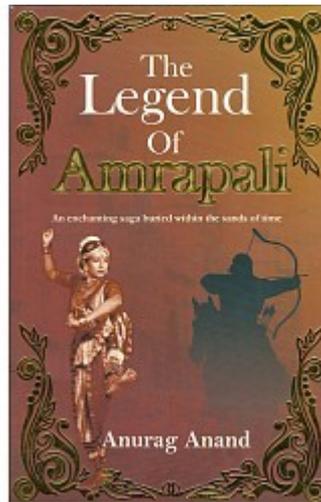
A person named Mahanaman found her when she was a child. Lured by her great beauty, he abandoned his own kingdom and set up residence in Ambara village, a small hamlet in Vaishali.

Amrapali Becomes the Nagarvadhu

Amrapali grew up to be a woman of extraordinary grace and charm. She became famous in the entire city of Vaishali for her looks and was declared as the most beautiful girl in the region at the tender age of 11. As she grew older, many young nobles desired to spend time in her

company. In order to avoid any confrontation with her suitors, she was then bestowed the status of being the state courtesan of Vaishali.

Manudev, the King of Vaishali, once watched her performance in the city and wished to have her for himself. Arrogant and inconsiderate about her feelings, he decided that he had to "own" her. Amrapali, in the meantime, had a childhood love, by the name of Pushpakumar. They were deeply in love with each other and planned to wed each other.



The Legend of Amrapali - An Enchanting Saga
Buried within the Sands of Time

Not wanting to lose Amrapali, Manudev killed Pushpakumar on the day of their wedding. Wanting to possess her completely, he then declared that Amrapali was the "bride of Vaishali", that is, the Nagarvadhu.

In accordance with his wishes, Amrapali was made the nagarvadhu and Vaishali Janpath Kalyani (the most beautiful and talented girl in the kingdom). This post of Janpath Kalyani would last for seven years. During this period, she had the right to choose her lover and also choose the person with whom she wished to maintain physical relations. She also remained the court dancer of the Vaishali democracy.

Tales of her beauty and talent soon reached far and wide. King Bimbisara, ruler of the neighboring hostile Magadha region, was enamored by these stories and wished to see her. He attacked Vaishali and then took refuge in Amrapali's own residence. He was an excellent musician and would often sing to her. In due course of time, the two fell deeply in love with each other.

It was only a few weeks later that Amrapali learned of Bimbisara's true identity. Angered, she asked him to call off the war and leave immediately. Totally smitten by Amrapali, Bimbisara readily agreed to her wishes. He did not care that it made him seem like a coward in the eyes of the residents of Vaishali. In the next few months, Amrapali bore him a son, who she named

Vimala Kondanna.

Bimbisara Meets His End

There are several versions of how Bimbisara met his end. One of them relates that he was poisoned by Ajatashatru, who was getting tired of waiting to take over the throne. Ajatashatru was Bimbisara's son by Queen Chelna. He was a contemporary of both Mahavira and Gautama Buddha. A powerful and arrogant character, he imprisoned his own father and forcefully took over the rule of Magadha from him.

Here are a few other versions of the story:

The Jaina Version

According to the Jaina version, Ajatashatru was one day eating his meal with the rest of the family. Holding his newborn son on his lap, he proudly asked his mother, Queen Chelna, if she had ever seen a devoted father as he was. His mother then narrated several incidents from his childhood, where his father had showered all his love and devotion on his son.

An emotional and guilty Ajatashatru immediately decided that he would free his father from imprisonment. He hurried to the dungeon with an axe, in order to pry open his chains with it. When Bimbisara saw his son approaching him with an axe, he misread the situation and thought that he was going to murder him with it. Not wanting to die at his son's hands, he decided to take his own life, by consuming the Talaputa poison present in his ring. He said a last prayer and almost immediately breathed his last.

Ajatashatru repented much for the loss of his father. However, none of it was of any use. Finally, he moved his headquarters to Champa and made that city his capital.

The Buddhist Version

The Buddhist version of the story narrates how cruelly Ajatashatru kept tormenting his father in prison. He ordered that Bimbisara be given no food and also tortured him physically, injuring his body. Queen Kosala kept finding different ways of reaching food to her husband. However, when she was caught, she was altogether stopped from visiting her husband.

Bimbisara gradually started growing weak, but derived comfort by looking at a distant mountain from his cell window. The mountain was then inhabited by Gautama Buddha and his disciples. When Ajatashatru realized this, he ordered his people to block the window and make his room dark.

One day, the Buddha and his disciples visited the city. An overjoyed Bimbisara got to see him through the holes of his prison door. Incensed that his father got a chance to be happy again, Ajatashatru ordered his henchmen to skin his feet. After this incident, Bimbisara could no

longer move around. Ultimately, he kept getting weaker and weaker.

Then one day, Ajatashatru was sharing a meal with his mother, Kosala Devi. Wanting him to see sense and free his father, she told him how much Bimbisara had sacrificed so that his son could be happy in his life. Hearing all the stories and being touched by his father's kind heart, he decided to free Bimbisara.

The news spread all around the city and everyone was talking about Bimbisara's release. However, Bimbisara suspected that his son had an ulterior motive behind this move. Not wanting to die at his son's hands, he decided to take his own life.

Ajatashatru Wages War over Vaishali

Soon after his father's death, Ajatashatru decided to invade all the hostile regions around Magadha. He then waged war against Vajji, which was then ruled by the Lichchhavis, also conquering Vaishali, Kosala, Kashi and many other neighboring regions.

Ajatashatru Meets Amrapali

Having conquered Vaishali, Ajatashatru was roaming the streets in triumph. He had heard much about Amrapali and wished to have an audience with her. A short search led him to her residence. Seeing her, he immediately fell for her beauty and charm. She too liked him and, gradually, grew to reciprocate his love.

The residents of Vaishali, however, were against their relationship and demanded that Amrapali be imprisoned for her promiscuous behavior. Seeing her imprisoned and helpless, he became so upset that he burned down the whole of Vaishali. Several hundreds of people died in the huge massacre and the city was almost completely ruined. But he saw to it that his love Amrapali was safe all the way through. When she came out of prison, she was aggrieved seeing the amount of damage the invasion had caused to her motherland. Disgusted with Ajatashatru, she walked away from him for good.

Interestingly, it is not clear if Amrapali knew that Ajatashatru was her lover's son; or that he had killed his own father, who was also the father of her own child.

Ajatashatru Becomes a Monarch

Ajatashatru eventually became the monarch of a vast kingdom, which spanned almost all areas of present-day North India, including Chandigarh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, a bit of Jharkhand and a fourth of Madhya Pradesh as well. Ajatashatru was considered to be one of the most powerful rulers of North India at that time.

With the help of his two ministers, Sunidha and Vassakaara, he built a massive fort by the

banks of the Ganga, in order to further strengthen the security of Magadha. He named this place Paatali Grama, which later became popular as Pataliputra (modern-day Patna).

The Mahaparinirvana Sutta states that, when Pataliputra was being built, the Buddha happened to pass through and praised the city for its beauty. He however pointed out that three things could prove detrimental to the city, namely, water, fire and general discord amongst the people living there.

Ajatashatru's Death

Accounts of Ajatashatru's death differ vastly in Buddhist and Jaina traditions. However, it is generally believed that he was brutally murdered by his own son, Udayabhadra, around 535 BC. The latter was greedy and wanted to take over his kingdom. Ajatashatru was then reborn in the hell called Lohakumbhiya.

According to yet another version, he is believed to have passed through many births, till finally, he was born as a wise prince, who later became a monk and attained nirvana (liberation).



Buddhist Monk

In spite of his horrible deeds, Ajatashatru enjoys a respectable position in both the Jaina and Buddhist traditions. According to the Aupapaatika Sutta, he had the highest regard and respect for Mahavira. He took great care to look after the latter and appointed several officers to fulfill all of Mahavira's needs.

According to Buddhist legend, he was closely associated with the Buddha. After repenting for all his past deeds, he completely surrendered himself to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. He became an avid follower of the Buddha and even erected a massive Stupa, built on the bones and ashes of the Buddha, after his funeral. Further, he was also present at the first Buddhist council at the Sattapanni (Saptaparni) caves, Rajgir.

Amrapali Becomes a Bhikkhuni

In the meantime, Amrapali had heard a lot about the life and teachings of the Buddha and wished to see him and serve food to him. Though the general public of Vaishali was against this, Buddha accepted it, as it was a direct invite from the ruling aristocracy. A thrilled Amrapali received the Buddha with due respect and offered meals to him and his retinue.



Buddha in Meditation

One version of the story narrates that Amrapali was so taken in by the Buddha's presence and his innate peace that she decided to renounce her position as courtesan and chose, instead, to follow in his footsteps, as a Bhikkhuni (female monk or nun). Throughout her life, she actively supported Buddhism.

The Monk Who Converted Amrapali into a Bhikkhuni

There is yet another interesting version about Amrapali becoming a Bhikkhuni. This version relates that Amrapali happened to fall in love with one of the Bhikkhus (male monks) from Buddha's retinue. Spotting him from her terrace, she was immediately smitten by him. She then not only invited him for a meal, but also asked him to stay on for the next four months, till the ongoing monsoon season got over.

Sworn to a life of celibacy, the young monk replied that he would agree to her wishes only if the Buddha gave him permission to do so. The other young Bhikkhus came to know of this and became jealous of him. They reached the news to the Buddha's ears, much before this young monk could request an audience with him. The other monks were hoping that the Buddha would become angry and throw him out of the order.

To the surprise of all present, though, Buddha merely smiled and gave him permission to stay at Amrapali's residence. The Bhikkhu stayed there for 4 months, as was required of him. Everyone was convinced that the monk would have had a physical relationship with her during that time.

After the said time period elapsed, the monk returned to the monastery, with a saffron-clad Amrapali in tow. Much as the Buddha had expected, he had successfully converted her into a Bhikkhuni. Amrapali told everyone present that she had tried to seduce the young monk many times, but had utterly failed in all her attempts. In the end, he had spiritually seduced her; making her renounce her highly materialistic life and join the Buddhist monk order.

She then requested Buddha to take her into his Sangha as a Bhikkhuni. Initially, he refused to grant her the wish, saying that there were only Bhikkhus in the Sanghas and that there was no arrangement for Bhikkhunis to join in. Amrapali boldly questioned his stand. The Buddha patiently tried to explain that a woman could end up tempting the Bhikkhus, making them break their vow of celibacy. Amrapali hotly debated that as well, saying that if the monks were spiritually strong enough, they would not be swayed by a mere woman. Finally, Buddha gave in to her wishes and accepted her into his fold.

In due course of time, Amrapali, who became deeply involved with the Dhamma and the Sangha, achieved enlightenment and remained as one of the main disciples of the Buddha. She was also posted as the head of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. A few years later, her son Vimala Kondanna too joined the order and became a Buddhist monk.



Buddha with Disciple

Amrapali is mentioned in the ancient Pali and Buddhist texts; particularly her association with the Sangha; with the Buddha and his monks staying at her mango grove. She eventually donated this Ambapali vana (garden) to his order. Here, he preached the famous Ambapalika Sutta.

Amrapali: A Brave; Truly Spiritual Soul

The tale of Amrapali is truly inspiring. It is the tale of a woman who successfully dethroned a megalomaniac ruler and emerged as a powerful character, who dared to rise and go beyond the order of the day. As a courtesan, she was expected to remain a mere object of sexual

desire - one who was born only to please the kings and emperors. She, however, had the courage to fight the society and surfaced as one of the most commanding and influential women in the history of that era.

A Braveheart; a Warrior

She was a woman of unknown parentage - someone that was found under a mango tree. However, so strong was her personality, that she is remembered, even today, as someone who verily changed the course of history. She is known not only for her incomparable beauty, but also for her excellence in the arts (especially in dance and music); her sharp political acumen; her bravery to overthrow chauvinistic rulers; and her compassion towards society, especially towards downtrodden women. She tirelessly worked to improve society and actively involved herself in constructing schools, roads and temples.

Breaking Away from a Life of Dreams

Hers was a life that seemed like one that dreams were made of. She had thousands of male admirers and commanded respect wherever she went. Yet, she felt imprisoned within her own life. Her room was called "Swapna Kakshika" (the room of dreams). She spent her nights pleasing royalty, in exchange for a few gold coins. Though she satisfied the men that visited her, she was left utterly dissatisfied with her own life and yearned to break away from it.

The Turning Point

Looking outside one day, Amrapali saw a moth struggling to come out of its cocoon. Watching it, she compared it to her own life and her own struggle to break free from the oppressive society that she was in. That thought went on to become the turning point in her life. Deep in her mind, she knew that she was made for a much higher purpose and had to work towards achieving that mission.

Amrapali in Popular Culture

In the year 1962, Vimala Raina penned a work of historical fiction, titled "Ambapali". This narrates the life of the beautiful courtesan of Vaishali, who went on to become a follower of the Buddha.

Amrapali features in several other books, including "Vaishali Ki Nagarvadhu", penned by Acharya Chaturseen; "The Legend of Amrapali: An Enchanting Saga Buried within the Sands of Time", penned by Anurag Anand; and so on.

Several biopics have been filmed on her life and times. Most famous among them is the film, "Amrapali" (1966), starring the gorgeous Vyjayanthimala in the title role and the dashing Sunil Dutt as King Ajatashatru.

A serial named "Aamrapali" was telecast on the Indian national television network (Doordarshan) in 2002. Later, popular Bollywood actress Hema Malini produced, directed and starred in a TV series, called "Women of India". In this series, she featured the story of Amrapali.

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