

## EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: EARLY BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is an attempt to study the aspect of empowerment of women as depicted in Buddhism and aims to examine the role of women in Buddhism. It will consider existing literature on the topic and contribute to new avenues of research with the help of literature of Hinayana. Buddha was the first religious teacher who gave women equal and unfettered opportunities in the field of spiritual development. He truly paved the way for women to lead a full religious life. Buddha was not a reformer but he admitted women into the monastic order. The Buddhist concept of empowerment tells that a woman who wants to empower herself should not only realize her potential and true nature but must put in efforts to achieve her goals. Buddha made women eligible for Buddhahood by opening the gates to women by forming the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Several nuns and laywomen were among the Buddha's ablest and wisest disciples. It is recorded that in Sangha, there was free intermingling of male and female monks and nuns. Present study will analyze Buddhist perspective on empowerment of women with special reference to early Buddhism.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

United Nations has developed the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for the cohesive development of the society. Goal 3 of the MDG promotes Gender equality and empowerment of women. The MDG focuses on the education of the women to eliminate the gender disparity and points out that the developing countries including India as a whole should have achieved the target to eliminate gender disparity in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Women in India continue to experience significant gaps in terms of poverty, labor market and wages, as well as participation in private and public decision-making. Empowerment involves the enhancement of an individual's capacity to know, to act and to enjoy. Empowerment brings confidence, awareness, mobility, ability to choose and capacity to control all types of resources and above all to possess decision making power. Empowerment can be achieved through developing positive role models. The need for empowering individuals is vital in order to identify the real and appropriate needs, encourage commitment, ensure sustainability and personal development and inculcate self-esteem and equal opportunity to share power. The aim of empowerment is to transform the society through the transformation of individuals. When an individual is empowered, he can transform the society in different ways. For example, education is considered to be prime means of empowerment. Economic empowerment involves removal of insecurity, development of skills and control over resources and decision-making processes.

As far as the empowerment of women is initiated during the Buddhism is concerned, it is better to know the Pre-Buddhist period of explanation about the women empowerment. The role of women has mentioned in the Vedic culture, the epics of Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The women in these societies were not given importance in the core area of the society and the issue of enhancement of their potential does not arise. The women in the family are a unit consisting of parents, mother, daughter in-law, husband, wife and children. The family members have used the balance and power and control her behaviour with the other members of the family, in the decision-making process and administering the day to day activities.

The empowerment of women during the period of Buddhism needs to consider the following consideration such as women's perspective about herself, woman's perspective about the society and the society's perspective about the woman.

## 2. WOMEN'S STATUS AND BUDDHISM

The position of women in the society is analyzed through her position as an individual, position in the family, position in the decision-making and position in the society. Women in the individual capacity and her empowerment as an individual level enhance all sorts of capacities of the individual in spiritually, economically, socially and morally. The confidence of the women developed these capacities and created self-respect. The nature of self-respect motivated her in taking her own decision and strengthened relation with the society. To understand the empowerment of women as an individual during this period, one should analyze the women overall capacities in transforming her spiritually, economically independence and enabled her to participate in decision making.

The analysis of existing literature such as Purushertha and other explains the status of women in the society at the time of origin of Buddhism. Women in the individual capacity in the family is analyzed through individual's spiritual, economic, social and religious aspects. The analysis of Purushertha about the individual is explained as such that there four goals of human life, namely Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksa. The status of woman as far as dharma is concerned, was negligible. It was assumed that woman did not need money because she was cared for either by her father, husband or son. In fact, the women had no important place as far as artha is concerned. The women had no provisions of attaining the economic resources and as a result, there are rare chances of women empowerment at that time. The concept of Mokṣa is directly related to the attainment of knowledge and the women of this period in general were deprived of knowledge and education. As a result, women empowerment in the field of moksha, could not attained by the women. The history of that period did not glorify the women's attainment of Mokṣa. Overall, the women of this period was untouched the Dharma, Artha, and Moksa and is considered only for the Kama. Women primarily was considered as

sensuous pleasure to her husband and fulfills the karma tendency in the society.

The concept of marriage was considered as a religions sacrament or *Sanskara* that build the man-women relationship into a social tie and an emotional bond. This status and position was well received by the woman and she was extra careful in performing her role as a wife and provided maximum sons. It reflects the status of women in the family and vis-a-vis her position of the woman as a real partner in all his activities including religious sacrifices. It reflects the light on the society that women were meant for injustice, exploitation, and suppression of women that is based on sexual discrimination. The nature of the society considered that man and woman are social construction constructed out of the need of the society in which women acted the role of mother, an individual as compassion, forgiveness etc. In this way, criterion of empowerment as well as feminist understanding of concepts, doctrines and thoughts in Indian social and moral philosophy show that women belonging to Pre-Buddhist Era were not empowered. Overall, at the time of initiation of the Buddhism, it was rarity of the rare that the woman empowerment is either spoken or idea of practice and never been practically implemented in the society. As a result, the women did not consider any primary importance in the family and question of women enhancement of their capacities does not arise.

### 3. WOMEN'S STATUS DURING THE BUDDHISM

The philosophy of Buddhism did not elaborate the concept of empowerment of women. But the details of the Buddhist texts have referred about the women's in the society that enables to articulate the Buddhist concept of women empowerment. The Buddhist philosophy emphasizes on the self-realization of woman and her active participation in decision-making in her social and personal life that is attributed towards empowerment of woman. The woman's holistic development highlights the social, cultural, economic, political, mental and spiritual development. It further elaborates the woman's realization of her own capacities and power that helps in the overcome of social and cultural barriers and further strengthen her active participation in decision-making related to her and her family. The Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that the

empowerment is not something that is external to her but it is built in her and it has to be excavated to fulfill self-realization.

The self-realization of women is related with actualization of different possibilities of empowerment and its actualization related with their application in the society where woman as well as society have an important role to play. The actualization of woman's self-realization is possible only when there is change in the mental attitude of woman and change in the mental attitude of the society. Change in mental attitude of woman enables her to break social and cultural barriers and change in mental attitude of society enables the society to accept the independent existence of woman and to provide the opportunities to woman and also to encourage her so that she can explore her capacities. The Buddhist philosophy explains further about women self-realization by analyzing woman's perspective about herself, Woman's perspective about the society and society's perspective about the woman.

It is equally important to note that the empowerment of woman is attained through her self-realization having mental and spiritual development and independent existence.

The self-realization of women makes her aware of her attributes, qualities and the processes of enculturation and socialization. The woman in the society has clear understanding regarding the nature of co-existence will develop the holistic nature of the society. Gautama Buddha through his discourses always tried to enlighten the people about the myth of gender difference. In Buddha's days also, the birth of female child was not welcomed. Her birth made the parents unhappy. It may be because the parents believed that after marriage, daughters went to their husband house then who would take care of the parents in their old age. But if they had son their son lived with them even after their marriage. So the sons could take care of them. It is because of this belief, parents preferred the male child. The Buddha tried to remove this kind of belief from the mind of people. Further, Buddha explains that there was no reason to feel gloomy at the birth of a daughter. For example, King Pasenadi was unhappy at the time of birth of a girl to his Queen Mallike. He went to the Buddha to tell this news and when the Buddha observed that King is unhappy, he said; "Indeed, a woman

of a certain sort is better than a man lord of folk: Wise, Virtuous, reversing her husband's mother, a devoted wife, the man born of her is a hero, ruler of the regions, such a son of a good wife is one who advised his realm" (SN.I.86.).

#### 4. WOMEN AND UNFETTERED SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Buddhism did not just look at women as child-bearers, and did not accept that marriage was the only the aim of a woman. It is because unmarried adult woman held a legitimate role, and she could also become Buddhist nun. It is said that the faithful laywoman would encourage her only son to emulate the best laymen or monks, and her only daughter to emulate the best laywomen or nuns.

The Buddhist literature explains about marriage is that the marriage itself was not held to be imperative as it was in the case of Vedic culture. A single life was not regarded as a wasted life. Even a maiden was allowed to lead a life of celibacy and devote herself exclusively to other secular or spiritual affairs. The example of goldsmith daughters remained unmarried throughout their life and devoted themselves to the management of their family affairs. The Buddhist text states that wife by husband is always esteemed in the household. In the choice of career for children, wife had the same right of decision as husband had for him. These indications certainly lead one to believe that the status of women in the household had improved.

The practice of early marriage before puberty is not mentioned in the canonical literature. Thus the age of marriage is sixteen years of age. Women had greater liberty in the choice of their husbands during the Buddhist age as compare in the preceding periods. The Buddha tore off the observance of parda (face covering) and gave the clear verdict that women had the full right of leading independent religious life. Women had the option to share their husbands' calling and undertake any productive labor. Thus they were often instrumental in bringing prosperity to their homes. This social arrangement worked very well in the Buddhist society. In the Buddhist age, marriage ceases to be a sacrament and instead became a strictly civil and domestic affair. Gautama Buddha himself ordains in no uncertain terms such as Slaughter of life, theft, lying, and adultery.

The Buddhism did not make gender discrimination during the preaching of the dhamma. Buddha at the time of enlightenment said, "it is for the sake of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen and to all four groups are said to have an analogous effect on the persistence or disappearance of Buddhist knowledge and practice. Thus the Sa-gha is illuminated by a monk, nun, layman and laywoman who is accomplished in wisdom, disciplined and is confident....practicing according to Dhamma and the same set of virtues or vices leads to hell or heaven for a man or woman. He further said, women have both the same spiritual limitations and the same spiritual powers as men" (Harvey, Brian).

Nuns may develop spiritually to the same extent as monks. Buddhism emphasized that the philosophy would not die until he had monks, and nuns, and laymen, and laywomen, who could teach Dhamma, establish it, expound it, analyze it, and make it clear. Buddha gave the same teachings to both male and female, and sometimes went out of his way to teach women. The Buddha refused a meal invitation from some proud and rich young man, as he had already accepted an invitation from the courtesan and honored even when the young men objected.

Buddha gave a new outlook to the society. His outlook was rational, which prompted the society to give fair treatment to women. Buddhism was essentially a moral religion, the moral precepts of which touched all classes irrespective of any sex consideration. During the life time of the Lord Buddha and in the time of Asoka when Buddhism was at its zenith the status of women improved appreciably. The Buddha's outlook was liberal and in the propagation of his teachings, he treated women and men alike. He gave Dhamma to both the sexes without making any distinction. This was indeed a great achievement for women as in the previous centuries women had lost their individuality.

## 5. WOMEN BUDDHAHOOD, BHIKKHUNI SANGHA AND DEVELOPMENT OF SPIRITUALITY

The word religion means Dhamma in the philosophy of Buddhism. Women had freedom to listen to the thoughts of the Buddha and had freedom to follow Dhamma. The religion is a

religion of free individuals. The Buddhist religion believes that mere living is not the highest good but living righteously with self-control, pure mind, clean heart and clear conscience is the supreme attainment that mankind ought to strive for. The teaching of Buddhism confirms that, there are no differences between men and women if both are psychologically strong. In many discourses, the Buddha said that women can develop their mind up to the extent of liberation.

Women can achieve highest fruits as the men and gave the example of “Culavagga, Bhikkhunī khandaka”. Buddhist philosophy tried to remove the low positions of women in the society. On hearing the news of a birth of a girl, King Kosala was disappointed. The Buddha encouraged him and said that women are as good when they have cultivated virtuous activities and explained, “By those wishing with attachment the excellence, again and again of life span, good health, beauty, heavens and high birth, Merit should be done, wisely appreciating diligence. Diligence, serves for the welfare of this and the other world. When the diligent one attains his aim, he is called a wise man” (SN.S. 127).

No woman could reach the high ground of the wise once anybody humiliates the women because she has only the two-finger knowledge. It is an allusion to cooking where the consistency of the cooked rice is tested by pressing it between the fingers. The refutation of has mentioned in the Buddhist texts and mentioned, “When the mind is established, being a woman does not matter I have knowledge and reflect the teaching rightfully, whether woman or man whatever was mine is suitable to be in the power of Māra” (SN.S. 163).

The foster mother of the Lord Buddha actuated by feelings of her spiritual welfare went to the lord Buddha and requested him initiation in the Order. It was quite a new experience for the first time for Gautama Buddha. A woman had approached him independently with a request for admission to the religious organization. Ānanda, the disciple of the Buddha, took upon himself the task and he secured the Lord’s consent. The Buddha in consultation with Ānanda inaugurated the order of nuns as a separate religious organization. In this way the status of women was elevated tremendously.

Women could work out their own destiny and achieve salvation. The first sermon that the Buddha delivered to Mahāpajāpatī and her associates was the same which he gave the men on their admission to the order of monks. By this identical sermon to the male and female disciples, the Buddha decidedly acknowledged the equality of both the sexes in the religious sphere. In Rajpriya alone not less than six thousand nuns with Mahāpajāpatī at their head practiced severe austerities with spiritual thirst in their hearts. The teacher himself was so impressed with their deed so earnest that to Ānanda he was compelled to acknowledge once more that women are capable of Arhatship (Arhatship means gained insight into the true nature of existence and has achieved salvation nirvana).

Women could no longer be restrained from ascending the heights. Therefore, the Buddha himself was concerned and allowed women to take to ascetic life and reach any spiritual height from their own efforts.

Ānanda, the faithful disciple of the Buddha brought the matter of admitting women into the Sangha and the Lord Buddha replied: Are the Buddhas born only for the benefit of men? Have not Visākha and many others entered the paths? The entrance is open to women as well as men. Thus the Buddha gave woman an independent status and placed her on a footing of equality with man. The consistent principles of the Dhamma, which sees no difference between man and woman except that which may exist by superiority of virtue. The step taken by the Buddha was indeed bold, considering the depraved moral condition of ancient India and the consequent low estimation in which woman was then held. That the Buddhist revolt against this depraved social and moral condition proved a success is shown by the *Therīgāthā*, a work containing verses ascribed to Bhikkhunis. A good many of these verses are not only beautiful in form but also give evidence of a very high degree of that mental self-culture which played so great a part in the Buddhist ideal of the perfect life. Many of the women who joined the order became distinguished for high intellectual attainments as well as for moral earnestness.

Some women nuns or Bhikkhunis were teaching Buddhist men which men meant not only expounding the deeper and subtler

points of the Dhamma but also as having attained the great peace which is the final result of intellectual illumination and moral earnestness.

MahāpajāpatĒ, KĒsĒ GautamĒ, SomĒ, KhemĒ, UppalvannĒ and others were recognized to be the accomplished sages, widely learned and brilliant orators. Subha was one of the most eminent teachers of the faith along with MahēprĒpatĒ and PaŌĒchĒrĒ. One of the brilliant orators of religion was KhemĒ, who along with the king's, queen MallikĒ persuaded her husband king Pasenadi to be converted to the new faith of Buddhism. Likewise SĒmĒvatĒ and KhemĒ were successful in persuading their husbands Udayana and BimbisĒra respectively to accept the holy doctrine of Buddhism. In addition to these, SujĒta, SigalmĒtĒ, BhaddĒ KuŌĒalkeshĒ attained Arhatship. SubhaddĒ Nanda MĒtĒ, SuppiyĒ and VisĒkhĒ were the laywomen who attained high religious positions as laywomen VisĒkhĒ and other laywomen with their religious zeal, laid the foundation and principles of oldest Buddhist community.

The Buddhist reformation being a moral reaction against a corrupt state of society and it was necessary that the relations between the sexes should be guarded with care. Strict rules were therefore laid down for the conduct of Bhikkhus with women and of Bhikkhunis with men. The Buddha did not make any difference between man and woman. If he honored MoggallĒna and SĒrĒputta, he also held in high esteem KhemĒ, the wife of King BimbisĒra and DhammadinnĒ, the chief among the Bhikkhunis that preached the Dhamma. In no religion has a woman played such a prominent part as VisĒkhĒ has done in Buddhism. Buddhism being a matter of self-control and self-culture, it regards every individual, whether man or woman as a complete whole. Accordingly the Dhamma does not concern itself with those relations between man and woman in which one sex is regarded as completing the other.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Buddhist concept of empowerment explains the authentic empowerment of women as individual and in the society. The understanding of the Buddhist women empowerment analyses

that a woman has empowered herself in the realization of her own nature and has to take enough efforts to achieve her goal.

To sum up, Buddhism and feminism is a growing field of interest in the present context. The Buddhism becomes an increasingly relevant globalized force with the scriptures of all schools available freely to monastic women. Today, the various scriptural sources may present an ambiguous view of women, and discriminatory practices and attitudes still exist in Buddhist countries and including India. There may also be doubts about the accuracy of the scriptures themselves, as well as their misrepresentations viewed through the opaque prism of each culture as Buddhism incorporated many of the existing beliefs and cultural norms as it spread across different regions. However, meditation is not only the highest and most crucial stage of the Buddhist stereological Path but also its truly practical, experiential and educational aspect that is timelessly and universally open to everyone to test. The *Dhamma* that promotes the eradication of all negative attitudes and false views is genderless at its pristine and transformative core.

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## References

- Harvey, Brian, Peter; An introduction to Buddhist ethics: foundations, values, and issues, p. 357.
- SN.S. 127. Itthīpi hi ekacciyē, Seyyē posa janēdhipa; Medhēvini Sēlavatē, sasudevē patibbatē. Tassē yo jēyati poso, s|ro hoti disampati; Tēdisē subhagiyē putto, rajjampi anusēsati'ti.
- SN.S. 163. Itthibhēvo kim kayirē, cittamhi susamēhite; Òēnamhi vattamēnamhi, sammē dhammam vipassato. Yassa n|na siyē evam, itthēham purisoti vā, Kiōci vē pana aōōasmim, tam mēro vattumarahati'ti.
- SN.I.86. Itthē pi hi ekacciyē seyyē posē janēdhipa, medhēvinē sēlavatē sassudevē patibbatē. Tassē yo jēyati poso s|ro hoti disampati, eva° subhagiyē putto rajjam pi anusēsati.