

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Buddhism, the word comes from two different elements – Buddha (the preacher) and the ism (the philosophy) of Buddha. Whenever this special suffix (ism) finds its position with any notion or person, the purview of that notion or person goes beyond certain dimension. Thus Buddhism is not only concerned with a religion rather it shows a path to enlighten us. It is concerned with each and every aspect of a society.

In this paper the focal point of discussion will be the status of women in Buddhism and its reflections on literary scenario especially how it can be compared with feminist perspectives. The problem of discrimination against women has always been a vital issue for discussion. The assumption is that women of all civilization and generation are subjected to humiliation, exploitation both physically and psychologically. The socially constructed ideologies has played a significant role in this discrimination between men and women. This social construction states that women is born from the ribs of men and therefore is weaker than him.

Simon de Beauvoir in her seminal text, *The Second Sex* (1949), points out that both man and woman are not value free. Man is positive and standard whereas woman is negative and the other. She goes on to state that women as negative and the other have no value or identity by herself. She is defined in relation to men, she is defined as “what man is not.” Extending the same idea she gives a concept of ‘Othering’. She claims that, woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her... he is the subject, he is the absolute.

The status of women was very sound as compared to the contemporary scenario that we are witnessing. The reason behind their peculiar position was that Buddhism provided them with ample liberty to be indulged in religious rituals.

The advent of Buddhism and its attitude towards women showed a path to their empowerment in any existing society. The doctrines of Buddha suggested a social and religious equality in the society. During that period of time the women were assigned a comparatively better position and were admitted to the Buddhist order.

Although Buddhism gave such kind of freedom to women but at the same time we cannot ignore the problem of discrimination against women that is a feature common in all societies. The basic point of this inequity is nothing but the religious biasness that was prevalent everywhere.

Some of the fanatical religious cults have also restricted women from participating in the religious rituals. They were also discarded from entering places of worship. If some liberal attitude was ever shown to involve women in a religious rituals, such participation was only

confined within their own homes, attending to household religious ceremonies. Such encumbrance and resistance in the matter of moral and spiritual development of women still exist in varying degrees in certain parts of the world, even though many barriers have been removed. There will be no exaggeration if one says that the Buddha was the first religious teacher who broke new ground to provide women equal and tolerant initiatives in the realm of social and religious life. The liberal attitude of Buddha towards women cannot be called prejudiced as he had mentioned the natural tendencies and weakness of women, he had also given due credit to their abilities and capabilities. This attitude of Buddha had not only enlightened the women but had also enlightened the biased tendencies of prejudiced people. They were able to develop and purify their minds and realize the bliss of Nirvana in as much as men could. Through the Bhikkuni Sangha- the Order of Nuns, Buddha had provided an opportunity for the full participation of women in the field of religion which truly opened to women a new cultural and social opportunities for public life. This initiative of Buddha had made them aware of their own existence in the society and brought them to recognition of their importance to society and greatly enhanced the status of women.

During the pre-buddhist period the social attitude towards women can be traced from the early Vedic literature, such as the Rigveda. The Vedic age was also regarded as the brightest period so far as the condition of women is concerned. The in- depth analysis of these Vedas give a glimpse that women were given proper respect within the certain dimension of the four walls of their home. They were surviving a life with the proper space for moral and intellectual development in Vedic era. So far as the question of their involvement in any religious ritual were concerned, they had access to the highest knowledge of the Absolute or Brahma. However, a swift transition took place and this liberal attitude towards women changed with the course of time, under the influence and dominance of the priestly caste along with their priest crafts, animal sacrifices, and other ritualistic practices. New interpretations were given to the scriptures. Women came to be considered as greatly inferior to men - both physically and mentally. In the words of Simon de Beauvoir, ‘what man is not?’ (Beauvoir 1989)

During that period of time, women were regarded nothing more than an object kept within the dimension of the four walls of the house. They were compelled to confine themselves under the complete whims and fancies of her husband. According to a mythical interpretation it is claimed that all women are regarded as sinful and the only way to keep them out of mischief was to keep them occupied endlessly with the task of motherhood and domestic duties. Her status can be aptly described in the words of Simon de Beauvoir, “women still dreams through the dream of men.”(Beauvoir 1989)

The vitality of the tenets of Buddha appeared as an ideology which showed the path to the pure enlightenment. His emphasis on the real nature of life and death -about karma and samskaric wanderings, had greatly struck the biased mind set of the people and had given rise to considerable changes in the social attitudes towards women in his days. Buddha claims that one is responsible for one's own action and its consequence. This is what he calls, the Law of Karma. The well-being of a father or grandfather does not depend upon the action of the son or grandson. They were responsible for their own actions. Such enlightened teachings changed the views of many people and naturally reduced the anxiety of women who were unable to produce sons to perform the rites of the ancestors.

During the initial phase of Buddhist period, the glimpse of the liberal attitude towards unmarried girl could be easily witnessed as she might even become the owner of great possessions of her legacy, of slaves, and rich fields; as did Subha, the daughter of a goldsmith,

during the time of the Buddha. But when the Dhamma was taught to her by Mahapajapati, Subha realized the nature of all fleeting pleasures and that 'silver and gold lead neither to peace nor to enlightenment', with the result that she entered the Order of Buddhist Nuns.

This act was a great boon to the unmarried women. The doctrines established by the teachings of the Buddha had done a great deal to diminish most of the prevalent superstitious beliefs and meaningless rites and rituals including animal sacrifices, from the minds of many people. When the true nature of life and death and the natural phenomena governing the universe were revealed to them, wisdom and understanding arose. This in turn helped to arrest and corrects the prevailing social injustices and prejudices that were rampant against women in the days of the Buddha thus enabling women to lead their own way of life.

It is generally assumed that in a orthodox Indian society the birth of a girl child is never welcomed. During the early period the unmarried daughters were considered to a burden in the family. But Buddha's attitude towards a girl child shows his enlightened perspective.

The Buddha's attitude on women can be seen when the news of the birth of a daughter was brought to his friend, King Kosala. The King was displeased at the news as he expected a son, but the Buddha, unlike any other religious teacher paid a glowing tribute to women and mentioned certain characteristics that adorned a woman in the following words :-

Some women are indeed better (than man) Bring her up, O Lord of man.

There Are Women who are wise, virtuous, who have high regard for mother-in-law, and who are Chaste. To such a noble wife may be born a valiant Son, A lord of Realms, who rule a Kingdom.

Buddha here considered women as a whole ,while discussing the nature of women, he had emphasized not only their weakness but also their potentialities and abilities.. His liberal attitude towards women was considered to be a radical move. Even though the Buddha allowed women to prove themselves and to get the equality in the society.

With the advent of the modern era in the 19th and 20th century, a far cry from the days of the Buddha, women's emancipation and quest for freedom and equality had achieved tremendous strides, particularly in the West. This was the result of modern trends and modern education for women in all seats of higher learning.

The liberty in its purest sense of the word refers to the freedom that is free from all forms of bondage. This freedom is attainable only by the means of proper spiritual development and purification of one's own mind - purging and cleansing oneself from all taints of greed, hatred and delusion. No amount of public debates, demonstrations and universal charters could bring true freedom - except through one's own diligence and heedfulness by the regular practice of meditation as taught by the Buddha.

The Buddha should be considered as the first religious teacher who showed the liberal attitude towards women and promoter of a democratic way of life. It is to the eternal credit of the Buddha-Dhamma that women were not despised and looked down but were given equal status with men in their spiritual endeavor on the way to gain wisdom and the complete deliverance – Nirvana.

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