

Women Empowerment and Buddhist Philosophy

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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. Buddha was the first religious teacher who gave women equal and unfettered opportunities in the field of spiritual development. He truly passed 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. Presently study will analyze the Buddhist perspective on empowerment of women with special reference to Buddhist philosophy.

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Women in general and Buddhist women, in particular, is some of the most neglected subjects in Indian history. There are scholarly works on the position of women in ancient India but most of these works are confined to the dominant Hindu society. It is well known that the status of women in India was on a whole low in the pre-Buddhist age. Her rights to pursue religions, life and move freely in society were considerably restricted but with the rise of Buddhism the position of women began to improve. "Women enjoyed more equality and greater respect and authority which was denied to them in pre-Buddhist age. Buddhism rejected any kind of distinction on Caste base or gender base. It tried to uplift, the positions of women in society."

Patriarchy seems to be the main characteristic of pre-Buddhist or Vedic society therefore women were kept at a secondary status. "Birth of a girl child was looked upon a curse. A daughter was regarded as a source of misery according to Aitareya Brahmana."

Similarly, a desire to have more and more sons in Vedic literature too reflects a typical patriarchal approach, in pre-Buddhist days." But under the Buddhism, there occurred a change in the attitude. Buddha's view regarding the birth of a girl child was progressive and path-making. Kosala King Pasendi was disappointed when his Buddhist queen Mallika gave birth to her daughter. At that time Buddha said, "A girl may prove even a better offspring." This remark of Buddha stands exactly in contrast to that of Vedic tradition. It is very clear that the birth of a girl child was not considered as a curse under Buddhism. This is really a progressive approach. When pre-Buddhist tradition was openly welcoming the birth of male children. Buddhist tradition welcomed the birth of a girl child. A reference to the adoption of Samavati. By householder, mitta was a revolutionary step adopting a daughter and not a son was definitely a step forward.

The progressive approach of Buddhism is evident in its stand against child marriage. Samavati's father refused to give her to the king "He said, we the householders do not give young girls for fear that the people will say that the male maltreated and ill-used. When the pre, Buddhist tradition was propagating a child marriage Buddhist tradition stood against this custom.

Marriage as an institution was not challenged under Buddhism but to be unmarried was not regarded as a disgrace. In the case of married women too, a traditional approach was not totally attacked by Buddha. But it should be remembered that Buddha's path was middle path. The traditional values and customs did not come to an end immediately. Buddha's way out to this situation was the explanation of the duties of a husband towards a wife. It was mature and balanced view towards women. In fact, the husband-wife relationship under Buddhist philosophy was based on moral values.

A similar approach has been reflected in the case of widows. Widowhood in pre-Buddhist days was terrible but under Buddhism, a widow was treated as a human being. 'A tradition of widowhood filled with hardship in pre-Buddhist philosophy days was not totally forgotten as a women in Vessantara Jataka fears about widowhood but in Buddhist way was not considered ill women under Buddhism. There are records of widows who joined the Sangha and joining a sangha opened up a new kind of life for them.

Caste, marital status, age, or economic status was not at all a barrier for entering a Sangha. Buddhist philosophy gave equal treatment to all women. Ambarpali a courtesan paid a visit to Buddha and invited him for meals. Shortly afterward Buddha received an invitation for meals for the same day from the princely family of the Licchavis but he refused them and kept his promise to Ambarpali.

In the field of religion too, Buddhists gave an equal access to women in every path. It is true that Buddha was reluctant to admit women in Sangha. "It was only when Ananda his favorite disciple made a strong plea that Buddha sanctioned the admission of women in sangha." This reflects a work pattern of Buddhism Ananda's convincing capacity plays a vital role in changing Buddha's view. It stands exactly in contrast to that of the pre-Buddhism age. We do have the examples scattered in a vast mass of Vedic literature bearing on the Prejudiced attitude towards women. The so-called debate between Gargi and Yajnavalky, in the court of Janaka, reflects the existing male dominance and imposed silence on women-Gargi was a force to remain silent but Buddha never dictated his views on his disciples. Listening to others and accepting them openly is the most democratic feature of Buddhist Philosophy. Regarding the entrance of women in Sangha, it seems that Buddha changed his earlier views.

The empowerment of women in India has a specific goal a gender-specific goals. It has to eliminate 'marginalization devaluation, displacement and ultimate dispensability of women in India. To achieve genuine empowerment. In the the order of nuns opened up new avenues of spiritual growth for women. Among Buddha's famous disciples there were 13 ladies whose merit was appreciated by Buddha. Dhammadinna for example was the most distinguished merit was appreciated by Buddha. There are so many examples in the Buddhist literature that there is no discrimination between higher and low classes of women in the Sangha. They both gave the same status in Buddhism. Therigatha, the existing notions about women are reflected. Buddhism tried to bring change in the existing approach towards women. Giving equal opportunities to women in the religious field and trying to shake the age-old nation about women was definitely a step forward.

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