

## **Status of Women in Buddhism –A Study**

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### **Abstract**

The topic regarding the status of women in the society is like a burning topic in almost all the religions of the world. The patriarchal system existing in the society from decades is still going on in various places due to which the struggle of women to achieve a respectable and independent position in the society is still present. Almost every religion has placed women to a sub-ordinate position. Early Vedic age saw a very honourable position in contrast with the later Vedic stage which comprehends a downfall of their position. Buddhism is a humanitarian religion emphasizing in the happiness of all. Siddhartha Gautama, popularly known as Gautam Buddha, was a religious teacher of Buddhism who placed women to an equal position like that of men irrespective of the social divergence widespread in the society. Before Buddhism women's condition was worse but Buddha's emergence was like a life giving force to the women who were able to secure their old reputable position. Buddha gave them a way to bring forward their hidden potentialities in the society. But after the death of Buddha, womenfolk suffered a lot. Their birth was regarded to be a bad omen and was merely treated as an object who were confined only to household chores. This paper is an attempt to put forward the place of women in Buddhism and I have tried also bring forth the comparison of their position before Buddhism, during the time of Buddha and after his death.

**Keywords:** Women, Buddha, Arhatship, enlightenment, female transformation.

### **Introduction:**

Women during the early Vedic period enjoyed a very respectable position but they went under a bad phase during the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. They were not given equal respect like that of a man. It is seen that in every cultures, women always had to struggle for her rights. Buddha who was a religious teacher and social reformer attempted to emancipate women and his effort created a change in the outlook towards women in the society. I. B. Horner stated that in the pre-Buddhist period, the position of women was very deteriorating but with the epoch of Buddhism there was a drastic change. According to Horner, this credit goes to Buddha because he had given Dharma to both men and

women. The men folk reluctantly accepted it though tardily. After the emergence of Buddha, women earned greater respect and authority. It is to be noted that their interference was only confined to certain spheres of domestic, social and religious activities; their position was elevated a lot. Birth of a girl child was welcomed by the people. "The birth of girl-child was no longer met with open-eyed and loud-voiced despair, for girls had ceased to be despised and looked upon as encumbrances"<sup>1</sup>. In the Saddharmapundarikam, it was written that Buddha was once surrounded by six thousand female saints among a large number of disciples. This shows Buddha's attitude towards other women.

### **Discussion on the place of women in Buddhism**

In the pre-Buddhist phase, a girl was a source of misery to her parents because she may not get married and if they get married a large expense had to be done on her marriage. She was only treated as a child-bearer and had only a minimum authority in the house. A famous sutra, known as the lotus Sutra which is the most influential sutra of Mahayana Buddhism, talks about a story about a girl who was the daughter of the Serpent King, Sagara. Just before she became a nun, she transformed her body into a male body. Sariputra, a disciple of Buddha, while addressing the daughter commented that a woman is incapable of realizing the status of irreversible Bodhisattva which is the highest stage of Bodhisattvahood which means a woman cannot attain Buddhahood. But this goes against what she did by realizing Buddhahood. From this story we can see that during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, there was prevalence of the incapability of women of becoming Buddha.

In one passage, regarding the past life of Buddha, it was written that Buddha was a princess known as Muni. There was an old monk who could not collect lamp oil to worship Buddha Ratnakara predicted that after a millions of years, he would become Buddha Dipankara. The princess would supply lamp oil so that he could worship. The princess then insisted Buddha Ratnakara to predict her if she could become Buddha in the future. But Buddha Ratnakara refused to do so because a woman cannot become a Buddha so advised her to ask this to future Buddha Dipankara. After millions years, she approached the Buddha in the form of a man and he predicted that she would become a Buddha by the name Sakhyamuni.

Another instance of transformation can be seen in where Buddha Amitabha made a vow that if a woman aspire to be born again and attain enlightenment then she must be reborn as men. So for becoming Buddha, a woman has to become a man.

This kind of sexual discrimination can also be seen in the Perfection of wisdom in 8000 Lines, which is among the earliest Mahayana Sutras where we come across a story regarding Ganga Devi, the Goddess of the Ganges, to whom Buddha predicted that she will become a Buddha named Suvarnapuspa but she had to undergo numerous births and had to change her sex into a male before her birth. So, from the very beginning of Mahayana Buddhism, the idea of incapability of women to become a Buddha and sexual transformation existed.

Bahudhatukasutta of the Majjhima-nikaya presents a lengthy list that gives a numerous description about possibilities and impossibilities like there cannot be two Buddha's in one and the same world. In the list, there is also description about the possibilities and impossibilities of women like women cannot become Buddha, Mara, Indra, Brahma or Universal Monarch. But Men are capable of becoming any one of these.

Atthanavagga of the Anguttaranikaya states that the position of Samyak-sambuddha, Cakravartin, Sakra, Mara or Brahma is impossible to be attained by women but it can be attained by man. The dictum about the impossibilities regarding women can be said to be present when Buddhism was

divided into many schools and later it was included in the Sutras. But before the time of the first schism, it was found that there was equality of power between both men and women. A verse from the Majjhima-nikaya can be stated here expressing this view,

“And be it woman, be it man for whom  
Such chariot doth wait, by that same car  
Into Nirvana’s presence shall they come”.<sup>ii</sup>

The *Fu-shuo Yu-yeh-nu-chingi*, one of the group of sutras written in Pali and Chinese, talks about the perspective of Buddhist regarding women. An excellent summary has been given by Professor Y.Iwamoto in this book *Bukkyo to Josei (Buddhism and Women, Regulus Library No. 123, 1980, pp. 24-37)*. The Sutras are-1) *Anguttara-nikaya VII. 59, Sattabhariya (Seven Kinds of Wives)*- This sutra talks about the seven kinds of wives. The types are- murderous, thievish, masterly, motherly, sisterly, friendly and subservient. First three types are bad, rest are good while the last one is the best. 2) *Chinese Ekottaragama VI. 9 (Taisho II, 820c-821a)*- It talks about four types of wives, namely, motherly, parental, rebellious and slavish. 3) *A-sou-ta-ching (Taisho II, 863, a-c)*- This sutra is parallel to sutra 1 and 2 consisting of three evil and four good wives. 4) *Fu-shuo Yu-yeh-nu-ching (Taisho II, 863c-864c)* – This sutra enumerates wives into five kinds, namely, a mother-type who loves her husband like a child, subject-type who serves her husband like a Lord, sister-type who serves her husband like an elder brother, slave-type who treats her husband like a slave and wife-type who loves her husband just as her husband does. 5) *Yu-yeh-nu-ching (Taisho II, 864c-865c)* and 6) *Yu-yeh-ching (Taisho II, 865c-867a)*- These two sutras are parallel to sutra 1 and 3 consisting of seven kinds of wives.

The Sutras also contains a list of ten miseries. They are-1) A birth of a women is not welcomed by the parents, 2) They believe it to be useless to raise her, 3) Marriage is the topic to which the parents are anxious about, 4) A women is fearful of her husband wherever she goes, 5) She has to stay away from her parents, 6) She will always have to be dependent on other family, 7) It is difficult to conceive, 8) Delivery is painful, 9) She has to remain afraid of her husband everytime, 10) She is always in a bondage.

But after the emergence of Buddhism, girls were no longer thought to be an object. Early marriage was stopped and had the liberty to reject their parent’s selection. As a wife, she was given equal position as her husband and taken to be a companion who was worthy of respect. As a mother also she was given great honour and respect. As a widow, she was allowed to participate in festivities and not regarded as a bad omen. Women under primitive Buddhism was a woman of her own choice in contrast with the women who were completely dependent and only does as she was commanded. Many convictions were gradually vanishing like thinking women to be only as a child bearer, making motherhood to be the most important duty and all those notions which emphasizes the inferiority of women to men. In I.B. Honer’s words, “Women had been regarded as belonging to a plane intermediate between men and animals, whom the Indians think of as being in a real relationship to man, differing from him simply in degree and not in kind. But with the growth of Buddhism, woman as spinster, wife and widow, with rights and duties not limited to child-bearing, became an integral part of society.”<sup>iii</sup>. P. Lakshmi also said that Buddha placed man and women in the same footing of equality.

During the time of Buddha, Arhatship was equally attained by both men and women. The problem arose with the division of Buddhism into various schools. The emergence of the Hinayana school of Buddhism marked a turning point in the lives of women in Buddhism because this school offered

attaining Arhathood only to men and regarded women to be incapable of attaining Arhathood. But the rise of Mahayana Buddhism changed the belief about the incompetency of women and emancipate women. While reviving the true spirit of Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism went on to bring back the lost glory of women and for this new ideas and theories were developed.

There are many poems, verses and psalms depicting the attainment of Arhatship by women. The Theragatha contains 73 verses or psalms composed by almswomen. Records have been found about hundreds of monks and nuns who attained Arhatship under the Gautama Buddha. For Gautama, men and women were equal to him with regard to their attainment of enlightenment. Buddha always treated equally to both men and women. So in early Buddhism, no distinction is seen between men and women.

There is a story explaining how MahaprajapatiGautamiseeked ordination for women. After Buddha attained enlightenment, Mahaprajapati along with a large number of women reached the Nigrodha Park in Kapilavastu, dressing themselves in yellow robes with swollen feet. All of them wanted to join the religious order. But Buddha was not willing to allow them as they were women. They all followed the Buddha to Vaisali and remained consistent in their decision. On the way to Vaisali, they met Ananda who being impressed by their determination went on to speak to Buddha to get them admission in the order. He persuaded Buddha many times but Buddha remained adamant to his decision. Then Ananda entered into an argument with Buddha and questioned Buddha that why women cannot attain arhatship. Buddha being persuaded by Buddha replied that women can gain Arhatship and allowed women to get admission in the order and imposed eight special rules known as the gurudharma. The gurudharmas are a set of principles which are to be respected. Mahaprajapati marked the beginning of the bhiksuni tradition by accepting the gurudharmas. Finally the two orders were formed comprising of the order of monks and order of nuns (bhiksuni-sangha). These gurudharmmas are the additional precepts that are to be followed only by women.

This incident shows that Buddha was hesitant to allow women to enter the sangha but the reason is not that Buddha believed women to be incompetent to attain enlightenment but that he was careful about the situations that may arise between the Order of monks and women. His denial to enter women into Sangha should not be taken to be against women. It can also be taken that Buddha may think that women can get salvation by doing their household chores well. It is also written in some places that Buddha at first made the nuns to be dependent upon the monks. From this it can be interpreted as that may be since Buddha had already imparted knowledge to the monks so instead of repeating again he wanted women to learn it from the monks. No where do we find any instances where the inequality of men and women was pointed out by Buddha. Buddha never stated that Nirvana is not for women. “ And be it women, be it man for whom

Such chariot doth wait, by the same car  
Into Nirvan’s presence shall they come”<sup>iv</sup>

Dr B.R. Ambedkar said, “no caste, no inequality, no superiority; all are equal. That is the Buddha stood for.”<sup>v</sup>

But in the Chullavaga, it is written that’ “If Ananda, women had not received permission to go out from the household life and enter the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata, then would the pure religion have lasted long. The good law would have stood fast for a thousand years. But since Ananda, women have now received that permission, the pure religion will not now last so long the good law will stand only for 500 years.”<sup>vi</sup> This may be interpreted wrongly by the monks

because the monks did the interpretation and they may have done this to keep their position higher. Buddha always worked for the welfare of mankind so he cannot exclude women from happiness.

Buddha appreciated Mahaprajapati's work and the admission of her into the Bhikshuni Sangha marked a turning point in the lives of women. Women in Buddhism like Sanghamitra became a famous teacher of the Holy Scriptures. The Therigatha consists of nuns mostly who were maidens. Buddha's permission to women to enter the Sangha was a turning point of the life of the women during that period as it had made education among women accessible.

Women in pre-Buddhist periods were restricted in their movement but Buddha had given new dimension to women in religious and social life as they can move freely and realize their potential. It seemed like the revival of the period of Rig Veda. Mahaprajapati Gotami was concerned about injustice towards women. Some monks made the nuns to wash, dye and comb sheep's wool etc to which Mahaprajapati protested and informed Gautam Buddha and he took immediate action. This shows that how the monks left no stone unturned to exploit women even in the sangha. Later Mahaprajapati attained Arhatship alongwith five hundred companions. Instances are also there about widows like Canda, Sona, Vuddhamata, etc who were guided by Mahaprajapati Gautami. So, it can be seen that Gotami had contributed a lot in the upliftment of women during the Buddhist period.

Another women named Visakha who was a housewife was one of the most prominent female lay devotees. She worked in the Sangha and also did lavish donations of eighteen crores of gold coins. Being the first and the last to promulgate eight laws sanctioned by Buddha for the monks, she gave explanations for the need of such laws. She was like an adviser for Buddha. Another women named Sanghamitra, daughter of King Ashoka became a successful nun and spread religious teachings in Sri Lanka.

Gautam tried to maintain equality between men and women inspite of the existing social discrimination against women. When Buddha saw King Kosala being distressed by the birth of a daughter then Buddha consoled him saying that a female child may prove herself to be much better than a boy child. Buddha always taught his followers to respect every women and tried to make them understand the capability of women. Buddha taught everyone to keep oneself away from sexual misconduct and be happy with monogamy.

After the emergence of the Order of almswomen, it is found that the struggle for power existed between almswomen and almsmen. Almswomen, though succeeded in achieving their rights, their position declined after the death of the Buddha

Thus, Buddhist attitude towards the problems of women have gone through many historical stages. . I.B.Honor stated that during the second century B.C., women's status was declined to a very low level and much greater difference was observed between men and women. After the death of Buddha, Buddhist sutras were compiled by the monks so it is evident that those texts contains writings and passages about the discrimination of women.

We have seen that during the time of Buddha, women enjoyed an equal position like that of men regardless of the discrimination prevalent in the society. In the second stage, the assertion that women cannot become a Buddha began in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. Many Buddhas like Aksobhya and Amitabha made attempt to save the women from their sufferings. In the Early Mahayana sutras, we see that the idea was developed that women can be transformed into a male if she wants to be enlightened. But in the later stages, in the Vimalakirtinirdesa, Srimaladevi and other sutras, it is seen that women can attain enlightenment transforming into a man.

## Conclusion

Women in early Buddhism enjoyed equality and respect which was missing in the pre-Buddhist time and after the Early Buddhist period. In Early Buddhism, men were deprived from showing their supremacy with the rising emancipation of women. Buddhism made women education accessible to all irrespective of caste, creed, sex, etc. Buddhist period gave women ample opportunity to achieve glory in field of education, culture, religion and spirituality. There are many records of Buddhist women who were preachers like Dhammadinna, Sukka, Patachara, Khema, Thullananda, etc.

But with the death of Buddha, the Bhikkhuni sangha was declined. After Buddha's death, Buddhism was divided into many schools and among those Mahayana Buddhism entertained a positive outlook towards the place of the womenfolk. Mahayana Buddhism elevated the position of women in the spiritual domain. The emergence of Tantric tradition in Mahayana Buddhism also played important role in elevating women as this tradition believes that enlightenment can be attained by women just like men because women has same potentialities like men. There are many Indian and Tibetan female yoginis who are worshipped. Worshipping of female deities were also widespread in Mahayana Buddhism.

It is seen that the establishment of Chinese orders of Bhikshunis was done with the help of Theravada bhikshunis from Sri Lanka. Theravada Bhikshuni order existed only in India and Sri Lanka. But Bhikshu order was spread to South-East Asian countries. But this was not with the case of Bhikshuni order. If we compare Buddhism with other religion, we can see that Hinduism has changed his outlook towards women but still there are certain limitations. Christianity is a religion where the main God is a male. Most emphasis is given to Father-Son relationship. Islam always has imposed many restrictions towards women like prohibition from entering the mosque and so on. So, among all religions, Buddhism view is very enlightening. Thus, early Buddhism was a turning point for the progress of women which was again lost after the death of Buddha but Mahayana Buddhism, being broad minded, tried to revive their lost position to a great extent. Buddha, though at first was hesitant to permit women into Sangha, we should not take it to be a kind of injustice or discrimination against women because we do not find any records where Buddha has hinted that a women must not be given the opportunity to become an Arhatot she is in any way unfit to attain Nirvana.

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