

## **STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE AGE OF BUDDHA : A REVIEW**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The ancient law giver Manu was considered the founder of social and moral order. From the outset, Manu deprived women of their religious rights and access to the spiritual life. As per social order a women could not attain heaven through any merit of her own, but only through obedience to her husband. Despite this humiliating subordination of women in the religious domain, there was always in India a parallel line of thought that glorified motherhood and idealized the concept of the feminine. In actual practice, however, Manu's Code of Laws adversely influenced social attitudes towards women. It is against this background that we must view the emergence of Buddhism in the Northern India in the sixth century B.C. He condemned the caste structure dominated by a particular caste and denounced excessive ritual and sacrifices. He emphasized emancipation through individual effort. This assertion of women's spiritual equality, explicitly enunciated in the texts has had a significant impact on social structures. Examining the position of women in pre – Buddhist India on the basis of evidence in the literature of the Indo-Aryans, the Rig-Veda, it is clear that women held an honorable place in early Indian society. There were also a few hymns composed by women. Later, when the priestly cast began to dominant society, it is apparent that religion lost its spontaneity and became a complex system of rituals. At this point, downward trends in the position of women began. In the present work I will examine the fundamental tenets of Buddhism to see whether there is a fundamental difference in attitudes towards men and women. Then I discuss how Buddhist ideology influenced the position and status of women in India.

**Keywords : Buddhism, Emancipation, Sacrifices, feminine.**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism is a religion and dharma that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on teachings attributed to the Buddha. Buddhism originated in India, from where it spread through much of Asia. Most historians agree that Buddhism originated in northern India in the 5th century B.C. The tradition traces its origin to Siddhartha Gautama (or Gotama), who is typically referred to as the Buddha (literally the "Awakened" or "Enlightened One"). Siddhartha observed the suffering in the world and set out to find an antidote. Through meditation and analysis, he attained an enlightened state of being that marked the end of attachments, and ultimately, upon his death, release from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*).

Buddhism has spread from its roots in India to virtually every corner of the world, and in each place it has spread it has adopted and adapted local practices and beliefs. Buddhism is a path of practice and spiritual development leading to insight into the true nature of reality. Buddhist practices like meditation are means of changing yourself in order to develop the qualities of awareness, kindness, and wisdom. The experience developed within the Buddhist tradition over thousands of years has created an incomparable resource for all those who wish to follow a path - a path which ultimately culminates in Enlightenment. An enlightened being sees the nature of reality absolutely clear, just as it is, and lives fully and naturally in accordance with that vision. This is the goal of the Buddhist spiritual life, representing the end of suffering for anyone who attains it. The basic tenets of Buddhist teaching are straightforward and practical: nothing is fixed or permanent; actions have consequences; change is possible. So Buddhism addresses itself to all people irrespective of race, nationality, caste, sexuality, or gender. It teaches practical methods which enable people to realize and use its teachings in order to transform their experience, to be fully responsible for their lives.

It is generally believed that Buddha was a great social reformer and believer in the equality of all human beings. He left home to set out on a journey to solve the questions of human existence. First he studied under Brahman teachers who had achieved a high level of awareness, and then he underwent a long period of austere practices, before abandoning that course as well. Finally, through intense meditation, he was able to grasp the ultimate truth and attain enlightenment. The truth that he discovered could be defined as the Law of non-self and dependent origination. He

traveled throughout India preaching the Law, telling people that by becoming aware of this Law within their own lives, they could free themselves from the shackles of suffering. In other words, he taught that the fundamental cause of suffering in the world must not be sought in the external environment, but within the human heart. Opposite of being escapist, this approach naturally leads to tangible social reform. Buddhism was in theory as well as in practice a revolt against Brahmanism and the Vedic religion. It was instrumental in bringing about not only religion-philosophical upheavals in the country but sociological changes as well. Buddhism was essentially a moral religion, the moral precepts of which aimed to improve all classes of the society. It challenged the Brahminical doctrine of women's inferiority which paved the way for their emancipation in different spheres of life.

## II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The pre-Buddhist era marks a general deterioration in the position of women in Indian society.<sup>1</sup> The Vedic studies, in the age of Brahmanas (B.C.1500-1000 B.C.) became very extensive and the theory had found universal acceptance that to commit a single and even a most minor mistake in the recitation of a Vedic Mantra would produce disastrous consequences to the reciter.<sup>2</sup> Vedic sacrifices also became very complicated at this time and as a result the participation of women in sacrifices gradually became a mere matter of formality. Many sacrificial duties that could be once discharged by the wife alone came to be assigned to male substitutes in the age of the Brahmanas.<sup>3</sup> Upanayan (initiation ceremony) became unnecessary for girls and they began to be bracketed with Sudras and other backward classes in society.<sup>4</sup> The Mahabharata presents still more dis-graceful picture and holds that 'women have no scriptures to follow and that they are living lies.'<sup>5</sup> References occur here and there in later Vedic texts to girls occasionally attending the lectures of gurus and mastering atleast part of the Vedas. The Brhadaranyaka Upanisad tells of a learned lady, Gargi Vacak-navi, who attended the discussions of the sage Yajnavalkya and for a time so non-plussed him with her searching questions that he could only jestingly reply, 'Gargi, you must not ask too much, or your head will drop off'.<sup>6</sup> But in Brahmanic traditions women were being deprived of learning and it is evident that by the Smritis, around the beginning of the Christian era, the vedic knowledge was closed to women.<sup>7</sup>

Thus in a period when under Brahmanic injunctions the women had lost their individuality, the Buddha came with a liberal outlook. In the propagation of his teachings he treated them alike with men. He gave Dhamma to both the sexes without making any individual distinction.<sup>8</sup> This was indeed a great achievement for women.

The admission of women in the order and the first sermon that the Buddha delivered to Mahaprajapati Gautami and her associates was also a turning point in the life of the Indian women.<sup>9</sup> The sermon was the same which he gave generally to men on their admission to the order of Monks. The equality of both the sexes at least in the religious sphere. The order of nuns once established assumed gradually a formidable form. In Rajagriha alone not less than six thousand nuns with Mahaprajapati Gautami at their head practised severe austerities with spiritual thirst in their heart. The career of preaching and evangelizing that was thus opened before women by Buddhism attracted a large number of talented ladies, who distinguished themselves as teachers and preachers.

In Therigatha (songs of the Elder Nuns) there is a collection of stanzas attributed to 73 of the leading ones (i.e. sisters) in the order during the lifetime of Gautama Buddha himself. The stories, explanatory of the verses, give a short account of the life history of each of the authoresses. This account presents a very instructive picture of the life they led in the valley of the Ganga in the time of Gautama Buddha. It was a bold step on the part of the Buddhist reformation to allow so much freedom and to concede so high a position to women. But, it is quite clear that the step was a great success and many of these ladies were as distinguished for high intellectual attainments as they were for religious earnestness and insight. A good many of these verses ascribed to them are beautiful in form and not a few give evidence of a very high degree of mental self-culture which played so great a part in the Buddhist ideal of the perfect life. Women of acknowledged culture represented as being the teachers of men and expounding the less advanced brethren of sisters in the order, the deeper and more subtle points in the Buddhist philosophy of life. As to the standard of those poems it is established that many of them are of great literary merit. The style of these poems is similar than that of courtly Sanskrit literature and suggests the influence of popular song.<sup>10</sup>

The reformatory attitude of the Buddha towards women is apparent from his courteous gesture shown to Ambapali, the beautiful courtesan (ganika) of vaisali. On his last journey to the Hills, as he passed through vaisali, the Buddha accepted her invitation to dine in preference to that of the city fathers, who wished to give him a civic reception. Ambapali is said to have become a Buddhist nun and one of the most beautiful poems of the Pali canon is attributed to her.

### III. ANALYSIS

Buddhism declared that womanhood was no bar to salvation.<sup>11</sup> It appears from the Buddhist literature that the marriage itself was not held to be imperative as it was the case in Hinduism. A single life was not regarded as a wasted life. Buddhism had never subscribed to the view that a son was essential for father's safe entrance to heaven and hence the institution of marriage receded in background. Even a maiden was allowed to lead life of celibacy. We find rich heiresses refusing tempting marriage offers and joining the preaching army of new religion. Such, for instance, was the case of Gutta, Anopama and Sumedha who eventually became very famous teachers. Subha, a goldsmith's daughter and Sumana, the daughter of Anathapindaka remained unmarried throughout affairs. Sanghamitra, the daughter of Asoka, went to far off Ceylon to spread the gospel of the Buddha. Evidently, women in the Buddhist society had liberty to lead an independent life without being tied to a husband.

The birth of a daughter in a Hindu family was unwelcome. In the Brhamana literature, there is one passage on serving that the son is the hope of the family, daughter is a source of trouble to it.<sup>12</sup> A similar idea occurs in the Mahabharata also.<sup>13</sup> In the Ramayana also the daughter is described as a curse of trouble and humiliation to her fathers.<sup>14</sup> But no such discrimination was made between a male or a female progeny in a Buddhist family. A rich householder Maha Suvanna is said to have exclaimed before a holy tree : "Should I be granted a son or a daughter, I will pay you great honor, O decked tree."<sup>15</sup> In the Jatakas we hear of Brahmadata and Kasiraja praying for a daughter. Gautama Buddha himself admonishes the king Pasenadi of Kosala for his sorrow on the birth of a daughter and remarks that 'A woman child, O Lord of men, may prove even a better offspring than a male'. The reason for this psychological change was the Buddhist notion that even a sonless man could obtain Nirvana by leading a spotlessly pure life.

The ascetic or monastic way of living one's life was prescribed by the Buddha essentially to combat the Brahmanic maxim that without a male progeny a man was sure to fall in hell.

As to the freedom of women, the Hindu view in the Buddhist age was to keep them at a distance from the opposite sex. The Arthashastra gives evidence to show that even in Mauryan times the freedom of high class women was considerably restricted by custom.<sup>16</sup> But in the Buddhist society all the adherents of the church including the female adherents, moved from one place to the another with freedom. Even secular women enjoyed liberty to an honorable extent. Early Buddhist sculpture gives the same impression, At Bharhut and Sanchi wealthy ladies lean from their balconies to watch processions and women in the company of men worship the Bodhi Tree. Thus, a peculiar socialistic arrangement worked very well in the Buddhist society and it is still working well in countries professing Buddhism like Burma, Japan and Thailand.

In the political arena, monarchy was the order of the day. Even men could not aspire to high offices of state as these were awarded on principles of hereditary right. Under this circumstances, it is not strange if Anguttara holds that 'A woman will not become a ruler of an administrator of the country. The Majjhima also affirms the same view.<sup>17</sup> Observations like this are made even today in the so-called enlightened and advanced twentieth century. But the Buddha has entrusted Visakha, a lay- woman of repute, the responsible task of judicial investigation into a disputed matter and also to give her judgment. Though Visakha was an exceptional personality elevating the women in the public life to the extent that they could act as judges.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Though the Buddha did not lay down specific rules with regard to women's proprietary or inheritance rights yet we meet with ample testimony in the canonical literature to the effect that women as wives with their house holders had co-equal authority over all property. They could independently make gifts without seeking approval of any second person. For instance Visakha distributed a large amount of her fabulous riches to monks and nuns. Even widows were allowed to inherit property of their husbands and to manage it till the end of their life. Dhammadina is mentioned to have possessed her husband's vast wealth and utilized it in many a noble endowments. Another woman Bhattakapalani is also described as the sole owner of her property

who on her renunciation handed over the great wealth to her kinsmen.<sup>18</sup> A daughter also was recognized as a legal entity. She was fully entitled to a share in the patrimony sometimes she got even all the property of her father in preference to brothers. A daughter named Sundari was endowed by her father with all his estate.

With the emergence of Tantric cults in Buddhism the worship of female divinities became prominent and popular. It is from the seventh century A.D. onwards that we find the exuberance of Tara was raised to the mother ship of all Buddhas.<sup>19</sup> The Guhyasamaja mentions a number of goddesses like Lochana, Mamaki, Pundravasini and Samayatra. Worship of goddess Tara in different forms like Syama-Tara and Vajra-Prajna-Paramita etc. were other popular female deities. Thus it is evident that the Tantric sects gave women an important place in their cult and instituted orders of female ascetics. This naturally enhanced the position of women in the general estimation of the masses. Most of these deities personified prosperity affluence and well-being. By cherishing woman one cherished the goddess of prosperity and well-being.

Thus, Buddhism proved to be a boon to the woman community. The feeling of equality and freedom given by Buddhism to the Indian women evoked the highest virtues of the womanhood and lifted the society to a high state of culture.

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