Early Buddhism and Women Emancipation in Ancient India.

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Abstract

“It is generally believed that the Buddha was a great social reformer, a believer in the equality of all human beings, a democrat and that his efforts for the emancipation of women and lower castes created a sort of social revolution in society.”

(Jawaharlal Nehru, Discovery of India, p. 141)

Patriarchy and Androcentrism is one of the common grounds where we could trace the origins of majority of religions. In the 5th and 6th century BCE India, the discrimination towards women had reached to its zenith, as like the whimsical spread of Brahmanism and its ritualistic traditions as cobwebs on Ancient society. Thus Gautama Buddha’s assertion that the highest goal of the religion he found – Nibbana- was possible for women is revolutionary even in today’s standards. Moreover, by instituting Bhikkuni Sanghas and including nuns in the order had also helped the women to enhance their stand tremendously, even though watered down by conservatives after the Parinibbana. Buddha instituted social relationships in strict guidance of reciprocity, including in that of marriage. Thus marriage as a secular institution had enhanced women agency and by seeing death as a natural occurrence, removed the stigma attached to widowhood. This paper tries to delve into different instances where women were depicted in the Early Buddhism and an analysis on how it would have helped women to ascertain their gender in both social and spiritual spheres.

Keyword: Women, Buddhism, Women emancipation, Ancient India.

Introduction

The prudent way to analyse the spirit and vigour of civilization and to comprehend its limitations and stagnation is to ascertain the role played by women in it. Examining the Rig Veda one must analyse the exalted position enjoyed by the women and their honourable treatment in domestic and social spheres. There were a few Rigvedic hymns composed by women. The learned females like Gargi, Ghosha, Lopamudra and Maitreyi are true embodiments of supreme knowledge, attaining the status of ‘Rishis’ and had seen at that point debating with learned sages.

The participation of women was a must for all religious ceremonies, ruling out the possibilities of seclusion and Purdah. And child marriages would have been a myth in such a society where women were revered in all spheres of life. When the priestly class got the grip of the religious life, the religion itself lost its spontaneity and fell into pageantry of ritualistic traditions. Simultaneously one could see the downward sliding of women in the society and publishing of Smritis, most of which are anti-feminist, but that of Manu had crossed all limits to put feminine into chains. “By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent”. (Laws of Manu, V, 147-8). Thus the Law of Manu strangled Indian women in the iron chains of domesticity and motherhood, while consciously skipping her aspirations with a strong sense of superiority and patriarchy. In this backdrop we must start the analysis of the idea of gender equality in Ancient India.

Buddhism and Women

In Buddhism, one must analyse the condition of women by correlating to the conditions existing at that point

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of time. Sri Buddha not only admitted women into the Sangha, but also suggested that women shall achieve salvation in the same way as man. Thus the progressive idea must be seen in the light of equality alongside that of Inclusion. Semi-historical or Semi-legendary stories of Sri Buddha right from his birth had shown much regard to feminine spiritual prowess. His mother Maya who delivered him at a grove in Lumbini had spiritual encounters before his birth. After renouncing his worldly life, he wandered out with the company of five ascetics and practiced severe austerities until he was emaciated. Then he understood the need of nourishing one’s body and is said to have taken a bowl of milk-rice from a woman named ‘Sujata’. The absence of severe austerities mark the difference of Buddhism with regard to Jainism and in this early incident one could get the presence of women in Buddhism.

During a period when the birth of a girl child was seen inauspicious, Buddhism recognized the spiritual potentialities of women and had thrown open the gates of Sangha for them, though with restrictions of Garudhammas, it was clearly a radical experiment of its times. However, Sri Buddha was much criticized for the way he had deserted his wife and little child, but K.T.S. Sarao had justified this incident as it had occurred before and not after the making of Buddha from Siddhartha. Also it must also be reminded that in various versions of Jatakas, Siddhatha-Yasodhara couple had been born and reborn multiple times.

**Bhikkunis and Early Buddhism**

It must be thought that Buddha personally had convictions on the capability of women being achievers of Nibbana, but was conscious about the sensitivities which would have ignited by such radical convictions in a deeply patriarchal society. Moreover the sangha as envisaged had to rely primarily on the society for its daily needs and patronage. The strong passion of celibacy in the sect had marked women as temptresses and creatures of passion, while many other texts had compared women to poisonous black snakes. In such a scenario, inclusion of women was mainly given in to the credit of Buddha’s nearest disciple, Ananda and Buddha’s foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami. Some scholars argue that Ananda was too young to influence Buddha in such a delicate and crucial issue, but the legend goes in Therigatha that when Buddha refused the admission of Gotami into the Sangha, Ananda asked for the reason of women being kept out of enlightenment and Buddha with much thought replied there is none while admitting her. Buddha also mentioned that women are able to achieve four advanced stages of spiritual development, namely, Sotapanna, Sakadagami, Anagami and Arhat. The Vinaya Pitaka states Buddha made a gloomy prediction that his doctrine would sustain 500 years instead of 1000 years because of women entry. The another viewpoint which justifies the initial hesitation of Buddha in admitting women put forward by I. B. Horner is that, he would have thought women attaining salvation by doing their duties in the household and the scholar also justifies the nuns being put under strict garudhammas and monks, for being considerate on the security of nuns.

“And be it women, be it man for whom
Such chariot doth wait, by the same car
Into Nirvan’s presence shall they come”

The order of Bhikkunis attracted distinguished and holy women raised from varied social backgrounds, mostly attracted out of easy solutions offered by the teachings of Buddha and of course the massive freedom offered by the Sangha in a deeply patriarchal society. Buddhism speaks reverentially about these Bhikkunis who attained the supreme bliss of enlightenment. The illustrious stories had been chronicled in various Buddhist texts, the most important being Therigatha. The most illustrious ones had to be named here includes Mahapajapati Gotami, Buddha’s foster mother and the first Bhikkuni, Uppalavanna and Khema, exalted as the ‘Bhikkunis of highest honour’, Kisagotami and Patacara, immortalized in the prominent fables of early Buddhism. As said earlier, the members of the Sangha were drawn from diverse social backgrounds. For example, Sangha provided spiritual space for Ambapali and Vimala who were former courtesans along with women like Sumeda and Sela who were born to a royal lineage. Contrastingly, inheritors wealthy merchant families like Bhadda Kundalakesa, Sujatha and Anopama found the same spiritual refuge as that of Punnika, a slave girl or Chanda, Brahmin girl from a family languished in poverty. In Samyutta Nikaya, Khema is seen to have given King Pasenadi a discourse after which out of respect the King of Kosala had bowed before her. To the tricky questions posed by laywoman Visakha to Dhammaddina, the exponent of Dhamma she had answered so prudently that, on knowing the answers Buddha appreciated the wise Theri’s learned approach to the question.

Of these Bhikkunis, two illustrious lives deserve special mention to describe some important aspects regarding emancipation of womanhood during the early days of Buddhism. Mahapajapati Gotami was held by
Buddha in highest esteem, she constantly had fought against injustices inflicted upon females and stood up for the rights of women in the sangha. Nissagiya Rule 17 states the monks misusing the services of nuns in dying, combing and washing woolen clothes. She strongly protested against it, brought it to the notice of Buddha and He promptly prohibited all such injustices. She initiated many women into the Sangha, of which widows top the list, Canda, Sona and Vudhamata are few of the widows initiated by Gotami, who was hailed by Buddha as the chief of those who had Experience (Ruttannunam).

Visakha was yet another embodiment of women empowerment in Early Buddhism, who had opened up numerous avenues for oppressed and suppressed women into the Sangha. She had the fortune of donating huge funds to Sangha and patronizing viharas. She is said to have counseled Buddha at difficult situations and is perhaps the first and last woman who framed eight laws for the monks, later sanctioned by Buddha and incorporated into Vinaya Pitaka. The high-time of this Bhikkuni, comes when a lady entered Sangha unknown of her pregnancy. When it was known outside, she had to be expelled and Buddha constituted a Tribunal which had Visakha as a member. She recommended for nursing her at the nunnery and initiated two Aniyatha Rules, which upheld the decorum and decency of the women and Buddha had approved of it wholeheartedly.

**Preference of Son over Daughter : Buddha’s Answer**

Patriarchal societies often prefer sons over daughter; often this preference gives way for deep dislike and anger for the latter when born. In such a deeply patriarchal society, Buddha held a contrasting view and passed on the message of valuing the quality of living a meaningful life, rather than concentrating on the gender preferences. In patriarchal tradition the birth of a son was a precondition to achieve the goodness of afterlife. At an instance when King Pasenadi of Kosala who was a strict follower of Brahmanical religion was shattered that his Queen Mallika had given birth to a daughter, instead of a son, according to Sanyukta Nikaya Buddha advised him: “A woman-child, Oh Lord of men, may prove to be a better offspring than a male” (San. Nik, iii, 2, 6). Some people sense the diplomatic interference of Buddha to the Brahmanical King Pasenadi in not developing an aversion towards the Buddhist Queen, but the words found here are complimentary to the teachings and deeds of Buddha. These revolutionary lines had also underlined the fact that ‘despite the spiritual quality of the sexes and the fact that son is not a necessity in securing the happiness in after-life’.

Even the biosketch of Queen Mallika deserves attention in this context. She was born in a very lowly class and while leading a country life, she happened to give alms to Buddha and Ananda, for that virtue the same evening she was elevated by King Pasenadi as his Queen consort. The legends say about different aspects on their life and how Buddha was a constant figure, even in solving quarrels between the husband and wife. Buddhism while giving importance to monastic life had not dropped family as an institution; rather it had embraced the fact that good conduct in running family is prerequisite in attaining the goal of life.

**Marriage, Household, and Buddhist idea of respecting Women Agency**

Societies both primitive and modern follow the institution of marriage and family, while the role played by women in it could be assessed by analyzing the condition of women in these institutions. As many other religions, Buddhism had not considered marriage as a sacrament and had extensively outlined tips to enhance the institution’s utility in nearing towards goals of Buddhist teaching. Also there is complete absence of any form of ritual or vow with regard to marriage, and specially to be mentioned, monks are not required as middlemen to conduct the function. Still in many Buddhist countries, we could witness marriage as a completely secular function. Through the Sigalovada Sutta, Buddha provides the directives for husbands and wives:

> “In five ways should a wife as Western quarter, be ministered to by her husband: by respect, by courtesy, by faithfulness, by handing over authority to her, by providing her with ornaments. In these five ways does the wife minister to by her husband as the Western quarter, love him: her duties are well-performed by hospitality to kin of both, by faithfulness, by watching over the goods he brings and by skill and industry in discharging all business.”

The most important point of quote this is to demonstrate the aspect of bilateralism in mentioning the functions of this institution. The idea of reciprocity with mutual rights and obligations is seen as one of the most novel ideas of Buddhism in defining personal relations. By analyzing the injunctions provided by Buddha through Sigalovada Sutta which deals with domestic duties, every relationship was deemed reciprocal, irrespective of it being between spouses or partners, parents and children, teachers and students or master
and servant. In ideal conditions, Buddhism views marriage as a secular contract among equals. But the early Buddhism ideally put renunciation in the forefront, the story of monk Nanda and his wife Janapada Kalyani can be read as keeping bliss of Nirvana above the worldly pleasures of romantic love or contract of marriage. The encouragement provided by Buddha, Nanda had left his wife on the same day of marriage and joined the Sangha. Through the stories narrated in the vast Pali Canon, Romance and Love are perceived as bottlenecks to attain Supreme bliss, a hindrance as attachment to samsara and finally pushes to the countless cycle of rebirths. It can also be seen as a clear influence of Brahmanic ideals present in India at that point of time, where renunciation gave more reverence that given to that of a Grihastha, whose status in social life had declined.

The completely secular nature of Buddhist marriage had given the possibility of terminating marital contract on mutual interests. Most cultures of the same age shows women being strangled by the shackles of indissoluble sacrament called marriage and quite contrary to it, Buddhist societies hugely demonstrate the agency of women in deciding the fate of family life. The idea of divorce was used by women when suffered by maltreatment at the hands of her partner, while she could also use that opportunity to equally divide property among them. There was also a prominent way out to redeem one’s self by joining the Sangha, an option often opted out by the widows.

In a world where no advanced scientific or medical facilities were available, the life expectancy seemed to be very low. In such scenario, men who were exposed to outer world had to succumb to various factors they had encountered. Often, the women they left behind would turn a burden to the family structure and most of the civilisations had perpetuated utmost injustices to those widows. Buddhism had viewed death as inevitable and natural end and women had not face any sort of moral humiliation with regard to their widowhood. The social status of widows was never degraded or denigrated. In order to proclaim her disability women did not have to shave off her head and relinquishing her ornaments or colourful attires. She is not forced to fast on special days nor was subjected to harsh treatment, as Buddhism had zero tolerance to self-mortification. Her presence in ceremonies and auspicious events were also not proscribed, as widowhood was never deemed inauspicious. Buddhist literature gives ample evidences of the remarriage of abandoned wives. Rather than the equality of the status, complete desegregation of the sexes is what resulted in the social freedom enjoyed by women in Buddhist societies and it is what they are distinguished from their fellow gender in other parts of the globe.

The Anguttara Nikaya mentions the story of Buddha counseling Sujata, the noisy daughter-in-law on the request of famous Gahapati of Shravasti, Ananthapindika. In that counseling Buddha remarked bout seven kinds of wives, first three unapproved and last four appears to go for heaven. The Vadhaka (slayer) wife who is cruel pitiless and leaves husband for others in night, the Chorasama (thief-like) wife takes away husband’s money and ruins him, the Ayyasama (mistress-like) wife who diminishes husband’s zeal and lazy, fond of luxuries are the three kinds of wives unapproved off. While, the matusama (mother-like), bhaginisama (sister-like), companion-like and dasisama (slave-like) wives are said to be taken to heaven. According to Wagle, whether this incident happened or not is immaterial. It describes a range of possible relationships between partners and despite the ‘noble’ relations, other sort of relationships are also envisaged.

Conclusion

The above paper mentioned numerous occasions in which the condition of women being touched upon by Buddhism, the greatest social disruption to Ancient Indian society. It must be kept in mind that the situations must be judged by the standards of its time. Without hesitation, we can approve the fact that Buddhism had in fact given enormous opportunity for women to empower themselves, but often these were corrupted by strong sense of masculinity and patriarchy. Another striking characteristic of women joining sangha is their escaping from tragedies of life, mostly death of husbands. In the patriarchal India, by joining Buddhist sanghas these women had redeemed themselves from the social death inflicted upon them. Also the observers should appreciate Buddha’s making of relationships based on the value of reciprocity, had in fact escaped women from strangling at ones matrimonial ties and gave them power of own, disown or inherit property.

By the passing away of Buddha, his strong vision on women empowerment had slowly faded away and Bhikkuni Sangas scarcely existed on the face of earth. But at least for the lessons to laity, the condition of women in Buddhist countries are tremendously advanced, even according to late colonial archives. By the division of Buddhism into Mahayana and Hinayana Schools, women Bhikkunis had to face complete divesting of actual powers given to them by Buddha. Buddhism believes in ‘inherent emptiness of self’ which could be
analysed as radical dismissal of static ideas of gender and championing of stereotypically feminine characteristics. Thus this study is done to analyse the radical approaches taken during the early phase of Buddhism and by it underscoring some potential ways in which women could achieve emancipation.

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References


