

BUDDHISM EMPOWERMENT FOR WOMEN: THE ELIMINATION OF GENDER INEQUALITY

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Abstract

The empowerment of women is one of the solutions to the problems of inequality, subordination and marginalization that women face in the society. However this kind of empowerment is only partial, for all though they have economic and political power, they are kept out of decision making or they are dependent on their husband, father or brother for crucial decisions. Hence in order to change this situation, it is necessary that women have to realize their own nature and understand the value of their own existence. When they realize their own nature they will have confidence and will participate in decision making independently. This will be possible only when they will be empowered spiritually. However, this also means to bring a significant change in the social mentality. Many a time, a woman has confidence and has realized her own potential, but society prohibits and blocks her progress, her problems cannot be solved. In other words, to solve the problems of the woman, and in order to empower her it is also necessary that the society has to change its patriarchal mentality.

Keywords: Buddhism, Empowerment, Gender, Inequality.

Introduction

The Concept of Empowerment :

Women in the Buddhist world generally take on more subservient roles than their male counterparts. By and large their culture has trained them to accept their subordinate positions, and the foundations of that culture are directly intertwined with Buddhism (Me Me Khine, 2016, p.110) The Concept of Empowerment is central to the ideal of sustainable

development. This concept has assumed greater significance in the present times in order to liberate all human beings from the dictates of the external forces. Empowerment enables an individual to become capable of attaining freedom from want, freedom from fear and the right to lead life in a dignified manner(Hajira Kumar and Jaimon Varghes,2005,p.54-55). Liberation from want and fear and attainment of essential human dignity are the desired outcomes of empowerment of each and every individual irrespective of gender, race and religion. Empowerment is a process that enables an individual to gain confidence to attain, control over resources and to set agenda of one's own life. It enables an individual to know about himself or herself, what she or he wants, and to try attain what she or he wants. Empowerment involves the enhancement of an individual's capacity to know, to act and to enjoy. Empowerment brings confidence, awareness, mobility, ability to choose and capacity to control all types of resources and above all to possess decision- making power (R.Venkata Ravi,V. Narayana Reddy and M. Venkataraman,2004 ,p.8). Empowerment can be achieved through developing positive role models. The need for empowering individuals is vital in order to identify the real and appropriate needs, encourage commitment, ensure sustainability and personal development, inculcate self-esteem and equal opportunity to share power. The aim of empowerment is to transform the society through the transformation of individuals. When an individual is empowered, he can transform the society in different ways. For example, education is considered to be prime means of empowerment. Economic empowerment involves removal of insecurity, development of skills and control over resources and decision-making processes.

Empowerment increases the spiritual, political, social and economic strength of individuals and communities. It develops the confidence in their capacities. It is a measure of people's capacity to bring about change. Empowerment means people assuming mastery over their lives. Empowerment promotes participation of people towards the goals of increasing individual and community control (Neelam Gorhe, Dr,2005 ,p.1).

Empowerment is an alternative strategy to the traditional way of promoting development. Empowerment attempts to humanize the system and its long term objective is the transformation of society, including the structures of power. The concept of empowerment emphasizes an improvement in the quality of life of the marginalized people(Friedman, John, 1992,p.28).

Women's Nature through the Buddhist Perspective:

Buddhism, in its origins, was a pragmatic soteriology, a theory of liberation that sought to free humanity from suffering, first by thoroughly analyzing the fundamental human predicament and then by offering a practical method or path for eliminating the afflictions, cognitive and dispositional, that are perpetuated as greed, hatred, and delusion. Human suffering and liberation, the Buddha was frequently critical of conventional views, including those carrying the authority of Brahmanic tradition. In marked contrast to the sacerdotal ritualism of the Brahmins, he offered a path that was open to all. The first canonical attitude to consider, soteriological inclusiveness, thus arguably is the most basic and also the most distinctively Buddhist attitude regarding the status of women that one can find in the vast literature of the 2500 year old tradition. The earliest Buddhists clearly held that one's sex, like one's caste or class (*varṇa*), presents no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation from suffering. Women can, affirmed by the Buddhist tradition, pursue the path. Moreover, they can become arhats, Buddhist saints who had broken completely the cycle of the suffering of death and rebirth (*samsāra*) (José Ignacio Cabezo, 1992, p.8).

In fact, the position that femaleness is no barrier to the achievement of the Buddhist human ideals takes two forms in Buddhist texts. The more common variation on this theme essentially proclaims that "the dhamma is neither male nor female," that gender is irrelevant or even non-existent when one truly understands the Buddhist teachings. One also finds infrequent claim that in fact, for those with good motivation, femaleness is actually an advantage. Though that assessment is not by any means common or well-known, its very existence is important for gathering the fullness of an accurate record of Buddhist attitude toward gender. In addition, the Buddha's main argument against this was that no man or woman could be superior or inferior in society merely by reason of his birth (K. T. S. Sarao, 2010, p.104).

He clearly pointed out that position of man and woman depended on his or her conduct. This meant that it was a person's attitude and behavior (*kamma*) which made a man superior or inferior. It will be shown that these are not all that the race of woman needs; not all that her human nature requires. She has the same human nature which man has, and of course, the same natural human rights. Woman's natural right for its rightfulness does not depend on the bodily or mental power to assert and to maintain it – on the great arm or on the great head; it depends only on human nature

itself, which God made the same in the frailest woman as in the biggest giant. Further he told to Ajātashatry do not become unhappy at the birth of the daughter(Dixit, Shailini,200 ,p.18).The Buddhist View about woman's nature pointed out that despite the fact that the Buddha elevated the status of women; he was practical in his observations and advice given from time to time. He realized the social and biological differences between men and women.¹⁰ The reality of the fact of the nature of women was brought out by the Buddha who had pointed out not only their weaknesses, but also their abilities and potential.

Aspects of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism:

Empowerment of woman is expressed in various aspects of her life like social aspect, religious aspects etc.

Social Aspect of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism:

As we have seen that empowerment of woman is attained through her self-realization that is through her mental and spiritual development and through her knowledge of herself and of the society as well as the realization of society and its acceptance that woman also has her own, independent existence. Her self-realization makes her aware of her attributes; her qualities belong to her and not these that are imposed on her by social and cultural conventions and through the processes of enculturation and socialization. When the woman and the society have clear understanding regarding the nature of each other then only, there is holistic development of society as well as of the members of the society.

Gautama Buddha through his discourses always tried to enlighten the people about the myth of gender difference. In Buddha's days also, the birth of female child was not welcomed. Her birth made the parents unhappy. It may be because the parents believed that after marriage, daughters went to their husband house then who would take care of the parents in their old age. But if they had son their son lived with them even after their marriage. So the sons could take care of them. It is because of this belief, parents preferred the male child. The Buddha tried to remove this kind of belief from the mind of people.

According to him, there was no reason to feel gloomy at the birth of a daughter. For example, King Pasenadi was unhappy at the time of birth of a girl to his Queen Mallikā. He went to the Buddha to tell this news

and when the Buddha observed that King is unhappy, he said;

“Indeed, a woman of a certain sort is better than a man lord of folk: Wise, Virtuous, reversing her husband’s mother, a devoted wife, the man born of her is a hero, ruler of the regions, such a son of a good wife is one who advised his realm”(Sharma, S. Ram, 1995,p.29).

Here, the Buddha gave a statement which skillfully combines an elevation in the status of women and made the King happy. It is because, after hearing the statement of the Buddha King realised that the female child that is daughter and male child that is son are equally important so one should not make the gender discrimination. The thought of not making the gender discrimination was reflected in the life of people as well the birth of female children was not met with so severe a sense of despair and encumbrance as was done before. Indeed no discrimination was made between a male and a female progeny in a Buddhist family. Another important fact is that the notion of indispensability of a male child was fast losing ground in the Buddhist society. A wife always bearing female child is not to be discarded. The social restrictions placed on the women were simply unbearable to the rising spirit of rationalism in Buddhism. This very spirit of rationalism is responsible in the Buddhist scriptures for a still more unprecedented injunction in the Buddhist scriptures that the practice of adoption of a son by a sonless man is not quite legitimate. Not only this, the reaction has gone yet a step further. Contrary to all previous legal tenets of the DharmaŚāstras, the Buddhist canons hold the adoption of daughters as quite valid. This is indeed a serious innovation. In the Buddhist period instances were not lacking in the adoption of daughters, Sāmāvātī was adopted by the householder Mitta and a certain king is mentioned to have taken a girl named Kana and made her his own eldest daughter.

Buddhism did not just look at women as child-bearers, and did not accept that marriage was the only the aim of a woman. It is because unmarried adult woman held a legitimate role, and she could also become Buddhist nun. It is said that the faithful laywoman would encourage her only son to emulate the best laymen or monks, and her only daughter to emulate the best laywomen or nuns. It is observed in the Buddhist literature that the marriage itself was not held to be imperative as it was in the case of Vedic culture. A single life was not regarded as a wasted life. Even a maiden was allowed to lead a life of celibacy and devote herself exclusively to other secular or spiritual affairs.

Thus Subha, a goldsmith's daughter and Sumana, the daughter of Anāthpiṇḍika remained unmarried throughout their life and devoted themselves to the management of their family affairs. Aṅguttara Nikāya, a Buddhist text states that wife by husband is always esteemed in the household. In the choice of career for children, wife had the same right of decision as husband had for him(Indra, M.A, 1995,p.237).

In the Upasampadā ceremony the novice was asked: "Have you your father's and mother's permission for undertaking an ascetic life"? Anāthpiṇḍika consulted his wife for accepting merchant Vgga's son for their daughters. These indications certainly lead one to believe that the status of women in the household had improved.

The Buddha gave a new outlook to the society. His outlook was rational, which prompted the society to give fair treatment to women. Buddhism was essentially a moral religion, the moral precepts of which touched all classes irrespective of any sex consideration. During the life time of the Lord Buddha and in the time of Asoka when Buddhism was at its zenith the status of women improved appreciably. The Buddha's outlook was liberal and in the propagation of his teachings, he treated women and men alike. He gave Dhamma to both the sexes without making any distinction. This was indeed a great achievement for women as in the previous centuries women had lost their individuality.

Religious Aspect of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism:

In this aspect, the word religion means Dhamma of the Buddha. We will see whether the women had freedom to listen to the thoughts of the Buddha and whether they had freedom to follow Dhamma. The religion is a religion of free individuals. The Buddhist religion believes that mere living is not the highest good but living righteously with self-control, pure mind, clean heart and clear conscience is the supreme attainment that mankind ought to strive for. The Buddha's teaching confirms that, there are no differences between men and women if both are psychologically strong. In many discourses, the Buddha said that women can develop their mind up to the extent of liberation. In the "Culavagga, Bhikkhunī khanda" mentioned that women can achieve highest fruits as the men. The Buddha tried to remove the low positions of women in the society. On hearing the news of a birth of a girl, King Kosala was disappointed. The Buddha encouraged him and said that women are as good when they have cultivated virtuous activities.

“By those wishing with attachment the excellence, again and again of life span, good health, beauty, heavens and high birth, Merit should be done, wisely appreciating diligence. Diligence, serves for the welfare of this and the other world. When the diligent one attains his aim, he is called a wise man” (Harvey, Brian, Peter, 2000 ,p.357). In Therīgāthā, Māra spoke to Therī Somā in a humiliating manner he stated that no woman could reach the high ground of the wise because she has only the two-finger knowledge (dvāṅgulapaññā). It is an allusion to cooking where the consistency of the cooked rice is tested by pressing it between the fingers. The refutation of Māra, as given in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, is worth quoting in full:

“When the mind is established, being a woman does not matter I have knowledge and reflect the Teaching rightfully. If that was not so, whether to woman or man Whatever was mine is suitable to be in the power of Māra.” Mahāpajāpatī, the foster mother of the Lord himself, actuated by feelings of her spiritual welfare, went to the lord Buddha and requested him initiation in the Order. To Gautama Buddha it was quite a new experience for the first time; a woman had approached him independently with a request for admission to the religious organization. Ānanda, the disciple of the Buddha, took upon himself the task and he secured the Lord’s consent. The Buddha in consultation with Ānanda inaugurated the order of nuns as a separate religious organization. In this way the status of women was elevated tremendously (Talim, Meena, 1992, p.121). Women could work out their own destiny and achieve salvation. The first sermon that the Buddha delivered to Mahāpajāpatī and her associates was the same which he gave the men on their admission to the order of monks. By this identical sermon to the male and female disciples, the Buddha decidedly acknowledged the equality of both the sexes in the religious sphere. In Rajpriha alone not less than six thousand nuns with Mahāpajāpatī at their head practised severe austerities with spiritual thirst in their hearts. The teacher himself was so impressed with their deed so earnest that to Ānanda he was compelled to acknowledge once more that women are capable of Arhatship. After having thrown open the portals of the order to them, women could no longer be restrained from ascending the heights which their brother adherents could reach. Therefore so far as the Buddha himself was concerned he had on hesitation to allow women to take to ascetic life and reach any spiritual height they could by their own efforts.

Political Aspect of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism:

The Buddha acknowledged the independent religious status to women but his views with regard to the political status of women, remained conventional. We don't have many references about the political status of women in early Buddhism. We also do not know much about the stand of Gautama Buddha on the political status of women. However, Srimālā, in Mahāyāna Buddhism held the position of queen. This consolidates the view that Buddhism did give equal status to women. A woman could rule a kingdom. As secular women, their only business was to pure themselves as good housewives and affectionate mother. The truth is that Gautama was least interested in temporal matters. To him systems of governments did not appeal much. He did not care what general position of women or even men was in the social or political fabric of the country.

In the extensive kingdom of the great Buddhist monarch Asoka, it is not found that any office of significance was ever occupied by any woman. In the noble mission of propagating the Buddhist doctrine far and wide women travelled to every nook and corner of the globe and mixed with every sort of people, putting away all the gender differences. They preached to all men and women and expounded the doctrine in a worthy manner. Although, women held eminent religious position, the lay-sisters in the world had no respectable status to enjoy. Nothing was done by any law-giver to improve their secular existence and to ensure their general welfare. Thus all went on as usual, without any betterment of the secular status of women. As we can see, Śrī mālā the Queen of Andhra, belonging to first century had important contribution to the development of the Buddhist thought.

Economic Aspect of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism:

It is of course indicated that women enjoyed independence in the economic domain. The poorer classes had no alternative but to allow their female members to co-operate with men in the cultivation of crop, in reaping of harvest and in other possessions of production. There were women who were self-supporting units in the family. They kept their own paddy fields, gathered and parched the seeds of rice and grew cotton. Women used to spin five threads and manufactured their own clothes. (Narasu, P. Lakshmi, 1992 ,p.89). At least in the village economy of the primitive type women contributed their share of productive labor to maintain the prosper-

ity of their self-sufficient colonies. Besides they worked as domestic helps in families and earned their own livelihood. They were free to undertake independent business. In fact, the religious independence of women was to some extent the outcome of their economic activities. Vimāla, Sarama, Ambapālī and others like Bindumati were prostitutes who were quite prosperous Vishvantara, the son of king Sanjay, guaranteed the steadfastness, virtue and moral firmness of his wife Mādrī. Women could act judges in the Buddhist ages as illustrated by the example of Visākhā who was entrusted by the Buddha the responsible task of judicial investigation into a disputed matter and also to give her judgment. From certain practices it appears that the legal privileges enjoyed by women in ancient times were kept intact to a considerable extent. Visākhā owned fabulous riches and distributed a lot in charity. In this exercise of her legal rights, she was not restricted in any way, even widows were allowed to inherit property of their husbands and manage it till the end of their life.²⁴ Dhammadinnā Bhaddakapilāni and others possessed great wealth. A daughter was recognized as a legal entity and she was entitled to a share in the patrimony in addition to what she received as mother's legacy. A daughter named Sundari was endowed by her father with all his estate overlooking even the rights of her matter.

Women under Buddhism had maintained their traditional legal position and the laws of the land had not change in the favor changed on this respect. In the Buddhist ages, women enjoyed religious independence and spiritual and ethical advancement but in other spheres such as social, political and economic the situation remained the same as it was in the preceding ages. Overall, the rise of Buddhism in India brought an improvement in the status of women. Through its practices, it has also facilitated the self-confidence, empowerment and spiritual liberation of both women and men Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's maternal aunt and foster mother, Khemā, the queen of king Bimbisāra of Rajgriha, Paṭāchārā from Shravasti; proficient in duties, Bhaddā Kuṇḍalkeshā, Ambapālī and Isidāsī have attained positions of high repute in the religious order of Buddhism. Sāmāvatī from Bhaddiya, Khujjuttarā and Visākhā are known for their devotion and charitable deeds (K. T. S. Sarao, 2010, p.18).

The empowerment is based on self-realization and self-realization is ultimately possible through the society's attitude to women. The social framework changed drastically as the Four Class-Caste Groups Structure

was done away with in the days of Buddhism. The subordination of women and the slavish degradation of woman through the displeasure at the birth of a daughter, child-marriage, prevalent general practice of monogamy, the discontinuation of discrimination towards widows and other practices were no more approved and were discontinued. The social acceptance of the equality of women, the acceptance of the spiritual empowerment of women, the discontinuation of discrimination against women bring out the fact that the social attitude towards woman was quite different from what it was in the Pre- Buddhist periods. This has led to the improved empowerment of women in spheres of religious, social and spiritual aspects. It is noticed that empowerment in the economic and political spheres for men and women was not still in sight as agro-economy and monarchy were still the watch-words of these areas of life. The Buddhist period has empowered women to attain spiritual liberation and enter in spiritual bliss.

This shows that women's view towards herself underwent changes, the woman's attitude towards society improved and the society's attitude to woman too changed to accommodate woman in religious and spiritual aspects. In spite of these changes, the situation in other spheres of life remained as it was in the Pre-Buddhist days. Empowerment through self-realization through the triple awareness and possession of enlightenment is a remarkable feature of the position of woman in the days of Buddhism in India for a period of about one thousand and five hundred years from the sixth century B.C. to the ninth century A.D. self-realization and empowerment are thus inseparably linked.

Conclusion

Buddhist concept of empowerment tells us that for the authentic empowerment of any individual it is necessary that individual as well as society both have to realize their own nature as well as the nature of each other. The feminist understanding of the Buddhist Concept of Empowerment tells us that if any woman has to empower herself then it is necessary for her that she has to realize her own nature and has to take enough efforts to achieve her goal. It further tells that society also has to support her. On this background it is very interesting to see how the Buddhist women, including Bhikkhunī and Upāsikā became empowered. In the preceding chapters we will discuss these points.

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