



EARLY BUDDHIST WOMEN IN THE SANGHA: AN OVERVIEW FROM AMBEDKAR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This study has been undertaken to have an overview of how Ambedkar perceives and understands the Buddhist position of women. Ambedkar's true aim was to annihilate the inequality system prevailing in the society. He was in search of a society that gives liberty, equality, and fraternity to both men and women. To liberate the people of the downtrodden, Ambedkar understood eventually that none other than Buddhism could annihilate the idea of inequality and bring peace to the human race. Ambedkar in many of his writings stated that women were subordinated for decades where women are portrayed as low, impure, dishonest, and of bad character who seduce men and were being denied their rights. By any means, women were either degraded or put in a subordinated position in the history of India. But Ambedkar strongly believed that it was Buddha and his Buddhism who have given equal opportunity, liberty, and dignity to women in respect of learning, who allowed them in the monastic order to realize their spiritual potentialities along with men. In the form of writings, Ambedkar strongly suggested what generally Buddhism aims to and how Buddhism perceives women.*

Index Terms: Ambedkar, Buddhism, Dalit women, Buddhist women

1. INTRODUCTION

To quote Dr. Ambedkar, "I measure the progress of the community by the degree of progress which women have achieved."

Babasaheb Ambedkar a well-known personality is recognized as the father of the constitution who fought for an unequal societal outlook of his time. True to say, he was equally concerned with reforming the status of Dalit men and women. Rather to his idea, the progress of the status of women defines the development of society. In Ambedkar's work, Castes in India, he openly mentioned that the systematic working of the caste system lies in subordinating women¹. To fight the injustices and inequality existing in the society during his time, he used Buddhism as his guiding principle to solve the problems. Because he believed that Buddhism was free of such claims of maintaining subordination towards the people of any caste, gender, tribe or community, and religion. In addition to that, Ambedkar accepted Buddhism to be of maintaining equality between men and women.

¹ Ambedkar, 1945

Ambedkar's writings in the form of text 'the Buddha and his Dhamma' justifies that he was truly and honestly inspired by Buddhism. Though several claims have been made about Buddha's subjugation of women yet Ambedkar's arguments/response towards the claim revealed that Buddha maintained an egalitarian attitude towards women in the history of Buddhist tradition. This idea marks as an evidence of inspiration taken from Buddhism by Ambedkar towards his development of the status of Dalit women. Further, Ambedkar's outlining of a separate section in the text as 'Conversion of Women' attempts to provide separate evidence that Ambedkar had an utmost interest in the status of Buddhist women in order to change inequality into equality in the society of his time. Because he believed that the society would be developed only when the condition of women improves. The present paper is to look at how the idea of equality in Buddhism and the equal opportunities given to early female Buddhist renunciates changed Ambedkar's perspective on the development of the position of Dalit women. Let us have an insight into how Ambedkar argues in favor of and present the women in *Sangha* and reflect on his justifications to entail that Ambedkar was firm about the fact that Buddha had an egalitarian attitude towards women.

2. OBJECTIVES, METHODS, AND MATERIALS

The objective of the present paper is to have an overview of Ambedkar's perception and understanding of the position of Early Buddhist women in the Buddhist tradition. The methodology used in the present paper is interpretative cum reflective method. Secondary sources have been used in this research paper in the form of books.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. A Glimpse of Buddhism from Ambedkar's eye

Dr. B.R Ambedkar was a man of justice and progress whose main concern was to create an egalitarian society irrespective of caste, gender, class, creed, and religion. As he was on his mission to bring change into society, he could understand that until and unless there is a change in the status of women society would not change and be developed. In many of his writings, Ambedkar asserted that there is none other than Buddhism whose thoughts and the idea he was inspired and which provides equal status and opportunities to men and women.² Simultaneously, he observe that Buddhism was never a religion of god or any supernatural being who possess power. Rather, in Ambedkar's view, Buddha was a human and his doctrine similarly is conveyed from one human to another. Ambedkar understands that:

'The first point which mark off Buddha from the rest is his self-abnegation. All throughout the Bible, Jesus insists that he is the Son of God and that those who wish to enter the kingdom of God will fail, if they do not recognise him as the Son of God. Mahommed went a step further. Like Jesus he also claimed that he was the messenger of God on earth. But he further insisted that he was the last messenger. On that footing he declared that those who wanted salvation must not only accept that he was a messenger of God, but also accept that he was the last messenger. Krishna went a step beyond both Jesus and Mahommed. He refused to be satisfied with merely being the Son of the God or being the messenger of God; he was not content even with being the last messenger of God. He was not even satisfied with calling himself a God. He claimed that he was 'Parameshwar' or as his followers describe him "Devadhideva" God of Gods. Buddha never arrogated to himself any such status. He was born as a son of man and was content to remain a common man and preached his gospel as a common man. He never claimed any supernatural origin or supernatural powers nor did he perform miracles to prove his supernatural powers.' (97)

In a matter of time, he presented us his writings in the form of books, viz, 'Dr. B.R Ambedkar writings and speeches: The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman. Who was responsible for it? Vol-17' and 'Buddha and his Dhamma' where he displayed what is Buddhism and how women have been perceived in Buddhism.

² Those who see a social wrong in the Buddha placing the *Bhikkunis* under the authority of the *Bhikkhus* do not realize what a revolutionary act it was on the part of the Buddha to have allowed women to take *Sannyas or Parivraja* (Monkhood). Under the Brahmanic theory women had already been denied the right to acquire knowledge. The Buddha in allowing women to become *Bhikkunis* he opened them the way to equality with man. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol-17 p-(118-121).

3.2. Buddhist attitudes towards women from Ambedkar's point of view

In his writing entitled "Dr. B.R Ambedkar writings and speeches Vol. 17 section-1 of Part-2, The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman" Dr. Ambedkar responded to the allegations that Buddha's attitude towards women was negative. On his part, he fairly maintained a justification for this allegation and held that Buddha is eventually found to be egalitarian in nature. In order to justify the claim, he presented a passage from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* that directed Buddha's attitude towards women as objects of pleasure.³ Ambedkar stated that this passage could be taken as a later interpolation⁴ by the male counterparts of monasticism. To support the statement, he has given two reasons; first that the *Sutta* has taken an ample amount of time to be written down which suggests that there could be an error in the compilation. And moreover, he suggested that it could be possible that a male monastic has written down dedicating to the male monastics only and that such statements may be made for the benefit of the monks generally and not literally. Ambedkar held that:

'There is therefore nothing very extravagant in the suggestion that this passage is a later interpolation by the Bhikkhus. In the first place the *Sutta Pitaka* was not reduced to writing till 400 years had passed after the death of the Buddha. Secondly, the Editors who compiled and edited them were Monks and the Monk Editors compiled and wrote for the Monk. The statement attributed to the Buddha is valuable for a Monk to preserve his rule of celibacy and it is not unlikely for the Monk Editor to interpolate such a rule.' (110-111)

However, Ambedkar further, invites a comparative analysis of the *Suttas* and stated that inspite of the presence of similarity of passages in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* and in some other *Suttas* there is no sign of the above passage. Noting this fact he suggested that even a Chinese translation of this *Sutta* is available with no sign of the passage. Further, to deny the statement he offered us numerous instances where in one instance Ananda his personal assistant was brought into the discussion. Ambedkar stated:

'There is evidence to show that such a question could not have been asked by Ananda and that if such a question had been asked, the Buddha could not have given such a reply. The conduct of Ananda and of the Buddha toward women as reported in the *Pitakas* is so contrary to the possibility of such a question being raised and such an answer being given.'(111)

In another instance, Ananda was described to be fair in nature where he was being friendly with women, and there is no question of a negative attitude towards women on the part of Ananda which suggests that the above passage seems to be a later interpolation. He was even alleged to be guilty of allowing women into ordination. Ambedkar eventually takes his position and claims that such allegations are inconsistent with the thought process and actions of Buddha. He presented us with some of the names of women from the *Suttas* who either made a request to Buddha either to visit their house for a meal or for religious preachings to which Buddha⁵ positively made a move to their request. This description further justifies that Buddha did not neglect women and had his arms open to his teachings. But Ambedkar suggested that what could not be denied is his advice to Ananda of not coming into regular or frequent contact with women. To his justification, Ambedkar points out that all this is likely told to maintain their celibacy or brahmacharya and not to maintain some kind of superiority towards women being.

To the question 'Why did the Buddha oppose the demand of Mahaprajapati to take *parivraja* (ordination)? Did he oppose it because he was of opinion that women were a low class whose admission would lower the status of the *Sangha* in public esteem?'(Ambedkar 114-115), Ambedkar points out that Buddha had no such intention of maintaining superior or inferior status rather all of the discussions point to practical reasons⁶. In the course of the

³ Ambedkar referred Chapter-V, Verse no. 9 of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* that states "How are we to conduct ourselves, (asked Ananda) with regard to womankind? As not seeing them, Ananda. But if we should see them, what are we to do? Not talking, Ananda. But if they should speak to us, Lord, what are we to do? Keep wide awake, Ananda." Dr. B.R Ambedkar writings and speeches Vol. 17 Part II, in the contents Section-1 "The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman. Who was responsible for it?"

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ambedkar's writings and speeches 113-114.

⁶ Ambedkar writes, "The Buddha knew what a great force the sex instinct is with life of both man as well as woman. To use the Buddha's own words it is this instinct which drives a man in woman's bondage and a woman in man's bondage. This force, if given an opportunity to have its full force, the rule of celibacy could not last for a minute. To save the rule of celibacy he had to organise two separate *Sanghas*". Dr. B.R Ambedkar writings and speeches Vol. 17 Part II, in the contents Section-1 "The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman. Who was responsible for it?"

discussion counter questions come up like “Did he oppose it because he was of the opinion that women intellectually and morally were incapable of realizing the ideal of His Doctrine and His Discipline?”⁷ To this, Ambedkar suggested that:

‘The Buddha gave an unequivocal answer leaving no room for doubt or dispute. He said that women were fully capable of realizing His Doctrine and His Discipline and that was not the reason why he refused their demand for taking *parivraja*. It is clear from this that the Buddha did not regard woman as inferior to man either in point of intellect or character. That he opposed the admission of women because he held them in low esteem and feared that they might lower the prestige of the Sangha is an argument which is hardly worth mentioning. For if that was his feeling he would never have admitted them at all.’(115)

Ambedkar argues that the *Bhikkhus* were given the responsibility to teach the doctrine to the *Bhikkunīs* for the fact that they were already trained by the Buddha and according to him, nobody other than the monks could take up the job. To Ambedkar’s understanding, the *Bhikkhus* responsibility to train the *Bhikkunīs* is not to be understood as a way to their subordinate but rather to accept as a connection between a teacher and a student. As he notes:

‘The women who joined his faith were raw women. They had to be instructed in His Doctrine and they had to be trained in His rules of Discipline. Who could undertake this task? To whom else could He have entrusted this work? To none except the male *Bhikkhus* of his Order. For they were already instructed in His Doctrine and trained in His Discipline. And this is what He did.....by entrusting the work of training the *Bhikkhunīs* to the *Bhikkhus*, their relationship became one of teacher and pupil.’ (116)

This statement suggests that Buddha’s thoughts and actions were not negative and were egalitarian towards women. Ambedkar understands that Buddha accepted women to be equitable to men and further, he was the one to recognize women’s capability and did not infringe their rights to educate themselves equally with men. Thus, to him this event mark an event of change and freedom for the women in the history of India as he stated:

‘By admitting women to the life of *Parivrajika*, the Buddha, by one stroke, removed both these wrongs. He gave them the right to knowledge and the right to realize their spiritual potentialities along with man. It was both a revolution and liberation of women in India..... This freedom which the Buddha gave to the women of India is a fact of far greater importance and out-weighs whatever stigma which is said to be involved in the subordination of the *Bhikkhunīs* to the *Bhikkhu Sangha*.... In allowing women to become *Bhikkhunīs* the Buddha not only opened for them the way to liberty, he also allowed them to acquire dignity, independent of sex..... The Buddha in allowing women to become *Bhikkhunīs* he opened them the way to equality with man’(120-121)

In ‘*The Buddha and his Dhamma*’ Ambedkar chronicled a type of narrative of women’s admission to the *Sangha*. In this account of the story, Ananda has been portrayed to be the one who made a proposal to Buddha regarding the matter of women’s ordination on behalf of his stepmother. While the narrative depicted Buddha’s refusal in the first place who in the course of time accepted his proposal. Buddha while giving his clarification of initial rejection noted:

‘The Blessed One replied : " Ananda ! Do not misunderstand me. I hold that women are as much capable as men in the matter of reaching *Nibbana*. Ananda! do not misunderstand me, I am not an upholder of the doctrine of sex inequality. My rejection of Mahaprajapati's request is not based on sex inequality. It is based on practical grounds." (Ambedkar 175)

Ambedkar mentioned that Buddha’s initial refusal is not to be misunderstood and that he doesn't discriminate between men and women. To his understanding, Buddha recognized women’s potentiality at par with men in the matter of attaining *Nibbāna*. And he further claims that as far as his refusal of Mahaprajapati’s proposal is concerned there is somehow practical ground to it.

⁷ Ibid 115.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, to Ambedkar, Buddhist tradition in no way maintains the concept of inequality or discriminatory practices between sexes. Even if allegedly claim to be discriminatory, Buddhism has always had practical reasons to offer behind its initial steps. Buddhism offers no blind belief in faith, it always offers argumentative reason behind its teachings. Therefore, the argumentation and the logical response of Ambedkar on Buddhist positive attitude to women just made it clear that Ambedkar was highly inspired, motivated, and influenced by Buddhist nature of thoughts toward women. Though there is neither a separate description nor statement to this fact that this idea would emancipate the status of Dalit women to Ambedkar. But the very fact that the way Ambedkar presented and extensively analyzed the matter both in his writings “Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar writings and Speeches vol-17” and ‘Buddha and his Dhamma” itself clarifies his appreciation of the egalitarian position of women in Buddhist tradition which revealed that he was not merely influenced by Buddhism in general but the presentation of the idea of equality in the discussion made more meaning for him which could be applied for improvisation of the condition of Dalit women in particular.

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