



Buddhist Sangha –An Embodiment of Gender Neutrality or Prejudice

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Abstract:

The women has been naturally a parallel section of the society since its inception but the society and its institutions have molded these natural provisions in to create an unnatural imbalance. The foundations of such imbalance theory has took its root from the post- Vedic period onwards in the form of various vices such as gender biases in social, cultural, religious and economic and political arena. Two thousand five hundred years ago, Buddhism created a revolution in India that is recognized in religious history as one of humankind's greatest revolutions. When Buddha started Sangha, the Buddhists predominantly consisted of men. Women did not participate in the early beginnings of Sangha, therefore, many women wanted to join the Sangha and yearned for equality. However, they could not get easy access as there was no tradition of assimilation. Therefore, Position of women in Buddhist Sangha has been debated for a long time. The present paper aims to discuss such aspects in the light of the available sources and reach some important conclusions. Looking into the different traditional sources and texts of legal character, we would come across many remarks complimentary or derogatory about woman in the society and as an individual.

The main purpose of this paper is to figure out the real situation and status of women in Buddhist Sangha. There seems to be many challenges that women have faced in that era, out of which some will be highlighted here. An analysis will also be done of rules and regulations of Bhikshu and Bhikshuni. Paper will try to figure out about discrimination in sangha and if it existed then what is the justification of it.

Keywords:

Buddhist Sangha, Discrimination in Sangha, Gender biasness in sangha, Position of women in Buddhism, Bhikshuni in Sangha.

"Feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong; it's about changing the way the world perceives that strength."

- G.D. Anderson

INTRODUCTION:

The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. Women play a key role in strengthening the dynamism of human civilization. According to Altekar, "one of the best ways to understand

the spirit of a civilization and to appreciate its excellences and realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it.”¹

The women of India over the centuries have proved the world that the hands that can rock the cradle can also rule the world. The role of women in various spheres of life has contributed to the evolution of values, which have counted for what may be termed as all-round progress.

India has a long past civilization and in every stage of its history; position of women in society is not the same in all the ages of history. Their position has been variously estimated and diametrically opposite views are expressed regarding their place in different stages of Indian Civilization.²

Several factors including social movements, various geographic regions, different economic occupations, political stability and instability and religious affinity of the family to which women belong have greatly influenced her status in the family as well as in the community.³

The Buddhist Order of Nuns (Bhikshuni Sangha) is not one of the oldest monastic communities in the world but also one of the oldest movements in which women have struggled for their liberation : liberation in the noblest sense of word. The doctrine of Buddhism has been egalitarian from the beginning. Buddha founded an order of monks (Bhikkhu Sangha) and order nuns (Bhikunis Sangha) to foster the life fully devoted to the pursuit of nirvana. An order of lay disciples was also founded, laymen, and women often practiced a modified religious discipline while maintaining their normal occupations.

Admission to Women in Sangha :

Soon after the Buddha's own enlightenment he formed an order of monks, male renunciants of ordinary worldly life, and a few years after that he was asked by his foster mother and aunt, Mahaprajapati, to establish a similar order for women but Buddha refused her request three times. Later with the help and intervention of Ananda Buddha's Kinsman and constant attendant he did agree to let an order be founded. Had it not been for the general counter-culture that Buddhism was creating against Brahmanism, such a demand by women to be permitted to renounce, the home would have been impossible. Hindu asceticism did not provide any scope for women to renounce household life. Buddhism originated in a patriarchal society. Thus, It compelled him to reverse the Hindu dispensation for women also. This, he had decided to give a call to women who were willing to rise in defence of their own self respect but the resistance of Mahaprajapati to put forth her demand for admission in sangha is praise worthy. Later with the help and intervention of Ananda Buddha's Kinsman and constant attendant he did agree to let an order be founded. Entry of women in sangha had however, only with the promise that the women must agree to live according to eight rules (Garudhammas)⁴ which would place them in a position subordinate to the monks. These rules were not supposed to be followed by male monastics. By subordinating the nuns to the monks, the Buddha probably intended to protect the spiritual and social welfare he saw endangered by making too many concessions to women. Buddha's position was to correct orthodox Hinduism. These Garudhammas were:

- A Bhikshuni, however, senior in age and experience, should always salute a Bhikshu.
- A Bhikshuni should not spend the rainy season in a district where there is no Bhikshu.
- Every half month the Bhikshuni's should take a lesson from a male Bhikshu.
- After the rainy season is over every Bhikshuni has to confess to a joint meeting of Bhikshunis and Bhikshu what has been seen, what has been heard, and what has been suspected.
- A Bhikshuni's who is guilty of a serious offence shall be punished in a joint meeting.
- A Bhikshuni has to go through two years probation and will get full membership only when a joint meeting approved it.
- Under no circumstances should a Bhikshuni revile or abuse
- Officially, no Bhikshuni shall be granted the right to admonish a Bhikshu, but a Bhikshu can admonish a Bhikshuni.

The eight restrictions (Garudhammas) clearly kept Bhikshus at a much higher level than the Bhikshunis. According to Ajahn Sujato, the early texts state that the most severe of the Garudhammas, which states that every nun must bow to every monk, was instituted by the Buddha because of the customs of the time, and modern scholars doubt that the rule even goes back to the Buddha at all. They think that the rule may have been formulated later. It can be a possible argument because the rules were written only after the people started to become literate. In the ancient times, we know that men were the first ones to become literate. It was only much later that women got the chance. So, it is possible that these rules were written by a male dominant society. We can assume that one who is in power will definitely write down the rules that will favor that group

Buddha also declared that the Sangha would be weakened by the presence of women within it, and for this reason they must be controlled by special regulations.

Living within the monastery, the nuns have to follow a code of conduct (*Bhikshunī-Vibhanga*, 311 rules) quite similar to, but much more comprehensive than the monks' code (*Sutta-Vibhanga*, 227 rules). The nuns have to observe 84 additional rules.⁵

Young Chung also noted that cases of Brahmin men and women recorded in the Vinaya treated the Bhikshunis more harshly using "shaven-headed strumpets or whores", whereas "shaven-headed" was not applied to the Bhikshus in a derogatory manner.⁶ This harsher treatment (which also included rape and assault) of Bhikshunis by society required greater protection. Within these social conditions, Gautama Buddha opened up new horizons for women by founding the Bhikshuni sangha. This social and spiritual advancement for women was ahead of the times and, therefore, drew many objections from men, including Bhikshus. He was probably well aware of the controversy that would be caused by the harassment of his female disciples.

Although most Buddhist scholars and writers contend that bhikshuni were subordinated to bhikshu by having so many additional rules and the Eight Rules imposed upon them.

The categories of rules in the Ssu fen lu and the Pali Vinaya are arranged in order of the severity of the offenses. The most serious offenses against monastic life are the parajika dharma for both bhikshuni and bhikshu. In explaining the term parajika dharma the Ssu fen lu says that if a Bhikshu [or Bhikshuni] commits a parajika offense, he [she] is compared with a person whose head is cut off. The offender totally loses his [her] monastic status and is no longer in association with the pure bhikshuni or bhikshu. In this category, we see that bhikshuni have four additional rules concerning sexual behaviors. If a bhikshu is involved in a sexual offense in this category, the bhikshu is required to leave the Bhikshu sangha. In the same way, if a bhikshuni has committed a sexual offense in this category, she is also required to leave the Bhikshuni sangha. However, the result of the bhikshuni's sexual offense may lead to pregnancy because bhikshuni are potentially fertile. For this reason, the four additional rules in this category are restricted rules to bhikshunis.⁷

The Parajika Dharmas are as follows:

Table 1

Parajika Dharmas (Defeat)

(Emphasizing Rules for Bhikshunis)

Order of Rules for Bhikshuni	Order of Same Rules for Bhikshu	Summary of Rules for Bhikshuni
1	1	Not to have sexual intercourse
2	2	Not to steal
3	3	Not to kill a human or one who has human form of life
4	4	Not to falsely claim to have attained superhuman perfection
5		Not to touch and rub a man who is filled with sexual desire.
6		Not to involve in the special eight actions with a man who is filled with desire
7		Not to condone or conceal another Bhikshuni parajika offense.
8		Not to follow a bhikkhu who is suspended by the saṅgha in spite of being admonished a third time.

As table number one shows, Bhikshuni and Bhikshu share the first four parajika dharmas. There are four additional rules (#5, 6, 7, 8) for Bhikshuni. Nagata Mizu additionally claims a practical reason for the two additional rules (#5, 6) concerning sexual prohibition for Bhikshuni. He notes that these rules prohibit Bhikshuni from physical contact with men at any time and in any situation because of the Bhikshuni potential fertility, childbearing being contrary to monastic life. The Ssu fen lu does not elaborate on how the seventh parajika dharma for bhikkshuni came to be formulated. So even though rule number seven of the Parajika Dharmas at first glance seems to deal with the concealment of an offense, it also indicates a concern with sexual matters between men and women.

One of the chief difficulties we see in the female ordination. Female women in order to become a Buddhist should have observed a two year training period as a probationer—a sikkhamana. After having observed this period of training, higher ordination should be requested by her from both communities, that is, from the communities of bhikshu and bhikshuni. Initially, this created a big problem as the females were very much ashamed to answer questions regarding their genitalia and menstruation from the bhikshu. This kept them in a very awkward situation. Later on, having acknowledged this problem, Buddha ordered that Bhikshus should ordain those candidates who have already been formally interrogated by a community of Bhikshunis. This rule provided some sort of relaxation to the female candidates as talking into these matters with a bhikshuni was much easier and comfortable for them.⁸

After achieving enlightenment, the Buddha began to admit people to the Order based on their own choice so that they could devote their lives to the Path he discovered. This went on for some time until his own father, Siddhodhana, made a request that “in future no boy be admitted to the Order without the permission of his parents”. The need to protect his followers should be the exact reason why the Buddha made the spousal consent compulsory for would-be nuns and parental consent for both would-be monks and nuns⁹. This point can also be argued as a matter of female suppression. Buddha has made spousal consent necessary for would be nuns but not for would be monks.

Mahaprajapati Gotami as a nun she was always alert about injustice being inflicted on women. Nissagya rule number seventeen¹⁰ states that some monk took under advantage of nuns and made them to wash, dye and comb sheep's wool for making woolen garments. This type of exploitation was so great that nuns could hardly get enough time for meditations and spiritual practices. Mahaprajapati protested against this and brought it to the notice of Buddha who took prompt action and made laws to forbid such types of oppression on nuns. It shows that monk wants to make their superiority over women, and in the Buddha's perception he did not make any difference between men and women.

One more instance is noted where in an assembly of monks and nuns in Jetavana, the Buddha declared Prajapati chief of those who had experience (Rattannunam)¹¹

There is one story where Mahindra and his Bhikshus could not just confer the higher ordination on the queen and her followers, since in India an order of Bhikshunis was in existence. This is why the queen and her followers had to wait until Mahindra's sister Saṅgamitra and her group of Bhikshunis had come. (CV X 22.2)¹². This shows that Bhikshunis had been given a place in ordination of other Bhikshunis and their presence was a must for the ordination to take place.

There are some other illustrations to show that Buddhism is not a sexist religion. Earlier limitations on attainment of Buddhahood by women were abolished in the Lotus Sutra which opened the direct path to enlightenment for women equally to men. Only in the Lotus Sutra do we read that a woman who embraces this sutra not only excels all other women but surpasses all men.¹³

Buddhism's greatest contribution to the social and political landscape of ancient India is the radical assumption that all men and women, regardless of their caste, origins, or status, have equal spiritual worth. This is especially pertinent concerning the status of women, who were traditionally prevented by the Brāhmanas from performing religious rites and studying the sacred texts of the Vedas.

The Theri-gatha (the story of elder nuns) contains numerous stanzas that clearly express the feelings of joy experienced by saintly bhikkhunis at their ability to enter the order and realise the Truth. Furthermore, the Therigāthā (The Songs of the Women Elders) of the Pāli Canon provides significant evidence recounting the struggles and triumphs of the first group of nuns who came from the highest rungs to the lowest in society. In some of the songs of Therigāthā, we can understand how women felt relieved after joining a sangha.

For example, Sumangala, Bhikkhuni says:

*“O Woman well set free! How free I am,
How wonderful free from kitchen drudgery,
Free from empty harsh grip of hunger,
And from empty cooking pots,
Free too of that unscrupulous man,
The weaver of sunshades.
Calm now and serene I am,
All lust and hatred purged.
To the shades of the spreading trees, I go
And contemplate my happiness.”¹⁴*

The sigh of relief - nay - joy, of the woman who, having spent the previous few hours satisfying others needs, now goes out to seek her own in solitude defines the state of mind of a woman after joining the sangha. She makes it clear that though she lives under a tree, she feels freed from drudgery and from the brutal husband who respected her less than the shade of a tree. This shows after joining a Sangha, women were free from all such

bondage. Such a piece and relief of mind was experienced by her which would have not been possible in absence of gender parity.

Conclusion :

The close and comparative examination of the Buddhist monastic rules for both Bhikshuni and Bhikshu reveals a compassionate and practical regulation of the daily monastic life of both men and women, based on the realities of life at the time the rules were formulated. This is seen in the meticulous care and compassionate understanding of women's life in the Vinaya. It is perhaps a mistake to depend solely on the existence of the additional monastic rules for Bhikshunis, without examining their origin or social context, to form a generalized Buddhist view of women.

This inferiority issue not only affects the suffering group but also affects the other group. As a whole, the whole policy will be affected. Maybe, the rules were made by the monks in order to have a greater control over the nuns. This is only a suspicion and has no material evidence to support it. Having said so, it is not that the female birth was always considered as a negative one.

In ancient India, when queen Mallika of King Pasenadi of Kosala gave birth to a daughter, the king was a little dissatisfied. Then a blessed Buddhist convinced the king that a daughter may be better than a son. She can be a ruler, wise and virtuous and the son born from such a woman may well govern the kingdom. The stories from the Ekottarika Agama gives a view that female birth is a valuable asset, as it affords an opportunity for Bhaddā Kaccānā and Bhaddā Kapilānī to walk the path to liberation. Here I would like to quote one of the sayings of Buddha. He said that we should not believe blindly in anything. We should experiment the things by applying them in our lives and if we judge it to be right, then we should believe it is right, not just by listening to others and making decisions. That would be their decisions, not ours. However, Buddha's acceptance of a female monastic order and above all his unequivocal affirmation of their equality in intellectual and spiritual abilities in achieving the highest goals clearly establish a positive stance.

Buddhism's greatest contribution to the social and political landscape of ancient India is the radical assumption that all men and women, regardless of their caste, origins, or status, have equal spiritual worth. This is especially pertinent concerning the status of women, who were traditionally prevented by the Brahmans from performing religious rites and studying the sacred texts of the Vedas. Although Buddha was not a social reformer, simply the fact that he admitted women into the monastic order was revolutionary and would have no doubt created a great deal of animosity in society and unease even within the male monastic communities.

A core positive characteristic of Buddhism with regard to gender equality is the absence of an omnipotent Creator God traditionally portrayed as a male at its centre providing legitimacy to male supremacy. Thus, there is also no divine code of conduct that gives authority to males as in other major religions. Instead of a Creator God it is one's karma and dependent origination that shape the birth of every being opening up the possibility or indeed high probability of being born as any gender in the sansaric(Worldly) cycle.¹⁵

Therefore, The status of women in Buddhist sangha experienced positive as well as negative effects. They were provided with opportunities as well as experienced discriminatory treatment. Prejudices did exist due to the impact of patriarchal society as well as due to the effects of post Vedic changes in status of women in society but we cannot even totally deny the fact of embodiment of gender parity. I would say that women's position in Buddhist sangha laid somewhere in middle of parity and prejudice.

Even in present scenario women are uplifted, emancipated and granted equal status but there is a great contradiction in the constitutional position and stark reality of life .Our Patriarchal society do talk about freedom and equality and making women stronger but society does not give freedom to exercise Right to Freedom(i.e. exercise their Freedom rights by themselves).It is just like as it was Buddhism era ,where people knowing or unknowing were talking about equality and parity but actually in their deeds traces of discrimination did exist.

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