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ROLE OF BUDDHISM IN EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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Abstract: -The understanding about status of women in India and their empowerment needs to also take into account the contribution of Buddhism towards their emancipation. This paper traces the changes in the status of women in India from the pre-buddhist times to the current. Social reformers and constitution maker were influenced by the Buddhist ideology of equality and spiritual development of women, which reveals through their social reform activities aimed at women's empowerment. Research in psychology has proved that the self concept and self identity of an individual affects their achievements and well-being. Buddhism has played an important role in enhancement of psychological well-being and success of women till current time.

Keywords: Buddhism, women and social identity.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism today is a religion in the world which is known for its values of compassion, rationality and spirit of equality. Women's empowerment has been a concern for various social science disciplines.

The objectives of this paper are-

1. To bring out the emancipation of women during the Buddhist era
2. To explore the relationship between the women's empowerment measures in recent past, and the influence of Buddhist ideology.
3. To highlight the psychological changes taking place within a woman, which makes her feel intrinsically empowered and confident due to her belief in equality (i.e. a Buddhist principle)

Pre-Buddhist era

The socio-cultural development as a context within which Buddhism developed which could be broadly considered along two lines (1) Indus and (2) Vedic

The Indus valley civilization, one of the oldest in the world, centered in the Indus valley in Pakistan, in a region that was to later become a Buddhist stronghold and one that had some form of Dravidian as its main language. Some scholars, on the basis of the associations of agricultural societies with matriarchy, have seen Indus civilization as characterized by a matrilineal goddess-oriented culture in contrast to the Vedic people. (Omvedt, 2003)

The decline of Indus civilization was followed by entry of Aryans or Vedic people. The Rig Vedic people entered the subcontinent around 1400 BC and Rig Veda itself has been composed sometime between 1700 BC and 900 BC.

During the Vedic period there are evidences that women received honor and respect and that they had access to grandest knowledge. However such a liberal attitude towards women altered in the course of time, under the influence and dominance of the priestly caste with their priest crafts, animal sacrifices, and other ritualistic exercises. New interpretations were given to the scriptures; women came to be considered as grandly inferior to men both physically and mentally. (Sawant, 2009)

A woman was looked down upon as a mere possession or thing. Her place was the home, under the complete whims and fancies of her husband. She not only had to perform the domestic chores, but also had to bring up a large family. A myth was built up that all women were regarded as unrighteous and the only method to keep them out of mischief was to keep them

ceaselessly occupied with the task of motherhood and domestic obligations.

Her rights to pursue religious life and move freely in the society were considerably restricted.

However if during the Buddhist period (600 – 100 BC) on which we shall concentrate with the rise of Buddhism that the Indian women found new dimensions of life which made her stand boldly in the society. She became more assertive and conscious of her latent individuality.

Eminent Pali scholar Dr. Meena Talim has affirmed that “Ancient Indian History reveals that women enjoyed more freedom in the Buddhist period, than in any other periods of Ancient India”.

Many scholars are of the opinion that Buddha was more a social reformer (remover of abuses) than a philosopher. The reformative activities such as nonbelief in caste system, sacrifices and ritual ceremonies were initiated. Buddhism tried to uplift the position of women in the society. At least general awareness was inculcated as to regard women as human beings and allow them to express their rights.

Buddhist scriptures refer to women in the positive way more than negative ways. Buddhism has played a role in the spiritual freedom of women, when we equate the role of the women in the Brahmanic society and Buddhist society, it imparts clear image of women's rights and equality in Buddhism.

In Buddhism, women are able to take part in all activities without exception. The Buddha has advocated Dharma to both man and woman with clear understanding that the difference between male and female is meaningless and not significant.

In the early Buddhist period, an unmarried girl could go along unabused, contended and adequately occupied, in caring for parents and younger brothers and sisters. She might even become to owner of grand possessions and rich fields. The commandments of the Buddha had done a grand deal to eradicate many superstitious belief and purposeless rites and rituals, including animal sacrifices, from the minds of many people, when the true nature of life and death and the natural phenomena governing the cosmos were revealed to them, wisdom and understanding arose. This helped to eradicate the social injustice and prejudice that were rampant against women, thus sanctioning women to lead their own way of life.

There is some critique about female – exploitation in Buddhism such as no permission of ordination for women initially, but they were later admitted. (Altekar, 2008)

It is important to take an overview of why women wanted to practice renunciation and elevate herself in the spiritual sphere. It seems that the thought “Everything is impermanent and transiting allowed her mind no rest and therefore she embraced a houseless state”.

Buddhist literature have revealed that the aim of renunciation was both material and spiritual.

The Buddhist literary sources point out to certain causes.

i) Women's natural inclination towards spiritual life.

-Sumedha for example – in spite of pleading and request by parents did not get married and retired from the world.

-Annatara Theri had a natural aptitude for celibate life, from her childhood. Hence she took permission from her husband and joined the order – Mutta & Punna dawned the yellow robes as soon as they were 20.

All these ladies seem to have been anxiously waiting for a chance, and when it came their way they jumped at it.

ii) For some women the nunneries provided as a shelter to them as they were helpless and bewildered by circumstances. Therefore they wanted to join the Sangha.

iii) Eg. Abhirupananda was very beautiful. And was the daughter of queen Khemka. Her fiancé died when she came of age hence her parents compelled her to retire from the world.

- Upplavanna was also a beautiful lady. Many noble men expressed a desire to marry her. Her father was bewilderedly and did not want to please any one or displease either hence her father requested her to renounce the world.

iv) Some women were mature for spiritual life but were hardly conscious of that state. Hence when they heard the sermons it was sufficient for them to tear off the layer of ignorance.

eg. Khema wife of king Bimbisara. Hence wanted to join sangha for their spiritual growth.

v) Some renounced the world because of miseries of life and find solace in the teachings of the Dhamma.

eg. Mukta – was married to a poor ugly looking man and was dissatisfied with her married life.

– Chanda – lost all her relatives in epidemics and was wandering alone in misery.

vi) Other women joined the sangha by following their husbands who were leading ascetic lives.

– Capa – Whose husband was from the Ajvakeset.

vii) Some joined because they were closely connected to the Buddhist preachers

-Vijaya was the friend of Khema

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-Cala, upacala, Sisupacala were sisters of Saripulta and followed their brother in joining the sangh.

viii) Death was another reason- sight of her dead child made her aware of limitations and learning the philosophy of sorrow and impermanence.

Eg. – Kisagotami.

ix) Utter frustration in life due to love was another reason.

– Bhaddha Kundala Kesse – fell in love with a dacoit and was dissatisfied with her married life.

-Vimala – harlot fell in love with Maha Mogallnu Monk.

Therefore, suffering was the main cause of woman's renunciation. She suffered mentally physically or was disappointed in household life or disappointed with mundane affairs. So when she heard the call of Buddha explaining the cause of suffering and showing the way of liberation from suffering she wanted to join the order.

But when Maha Prajapati Gotami approached Buddha to admit her and other sisters he initially refused.

Various causes for the refusal have been proposed.

i) Close proximity between an order of celibate women and men could lead to sexual temptation.

ii) Indian cultural context suggestive of women need protection implied allowing them to leave family and roam about as dangerous for them as well as family.

iii) The organizational difficulties such as housing seating, ritual activities and communication could have also been a deterrent in admitting Bikkhunis would potentially double the size of the sangha.

Suggesting that it was only the practical problems of life due to which Buddha was hesitant.

Then why did Buddha accept women in the order established a parallel Bhikkhuni Sangha ?

i) When Ananda questioned Buddha “ Is women not capable of understanding Dhamma?”

Buddha categorically replied “No they can”, this indicates that it was not a part of male chauvinism, but full confidence in women's intellectual capacity. Hence accepted them in the sangha. (Coomaraswamy, 1956).

ii) Buddha might have succumbed to republican tradition. Buddha was the son of sakyen clan and knew the democratic values. Therefore, after observing the majority of women monks, he accepted them.

iii) Acceptance could also have been due to persistent requests from Mahaprajapti Gotami and other 500 ladies who had act off their hair and travelled of foot from kapil vastu to vesali. Their persistence may have had an impact on the Lords mind.

iv) The 500 ladies were perhaps the royal ladies and could have been from the harem of king Suddhodhana. Hence, after his death they were like widows, compassionate mind of Buddha might have accepted them, so that they could have some status and dignity and spend life in spiritual pursuits.

Early Buddhist literature carries the impressions that in some respects the order of Nuns was subservient to the order of the monks. However, it is equally true that the pali texts never depict the nuns as stooping down to the position of parasites.

Also literature suggests that

(i) The nun enjoyed the same privileges as the monk in spiritual exercises, she could strive for self emancipation, enjoy the rapture of meditation, indulge in the knotty problems of metaphysics, attempt to unravel supernormal powers, taste the bliss of vision and be proficient in the rules of discipline.

ii) She was allowed to mix in society, deliver religious sermons to laymen, discuss with them freely on religious topics and guide them whenever necessary. Her position in this respect was equal to that of the monk.

iii) Monks could not bring any type of a pressure to bear upon her. Her relationship with the monks was cordial and healthy. Though she had to pay him respect, regardless of seniority, yet whenever a monk could misbehave, she was exempted from showing him the usual courtesy.

Buddha in fact instructed the monks that if they acted imprudently or talked arrogantly to them then such a monk does not deserve respect and thus he should correct himself.

He should go to the nunnery and say “ let Bhikkhuni Samgha forgive me”. If nuns forgive him then that monk can be revived to his positions and be respected.

iv) The Buddhist literature indicates that the relations between the monk and the nun were in fact friendly. Monks helped nuns whenever they needed help.

Buddha while giving a list of disciples noted for good qualities is said to have mentioned Nandaka Channa a old moniser of nuns fought with other monks while taking side of the nuns.

Buddha himself too was protective about the nuns.

- i) A nun was recommended to go begging alms to a village but return to the vihara with the alms and not eat sitting under a tree or in forest. This was to ensure her security.
- ii) He desired that nuns should be respected by monks. "not say bad word to a nun, or censure a nun, or create a sort of a fear in her mind". A nun should be given honourable position, behave courteously with her.
- iii) Buddha was very strict with the monks who defiles a nun, he condemned them and said such a one will not be initiated nor will be conferred ordination.
- iv) There was also an attempt on the part of the sangha to keep immature brothers away from the nuns. The utmost care was taken not to let an inexperienced or guilty monk to be involved in the affairs of the nunnery.
- v) Nuns were pardoned even if they made a mistake but realized it and confessed it. as that was seen as a sign of growth and discipline.

Also if a nun was a victim of abuse or was raped but it was not considered as an offence as she was not willing. She was fully pardoned and exonerated from all blame.
Eg. Uppalavanna was raped by her lover.

Status of women who were the upasika's

- 1) In the Anguttar Nikaya Buddha gave a list of upasikas which he felt was a matter to be known to all the members of the sangha. This indicates his concern and personal observations and must have been encouraging for women folk at large.
- 2) When Prasenjit king's wife gave birth to a girl child and the king and queen were unhappy, Buddha told them that a daughter's birth should be appreciated.
- 3) Anguttara Nikaya states that when home financial affairs are handled by a honest sincere women such a family prospers.
- 4) Sanyukta Nikaya- Women are a precious contributor in the world. They give birth to Bodhisattvas and conquerers.

In the Dhammapada literature we come across eg.

- 1) Vishakha on her way to her in-laws place while travelling through the saveti city progresses without purdah.
- 2) Asuras daughter chose her husband- right to choice of life partner was asserted.
- 3) Parents used to take decisions together about the matters related to their offspring eg. Anandpindika decided to accept the proposal of Uggas son for his daughter after consulting his wife.

Participation in decision making existed.

Women's education was ensured and expressions of it are found in the following forms-

The Suttapitak has one of the most important books. The "Therigatha", which are verses of the nuns and is the first ever feminist literature ever in the world. Through these verses the Theris express their sufferings, views on social values, false sense of pride, male attitude, and they also express their insights due to the teachings of the Buddha.

Dhammapala the commentator of the book narrates about the origin of the book that these verses were collected together in the 1st Buddhist council, implying that these verses of the nuns were not ignored by the monks and that they had no biased feelings towards them. These verses were memorized later for 400 years till king Vattgamini of Srilanka 1st BC initiated them into writing and became a part of Sutta Pitaka.

The Therigatha the 1st women's literature has a collection of verses of 73 nuns. They have poured personal experiences some of them were poetic. The Theris were nuns from various strata of the society ie women from noble families poor, house wives, dasis, ganikaas. This also throws light on the democratic spirit of including women from all sections.

Nun Khema talks about how she fought with Mara, the evil one and finally reached emancipation.

Nun Kisagotami who was grief stricken talked about how impermanence is the characteristics of the entire world.

Nun Nanduttara their vividly gives religious customs of those days.

Nun Punnika logically argued with a Brahmin who held that taking bath in holy river released a man from the effects of his wrong actions. She convinced him of his silly notion and laid stress on the theory of Karma.

Nun Amrapali who was daughter of a prostitute and a courtesan could invite Buddha and his disciples to her home for meal and later donated her mango garden to Buddha on becoming enlightened talked about how short lived her beauty is and how permanent Buddha's teachings were.

Thus, the Therigatha is a unique example of women's education and spiritual emancipation and a significant contribution to women's literature.

Though we have a positive portrayal of woman in the Therigatha, the Jatakas have condemned the dark side of womanhood. However that needs to be analyzed.

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- 1) Due to some individual cases the writers of the Jatakas seem to have taken entire womanhood to the task.
- 2) Jatakas depict society and social traditions that prevailed in ancient India. In almost all ancient civilization of world we notice an attitude of denial in ancient social books.
- 3) The writing of Jatakas were men.

The portrayal of women thus can be defended by taking into account the opportunities available to her, her achievements and contribution to women folk.

To sum up Buddhism empowered women in the following ways.

- 1) Conferred them an equal status by admitting them in the Sangha.
- 2) Women could pursue spiritual growth and discover their identity and talents.
- 3) Got her a place of dignity and respect in the society.

The influence of Buddhism on the recent women's empowerment movement .

India takes pride in being a nation which has examples of women who have matched the achievements of a man in almost all spheres including holding high offices eg. the Prime Minister, President or any other post for public representation to exploring space, or contributing for our nations development by working at par with men in various professions like medicine science and technology, law, policing sports or any other to name.

Buddhism has played a role in our empowerment today.

The evidences can be observed in 2 parts.

Firstly, all the women in India are educated and are able to progress in our lives with their battles for achievement, identity and respect as they are educated which has been possible due to the 1st school for women set up by Savitri bai Phule with the support of her husband Jyotiba Phule.

It is evident women could access education due to the sphere headed effort of the Phule duo by starting the 1st women's school in India.

The Phule's who fountain headed their revolutionary social reform movement were influenced by Buddhism.

a) Though archeological evidences about Buddhism in India were not available yet but Buddhist writings translated from Pali to English were available. "Vajrasuchi" a book written in Sanskrit by the famous Buddhist scholar Ashwaghosa was also available.

Reading this has had an influence on Phule which shows in his works like "Gulamgiri" - in which he mentions about vajrasuchi and talks about the aim of education being Political and Social reform.

Also the turning point in Phule's life i.e. being insulted in his friends' marriage instigated his thinking that even if British go away, Peshwai will remain, so to find a solution he suggested that people should hurry up in educating themselves.

With the formation of the Satya Shodhak Samaaj he would read Kabir's "Bijak", which was influenced by writings in the Vajrasuchi.

Phule published the Vajrasuchi in Marathi "Jatibhed Vivek Saar" which was the essence of Tukaram Tatya Padwal's writings, who was a philosopher at that time. Therefore Phule happens to be the 1st ever publisher of Buddhist literature. (Sukhtankar, 1993)

b) Phule has offered his book Saarvajanik Satya Dharmapustika to Prabuddha's only, which emphasized on equality between man & women.

The second evidence of influence of Buddhism on the recent women's empowerment movement came in the form of the crusader for women's cause Dr. Ambedkar. He had considered Buddha, Kabir and Phule as his gurus. All his social reform activities have been influenced by the teachings of his gurus and we all are aware that his teacher Keluskar had presented him a copy of Buddha biography. And later he even initiated the movement for the mass conversion of the Dalits and embracing Buddhism. Some of the women's empowerment measures undertaken by Dr. Ambedkar are as follows-

On 25/12/27 - Manusmriti dahan for its caste and gender bias.

28/07/28 - He supported the Maternity Benefit bill as a member of the legislative council.

(This was merely due to his Buddhist ideology to ascribe an equal, dignified status to women)

10/11/1938 - Dr. Ambedkar recommended Birth control facilities for women as member of Bombay legislative assembly.

20/07/42 - Dr. Ambedkar became the labour member in EC of the viceroy passed several progressive legislations relating to better working conditions for women workers.

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29/08/47-Dr. Ambedkar became chairperson of the constitution drafting committee and made discrimination based on sex a punishable offence.

27/09/51-Resigned as a law minister in protest against the dropping of the Hindu code bill.

Further Dr Ambedkar is known as the Architect of the Indian constitution and in the preamble of the Indian constitution starts with the phrase, "we the people of India" Itself ascribing the equal, status to all women and men in this republic.

The Buddhist principles of equality, liberty, fraternity and justice seem to be the essence of the constitution. Also the modern laws and enactments, like Domestic violence Act 2005, law related to single parent hood, surrogacy, rape etc. find its roots in the framework of the constitution.

Hence the litigations that have empowered us today here in the 21st century also find roots in the Buddhist ideology which has been neatly integrated in the constitutional framework.

Psychological changes in women

Psychological changes take place within a woman which makes her feel intrinsically empowered and confident due to her belief in equality.

Beginning this investigation from the nuns, it was found that training received in the nunnery, living a communal life her vision was expanded, there is no morose or sinking attitude towards life. She extended her hands to help the people. Her intellectual scope was widened through Samatha & Vipassna meditation. All the nuns, at the end of their gatha seem to be more positive and optimistic.

The effort of Mahaprajapati Gotami of establishing an independent Bhikkhuni Sangha. Upasika Visakha Migaramata made the first attempt in history of India to have an organized institute of women celibates.

Sanghamitra's spirit to preach Buddhism and work towards conversion to Buddhism in Srilanka are examples of noble women which definitely upgraded women's position in society. An awareness of an individuality must have raised her position in the society. Psychologically women must have felt more secure and would no longer tolerate any type of injustice, inflicted on her. This seems to be the greatest contribution made by Buddhist women to Indian Society.

An impression of their achievement seems to have fallen on the women leading a householder's lives. She gained a greater confidence, greater exposure to the social life and greater chances to lead a happy life. A cross section of the social life though she was linked with previous traditions, she did not make it compulsory to follow them. It was a matter of choice. "Matru devo Bhawa" was not discarded in Buddhism, but "mata mittam sakhe gharam" was propounded i.e. an attitude that the mother is not only one who feeds child but is a guide, councilor to her child.

Also a married woman whose husband renounced the world or did not come back had the choice of remarrying and the society did not despise them.

Widows had option of joining the nunnery and get educated thus to live a respectful life.

Working class women with help of different occupations made themselves independent. They could work and earn their livelihood. Even prostitution was one occupation but such ladies could get respect from men and women both. Many were awardees of prestigious awards, such as "Nagara Sobhini" or Janapada Kalyani" this was a special feature of Buddhist society.

Social identity theory in psychology explains the positive impact of this positive identities Buddhist women enjoyed.

Kirmayer, Brass and Tait, (2002); Reitzes & Mutran, (2002); Scheff, (2001), found that when groups or social identities provide a person with stability, positive meaning or positive distinctiveness, a sense of worth and direction, this has a positive implication for that individual's psychological well being/ mental health.

The same seems to be true about women from the Buddhist era.

Tajfel, (1982), Turner and Onorato, (1999), studied the relationship between self esteem and minority group membership and found that the minority group members are likely to accept the majority groups negative view only if they perceive that there is little possibility of changing the power and status differences between the groups.

Buddhist women have been able to successfully acquire an equal status with men, hence are not prepared to take any form of injustice or negative attitude.

Thus surveying Buddhist literature upto 5th century AD one feels that woman depicted there, is closer to women of 20/21st cent. She is definitely leading a superior, free, cultured life.

During the last 50-60 years the process of increasing women's involvement in the economic, social and political life of their countries has been moving forward steadily. The success achieved by women in 21st century is phenomenal and has been able to excel in all realms of careers and opportunities such as becoming the Prime Minister, President, Pilot, engineer, doctor in our Country.

CONCLUSION

Buddhism has contributed in the emancipation of women and has promoted a democratic way of life. It is eternal credit to the Buddha's Dhamma that women weren't despised but were given equal status with men in their spiritual endeavours to gain wisdom. The Buddhist ideology of equality and spiritual development thus has contributed in the development of psychological well being and success of women through time, till date.

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