

Buddhist Ideas Regarding the Status of Women

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“For most of history, Anonymous was a woman.”
Virginia Woolf¹

The effort of this paper is to eradicate the misunderstanding that some may have about women and show the Buddhist point of view. As an important character, the woman has to play various kinds of roles in society. In ancient India under Brahmanism women had a lower status in society than men. This is because Brahmanism had patriarchal and even misogynist concepts regarding women. So women were not free to make their own decisions and do what they wished because of the limited freedom they had always to live under the rule of men. They were treated like the lowest cast – the “kshudra”. I shall further elaborate on the status of women in the Brāhmanic tradition and what kind of misogynist ideas were prevalent at the time. Also I shall contrast these ideas with those in Buddhism.

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1. Adeline Virginia Woolf was an English writer, and one of the foremost modernists of the twentieth century.

Women have more responsibilities in society than men. Within the roles she has to play, the woman has to do her service as her heart tells her. In that sense women have to do their duties and responsibilities as a mother, as a daughter, as a sister, as a wife, as a house wife and now in modern times as an employee also. To play all these roles at once in an active manner they have to have some qualities such as a good education, maintain good health, be strong, brave, and have courage to do all these duties well. So, today as we are living in a complex society, it is very important that all people should have gender equality.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE WOMEN'S STATUS IN THE SOCIETY

In the period of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa there was gender equality. They worshiped the sexual organs of both men and women. Also they believed in god Pashupathi and goddess Jaganmāta. In that period women were treated as the symbol of prosperity. And they had freedom and were happy.

In the Vedic period also women had a respectable position in society. In that period women were free to study Vedic texts and to do religious activities also. But this is the period which started to limit women's freedom.

“Be a friend to our livestock without casting an evil eye and do not hurts your husband. Give birth to brave children. Worship gods. Live comfortably.”²

In this period men started to give orders to women. This can be identified from the meaning of the verse that is given here.

LATER VEDIC PERIOD

When it comes to the later Vedic period, the women had to face many problems in their lives. Because in that period Brahmins wanted to spread and entrench their power in Indian society. Therefore, they divided society into four groups.

2. Rig Veda, 10th zone, 85 verse.

“Brāhmanosya mukhamāsid - bāhu rājanya: krutah:
ūru tadasya yad vaishya - pādbyām kshudro ajāyata”³

According to this verse the lower caste was the “kshudra”. After the Brāhmana texts came an extreme form of Brāhmanic patriarchy in the Laws of Manus. Manu’s law book is ascribed to the first century B.C.E. This is about 5 centuries after the Buddha, but it codifies ancient Brāhmanic religious Practices and customs coming down from the Vedas.

Under Brāhmanic tradition women were kept down in the society. So the Brahmins used religion to establish all their ideas. By using religion they tried to control women. In that situation women had to face many difficulties and sufferings. They were not treated well and the Brahmins ascribed a place for them in society as the lowest cast, the “kshudra”.

The Brahmin tradition taught society various kinds of misogynist concepts about women by criticizing them.

They have no right to follow or to participate in religious activities. No right to have an education. Their only function was to give birth to children and take care of them and husbands. They had to live under men’s order always.

“In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons, a women must never be independent.”⁴

According to Manu’s Laws the only way to the heaven for the women was to obey the husband. They taught by that they could reach heaven.

“Nāsti strīnaṃ prthag yajño na vrataṃ nāpyupoṣṣathaṃ patim
suśrūyate yena tena svarge mahīyate”⁵

“No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart (from their husbands): if a wife obeys her husband, she will (for that reason alone) be exalted in heaven.”⁶

3. Rig Veda, 10th zone, 90th Purusha Sūktha

4. Book V vs. 147

5. Manu. V. 153.

6. The Laws of Manu Tr. By G. Buhler SBC. Vol. XIV. P. 196. Ch. V. v. 155

Because of such concepts society automatically changed in to a patriarchal society. The Brahmin tradition always looked at women with misogynist eyes.

We cannot go in to why this happened but certain feminist historians say it could be due to wars. Men go to war leaving their wives sometimes unprotected, sometimes under the protection of the mother-in-law who become an agent of patriarchy, becoming almost a tyrant.

BUDDHIST IDEAS REGARDING WOMEN

Under Buddhism the Buddha gave an honorable place to women. With Buddhism women got the freedom to engage in religious activities, to live freely under Buddhist guidance, to enter the Buddhist Saṅgha community...etc. The Buddha regarded everyone as equal. Buddhist society consisted of the following:

1. Bhikkhu
2. Bhikkhuni
3. Upāsaka
4. Upāsikā

Also the Buddha did not agree with those misogynist concepts that the Brahmin tradition had. The Buddha mentions the five woes that women have to suffer. The five woes that a woman has to undergo are stated:⁷

1. “She has to live in her parents’ home and relatives at a tender age and go to her husband’s home”
2. Menses
3. Pregnancy
4. Child birth.
5. The fifth woe in waiting upon a man.

“But at the same time, menses, pregnancy and child birth are the very factors which make it possible for a woman to become a mother- a state to which man himself attaches a great deal of respect...”⁸

7. S. IV PTS, London 1956, PP. 162-9,

8. Savimalee Karunaratna “the female in early Buddhism” P. 60 from an unpublished M.Phil thesis, university of Kelaniya, 1999.

“such comments regarding the five woes cannot be attributed to the Buddha for they do not occur in the central doctrines of the Buddhist philosophy... the egalitarian out look of the philosophy does not admit of any kind of sexual superiority of the male over the female.”⁹

Buddhism looks at women in a compassionate way. Not only women but all living beings. The Buddha appreciated women in the same way. The Buddha introduced the mother as the friend in the home. “Mātā mittam sake gare”¹⁰. Also in the Mahamangala sutta of Majjhima Nikāya the Buddha mentions looking at the both father and mother as a very meritorious act. “Mātā pitū upathānam”¹¹. The Buddha explained to King Pasenadi Kosala that women also should be looked after. They also could be wise and they also could treat relatives well and give birth to brave children who can rule the kingdom.

“itthī pi hi ekacciya seyyā posa janādipa
medhāvinī sīlavatī sassudevā patibbatā
Tassā yo jāyatī poso sūro hoti disampati
evam subhagiyā putto rajjam pi anusāsati”¹²

Women’s wisdom is not limited to the two finger knowledge. That cannot be true. Because there are lot of duties that women has to do in their household life. To do them they need some kind of knowledge. Without wisdom they could not maintain the household life.

“yam tam isīhi pattabbam thānam durabhisambhavam
natam dvaṅgulapaññāya sakkā pappotum itthiyā”¹³

Also according to the Vāsetta sutta of Sutta Nipāta it says that human beings are one species in the animal kingdom. That means men and women form together one division in the animal kingdom.

The great devotee of the Buddha named Visākhā can be identified as a very strong character in the Buddhist literature. Visākhā is considered as

9. (Karunaratne, ibid,)

10. SN. I. P. 37.

11. KN. I. Mangala sutta, B.J.T.S

12. SN. I. 86

13. SN. I. 129

an ideal lay woman¹⁴. When she was going to get married her father gave her seven injunctions as advice:

1. Not to take fire from the house outside;
2. Not to take in to the house fire from without;
3. To give only to those who give in return;
4. Not to give to those who do not give in return;
5. To give him that gives and to him that gives not;
6. To sit, eat and sleep happily;
7. To tend the fire and to honor household deities.¹⁵

This advice refers to the responsible role that the woman has to play in her household life.

According to the Nakulapitu sutta it can be seen how strong and how much confidence Nakula Māta had when her husband was very ill once and when he was very sad wondering what would happen to them as it is not easy to take care of a family alone. It is really a very big task but she consoled him. She assured him that she could look after the family by weaving and making it her livelihood. It can be identified by the following:

1. “na Nakulamāta gahapatānī mamaccayena sakkhissati dārake posetuṃ ghaāvāsaṃ sattharitut ti”.

2. “Nakulamāta gahapatānā mamaccayena aññaṃ varaṃ gamissati”.

“Nakulamāta gahapatānī mamaccayena na dassanakāmā bhavissati bhagavato, na dassanakāmā bhikkhu saṅghassā ti”.

3. “na Nakulamāta gahapatānī mamaccayena sīlesu paripūrakāni ti”.

4. “na Nakulamāta gahapatāni lābhini ajjhataṃ cetosamathasso ti”.

5. “na Nakulamātā gahapatānī imasmiṃ dammavinaye ogādhappattā assāsappattā tiṇṇavicikicā vigatakathānkatā vesarajjpttī aparappaccayā satthasāsane viharatī ti¹⁶”.

By having a virtuous character she can achieve respect and serenity in her household life. As following: “pañcahi bhikkave dhammehi samannāgato mātugāmo visārado agaṃ ajjhāvasati. Katamehi pañcahi?

14. A. i. 26; Malalasekara G.P., “Dictionary of pāli proper names”

15. Malalasekara G.P., “Dictionary of pāli proper names”, p. 901.

16. A. iv. Nakulapitu sutta, BJTS,

Pānātipātā pativirato ca hoti... surāmeraya - majjapamādaṭṭānā pativirato ca hoti.”¹⁷

The good women has to be successful in both life of in this (idha-lokavijaya) and the otherworld (para-lokavijaya). They are also trying to win both spiritual and worldly lives. In Aṅguttara Nikāya it mentions as following: “Catūhi kho visākha dhammehi samannāgato mātugāmo idhalokavijayāya paṭipanno hoti ayaṃsa loko āraddho hoti. Katamehi catūhi? Idha visākha mātugāmo susamvihita-kammanto hoti sangahitā parijano bhattu manāpam carati sambhataṃ anurakkhati... catūhi kho visākha dhammehi samannāgato mātugāmo paralokavijayāya paṭipanno hoti parassa loko raddho hoti. Katamehi catūhi? Idha visākha mātugāmo saddhāsampanno hoti sīlasampanno hoti cāgasampanno hoti paññā sampno hoti”¹⁸

The good women has duties to develop not only the worldly life, but also the religious life. She has to keep the balance of both aspects of worldly and spiritual life. In Aṅguttara Nikāya it says that the path for her to attain heaven. “Susamvihitakammantā sangahitā - parijjanā, bhātu manāpam carati sambataṃ anurakkhati. Saddhāsīlena sampannā vadaññā vītamaccharā niccam maggaṃ visodehi sotthānaṃ samarāyikaṃ. Iccete aṭṭhadhammā ca yassā vijjati nāriyā taṃ pi sīlavatiṃ āhu dhammaṭṭhaṃ saccavādinim. Soḷsākārasampannā aṭṭhaṅgasusamāgatā tādisī sīlavatī upasikā upapajjati devalokaṃ manāpam.”¹⁹

They are:

1. Organizes the work of the household with efficiency,
2. Treats her servants with concern,
3. Strives to please her husband,
4. Takes good care of what he earns,
5. Possesses religious devotion,
6. Is virtuous in conduct,
7. Is kind,

17. SN. IV. 250

18. AN. IV. 269f.

19. AN. IV. 271

8. Is liberal.

Gender and millennium development goals

There is a strong relationship between gender equality and all the millennium development goals. There are eight goals under the millennium goals, such as,

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal and primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV / AIDS, Malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

These eight are the goals which were selected by the UN as the goals that should be achieved by the year 2015. Up to now Sri Lanka has achieved some of the goals and others are in the pending list.

Gender equality is important not only as a goal in itself but also as a path towards achieving the other goals. Thus gender equality plays a vital role in development goals.

SRI LANKA AND MDG'S GOALS.

When considering the MDG's goals Sri Lanka has achieved goals such as, reducing poverty, improving child care and maternal services, gender equality...etc. As a result today we are developing quickly as a country.

Scientifically it is true that the women are not as strong as men. But they can do many things that men do. As a result of the gender equality target set by MDG we can see women going into employment as pilots, conductors, professors, doctors, politicians, judges, scientists...etc. In our country there was Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranayake, who became famous as the first woman prime minister and her daughter Chandrika Bandaranayake

became President, judge Sriyani Bandaranayaka became Chief Justice ... etc. Through these examples we could prove that the women also can contribute to develop the country and do things as well as men.

Sri Lankan women are contributing to develop the country without many barriers. Through that we could take their labor power to develop the country and through that we could prevent poverty also. That is a very good answer for poverty. In the Sri Lankan constitution also equality of all citizens before the law is mentioned.

“All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection under the law”²⁰

According to the Sri Lankan constitution the rights of all persons are protected (has protected the right to equality). That also can be identified as an occasion of protecting the right of equality in Sri Lanka. Also there are many organizations which are helping women like CENWOR. And the government also expends a lot of care for the Sri Lankan women to protect them and children. Because they are the people who give birth to future generations. So the government has developed maternal care and services for pregnant mothers. From such examples we could prove and understand how Sri Lanka has achieved the Millennium Development goals to “promote gender equality and empower women”.

BARRIERS TO DEVELOP THE 3RD GOAL

On the one hand there is a value that has been given to women by religion, society, culture...etc. that is, they are limited to the household life because bringing up a family is a big task. In our country many women are working as employees. But still very few village women are not going out to work in jobs. They just wait in their homes even though they have to undergo many difficulties without sufficient money, because they don't like to break the tradition or the culture. They are afraid that they will be rejected by society if they are doing something beyond their domestic role. It is true we must value culture, religion...etc. we must protect them. But on the other hand we have to live in the current world and do what is suitable.

20. 13th Article of the Sri Lankan constitution

On the other hand world as suitable for the both things. In one hand it is a waste. This is the 21st century. So we live with the times.

CONCLUSION

According to the World Bank information the female youth literacy rate in Sri Lanka is 98% in the year 2008. According to the UNICEF records it is 99% female literacy in youth in Sri Lanka in the year 2007-2011. As a Sri Lankan lady I am proud to say that we have achieved the 3rd goal of Millennium development Goals which is “promoting gender equality and empowering women”. Finally when considering all these factors we could say that promoting gender equality is very important for the development of a country.

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