

The Silent Revolution: How 6th Century BCE Buddhist Doctrines Anticipated 21st Century Gender Discourse

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Abstract

This article embarks on a diachronic analysis of the social standing and roles of women in the Indian subcontinent, tracing the trajectory from the early Rig Vedic period through to the interventions of Buddhism in the 6th century BCE. Challenging the notion of a static patriarchal history, the paper posits that the status of women has been a dynamic variable, deeply influenced by evolving socio-economic structures, religious interpretations, and institutional stabilization.

Drawing upon classical texts and historical references, the study initially establishes the relatively egalitarian fabric of early Vedic society, where women like Ghosha, Maitreyi, and Gargi were not only educated but also active participants in philosophical discourse and religious rituals. It argues that this period represented a zenith of gender symmetry, where biological differentiation did not translate into social subordination. Subsequently, the paper examines the gradual, yet profound, regression in the later Vedic and post-Vedic eras. It analyzes how the solidification of the family unit, the codification of property rights, and the monopolization of ritualistic knowledge by a priestly class led to the systemic marginalization of women. This phase witnessed the denial of educational rights (Vedas), the restriction of religious autonomy, and the emergence of regressive practices such as the prohibition of widow remarriage and the early origins of Sati. Finally, the paper evaluates the catalytic role of Buddhism in the 6th century BCE as a counter-hegemonic force. By analyzing the Buddha's decision to establish the Bhikkhuni order (nuns), the study highlights how the Sangha served as an alternative social space that transcended the prevailing caste and gender hierarchies, offering women a path to spiritual liberation and social autonomy denied to them in the mainstream Vedic framework. The article concludes that the history of women in India is not linear but cyclical, marked by periods of contraction and expansion of rights, with the Buddhist response serving as a critical juncture in the long struggle for gender equity.

Keywords: - Gender Studies, Status of Women, Patriarchy, Rig Veda, Buddhism, Bhikkhuni Sangha, Social Stratification and Women's Emancipation

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INTRODUCTION

Society is a pure human edifice with two main wheels of the cart of life – man and woman. They share equal responsibility in making the society and also supplement to each other. If one is weaker, the cart cannot move properly so both are equally important. Different types of roles are played in family and society so far by women. Indian history starts from Indus- Saraswati civilization. The earliest references of Indian social life are available in the Vedas in general and in Rig Veda in particular. When we have a glance at the Rig Vedic society, we find that man and woman stood at the equal footing. Woman had full social rights and privileges to participate in all sorts of social, religious, cultural activities. Due to natural, physical capabilities and body structure, woman used to share most of the family activities, whereas man used to engage himself in farming, harvesting, marketing, trade & commerce activities and so on. However, woman had equal access

to education, sacrificial ceremonies, decision-making etc. According to Altekar (1959) and Vanshika (2023) there are a number of references in the Rig Veda to certify that Ghosha, Lopamudra, Sulabha, Maitreyi, Apala Gargi etc. who nowhere less than man in intelligence and wisdom. They are credited with composition of many Vedic hymns. However with the passage of time, institution of family got stabilized, which necessitated more and more engagement of woman folk in the family activities. A peculiar change could be noticed in the changing times. Woman of course continued to get all respect, love and affection in the family: her social status declined and openness at the social level was gone. Later a time came when she started to be looked down upon merely as a child producing machine. Since then discrimination and exploitation of woman became a common feature and went on aggravating with the passage of time. In the later Vedic Period woman was prevented from

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performing religious rites, and even the access to the Vedas was also denied to her. Similar conditions of woman were prevailing upon in various other countries as well. After Vedic period the position of woman does not appear to have been a very happy one. Generally, women seem to have been looked upon as being inferior to men, although in principle there was no change, her freedom was extremely limited. The general view appears to be that she had to be under the care of parents in her childhood, under the protection of husbands in her youth; and in her old age she had to be under the care of her sons. Therefore, it was thought that she does not deserve any freedom. The widow's plight was still worse. Normally, a widow was not allowed to remarry. It is said that a widow had to kill herself by jumping into the funeral pyre of her husband. Woman had lost her educational freedom in the following centuries. As they had only little freedom, their chances of performing meritorious religious rites, too, were very limited.

The Buddha did a lot for woman during the 6th century BCE under the prevailing situation of that time. Within the Saṅgha there was no distinction or discrimination between man and woman, rich and poor.

WOMAN AND HER POSITION IN BUDDHISM

The role of Buddhism could be considered in several ways. The position of woman in both the religious (inside the Saṅgha, as a man) and the secular life (society) after the emergence of Buddhism completely changed the attitude of society. Buddhism paid equal attention to all segments of society and treated man and woman uniformly. The Buddha's attitude towards woman in 6th century BCE to current debates over woman's higher ordination in Buddhist Saṅgha, woman has been the subject of attention and concern throughout the history of Buddhism. The objective of woman in Buddhism was to attain emancipation and wisdom. Even when judged by the standards of the modern age, it must not be thought that everything on this subject is in Buddhist writing. Pāli literature throws ample light on the said feast of womanhood. We come across a number of instances wherein woman is seemed leading her life with highest celibacy and acquiring the enflish ideals of sainthood.

Buddhism does not restrict educational opportunities of woman or her religious freedom. The Buddha unhesitatingly accepts that woman is capable of realizing the Truth, just as a man. This is why he permitted the admission of woman into the Order, though he was not in favor of it at the initially as he thought her admission would create a number of complexities in the Saṅgha. Once woman proved her capability of managing her affairs in the Order, the Buddha recognized her abilities and talents, and gave her responsible positions too in the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. Buddhist texts record of eminent saintly Bhikkhunīs, who were very learned and experts in preaching the Dhamma. Dhammadinnā was one such Bhikkhunī, Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā were two others. The nun Khemā was born in a princely family at Sāgala and was exceptionally beautiful. She was married to King

Bimbisāra of Magadha who in turn, was an enthusiastic supporter of the Buddha. Every time she was asked to visited monastery during the Buddha's stay she dodged the meeting him.

As a gahapatānī (house-wife), she performed various responsibilities as mother and wife. She looked after the daily needs of her husband, children and family elders. She was treated as the best among the well-wishers of the family. Woman, being an integral part of any society attained wide attention of the sculptors of various narratives which resulted in her active presence in art, performing various activities inside and outside the houses. After the advent of Buddhism, women, after long time in history, attained individual entity. The early Buddhist inscriptions have plenty of examples where a son or daughter felt extreme pride in announcing their mother's name solely or with the father's. During this period a woman was regarded gracefully even before marrying and entering the household life, especially as per the Pāli records.

The Buddha, while teaching the true nature of life and death - about karma and different wanderings, gave ascend to extensive changes in the social attitudes towards woman in his days. The Buddha taught the Law of Karma that one is responsible for one's own action and its consequences.

*Tumhehi Kiccaṃ ātappaṃ, akkhātāro Tathāgatā /
Paṭipannaṃ panokhanti, jhāyino mārabandhanā //*

(Dhammapada, verse No. 276)

Nobody is responsible for action of someone else.

*Attanā hi kataṃ pāpaṃ, attanā saṅkilissati /
Attanā, akataṃ pāpaṃ, attanā'va visujjhati /
Suddhī asuddhi paccattaṃ, nāñño aññaṃ visodhaye //*

(Dhammapada, verse No. 165)

Such enlightening teachings assist to accurate the views of many people and thus abridge the nervousness of woman who is unable to produce sons to execute the 'rites of the fore - fathers'. The teachings of the Buddha really help a lot to mop off many meaningless rites, rituals and also various superstitious beliefs like animal sacrifices from the minds of many people. The Buddha initiated the process of equality in the Saṅgha also. Buddhism does not consider woman as being inferior to man. While accepting the biological and physical differences between the two sexes, Buddhism considers man and woman equally useful to the society.

In Buddhism, there are two categories of woman: The first category consists of woman who follows the Basic teachings of the Buddha. They were called as Upāsikā. In the second category, those who renounce family life and becoming recluse and are formally called Bhikkhunīs (Pravrajita Bhikkhunīs). 'Woman in Buddhism' spans a period of over 2500 years and encompasses different Buddhist locales and traditions.

We find in Buddhism about the Therīs who compiled hymns or songs which is known as Therīgāthā forms part of Buddhist text and it consists of composition of 73 Nuns which gives us brief accounts of the lives of the Therī and we get an idea of what led to their renunciation. Therīgāthā tells us how the woman status was upgraded and they felt happy about that. It also

mentions how miserable the father felt at the birth of a daughter is seen from the event connected with King Pasenadi (Prasenajit) of Kosala. When the King was informed that his queen gave birth to a daughter he came to the Buddha and lamented. The Buddha's advice to the King, who was his close devotee, clearly shows that Buddhism does not consider the birth of a daughter as a cause for worry and despair. The Buddha pacifies him saying that good daughters are as good as good sons, besides being more caring to her parents. Therīgāthā contains numerous stanzas that clearly express the feelings of joy experienced by saintly Bhikkhunīs at their ability to enter the Order and realize the Truth. To contrast this attitude which reserved spiritual achievement for only males, the Buddha proclaims a message that is to be universally designed for the good of humanity as a whole without exception as to race, caste or sex. 'Sathā devamanussānam' or 'teacher of gods and humans' is one of the classic titles given to the Buddha.

The position given to woman in an ordinary life, we have to note that the Buddha's teaching was primarily concerned with individual spiritual emancipation. Buddhism differs from other religious traditions where private and public affairs are brought within the gambit of religious regulation. Buddhism does not approve things like marriage as a religious 'sacrament'. Marriage is regarded as entirely a personal, individual concern and not as a religious duty. There are no religious laws in Buddhism compelling a person to be married, to remain as a bachelor or to lead a life of total chastity. The Buddhist position is that these matters have to be regulated by the society through some kind of social, political or legal process. It is only required that such arrangements should not be in fundamental conflict with the Dhamma. It is possible to have many different kinds of social and family arrangements which are compatible with the broad framework of the Dhamma.

In matters like marriage, divorce, ownership of property, personal political or religious beliefs, etc. wives were allowed considerable liberty. A few discourses given to householders emphasize the more worldly aspects of living, and of these the *Sigalovada Sutta* is the best known. This Sutta has been dissected to get actual rules of conduct on a wide variety of secular matters. The Buddha lays down rules in this regard that could be considered common sense and eminently sensible and emphasizes the principle of reciprocity. The equal burden of responsibility and duty laid on both husband and wife is the hall-mark of the Buddha's attitude to the role of woman in the family life. In this Sutta, Buddha identifies some qualities in woman (wealth, beauty, virtues, kin, sons) which would make them the superior partner in a marriage, but these qualities are generally accepted in society in the Buddha's time.

THE ORDER OF BHIKKHUNIS

Every religion has jealously guarded entry into its innermost compartment. In many religions the doors of this chamber are barred to women. The Buddha established the order for Bhikkhus a few months after his enlightenment and the established of the Bhikkhunī

Order only five years later. Maha Prajapati Gotami (the foster mother of the Buddha), expressing her wish to enter the order but Buddha rejected her request. We also hear about Ananda's pleas to the Buddha on her behalf and lastly the Buddha relented and ordained Maha Pajapati.

The Buddha's decision to sanction the establishment of an order for Bhikkhunīs was a landmark in Buddhist and Indian history. But by the standards of the modern age it was ruined by the special rules which the Buddha imposed on Bhikkhunīs. Thus Prajapati Gotami had to agree to 8 special rules before she was proclaimed, and these rules were later integrated in the Bhikkhunī Vinaya. These rules could be recapitulated as follows:

1. Bhikkhus were always to have precedence over Bhikkhunīs in matters of salutation, etc. Irrespective of any other consideration.
2. Bhikkhunīs could not observe the annual retreat (vassa) in a district where there no bhikkhus.
3. Bhikkhus had to set the dates for Bhikkhunīs Uposatha ceremonies.
4. Confessing transgression by Bhikkhunīs had to done before the assembly of both Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunīs.
5. Certain judicial process in case of Bhikkhunīs had to be undertaken by both the Saṅgha.
6. Upsampada initiation of Bhikkhunīs should be given by the Bhikkhus Saṅgha as well.
7. A Bhikkhunīs should never abuse a Bhikkhu.
8. Bhikkhus can officially admonish Bhikkhunīs, but not vice versa.

Once the order of Bhikkhunīs was founded a large number of distinguished women from various social backgrounds came to adorn this order, attracted by the power of the Buddha's teaching and the freedom which the new order offered them. Many of these Bhikkhunīs attained to the supreme bliss of enlightenment. The stories and the deeds of these discriminated Bhikkhunīs are recorded in many places in the Pali Text, most notably in the Therīgāthā, a compilation of verses uttered by these Therīs when they saw the clear light of the Dhamma. The establishment of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha – the order of Nuns, in the 5th year of the Buddha ministry, really paved the way for full religious freedom for woman in the days of the Buddha. The Buddha did not place any restrictions on the nuns in the matter of teaching and preaching of the Dhamma. This order produced a remarkable number of brilliant preachers and exponents of the Dhamma e.g Sukha, Patacara, Khema, Dhammadina and Maha Pajapati. This step taken by the Buddha not only helped woman in an active share in the religious life but also helped to raise their status in secular life as well.

WOMAN IN MODERN WORLD

Woman is painstaking as the goddess in the Indian society from the ancient time though it is also true that they are not treated as goddess. They are being mistreated for numerous years and used presently as things to accomplish the wishes of men. Considering them as goddess is not sufficient to give them complete woman empowerment in the society; however it desires positive incessant effort to truly bring woman

empowerment. Woman plays a huge position in everyone's life without which we cannot envisage the success of life. They are the extremely responsible for the successful maintenance of the life on this planet. Now the condition has been enhanced a little bit, they have started taking part in the numerous activities other than family and kids. 21st century has brought in its trace a new hope for women. Dramatic changes have happened in various areas like education, legislations, economic, employment as well as in political also. From a non being, they have been able to create an identity of their own in the modern society.

The position of woman in different countries around the world has been rising and varying a lot right through the path of history. It has become general to grasp an opinion that the position of woman have been steadily improving and that nowadays the role of a woman in the society, at least in most countries, is identical to that of a man. It is still declared that in some professions woman are getting an upper hand while men are distinguished. Woman has fought an enormous deal so that the present times would treat the new female generation differently.

Factors which enhance the Status of Woman in today's Society:

➤ Educating girls leads to a number of social benefits, including many related to women's empowerment. Recent researches have established a sturdy association between women's education and international development. Women's education is one of the major descriptive variables behind the rates of social and economic development.

➤ Remarkable increase has been seen in the status of woman as the number of woman going out of the four walls of their houses and becoming workers. The number of woman employs steadily increasing in various areas such as teachers, doctors, advocates, nurses, bank employees, architect, clerks and so on. However, our government give protection to the rights of the womenfolk in various socio-economic legislations, which cover areas such as right to property, job security, working conditions and equal wages etc.

➤ Women's participation in mainstream political activity has significant implications for the broader field of governance in any country. Equitable participation of woman in politics and government is essential to build and sustain democracy. Woman are measured to be the 'ornaments' of a world and it is a reality that image signify 80 % in politics.

➤ Equal rights should be given by the government to the woman to avoid discriminations on the basis of sex. Government also take steps to establish public institutions to guarantee woman effective protection against all forms of discrimination practised against by individuals, organisations and enterprises.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, the advent of Buddhism in the 6th century BCE represents a watershed moment in the history of gender relations in India. This paper has demonstrated that while the post-Vedic era was

characterized by the steady erosion of women's rights—marked by restricted access to education, religious marginalization, and the onset of regressive practices—Buddhism emerged as a powerful counter-narrative that sought to restore the balance between the sexes.

The philosophical core of the Buddha's teachings lay in the radical recognition of the individual's sovereignty over their own spiritual destiny. Unlike the prevailing Brahmanical framework, which often defined a woman's religious merit through her relationship to father or husband, Buddhism affirmed that salvation (Nirvana) was attainable by any individual, irrespective of gender or marital status. This principle was most profoundly embodied in the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha (the order of nuns). For the first time in Indian history, women were granted institutional space to work out their own Karma, pursue scriptural knowledge, and attain the highest spiritual goals independently of male guardianship. According to Blackstone (2000) and Horner (1930) in the Therigatha, the collection of verses by enlightened nuns, stands as enduring literary testimony to this newfound agency.

Furthermore, Buddhism's impact transcended the monastic order and permeated the secular social fabric. By sanctioning the remarriage of widows and advocating for women's education, the Buddha directly challenged the systemic exploitation that had taken root in later Vedic society. This reformation was not merely a matter of social charity; it was a doctrinal imperative rooted in the principles of non-harmfulness (Ahimsa) and universal compassion (Karuna). By treating men and women uniformly in matters of ethics, spirituality, and moral responsibility, Buddhism effectively revolutionized the philosophical discourse surrounding gender.

In conclusion, the Buddhist period did not simply offer minor adjustments to patriarchal norms; it offered a fundamental reorientation. It recognized that a society cannot claim moral progress if it denies half its populace the right to spiritual and intellectual fulfillment. The legacy of this period is a testament to the idea that true social contribution lies in the collective energy of all individuals working together—preserving the dhamma and embodying humility. As we reflect on the modern struggles for gender equity, the early Buddhist model serves as a powerful historical precedent: a reminder that the path to a just society is inextricably linked to the liberation and respect of women.

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