

PLACE OF WOMAN IN BUDDHISM

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Discrimination against women is a feature common to all religions. In some religions it is more intense while in others it is less. Buddhism is the religion where the least amount of discrimination is found.

In certain religions we find that women are not even admitted to their places of worship even as worshippers, not to mention the role as religious leaders and teachers. They cannot officiate in such places in the same way as male religious teachers.

In Christianity the position is not the same. Women are admitted to churches as devotees and worshippers. But it was St. Paul and not Jesus who laid down the role that women should play in Christianity. St Paul decreed that they should be in purdah when inside the church, but men were exempted from this requirement. Men are allowed to enter the church without covering their head according to the teachings of St. Paul in his Epistles. In his many injunctions to the early Christians he has laid down such teachings as:

“A woman must listen quietly in the church, and be perfectly submissive. I allow no woman to teach or dictate to men. (I Tim.) “Wives submit yourselves unto your husbands as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the Church.....Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for man.” (Epistle to the Ephesians).

In spite of these and similar injunctions women were admitted to become deaconesses in the early church, but the role they played was a minor one. Before long even this privilege was taken away from them and they were debarred from all share in the church's sacerdotal activities. For centuries the early church fathers were not even sure whether women had souls. After debating this question for over a century they were able to decide that women did have souls at the Council of Macon in A.C. 585.

The Roman Catholic Church took over the worship of Virgin Mary and female saints from the pagan practices prevailing in the lands they set out to convert. The pagans could not do without the goddesses they were so much used to venerate. So a substitute had to be found though there is no authority for such in the Christian scriptures. This did little to improve the position of women in Christianity. It is true that the Roman Catholic Church did manage to establish some religious orders for nuns, on their own initiative but they never had the

position of priests, nor could they officiate in a church or preach in a church. The Roman Catholic Church still regards women as the potential baby factory meant to produce little Catholics to run the churches and convents, and also to provide them with financial support. They are not allowed to plan their families or practise birth control.

Modern Development

Prior to the rise of the present world religions this subordinate position of women did not always prevail. The down grading of women and excluding them from official positions in religion is a relatively modern development. We find that in ancient Egypt, Babylonia, Crete, Rome, and in America prior to the arrival of Columbus, women are known to have held high positions in the hierarchy. They appear to have performed high religious functions according to authorities on the subject.

In India during the earliest period of the Rigveda we find that “from old comes the wife to the public sacrifice and the festive gatherings. As orderer of the sacrifice comes the noble woman attended by men”. However by the time the Mahabharata was written women had been badly demoted. We find the Mahabharata saying, “A woman has no sacrificial right, no religious feast or fast, the wife obtains heaven solely by obedience to the husband.”

By the time the Buddha appeared, woman had little authority in both religion and secular matters. In the field of religion she had hardly any place worthwhile speaking about. Her hope of prestige lay in becoming the mother of sons who could perform the rites of his father’s funeral. These were considered essential for the departed person’s welfare in the next world. On such occasion the daughters were of no importance. Woman was not considered an individual with her own human rights, but as a possession or thing. (Itthi bhandana muttamam). She lived her entire life under the domain of one man or the other, i.e. first the father and later under her husband. If widowed she could be under her father or her son. Although this was so under the orthodox tradition where the Brahmins and their Vedas held sway, the position was being undermined by those who did not accept the authority of the Vedas, Maha Bharata and Brahmanism.

The Jains had just broken new ground by opening up avenues in their religious life for women, and that too only in the Magada country where they had some following. Both Buddhism and Jainism rejected the authority of the Vedas, refuted the idea of God and followed independent religious trends. Both Jainism and Hinduism were unorthodox sects from the point of view of Brahmanism. There was no Hinduism as we know it now at that time, the

present Hindu pantheon and literature came later on. Only the three Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and the earliest of the Upanishads were extant at that time, and they too were not committed to writing.

It is at such a time that the Buddha appeared and took steps to found an order of Nuns on the same lines as the order of monks. Most of us are familiar with the story of the inauguration of the Order of Nuns by the Buddha. Here we find the Buddha hesitant, and even unwilling to open the doors of the religious life in the Order to women. It is after much pleading and bringing in pressure by the Ven. Ananda that the Buddha consented to inaugurate the Order of Nuns. The Anguttara Nikaya says that the Buddha laid down eight strict conditions (Atta Garu Dhamma) which guaranteed the supremacy of the monks over the nuns.

These conditions appear to us humiliating and calculated to preserve the superior position which men had hitherto enjoyed in the field of religion. The implication of these eight rules is in keeping with the doctrines of the other world religions that all men by virtue of their sex, are by that very reason superior to all women. This position is very embarrassing to the modern exponent of Buddhism, and we have to constantly resort to apologetics to defend the so-called position taken by the Buddha. After laying down these conditions the Buddha is reported to have said:

“If Ananda, women had not been allowed to go forth the home to the homeless life, then long would have lasted the higher life, for a thousand years would the Saddhamma have lasted. But now since women have gone forth, not for long will the holy life last. Just for 500 years will the Good Doctrine (Saddhamma) last.” This prophecy turned out to be a hollow one, and again we are called upon to do much quibbling, to defend it resorting to all kinds of apologetics, reminding one of the Christians trying to defend the false prophecy of Jesus Christ that the world would end within the life time of his disciples.

Several Disparaging Passages

In addition to this there are several disparaging passages referring to women in the Pali Texts attributed to the Buddha. These disputable references are likely to be passages cooked up by the monks who drew up the texts. If we take up the orthodox and strictly conservative position that the Pali texts are the very words of the Buddha, we will have to come to the inevitable conclusion that he was not a very enlightened being. We who believe in his Enlightenment in the light of his teachings in other matters must refuse to accept these passages at their face value. Authorities of the eminence of Miss I. B. Horner, in her “Women under Primitive Buddhism” and Pandit Dhammananda Kosambi in his

“Bhagavan Buddha” doubts the authenticity of these passages. Miss Horner in her book referred to above says,

“It is sometimes impossible to disentangle the original matter from later accretions, and in many places it appears as if much of what Gotama thought, said, and did, has become lost or distorted. If the monk-factor be kept in mind, some of the distortions may be accounted for and rectified. It partially explains the views, some favourable to men than to women, more favourable to monkdom than to lay life which are usually ascribed to Gotama.”

On the same question E. J. Thomas says, “The most thorough treatment of the whole question of nuns is by Miss M. E. Lulus Van Goor. (Die Buddhistische Non) who rejects the legend entirely.” (The Life of Buddha as Legend and History).

It should be noted that there are other passage in the Pali texts where the Buddha expresses views completely opposed to those I have referred to above. Take for instance his admonition to King Pasenadi of Kosala who appeared disappointed when he got a message that his queen had given birth to a daughter. “A woman child, O Lord of men, may prove even a better offspring than a male” (Majjhima Nikaya). A well-known saying of the Buddha from the Suttas is “Na so sabbesu thanesu puriso hoti pandito, Itthipi pandita honti, tattha tattha vicakkhana”. “Man is not wise in every situation. Women are also discerning and wise in certain situations and cases.” These are at variance with the unjust remarks, and prejudiced utterances ascribed to him. His most significant utterance was that “Women are capable of attaining full enlightenment, after treading the Noble Eightfold Path.” Once having made this admission there was nothing he could do but to admit women into the Order of Nuns.

Now what could be the reason for the Buddha to admit women into the Bhikkhuni Sangha? In all probability it must have been the climate of public opinion during his day. As we have seen it was a society where women were held to be inferior beings. A religious leader cannot afford to antagonize the lay society on which his order of disciples was entirely dependent on. The matter had to be given weighty consideration, and a progressive and correct innovation had to be brought in with circumspection. If the Buddha forged ahead far too much above the level of development of the society of his time, he would find himself isolated, standing alone. His monks and nuns would have no support from the people. They would be preaching to a hostile people.

The Buddha wished to avoid this situation. He knew very well that his venture would be out of keeping with the times, and very strange to the cultural patterns of the people of his time. The Jains had instituted an order of nuns, and had

broken new ground. This was a favourable factor to be reckoned with. But their influence was not great and was confined only to parts where the Brahmins did not hold undisputed sway, e.g. Magadha. Once the women were admitted to the Sangha, the results were spectacular. It was a splendid success. There arose many eminent nuns who shone brilliantly in the study and practice of the Dhamma. In the eyes of the world, Buddhism was raised to a very high level. The Psalms of the Sisters (Therigatha) containing 77 verses by individual nuns is one of the prides of Buddhist literature.

The Buddha did not place any restrictions on nuns in the matter of teaching and preaching of the Dhamma. The Bhikkhuni Order produced a remarkable number of brilliant preachers and exponents of the Dhamma, e.g. Sukha, Patacara, Khema, Dhammadinna, and Prajapati, the foster mother of the Buddha. The able exposition of the Dhamma by learned nuns must have been the envy of many lesser able monks. All authorities on Indian history agree that from the time of the Buddha to Asoka the position of women in India improved by leaps and bounds as a result of the emancipation of women by the Buddha. Buddhism never shared the Brahmin view that a son was essential for the father's passage to heaven. Daughters became quite as good as sons and marriage was no longer a compulsory necessity. Women under Buddhism had the liberty to lead an independent life and go about their own business. The Buddha by granting women an active share in the religious life also helped to raise their status in secular life as well.

The admission of women into the Order was a step too advanced for the period. So it was not the Good Doctrine (Saddhamma) that became short-lived, but the improved status of women as Nuns. Whenever an innovation or improvement is in advance of the thinking and development of a people during a particular era, we find that people become unable to adapt themselves to the improved conditions. So they tend to regress back to the society that they are used to and conditioned to think is good for them. They fail to master the situation. Hostile propaganda by the Brahmins who found their caste system undermined, and privileges giving way was also a factor to reckon with. This baneful tendency is noticeable even in the life-time of the Buddha.

The problem of women became a subject of dispute at the first Council held soon after the passing away of the Buddha. There were some who blamed the Ven. Ananda for pressing the Buddha to admit women into the Bhikkhuni Sangha. When Fa-Hien and Hien Tsang visited India they found the nuns ever grateful to the Ven. Ananda for pleading on their behalf commemorating his memory and respecting him. By the time the "Questions of Milinda" was written we find the position of women deteriorating, and a woman without a husband is referred to in derogatory terms. There are references disparaging

women ascribed to the Buddha in the “Milinda Panha”. No systematic history of the Order of Nuns was kept in India. It is likely to have died out at the time of the foreign invasion. We know from Manimekala the classical poem in Tamil literature that the Order of Nuns was flourishing in India during the time it was written. In Ceylon the Order of Nuns flourished till the time of King Mahinda IV, and with the invasion of the Island by Tamils from South India in 1017 A.C., it disappeared and was not revived again. But the Order of Nuns was introduced in China by Singhalese nuns, and still exists there as well as in Japan. But in the Mahayana tradition they occupy a subordinate place, and are by no means on par with the monks.

Eight Strict Conditions

An elderly nun, who has led an exemplary life, long in the Order would obviously be entitled to admonish a young monk for his lapses. But that she is debarred from doing so is gross injustice and a flagrant discrimination against women. The Eight Strict Conditions (Ashta Garu Dhamma) imposed on women who enter the Order of Nuns allegedly on the authority of the Buddha constitute the worst form of tyrannical coercion on religious matters. There is no Order of Nuns in the Theravada countries now. It is better not to have an Order of Nuns at all, than have one with humiliating conditions out of tune with the climate of trends in the modern world. The Eight Conditions sentence women to perpetual inferiority. To perpetuate it in the name of the Buddha is the greatest disservice we can do to the Master. It will bring Buddhism to disrepute, and cause the noble teachings of the Buddha to be unpopular if not repulsive to women, particularly women in the West.

The low status given to women is a common feature of all world religions. This is not the result of teachings of any one man, be he St. Paul or the Buddha. It is due to the social thinking of men at the time of the rise of these religions and the time of their being recorded. At that time the only practical social system that was geared to maintaining the inalienable rights of property, was the patriarchal system. And woman was part of that property, like other household assets, and domestic animals.

Buddhists should think in terms of the Buddha’s teachings in the Kalama Sutta. We should be able to repudiate the discriminatory passages which are inconsistent with the compassionate and enlightened teachings of the Buddha on women found in many parts of the Pali Texts. There are several such disputable passages in the texts on several other topics as well. These are the results of monkish accretions, additions, and distortions. The Pali Texts are not the infallible words dictated by some superhuman beings. They are the work of men, there are obvious human mistakes there. It is by resorting to such a

revision of doubtful passages that we can gear the Dhamma to be of value in the modern world. Obscurantist “back to the wall” defence of the “sacred scriptures” will not help. It may be of help to the old conservative types of people. But Buddhism will not be able to forge ahead with its missionary work in the modern world, unless these millstones hanging on its neck are discarded.

