

## **BUDDHA'S APPROACH TOWARDS WOMEN STATUS**

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One of the best ways to understand the spirit of civilisation and to appreciate its excellences and realise its limitations is to study the history of the position of women in it.<sup>1</sup> The position of women in a society is the true index of its cultural, religious and spiritual levels. The position of women is the best criteria for estimating with precision the degree of civilization attained by a particular society during various periods of its history. We observe that in the pre-Buddhist period the position of women in India was considerably lowered down, especially when one compares it to the early *Vedic period*. In ancient times in all patriarchal societies the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event. Almost everywhere the son was valued more than the daughter.<sup>2</sup> In the *Brahmana* literature there is one passage observing that while the son is the hope of the family, the daughter is a source of trouble to it.<sup>3</sup> From the Vedic time downwards women have been regarded as impure during the time of confinement also.<sup>4</sup> P. Lakshmi Narasu writes that,<sup>5</sup> "ancient India was notorious for the looseness of its morality. *Vedic* worship was highly sensual. Indra the principal *Vedic* deity, was not only an indulger in the intoxicating *Soma*, but also an adulterer. *Paundarikam* was a sacrifice in which the sexual act was worshipped, and which in later times developed into the worship of the phallus as Mahadeva. The priests, who spoke of themselves as the representatives of gods on earth, indulged largely in sexual debauchery. The priest was enjoyed by a special rule to commit adultery with the wife or another during a particularly holy ceremony, but if he could not practise continence, he might expiate his sin by a milk-offering to Varuna and Mitra. Naturally the sentiments towards women was low. Altekar mention that,<sup>6</sup> "in his early history man is seen excluding woman from religious service almost everywhere because he regarded her as un-clean, mainly on account of her periodical menstruation..... The Aryans also regarded the women as untouchable during her monthly period.....The *Vedic* age assigned this temporary impurity of women to their taking over from Indra one third the sin of *Brahmana* murder, which he incurred when he had killed *Vritra*. During this period, therefore, Hindu society has been regarding women as extremely impure and temporarily untouchable." But in the *Vedic* age women enjoyed all the religious rights and privileges, which men possessed.<sup>7</sup> The present attitude of Hindu society towards women is unsympathetic; if a woman has the misfortune of falling into captivity even for a short time, she finds it impossible to get readmission into her family and society. We just take the example of Shri Ramachandra, who refused to accept back Sita Devi after the overthrow of Ravana. He informed her that all his efforts to kill Ravana were only for the purpose of avenging the wrong done to him; he had no idea whatsoever of accepting back a wife, who had stayed so long in the house of the enemy.<sup>8</sup> After this Ramachandra's attitude, Sita reply that being in captivity, she was no longer the master of her person; she could command only her mind and that was always faithful to her husband.<sup>9</sup> This explanation did not satisfy Sri Rama; he accepted Sita

only when a superhuman agency vouchsafed her continuous chastity. In the *Mahabharata* in one place we are told that sensual enjoyment is the sole aim of woman's existence.<sup>10</sup> Another mention that "women deserve no independence was not literally interpreted even by those who neglected the protection aspect of the doctrine. Manu, for instance, allows the wife large powers in the management of the household. It was she who was to control its expenditure and supervise the general arrangements of the kitchen furniture."<sup>11</sup> Altekar mention that the history of the most of the known civilizations shows that the further back we go into antiquity, the more unsatisfactory is found to be the general position of women.<sup>12</sup> Through the study of literature pertaining to the position of women, we come to a conclusion that the general position and status of women were changing from time to time, and so naturally the attitude of society towards them could not remain the same in different periods. In one side women play an important role in the religious activity and on the other side she is restricted to take part in religious activities.

In the sixth century B. C. when the Buddha was born at that time the position of women was not in a good condition like in the early *Vedic* period. In all cultures and during all times, women have never been considered mere entities or totally ignored. However, they have never been accorded the same kind of universal respect conferred upon men. But the course of history also shows that however much men were regarded as superior, women frequently challenged this conception and sometimes won a more honoured standing both in life and literature.<sup>13</sup> It is generally believed that the Buddha was a great social reformer, a believer in the equality of all human beings, a democrat and that his efforts for the emancipation of women and lower castes created a sort of social revolution in society.<sup>14</sup> Before Buddhism, women was also participating in religious activities, but their participation was not so independent like Buddhism. In the *Saddharmapundarikam* the Buddha appears on his holy mountain surrounded by multitudes of disciples, and among them are six thousand female saints. In the Buddhist texts women are always named before men. That the Buddha often warned men against the dangers that lurk in man's attraction for women as naturally wicked.<sup>15</sup> According to I. B. Horner, in the pre-Buddhist days the situation of women in India was on the whole low and without honour. During the Buddhist epoch there was change. Women came to enjoy more equality and greater respect and authority than ever hitherto accorded to them. Horner given the credit for this supposed change to the Buddha for he "gave the *Dharma* to both (men and women)". "Under Buddhism, more than ever before, she was an individual in command of her own life until the dissolution of the body and less of a chattel, to be only respected of she lived through and on a men. The old complete dependance, in which the will never functioned but to obey, was gradually vanishing."<sup>16</sup> According to another Buddhist historian, "Buddhism alongwith Jainism but unlike *Brahmanism* gave equal opportunity in religious culture to women."<sup>17</sup> According to Ambedkar also the Buddha was an upholder of the doctrine of the equality of sexes.<sup>18</sup> P. Lakshmi Narasu mention that, "man and woman are placed by the Buddha on the same footing of equality."<sup>19</sup> It is mentioned that Buddha was firstly not in favour of admitting women as nuns in his order and agreed to do so

after the repeated requests of his foster mother *Mahaprajapati* Gotami were supported by Ananda. While admitting women into the order eight rules was imposed upon them.<sup>20</sup> But the attitude of the Buddha at all more sympathetic to women than the attitude of other contemporary leaders and thinkers. The Buddha's firstly denying to enter the women into the *Sangha* did not shows his views against women. He may think that the women who is performing their household activity efficiently can get salvation their also by performing them according to the rules laid down for lay devotees.<sup>21</sup> Some scholar mention the eight rules to say the least highly insulting for women. It is not like this some of those rules were obviously framed from the point of view of the security of the nuns (for example rule no.-2) and the other was framed with the other purpose in view. In starting the Buddha made nuns to dependent on monks. It may be possible due to that the Buddha had already delivered teaching to the monks and in place of repeating it again he preferred women to consult and get knowledge from monks. Which was later misinterpreted that the Buddha made rules for nuns to made them dependance on monks. These rules was not to be forever it may be for some period, when they get all the teachings from monks then they can manage by herself. It is no wonder that rules were laid down for the intercourse of *Bhikhus* with women and of *Bhikshunis* with men, and for their admitting into the *Sangha*. But no where in any of the utterances of the Buddha do we find any thing to show that he made any differences between men and women. If he honoured Maudgalyana and Sariputra he also held in high esteem Khema, the wife of the king Bimbisara, and Dhammadinna, the chief among the *Bhikshunis* that preached the *Dharma*. Unlike the nuns of Christendom the *Bhikshunis* were allowed as much freedom to preach the *Dharma* as the *Bhikshus*. It is said that no religion has a woman played such a prominent part as Visakha has done in Buddhism.<sup>22</sup> It is said that five year after he attained enlightenment Gotama is said to have received a deputation in the Nigrodha Park from a large company of women, who arrived led by Mahaprajapati the Gotami, his aunt and foster mother, all of them dressed in the yellow robes, travel-stained their feet swollen. On the plea of Ananda they were admitted into the *Sangha*. I. B. Horner mention that Gotama never hinted that women had not the same chance as man or was in any way unfitted by her nature to attain *Nirvana*. The way of salvation was not closed to women.

"And be it women, be it man for whom  
Such chariot doth wait, by the same car  
Into *Nirvan's* presence shall they come."<sup>23</sup>

These lines clearly show that the Buddha himself was willing to afford women equal chances and opportunities with men and never suspected their capacities. The unequivocal frankness of this statement is not unique. Besides the *dictum*, already mentioned, that "they are capable", in the *Anguthra Nikaya* Gotama is represented as saying that mother and son by following the Noble Eightfold Way are able to overcome the three terrors<sup>24</sup> P. Lakshmi Narasu mention that the Buddha,

admitted women into the *Sangha* with the following reply : "Are the Buddha born only for the benefit of men? Have not Visakha and many others entered the paths? The entrance is open to women as well as men. "Thus did the Buddha give woman an independent status and place her on a footing of equality with man.<sup>25</sup> According to Ambedkar, "no caste, no inequality, no superiority : all are equal. That is the Buddha stood for.<sup>26</sup> Rhys Davids has stressed that Buddhism "ignores completely and absolutely all advantage and disadvantages arising from birth, occupation or social status and sweeps away all barriers and disabilities arising from the arbitrary rules of mere ceremonial or social impurity.<sup>27</sup> It is possible that Mahaprajapati Gotami came late into the order, after her husband had died. There were lay-women adherents from the quite early days. The first women to become lay disciples by the formula of the holy triad were the mother and the former wife of Yasa, the noble youth. Their conversion took place soon after the first sermon preached in the Deer-Park at Sarnath, and just after Yasa's father, the merchant had become a lay-disciple, and Yasa himself had attained full enlightenment and had become freed from the *Asavas* (Cankers).<sup>28</sup> In the *Chullavaga*, the Buddha's opinion regarding women are mentioned that : "If Ananda, women had not received permission to go out from the household life and enter the homeless state under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata, then would the pure religion have lasted long. The good law would have stood fast for a thousand years. But since Ananda, women have now received that permission, the pure religion will not now last so long the good law will stand only for 500 years.<sup>29</sup> It can be hardly denied that the Buddha was always sympathetic, courteous and helpful to his women contemporaries.<sup>30</sup> It may be the wrong interpretation of monks because the commentary and interpretation of Buddha's teaching is done by monks and they may have shown their own superiority over women. The Buddha gave the *Dharma* to both; he also gave talks to the householders and their wives.<sup>31</sup> Buddhism is a religion of humanity and is a religion of welfare of human beings (*Bahu jana hitaya* and *bahu jana sukhaya*). Buddha talk about for the welfare of all living beings then how can he have negative attitude towards women. He gave his teachings to human beings so that their suffering can be removed. The main motto of his teachings was to bring happiness for human beings and make them free from sufferings. The word human beings includes both men and women then how he is against women?

Many scholar are of the opinion that the Buddha was more a social reformer than a philosopher. His attitude towards women was therefore more enlightened and considerate. Ancient Indian history reveals that women enjoyed more freedom in the Buddhist period than in any other period of Ancient India. Horner also mention regarding the above anti- women statement of Buddha that "although this statement is strongly worded, and is usually interpreted to mean that Gotama grudged women their entry into the order, it would be mistaken to let one utterance colour our entire opinion of his attitude towards this situation. It should be remembered too, that monks edited the sayings attributed to Gotama, and they would naturally try to minimise the importance which he gave to women.<sup>32</sup> Alongwith many reformative activities such as not to believe in caste system, sacrifices and ritual ceremonies,

Buddhism tried to uplift the position of women in the society. At least a general awareness was created as to regard women as human beings and allow them to express their rights. It was definitely not a period when law-givers acted upon the slogan, *Nastri svatantrayamarhati* (women does not deserve a freedom).<sup>33</sup> When the eight rules was imposed on the women to admitted in the *Sangha* at that time mahaprajapati was confident that women would gradually reach the respectable position in the *Sangha*. The observation of these eight laws reveals that they were not humillating or harmful but were promulgated to keep a pure and amicable atmosphere in both the *Sanghas*.<sup>34</sup> *Therigatha* states that many women after listening to Gotami religious sermons had joined the order which speaks of her missionary activities. She was very popular amongst the people and had a great rapport with them. The Buddha had appreciated her work and had declared that "she is the foremost jewel amongst women disciples."<sup>35</sup> With the admission of Mahaprajapati started the *Bhikshuni Sangha*. Altekar mention the admission of women to the Buddhist order gave a great impetus to the cause of female education among the ladies in commercial and aristocratic families.<sup>36</sup> He also mention that among the famous ladies in Buddhism are of them like Sanghamitra went even to foreign countries like Ceylon and became famous there as teacher of the Holy scriptures. Among the authoresses of *Therigatha*, who were all believed to have obtained the salvation, 32 were unmarried women and 10 married ones.<sup>37</sup> Buddhism declared that womanhood was no bar to salvation.<sup>38</sup> The permission that was given to women to join the Church by Jainism and Buddhism raised a new and respectable carrier before them.<sup>39</sup> Buddha owing to the pressing entreaties of his foster mother, he eventually decided with great reluctance to admit nuns into his Church.<sup>40</sup> Among the nuns of the *Therigatha* the majority consists of women, who had renounced the world during their maidenhood. The carrier of preaching and evangelising that was thus opened before women by Jainism and Buddhism attracted a large number of talented ladies, who distinguished themselves as teachers and preachers. Several inscriptions shows that senior nuns had their own female disciples and novices and used to possess influence sufficient to collect funds necessary for the maintenance of the establishments. We find such heiresses, refusing tempting marriage offers and joining the preaching army of the new religions. Such for instance, was the care of Gutta, Anopama and Sumedha, who eventually become very famous preachers.<sup>41</sup> Similar was the case of Sanghamitra, the daughter of Asoka, who went to far off Ceylon, to spread the teachings of the Buddha. Self-mastery, the taming of the self, and formation of character are among the highest ideals set forth by Buddhism; and Gotama might have conceived that an added reason for admitting women would be on account of the more stringent discipline that their presence would necessitate.<sup>42</sup> he further added that conscious of all this he would have realised that now was the time to open the order without distinction of sex, as it had been opened earlier without distinction of caste.<sup>43</sup> The eventual permission, which the Buddha accorded to the admission of women to his order, gave an impetus to the spread of education and philosophy among the women. Many women used to lead a life of celibacy, with the aim of understanding and following the eternal truths of

religion and philosophy. By this it is but natural that the general average of intelligence and education among women must have been fairly high. A. S. Altekar mentioned that in the early period the Buddhist movement gave an indirect impetus to female education and produced a number of nun poetesses.<sup>44</sup> What Gotama did for women shines as a bright light in the history of freedom; and it brought its own rewards, not fugitive but lasting.<sup>45</sup>

In the pre-Buddhist period women rights to pursue religious life and move freely in the society were considerably restricted. However with the rise of Buddhism the Indian women found new dimension of life which made her to stand boldly in the society. She became more assertive and conscious of the latent individuality. According to Horner the association of the large number of educated women with early Buddhism proves what Buddha had done for the emancipation of the weaker sex.<sup>46</sup> It was a period, which seemed to have revived the memories of ancient *Rsikas* like Gargi, Ghosa, Apala etc, who had contributed to *Rigvedic* society. A period from the sixth century to second century B.C. was the one where women enjoyed a fair amount of social freedom.<sup>47</sup> Mahrajapati Gotami as a nun she was always alert about injustices being inflicted on women. *Nissaggiya* rule number seventeen<sup>48</sup> states that some monk took under advantage of nuns and made them to wash, dye and comb sheep's wool for making woollen garments. This type of exploitation was so great that nuns could hardly get enough time for meditations and spiritual practices. Maharajapati Gotami protested against this and brought it to the notice of the Buddha who took prompt action and made laws to forbid such types of oppression on nuns. It shows monks wants to make their superiority over women, and in the Buddha's perception he did not make any difference between men and women. After her ordination Mahaprajapati came to Buddha and the Buddha preached to her and gave her a subject for meditation, with this topic she developed insight and soon after won *Arahatship*, while her five hundred companions attained to the same after listening to the *Nandakovada Sutta*. Later, at an assembly of monks and nuns in Jetavana, the Buddha declared Pajapati chief of those who had experience (*Rattannunam*).<sup>49</sup> In *Therigatha* we come across many widows like Canda, Sona, Vuddhamata, etc., who took refuge in the Buddhism under the guidance of Mahaprajapati Gotami. The act of Gotami definitely contributes in enhancing the social status of a women in the society. She must have proved an angel of mercy to many women, especially widows. She was therefore very popular and after his death she was given an unique honour which was impossible for any ancient Indian women to receive. The miracles at her cremation rites were second only to those of the Buddha.<sup>50</sup>

Another Buddhist famous women Visakha<sup>51</sup> was a house wife who served the Buddha and his order. Householders (*Upasaka*) formed an important part of Buddhist religion and Visakha was the most prominent amongst female lay devotees. She was a very prominent *Upasika* (housewife) and portrayed in *Vinaya Pitaka* and *Nikaya*. She took keen interest in the progress of Buddhist *Sangha*, fortunately she was very lucky and could make lavish donations to the *Sangha*. She had donated eighteen crores of golden coins to a monastery named Pubbarama Vihara.<sup>52</sup> Rahul

Sankrityayana<sup>53</sup> has pointed out that she had made a charity worth of twenty seven crores in the cause of *Sangha*. Besides such philanthropic deeds she vigorously took interest in the activities of the *Sangha*. She was the first and perhaps the last lady in the Buddhist community to promulgate eight laws.<sup>54</sup> for the monks which were sanctioned by the Buddha and incorporated in the *Vinaya* Laws. She had given explanations and reasons for the need of making such laws for the monks. She requested the Buddha to allow monks to use a little Jar, broom, fan, and palmyra whisk<sup>55</sup>, which would give little comforts to them. She had also made a house of grass (*Salinda Pasadam*) for the *Sangha*.<sup>56</sup> The Buddha often sought her advice at the time of crisis. Once a certain lady not knowing that she was pregnant joined the nunnery.<sup>57</sup> As she realized her condition she narrated it to her preceptor, Devadatta. Devadatta expelled her from the *Sangha*; she then came to the Buddha who appointed a tribunal. Visakha was appointed as one of the members of this tribunal. She found the nun innocent and pleaded to give her shelter in the nunnery, as a special case. At this juncture she requested the Buddha to promulgate two rules which are known as *Aniyata Rules*.<sup>58</sup> These two rules are very important as they insist from the society on a treatment of decency and decor towards women. The Buddha gave consent to her suggestions that reveals his confidence in her. I. B. Horner mention, then Visakha herself eminent, trustworthy and single-minded in her efforts improved the conditions in the order, is instrumental in bringing to all reliable women lay followers the responsibility of procuring investigation into monks conduct.<sup>59</sup> Visakha helped the Buddhist Church in various ways and become a part of *Sangha*. she helped monks. instructed them and imposed rules on them.

Another famous Buddhist lady was Sanghamitra, daughter of the King Ashoka, who requested her to renounce the world and she become a nun.<sup>60</sup> She become a very successful nun and according to commentaters, she was a well wisher of all the people and cared for their benefit and happiness.<sup>61</sup> She was the first women missionary of India who went abroad to propagate the religious teachings at Sri Lanka. She converted Anuladevi along with five hundred ladies and establish a nunnery in Lanka. She became very popular figure and all respected her. She died at the age of fifty nine and King Uttiya of Lanka constructed a stupa over her relics. This stupa was known as Thuparama Puratha.<sup>62</sup> Through the study we can say in the early history of Buddhism, however, the permission given to women to enter the order gave a fairly good impetus to the cause of female education, a large number of ladies joined the order and became life long students of religion and philosophy. Their example must have given an indirect encouragement to the spread of education among lay women as well. During the Buddhist epoch there was a change. Women came to enjoy more equality, and greater respect and authority then ever hitherto accorded them. Although their activities were confined within certain sphere-principally the domestic social and religious-their position in general began to improve. The exclusive supermacy of man began to give way before the increasing emancipation of women.<sup>63</sup> In India for a long time education was imparted by individual teachers on their own houses and responsibility. With the development of Buddhism as organised public educational institution came into existence. Buddhism

threw their doors open to all, irrespective of any considerations of caste or country. It raised the international status of India by the efficiency of its higher education, which attracted students from distance countries.

During the Buddhist period, the women of India attained remarkable success and achieved glory in the sphere of education, culture and spiritual potentialities. The Buddha spread his message for the good of the many (*Bahu jana hitaya, bahu jana sukhaya*). Based on the compassion for humanity, a tradition matured in North India under the Kusanas (70-480 A.D.) and the Guptas (320-650 A.D.), it developed the ideal of salvation of all, the discipline of devotion and the way of universal service. In its essence and inner core Buddhism was primarily a religion for recluses, male and female. During this period, *Bhikshuni* attained the highest stage of *Arhathood*.<sup>64</sup> The *Therigatha* clearly illustrates the high degree of proficiency attained by the women in Buddhism. *Therigatha* is a celebrated volume of psalms, consisting of more than five hundred stanzas, and attributed to seventy one Buddhist *Theris*. The central core of these songs was the glorification of the Buddhist ideals of renunciation and attainment of *Nirvana*. We note a galaxy of reputed Buddhist women preachers and teachers of the day recorded in classical Buddhist works. To mention only a few, Dhammadinna was regarded as the most celebrated women preacher (*Dhammakattika*), Sukka was another great woman, who revealed the essence of Buddhist religion to a wide circle of followers. Patachara influenced as many as five hundred women to join the order to gain salvation. Khema, wife of King Bimbisara was another great soul who was described by the Buddha himself as nun par-excellence. In the *Vinaya Pitaka*, Thullananda is referred to as a great women teacher of the Dhamma and as a famous recitor, Princess Sumona and Princess Chandi, entered into enlightening dialogues with the master-the Buddha and earned the recognition as women of great enlightenment. The detail discussion shows the position of women in the Buddha's time high comparatively to the later *Vedic* period. Buddha never made any differences between men and women and his main motto was to remove sufferings of human beings, then they can attain *Nirvana*.

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9. Ibid., p. 196 ;  
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Privvyj jchchh me yan chiritrinis Le spe (6)  
Vadhyh jitrshsusr jhsimh vivsi prbho  
Kam karo na me tantra divh tksipridhyita (7)  
Madhenv tu-yammte hdyam vuiyt prvte  
Pradhinesu jitrisu ki-krisvabhynisvra (8)*
10. *Mahabharata*, kumbhakonam ed., 1906-9, IV, 39, 78 (B) ;  
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  1. A nun, even of a hundred years standing, must make salutation to and bow down before a monk if only just initiated.
  2. A nun must not spend the rainy season in a district in which there was no monk.
  3. Every fortnight a nun must know from the monks the date of *Uposatha* and the day fixed for monks address (*Ovada*) to nuns.
  4. A nun must perform *Pavarana* first in the *Bhikkhu Sangha* and then in the *Bhikkhuni Sangha*.
  5. A nun trained in six *Pachittiya* rule of *Bhikkhuni Patimokkha* should seek *Upasampada* from both the *Sanghas*.
  7. On no pretext a nun was to revile or abuse a *Bhikkhu*.
  8. A nun must not admonish a monk and she must not prescribe any date for *Uposatha* or *Pavarana* for monks ; the official admonition of the nuns by monks, however, was not forbidden.
21. Vide *Lalitavistara* ed. by Leftamnn, P. 15.
  1. One should not kill.
  2. One should not steal.
  3. One should not be sexually sinful.
  4. One should not speak a lie.
22. P. Lakshmi Narasu, op. cit., p. 121.
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*litybhivono ki kiyri chitimh susmaihyte*  
*Jhanimh ktminimh smmdhmym vipsssto.*
39. A. S. Altekhar, op. cit., No. 1 p. 209.
40. Ibid., p. 208.
41. *Therigatha*, 54, 56, 73.
42. I. B. Horner, op. cit., p. 112.
43. Ibid., p. 113.
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