

Research Article

Social Position of Women in Buddhist Discourse

Proggya Ghatak

Assistant Professor, Social Anthropology, Government General Degree College Singur,
West Bengal, India

Email id: proggyaghatak@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The scope of this paper advances and questions the social position of women as Buddhism moved across geographical bounds from the East to the West. In spite of ambivalence regarding the spiritual standing and community role of women even during the Buddha's own lifetime, Theravada Buddhism, established precepts and institutions that ultimately recognise women as spiritual equals in the Buddhist community. The inclusion of women in Buddhism the religious life, was extraordinary for the times in which Buddha lived. It was an elevation of women from inferior roles accorded them in secular life and an affirmation that women were as worthy as men when it came to spiritual attainment. It is only because the Buddha was questioned concerning women and women's roles that Buddha has provided detailed discourse on the role of women.

Keywords: Gender, Buddhism, Women, Discourse, Caste, Social position

INTRODUCTION

Today, Buddhist women around the world are struggling for gender equity and the same opportunities as men in their traditions to gain access to education and ordination. women perform vital functions in religion throughout Buddhist communities in Asia and abroad. There are historical precedents of similar struggles, beginning with Mahāpajāpati's charismatic leadership and valiant activism that initially won women admission to the *sangha* and continuing with the courageous actions of women, such as the Japanese nuns who reinvigorated the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage at Hokkeji in the thirteenth century. Despite resistance from men to accept that women are as eligible as they are for equal opportunities for ordination within entrenched Buddhist hierarchies, there is full

justification for this struggle available in the Buddhist canon itself. In the Buddhist world, until very recently, the reputed knowledge holders have been male. Upon reflection, this is rather odd, especially considering the nongendered nature of Buddhism's primary values: loving-kindness, compassion, knowledge, wisdom, authenticity, spiritual attainment, and liberation. In view of this apparent contradiction between the universal nature of fundamental Buddhist principles and unapologetic male dominance for more than two thousand years of Buddhist history and development, a reassessment of the lives and experiences of women within the tradition is imperative. The Buddhist traditions are not bereft of feminine imagery and exemplars. The legacy of eminent Buddhist women begins with Mahāmāyā, the woman who gave birth to Prince Siddhartha. Without her, there would have been no Siddhartha Gotama and hence no Buddha Śākyamuni. The Buddha offered special teachings to Mahāpajāpatī when she was a layperson and also after she was ordained as a nun. Her leadership in advocating for the admission of women to the monastic order is one of the earliest recorded instances of what today is termed feminist advocacy. Mahāpajāpatī's attempt to reverse one of these conditions; the one that clearly subordinates nuns to monks is evidence of her awareness of gender injustice and her determination to change it. The legacy initiated by Mahāmāyā and Mahāpajāpatī continues today with the scores of eminent Buddhist women working as agents of social change. Not only did Mahāpajāpatī and her many disciples become liberated from mental defilements, but they also freed themselves from the prescribed roles that society allotted them. They blazed new pathways for women both personally and socially. Instead of being confined to the expected female roles of housewife and mother, thousands of women at the time of the Buddha became seekers, many of whom were publicly recognized by the Buddha as outstanding exemplars of spiritual attainment. Sujata, a young village woman who had offered milk rice to the emaciated renunciant Siddhartha and who sustained the fledgling Buddha in the crucial days leading up to his final awakening, was one of the first to enter his newly discovered path to liberation. Mahāpajāpatī and the five hundred noble women who marched with her, traveling barefoot and resolute in their determined effort for women's rights, deserve immense appreciation and respect. Mahāpajāpatī succeeded in founding the *bhikkunī sangha* and skilfully guided its development until her death. Thousands of women became respected *arhats* and were recognized by the Buddha himself for their extraordinary attainments: Khema for her great wisdom, Uppalavanna and Patācārā for their exemplary monastic discipline, Dhammadinna for her proficiency in teaching Dharma, Nanda for her dedication, Sona for her energetic determination, and so on. Not only nuns, but also laywomen were acknowledged by the Buddha as eminent. Visākhā, the devout daughter of a millionaire, became renowned for her exceptional generosity to the *sangha*. It is essential to recognize the work of women and their inner attainments so that this knowledge and inspiration can be imparted to future generations. In an effort to elevate

the status of all women everywhere, especially because the struggles of women in earlier generations still remain largely unacknowledged and unappreciated, it is essential that we begin to collect these stories and bring to light the bountiful accomplishments of women thus far.

Social Position of Women in Buddhism

The consciousness of social attitudes towards gender equality has been one of the focal points in some religions like Buddhism and Jainism. In India around the 6th Century B.C., there were many philosophers who struggled to reform the traditional Brahman society by establishing all forms of social equality. These philosophers attempted to emphasise the biological and intellectual similarity of women and men. Before Lord Buddha established the Bikkhuni Sāsana, there were few female ascetic groups in India. According to Buddhist chronicle reports, there were Paribbājikās, Ājivikās, Jain nuns etc. The Buddhist story of *Kundala Keshi* shows that women had equal freedom to challenge their parallel *sanga* communities including male ascetic groups. Therefore, it is obvious that before the Buddha established an equal intellectual opportunity to women in the Buddhist society, there are few other women ascetic groups in contemporary India. Some scholars discussed this historical background and surprised about the limitations which were given by the Lord Buddha to women. In the beginning, the Buddha did not accept the request for ordination of Mahā-Pajāpatī Gōtamī. Then a large group of Sākya ladies cut their hair, dressed themselves in ascetic clothes and travelled the long distance to Vesālī on foot to show their loyalty and devotion to Buddhism. Finally, Lord Buddha gave permission to women to enter the ascetic life with the intervention of bhikku Ānanda. According to classical Buddhist texts, Mahaprajapati, the Buddha's step-mother and aunt, asked the Buddha to affirm the equal potential of women to achieve spiritual enlightenment and to recognize the right of women to wear the robe of a Buddhist mendicant which he did after some hesitation, for his cultural context was patriarchal Indian society. After the Buddha's death, however, earlier modes of gender relations began to reassert themselves around the time written Buddhist literature began to appear. Nonetheless, the order of women renunciates, the Bhiksuni Sangha, has continued to exist in some areas of Asia up to the present day. Lord Buddha also stated 'Vinayō nama Sāsanaṃ' or 'the disciplines mean the lifetime of the Buddhist dispensation. The achievement of wisdom and the existence of dispensation are totally different phenomena. The first one is spiritual and the second one is physical. Like a community of monks, nuns also had a very precise judicial system. The nun's right to activate in judicial system of monasteries, shows another dimension of women right in Buddhism. Moreover, in Buddhist societies, men are respected for their decent manners on women. A story of the Uthpalawannā Bhikkuni is a famous example. Lord

Buddha was concerned about the security of women as nuns and that may be the primary reason to refuse the first requests of Bhikkuni ordination. As the Buddha predicted the great disciple Uṭṭapalawaṇṇā who reached the first place of irdi faced tragic situation of sexual harassment. After that incidence Lord Buddha showed compassion to nuns and request from the king to facilitate bhikkuni monasteries only in urban areas. Many oppression ideas which charged Buddhism as a patriarchal religion depend on Vinaya pitaka. Similarly, a poor servant girl called Rajjumāla who experienced much harassment from her masters and finally tried for committed suicide was helped. The Buddha was involved solving her problem and supported in achieving the wisdom. Also, some theri gāta show the relief which obtained by women who faced many domestic violence. The poem belongs to the nun called Muttā is a great example. She has mentioned that she released from three obstacles named the pestle, the waking stick and her handicapped husband. They are symbols that reflect the duties of a woman in household, domestic violence and an unpleasant marriage life. In few sutta, Lord Buddha advised lay persons to respect their mothers, wives and daughters. He didn't encourage polygamy and tried to emphasise the benefit of limited on one spouse. According to Buddhism keeping illegal female or male partners and continue sexual relationships and cheating legal spouse is a sin. From the fundamental Buddhist rules called five Precepts or Panchasēla, the sexual misconduct is discouraged. In the Sigālowāda sutta, Lord Buddha admired lay persons who respected their wives and provided them necessities. He declared the duties of a husband. As expressed by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (2014), "Historically, there are at least four areas in which Buddhist women have found obstacles in their spiritual lives. The first area is religious practice, that is lifestyle customs, instructional opportunities, meditational forms, and institutional structures, many of which are routinely available to lay men and monks but are infrequently or never available to lay women and nuns; Second, the disciplinary rules that govern the monastic lives of nuns have clearly delineated them as second-class citizens in relation to monks. The best examples of this are the eight disciplinary rules said to have been laid down by Gotama Buddha. These eight rules, for example, require: all nuns to pay homage to all monks regardless of how senior a nun might be or how junior a monk might be; to be instructed by monks in the teachings and conduct of the tradition but not vice versa; to refrain from criticizing or reprimanding monks though the reverse may happen; and become ordained by the orders of both nuns and monks though the reverse does not happen. Third, although women are, by doctrine, fully capable of experiencing enlightenment, the recognition of that highest experience in terms of title and status has often been withheld from them. For example, the Pali term Arhat is often not applied to women, or the term bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism. Finally, female renunciates have at many times in Buddhist history been refused the kind of material support that male renunciates have received". The Buddha had also rejected the efficacy of speculation about God or

the cosmos. But his attention was directed towards the psychological nature of individual action; and instituting changes in society was not so important as changes in the individual; from that social changes would flow. In that sense, early Buddhism was a radically individualistic doctrine, though it stressed a social ethic and the role of a social organisation. The concept of the Dhamma as the basis for ‘reconstruction of the world’ moves the focus away from the individual to the social. Buddhism on the whole has been an individualistic religion. This can be looked at, from one point of view, as an advantage-because the ‘ordering of society’ by such religions has often involved the maintenance of social hierarchies and, even if they have been relatively equalitarian in ‘class’ terms, almost always gave rise to gender discrimination.

According to Buddhist Suttas and Abhidhamma the consciousness of femininity or machismo is a phenomenon which is constructed socially and culturally. Sexual category is not an obstacle to achieve wisdom and the goal of liberation. An explicit endorsement of women’s abilities to reach awakening can be found in a discourse in the Samyuttanikāya and its counterparts in two Samyukta-āgama collections translated into Chinese, which allegorically refer to a set of wholesome qualities as a vehicle for approaching liberation. The three versions agree that by means of this vehicle the goal of liberation can be reached independent of whether the one who mounts the vehicle is a woman or a man. In Samyuktaāgamas Māra appears as an advocate of ancient Indian machismo in this respect. The three versions describe how Māra accosts a meditating nun and tries to unsettle her by suggesting that a woman’s innate lack of wisdom renders her incapable of reaching realization. The nun is quick to give a fitting reply to this insinuation. After clarifying that gender is simply irrelevant, once the mind is concentrated, she tells Māra that with such talk he should better go to those who are still caught up in identifications with being a woman or being a man. The Mahāvaccagotta-sutta and its parallels give even higher numbers, recording that over five-hundred nun disciples of the Buddha had reached full awakening. In sum, there can be little doubt that early Buddhism did consider women to be fully capable of attaining the highest level of liberation. When it comes to the issue of being a Buddha, however, tradition takes the position that only a male is capable of fulfilling such a role. In the early discourses, the locus classicus for this position is the Bahudhātuka-sutta of the Majjhima-nikāya, according to which a woman is incapable of occupying various positions, one of them being that of a Buddha. The Bahudhātuka-sutta has several parallels which show some variations in their presentation of these impossibilities. Of particular significance is a Madhyama-āgama parallel which does not mention any inability of women at all. This Madhyama-āgama parallel to the Bahudhātuka-sutta was translated into Chinese by Gautama Sanghadeva towards the end of the fourth century, apparently based on a Prākṛit original transmitted within the Sarvāstivāda traditions. Thus, in this

respect the Madhyama-āgama version quite probably testifies to an early stage, when the theme of what women cannot achieve had not yet become part of the discourse. As part of the general tendency to expand on various impossibilities, however, this theme must have soon enough made its way into various versions of the discourse.

Theorizing Gender in Buddhism

The issue of women in Buddhism is a topic that has been approached from a variety of perspectives, including history, anthropology, feminism, and theology. Accordingly, the questions that can be asked about women in Buddhism are extensive. Among the most commonly cited concerns are: how Buddhist societies have traditionally viewed women and how Buddhist women have viewed themselves; what role women have traditionally played in the secular and religious life of Buddhist societies, and how that role might be expanded or changed; Buddhist women in the West; women and celibacy; inaccuracies in the history of Buddhist women; Buddhist women and the media; education for Buddhist women; the role of Buddhist women in social welfare; living by the Vinaya (monastic codes) in the present day; the creation of opportunities for full ordination for Buddhist women; living as a nun in the West; growing up as a Buddhist woman; and sexual conduct and misconduct. Questions like this address, of course, the issue of gender in religion more broadly than just in Buddhism. The classic model of Buddhism that emerged is referred to as the “two accumulations” or the symbiotic model. In this system male monastic elites engaged full-time in the accumulation of wisdom through study and meditation in a monastic setting, while laywomen earned merit by supporting these elite males. This division of labour was consistent with the view in the India cultural context that the ideal role for women was in the family. Limited by the socially approved roles for women, laywomen were to accumulate merit by tending to the family shrine, keeping the precepts, giving charity to the needy, chanting the sutras, transmitting the Buddha’s teachings to children, and making offerings to the male Sangha, among similar efforts. This inferior status for women was occasionally accompanied by negative stereotypes of women in both Theravada and Mahayana texts; and of course, to challenge the texts was to call into question their very validity. Nonetheless, these conflicting images of women in Buddhism have made the study of women in Buddhism complex and difficult. With considering contemporary social obstacles, Lord Buddha gave a limitation and Mahā-Pajāpati Gōtamī accepted the Eight Great Conditions. After offering Bhikkuni ordination, Lord Buddha stated that the existence of Buddhist dispensation has been reduced by half. With highlighting these statements, some modern scholars like Rita M. Gross, Diana Y. Paul and Kathrayan Blackstone have debated patriarchal attitudes in ancient Buddhism and Buddhist institutions. Especially Rita M. Gross offers an engaging survey of the change’ feminism has wrought in religious ideas, beliefs, and practices around the world, as well as in the study and understanding of religion itself. She has a

different argument on the relationship between Buddhism and patricidal concepts. She has rationalised the Buddha's teaching which introduced female birth as an obstacle to the wisdom with her own experiences. Buddha gave no comment or discourse on the subject of gender and whether there were any karmic factors in play that determined whether a person would be born male or female. Especially in modern times, non-Theravada Buddhist practitioners have stories (e.g. the Jakarta stories) in which males and females have delineated roles. A popular misperception persists that being born as a female may be seen as a negative consequence of "unskillful" practices and conduct. Although there is absolutely no basis for this perception it has become prevalent in many Buddhists lay communities. Buddhism's focus is predominantly on Universal Laws that are genderless and the pursuit of the enlightened state which is also beyond both the self and the sex.

The Dhamma basically ignores the sexual identity of the individual, since the gender identity, through transmigration and rebirth. Therefore, the individuals' current gender in a particular lifetime has very little import. The personal identity is also not thought to persist over many incarnations and is also viewed as unimportant. In Theravada Buddhism, the path of Buddha may be practised by anyone. Although Dhamma is the ultimate guide to the practice of Buddhism and is a path open to males or females. Morality (Sila), Spiritual Growth (Bhavana) and Wisdom (Pañña) are categories covered by the components of the Noble Eight-Fold Path. Of these three, only morality (Sila) makes any reference to different rules of conduct for males and females, and these are relatively minor and do not involve any spiritual aspects. The Buddha does express views on occasion that are compatible with social views and seem to be in agreement with the broad framework of the Dhamma. Buddhism espouses rules of reciprocity within the household of lay Buddhist members, emphasizing that although certain tasks may be best suited to certain genders, each sex has their own duties to look after. Buddha was very clear that the wife has duties to the husband and vice versa. Buddha extolled certain qualities in a woman, among them are beauty, virtue, and wealth. Chanting or symbolic offerings are the main ritualistic practices in Buddhism, and both men and women are able to practice these in the same manner, without restriction. As Buddhism moved across geographical bounds from the East to the West, it was introduced to cultural and social settings quite different from that in which it originated. According to such feminist assessments, Buddhism possesses a more egalitarian view of the social world and a less patriarchal structure than that of other major world religions. However, many feminists still maintain that "Buddhism as received tradition is not perfect and complete as it is. It needs to be revalorized by feminist insights in order to overcome patriarchal inadequacies and excesses, and to be true to its own vision" (Fisher, 2007, pp. 118-119). What followed was a rise in feminist evaluations of Buddhism, both

academically and spiritually. Feminists and social activists, both within and outside the Buddhist tradition, have concentrated efforts in areas of research such as female imagery in Buddhist texts, the ordination of nuns, the issue of race and gender, homosexuality and equal rights, environmental concern, and the image of the goddess. Other issues that have received special attention have been the role of the woman among different lineages of Buddhism including Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Zen. "Vajrayana Buddhism, for instance, has come under feminist criticism for the Tantric principle of the joined efforts of a man and a woman to achieve transcendental spiritual insights and powers" (Fisher, 2007, p. 117). In many suttas, Lord Buddha showed his concepts of gender equality. He always admired the intellectual capacity of women. In Verses of the Nuns Bhikkuni Dhammadinna was appreciated by Lord Buddha for her intellectual achievements. He advised her husband Sujāta to respect her as a sophisticated woman. In Mahāwachchayagotta sutta Buddha admired about the female community of Buddhism. In the Ariya Priesana Sutta of Majjima nikāya, the lay men were divided in to two groups considering their spiritual character as Apparajaḥkha and Maharajaḥkha. Lord Buddha always encourages the achievements of the four groups of Buddha Order. The two main groups of Buddhist community are Bhikkuni Snaga and Upāsikā or lay Buddhist women. They have represented gender equality in Buddhist dispensation. Also, the Lord Buddha kept the separation of Vinaya (Discipline) and Dhamma (Doctrine) from the beginning.

As mentioned above, in Dhamma or Doctrine, he always conceptualised the validity and capacity of human being without considering the gender. This would also explain why Buddhist tradition holds that someone about to become a Buddha will not take birth as a woman. To do so, at least in a patriarchal society like ancient Indian, would make it more difficult to successfully execute the role of being a Buddha, as people would have less respect for a female teacher. A parallel reasoning seems to underlie the circumstance that Buddhas are born in families from the warrior or Brahmin class (varna). This specification appears to be based on the same logic, since for a Buddha to be born in a low class would make it unnecessarily difficult to be sufficiently respected as a teacher. Thus, these specifications on the gender or the social class of a Buddha are an adaptation to ancient Indian society. They do not imply that gender or social class have a bearing on spiritual ability. Whereas the inability of a woman to be a Buddha can still be seen as an expression of leadership conceptions held in ancient Indian patriarchal society, once her ability to be a Buddha becomes part of the listing of impossibilities, the implications are clearly a diminishing of the spiritual abilities of women. This tendency can safely be assumed to stand in contrast to the original teachings of early Buddhism, whereas far as the texts allow us to judge gender was not considered to have an impact on spiritual abilities.

Gender Justice in Buddhism

Yet what might set the stage for gender justice in Buddhist institutions is marred by another, parallel narrative in which, oddly, the Enlightened One is represented as needing convincing before he allowed women to join the *sangha*. A revolution is currently under way in Buddhist societies to upset the myth of women's inherent inferiority and to rescind the restrictions placed on women as a consequence of their imposed second-rate status. There is nothing in the Buddhist scriptures to prevent such a revolution and much to support it. Over time, the legend of the Buddha's hesitation to admit women to the order worked to subvert his own ideal of a harmonious Buddhist society balanced among laywomen, laymen, nuns, and monks. Instead of this harmonious balance, the ritual and institutional subordination of nuns became canonised through the imposition of the "eight weighty rules," alleged by others to have been decreed by the Buddha, which has had a deleterious effect not only on the social and religious status of women in Buddhism, but also on the psychological, physical, and intellectual development of women up to the present day. The *bhikkunī* ordination issue serves as a litmus test for attitudes toward gender in Buddhist societies. The questions that are being debated among conservative Buddhist scholars in the Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhist traditions today about whether women should be allowed to take full ordination and, if they are, how it should be conducted are questions that the Buddha has already answered in full. The mystery is not what the Buddha would have said in such a situation but rather why so many Buddhist scholars and religious leaders are not listening to what the Buddha said. The frequently echoed assertion that *bhikkunī* ordination must wait until the next Buddha appears ignores the fact that Buddha Śākyamuni himself has already answered the question. The powerful established hierarchies hold change at bay, based on antiquated views of women's inferiority. Unwilling to relinquish these unreasonable and self-defeating views, some even manipulate the Buddhist teachings and the monastic codes to justify their dominance. Many monks are willing to ordain women as novices, although this is the right and duty of *bhikkunīs*, yet refuse to allow women access to full ordination. Access to full ordination for women both improves women's status and signals women's greater inclusion in Buddhist institutions, yet some Theravāda nuns argue against *bhikkunī* ordination on the grounds that it could work to keep women under the institutional thumb of the male elite. This line of argument assumes that institutional subordination is a Buddhist nun's only option, which is certainly not the case. Current efforts to restore the *bhikkunī* order around the world enable Buddhist women to affirm their own legitimacy. This is especially significant for women who are fully qualified and prepared to take their place within Buddhist institutional lines of authority, often for the first time. Renewal and invigoration of the *bhikkunī* order will help to usher in a welcome spiritual revolution that will benefit not only Buddhist nuns and laywomen, but also practising

Buddhists everywhere. In certain Buddhist societies, hiding in broad daylight and justified by the rhetoric of maintaining "the purity of the tradition," gender injustices continue to thrive. Bringing to light the stories of some of the unsung heroes among women who have challenged these clandestine codes and worked for social transformation, skillfully but without compromise, transports us closer to the enlightened society of the Buddha's vision.

CONCLUSION

The Buddhist feminist revolution is concerned with optimizing precious human opportunity, a widespread awakening that is transplanting itself deeply into the hearts of millions of women around the world today. To move this awakening forward, Buddhist women need greater opportunities in the real world to realise their potential. At present, for example, despite their numbers and accomplishments, Buddhist women have little representation at the United Nations and many other global forums. This lacuna stems in part from the fact that Buddhist women's capabilities and potential have not been fully recognized, even within their own communities. Another reason is that, until very recently, few Buddhist women have had access to the higher education and community leadership experience that is required to effectively take an active role in international discourse. Finally, it can be concluded that there is a necessity for re-establishing women's rights and attitudes toward gender equality in societies like South Asia. There are values and ethics that are already rooted in Buddhist minds on the rights of women. The philosophy of Buddhism always encourages women's intellectual careers and equal social behaviours as well as property rights. According to historical research, there were women who belonging to various social levels and castes who had achieved wisdom and secular prosperity. Other examples include Tibetan Buddhist myths of female rock demons and deities, and female bodhisattvas. Two of the most popular and contrasting portrayals of women can be found within the representations of Mara and Arya Tara. Mara is a female demon known within the Buddhist tradition to have tempted the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, trying to seduce him in order to distract him from enlightenment. Arya Tara, in contrast, is a female bodhisattva known for her characteristics of true compassion and healing qualities. Deeply intertwined with these issues is a profound concern for the compassion for all beings. "Many of the basic tenets of Buddhism, such as non-attachment, the transitory nature of life, the interconnectedness of all beings, karma and renunciation, support this viewpoint" (Findly, 2000, p.339). The relief of suffering in all aspects is central to the Buddhist path and therefore is an important principle to Buddhist feminists and activists. Buddhism considers the "spiritual and moral consciousness in which we take responsibility for not only ourselves but for how we affect other beings and the earth" (Findly, 2000, p. 339). Some women leaders

were able to dominate institutes related to religious and economic fields and some were able to rule the country. As emphasised above, these equalities in social status were acquired through changing people's thoughts according to Buddha dharma. Therefore, modern activists on rights of women and feminists can return to the Buddhist perspective to promote gender equality and empower women in the new millennium than importing Western theories into Asian societies.

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