

Does Buddhism provide low status to womenfolk? An inquiry with reference to Early Buddhist scriptures.

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Introduction

Beings in the world are different from each other both mentally and physically. In fact, human beings can also be categorized based on various grounds, the Gender is one of them. Gender difference has been caused many issues in the human world since the beginning. In the Pāli Canon, Aggaññasutta in Dighanikaya and the Genesis in the Holy Bible are the best examples that reveal the religious point of view of the beginning of the world. Each and every religion in the world has to address the same issue because the human world is more complicated and competitive. As a result, there can be seen an issue between male and female. Sometimes male tries to dominate their supremacy while the female is struggling to save their rights in modern day. These sort of strivings can never be solved because male and female are totally different in biologically as well as beings are even mentally different from others, according to Buddhist teachings. Both groups have their own duty which is biologically inherited to fulfil for the sake of the well-being of the society. In fact, no one can claim that either male or female is the best. The feminism is one of the modern approaches that took place to save and protect the rights of women today. Thus, feminists force whole society to have equal position for women in the world, same as males. Furthermore, they ask for equivalence same as male in every grounds such as religion, education, political, social etc. Most who were labeled as feminists have investigated the palace of women in Buddhism and proclaimed that women in Buddhism have low status. Therefore, this paper will be confined to discuss whether women were provided a low status in Buddhism with special reference to early Buddhist scriptures.

Research Methodology

This research mainly depends on library survey or textual analysis. The Theravāda canonical texts are used as the primary source, while their commentaries and sub commentaries are utilized where them necessary. Furthermore, other related primary texts are also to be utilized as

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pertinent to the context of the discussion to go deep into concepts. Some modern compilations on feminism and feminist concepts such as an article titled “There’s misogynist aspect of Buddhism that nobody talks about” by Devdutt Pattanaik will also be used. Contextual and textual analysis have been utilized as the methodology.

Research Problem

Women in ancient India had no social status and position, but gradually, the position of women had changed. The Buddha and his teachings have drastically been influential on such social changes. Whether women have ever been provided with the low status in Buddhism is the research problem which is going to be answered through this paper.

Research Discussion and findings

People who raise up their voice to ensure equal opportunities for female like male, and dedicate their time to uplift the passion of women in the society, can be known as feminists in modern-day. In addition, feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women. Furthermore, it includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in aforesaid areas and it supports and advocates the rights and equality of women. Feminist theory is the extension of feminism into various fields and religion is one of them. Many feminists provoke their rights in religion and they criticize the religious fundamentalism, which has not allowed women to practice freely. Moreover, the article titled “There’s misogynist aspect of Buddhism that nobody talks about” by Devdutt Pattanaik published on QUARTZ INDIA webpage (<https://qz.com/india/586192/theres-a-misogynist-aspect-of-buddhism-that-nobody-talks-about/>) in 6th January 2016, highlighted many disputes by quoting some Buddhist scriptures which is incomplete referencing academically. The author tries to socialize that Buddhism is a religion which consisted of misogynist concepts i.e. Buddhism is patriarch or androcentric religion. In addition, he argued that there are disciplinary rules number in bigger for nuns than monks which implies misogynist concepts. Venerable Sudinna who committed the first defeats (*pārājikā*) and free from offence, was admonished by the Buddha not to commit this again in *Vinayapīṭaka*, is also criticized by Mr. Devdutt Pattanaik in his article. The main object of his article is to demonstrate that Buddhism consisted of many misogynist teachings and women have been provided low status throughout the teachings of the Blessed One.

Somehow, Buddhist Order and Bhikkhuni ordination were questioned and criticized by many feminists by asserting that Buddhism is one of patriarch religions that consisted of the misogynist, androcentric and androgynous attitude. Most of the time, they drag the eight laws (*Aṭṭhagarudhamma*) up which represents the Buddha's hesitation to admit women to the Order of *mahasamgha*, the greater community and the rejection of Prejapati's first attempt to be ordained. In a nutshell, the Buddha was not a misogynist who chases away the women and he is the one who protected the women's rights. Feminists of Western world used to declare the aforesaid idea, but it is further clear that they were not aware of the Eastern culture as well as Buddhism too. Nobody can state the promulgation eight great laws (*aṭṭhagarudhammo*) is to provide low status for women because in Indian context, Brahmin dominates the social authority and creativity was presented to build up new social stratifications. As a result, Brahmin announced *Mahābrahma* the creator or almighty God who has the power to control everything in the world, created human based on four casts which was known as *Chaturvarṇa*. Lorna Devaraja said, (Devaraja, Lorna., 1999) in "Purusa Sukta" of "Rig Veda" unjustifiable social grading existed. *Brāhmaṇa* (Preasts), *Kshatriya* (Warriors), *Vashya* (Merchants) and *Khudra* (Servants) are the four casts that taught by Brahmins. Even there was a group who didn't have any minor rights, known as an outcast (*pariah* means untouchables) people. Female in this society was compared with a frog by Brahmin teachings. Moreover, females had no independent life and they had to be under control by the male until the end of their lives. Though, the woman is young, adult or elder, is not permitted to behave as her own. (Manusmṛiti, v. 147) This was a worst experience of the women in India, at the contemporary time. Women were fed up with the system and they had been seeking alternatives for overcoming the situation. As a rain drop in the desert Buddhism healed the minds of women and showed the right path. Additionally, The Dispensation which is formed by the Blessed One is fourfold as Monks (*Bhikhu*), Nuns (*Bhikkhuni*), Layman (*Upasaka*) and Laywomen (*Upasikā*). Among these four, two represent the female community. It clearly shows that there is no any discrimination on gender in Buddhism. The ideology of Equality and reconciliation is Buddhism, some sociologists said.

Dhīthusutta in the *Samyuttanikāya* is one of the best instances to prove the Buddhist viewpoint towards women. King Kosala, husband of Queen Mallika who gave birth to daughter, was upset by hearing the news and the Buddha advised and showed the uniqueness of the Daughter. "well some women better than women...." Said the Buddha. This clearly explains the position women

in Buddhism. Moreover, women have been conferred to enter the dispensation and they could attain the Enlightenment as well. The eight grave laws were promulgated by the Buddha for the protection of the nuns in the dispensation. Promulgation of the disciplinary (*vinaya*) rules is not to harm them but to support to achieve the ultimate goal and provide a safe environment to nuns. Verses of the Enlightened nuns (*Therīgāthā*) is one of the best examples to show that the status of women in Buddhism. *Bhikkhūṇī Saṃyutta* in *Saṃyuttanikāya* is also provided evidences enough to emphasize the exact place of women in Buddhism. Gender deference is not important to the liberation in Buddhism. Therefore, being a male or female in the path of liberation does not matter except striving and determination of one's own.

Research Conclusion

Several centuries before the Christian era began, the Buddha and his followers have raised up their voice for protection of the rights of women in the Indian subcontinent. The Buddha wanted to have pleasant and peaceful community within his Order. Therefore, the Buddha promulgated eight laws for women to accept before entering the community. A person who wanted to save water should build a dam and simply just like that the promulgated eight laws was to save female in the Order, commentary of Discipline (*Samantapasādikānāma Vinayaṭṭhikathā*) said. Women have never been given the equal position by Buddhism though they have been given the proper/due place. There is no point of disputing the feminist point of view because the Buddhist attitude towards women cannot be limited to mundane purposes either.

Keywords: Women, Eight Law (*aṭṭhagarudhamma*), *Bhikkhūṇī* Order, feminism

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