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### Bhikṣuṇīs and their rights in early Buddhist SAṄGHA

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#### Introduction

In this period of globalization, human rights of women are a topic that has been widely debated. Women are a group that has always faced threats on leading a life with dignity and honour. It is a historical truth that even though women comprise half of the world population, they have had been exploited and attacked during different ages as part of gender discrimination.

Any study that looks into the social status of women in the ancient India cannot be complete without studying the women in Buddhist Saṅgha.

#### Formation of Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha

When the Saṅgha was formed which included Buddha's disciples, there was no women in it. It is also important to note that it was women itself who took the lead in making women enter the Saṅgha. The woman who paved the way for this was Mahāprajāpati, the queen of Kapilavastu and Buddha's foster mother. She made a request to Buddha to accept women as Bhikṣuṇī so that they can lead a pure life. But, Buddha denied admission to them. Buddha's chief disciple Ānanda followed up by making Buddha the same request. Once again, Buddha denied the request (*Cullavagga*, Khaṇḍaka X: 320- 322). This was followed by a debate between Buddha and Ānanda and Ānanda asked the following: Has Buddha proclaimed that women too had the ability to reach Nirvana? (Ibid: 322). That way, after that debate, Buddha accepted the request. As a result, Buddha formed Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha. Buddha formed Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha by formulating more laws and codes of conduct to be followed in comparison to that of Bhikṣu Saṅgha. Buddha proposed eight rules for Bhikṣuṇī (Ibid). In the case of Bhikṣu, there were only four laws. These were eight rules:

- i. A Bhikṣuṇī, however senior she may be by age and experience, should always salute a Bhikṣu.
- ii. A Bhikṣuṇī should not spend the rainy season in a district in which there is no Bhikṣu.
- iii. Every half month the Bhikṣuṇīs should take a lesson from a male Bhikṣu.
- iv. After the rainy season is over every Bhikṣuṇī has to confess to a joint meeting of Bhikṣuṇīs and Bhikṣus what has been seen, what has been heard, and what has been suspected.
- v. A Bhikṣuṇī who is guilty of a serious offence shall be punished in a joint meeting.
- vi. A Bhikṣuṇī has to go through two years probation and will get full membership only when a joint meeting approves it.
- vii. Under no circumstances should a Bhikṣuṇī revile or abuse a Bhikṣu.
- viii. Officially no Bhikṣuṇī shall be granted the right to admonish a Bhikṣu but a Bhikṣu can admonish a Bhikṣuṇī (Ibid: 322-324).

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Buddha also established that Bhikṣuṇīs had to follow and respect these rules throughout their lives and that they should never break these rules. It was after accepting these rules that Mahāprajāpati and other women joined the Saṅgha. For the women of that period, however, the rules in the Saṅgha were more relaxed and simple in comparison with the laws and rules (*Grhyasūtra* laws) they had to follow in their familial and social lives. It could not just be Buddha's perceptions on Dharma that attracted women to the Saṅgha. The conditions that were dominant in the society that was against women could also be an important reason for them to join Saṅgha.

### Rights of Bhikṣuṇīs in Saṅgha

Women during the time of Buddha might have considered Saṅgha as an institution where they could get a new opportunity at life. An individual identity was not permitted for women both inside and outside her familial society. With the formation of Saṅghas for women, they felt that it was an opportunity for them to improve their status. Buddha was able to bring recognition to women who were ridiculed by their society and family. Even though Bhikṣuṇīs had many limitations under law, they were allowed to take up leadership roles in the Saṅgha. Elderly Bhikṣuṇīs had disciples with newly admitted Bhikṣuṇīs posted under them. Bhikṣuṇīs had the right to present resolutions in the Saṅgha council regarding the admission of women into the Saṅgha. It is important to note that it was women itself who led the rituals of initiate upasampāda of women. Democratic structure that was recognised by the Saṅgha was also applicable to women. But, women's permission was not required for the initiation of male candidate.

Buddha taught Bhikṣuṇīs about how to educate the newly admitted Bhikṣuṇīs and improve their knowledge. Buddha said, 'Let the scholarly and effective Bhikṣuṇī provide advises' (Ibid: 350-360). It is evident from this the interest Buddha had in bringing up women to the leadership.

Buddha didn't give importance to family, virginity or chastity. Buddha considered family as the source of greed.<sup>1</sup> Even though Buddha gave admission to his son Rāhula into the Saṅgha, he never behaved to him like a father. The approach to his wife Yaśodhara was also similar. Buddha was only ready to accept the argument that Yaśodhara had the same right to join the Saṅgha like any other woman. Buddha behaved to everyone the same way<sup>[2]</sup>. Buddhist preachers did not consider prostitution and sexual relationships outside marital life as an issue related to chastity like considered by the Hindu preachers. Buddha was provided admission and high status to many women who were kept aside by the society as prostitutes. Arthakāśī from Kāśī, Padmāvati from Ujjain, Ambapālī from Vaiśālī, etc. were women who entered Saṅgha from such social backgrounds who went onto become key figures after joining Saṅgha.

Buddha talks to Ānanda about the reason why he denied admission for women in Saṅgha; he told him that it was not

because he did not believe women could not lead a spiritual life but because of practical reasons. Buddha also said the following to Ānanda,

"Saṅgha's life will only be 500 years if women are permitted entry to Saṅgha; else it will survive for 1000 years." (*Cullavagga*, Khaṇḍaka V: 323-324).

Neither Buddha nor his disciple Ānanda doesn't suggest through their conversation that women are inferior in either the spiritual or the intellectual. Through the phrase 'practical problems', Buddha was referring to the formation of Saṅgha for Bhikṣuṇīs and the effects it will cause in the social space within the Buddhist Saṅgha. In the practical sense, there was a conflict in the Bhikṣu practical system as Bhikṣus ought to avoid interaction with women but then had to manage the women who were entering the Saṅgha social space. Buddha might also have feared that this could break the practice of celibacy in the Saṅgha. Buddha can be seen facing such problems while making references to the rituals to be practiced by Bhikṣus and Bhikṣuṇīs in the text *Cullavagga*. In the act of trying to control the Bhikṣuṇīs through laws and rituals, it can be seen that Buddha was not able to make his perception completely free from the general public conscience of the times. But, modern studies on the topic do not accept this idea. Most of them suggest that such anti-women instances were later added to the text. These studies make this claim by analysing such instances in the text by applying it to language theories and arriving at the time line of these texts. In their observation, they maintain the stance that Buddha had the opinion that women too can lead a spiritual life. This disclaimer is not important. This is against the ideas of equality mentioned in Vinaya texts.

Buddha formulates strict laws in the Saṅgha in the event of the occurrence of problems.

"When Buddha comes to know of a Bhikṣu committing a mistake of the form that was committed for the first time in the Saṅgha, he will assemble all the Bhikṣus in the Saṅgha and propose a law. If he learns that that law was not properly practiced, he will make necessary amendments to it. However, in the case of Mahāprajāpati Gautami, this process cannot be seen executed. It is a matter of surprise that Buddha created eight laws on the onset itself in the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha before they even committed any mistakes. These laws were later conceived and written into the texts *Vinayapīṭka*, and *Aṅguttaranikāya* by later generations in order to claim complete control over the Saṅghas" (Dharmananda Kosambi, 2009: 156)<sup>[39]</sup>. Kosambi makes these assumptions.

Ambedkar comments on this with the following:

"One has to be very careful while taking in words from Buddhist texts that were written as if they were proposed by Buddha. If there are any ideals that have been presented secretly and were logically conflicting, then those words are not that of Buddha. If they are not intellectual, then they are not of Buddha. If there are similarities but are both intellectual and logical, then they are of Buddha. Buddha had never shown

interest in entering into debates that were not helpful to human's welfare. Therefore, if there is Buddha's name addressed to any texts that did not talk about human welfare, then such words cannot be accepted as Buddha's." (Suresh Mane, 2004: 58)

### ***Therīgātha***

*Therīgātha* is referred to the text containing a collection of spiritual experiences by Bhikṣuṇīs who lived during the time of Buddha. The term 'Therī' is also meant as 'Parivrājika'. This consists of stories of Bhikṣuṇīs who reached Nirvāṇa. The text begins in the way in which Buddha addresses the Bhikṣuṇīs. It portrays Bhikṣuṇīs' spiritual experiences and also their life before joining the Saṅgha. *Khuddakanikāya* is one of the five parts of *Suttapiṭaka* which itself is one of the three parts of *Tripiṭaka*. *Therīgātha* is one of the 15 texts that are part of this. Similar to the text *Therīgātha*, there is another text by the name of *Therīgātha* which portrays the experiences of Bhikṣuṣ. *Therīgātha* consists of 73 Gāthas (stories) represented in the form of 522 poems. Each of these Gāthas are portrayed as addressing a particular Bhikṣuṇī, praising her Nirvāṇa, or a Bhikṣuṇī explaining her own experiences. Just like Buddha's teachings and teachings of his main disciples were kept in safety as tradition, these texts which were from the early period were also kept in collection. The lack of another religious traditional text that is written by women speaks about the significance of this text.

Gāthas key subjects include different versions of liberation from the sufferings in life and psychological suffering present in the world. Deeper levels of spirituality and liberation from the sufferings of life can be seen in the Gāthas in same depth<sup>[3]</sup>. We can also see stories of Bhikṣuṇīs in the Gāthas who converted people into Buddhism who tried to separate them from their path. *Therīgātha* tries to make one understand about the temporality and the reality concerning the beauty of body, and proposes them to reject it. Body is the seat where all dirt rests. But, *Therīgātha* also talks about the ability of beautiful human bodies to create temptation and also about ways in which one can overcome this temptation through various experiences shared in the form of examples. This way, Therīs (Bhikṣuṇīs) who came from different social orders have provided descriptions of the society in their time, and of the familial relationships in the Gātha. Descriptions of women from all spheres of the society that includes the status of caste system, queen, princess, scholarly Brahmin woman, serf, dancer, prostitute, etc. We can also see Buddha congratulating these women by mentioning their special abilities. Gātha also explains the reason and event that attracted these women into the Buddhist Dharma. When some of the women are attracted to Buddhism due to its philosophical greatness, some others are attracted to it because of their sufferings and social alienation. Such descriptive detailing in the Gātha paves way for understanding the social order that existed during that period, especially of the women. But, the quality that this text represents is not followed by the later Buddhist traditions.

Rather than persist for equality of sex in the later society, they helped empower a Saṅgha that had patriarchal perceptions.

Many scholars consider Buddha's act of providing admission for women in the Saṅgha as a turning point in the society. According to Horner I B:

"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 come to enjoy more equality and greater respect and authority than ever hitherto accorded to them" (Horner I B, 1975: 1F)<sup>[17]</sup>.

Horner considers this as a shining light in the history of freedom for women. Altekar analyses this in the context of women from Vaiśya- Kṣatriya communities getting an opportunity to garner knowledge (Altekar A S, 1995: 12)<sup>[17]</sup>.

"Buddha presented women with an opportunity that they cannot even think about under Brahmin tradition. He gave rights for women to think and to choose" (Kumkum Roy, Kunal Chakrabarthy, Thanika Sarkar, 2012: 54)<sup>[40]</sup>.

Kunal Chakrabarthy makes this analysis. Modern studies that give impetus to equality for women in Buddhism support ideas such as this.

Even though there were limitations and personal apprehensions, we can see that Buddha has made important contributions towards improving the status of women. The decisions made by Buddha regarding permitting admission for women in the Saṅgha and breaking the myths of family and marriage show revolutionary uniqueness in comparison with Hindu rituals. Buddha was the first person who accepted that women also need education and political roles. Buddha also permitted them to don leadership roles in the Saṅgha. Buddha argued that, contrary to Hindu perceptions, a woman can develop her own personality without the support of a man. Rights of women were not limited to a particular class of women. Buddha himself amended many strict laws and made them lenient.

The limitations of the concepts in Buddhism should be analysed in the background of that time period. Even though India is one of the countries in the world with most women safety laws, the state of affairs shows that sex discrimination continues to happen in India in different forms. Hence, when we look at Buddha in this context, the contradictions we find in Buddha can be seen as the reflections of the contradictions that existed in the world situations during the period of Buddha. It is because of this reason that we infer Buddha made a revolutionary step forward by allowing admission to women into the Saṅgha, even with certain limitations and contradictions.

### **Notes:**

1. Buddha didn't consider marriage as an inevitable holy practice. Buddha believed that marriage and family were hindrances to the achievement of freedom.
2. There were Gṛhapatis and Upāsakas during the time of Buddha itself, who were attracted by the ideas propagated by Buddha. Buddha considered Bhikṣu, Bhikṣuṇī,

Upāsaka and Upāsika as the four components of Buddhist society. In his speeches made during the period before his Nirvāṇa, we can see that he addresses Bhikṣu, Bhikṣuṇi, Upāsaka and Upāsika on the same lines. Buddha parts during the time when Saṅghas of Upāsaka-Upāsikas and Bhikṣu- Bhikṣuṇis had made good growth. Buddhist Saṅghas, by then, had made good strides both socially and economically.

3. For example some Gāthas are given below:  
A Bhikṣuṇi by the name of Madhika says:

Though I be suffering and weak, and all  
My youthful spring be gone, yet have I come,  
Learning upon my staff, and climb aloft  
The mountain peak.  
My little bowl overturned, so sit I here,  
Upon the rock, and over my spirit sweeps  
The breath of liberty I win, I win  
The triple lore, the Buddha's will be done (Uma  
Chakravarti & Kumkum Roy (Tr), 1991: 69).

Dhīra is exhorted thus:

Come, O Dhīra, reach up and touch the goal  
Where all distractions cease, where sense is stilled  
Where dwelleth bliss; win thou Nibbāna, win  
That sure Salvation, which hath no beyond  
(*Therīgāthā*, V: 6).

Another Bhikṣuṇi Mutta says:

O free, indeed! O gloriously free  
Am I in freedom from three crooked things:  
From quern, from mortar, from my crookback Lord  
Ay, but I'm free from rebirth and from death  
And all that dragged me back is hurled away  
(Ibid:11).

Another Bhikṣuṇi named Sumaṅgala makes it clear that after joining the Saṅgha she was free from the brutal husband and all such bondage:

O Women well set free! How free am I  
How thoroughly free from kitchen drudgery  
Free from the harsh grip of hunger  
And from empty cooking pots  
Free too of that unscrupulous man  
The weaver of sunshades.  
Calm now and serene I am  
All lust and hatred purged.  
To the shades of the spreading trees I go  
And contemplate my happiness (Ibid: 23).

Words of Śubha, the daughter of a goldsmith:

Ruthless and murderous are desires  
Foemen of cruel spear and prison bonds  
Why here withal, my kinsmen- nay my foes-  
Why yoke me in your minds with sense desires?  
Know me as her, who has fled the life of sense,  
Shorn of her hair, wrapt in her yellow robe (Ibid,  
VV:347- 348).

Another Bhikṣuṇi named Iṣidāsi says:

And as a mother on her only child  
So did I minister to my good man.  
For me, who with toil infinite thus worked,  
And rendered service with a humble mind,  
Rose early, ever diligent and good  
For me he nothing felt save sore dislike (Ibid: 412-  
413).

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