

Empowerment of women through buddhism



Nature has gifted women with compassion, tender-heartedness, caring nature, concerns for others. These are very positive signs which imply that women can be leaders. Empowering women enhances their ability to influence changes and to create a better society. Empowerment means to inspire women with the courage to break free from the chains of limiting beliefs, patterns and societal or religious conditions that have traditionally kept women suppressed and unable to realise their true beauty and power.

Thus, empowerment of women occurs in reality, when women achieve increased control and participation in decision making that leads to their better access to resources, and therefore, improved socio-economic status. In this paper I intend to discuss the empowerment of women through Buddhism. The emergence of Buddhism in India proved to be highly beneficial for the women. Buddha, the enlightened one was also a great social reformer . He was the first to abolish slavery & vehemently protested against the degrading caste-system which was firmly rooted in the Indian soil.

He raised the status of the women and brought them to a realization of their importance in the society. He also founded the first celibate religious order for women with rules & regulations. Women in earlier times were subjected to discrimination and domination not only in India but same was the case in other countries as well. However the spread of Buddhism to foreign countries enabled women in those countries to rise in position. Unfortunately, Buddhism was lost to India in course of time. Women who had enjoyed freedom and privileges at the time of Buddha were once again subdued and subjugated.

But thanks to the Great man Dr. B R Ambedkar who brought back Buddhism to India. , which led to the upliftment of the Indian Women. Women to a great extent were able to retain their lost privileges and position. Women empowerment at the time of Buddha Before the advent of Buddhism, position of women does not appear to have been a very happy one. Generally women seem to have been looked upon as being inferior to men. The general view appears to be that they had to be under the care of parents in their childhood, under the protection of husbands in their youth; and in their old age they had to be under the control of their sons.

Women did not have educational freedom. Education was not considered as being of any importance to women. In contrast, Buddhism never considered women as being inferior to men. The Buddha, while accepting the biological and physical differences between the two sexes, did consider men and women to be equally useful to the society. The Buddha emphasized the fruitful role of women as a wife and a good mother in making the family life a success. . The Buddha's advice to the King Pasenadi of Kosala, who was a close devotee of His, clearly shows that Early Buddhism did not consider the birth of a daughter as a cause for worry and despair.

Buddhism did not restrict either the educational opportunities of women or their religious freedom. The Buddha unhesitatingly accepted that women were capable of realizing the Truth, just as men were. That was why he permitted the admission of women into the Order, though he was not in favour of it in the beginning because he thought their admission would create problems in the Sangha. Once women proved their capability of managing

their affairs in the Order, the Buddha recognized their abilities and talents, and gave them responsible positions in the BhikkhuniSangha.

Though the Buddhist Literature does not contain any reference to girls being sent to school or being given education at home but there are references to educated women in Buddhist Literature. Women at the time of Buddha were able to follow his teachings without much difficulty. In fact, some of them were ahead of monks in education. The verses in the Theri-gatha are attributed to Buddhist nuns. It clearly shows that the education must have been in vogue among women during the time of Buddha . Buddhist education certainly empowered women in various ways.

The combination of education in monasteries, free time, and a sense of personal moral superiority must have led many women into an organized life of unknown possibilities. Here, women were able to indulge in activities outside the home, including preaching, development of organizational skills, and above all, an atmosphere where they could experience a sense of accomplishment. Although at first the Buddha refused to admit women in to the Order on reasonable grounds, yet later, He yielded to the entreaties of his foster mother Prajapati Gotami.

Sariputta & Moggallana were made the two chief disciples in the order of monks, even so he appointed Arahats Khema & Uppalvanna as the two chief female disciples. Many other female disciples like Khujjutra, Theri Punna, Patachara, Ambapali, Kisagotami etc too were named by the Buddha as the distinguished and pious followers. Many women who otherwise would have fallen into oblivion, distinguished themselves in various way, and gained

their emancipation by following the Dhamma and entering the order. In this new order, which later proved to be a great blessing to many women, queens, princesses, daughters of the royal families, widows, bereaved mothers, destitute women, pitiable courtesans, all took refuge in the Buddha's Dhamma and the Sangha, and breathed that free atmosphere which is denied to those cloistered in cottages and palatial mansions. Some famous figures who clearly show that women were not a negligible factor are mentioned thus : Khema : She was born in the royal family of Sagala. She was very beautiful. She became the consort of Bimbisara. One day she heard that the Buddha was in the habit of speaking ill of beauty, since then she did not appear before the Buddha.

The king was a chief supporter of the Buddha. He asked his court-poets to compose a song on the glories of the Veluvana hermitage and to sing the song very loudly so that the queen might hear it. The royal order was carried out. Khema heard of the beauty of the hermitage and with the king's consent she came to the Veluvana Vihara, where the Buddha was staying at that time. When she was led before the Buddha, the latter conjured up a woman to be celestial nymph who stood fanning him with a palm leaf.

Khema observed this woman like a more beautiful than she and was ashamed of her own grace. Sometime after she noticed again that the woman was passing from youth to middle age and then to old age, till with broken teeth, grey hair, and wrinkled skin, she fell on earth with her palm leaf. Then thought Khema that her beautiful body would meet with the same fate as that of the nymph. Then the Master, who knew her thoughts, said

that persons subject to lust suffer from the result of their action, while those freed from all bondage forsake the world.

When the Master had finished speaking, Khema, according to the commentary, attained arhatship and according to the Apadana, she was established in the fruition of the first stage of sanctification and with the king's permission she entered the order before she became an arhat. Thereafter she made a name for her insight and was ranked foremost amongst the bhikkhunis possessing great wisdom. In vain Mara tried to tempt her with sensuous ideas. Uppalavanna: She came of a banker's family at Savatthi. Her skin was of the colour of the heart (gabbha) of the blue lotus.

Hence she was called Uppalavanna. Many princes and banker's sons wanted to marry her. But she renounced the world, went to the bhikkhunis and was ordained. Thereafter one day she lighted a lamp, and by continually contemplating on the flame of the lamp, she gradually obtained arhatship with adhinna and patisambhida. She was assigned a chief place among those who had the gift of iddhi. Uppalavanna Theri acquired the power of performing a miracle by coming in to the presence of the Buddha to worship him with the pomp and grandeur of an individual monarch, being surrounded by a retinue extending over 36,000 yojanas and this miracle was visible to an assembly extending over twelve yojanas. Khujjuttara : She was the maid servant of Samavati, queen of King Udena of Kosambi. Her daily duty was to buy flowers from Sumana, a garland-maker for eight kahapanas. Once the Buddha together with the bhikkhusamgha was invited to take meals in

Sumana's house. Khujjuttara waited on her and heard the sermon delivered by the Buddha. She obtained sotapattiphala after hearing the sermon.

In former days she used to steal four kahapanas out of eight kahapanas given to her by her mistress for buying flowers. After having obtained sotapattiphala she brought flowers to the value of eight kahapanas. She confessed her guilt when asked why she brought such a large quantity of flowers. She told Samavati that she had acquired knowledge and came to realise that stealing things is a sin committed by a person who listened to the Buddha's sermon. Samavati after listening to the dhamma repeated by her obtained sotapattiphala. She was well versed in Tripitaka. Kisagotami: She came of poor family at Savatthi.

She was married to a rich banker's son who had forty crores of wealth. On the death of her only child she went to the Buddha with the dead body and requested him to bring the dead to life. Buddha asked her to bring a little mustard seed from a house where no man had died. Kisagotami went from house to house, but she came back to Buddha quite unsuccessful. The Buddha delivered a sermon which led her to become a bhikkhuni. Her insight grew within a short time and she attained arhatship. Then the master assigned her the foremost place among the bhikkhunis who used very rough and simple robes.

Patacara: She came of a banker's family at Savatthi. In her youth she formed an intimacy with a servant of her house. On the day fixed for her marriage with another youth of equal rank she eloped with her lover and dwelt in a hamlet. Shortly afterwards Patacara gave birth to a child, but at the time of

the birth of her second child, a storm arose. Her husband went to a forest to cut grass and sticks, a snake came from the ant-hill and bit him. He fell there and died. The next morning Patacara went to the forest with her two children and found her husband dead. She lamented and left the place.

On her way to her father's house there was a river, the water of which was knee-deep. She lost her children while crossing the river. With tears of grief she came to Savatthi and learnt that her parents and brother had perished under the debris of the fallen house. She turned mad. Since then she did not wear clothing, and was therefore known as Patacara. One day the Exalted One saw her in that plight and said, " Sister! Cover your shamelessness. " She regained her consciousness, and the Lord taught her that sons, parents and kinsfolk were no shelter, and asked her to discern this truth in order to make clear quickly the way to nibbana.

Then she was established in the sotapattiphalam. She attained arhatship with analytical knowledge Manorathapur. Thereafter she preached the Buddha's dhamma and converted many afflicted women to the Buddhist faith. Visakha: She was the daughter of Sumanadevi, wife of Dhananjayasetthi, son of Mundakasetthi. Her abode was at Bhaddiyanagara in the kingdom of Anga. When seven years old Buddha with the bhikkhusamghawent to Bhaddiyanagara. Sumanadevi was one of the advisers of the king. Visakha with 500 female companions and 500 chariots received Buddha, who gave instructions to her according to her nature and she obtained sotapattiphalam.

She was the most eminent and generous benefactor and supporter of the order of the monks and the nuns. She was granted eight boons by the Buddha that as long as she lived she will be allowed to give robes to the members of the Order of the monks for the rainy season; food for monks coming into the town of Savatthi; food for monks leaving Savatthi; food for the sick; food for those who wait on for the sick; medicines for the sick; a constant supply of rice-gruel for anyone needing it; and bathing robes for the nuns. Women Empowerment in India In 1956, BharatRatnaDr. B.

R. Ambedkar with his two lakh followers embraced Buddhism, people from the Untouchable community, in large numbers became the followers of Buddhism.

Their faith in Dhamma was so strong that many people renounced the worldly pleasures and took up the work of serving the fellow beings. Making people understand the philosophy of the Buddha in simplistic manner, discharging religious duties , and collecting contributions from people for building Buddhist monasteries etc. while doing all this, the Buddhist monks(Bhikkus) tried to set precedent of their ideal, munificent and wholesome conduct before the people.

Women were not to left behind. The new religion led to their upliftment, unabled them to rise in position. Many women turned social activists, Bhikkunis , organisers etc. They spent their entire lives for the good of the society. Let us peep into the generous lives of some of such Indian Women: BhikkuniLaxmibaiNaik: Laxmibai was born in1911 in Aloka. In 1924 she got married to SampatraoNaik. Before marriage she had passed the 7th class and after marriage completed her teacher's training course.

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Thereafter, in Amravati , Belapur, she established her own school and taught the downtrodden people there. She was an ardent follower Dr. Ambedkar . In 1956, she also embraced to Buddhism. Henceforth, she ransacked many books on Buddhism . She was a teacher, but after turning back from the school , as if she had become an addict of reading books and serving the serving the society. The study of the Budhhist literature filled in her an unique strength and enthusiasm. She began to work for the spread of Buddhism. She belived that only Buddhism can liberate the entire World.

She was so influenced by the Budhha's philosophy, that she chose the life of an ascetic, became a Bhikkuni and wandered from place to place, village to village for the spread of Buddhism. She died on 29th June 1970. Thus a Bhikkuni from newly converted Buddhist community set an ideal example before the people. Shantabai Dani: Shantabai hailed from a poor family. Her father's name was Dhanaji Dani and Mother's name was Kundabai. When she was just a teenage girl she participated in the Mahad Satyagraha under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar.

And while she was pursuing education from the Teacher's Training College, Pune, she participated in the Nasik Satyagraha led by Dr. Ambedkar. She had taken part in the Conversion Movement of 1956 and embraced Buddhism at Nagpur. She played an active role in the ' Bhumihin Satyagraha'. She became the secretary of Ramabai Ambedkar Nasik Hostel. She is also the secretary of ' Dr. Ambedkar Vidhyarti Ashram'. Thus Shantabai was very active participant in most of the movement those catered to upliftment of women and the downtrodden. Damyanti Deshbhrat : As a MLA, the name of Damyanti Deshbhrat is known to us.

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She was born on 29 May 1935. Her father Girdhari Dongre was a tailor, and her mother was Kundabai. Parents were enthusiastic participants in all the movements led by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar's constructive works were routinely discussed in the house, leaders would come and go and in such an atmosphere she grew. In 1953, she became the secretary of Siddharth Primary Teacher's Council. In 1956 after embracing Buddhism she began to work in the social, educational and political fields of the Bhartiya Scheduled Caste Federation.

Foundation of Republican Party was laid down in the same year. She was one of the organisers of All India Republican Party. She along with other females like Shantabai, Dani, Chandrika, Ramteke, Jaibai Nagdive etc went to the remote areas for the spread of Buddhism. She would enlighten people about Babasaheb's goal of making the entire India Buddhist. She would urge people to follow the five precepts ardently, as well as follow the 22 pledges as laid down by Dr. Ambedkar. From 1955- 1967 she served as a teacher, thereafter she entered into the politics.