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BUDDHIST NUNS IN PRISTINE BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

Male and female are the two wheels of a chariot of human civilization. Both have equal credit in the development of human civilization. In every respect women have played par excellence role with men. Notwithstanding surpassing contribution of women in every sphere of human civilization, Vedic-Brahman sacrosanct law boycotted women from the main stream of Indian culture and civilization. This law divorced women's natural rights and left them to live in seclusion confined to domestic work only.

It was for the first time, Lord Buddha Shakyamuni, broke the walls of the thralldom of women and paved the way for the betterment of them in every sphere of life. As far as the Indian history is concerned, Lord Buddha Shakyamuni is the first known historical ennobled figure who recognized the equal importance of women in human civilization and of their natural rights. Buddha not only recognized women's natural rights and equal importance but also His Noble One and Enlightened and Awakened One Buddha avail them an opportunity to enter into the Monastic Order of His Dhamma as a Buddhist nuns (Bhikkhunis) and teachers as par excellence with male monks.

If anyone ransacks the history and literature of Buddhism they would have found the several names of revered and famous Upasikas and the names of venerable Bhikkhunis who have played their great role in the development of Buddhism. By the dint of their great contribution in Buddhism their memories have been immortalized in the countless pages of Buddhist literature and history along with in the memorials in a Stupa as we found today "SujataGhar" constructed on a bank of river Niranjana near Buddha Gaya. The object of this paper is to highlight the work of such Bhikkhunis and Upasikas who have contributed greatly in the development of Buddhism during Buddha's period.



KEYWORDS: Bhikkhuni, Upasika, Sangha, Shakyamuni Buddha, Stupa, Dhamma.

INTRODUCTION:

Male and female are the two wheels of a chariot of human civilization. Both have equal credit in the development of human civilization. In every respect women have played par excellence role with men. Notwithstanding surpassing contribution of women in every sphere of human civilization, Vedic-Brahman sacrosanct law boycotted women from the main stream of Indian culture and civilization. This law divorced women's natural rights and left them to live in seclusion confined to domestic work only.

It was for the first time, Lord Buddha Shakyamuni, broke the walls of the thralldom of women and paved the way for the betterment of them in every sphere of life. As far as the Indian history is concerned, Lord Buddha Shakyamuni is the first known historical ennobled figure who recognized the

equal importance of women in human civilization and of their natural rights. Buddha not only recognized women's natural rights and equal importance but also His Noble One and Enlightened and Awakened One Buddha avail them an opportunity to enter into the Monastic Order of His Dhamma as a Buddhist nuns (Bhikkhunis) and teachers as par excellence with male monks.

If anyone ransacks the history and literature of Buddhism they would have found the several names of revered and famous Upasikas (lay women followers) and the names of venerable Bhikkhunis who have played their great role in the development of Buddhism. By the dint of their great contribution in Buddhism their memories have been immortalized in the countless pages of Buddhist literature and history along with in the memorials in a Stupa as we found today "SujataGhar" constructed on a bank of river Niranjana near Buddha Gaya.

The object of this paper is to highlight the work of such Bhikkhunis and Upasikas who have contributed greatly in the development of Buddhism during Buddha's period.

EARLY PHASE:

It is universally and unanimously recognized by all historians, indologists, philologists, epigraphists and archaeologists that Lord Buddha Shakyamuni is the founder and promulgator of Buddhism. His birth name was SiddharthaGautam. His father's name was Suddhodana and mother's name was Mahamaya or Mayadevi. Suddhodana was belonged to Shakyan clan and was a king of small kingdom of Kapilvastu. Traditionally it is recognized that Prince Siddhartha was a Bodhisattva before attaining Buddhahood. His birth took place in the year 563 BCE on the VaishakhPurnima day (full Moon night).¹ Queen Mahamaya was the birth giver to Bodhisattva Siddhartha² who later on became Buddha. So queen Mahamaya's role or contribution regarding giving birth to Bodhisattva Siddhartha cannot be ignored. As a matter of fact the history of Buddhism begins with the birth of Bodhisattva Siddhartha.

Second important thing is that Mahamaya the mother of Bodhisattva Siddhartha was died after a week of the birth of Siddhartha.³ Traditionally before passing away queen Mahamaya had devolved the responsibility of her child upon Mahaprajapati Gautami.⁴ She was the second royal queen of king Suddhodana as well as Mahamaya's sister. In this way MahaprajapatiGautami became the foster mother of child prince SiddharthaGautam. She carried out prince Siddhartha's care and nourishment up to he was grown up. Nobody could deny that prince Siddhartha would have been moulded as an amiable, considerate, reliable, unassuming and blithesome as well as diligent on account of his foster mother's nourishment. Though queen Mahamaya proved birth giver to Bodhisattva Siddhartha, Queen Mahaprajapati Gautami proved the alma mater for him beyond any doubt. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar mentioned in his epoch making book 'The Buddha And His Dhamma' that prince Siddhartha's childhood was marked by the presence of supreme sense of compassion.⁵ In this context we cannot deny the contribution of the noble teaching and nourishment of his foster mother.

Prince Siddhartha Gautama got married with the lady named Yashodhara when he was of sixteen years of age.⁶When he was of twenty-nine years old he renounces his worldly life and became Parivrajaka.⁷ When he had been ordained into asceticism he was never disturbed or left obstacles in his ways either by his mother queen Mahaprajapati or his wife Yashodhara. They both well cooperatedhim. After taking parivraja Bodhisattva Siddhartha wandered for six years. Once he was sitting under a Banyan tree he was offered with rice milk by a lady named Sujata who was a daughter of Senani of Uruvella.⁸ Traditionally it is recognized that on account of the food offered by Sujata Bodhisattva SiddharthaGautam got refreshed and ready to attained Buddhahood after a short while. Still Bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama was not Enlightened and Awakened One.⁹Mahamaya the birth giver to him, his foster mother MahaprajapatiGautami, his wife Yashodhara and Sujata who offered food to him were neither his lay followers or Upasikas nor Bhikkhunis by then. Could anybody deny the contribution of all these noble ladies in the early phase of life Buddha's life span? Off course, not! Certainly the early phase of Lord Shakyamuni Buddha's history cannot be written without mentioning the names of these great ladies whose have great contribution in Buddha's life.

AFTER PROMULGATION OF BUDDHISM:

Bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautam got Enlightenment in 528 BCE on full moon day of Vaishakha and became Buddha while meditating beneath Indian fig tree (Bodhi Tree). The place of His Enlightenment was the bank of river Niranjana near village Uruvela.¹⁰ Two months later on, on the full moon day of Asadha at Sarnath Lord Buddha Shakyamuni promulgated His Dhamma-the way of good living for the weal of living being and formed the Order-the Sangha (Monastic organization) of His Dhamma.¹¹

Initially there was no appearance of women in His Order but later on they began to enter into the Order as Bhikkhunis. The first ordination of women into monastic organization was conducted in Vaishali at Kuthagara Hall at Nigrodhrama. The first lady was royal mother MahaprajapatiGautami the foster mother of Lord Buddha Shakyamuni who ordained as Bhikkhuni in the presence of Buddha himself and Ven. Ananda. Second lady was YeshodharaSiddhartha Gautama's wife who after ordination named as BhaddaKaccana. Lord Buddha himself taught them the Dhamma, the Doctrine, and the Discipline. Other five-hundred Shakyani women also entered into the Order as Bhikkhunis followed by MahaprajapatiGautami and Yashodhara. These Bhikkhunis were instructed by Ven. Nandak one of the disciple of the Blessed One.¹²

As in context to the admission in the Sangha, the Sangha was open to all. There was no bar of caste, there was no bar of gender, and there was no bar of status. Caste had no place in the Sangha. Social status had no place in the Sangha. Inside the Sangha all were equal. Inside the Sangha rank was regulated by worth and not by birth as the Lord Buddha said the Sangha was like the ocean and the Bhikkhus were like the rivers that fell into the ocean. The river has its separate name and separate existence. It becomes one with the rest. Same is the case with the Sangha. When a Bhikkhu entered the Sangha he became one with the rest like the water of the ocean. He lost his caste. He lost his status: so said the Buddha. The only distinction observed inside the Sangha was that of gender. The BhikkhuSangha was separated in its organization from the Bhikkuni Sangha.¹³

As Lord Buddha's Sangha was open to all, there were entered persons in the Order from all castes and sections of the society. Pracruti a Chandali was also converted herself as Bhikkhuni by Lord Buddha at Jetavan in Shravasti. As the various and numerous Bhikkhus contributed greatly in Buddhism in context to propagation in India and abroad alike them Bhikkhunis also did. On account of their great contribution in Buddhism there is an independent book in Pali literature on the life and her deeds of Bhikkhunis. These independent ancient Pali work is known as 'Therigatha'. In Therigatha there are collections of seventy-three Bhikkhunis in five-hundred twenty-two sayings in total number. Therigatha is a collection of seventy-three biographies of Bhikkhunis. It consisted with Ven. MahaprajapatiGautami, Yashodhara, Sumana, Khema, Sumedha, Shaila who were belonged to royal families. Ven. Bhadra, Upashama, Sundarnanda, Tishya, Sinha, Dhira, etc... were belonged to warrior clan. Ven. Rohini, Sundari, Muqta, Nanda, Soma, Uttama, Upchala, Maitrika, etc... were belonged to Brahmin family. Ven. Dhammadina, Bhadrakundalkesa, Sujata, Patachara, Chitra, Purna, etc... were belonging to rich family. Ven. Amrapali, Abhaymata, Vimala, etc... were belong to court dancer. During Buddha's period Ven. Shaila, Soma, Nanda, Uttara, Patachara, Gautami, Purnika, Rohini, Sundri, Subha and Sumedha contributed greatly in propagation of Buddhism. Pali literature is abundance in the biographies of great Buddhist ladies like Amrapali, Vishakha and Dhanangali who were great benefactors of Buddhism.¹⁴

And lastly it is well known fact that Sanghamitra a daughter of greatest Buddhist emperor Asoka had went to Sri Lanka in order to propagate Buddhism among the women of Sri Lanka. It is also historical fact that she had carried away with her a branch of Bodhi Tree from Buddha Gaya to Sri Lanka and it was planted at Anuradhapur the ancient capital of Sri Lanka. The very same Bodhi Tree is still alive in Anuradhapur which is the genuine historical evidence of the Bhikkhunis contribution in the propagation of Buddhism. Sanghamitra and Charumati both daughters of emperor Ashoka had been ordained into Buddhism as Bhikkhunis. Sanghamitra's working land was Sri Lanka while Charumati's working land was Nepal.

CONCLUSIONS:

1. Prior to the Buddha's age there was not equality between male and female in social and public life. It was denied by Vedic-Brahman dominated theology.
2. Shakyamuni Buddha was the first person who allowed the ladies in his order on equal footing with monks.
3. However nobody could deny that his mother Mahamaya, foster mother PrajapatiGautami, his wife Yashodhara, and Sujata who offered him boil rice milk etc. had contributed greatly towards Buddha.
4. It is because of the Buddha's loving kindness Buddhist nuns could obtained equality and prepared there place in the human civilization as important as men.

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