

## **Status of woman at the time of Buddha- A study**

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### **Abstract**

The status of woman is always a discussion matter. In ancient time a few woman worship as Goddess and got the respected position like Aditi but the real status and condition of the woman is still a question mark in ancient time also In the ancient India, the condition of woman is not very good. They generally lived under the supervision of man. This is the direct evidence of men superiority over woman. Women were treated as sudras, one of lowest cast among all four cast. There freedom was also limited. Generally women were under the custody of parent during childhood, under the care of husband during their youth and under the control of their son during their old age. In other word they are always under the control of male.

In this paper researcher try to explore the condition of woman during the Buddha period. During Buddha period it seems to be a little liberty in Buddhism. Buddhism did not consider the woman as inferior than that of man. They just accept the biological difference between the man and woman i.e. gender. They accepted that man and woman are equally important for the society.

In this study secondary data base has been used. The objective of the study is to know the real condition and situation of woman during the Buddha time. The study also tries to compare the modern condition, Buddha time and Vedic era status and condition of woman. Besides the various issue and disparity in the society, the research is limited to the study of woman condition only. This study is important because it will give the better understanding of progressive development of woman condition from the Buddha time to modern time.

**Key word-** Status of woman, Buddhism, Vedic era, Rig-Veda, Housewife etc.

### **Discussion**

Discrimination against women is a feature common in all societies. Whether in Africa, America, Asia or Europe, the prejudice and obstacles that women have to encounter and surmount seemed almost identical. According to certain religious mythological concept, man

was introduced as the son of God, but woman never found a similar standing as the daughter of God. Amongst the soul-believers, some held the notion that a soul exists only in man and not in woman. Women have also been regarded as the source of all the sins of the world and that they are blamed for the misfortunes on men in this world and the next. There was also the belief that as women, no salvation could be gained - they had to be reincarnated as men before they are able to gain their salvation.

There is not the slightest doubt that the Buddha was the first religious teacher who had given women equal and unfettered opportunities in the field of spiritual development. Although he had pointed out on several occasions, the natural tendencies and weakness of women, he had also given due credit to their abilities and capabilities. He had truly paved the way for women to lead a full religious life. They were able to develop and purify their minds and realize the bliss of Nibbana in as much as men could. The testimonies of the Theris (Nuns) in the days of the Buddha speak amply of this fact. The social attitude towards women in pre-Buddhist days can be traced from the early Vedic literature, such as the Rigveda. There is evidence indicating the honour and respect which women received in their homes. In the realm of religion too, they had access to the highest knowledge of the Absolute or Brahma. However, such a liberal attitude towards women changed with the course of time, under the influence and dominance of the priestly caste along with their priestcrafts, animal sacrifices, and other ritualistic practices.

The traditional belief was that only a son could carry out such rituals which were thought to be very necessary for bringing peace and security to the father and grandfather after their death, otherwise they might return as ghosts to harry the family. Uncertain were the lives of married women. No less uncertainty await the unmarried ones. As marriage was considered a holy sacrament, a young girl who did not marry was badly criticised and despised by society. According to what the Buddha taught about the Law of Karma, one is responsible for one's own action and its consequence. The well-being of a father or grandfather does not depend upon the action of the son or grandson. They were responsible for their own actions. Such enlightened teachings helped to correct the views of many people and naturally reduced the anxiety of women who were unable to produce sons to perform the 'rites of the ancestors

In early Buddhist period, an unmarried girl could go along, unabused, contented and adequately occupied in caring for parent and younger brothers and sisters. She might even

become the owner of great possessions, of slaves, and rich fields; as did Subha, the daughter of a goldsmith, during the time of the Buddha. But when the Dhamma was taught to her by Mahapajapati, Subha realized the nature of all fleeting pleasures and that 'silver and gold lead neither to peace nor to enlightenment', with the result that she entered the Order of Buddhist Nuns. This act was a great boon to the unmarried women.

Women were looked down upon as a mere possession or a thing. Her place was the home, under the complete whims and fancies of her husband. She not only had to perform all the domestic chores, but also had to bring up a large family. Some of the priestly caste Brahmins married and lived with their wives, yet regarded food -cooked by women impure and unfit to eat. A myth was built up - that all women were regarded as sinful and the only way to keep them out of mischief was to keep them occupied endlessly with the task of motherhood and domestic duties.

If a married woman had no children or failed to produce any male offspring, she might be superseded by a second or third wife or even turned out of the house; for there was the strong belief that there must be a male child for the continuance of family line and the performance of the 'rites of the ancestors'. The traditional belief was that only a son could carry out such rituals which were thought to be very necessary for bringing peace and security to the father and grandfather after their death, otherwise they might return as ghosts to harry the family. Uncertain were the lives of married women. No less uncertainty await the unmarried ones. As marriage was considered a holy sacrament, a young girl who did not marry was badly criticised and despised by society. In the field of religious practices, the position which they once enjoyed, was denied to them. A woman was believed to be unable to go to heaven through her own merits. She could not worship by herself, and it was believed that she could only reach heaven through unquestioning obedience to her husband, even if he happened to be a wicked person. The food left over by her husband was often the food for the woman..

It was in the midst of such extreme social discrimination and degrading attitudes towards women that the Buddha made his appearance in India. His teachings on the real nature of life and death -about karma and samsaric wanderings, gave rise to considerable changes in the social attitudes towards women in his days.

The Anguttara Nikaya contained some valuable advice which the Buddha had given to young girls prior to their marriage. Realising that there was bound to be difficulties with the new in-laws, the girls were enjoined to give every respect to their mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law, serving them lovingly as they would their own parents. They were requested to honour and

respect their husband's relatives and friends, thus creating a congenial and happy atmosphere in their new homes. They were also advised to study and understand their husband's nature, ascertain their activities, character and temperament, and to be useful and co-operative at all times in their new home. They should be polite, kind and watchful in their relationship with the servants and should safe-guard their husband's earnings and see to it that all household expenditures are properly regularised. Such advice given by the Buddha more than twenty five centuries ago stand good even today

Despite the fact that the Buddha had elevated the status of women, He was practical in his observations and advice given from time to time in that He realized the social and physiological differences that existed between men and women. These were depicted in the Anguttara Nikaya and Samyutta Nikaya. It was clearly mentioned that a man's duty is his unending quest for knowledge, the improvement and stabilisation of his skills and craftsmanship and dedication to his work and ability to find the wherewithal for the maintenance and sustenance of his family. On the other hand it was stated, as a matter of fact, that it was the woman's duty to look after the home, and to look after her husband.

In the days of the Buddha, other religious teachers had also spoken on the duties and obligations of a wife towards her husband - stressing particularly on the duty of a wife bearing an offspring for her husband, rendering faithful service and providing conjugal happiness and heavenly bliss. Confucianism also shares this view. However, although the duties of a wife towards the husband were laid down in the Confucian code of discipline, it did not stress the duties and obligations of the husband towards the wife. The teachings of the Buddha did not have such bias towards the husbands. In the Sigalovada Sutta, the Buddha clearly mentioned the duties of a husband towards the wife and vice versa. A husband should be faithful, courteous and not despising. It is the husband's duty to hand over authority to his wife and from time to time, provide her with adornments. Other useful advice was given to women on different occasions and under different circumstances.

The Buddha did not place any restrictions on the nuns in the matter of teaching and preaching of the Dhamma. The Bhikkuni Order produced a remarkable number of brilliant preachers and exponents of the Dhamma e.g Sukha, Patacara, Khema, Dhammadinna and Maha Pajapati (the foster mother of the Buddha). Buddhism never shared the Brahmin's view that a son was essential for the father's passage to heaven. Daughters became quite as good as sons and marriage was no longer a compulsory necessity. The Buddha by granting women an active share in the religious life, also helped to raise their status in secular life as well.

However the admission of women into the Order was a step too advanced for the period and became short-lived. Whenever an innovation or improvement was in advance of the thinking and development of a people during a particular era, the people were unable to adapt themselves to the improved conditions and tended to regress back to the society they were used to. They failed to master the situation. Hostile propaganda by the Brahmins who found their caste system undermined and privileges giving way was also a factor that caused the decline of the Order.

## **Conclusion**

From the above discussion it is clear that the status of women during the Buddha period is better than the other period. In pre Buddhism Period the women were participating in various religious activities but they are not much independent like Buddhism. In Buddhism, women were enjoying more equality, more respect and more authority in the society. In the Saddharmapundrikam, Buddha appears with many disciples in which six thousand were female saint. Buddha gives Dharma for both male and female. Buddhism always talks about the equality in Human Being. Buddha did not discriminate the human on the basis of caste, creed and gender.

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