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## Early Buddhist Perspective on Women and their Emancipation as Depicted in the Therīgāthā

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### Abstract

*The society as depicted in Buddhism consists of four distinct divisions, namely monks, nuns, lay male devotees and lay female devotees. It is again subdivided into two main groups called clergy and laity. These groups are formed on the level of their dedication in attaining spiritual emancipation. According to early Buddhism, realization of emancipation is the sole goal of the clergy, for which the lay takes a longer time. Since laymen is saddled with diverse domestic and social commitments and responsibilities, it hampers their path to realize emancipation. The cardinal teaching of most Indian religions were focused on the emancipation of individuals. Though Buddhism forms an integral part of the Indian religious tradition, it emphasizes not only individual's emancipation but also that of the clergy and the laity. Since the process of achieving emancipation is effectuated in a social context, a special responsibility is placed on the role of the individual in society. This role, as it appears in Buddhism, can be viewed from two different angles. When a woman with least social obligation and commitments enters the order, she is expected to concentrate exclusively on attaining her own emancipation. Yet the role of a lay women is of two-fold as she has to discharge her duties to her family and society. The Buddhist ideology concerning the woman is determined on the basis of her role and function in the family. Thus, two major stages of development relating to women can be identified in early Buddhism in contrast to those found in later Buddhism. The first section of this study examines the attitude towards women evident in early Buddhism. The second section delves into how emancipation of women is depicted in Therīgāta. The ultimate objective of the article is to delineate how helpful the teaching of the later Buddhism for women to seek their spiritual emancipation.*

*Keywords: Therīgāta, women, emancipation, Buddhist perspective, social significance*

**Introduction**

Monks (*bhikkhus*), nuns (*bhikkhunis*), male devotees (*upāsakās*) and female devotees (*upāsikās*) comprises a four-fold division in Buddhist society. Depending on individual's dedication to realize the spiritual emancipation as taught in Buddhism, it is again subdivided into two broad categories known as laity and clergy. Attainment of deliverance (*nibbāna*) expeditiously is the ultimate goal of the clergy. However, for the laity, the realization of that goal is anticipated at the end of a long journey through a round of rebirths (*saṃsāra*). In the religious tradition of India, Buddhism occupies a unique position as it lays emphasis not only on individual's salvation (deliverance) but also his commitment towards society. Viewing from this perspective one finds that Buddhism presents the role of women in two different ways. Thus, while a nun enters the order with the aim of attaining *nibbāna* as the final goal, a lay woman is obliged to fulfil her commitments towards the society as a mother and a wife. Since many discussions and debates have been formed on the role, function and rights of women, it is quite opportune to examine the Buddhist perspective in relation to the topic. In this discussion on the liberation of women as depicted in the *Therīgāthā*, it is pertinent to examine first the attitude towards women mentioned in early Buddhism. It provides a befitting background for such a discussion and at the same time it would also prove the non-founding views on women mentioned in later Buddhism.

**Attitude toward women as reflected in Early Buddhism**

Pristine or early Buddhism constitute the teachings recognized as orthodox and authentic. Those teachings treated as the original words of the Buddha are preserved in the Pāli canon. The attitude towards women in early Buddhism differed from the religious and social attitudes of other contemporary faiths in India. Though women held a somewhat backward position in society during the Vedic period, it deteriorated gradually during the post-Vedic period. In Brahmanic literature the status of women was so debased that she was treated as a person on par with *sūdras* and animals. She was denied the right even to her own body. However, during the Upanishad period there appeared some leniency in that attitude. This is corroborated by the fact that learned women like *Gārgi* and *Maitreyi* had made bold attempts to argue with their male counterparts. Nevertheless, it is evident from *Manusmṛti* that even by the time of the Buddha, no appreciable change had taken place in society regarding the attitude towards women (Ganganatha, 1999, chap. 9.3).

However, the tradition in relation to nuns or ordained women had shown some progress. The dispensation or the order of nuns in the Jaina religion came into existence prior to the setting up of Buddhist order of nuns. The Jaina order of nuns was headed by a Sākaya noble woman called Chandra, the step-mother of Jaina Mahāvīra. Those Jain nuns belonged to the Svetāmbara sect. According to the teachings of Jainism, women who became ordained were not able to attain the ‘Absolute Knowledge’ in this birth. It was due to the fact that anyone who fails to follow the vow of nudity taught in Jainism cannot realize the ‘Absolute Knowledge’. It was not possible for a woman to put that precept into practice. She had to be satisfied with the performance of moral deeds in this birth and hope to be reborn as a male in the next birth. In comparison to other religions, the more progressive teachings of those who had abandoned lay life and entered the order of nuns are to be found in the teachings of the Buddha.

The attitude of Buddhism concerning women can be discussed from different angles. While rejecting the religious teachings that denounce womanhood as something inferior and sinful, Buddhism does not impose any special taboos against women. The Dhitu Sutta of the Kosala Saṃyutta occurring in the Saṃyutta Nikāya shows that woman endowed with wisdom and morality is sublime in every respect (Leon Feer, 1991, p. 86). The contemporary Brahmanic society censures -women as a dull-witted and short-sighted.

The story of the nun Somā occurring in the Saṃyutta Nikaya is important in distinguishing the attitude towards women prevailed in that contemporary society,

‘No woman, with the two – finger – wisdom which is hers, could ever hope to reach those heights which are attained only by the sages. (Leon Feer, 1991, p. 129).

This utterance of Māra divulges the attitude in the contemporary society relating to the intellectual capacity women possessed. The nun Somā replies it thus:

‘When one’s mind is well-concentrated and wisdom never fails does the fact of being a woman make any difference?’ (Ibid)

This statement by the nun Somā rejects the attitude adapted by the Brahmins regarding the intellectual capacity of women.

What Buddhism advocates is that womanhood does not affect one's spiritual development at all and it can be achieved both by man and woman alike. When women sought permission

to enter the order, the Buddha in response to Elder Ānanda's query stated that woman can attain the status of stream-enterer (sotāpanna), once returner (sakadāgāmin) and accomplished one (arahant) by renouncing lay life and getting ordained according to Buddha's teachings and following vinaya rules (An iv, p 276 ) It was extremely difficult to change the attitude of Brahmins regarding the intellectual capacity possessed by women to realize dharma. The occasion of the attainment of parinibbāna by Mahāprajāpathi Gotami described in the Apadāna Pāli can be cited as an instance to dispel the erroneous view held by certain people suffering from inferiority complex. When the Theri Mahāprajāpathi Gōtamī was about to enter parinibbāna, the Buddha requested her to perform miracle saying :

There are fools who doubt that women cannot [too] gain an access to dhamma. To dispel that [wrong] view of theirs, display miracles, Gotamī. (Lilley Mary, 2000, p 535).

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta describes that women's role in respect of realization of dhamma and its perpetuation is equal to that of the monks and the lay devotees. When Māra implored the Buddha to attain parinibbāna shortly afterwards the attainment of the Buddhahood, the Buddha rejected it saying that he would not accede to it until his four-fold followers, namely, monks and nuns, male lay devotees and female lay devotees comprehended the doctrine thoroughly and gained the capacity to propagate it (Carpenter, Estlin, 1966, p. 104). Thus, the contribution rendered by all four divisions for the sake of the sāsana is recognized without any distinction. Foremost amongst the nuns who fulfilled that service were elders like Dhammadinnā and Khemā and the devotees like Vishākā. The yeoman service they rendered are recorded in the Tripitaka literature. The spiritual capacity as well as the unparalleled wisdom they demonstrated are corroborated by Etadagga Pāli in the Aṅguttara Nikāya.

The Āvenika Dukkha Sutta asserts that the basic difference existing between man and woman is merely biological (Leon Feer, 1990, p. 239) However, there are certain miserable situations that woman is invariably destined to face, namely, marrying at a young age and forced to leave her loved ones to join the husband, menstruation, frequently giving birth to children and nursing the husband. Of those, situations the first and the last are attributed to sociological factors while the other two are attributed to biological factors. Other than the

biological factor that differentiate man from woman, Buddhism totally rejects all other factors that tend to treat them either as noble or mean on the basis of sex. According to the traditional Indian religious thought based on Vedic beliefs, menstruation and other physical changes occurring in women were treated as serious defilements, and they were prohibited from participating at religious ceremonies and entering into places of religions worship. This belief had been infiltrated into the Sinhala culture through Hindu influence and Buddhism has nothing to do with it.

In the analysis of human body into five constituent parts, Buddhism makes no distinction on the basis of gender. The physical change that affects woman is treated as a natural phenomenon. Nowhere in the Buddhist teachings it is mentioned that women are debarred from participating at religious ceremonies on account of the physical defilements arising due to biological factors. In the orthodox Buddhism one cannot find any evidence to support that view. However, in certain countries where Buddhism is practiced, women are sometimes debarred from participating at certain religious ceremonies and some restrictions prevent them from participating at such ceremonies alongside men. For example, such instance of discrimination is to be found at certain rituals conducted at the Temple of the Tooth and also at the Sri Mahā Bōdhi Temple at Anuradhapura. Those inhibitions are purely due to influences of the Hindu religious beliefs that crept into Buddhist practices through the ages. By no means it was meant to demean that the female body as something loathsome. The purpose behind analysing individual's body and mind into *khandha*, *dhātu* and *āyatana* following the Buddhist *vipassanā* method of meditation was to reject the theory of soul. Thus, early Buddhism never emphasized the fact that only women's body is loathsome.

A major fallacy or a myth that prevails regarding womanhood is that it is a result of a sin committed in a previous birth. It is mentioned in the Bahudhātuka Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya that a women can never attain the status of the Buddhahood or become a Sakka, a cakkavatti king or a Māra. Without adducing any reason, that Sutta merely says that it is an impossibility. However, it does not imply that it is due to a sinful act committed in a previous birth. Evidences from the Jātaka literature can be cited to prove that this misconception has crept into Buddhist beliefs at a later stage. The gender of a child at the embryonic stage can be determined only by some device like scanning or a medical test. According Buddhist teachings, a person's destiny to be reborn in *saṃsāra* also reinforces this tendency. The

psychological factor that influences the gender of the child is explained in the Saṃyōga Visamyōga Pariyāya Sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya (Hardy, 1958, pp. 57-59). Certain scholars in their attempt to interpret the Buddhist attitude toward women have failed to realize that point in its proper perspective. The Sutta clearly elucidates that mental disposition prevailed at the time of performing the sexual act is the only fact that influences the determination of a child's gender. Thus, it proves that to be born as a woman is not a consequence of a sin one has committed in a previous birth. However, in the Pali commentaries and other similar expositions of the doctrine belonging to later Buddhism, this notion underwent a change and womanhood was treated as an outcome of a sinful act done in the previous birth.. Apparently this belief seems to have crept in at the time of the compilation of the *Jātaka Aṭṭakatās* and the *Kunāla Jātaka* provides good example that proves evil characteristics inborn are in women (Fausboll, 1963, pp. 434-35). On examining that *Jātaka* tale one could discover a strong Brahmanic influence there. The *Mahā Nārada-kassapa Jātaka* stresses that womanhood is due to committing adultery in the previous birth and exhorts that if she hopes to absolve herself from that sin and wishes to be reborn as a man, she should eschew adultery and nurse her husband well (Fausboll, 1963, p. 240). It is obvious from similar instances occurring in the *Jātaka* literature that the opinion of women reflected in *Jātaka* presents a distorted picture and it was due to the influence of the Brahmins who harboured a wrong impression of women. It is evident from the literature belonging to the subsequent period, that this parochial attitude on women held by narrators of *Jātaka* tales has influenced the later works as well. Accordingly, in the *Upāsaka Janālan-kāra* written during the Polonnaruwa period mentions that if a man committed adultery, he would be reborn as a woman and if a woman commits adultery she would be reborn as a woman over and over again (Saddhatissa, 1965, pp. 216 -217). This view of women found in the literary works of a later period has led to form a wrong view of the Buddhist attitude toward women.

The *Aggañña Sutta* refuting the theory of creation relates, by means of a fascinating story, how social institutions evolved gradually. Accordingly, appearance of the sex organs on the bodies of the beings who descended from the *Ābhassara Brahma* world had occurred simultaneously (Carpenter Estlin, 1976, p 88). Buddhism discards the theory promulgated by the theologians that man emerged first and woman followed him. Thus, Buddhism does not recognize the superiority of man over woman. According to the world vision of the early

Buddhism there in no theoretical basis to downgrade woman as a second-class citizen.

Sigālōvāda Sutta illustrates how woman's role and functions are evaluated in early Buddhism from two different angles (Ibid, p. 190). Buddhism does not interfere with the right one has to take his or her own decision in matters relating to marriage and that human rights are not interpreted as something bonded to a religion or a sacrament. Buddhism treats marriage as something purely personal and by presenting a code of ethics relating to marriage, it is intended to strengthen that bond further. During Buddha's time several forms of marriage existed in India, but Buddhism advocates only the monogamous form of marriage that promotes mutual happiness. Of the five precepts, the third precept is purported to ensure the social security of woman.

The order of the Buddhist nuns is a well-organized institution set up for the benefit of women in general. There are diverse opinions among the Buddhist and non-Buddhist scholars all over the world about how it originated and extensive academic discussions have been taken place on the subject. Therefore, a further discussion on the same subject is unwarranted. It is quite obvious that the eight conditions (aṭṭa-garudhamma), which have been subjected to a great controversy, was not there in the early Buddhist ethical teachings. (සද්ධර්මානුම නිමි, 1993, පි. 65). Difference in gender is not taken into consideration in Buddhist ethical teachings. Gender is immaterial regarding one's ethical behaviour or the retribution one gets as its outcome. On the other hand, after the passing away of the Buddha, the responsibility of collating the Buddha's teachings fell exclusively into the hands of monks, and nuns were excluded from taking part in it. Under such circumstances, it is reasonable to surmise that the monks might have twisted the teachings in their favour and reinterpreted the precepts relating to the nuns. After all, the order of nuns set up with blessings of the Buddha can be reckoned as a priceless boon to women who experienced suppression under the Brahmanic society. Woman who entered the order of nuns and attained Arahantship later on gave vent to their ecstatic feelings in the form of lyrics which are found in the Therīgāthā. It is evident from the above discussion that the attitude toward women manifested in early Buddhism has undergone considerable changes due to diverse interpretations that are found in the later Buddhism.



### **Literary and Social Significance of the Experiences of the Arahant Nuns as Occurring in the Therīgāthā**

Creative literature reflects the reality of human life and society. A successful literary work presents the nature of life and society in its real perspective. The truth that surfaces from such literary works applies not only to one particular person, but to the entire society at large. It is the universality of experiences depicted in literature that elevates such a literary work to the rank of a classic. Since that characteristic is quite evident in the *Therīgāthā* it deserves to occupy an unparalleled position in the world literature. This anthology that echoes the ecstatic feelings experienced by the nuns is significant not only poetically but socially as well. These lyrics that present a vivid picture of diverse problems confronted by women of all walks of life in the contemporary society can be treated as a valuable source revealing real facts of life that existed in the then society. The arahant nuns represented in these lyrics were from different geographical regions of that society. They ranged from noble women and millionaire women to ordinary housewives, sex workers and beggar women. Experiences recounted by these nuns representing various cross sections of a society sound quite genuine and frank.

Ambapāli, the well-known courtesan in her lay-life, contemplates on the reality of life by comparing her own body in the dotage with that which she possessed in her youthful days (Olden Berg, 1966, pp. 150-151), (Pruitt, 1998, pp. 198-203). Comparing her shriveled body at present with her extraordinarily beautiful and shapely figure in her youth, she admits that what the Buddha preached was the eternal truth. Realization of the eternal truth dawned to her only after she had reached the old age. This is a common phenomenon that applies to all humans alike. On the other hand, being a professional sex-worker, it was natural that in her youth she was not inclined to seek the reality of life. The lyrical expressions of Ambapāli, occurring in *Therīgāthā* are rated as compositions containing high poetic value. A feature of the Indian poetic tradition was to describe the female physique from the tip of hair to the toe and that of the male from toe to the tip of hair. The poem of Ambapāli consisting of 19 stanzas has followed this pattern described in Indian tradition relating to poetics.

Therī Muttā In her poem sums up the real nature of diverse sufferings endured by women in the contemporary Indian society. She joyfully confesses how she was released from the three humps, namely the hump of the mortar, the pestle and her own husband respectively (Ibid, p. 124) (Ibid, pp. 13-14). The three humps that hurt her are common to the present

day woman as well. Though she had to drudge at home, it was neither appreciated nor rewarded. She delightfully confesses that by entering the order of nuns, she was emancipated not only from the three humps but also from the eternal sufferings due to birth, decay and death. The lyric of Isidāsi discloses that the women in India had to undergo great suffering in the process of running a home (Ibid, pp.163-67), (Ibid, p. 249). Though she married several times she could never enjoy peace of mind. Ultimately, she calls marriage a retribution of a sin she had committed in a previous birth. (*pāpam hi mayāpatakamkammam tam nijparissāmi*). The lyric of Sumangala Māthā is like a dirge that reveals how she had to endure unfold sufferings due to abject poverty and misconduct of her husband (Ibid, p. 126), (Ibid, p. 27).

The bond that binds mother to her child is absolutely inseparable. One comes across in Therīgāthā stories of several mothers who lost their infant children under tragic circumstances. Having abandoned their lay life in utter despondency and disgust, they had sought solace by entering the order of nuns. The awful sufferings endured by women who had lost their most precious possession are vividly manifested in the lyrical compositions of Paṭāchārā, Kisāgotamī and Vāseṭṭi. The stanzas in Therīgāthā describes how they enjoyed the spiritual consolation and tranquility by following Buddha's admonition.

In the opening stanza of the poem attributed to nun Uppalavannā one finds a story that has a striking similarity to the story of Oedipus occurring in the classical Greek literature (Ibid, p. 144-45), (Ibid, p. 177). It is based on a true incident experienced by a nun called Gangātiriya. A mother who had been separated from her little son and daughter and living in isolation for a long time, was destined to become the concubine of her son quite unawares. When the truth came to light, she became utterly moved and in her bitter utter embarrassment sought Theri Uppalavannā's advice. In the Greek version mother committed suicide. But in its Indian version, all three of them namely mother, daughter and son left their lay life and entered the order instead. This story exemplifies the highly complex nature of carnality and also how the confines of morality is transgressed when the desire to gratify sensual pleasures is overwhelming. The themes of most poems reveal that in the Indian society, women were treated as playthings and subjected to undergo various forms of suppression.

Deprivation of social security was yet another tragedy that women in ancient India had to face. A nun called Chandrā, who subsisted in her lay life on pittance, was a woman neglected by the society. But after entering the order of nuns she was able to redeem herself from that miserable life. Among those who entered the order were many women domestic servants, who were ruthlessly exploited by their employers. The elder Punnā was formally a domestic aid, who had to endure severe punishment meted out to her by the employer. As a nun she denounced the ritual of purification by ablution advocated in the Vedic religion and pointed out its futility logically.

In addition to the interesting facts relating to the contemporary society, *Theragāthā* contains vivid descriptions of natural beauty. Paradoxically, the lyrical compositions in *Therīgāthā* is confined to recounting of various forms of suffering that nuns endured in their lay life. Vinaya rules forbade nuns to take shelter in forests. Out of the thirteen Dhūtāṅgas, the āranyakāṅga is not approved for nuns. Probably this restriction must have deprived the nuns of the opportunity to gaining access to forests to appreciate nature's beauty. The fact that *Therīgāthā* lacks descriptions of natural beauty does not diminish its importance as a work of high literary merit and sociological value.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, on examining the early Buddhist teachings relating to women, several interesting facts on the Buddhist attitude toward women emerge from the above discussion. In the early Buddhist teachings on women, it is observed that gender was not recognized as a factor that has much significance in the process of attaining one's spiritual advancement. Similarly, it is confirmed that certain attitudes and beliefs regarding women developed in later Buddhism were non-existent in early Buddhism. Introducing the order of nuns to the Indian women, who were neglected by the then society was a major contributory factor that had changed and uplifted their spirituality. The lyrical compositions in the *Therīgāthā* illustrate how women from all walks of life attained enlightenment by dispelling the gloom that shrouded their worldly life. It is an indisputable fact that the versified confessions of Arahant nuns occurring in the *Therīgāthā* are amongst the earliest pioneering literary compositions on women's liberation that one comes across in world literature.

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