CHAPTER II

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT:
FROM BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

In the first chapter, an evaluation is attempted in response to the query – whether the women in Pre-Buddhist society were empowered? It was found that although women were not empowered in sense of the term as women were still dependent on others they have not realised themselves. Their existence was still dependent and therefore the problem remained of how to get women liberated from such dependence and how to make them empowered? The concept of empowerment in Buddhism enables us to answer this question.¹ However, before elaborating the Buddhist concept of empowerment. Let us see nature of empowerment of woman.

2.1 Understanding the Concept of Empowerment from Buddhist Perspective

2.1.1 Nature of Empowerment of Woman

Generally, empowerment of woman means the self-realization of woman and her active participation in decision-making in her social and personal life. Empowerment refers to woman’s holistic development. That is her social, cultural, economic, political, mental and spiritual development. Empowerment means woman’s realization of her own capacities and power so that she can face challenges and overcome social and cultural barriers. It builds a positive image about her. It creates enough confidence in her. So that she

¹ Here we have to remember that the concept of empowerment has not been advocated by the Buddha. However, the systematic investigation and interpretation of the Buddha’s thought enable us to articulate the Buddhist concept of empowerment.
could take an active part in decision-making related to herself and her family. Further, empowerment is not something that is external to her but it is built in her and it has to be excavated by her. However, this is possible only when she has self-realization and reflection of such self-realisation in her life.

The self-realization of women is related with actualization of different possibilities of empowerment and its actualization related with their application in the society where woman as well as society have an important role to play. The actualization of woman’s self-realization is possible only when there is change in the mental attitude of woman and change in the mental attitude of the society. Change in mental attitude of woman enables her to break social and cultural barriers and change in mental attitude of society enables the society to accept the independent existence of woman and to provide the opportunities to woman and also to encourage her so that she can explore her capacities. Both these changes are important and necessary because if a woman has not realised her capacities then there is no use of providing opportunities to her. Similarly, if the society is not ready to provide the opportunity to her then there is no use of her having realised her capacities, that is being empowered. Hence, for the empowerment of woman it is necessary that there should be mental transformation of woman as well as of society.

However, almost in every culture in the world women are not empowered. In this context, questions arise, why is it so? Why has woman’s not realised herself? There are basically three reasons behind this situation; namely:

1. Woman’s Perspective about herself
2. Woman’s Perspective about the society
3. Society’s Perspective about the woman

Let us elaborate these reasons in detail.
1) Woman’s Perspective about herself: - Woman has some images about herself that she has acquired through the process of enculturation and socialization. Some cultural values have also been taught to her. It is because of this, she is not ready to do those actions which will break her images. For example, Sitā is an ideal woman for her. So, instead of behaving according to her will and reason, she blindly follows Sitā. She tries to forgive her husband even though he does not deserve. This happens because she thinks that being wife is part of existence or identity. She forgets that she has an independent existence apart from her being a wife. Consequently she is ignorant about her capacities and powers. This makes her to stick to her traditional and cultural roles. It means her mental set up does not allow her to break the cultural and social framework and barriers.

2) Woman’s Perspective about society: - Woman is thought through the process of socialization and enculturation that society in general and male in particular are her protectors. So it is her duty to serve the society and males in the society. It is because of this type of thinking she also starts to trust on society and man and always tries to express her obligations. She thinks that she is dependent on the society. She further thinks that if she does not behave according to the rules and regulations then society will blame her, she is not ready to break the barriers.

3) Society’s Perspective about the woman: - Sometimes society also creates some images about woman – a woman as an embodiment of traditional values and Saṅskāras. Society also examines and evaluates her achievements within the framework these values, the society has specific image about woman. It thinks that woman is physically weak, so she cannot do hard work. Being physically weak she has to depend on her husband; she has to serve him and his family. Hence, whenever the intelligent woman shows her calibre and revolts against the traditional roles that are assigned to her, she becomes the victim of social ridicule. Sometimes she is boycotted too.
This shows that the wrong perspective of woman about herself and the society and also the wrong perspective of society about woman create obstacles in the self-realization and actualization of empowerment of woman.

In brief, woman does not have empowerment because on the one hand she has a wrong understanding about herself and about the society and on the other hand society also has a wrong understanding about her. Hence, if we want woman to be empowered then her ignorance about herself and society as well as the ignorance of society about woman has to be removed. When this sort of wrong understanding will be removed from the mind of woman and that of the society, they will realise that all the ideas of woman about her rights, duties, obligation, and customs are social constructions, constructed at the time of formation of the society. They will realise that these rights, duties, customs etc. are anthropocentric in nature and hence they are human and social constructions. Yet, whatever is constructed by humans can be changed according to the context and situations. Hence, the anthropocentric world of values and roles cannot really assess the ability of woman.

This shows that if we want the empowerment of woman then it is necessary to bring three sorts of changes; namely, change in woman’s attitude about herself, change in woman’s attitude about society and change in society’s attitude about woman. In other words, if we want to make woman empowered, it is necessary that society as well as woman have to change their mentality as society and woman both are reluctant to accept the capacities and power of woman that enables her to prove herself as having independent existence then empowerment of woman will never be possible. In this context two problems arise, what are the reasons for this reluctance and how will this reluctance be removed? Answers to these questions can be given within the framework of Buddhism.

Kleśāvaraṇa and Jñeyāvaraṇa are two important concepts in Buddhism. Kleśāvaraṇa is related with the individual’s ignorance about nature of himself
while Jñeyāvaraṇa is related with the individual’s ignorance about the nature of external world. By interpreting these concepts with reference to empowerment of woman we will investigate the reasons behind woman’s not being empowered. With the help of these concepts we will also try to articulate and interpret the concept of empowerment from the Buddhist perspective.

2.1.2 Kleśāvaraṇa – Problem of Self-Realization of Woman

Gautama Buddha while talking about the problem of human suffering has pointed out that there is no permanent, eternal and unchanging principle like ātmā but due to the ignorance about himself, an individual thinks that there is permanent, eternal principle like ātmā that reside in his body and starts to please it. This perspective about himself gives rise to self-love, self-pride etc. This kind of perspective is known as satkāyaḍṛṣṭi. According to Gautama Buddha, this is a kind of Tṛṣṇā or uncontrolled and unlimited desire of man, which is the basic cause of human suffering. This kind of Tṛṣṇā is called Klistatrṣṇā.

Vasubandhu, while explaining this thought of the Buddha, has elaborated the concept of Kleśāvaraṇa. According to him, Kleśāvaraṇa is Ātmadrṣṭi or Āmiyadrṣṭi or man’s perspective about himself. Actually, every human being, independent of the consideration of gender, sex, caste, class etc. is composed of five elements or pañchaskandha, namely, rūpa skandha, saṃjñā skandha, vedanā skandha, saṃskāra skandha and vijñāna skandha. This is also known as nāma-rūpa. But due to the ignorance and perspective about himself / herself an individual assumes that there is a permanent, eternal and unchanging principle like ātmā that resides in human body. An individual further tends to desire those worldly things and affairs, which give nothing but pleasures and
avoids these worldly things and affairs, which give her/him nothing but pain. This feeling and desire of an individual is called by Vasubandhu, Kleśāvaraṇa.

This Kleśāvaraṇa consists of four kinds of Kleśas or defilements; namely, ātmadṛṣṭi, ātmamoha, ātmamāna and ātmasneha. Ātmadṛṣṭi means accepting that there is ātmā that resides in the human body. Ātmamoha is ignorance about the nature of ātmā. Ātmamāna is the pride about ātmā. Ātmasneha is self-love. According to Vasubandhu, ātmamoha, ātmadṛṣṭi and ātmamāna gives rise to ātmasneha or āsakti attachment. This āsakti gives rise to suffering.

This concept of Kleśāvaraṇa can be used to understand the nature of the wrong understanding of woman about herself. Like any other human being, a woman is composed of five elements. Like any other human being she has good and bad qualities. Besides that she does not have qualities like being a mother, a sister, a wife etc. that are built into her. That is such qualities are not born with her birth. However, while living in the society, some roles are assigned to her. Further, it is expected by the society, that in order to perform such roles, woman has to develop such characteristics. For example, being a mother, woman has to have forgiveness, compassion etc.

On the basis of these roles and the characteristics that she has developed for the performance of these, she is named as a mother, a sister, a wife. All these names are nothing but kinship terminologies. However, due to the wrong understanding about herself, she thinks that as being a woman she has to perform these roles as such characteristics are her essential characteristics. Accordingly she tries to behave within the framework of that role and this sort of behaviour gives her pleasure. Because she loves these roles, she is proud of them. For example, Kīsa Gotamī, one of the therīs in Buddhism becomes unhappy when her husband and son expired. It is true that the death of person to whom we love gives suffering but in addition to that the death of such
person creates social and cultural vacuum in the life of the individual especially in the life of a woman. Kīsa Gotamī is devastated her social, cultural and religious status changed forever. Though such status was given by society and achievement for her (she was proud of being a wife and mother). So far as India is concerned, for example, Indian social structure and epics are also responsible for this sort of wrong understanding of woman.

No doubt that Āshramavyavsthā, Purushārtha and Varnavyavasthā made important contributions in the formation of Indian society and also in shaping the individual’s private and social and social life. Varnavyavasthā had divided the society into four Varnas: namely, Brahmana, Ksatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra. These four groups have certain status in the society. Brahmana, Ksatriya, Vaisya enjoy the higher status and Sudra enjoys the lower status in the society. Thus, Varnavyavasthā has provided a pyramid structure of the society where Brahmanas are on a higher strata and Sudras on lower strata. There are four Purushārthas; namely, Dharma, Artha, Kāma and Mokṣa. Āshramavyavsthā includes tour āshramas: namely, Brahmacharyāśrama, Grahsttāśrama, Vanaprasttāśrama and Sanyāsashrama. With the help of Āshramavyavsthā the span of human life has been divided into four parts. This social structure creates the impression in her mind, as a member of Indian society she has to follow Varṇāshram dharma and has to develop the characteristics which are required for performing the roles assigned by Varṇāshram. This is a wrong perspective of woman about herself.

Similarly, Manusmriti and the epics like Rāmayana and Mahābhārata have described the nature of woman in such a way that a woman thought that her natures and identity should be in accordance to this description. For instance, the description of woman’s nature occurs in the Mahābhārata in three different forms:
1) Both Manusmriti and Mahābhārata have laid down certain norms of behaviour for an ideal woman with ample illustrations drawn from various sources. For example, Parvati, Savtrī, Draupādi, symbolize total devotion to the husband, a virtue necessary for an ideal woman.

2) It also goes on to explain how a woman becomes an object of ridicule if she violates the rules or refuses to observe the code of conduct prescribed for her. It is believed that the woman is a weak creature and needs to be protected. It is nothing but showing disrespect for the woman.

3) Lastly, it refers to how a woman achieves honour by strict observance of all the imperatives. There is no dearth of eulogies to woman in the Mahābhārata.2

Due to this kind of hammering and brain-washing either by social structure or through epics, the woman started to think that whatever is imposed by the society is her true nature and it is her duty to behave and to become a woman as described by the social norms and values. She started to think that the qualities imposed by society are her inborn qualities, that they are built-in-her. It is because of this kind of thinking she forgot her own nature, capacities and powers. Consequently, she is unaware and ignorant about herself. This ignorance has not only created the wrong apprehension about herself but has given rise to self-love and also a belief about herself that essentially she is a mother, a wife etc. In Buddhist terminology, this perspective can be called satkāyadṛṣṭi. This dṛṣṭi or woman’s wrong apprehension about herself creates tṛṣṇā or uncontrolled desire in her mind. Due to tṛṣṇā she tends to play only those roles which give her nothing but pleasure. Such roles may include the role of mother, wife, daughter etc. This satkāyadṛṣṭi along with tṛṣṇā forms the

2 M.A. Kelkar; Subordination of Women: A new perspective, p. 47.
Kleśāvaraṇa of woman. Due to this Kleśāvaraṇa woman starts to think that motherhood, wifehood etc. are her built-in features and she acts accordingly.

In this way, Kleśāvaraṇa has an important role to play in making the women think and form a view about the concept of ideal womanhood.

2.1.3 Jñeyāvaraṇa and Problem of Self-Realization of Woman

Epistemological inquiry is based on three pillars; namely, knowledge, known and knower. Generally, it is believed that the knower and the known exist independently from each other. It is further believed that the qualities and characteristics of the object that the knower knows are built-in-features of the object. However, according to Buddha, this is a kind of ignorance. While talking about the problem of human suffering, Gautama Buddha has pointed out that an ignorance regarding the nature of self is not the only cause of trṣṇā and thereby the cause of human suffering but man’s ignorance about the nature of an object is also the cause of trṣṇā and human suffering. In order to satisfy his desire, an individual imposed certain qualities on an object and assume that an object possesses these characteristics. That is to say though that object does not have these qualities, due to wrong apprehension and ignorance about the nature of an object, an individual thinks that an object has built-in-qualities and that such object and its exist independently without the knowledge of the knower.

In this way, due to the ignorance about the nature of an object, an individual accepts the duality of knower and the known. This kind of ignorance is known as Aklīṣṭā Avidyā. This perspective about the nature of an object of knowledge is called as dharmāmya drṣṭi. It gives rise to ignorance known as Aklīṣṭā avidyā. In this way, due to the ignorance about the nature of an object, an individual accepts the duality of knower and the known.
While explaining this thought of Buddha, Vasubandhu has introduced the concept of  Jñeyāvaraṇa. According to him  Jñeyāvaraṇa is dharmatmya-drṣṭi. He argued that the qualities or  dharmas that an individual apprehends do not exist in the external world but they are conceptual constructions of the individual.

But due to the ignorance and wrong perspective about the nature of an object he assumes that there is an object of knowledge having certain qualities existing in the external world independently of its being known. This ignorance gives rise to the duality of knower and the known. This kind of ignorance is called  Jñeyāvaraṇa which is due to wrong understanding of the nature of an object and its relation with the knower.

In other words  Jñeyāvaraṇa is the ignorance of knower about the nature of an object, which gives rise to the duality of knower and the known. It is a perspective which is known as graha-grahaka drṣṭi. Generally, it is accepted that whatever exists in the external world is the object of knowledge and whatever an individual experiences exists in the external world. Similarly, whatever an individual talks about exists in the external world and whatever exists in the external world can be talked about. In other words, whatever is knowable is real and whatever is real is knowable. Similarly, whatever is nameable is real and whatever is real is nameable. In this way to accept one to one correspondence between the knowable and the real is grāhya-grāhaka drṣṭi or abhidheya-svalakṣaṇa grāhaka drṣṭi. It is called dharmātmya grāhaka drṣṭi. It is because of this kind of drṣṭi an individual is ignorant about the fact that whatever that he experiences or talks about does not exist in the external world. This perspective is also called grāhya-grāhaka drṣṭi because an individual or a knower believes that whatever he experiences is independent from him. Thus, according to Vasubandhu, to accept the duality of knower and the known is a kind of ignorance, which is known as  Jñeyāvaraṇa.
This concept of *Jñeyāvaraṇa* can be used to understand the attitude of woman towards the society and society’s attitude towards the woman. In this context, we have to consider two sorts of epistemic relations between woman and society; first the epistemic relation where a woman is considered as known that is an object of knowledge and the society is considered as knower and second, the epistemic relation where the society is considered as known and the woman is considered as knower and second, the epistemic relation where the society is considered as known and the woman is considered as knower. Let us elaborate these relations:

1) **Epistemic relation where a woman is known and the society is a knower:** - This relation tells us how society perceives a woman that is members of the society looks at the woman within the social and cultural framework. As it is believed by the society, that such framework is an ideal framework. This ideal framework has been transmitted from generation to generation. Within this framework it is accepted that ideal woman means honest wife, kind mother etc. So woman is identified with wife and mother consequently a woman is also introduced as a wife of or as a mother of somebody. Nobody introduces her without any reference to these roles. Everybody forgets the fact that being a mother or a wife is not her inborn nature. She is a wife or mother only because she comes in contact with other members of the society. Hence, her description as a mother or as a wife is social construction. These roles are based on kinship. Unfortunately, it is not understood that all these relational qualities are not inborn qualities of woman but super imposed qualities on her and consequently it is believed that these qualities are essential qualities of woman. This ignorance creates the duality between society, man and woman. This is *Jñeyāvaraṇa* of the society in general and man in particular which is governed by man’s or societies’ wrong understanding about the nature of woman. This is *dharmatmya dṛṣṭi*. This kind of perspective assumes that woman has those equalities which social mind apprehends and the qualities which social mind apprehends are supposed to be
the essential qualities of woman. It is further assumed that whatever is attributed to woman is the built-in-property and vice versa. For example, it is believed that being a woman means essentially being a mother and any woman if for any reasons is unable to become mother, she is blamed.

2) The Epistemic Relation where women is knower and the society is known: - Right from her childhood, moral and social values are taught to woman through the processes of socialization and enculturation in such a way that every time, she thinks that she is dependent on others, especially on the male members of the society either for her work or for her existence. Further, she thinks that she has been protected all the time by men only. Hence, she thinks that it is her duty to serve them by all means.

Thus, the perspective that tradition has imposed on woman makes her to look at the society in general and man in particular, hence she is unable to see the appropriate nature of man. This perspective of woman can be called as dharmatmya drṣṭi. This drṣṭi makes her think that whatever she apprehends (through the processes of enculturation and socialization) as the qualities of society or man are built-in the society and in man and that these built-in qualities of society or man. For example, she believes that her husband is God. This type of relation between a woman and society as the knower and the known gives rise to the dualism of woman and society.

It is because of this perspective, she is reluctant to break the traditional framework and hence she is not ready to accept the opportunities given by the society. Due to this dharmātmya drṣṭi woman as well as society is not ready to go beyond the duality of social construction and woman. Both these sorts of perspectives can be called dharmatmya drṣṭi because the man and the woman both are ignorant about the fact that whatever that he or she apprehends or talks about are not inborn qualities of woman or man respectively. Consequently it is assumed that woman as well as man exists independently with their qualities.
To accept duality between man and woman is ignorance. This ignorance is called \( \text{Jñeyāvaraṇa} \).\(^3\)

In this way, \( \text{Kleśāvaraṇa} \) is related with the woman’s attitude towards herself and \( \text{Jñeyāvaraṇa} \) is related with the woman’s attitude towards society and society’s attitude towards woman. Thus \( \text{Kleśāvaraṇa} \) and \( \text{Jñeyāvaraṇa} \) tell us why woman is not empowered. Now if it is accepted that \( \text{Jñeyāvaraṇa} \) and \( \text{Kleśāvaraṇa} \) are causes for non-empowerment of woman then naturally we have to accept that woman will be empowered only when these causes will be removed. Vasubandhu also has talked about the removal of suffering.

### 2.1.4 Removal of \( \text{Kleśāvaraṇa} \) and \( \text{Jñeyāvaraṇa} \)

According to Vasubandhu, \( \text{Jñeyāvaraṇa} \) is pratiyogi or counter-adjunct of \( \text{dharmanairātmya} \).\(^4\) \( \text{Dharmanairātmya} \) accepts that the object does not possess characteristics; it is discrete, unique particular. That is, where there is \( \text{dharmanairātmya} \), there is an absence of \( \text{Jñeyāvaraṇa} \). In the context of empowerment of woman, \( \text{dharmanairātmya} \) means to accept that just like any other human being, a woman is composed of five elements. She too, is a bare i.e. without any imposed qualities and hence whatever the qualities that are apprehended are not built-in-her but are social constructions. For example, the qualities like kindness, compassion, forgiveness etc. are required for being a mother are not built-in-characteristics in a woman and man can also possess these qualities. These qualities are not inborn but are social constructs.

In order to have knowledge of \( \text{dharma-nairātmya} \) it is necessary that there should be an absence of \( \text{Jñeyāvaraṇa} \). There will be an absence of

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4. Jaideva Singh; An Introduction to Madhyamaka Philosophy, p. 34.
Jñeyāvaraṇa only when an individual realises that whatever he experiences and names are nothing but the result of conceptual and linguistic constructions and further when he accepts that although he has an experience about the external world and woman and even though he talks about it and woman, woman is essentially devoid of dharma.

Jñeyāvaraṇa of society and of woman will be removed only when society realizes that whatever is imposed on a woman is nothing but a conceptual construction and a woman too is nothing but an aggregation of five elements. Similarly Jñeyāvaraṇa of woman will be removed when she realises that whatever she imposes on male in particular and society in general is nothing but a conceptual construction, male too is nothing but an aggregation of five elements. When Jñeyāvaraṇa is removed both society and woman have an appropriate knowledge of each other. In this situation, woman will be ready to take the opportunities provided by society. Similarly society will not hesitate to accept woman as an individual, and independent being having her own existence.

While talking about the removal of Kleśāvaraṇa, Vasubandhu has said that Kleśāvaraṇa is the counterpart or pratipakṣi of pudgal nairātmya. Pudgal nairātmya means to accept that over and above that pañcaskandha, there is no eternal permanent principle that resides in human body. That is to deny the eternal soul means to accept pudgal nairātmya and where there is Kleśāvaraṇa there is an absence of pudgal nairātmya and where there is pudgal nairātmya there is absence of Kleśāvaraṇa.

In the context of empowerment of woman, accepting pudgal nairātmya will mean accepting that just like other human beings, woman is also composed of pañchaskandha, she is just like a bare particular or svalaksana, and she has her own qualities. Although she is performing certain roles in the society, the qualities which are necessary for the performance of those roles are not built-
in-her rather they are accidental characteristics. When she realises this fact, then her Kleśāvaraṇa will automatically be removed. In this way by knowing pudgal nairātmya, woman removes Kleśāvaraṇa. This could be called self-realization of woman.

In other words, Kleśāvaraṇa of woman will be removed only when she realizes how to draw a line of demarcation between her own qualities and the qualities imposed by society on her. When she realizes her own nature, she is capable of using her abilities for the welfare of family, society and nation. She is capable enough to participate in decision-making and play a decisive role in the world of politics.

Buddha in his talks had expressed how woman and society would look at each other when all ignorance and prejudices are removed.

2.1.5 Women’s Nature through the Buddhist Perspective

Buddhism, in its origins, was a pragmatic soteriology, a theory of liberation that sought to free humanity from suffering, first by thoroughly analyzing the fundamental human predicament and then by offering a practical method or path for eliminating the afflictions, cognitive and dispositional, that are perpetuated as greed, hatred, and delusion.5 Human suffering and liberation, the Buddha was frequently critical of conventional views, including those carrying the authority of Brahmanic tradition. In marked contrast to the sacerdotal ritualism of the Brahmins, he offered a path that was open to all. The first canonical attitude to consider, soteriological inclusiveness, thus arguably is the most basic and also the most distinctively Buddhist attitude regarding the status of women that one can find in the vast literature of the 2500 year old tradition. The earliest Buddhists clearly held that one’s sex, like one’s caste or class (varṇa), presents no barrier to attaining the Buddhist goal of liberation.

5 José Ignacio Cabezón; Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender, p. 8.
from suffering. Women can, affirmed by the Buddhist tradition, pursue the path. Moreover, they can become arhats, Buddhist saints who had broken completely the cycle of the suffering of death and rebirth (saṃsāra).\(^6\)

In fact, the position that femaleness is no barrier to the achievement of the Buddhist human ideals takes two forms in Buddhist texts. The more common variation on this theme essentially proclaims that “the dhamma is neither male nor female,” that gender is irrelevant or even non-existent when one truly understands the Buddhist teachings. One also finds infrequent claim that in fact, for those with good motivation, femaleness is actually an advantage. Though that assessment is not by any means common or well-known, its very existence is important for gathering the fullness of an accurate record of Buddhist attitude toward gender.\(^7\)

In addition, the Buddha’s main argument against this was that no man or woman could be superior or inferior in society merely by reason of his birth.\(^8\) He clearly pointed out that position of man and woman depended on his or her conduct. This meant that it was a person’s attitude and behaviour (kamma) which made a man superior or inferior.\(^9\) It will be shown that these are not all that the race of woman needs; not all that her human nature requires. She has the same human nature which man has, and of course, the same natural human rights. Woman’s natural right for its rightfulness does not depend on the bodily or mental power to assert and to maintain it – on the great arm or on the great head; it depends only on human nature itself, which God made the same in the frailest woman as in the biggest giant. Further he told to Ajātashatry do not become unhappy at the birth of the daughter.

The Buddhist View about woman’s nature pointed out that despite the fact that the Buddha elevated the status of women; he was practical in his

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\(^6\) Cabezón, José, Ignacio; *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. p. 8.
\(^8\) K. T. S. Sarao; *Origin and nature of ancient Indian Buddhism*, p. 104.
\(^9\) Dixit, Shailini; *Patriarchy and Feminine Space: A Study of Women in Early Buddhism*, p. 18.
observations and advice given from time to time. He realized the social and biological differences between men and women. The reality of the fact of the nature of women was brought out by the Buddha who had pointed out not only their weaknesses, but also their abilities and potential.

2.2 Aspects of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism

Empowerment of woman is expressed in various aspects of her life like social aspect, religious aspects etc.

2.2.1 Social Aspect of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism

As we have seen that empowerment of woman is attained through her self-realization that is through her mental and spiritual development and through her knowledge of herself and of the society as well as the realization of society and its acceptance that woman also has her own, independent existence. Her self-realization makes her aware of her attributes; her qualities belong to her and not these that are imposed on her by social and cultural conventions and through the processes of enculturation and socialization. When the woman and the society have clear understanding regarding the nature of each other then only, there is holistic development of society as well as of the members of the society.

Gautama Buddha through his discourses always tried to enlighten the people about the myth of gender difference. In Buddha’s days also, the birth of female child was not welcomed. Her birth made the parents unhappy. It may be because the parents believed that after marriage, daughters went to their husband house then who would take care of the parents in their old age. But if they had son their son lived with them even after their marriage. So the sons

10 Tsultrim Allione; Women of Wisdom, p. 83.
could take care of them. It is because of this belief, parents preferred the male child. The Buddha tried to remove this kind of belief from the mind of people.

According to him, there was no reason to feel gloomy at the birth of a daughter. For example, King Pasenadi was unhappy at the time of birth of a girl to his Queen Mallikā. He went to the Buddha to tell this news and when the Buddha observed that King is unhappy, he said;

“Indeed, a woman of a certain sort is better than a man lord of folk: Wise, Virtuous, reversing her husband’s mother, a devoted wife, the man born of her is a hero, ruler of the regions, such a son of a good wife is one who advised his realm”.  

Here, the Buddha gave a statement which skillfully combines an elevation in the status of women and made the King happy. It is because, after hearing the statement of the Buddha King realised that the female child that is daughter and male child that is son are equally important so one should not make the gender discrimination. The thought of not making the gender discrimination was reflected in the life of people as well the birth of female children was not met with so severe a sense of despair and encumbrance as was done before. Indeed no discrimination was made between a male and a female progeny in a Buddhist family.

Another important fact is that the notion of indispensability of a male child was fast losing ground in the Buddhist society. A wife always bearing female child is not to be discarded. The social restrictions placed on the women were simply unbearable to the rising spirit of rationalism in Buddhism. This very spirit of rationalism is responsible in the Buddhist scriptures for a still more unprecedented injunction in the Buddhist scriptures that the practice of adoption of a son by a sonless man is not quite legitimate. Not only this, the

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11 SN.I.86. “Ithī pi hi ekacciyā seyyā posā janādhipa, medhāvinī sīlavatī sassudevā patibbatā. Tassā yo āyati poso sūro hoti disampati, evaṃ subhagiyā putto rajjam pi anusāsatī.”
reaction has gone yet a step further. Contrary to all previous legal tenets of the Dharmaśāstras, the Buddhist canons hold the adoption of daughters as quite valid. This is indeed a serious innovation. In the Buddhist period instances were not lacking in the adoption of daughters, Sāmāvatī was adopted by the householder Mitta and a certain king is mentioned to have taken a girl named Kana and made her his own eldest daughter.

Buddhism did not just look at women as child-bearers, and did not accept that marriage was the only the aim of a woman. It is because unmarried adult woman held a legitimate role, and she could also become Buddhist nun. It is said that the faithful laywoman would encourage her only son to emulate the best laymen or monks, and her only daughter to emulate the best laywomen or nuns.

It is observed in the Buddhist literature that the marriage itself was not held to be imperative as it was in the case of Vedic culture. A single life was not regarded as a wasted life. Even a maiden was allowed to lead a life of celibacy and devote herself exclusively to other secular or spiritual affairs. Thus Subha, a goldsmith’s daughter and Sumana, the daughter of Anāthapiṇḍika remained unmarried throughout their life and devoted themselves to the management of their family affairs. Aṅguttara Nikāya, a Buddhist text states that wife by husband is always esteemed in the household. In the choice of career for children, wife had the same right of decision as husband had for him. In the Upasampadā ceremony the novice was asked: “Have you your father’s and mother’s permission for undertaking an ascetic life”? Anāthapiṇḍika consulted his wife for accepting merchant Vgga’s son for their daughters. These indications certainly lead one to believe that the status of women in the household had improved.

12 A.IV. 44.
13 Sharma, S. Ram; Women and education, p. 29. In Pali text: “Anuṇāññatosi mātāpitūhi”
About the practice of early marriage before puberty there is no mention of that in the canonical literature. Thus Visākhā married when she was sixteen years of age. Another maiden named Bhaddā Kuṇḍalkeshā is mentioned to have remained unmarried even at the age of sixteen. Therīgāthās furnish instances of many girls like Sela, Alavika and Sumedha were unmarried at the marriageable age of sixteen.

Women had greater liberty in the choice of their husbands during the Buddhist age than in the preceding periods. The Buddha tore off the observance of parda, he gave the clear verdict that women had the full right of leading independent religious life. Not only monastic women but even secular women in the Buddhist times enjoyed liberty to an honorable extent. Women had the option to share their husbands’ calling and undertake any productive labor. Thus they were often instrumental in bringing prosperity to their homes. This particular socialistic arrangement worked very well in the Buddhist society. In the Buddhist age, marriage ceases to be a sacrament and instead became a strictly civil and domestic affair. Gautama Buddha himself ordains in no uncertain terms: Slaughter of life, theft, lying, and adultery.

Buddhists treat the mother as the highest symbol of respect in the home. She is the progenitor and nearest to a person. It is the warmth of her body that gives infants the sense of safety and security. Mother is called the Friend in the Home (Mātā mitraṃ sake ghare). When the mother becomes the mother of a mother, she becomes the patron of the extended family. Buddhist thinking defines the vital role of the female in relation to her domestic setting. The growing up daughter is to be adequately equipped through the mediation of her parents with wisdom and virtue (medhārini sīlavati) to steer clear in her journey through life. A newly wedded wife is to be safely and securely established in her home with delightfully warm-hearted relationship with every member of the family to which she has newly arrived. She is to be the large-

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14 Indra, M.A.; *The status of women in ancient India: a vivid and graphic survey of women's position, social, religious, political, and legal, in India*, p. 237.
hearted loving mother, a friend to everyone including the domestic aids of the household. Equality of man and woman, wisdom and virtue as the prime prerequisite, chastity, purity and sanctity of womanhood, the spiritual emancipation and the liberated domestic empowerment as a girl, a wife and a mother are emphasized as the cardinal marks of the woman’s position in the Buddhist age.

Man and woman once bound in ties of matrimony were treated as an indissoluble whole. The paucity of references to widows in the Buddhist literature leads to infer that the widowhood was not full of hardship. It appears from the scriptural data that widows went unabashed in the Buddhist ages. They were not excluded from domestic festivities. If they chose to stay at home no severe austerities were imposed upon them against their will. Moreover, they had the right to inherit property. All painful remembrances of widowhood disappeared as the ascetic order was open to them. Sati or self-immolation was non-existent and surviving widows found solace either in the sister’s convents or in the household as mothers of children. Even without being mothers, they were treated with honor and did not have to disguise themselves or had a subordinate life which they were subjected to a proceeding ages.

The Buddha himself did not make gender discrimination while preaching his dhamma. While talking about his own enlightenment he said it is for the sake of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen and to all four groups are said to have an analogous effect on the persistence or disappearance of Buddhist knowledge and practice. Thus the Saṅgha is illuminated by a monk, nun, layman and laywoman who is accomplished in wisdom, disciplined and is confident....practising according to Dhamma and the same set of virtues or vices leads to hell or heaven for a man or woman.\textsuperscript{15} He further said, women have both the same spiritual limitations and the same spiritual powers as men.\textsuperscript{16} Nuns may develop spiritually to the same extent as monks. The Buddha said

\textsuperscript{15} A.V. 283-7.
\textsuperscript{16} Harvey, Brian, Peter; An introduction to Buddhist ethics: foundations, values, and issues, p. 357.
that he would not die until he had monks, and nuns, and laymen, and laywomen, who could teach Dhamma, establish it, expound it, analyze it, and make it clear. The Buddha gave the same teachings to both male and female, and sometimes went out of his way to teach women. The Buddha refused a meal invitation from some proud and rich young man, as he had already accepted an invitation from the courtesan Ambapālī, whom he honored even when the young men objected. Ambapālī was later ordained and became an Arahant.

The Buddha gave a new outlook to the society. His outlook was rational, which prompted the society to give fair treatment to women. Buddhism was essentially a moral religion, the moral precepts of which touched all classes irrespective of any sex consideration. During the life time of the Lord Buddha and in the time of Asoka when Buddhism was at its zenith the status of women improved appreciably. The Buddha’s outlook was liberal and in the propagation of his teachings, he treated women and men alike. He gave Dhamma to both the sexes without making any distinction. This was indeed a great achievement for women as in the previous centuries women had lost their individuality.

2.2.2 Religious Aspect of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism

In this aspect, the word religion means Dhamma of the Buddha. We will see whether the women had freedom to listen to the thoughts of the Buddha and whether they had freedom to follow Dhamma. The religion is a religion of free individuals. The Buddhist religion believes that mere living is not the highest good but living righteously with self-control, pure mind, clean

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17 D.II.104, 113.
18 Therī, 252-70.
19 Talim, Meena; Woman in early Buddhist literature, p. 121.
heart and clear conscience is the supreme attainment that mankind ought to strive for.

The Buddha’s teaching confirms that, there are no differences between men and women if both are psychologically strong. In many discourses, the Buddha said that women can develop their mind up to the extent of liberation. In the “Culavagga, Bhikkhunī khandaka” mentioned that women can achieve highest fruits as the men. The Buddha tried to remove the low positions of women in the society. On hearing the news of a birth of a girl, King Kosala was disappointed. The Buddha encouraged him and said that women are as good when they have cultivated virtuous activities.

“By those wishing with attachment the excellence, again and again of life span, good health, beauty, heavens and high birth, Merit should be done, wisely appreciating diligence. Diligence, serves for the welfare of this and the other world. When the diligent one attains his aim, he is called a wise man.”

In Therīgāthā, Māra spoke to Therī Somā in a humiliating manner he stated that no woman could reach the high ground of the wise because she has only the two-finger knowledge (dvangulapaññā). It is an allusion to cooking where the consistency of the cooked rice is tested by pressing it between the fingers. The refutation of Māra, as given in the Saṅyutta Nikāya, is worth quoting in full:

“When the mind is established, being a woman does not matter
I have knowledge and reflect the Teaching rightfully.
If that was not so, whether to woman or man

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20 SN.S. 127. “Iṭṭhipi hi ekacciyā, Sayyā posa janādhipa; Medhāvini Silavatī, sasudevā patibbatā.
Tassā yo jāyati poso, sūro hoti disampati; Tādisā subhagiyā putto, rajjampi anusāsati’ti”.
Whatever was mine is suitable to be in the power of Māra.”

Mahāpajāpatī, the foster mother of the Lord himself, actuated by feelings of her spiritual welfare, went to the lord Buddha and requested him initiation in the Order. To Gautama Buddha it was quite a new experience for the first time; a woman had approached him independently with a request for admission to the religious organization. Ānanda, the disciple of the Buddha, took upon himself the task and he secured the Lord’s consent. The Buddha in consultation with Ānanda inaugurated the order of nuns as a separate religious organization. In this way the status of women was elevated tremendously. Women could work out their own destiny and achieve salvation. The first sermon that the Buddha delivered to Mahāpajāpatī and her associates was the same which he gave the men on their admission to the order of monks. By this identical sermon to the male and female disciples, the Buddha decidedly acknowledged the equality of both the sexes in the religious sphere. In Rajpriha alone not less than six thousand nuns with Mahāpajāpatī at their head practised severe austerities with spiritual thirst in their hearts. The teacher himself was so impressed with their deed so earnest that to Ānanda he was compelled to acknowledge once more that women are capable of Arhatship. After having thrown open the portals of the order to them, women could no longer be restrained from ascending the heights which their brother adherents could reach. Therefore so far as the Buddha himself was concerned he had on hesitation to allow women to take to ascetic life and reach any spiritual height they could by their own efforts.

Ānanda, the faithful disciple of the Buddha brought the matter of admitting women into the Saṅgha and the Lord Buddha replied: Are the Buddhas born only for the benefit of men? Have not Visākhā and many others

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21 SN.S. 163. “Ithibhāvo kim kayirā, cittamhi susamāhite;ānānāṁhi vattamaṇānāhī, sammā dhammad vippasato. Yassa nāna siyā evam, itthāham purisoti vā, Kiīcī vā pana aṁsasim, tam māro vattumaraḥati’ tī”.
entered the paths? The entrance is open to women as well as men. Thus the Buddha gave woman an independent status and placed her on a footing of equality with man.²² Perfectly consistent with the principles of the Dhamma, which sees no difference between man and woman except that which may exist by superiority of virtue. The step taken by the Buddha was indeed bold, considering the depraved moral condition of ancient India and the consequent low estimation in which woman was then held. That the Buddhist revolt against this depraved social and moral condition proved a success is shown by the Therīgāthā, a work containing verses ascribed to Bhikkhunīs. A good many of these verses are not only beautiful in form but also give evidence of a very high degree of that mental self-culture which played so great a part in the Buddhist ideal of the perfect life. Many of the women who joined the order became distinguished for high intellectual attainments as well as for moral earnestness. Some women nuns or Bhikkhunīs were teaching Buddhist men which men meant not only expounding the deeper and subtler points of the Dhamma but also as having attained the great peace which is the final result of intellectual illumination and moral earnestness.

Mahāpajāpatī, Kīsā Gautamī, Somā, Khemā, Uppalvannā and others were recognized to be the accomplished sages, widely learned and brilliant orators. Subha was one of the most eminent teachers of the faith along with Mahāprjāpatī and Paṭāchārī. One of the brilliant orators of religion was Khemā, who along with the king’s, queen Mallikā persuaded her husband king Pasenadi to be converted to the new faith of Buddhism. Likewise Sāmāvatī and Khemā were successful in persuading their husbands Udayana and Bimbisāra respectively to accept the holy doctrine of Buddhism. In addition to these, Sujāta, Sigalmātī, Bhaddā Kuṇḍalkeshā attained Arhatship. Subhaddā Nanda Mātā, Suppiyā and Visākhā were the laywomen who attained high religious

²² Narasu, P. Lakshmi; *The Essence of Buddhism*, p. 89.
positions as laywomen Visākhā and other laywomen with their religious zeal, laid the foundation and principles of oldest Buddhist community.

The Buddhist reformation being a moral reaction against a corrupt state of society, it was necessary that the relations between the sexes should be guarded with care. Strict rules were therefore laid down for the conduct of Bhikkhus with women and of Bhikkhunīs with men. The Buddha did not make any difference between man and woman. If he honored Moggallāna and Sāriputta, he also held in high esteem Khemā, the wife of King Bimbisāra and Dhammadinnā, the chief among the Bhikkhunīs that preached the Dhamma. In no religion has a woman played such a prominent part as Visākhā has done in Buddhism. Buddhism being a matter of self-control and self-culture, it regards every individual, whether man or woman as a complete whole. Accordingly the Dhamma does not concern itself with those relations between man and woman in which one sex is regarded as completing the other.

2.2.3 Political Aspect of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism

The Buddha acknowledged the independent religious status to women but his views with regard to the political status of women, remained conventional. We don’t have many references about the political status of women in early Buddhism. We also do not know much about the stand of Gautama Buddha on the political status of women. However, Srimālā, in Mahāyāna Buddhism held the position of queen. This consolidates the view that Buddhism did give equal status to women.

A woman could rule a kingdom. As secular women, their only business was to purify themselves as good housewives and affectionate mother. The truth is that Gautama was least interested in temporal matters. To him systems of
governments did not appeal much. He did not care what general position of women or even men was in the social or political fabric of the country.

In the extensive kingdom of the great Buddhist monarch Asoka, it is not found that any office of significance was ever occupied by any woman. In the noble mission of propagating the Buddhist doctrine far and wide women travelled to every nook and corner of the globe and mixed with every sort of people, putting away all the gender differences. They preached to all men and women and expounded the doctrine in a worthy manner. Although, women held eminent religious position, the lay-sisters in the world had no respectable status to enjoy. Nothing was done by any law-giver to improve their secular existence and to ensure their general welfare. Thus all went on as usual, without any betterment of the secular status of women.

As we can see, Śrī mālā the Queen of Andhra, belonging to first century had important contribution to the development of the Buddhist thought.

2.2.4 Economic Aspect of Empowerment of Women in Buddhism

It is of course indicated that women enjoyed independence in the economic domain. The poorer classes had no alternative but to allow their female members to co-operate with men in the cultivation of crop, in reaping of harvest and in other possessions of production. There were women who were self-supporting units in the family. They kept their own paddy fields, gathered and parched the seeds of rice and grew cotton. Women used to spin five threads and manufactured their own clothes.23 At least in the village economy of the primitive type women contributed their share of productive labor to maintain the prosperity of their self-sufficient colonies. Besides they worked as domestic helps in families and earned their own livelihood. They were free to undertake independent business. In fact, the religious independence of women was to

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23 Dhp, 113; JTK, 526.
some extent the outcome of their economic activities. Vimāla, Sarama, Ambapālī and others like Bindumati were prostitutes who were quite prosperous Vishvantara, the son of king Sanjay, guaranteed the steadfastness, virtue and moral firmness of his wife Mādrī. Women could act judges in the Buddhist ages as illustrated by the example of Visākhā who was entrusted by the Buddha the responsible task of judicial investigation into a disputed matter and also to give her judgment.

From certain practices it appears that the legal privileges enjoyed by women in ancient times were kept intact to a considerable extent. Visākhā owned fabulous riches and distributed a lot in charity. In this exercise of her legal rights, she was not restricted in any way, even widows were allowed to inherit property of their husbands and manage it till the end of their life.24 Dhammadinnā Bhaddakapilāni and others possessed great wealth.25 A daughter was recognized as a legal entity and she was entitled to a share in the patrimony in addition to what she received as mother’s legacy. A daughter named Sundari was endowed by her father with all his estate overlooking even the rights of her matter.26 Women under Buddhism had maintained their traditional legal position and the laws of the land had not change in the favour changed on this respect. In the Buddhist ages, women enjoyed religious independence and spiritual and ethical advancement but in other spheres such as social, political and economic the situation remained the same as it was in the preceding ages. Overall, the rise of Buddhism in India brought an improvement in the status of women. Through its practices, it has also facilitated the self-confidence, empowerment and spiritual liberation of both women and men. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha’s maternal aunt and foster mother, Khemā, the queen of king Bimbisāra of Rajgriha, Paṭāchārā from Shravasti; proficient in duties, Bhaddā Kuṇḍalkeshā, Ambapālī and Isidāsī have

24 Dhp, 115.
25 JKT, 526; Therī, XXVII.
26 Therī, XIX.
attained positions of high repute in the religious order of Buddhism. Sāmāvatī from Bhaddiya, Khujuttarā and Visākhā are known for their devotion and charitable deeds.

2.3 Buddhist Concept of Empowerment and Its Reflection in Buddhist Society

Empowerment of women in the religious and ethical aspects is absolute in the Buddhist ages. There was economic independence, social equality but in political arena and in household tasks the traditional conditions continued. As a whole, woman in Buddhism enjoyed higher status, greater freedom, more equality and an enhanced liberal environment than in the preceding ages. Women were more empowered in the Buddhist Period.

Both Pārśva Nātha of Jainism and Gautama the Buddha as non-Brahminic protestant leaders totally rejected the position of inequality and subservience imposed on woman in the Post-Vedic periods. Both of them opened the doors of their monastic communities of course with strict rules and regulations for the admission of women, Hundreds and hundreds of women perfected their spiritual pursuit under the Buddha. The Psalms of the Sisters (Therīgathā) alone provides much evidence in this respect. Widows, bereaved mothers grieving over infant mortalities, victims of sexual assaults and exploited women of many other sorts found solace in the religion of the Buddha. The glory of the vast segment of the community of India’s women was restored through the religion of the Buddha and his teachings. Around the sixth century B.C., the protestant movements of Jainism and Buddhism appeared to do quite a bit of violent clean up and restored lost rights for many social groups, in terms of gender class and caste (Varna and Jāti).

Buddhist women, young as well as old, were emboldened through their own religious convictions and awakening to challenge the existing Indian
social and religious conventions on these matters. The Bhikkhunī Somā had fired back at a challenger, who told her that as a woman with her only two fingers wisdom (dvangulapaññā), she could never aspire to get anywhere hear true sainthood (yaṁ taṁ isihi pattabbaṁ). She bravely answered him: “What does it matter our being man or woman, when our minds are perfectly under our command? Our wisdom and judgment are wholly mature and the truth of the norm (Dhamma), we clearly see.”

In the Indian context, Somā’s reply in the sixth century B.C. indeed would be the highest point of emancipation in the ladder of the women’s liberation. Spiritual emancipation was one of the major hurdles to clear and Somā’s reply amply provides a substantial evidence of the same aspect of woman’s empowerment.

Buddhism’s contribution to the liberation and uplift of the Indian woman in the social sector was equally immense. In this respect, the elevation of the woman in the Buddhist set up was conceptually much nobler, it was much more than a question of ‘rights’ and ‘duties’. The Buddhists seriously respect interpersonal relationships and therefore do not desire to tear away any portion of society and isolate it. To the Buddhist, it is an achievement in the total integration the woman into the social fabric of the human community. The family in this respect is the smallest unit. In Buddhist thinking the male’s respect for the female had to be so high that the Buddhists knew what was meant by the courteous behavior to women. The ladies therefore had to be treated with due courtesy and consideration.

These believes and practices regarding the woman’s position in her spiritual aspect, in her family life the social aspect and the religious aspect in the days of Buddhism prevailing in India bring out the accurate picture of the knowledge of the triple views. What is the woman’s view of herself, what is the woman’s attitude towards society and what is the society’s attitude towards women – are the three aspects of the perspectives of the views towards mutual

27 Therī, V.61.
understanding. The first perspective is – What is the woman’s attitude towards herself? In this connection it is worth remembering Somā’s reply to the challenger\textsuperscript{28} and Mahāpajāpati Gotamī’s pleas to secure admission to the female monastic order.\textsuperscript{29} Somā is conscious of the fact that woman who is in possession of both wisdom and virtue is equal to any other virtuous and wise individual irrespective of the gender, class or caste distinctions. Mahāpajāpati Gotamī continued to appeal for the spiritual emancipation of herself and the other female disciples of hers. This shows that Somā as well as Mahāpajāpati Gotamī is conscious of the woman’s attitude to herself. This consciousness leads them to know that there is no difference as such between a man and a woman. Somā refuses to be discriminated on account of the differences in gender. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī seeks to find out whether women are entitled to spiritual emancipation or not as men are. This knowledge leads them to self-realization. This self-realization is what is essential for empowerment. Women in the days of Buddhism were aware of their spiritual empowerment. This empowerment emphasized their individual identity as distinct yet integrated in community.

The second aspect of woman’s self-realisation is related to the query concerning woman’s attitude towards society. Woman’s attitude towards society is noticed in the domestic roles that a woman was required to play during her career. Of course the major concern was about the duties a woman performed as a housewife. The period of growing up as a daughter was marked by the absence of any discrimination and the welcome absence of the feelings of disappointment of having a girl-child. It is found that such discrimination and such a puny of displeasure were experienced in the post-Vedic periods in Hinduism. In the Buddhist period this picture changed. Woman’s attitude to society too changed accordingly. This change in the attitude has led the woman to have a greater awareness of domestic obligations. In those days, the pattern

\textsuperscript{28} Therī.XXXVI.61.
\textsuperscript{29} Therī.XXXVI.61. quoted in, Psalms of The Sisters, pp. 87 – 89.
of domestic life was more or less the same as in the Vedic periods. Sāmāvatī was orphaned by the outbreak of the plaque but she was adopted by Mitrā. Similarly, a certain King took Kana and made her as his own daughter. This adoption of daughters is certainly an innovation in the Indian society.

In Buddhism the ceremonial need for having a son was done away with. No age is prescribed as the correct marriageable age but girls probably married as a rule between sixteen and twenty e.g. Visākhā, Bhaddā Kundaṇākesa. The arrangement of the marriage was strictly family affair and the majority of wives devoted themselves entirely to their husband’s service. In view of the available evidence it can be concluded that the position of women in Buddhist India was more enviable and more honourable than it had been in Pre-Buddhist days. Daughters and widows were no longer regarded with such undisguised despair and contempt. On the contrary, both daughters and widows alongwith the wives commanded respect and ranked as individuals. They enjoyed more independence a wider liberty to guide and follow their own lives. This status is attained by women through their attitudes to the society which are enlightened by their self-realization. The empowerment of women in the social and domestic domains is self-evident.

The empowerment is based on self-realisation and self-realisation is ultimately possible through the society’s attitude to women. The social framework changed drastically as the Four Class-Caste Groups Structure was done away with in the days of Buddhism. The subordination of women and the slavish degradation of woman through the displeasure at the birth of a daughter, child-marriage, prevalent general practice of monogamy, the discontinuation of discrimination towards widows and other practices were no more approved and were discontinued. The social acceptance of the equality of women, the acceptance of the spiritual empowerment of women, the discontinuation of discrimination against women bring out the fact that the

30 Dhm.82.
social attitude towards woman was quite different from what it was in the Pre-Buddhist periods. This has led to the improved empowerment of women in spheres of religious, social and spiritual aspects. It is noticed that empowerment in the economic and political spheres for men and women was not still in sight as agro-economy and monarchy were still the watch-words of these areas of life. The Buddhist period has empowered women to attain spiritual liberation and enter in spiritual bliss.

This shows that women’s view towards herself underwent changes, the woman’s attitude towards society improved and the society’s attitude to woman too changed to accommodate woman in religious and spiritual aspects. In spite of these changes, the situation in other spheres of life remained as it was in the Pre-Buddhist days. Empowerment through self-realisation through the triple awareness and possession of enlightenment is a remarkable feature of the position of woman in the days of Buddhism in India for a period of about one thousand and five hundred years from the sixth century B.C. to the ninth century A.D. self-realisation and empowerment are thus inseparably linked.

A Leap Ahead

Buddhist concept of empowerment tells us that for the authentic empowerment of any individual it is necessary that individual as well as society both have to realise their own nature as well as the nature of each other.

The feminist understanding of the Buddhist Concept of Empowerment tells us that if any woman has to empower herself then it is necessary for her that she has to realise her own nature and has to take enough efforts to achieve her goal. It further tells that society also has to support her.

On this background it is very interesting to see how the Buddhist women, including Bhikkhunī and Upāsikā became empowered. In the preceding chapters we will discuss these points.