SYNOPSIS OF

TOPIC OF RESEARCH ENTITLED

BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO EARLY BUDDHISM

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Significance of Women’s Empowerment

It is universally accepted that like all human beings, women too have a right to freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom to live in dignity as their male counterparts do, all over the world. Yet the position of women has all along been a subordinate one. Despite protests, movements, agitations and other means of resistance, there has been no respite from this social evil. Gender discrimination continues even in the present times.

Health care, education, literacy rate, income ratio and social status are the different parameters by which the position of women is gauged to be lower than that of men. In every walk of life, women were and are still marginalised and of lower than status than men because women all along have been subjugated to subordinate status by men. This problem of subordination and marginalisation of women needs a solution.

The empowerment of women is one of the solutions to the problems of inequality, subordination and marginalisation that women face in the society. However this kind of empowerment is only partial for though they have economical and political power, they are kept out of decision making or they are dependent on their husband, father or brother for crucial decisions. Hence in order to change this situation, it is necessary that women have to realise their own nature and understand the value of their own existence.

However, to achieve this there must be a significant change in the social mentality. Though the woman has confidence to realise her own abilities yet the society prohibits and blocks her progress, so that her problems remain unsolved. In other words, to solve the problems of the woman, and in order to empower her it is also necessary that the society has to change its patriarchal mentality. The patriarchal foundation of social structure is responsible for the inferior status of women and her oppression, disadvantaged by threats from man in the society. These problems of women have continued ceaselessly from age to age. These problems have almost become perennial to the human community and life.
Hence in order to empower woman, it is necessary that both woman as well as the society change their attitudes. Here a problem arises; will such a realization by the women and the men in the society be possible? What type of philosophy needs to adopted to change the attitude of the woman about herself and that of the society about women? There are different schools of philosophy, Indian or Western, that will enable us to solve these issues. Buddhism, one of the schools of Indian philosophy, is not an exception to this. It enables us to view solutions to this problem from a Buddhist perspective.

Gautama Buddha accepted that men and women are equal with regard to their spiritual capacity and their personality development. This fact he tried to convey to the people. Here a question arises; Why was it necessary for the Buddha to convey this fact to the people? Answer to this question within the Buddhist philosophical framework is that people of those times were not aware either of their personality or their nature.

In fact, the Buddha did not talk about the concept of spiritual empowerment of woman but the investigations of epistemological and metaphysical considerations behind the Buddhist thoughts enable us to understand the Buddhist concept of empowerment. This concept of empowerment will enable us, further, to solve the problems that arise in a woman’s life 2500 years ago he laid down his thoughts about women that were substantial enough to guide feminist thoughts and movements. Modern scholars of feminism have tried to study the thoughts of the Buddha on women after comprehending the significance of his views.

In other words, looking through this kind of literature on Buddhist woman, it is found no investigation of any epistemological and metaphysical considerations was done in Buddhist Thought on woman. Further, nobody has tried to investigate the Buddhist concept of empowerment in the Buddhist thought on woman. Hence, it is necessary to investigate the metaphysical and epistemological considerations behind the thoughts of Buddha on woman and with the help of this investigation to further, formulate the Buddhist concept of empowerment. Therefore, in this thesis, an attempt
has been made to investigate and formulate the Buddhist concept of empowerment taking into view the epistemological and metaphysical considerations behind the Buddha’s thought on woman.

**Objectives of the Study**

The present thesis analyses from a Buddhist perspective on empowerment of women with special reference to early Buddhism. In doing so, the researcher has focused on the following issues:

1. To study the Buddhist texts and discuss the concept of Empowerment from Buddhist Perspective.
2. To discuss the Buddhist concept of Empowerment from the point of view of metaphysical and epistemological considerations.
3. To attempt to study the aspect of empowerment of women as depicted in Buddhism.
4. To discuss the important role of Buddhist Bhikkhunī who were empowered, to understand the empowerment of laywomen in Buddhism.
5. To see whether this concept can be utilized in its modern context in feminist thought and gender studies.

**Methodology of Study**

This research is an attempt to present the Buddhist perspective on empowerment of women with special reference to early Buddhism. It is an attempt at studying basically the Pāḷī Buddhist literature which is the primary source together with the commentaries of related works. In addition to the Buddhist literature, the literatures on feminism and gender studies have also been considered to understand the concept of empowerment. Whenever it is necessary to investigate the metaphysical and epistemological considerations behind the Buddhist concept of empowerment with the help of literature of Hinayāna e.g. Pāḷī Tripitakas, Nikāyas, and commentaries on them.
and Mahāyāna texts written by Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Diśnūga and Dharmakīrti have to be duly understood. For the historical investigation and critical inquiry a search into the Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist literary texts and theological treatises are also used. Such studies include the study of Sanskrit and Pālī texts.

The thesis consists of five chapters in addition to the introduction.

INTRODUCTION

The introductory part of this study deals with the significance of women’s empowerment, scope of the study, methodology of the study and structural outline of the thesis.

CHAPTER I: EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN PRE-BUDDHIST ERA

The first chapter deals the empowerment of women in Pre-Buddhist era, it is necessary to discuss the general concept of empowerment, kinds of empowerment and nature of empowerment of women. Empowerment means the enhancement of an individual’s capacity to know, to act and to enjoy. It brings confidence, awareness, mobility, ability to choose and capacity to control all types of resources and possess decision-making power. Thus Empowerment can be divided into four kinds; namely individual empowerment, family empowerment, organizational empowerment and community empowerment. The nature of empowerment of women refers to the self-realization of woman and her active participation in decision-making in her social and personal life. Women’s empowerment deals with woman’s holistic development within her social, cultural, economic, political, mental and spiritual development to face challenges and overcome the social and cultural barriers. Within this framework it has to evaluate the status of women in pre-Buddhist period. The empowerment of women in the Pre-Buddhist period has been studied by using the framework of empowerment as the criteria for setting the status of woman in the society. With the help of feminist reading of social and moral thoughts on which Pre-Buddhist society was based, one
will understand the status of women in Pre-Buddhist society on the one hand and on the other hand be able to expose the patriarchal power politics in the society. To serve this purpose one has to study the social and moral thoughts that were prevalent in those days from feminist point of 1) Doctrine of *Purushārtha*, 2) Concept of *Rāpa*, 3) concept of *Asharmavyawastha* 4) concept of *Karmasiddhāna* and rebirth 5) feminist interpretation of ideal women in Hindu culture and 6) feminist interpretation of *Beeja-Kṣetra-Nyāya*.

This chapter has discussed the criteria for empowerment as well as feminist comprehension of concepts, doctrines and thoughts within Indian social and moral philosophical context to show that women belonging to Pre-Buddhist Era were not empowered. Although the glorification of women in different spheres show that women had high status in the society, it does not mean that they were really empowered. As feminist inquiry of important doctrines have shown that women were marginalised. Further, if it is accepted for the sake of an argument, that they were empowered then this empowerment was not achieved through the process of self-realization. This kind of empowerment would not allow them to change their life to suit their informed choices.

CHAPTER II: UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT: FROM BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

The second chapter explains the Concept of Empowerment: from the Buddhist Perspective. In order to reveal the Buddhist Concept of Empowerment, it discusses the nature of empowerment of women from the epistemological and metaphysical considerations view point and explains the reason for women not being empowered. Further, empowerment is not an external feature for her but an inbuilt one that needs excavation. However the possibility occurs when there has been reflected and self-realization of her life.

The self-realization of women is related to actualization of desires and
possibilities for empowerment. This actualization is related to its application in the society where woman as well as society have important role to play. As the actualization of self-realization in woman is possible only when there is change in the mental attitude of women 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 such opportunities to woman that encourage her to explore and enhance her capacities. Attempt is also made to inquire into the type of knowledge that both women and society have to acquire for this empowerment. Further, the chapter discusses the aspects of empowerment of women in social, religious, political, and economic context by which Buddhism brought equality and liberty to the empowerment of women. Buddhist concept of empowerment tells us that authentic empowerment of an individual and a when society takes place when both have realised their own nature as well as the nature of one another. The Buddhist Concept of feminist empowerment tells us that a woman who wants to empower herself should not only realise her potential and true nature but must put in efforts to achieve her goals. The society has a responsibility to support her.

CHAPTER III: BUDDHIST BHIKKHUNI WHO EMPOWERED

The third chapter shows how the Buddhist Bhikkhunî were empowered and how the Buddhist women fought for liberation at the time of the Buddha. It is further argued that though the Buddha laid down a set of special rules, or Eight Heavy duties (Atthagarudhammas) as primary condition for the ordination of women. The nuns were required to strictly adhere to them for the rest of their lives. The Buddhist Bhikkhunî created the space for themselve and attained Nibbāna or Arahantahood. In this context, the chapter deals with the contribution of nuns to the development of Buddhism. We have seen that Buddhist nuns on becoming empowered expected the Buddha as well as the members of society to accept the fact that women could attain the Nibbāna as the highest goal of life. These Buddhist nuns have not only empowered
themselves but also enabled the members of the society to get empowered while attempting to free themselves and society from suffering, their contribution must rightly be acknowledged.

CHAPTER IV: UNDERSTANDING EMPOWERMENT OF LAYWOMEN (UPĀSIKĀ) IN BUDDHISM

The fourth chapter deals with the Understanding Empowerment of Laywomen (Upāsiṇā) in Buddhism. Laywomen (Upāsiṇā) refer to one who waits upon or serves (another person). Thus an Upāsiṇā served mendicants by supplying the items, such as food and robes that they required for their religious lives. The mendicants instructed these lay believers on the practices in Buddhism when they lived as lay devotees. A lay person became an Upāsiṇā by placing his faith in the Three Jewels: The Buddha, The Dhamma and The Saṅgha. Those who were particularly zealous also observed the five precepts laid down for laymen and laywomen. This refers to members of four members of Buddhist Assemblies (Cutus Parisad) who were empowered to emancipate themselves and bestowed with beneficial power to help the human community publicly. This included power to evaluate and suggest remedies to overcome social evils in the Age of the Buddha.

Further, this chapter throws a light on how she is empowered, how her empowerment is reflected in her behaviour. This chapter also show that the empowerment of Upāsiṇās contributed to the growth and development of Buddhism. Although they did not renounce the home and family, they did not have any attachments towards worldly life and their family. This was on account of the realization of their potential nature and the nature of the society. Their self-realization was reflected in the roles that they performed for their family, society, monks and for the development of Buddhism.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The last chapter concludes the issues raised in the thesis. It can be concluded that the lack of self-realization and self-reliance is the main cause of the problem of the deterioration of the rights of women and her attitude to the society and in turn for the society’s attitude to women. This means that there is ignorance about themselves and the society in which they exist and of the various stages of life. They pass through as a member of society. The cause of their problems is that the society is also ignorant of their potential to affect positive change in the neighborhood. The Buddhist Perspective on Empowerment has efficiently provided possible solutions for these problems. For example, the ambivalent attitude of women to other women needs to be removed. So also the societal ignorance about the capacities of a woman. In this respect too, the teachings of the Buddha offer a handy tool of practical solutions to all housewives and nuns and also to the society of modern times. A look into Buddhism will enable the society to remove the ignorance towards women and rekindle the spirit of wisdom towards the roles and responsibilities of women.

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