

Understanding Social Exclusion and Inclusion with respect to Women in Early Buddhism

Abstract

Women in early India suffered due to certain 'exclusionary' practices which relegated her status to near obscurity. Buddha by allowing women into Buddhist Sangha addressed their issue of 'exclusion'. His philosophy was far ahead of his time and revolutionary in character because he felt that every individual had a role to play in the society and both he or she must be given equal opportunity in every sphere of life irrespective of caste, creed, color, sex etc. This was in a time when orthodoxy with its 'exclusionary agenda' deprived many of the various opportunities and privileges. Buddha's philosophy was 'inclusive' because he realized that the progress of a society and that of a country depends on the contribution made by every section of society unitedly, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex etc. and that 'exclusion' creates disparity and divisions which ultimately perpetuates exploitation, pain, and misery.

Keywords: Exclusion, inclusive, orthodoxy, revolutionary

Introduction

The term social exclusion has recently become a key concept amongst analyst and policy makers seeking to understand and alleviate different forms of social disadvantage-economic, social, political and cultural—that persist in multiple variants and with different intensity, across nations. It is a multidimensional process of progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normal, normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live.¹ The concept of social exclusion first appeared in Western Europe in the 1970s and generally refers to the rupture of social cohesion caused by unemployment. Arjan de Haan (1997) discusses several definitions of social exclusion and emphasizes on "the process by which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live"². The concept is broadly synonymous with the concept of marginalization and is related to a number of other concepts, notably poverty, unemployment and deprivation, disengagement, withdrawal, underclass, alienation, lack of freedom, etc.

Social inclusion, its converse, is affirmative action to change the circumstances and habits that lead to (or have led to) social exclusion. Social Inclusion is a strategy to combat social exclusion, but it is not making reparations or amends for past wrongs as in Affirmative Action. It is the coordinated response to the very complex system of problems that are known as social exclusion. The notion of social inclusion can vary according to the type of strategies organizations adopted.

This paper attempts to show that women in early India suffered due to certain 'exclusionary' practices which relegated her status to near obscurity. Buddha by allowing women into Buddhist Sangha addressed their issue of 'exclusion'. His philosophy was far ahead of his time and revolutionary in character because he felt that every individual had a role to play in the society and both he or she must be given equal opportunity in every sphere of life irrespective of caste, creed, color, sex etc. This was in a time when orthodoxy with its 'exclusionary agenda' deprived many of the various opportunities and privileges. Buddha's philosophy was 'inclusive' because he realized that the progress of a society and that of a country depends on the contribution made by every section of society unitedly, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex etc. and that 'exclusion' creates disparity and divisions which ultimately perpetuates exploitation, pain, and misery.

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Pre Buddhist Position of Women

The social matrix in which Buddhism arose was one which accorded to women an inferior position. The post-Vedic society was a male dominated one and like most nomadic pastoral societies it permitted little freedom and authority to women. Women were excluded from many spheres of life. For instance, they were not allowed to perform certain rituals, nor allowed to get education due to early marriage, they were also deprived of certain legal rights.

According to AS Altekar, when Aryan males began giving their non-Aryan (Sudra) wives roles in the rituals, Brahmans reacted by barring first the non-Aryan wives and then all the wives from participating in these rituals. Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy object to this explanation, calling it racist.³ Julia Leslie thinks that women's exclusion resulted from intentional mistranslation of the Vedas by male scholars, as the rituals became more complicated and as the requirement for property ownership was more rigorously enforced at a time, when woman could not own property.

The falling age of marriage for Indian women is another illustration of their loss of rights. According to some scholars in 400 BCE about 16 years was the normal bride's age at marriage; between 400 BCE and 100 CE it fell, until it just reached pre-puberty and after 100 CE pre-puberty was favored.

Child marriages also affected women's religious roles. Because girls got married early even before they finished their education. They were declared ineligible to perform ritual sacrifices, for lack of education. Furthermore wives' legal rights got eroded as child wives were treated as minors and as wards of their husband's. Women were prohibited any independence and were constantly under men's control their fathers, husbands and sons.

By 100 CE according to some scholars, religious texts defined women with negative characteristics stating for example, that women would be promiscuous unless controlled by male relatives. While on the one hand, Indian women were losing their independence, on the other, Indian men continued to glorify their wives and mothers. For instance, a wife was regarded as the essence of the home, a man was considered incomplete without a wife, emphasis was laid on the essentialness of marriage to women, and sons were expected to respect their mothers more than their fathers. Romila Thapar sums up these contradictions. "The symbol of woman in Indian culture has a curious intermeshing of low legal status, ritual contempt, sophisticated sexual partnership and deification."⁴

In the Udyogaparva of the Mahabharata it is said: "The birth of a daughter in the families of those that are well behaved and high born and endowed with fame and humility of character is always attended with evil results. Daughters when born in respectable families always endanger the honour of their families, viz, their maternal and paternal families and the family into which they are adopted by marriage." Still worse is the description of woman given in the

Anucasanaparva. Sukrati the grandson of Janaka, the ruler of the Videhas, has declared: "There is the well known declaration of the scriptures that women are incompetent to enjoy freedom at any period of their life. Even if high born and endowed with beauty and possessed of protectors, women wish to transgress the restraints assigned to them. There is nothing else more sinful than women." "Women are fierce. They are endowed with fierce prowess. There are none whom they love or like so much as those that have sexual congress with them. Women are like those (atharvan) incantations that are destructive to life. Even after they have consented to live with one they are prepared to abandon him for entering into engagements with others." The penalization of a girl proceeds from her very birth as the impurity or "untouchability" of a mother extends over thirty days when she gives birth to a daughter and only twenty days when the child is a boy. The tradition of the past strove against fairness and justice.

In Buddhism, on the other hand both the birth of a son or of a daughter was to be equally welcomed. King Pasendi (Prasanjit) of Kosala was reprimanded by the Buddha for his dejection on the birth of a daughter. After presenting various arguments that went in favour of birth of a female child Buddha concluded 'Woman child, O Lord of men may prove even better offspring than male'⁵

Later it was Buddha who saw the spiritual potential of both men and women and founded the Order of Bhikkunis or Nuns, though he was not inaugurating an unheard of scheme as there already existed Jain nunneries⁶ in Vesali. Nevertheless, it may be seen as a revolutionary step in times when innumerable restrictions excluded women from the mainstream.

Path to Inclusion from exclusion

Prajapati Gotami's wish to become a Bhikkuni soon became a common aspiration of many women. The permission was granted to women for joining the Order at a time when for women, marriage and family life were seen as destiny. The myth of family and marriage was being attacked by Buddha, although with great hesitation. The state of houselessness associated with the ordination, generated the proposed non-essentialness of marriage and provided a girl an option to join the order on attaining the age of discretion without going through the rigours of securing permission from the husband or the members of his family. A girl could remain single and choose not to have children. The practice contributed in raising the marriageable age for the girls. Apart from the examples of Bhadda, Kundalakesa, Sumedha etc. who chose to remain unmarried till at least they attained the age of discretion. One also finds no reference to child marriage in the Buddhist literature. In the Jatakas, both the youths and maidens are generally found to be grown up when they entered the married state. One also finds examples of girls like Sumana, the daughter of Anathapindika, who remained unmarried and devoted herself entirely to management of the family affairs. Prakriti, a Chandaliika a low caste

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woman, Ambapali a courtesan was also ordained in the Sangha. With varieties of options left open for women, widows in particular could on her discretion continue living with the family without any stigma or could remarry or join the monastic order on their own accord. These ennobling influences were forthcoming mainly through the media of religion and must have indirectly contributed in uplifting the status of women in the society.

The Buddha with his move of allowing women of all status widow, courtesan and even the low caste women in the sangha was also addressing the issue of 'exclusion within exclusion' and that was radical and unthinkable in that age. It may also be regarded as a pioneering step towards 'democratizing' society.

In joining the Bhikkhuni Order, women found a freedom that they could not obtain in the secular life where they were bound down by the rules of a society which accorded little importance to women. On his deathbed, the Buddha exhorted his followers to abide by the Dhamma which had no gender.

That implied that Buddha's Path could be practiced by anyone, male or female. The eight components of the Noble Eight Fold Path were collected into three groups: Sila or Morality, Bhavana, or spiritual growth and Panna or wisdom. The practice of morality may in some respects involve different kind of conduct for the two sexes but in practice of the Path, gender bore no relevance. The highest achievement of Buddhism, supreme enlightenment may be obtained by both the sexes.

Buddha's proclamation that any woman irrespective of her status could achieve Nirvana contradicted the prevailing view which denied her the right to education. The Buddhist Sangha gave them the freedom to read and write. Women like Ambapali, Sumangala, Mathika, Ishidasi, Subha and many others not only acquired the skills of composing songs but assumed enormous importance in Sangha life.

But in spite of their great achievements, practitioners of patriarchal view did not hesitate to 'exclude' them in the texts written years after Buddha's death. Patriarchal mindset also tampered with the Vinaya Laws and attributed a low status to the women.

The resulting negative portrayal of women in the Buddhist texts conflicts with the philosophy propounded by the Buddha and appears to be a reflection of contemporary social relationships rather than a philosophical justification of the patriarchal control of women. The scholars incorporated an imbalance in the positions of men and women into texts written long after the Buddha's death when they attempted to draw up rules to regulate society, claiming it to be in accordance with the Buddha's philosophy. "(*chaplā verma, in wildering gloom*).

Situating women negatively appears to have proceeded from the personal opinions of the writers according to some scholars. All of them reflected patriarchal values of the age. The compilation of texts by men who introduced words and stories, do not reflect the emphasis on universal equality inherent in

the Buddha philosophy. Some of the incidents in the Buddha's personal life have also been adduced to prove his dislike of women. They need to be reexamined in the socio-cultural context in which Buddha existed.

A careful analysis of Buddhist text gives information about few women voices, they are significant, as they give us an idea about the feminist perspective of Buddhism. They are also significant in view of the fact that most of the works were written and commented upon by men and have largely been the product of male view points. For the same reason man's role was highlighted and that of women deliberately ignored and omitted. Inherent social bias molded by the patriarchal values current during that time may be held responsible for the negative attitude towards the women.

The problem also lies in the vastness of history of Buddhism because of its spread over so many Asian cultures. Most of its early tradition is based on oral tradition in legend form whose transmission from one person to another is likely to be colored by the customary distortions of reportage or the attitudes of particular periods. No documentation was done during Buddha's lifetime but at least two hundred years after Buddha's Parinirvana and represent a reinterpretation of Buddha's teachings in the light of social developments through those two centuries. There are no grounds for thinking that rules arose out of Buddha's own injunctions because philosophy of Buddha had Universal character which refrained from making distinctions between genders. In the rules and legends of Buddha connected with them, appear to be later additions, invented to perpetuate the prevalent patriarchal constitution of the society and to counter any suggestion of immorality in the Sangha brought about by the first ever admission of women into any powerful organization in India.⁷ The available texts need to be supplemented with whatever meager literature is available about female voices of that era to work out an accurate reconstruction of Buddha's teachings and their implications.

Maintaining objectivity, an understanding of the Buddhistic culture has to be developed in a specific time frame. The voices and images of nuns in the Sangha have to be considered and the texts need to be reanalyzed from a feminist point of view and also that of the laywomen of that period who committed themselves to Buddhism and played an important role as donors. The earliest known anthology of women's literature in India certainly but possibly anywhere in the world took shape when the songs composed by Buddhist 'Theris' or senior nuns dating back to 6th century BC were collected in the Therigatha. The songs provide rare glimpse into the personal lives of the wide range of women who joined the Sangha. Among them were poor peasants, small artisans, wealthy wives and daughters of businessmen, noble women and courtesans. Many poems reflect on the pains of 'exclusion.' and how Buddha elevated their status with his 'inclusive philosophy'. For example:

Sumangalamata

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*A woman well set free! How free I am
A woman well set free! How free I am
How wonderfully free from kitchen drudgery
Free from the hardship of hunger,
And from empty working pots
Free too of that unscrupulous man,
The weaver of sunshades,
Calm now and serene I am, all lust and hatred
purged,
To the shade of the spreading trees I go
And contemplate my happiness
(Translated by Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum
Roy)⁸*

In uncovering the history of women within Buddhist life there should be recognition of filters through which they have been viewed in the past as Gross says: "Since history is always a selection from the past it can only be more or less accurate and complete, what is selected and what is omitted, the reasons for including or excluding certain data always coincide with certain uses of the past. Feminist history is concerned with uses to which an androcentric past has been put and what would constitute a usable past for women. The uses to which one would want to put the past reflects ones current values.

Apart from the exclusion from various spheres of society women was also excluded by the writers of history. Therefore, there is an urgent need to find those missing voices from the pages of history, only then the true picture of the age would emerge. Distortions and alterations contradict the real philosophy of Buddha whose philosophy was universal in nature and carried no gender bias. The inclusive character of Buddha's teachings have to be understood more carefully in order to create a world devoid of discrimination, disparity and inequality.

And it is to be remembered:

"Truth that Buddha preached must not be sought in the law or accepted out of reverence for the Teacher, but tried out, as gold is tried by fire."

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