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RESEARCH ARTICLE

STATUS OF WOMEN IN BUDDHISM: A STUDY OF TAI SOCIETY IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism is a humanistic religion which is much social in its outlook and has historical impacts on society as far as men's concept of social classes and position of women are concerned. It began as a religion that treated women as equal to men in their capacity for personal spiritual development. Buddha recognized the ability of women to reach the ultimate goal, and thereby, to enter successfully into religious life and attain liberation-nirvana. Buddhism, as a liberal reaction against orthodox Brahmanism, elevated the status of women. Buddhism has contributed towards empowerment and upliftment of women in the Tai society of North east India. There is no doubt that there are certain forces which did not much encourage in the process in the process of their upliftment and empowerment, like the Buddhist idea of women's natural inferiority, and patriarchal nature of the faith. But the same cannot be equated with Brahmanical religious systems where women's role in the society has never been recognized as equal with men. On the other hand, the tribal nature of the Tai society has encouraged it to see women as independent and capable of doing anything equally with men.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion has a definite role to play in human life. It has been described as a core concern, as expressing and addressing the sacred, or as disclosing a transcendent focus linked to ultimate value. Religion has not only been the matrix of cultures and civilizations, but it structures reality, including that of gender and encompasses the deepest level of what means to be human.¹ Religion provides ideological and moral bases for the accorded status and institutionalized roles of women in a society.²

Buddhism is a humanistic religion which is much social in its outlook and has historical impacts on society as far as men's concept of social classes and position of women are concerned. It began as a religion that treated women as equal to men in their capacity for personal spiritual development. Buddha recognized the ability of women to reach the ultimate goal, and thereby, to enter successfully into religious life and attain liberation- *nirvana*. Thus, Buddhism as a liberal reaction against orthodox Brahmanism elevated the status of women.³ Buddha was the first teacher who allowed women to enter religious life which was a turning point in the Indian society as well as in the history of women. It opened to women a new lifestyle as full-time religious practitioners (*bhikkhuni*) that freed them from their traditional family and social roles and obligations. Buddha himself recognized individuality and independence of women. It is however not that he was from the very beginning a proposer of women's equal status. Canonical literature, however, refers to Buddha as being reluctant to give women permission to enter the monastic life. The reason for this, as written in textual account, was that society would break down if women enter the religious life by keeping behind the responsibilities of

their family. But Buddha finally agreed to allow women to enter the monastic life when his foster mother and aunt Maha Prajapati are said to have requested him to do so; and when his disciple Ananda supported them.⁴ Buddha is said to have asked his disciple Ananda whether women were capable of becoming *Arhat* and on arguing that they were, he instituted the *vikkhuni* community although with certain restrictions.⁵ The story is presented in the canonical literature in the way of discussion between Buddha and his disciple Ananda as follows:

"Just Ananda, as houses in which there are many women and but few men are easily violated by robber burglars; just so, Ananda, under whatever doctrine and discipline women are allowed to go out from the household life into the homeless state, that religion cannot last long.... And just, Ananda, as when the disease called blight falls upon a field of sugarcane in good condition, that field of sugarcane does not continue long; just so, Ananda, under whatever doctrine and discipline women are allowed to go forth from the household life into the homeless state, that religion does not last long. And just, Ananda, as a man would in anticipation build an embankment to a great reservoir, beyond which the water shall not overpass; just even so, Ananda, have I in anticipation laid down these Eight Chief Rules for the Bhikkunis, their lifelong not to be over passed."⁶

This shows that Buddha himself had imposed some restrictions on the movement of women in their participation in the religious matters. Restriction thus imposed on women were-

1. A *vikkhuni*, even of a hundred years standing, shall make salutation to and bow down before a *vikkhu* if only just initiated. A *vikkhuni* of whatever rank,

senior or junior, must bow down to even a newly initiated *vikkhu*.

2. A *vikkhuni* must not spend the *varsha vassa* period in a district in which there was no *vikkhu*. Probably, it was done for the security of a *vikkhuni*.
3. Every fortnight a *vikkhuni* must know from the *vikkhus* the date of *Uposatha* and the day fixed for *vikkhu*'s address to *vikkhunīs*. Because in every half month a *vikkhu* should give a deliberation on *dharma* to the *vikkhuni* and she must know the date.
4. At the end of the rainy season, a *vikkhuni* must report any misdeeds she might have committed, before both the *sangha*- first in the *vikkhu sangha* and then in the *vikkhuni sangha*.
5. A *vikkhuni* who has been guilty of a serious offence is to undergo discipline towards both the *Sangha*. *Vikkhus* were subject to thirteen possible offences, but *vikkhunīs* seventeen. If she confessed, the punishment for a *vikkhuni*, however, was the same as for a *vikkhu*-practicing a penance for seven days and a period of probation equal to the time of concealment, if the offence had been deliberately concealed.
6. When a *vikkhuni*, as a novice, has been trained for two years in the six rules, she is to ask leave for the *upasampada* initiation from the *sanghas*.
7. A *vikkhuni* is on no pretext to revile or abuse a *vikkhu*. It means that she could report to a *vikkhu* if his actions went against the laws, but she could not directly speak to him.
8. A *vikkhuni* must not admonish a *vikkhu* and official admonition of *vikkhu* by a *vikkhuni* is forbidden, whereas the official admonition of *vikkhunīs* by *vikkhu* is not forbidden.⁷
9. According to I. B. Horner, the last rule is another instance of placing of the women in a position of definite inferiority to the men, and of a refusal to grant them independence to manage their own order, with the power to rectify their own proceedings.⁸

The eight rules were strictly imposed on women who seek monkhood. Thus women were asked not to supersede these rules.⁹ Mahaprajapapati, Buddha's aunt, at first, accepted these eight special rules and her acceptance served as her ordination, and thus she became the first *vikkhuni*.¹⁰ However, later she asked Ananda to request Buddha for inclusion of a rule whereby senior members irrespective of sex differences, would be shown respect. But Buddha did not agree.¹¹ According to the scholars, Buddha's initial unwillingness to allow women to leave their family responsibilities with his sanction and his announcement that the presence of nuns in the *sangha* would undermine the future success of the religion, appear to be concessions to prevailing ideas about the proper roles of men and women in the society.¹² According to some other scholars Buddha had kept this reservation mainly due to social pressures against putting women in a respectable position, and due to the potential vulnerability of women following a wandering life, and possibility of accusations of sexual relationships between monks and nuns.¹³ But this compromise with social attitudes is balanced by Buddha's acknowledgement that, in spiritual matters, women are the equals of men. That this fact acted well is shown by the fact that the *vikkhunīs* were not prevented from studying the *dharma* in spite of the eight strict

rules imposed on them. The Buddhist scripture contain traditions about some women whose understanding reached the highest level, such as Dhammadinna¹⁴ who was praised by Buddha for her brilliant explanation of *dharma* to her own learned former husband, and Khema¹⁵ who taught king Pasenadi of Kosala.¹⁶ Thus Buddhism admitted women into the *Sangha*, with a socially inferior status-but as spiritually equal to men. Thus, it was made to understand that Buddha was skeptical about women, but could not resist from recognizing spiritual goal to them. Buddha offered a spiritual path to his followers, not a revolutionary philosophy for social change. Keeping this in mind Citrarekha Gupta has stated that, "history would show that Buddha was reformist and not a revolutionary. So, despite his realization that a women child may prove a better offspring than a male, he could not stand against the age-old tradition of the superiority of men over women and thus was pragmatic in making the nuns subordinate to the monks."¹⁷ However, some recent scholars have argued that this was not happened, but was invented later in order to justify changes to the status of *vikkhuni*.¹⁸ In other words, both men and women are allowed to become monk and nun. But after Buddha's death attitude towards women's equality with men and their participation in religious affairs changed. It is sometimes stated that society could not deal with the existence of a group of women that were acknowledged to be equal with men. As a result, women's activities began to be ignored by the monks of the *sangha* and the very presence of women in monastic life was overlooked by the men.

Women in Theravada Buddhism

The present distinct Buddhist society of Assam is part of the extended Buddhist society of the countries of South East Asia. The present Buddhist society of North east India migrated to this region from Burma or present Myanmar in the middle of the 18th and 19th centuries. This migration restored the Buddhist connection in the Brahmaputra valley. This Buddhist group belongs to Tai race and it includes the tribes Khamtis, Phakes, Khamyangs, Aitons and Turungs. They are now found mostly in the few districts of upper Assam and the adjoining regions of Arunachal Pradesh. In Assam, the Tai Buddhist communities are concentrated in Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong districts and are following the *Theravada* Buddhism. In the Tai society of North east India where *Theravada* Buddhism prevails, the view as propounded by Buddha and as re-oriented after his death, is in force in connection with women's relationship with men. In essence, monks are to keep away from contact with women, who are considered as source of social evil. In this context Kondinya, a Buddhist *Vikkhu*, from Arunachal Pradesh, has stated:

"When preaching or chanting before a mixed congregation, monks must keep their eyes fixed on the fans held before their eyes so that they may not be tempted by the sight of an attractive woman. The prohibition on touching a woman extends to the monk's mother. Should she fall in a ditch, if others are present to help her he must not go to her assistance; if others are not present, he may offer her his robe or a stick (but not his hand), and he must think to himself that he is only pulling a long of wood."¹⁹

There is a widespread perception among the Tais that women are not meant to play an active role in monastic life; instead

they are expected to live as lay followers, making merit in the hopes of being born in a different role in their next life. In Thailand, for example, no female are admitted to full membership of the *Sangha* because they are considered as having no sacred beautiful power of monk.²⁰ It is certainly true that everywhere women are not encouraged to become *vikkhuni*. *The Yearbook for Religious Affairs* reported just over 10,000 nuns of Thailand in the year 1967. But this number too had decreased to 9,348 in 1970.²¹ It is therefore not proper to say that Buddhism allowed women in North east India to play equal role with men although many of them still like to be nun in Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka and other parts of Southeast Asia.²² This being known to all, the emergence of feminist studies all over the world has encouraged also the nuns to raise demands for their upliftment. Thus attempts one made to introduce *Vikkhuni* lineage in Thailand as a step towards improving the position of women in the Buddhist society of Thailand. 'The Foundation of Thai Nuns', an organization of the nuns of Thailand established in 1969, has helped to increase people's regard for them and nuns are now increasingly studying *dharma* and teaching in the school attached to monasteries.²³ In Burma also, the nuns begin to spend several hours a day in study and meditation.²⁴ In North east India women members are confined only to the status of lay followers. There is neither nun, nor nunnery as an institution.

Women in the Monastic Life

In Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Tais have institutionalized monastic system. Several religious rites and rituals are performed in the monasteries through the year in which both men and women participate, and take *panchasila*. All women above the fifty years of age take *astasila*. In the *vihara* the lay devotees of the village including women sit together, bent according to their spiritual level specified by the *silas*. In that case, the *astasila* holders sit in the front row and the *panchasila* holders next to them. Widowhood also does not prevent one to take part in such functions or rituals. Thus, their gender and age do not matter in taking their seats in the *vihara*. Thus there seems to be a significant difference in the case of women's relationship with religion in Buddhism, and that of Brahmanical Hinduism. This can be clearly understood by observing any two contiguous villages-one inhabited by the Buddhist Tais and the other by the non-Buddhist believers i.e. followers of Brahmanical Hinduism.

Participation of Women in Socio-religious Festivals

Women of the Tai Buddhist communities of North east India are allowed to participate in different socio-religious festivals. A study of the Buddhist monasteries of Lakhimpur district shows that 75 percent of the participants of *Poi Chang-ken* in those monasteries for the year 2009-2012 were women. One of their main festivals is *Poi Chang-ken* festival in which all the villagers, including women, take part. In this festival all villagers irrespective of their sex assemble in the *vihara* and participate in the bathing agenda of the image of Buddha, and offer food, flowers, candle, intense stick and other necessary materials to the *vikkhu*. Besides, women also take part in the preservation process of the books and manuscripts. A special agenda of the festival is the water-splashing ceremony in which young boys and girls splash water on the participants of the festival. Similarly, women take part in the offerings of flower, candle, intense sticks and other articles to the *vikkhu*

during the *Mai-ko-chum-phai* festival, and prepare rice cakes, puffed rice for the guests. It is to be noted that women have to prepare what is called *khao ja-cook*, a black coloured food, for the *Mai-ko-chum-phai* festival. It is believed that Buddha dyed his teeth black with an herb, and hence, his disciples offer him food of black colour to signify that tradition.²⁵

Women take part equally with men in the observance of the ritual of fasting called *varsha vassa*. On that period of fasting women use to go to the *vihara* and offer food, money, candle, intense sticks and flowers to the *vikkhus*. On every evening of the *varsha vassa* period, young girls carry flowers to the *vihara* which is considered as act of accumulating merit or *punya*.²⁶ Elderly women have also the freedom to stay in the campus of the monastery to observe *astasila* for a stipulated period in those days. It is often noted that women participate in such agenda more than even men. To quote an authority, "Not only do the elderly observe *uposatha* much more frequently than the young, but females observe it much more often than males. Women are more concerned with merit because, among other reasons, they aspire to rebirth as a male. Their greater concern is shown not only in ritual, but also in meditational activity."²⁷

Poi-kathin is a ceremony which is specially meant for women. During this ceremony women in the Tai Buddhist communities offer dresses to the monks made by themselves. It is believed that the dress presented to the monks during that ceremony should be made by the givers themselves including the robes. The full moon after *varsha vassa* period is supposed to be a special day for preparing robes to the monks. It is considered as a commemoration day for offering the robe offered to Lord Buddha by his mother. There is a myth behind this ritual which tells that, "Buddha's mother, a *deva* in the *Tavatimsa* heaven, realized that her son would discard His royal garments on the very next day in order to become a mendicant. Wanting to be the first to provide Him with the required robe, she stayed up all night weaving it, and next morning sent it to Him by a heavenly messenger."²⁸ This custom of weaving a dress for the monk is based on the belief that special merit is accumulated in offering of robes which in turn leads attaining to respect from men and gods, wealth, physical beauty, power, influence, long life, health, and so on.²⁹

Women of the Tai Buddhist society take active part in a ritual connected with the death of a monk. It is found that at the death of a monk the body of the deceased monk is kept in a coffin made of wood for a period of six months or for a year. After the period is over, on a definite day the coffin is carried to the cremation ground keeping it in a wooden chariot made beautifully in the shape of a goose or a peacock or the monastery. In the procession leading to the cremation ground, both men and women take part in chariot pulling activity. Participation of women equally with men in the chariot pulling function is to be noted, for it shows how women participation in important socio-religious functions is sanctioned by their belief.

Another religious act done by women is the making of the religious flag called *tván khan*. *Tván khans* are always woven by women and it is considered as a meritorious act. These religious flags are commonly seen hanging in the poles created in the campus of every Buddhist monastery in Assam and all over the world. In the process of weaving *tván khan*,

the weavers maintain utmost care and purity, and also take *silā*.

Similarly women participate in other religious festivals, rites and rituals like the *Buddha Purnima*. On such occasions women go to the *viharas* and offer food, clothes, flower, candle, intense stick and other essential articles to the monks. As mentioned earlier, the Tai Buddhist people of Assam follow some extra-Buddhist rites and rituals which are suspected to be related with their pre-Buddhist origin. One of their extra-Buddhist rituals is the act of calling back of the souls. This is called as *Rik-khwan* or *Hik-khwan* or *Hong-khwan* in which women actively participate. This ritual is specially meant exclusively for women. This ritual is performed to cure an ill child where the mother of the child or an elderly woman always plays a leading role. They also play leading role in the ritual of *khwan-khao* or soul of rice. On such occasion the elderly woman of the family goes to the paddy field to collect last as well as first bundle of stalks of paddy.

Women in Education

Buddhism opened the way for women's cultivation of education and spirituality. As we have mentioned above a few women, particularly, the *yasis* copied scriptural manuscripts, and preserved books and manuscripts in the library of the monasteries. Some of the nuns qualified themselves in the knowledge of sacred texts and were accepted as the teachers of other junior nuns.³⁰ Some of them quietly disciplined themselves, practiced mental concentration, and finally experienced *nirvana* or salvation. Many stories about their creations, struggles and success known as *Therigatha*, are still preserved as sacred works.³¹ There are ample evidences of such nuns and women like Mahaprajapati, Khema and Dhammadinna who were not only learned but skilled teachers.³²

In the past there were once separate monastic schools for imparting education to women, where some sort of education was given to them as imparted to the men.³³ In the past monasteries were the only centers of formal education. However, education offered at the monasteries was of an elementary nature, covering such matters as reading, writing, attaining the basic religious knowledge, knowledge in arithmetic, and cultural traditions.³⁴ But the education imparted to them not only helped to raise the standard of women's character and intellect but also produced a number of learned women of high caliber who guided the society in the field of religion and philosophy. One of such women was Sanghamitra, sister of emperor Asoka.³⁵

In the Tai Buddhist society of Assam, monastery plays an important role in the development of education before the establishment of schools for their formal education. In the past, *viharas* were the only schools in the Buddhist villages and education was in the hands of the monks. Women, however, were not allowed to have education imparted in the *viharas*. In this regard it has been stated that in the past "the monastic schools were the only schools in Khamti villages, and all education was provided by monks; even today half of all school children (not girls) continue to be taught by monks."³⁶ It has been further stated that "in the past, most of the monks (*bhikkhu*) who manned the *viharas* of different Tai villages of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh were ethnically Burmese and their mother tongue was Burmese. They were

well versed in Pali and taught the young monks (*bhikkhu*) and novices (*sramana*) to go through Buddhist religious scriptures written in Pali and Burmese besides observing Buddhist monastic rules, regulations and discipline."³⁷

Such statements however are not altogether based on facts as many of the *yasis* and women followers in the Tai Buddhist society could read and write; and many of the manuscripts preserved in the monasteries were copied by them. In this regard B. J. Terwiel, on the basis of his field survey conducted in the years 1978 and 1979, has stated that the monasteries at Disangpani, Chalapathar and Namphake were well-known centers of Buddhism in which scholarly monks provided not only religious guidance to the surrounding population, but also maintained schools for the religious instruction of the coming generation.³⁸ It may be presumed that his 'coming generation' included also girls. This is testified by the fact that at present girls of the Tai Buddhist communities of go to the monastery to learn Tai and Pali besides going to have formal education at school. As mentioned earlier, in the Barkhamti village of Lakhimpur district, women, including the young girls, go to the *vihara* as well as to the schools to take education of both religious and secular type. In the same way, the Phakes of the Namphake village in the district of Dibrugarh had their own traditional system of education through the monasteries when there was no primary school. After the establishment of Nam Phakial Primary School in the year 1910, villagers have begun to emphasize on modern education.³⁹ It is to be noted that even after independence of India, the monasteries continue to be important centers of education where scriptures written in Pali and Tai were taught.

Thus, Buddhism has contributed towards empowerment and upliftment of women in the Tai society of North east India. There is no doubt that there are certain forces which did not much encourage in the process in the process of their upliftment and empowerment, like the Buddhist idea of women's natural inferiority, and patriarchal nature of the faith. But the same cannot be equated with Brahmanical religious systems where women's role in the society has never been recognized as equal with men. On the other hand, the tribal nature of the Tai society has encouraged it to see women as independent and capable of doing anything equally with men. As a result, we find women in the Tai Buddhist society of Assam as somewhere in between the Brahmanical society on one hand and the tribal society on the other. The major force underneath the status is their faith system and social ideology.

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