

# The Priceless Treasure: Dr. Ambedkar's Manifesto for Women's Liberation

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## Abstract

“I am sure that whoever reads references to women by the Buddha which occur in the sacred literature of the Buddhists will be convinced that far from doing anything which would have the effect of degrading the woman, the Buddha all along tried to enable woman and to elevate her.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar *The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman*, Vol. 17, II.

Needless to say, women composed half of human society. But in India they suffer from the double oppression; firstly, is of gender itself and second is of the caste. It becomes all the more complicated and unliberated when it gets into the divine clutches. When a birth or the gender get sanctification of the divine and authentication of the sacred texts, who are the humans to alter or challenge it? Thus, gender and caste slavery eternally crippled both: women and the Shudrās in Ancient India. Unfortunately, this is the case even in our times. This results majorly into two serious consequences. Firstly, the human world paralyzes before divinity which is hierarchical and oppressive in nature which results in a culture of privileged and underprivileged. Secondly, once the slavery entwines with an oppressive divinity, thus becomes not a matter of reason or a questionable principle or an enquiry, it cannot be investigated, but cease to merely a belief; that makes slavery eternal and sustains forever. Such view cannot see any hope of ray of liberation in the human and non-human world. The doors of liberation thus shut down permanently.

The Buddha was a revolutionary. He permitted women to join the monastic life and allowed to be a part of his order. He recognized their full potentials as equal to men. The Buddha was courageous to flow against the stream of views that were existed in his time. The foundation of Bhikkhuni Sangha (Women's monastic Order) was the radical step in his time. While doing this undoubted contribution of the Buddha in liberating women, one must bear in the mind that the traditional view of women in the society that prevailed during the Buddha's time treated women as an inferior being under Vedic Brahmanical Culture. Religious literature that advocated liberation is more likely to be addressed to men alone. Hence we find the emphasis on renunciation of sensual desires expressed merely in terms of the male's attachment to women.

This paper thus trying to look at the issues in relations with Women and Shudras in ancient times. I think it is important to address this question because, such views are still dominant in contemporary Indian society and in the world in general. I am questing to find the answers mainly in the light of Dr. Ambedkar's vision for women's liberation - with special reference to his one of the important essays: *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?* Which he published in the early 1950s.

**Key Words:** Women's Liberation, The Buddha, Ānanda, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sangha, Hindu Code Bill, Dr. Ambedkar, Brahmanical Vedic Culture.

<sup>1</sup> Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?* Vol. XVII, Part II, p. 117.

## Introduction

Since ancient times the birth of a girl has been regarded as a calamity, burden, and fairly not very happy occasion by the people of India. Needless to say, women composed half of human society. But in India they suffer from the double oppression; firstly, is of gender itself and second is of the caste. It becomes all the more complicated and unliberated when it gets into the divine clutches. When a birth or the gender get sanctification of the divine and authentication of the sacred texts, who are the humans to alter or challenge it? Thus, gender and caste slavery eternally crippled both: women and the Shudrās in Ancient India. Unfortunately, this is the case even in our times. This results majorly into two serious consequences. Firstly, the human world paralyzes before divinity which is hierarchical and oppressive in nature which results in a culture of privileged and underprivileged. Secondly, once the slavery entwines with an oppressive divinity, thus becomes not a matter of reason or a questionable principle or an enquiry, it cannot be investigated, but cease to merely a belief; that makes slavery eternal and sustains forever. Such view cannot see any hope of ray of liberation in the human and non-human world. The doors of liberation thus shuts down permanently.

The founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha permitted women to join the monastic order and recognised their full potentials as equal to men. The Buddha was courageous to flow against the stream of views that were existed in his time. He challenged the notion of God, ātman, and was responsible for many revolutionary reforms in the society, culture, politics, and nature of reality itself, on the basis of the Dhamma he realized with direct experience. His mind was discrimination-less. The foundation of Bhikkhuni Sangha was the radical step in his time. While acknowledging this fact and his undoubted contribution in liberating women, one must bear in the mind that the traditional view of women in the society that prevailed during the Buddha's time treated women as inferior, impure, and unclean being. These were the societies where men have always been the authorities and given wider choices. A negative view of women was not uncommon for men. Religious literature that advocated liberation is more likely to be addressed to men alone. Hence we find the emphasis on renunciation of sensual desires expressed merely in terms of the male's attachment to women.

It is often believed that even in Buddhism they were looked down. This is noticed fact that the eight Garudhammas (eight heavy chief rules) are additional precepts required for Bhikkhuni ( a fully ordained Buddhist nun) above and beyond the monastic rule (vinaya) that applied to monks. The admission of women into the order was granted by the Buddha on condition that Mahāpajāpati Gotami should take upon herself the garudhamma; these were the first rules made for the Bhikkhunis. The authenticity of these rules is highly contested; they were supposedly added to the Bhikkhuni Vinaya to allow more acceptance of a monastic Sangha for women, during the Buddha's time. They are controversial because they attempt to push women into an inferior role because many Buddhists, have found evidence that the eight garudhammas are not really the teachings of the Buddha. It is debatable question and needs investigation.

## The Context

It is generally believed that the Buddha was not very happy for women to practice a spiritual life in the same fashion as Bhikkhus. He was not initially agreed to allow women to enter into the Sangha. He denied the request of his close disciple and his cousin Ānanda when request came from Mahāpajāpati Gotami. We know from the Pali scriptures that she was aunt of the Buddha. She was the spokesperson of a group of women who requested the Buddha to ordain in his monastic order. Although the modern scholarship questions the validity of this incident that the Buddha was hesitant before admitting women to the order. It is widely believed that when the Buddha's close

disciple and cousin Ānanda questioned him concerning the spiritual potentials of women, Buddha seems to be hesitant to give them entry into the monastic order. Modern scholarship still holds this view though they appreciate Buddha's position he took to allow them into the order.

Mahāpajāpati Gotami was serious on the thought to get ordained and then onwards to follow the monastic life to attain the nibbana – the liberation. It was a right time for her to consider and follow the path of the Buddha seriously. But when she approached and asked for the permission to get into the order of the Buddha. Mahāpajāpati Gotami with 500 other women shaved their head, donned yellow robes and went where the Buddha was. Ānanda went to the Buddha on their behalf to ask for their permission to join the Sangha, but Buddha's response to Ānanda was: "Please do not ask so."

According to traditional Vedic society, to lead a spiritual life for salvation is not the path for women. Even a thought of women or Shudrā reading the Vedas, attaining knowledge, and practicing for the salvation was indigestible for Brahmanical Vedic society. Question whether the Buddha allowed women into the Sangha or not, therefore needs critical investigation and requires close textual and historical analysis. I think, question here is not whether the Buddha allowed them to enter into the order and encourage them to live a spiritual life, but before entering into the debate of such kind, it is foremost important to understand what view and position the Buddha hold about women.

It is of prime importance to understand: Did the Buddha share same view and understanding about women? Did the Buddha share similar views and position as that of his contemporary Vedic culture? Did he think that the human are different potentials and capacities on the basis of birth, caste, and gender? What ways he showed to the liberation for human being? Fundamentally that comes down to what he teaches about the nature of reality itself? These are prime questions to quest for. His attitudes towards these questions were quite contrary to the traditional views that were prevailing in his time.

Undoubtedly, these are the questions of greater importance in our time as well. This paper thus focused on the questions raised above. I am trying to look at the issues in relations with women and Shudras in ancient times. It is because the influences of these views are still dominant in contemporary Indian society and in the world in general. I am questing to find answers for the questions mainly in the light of Dr. Ambedkar's vision for women's liberation.

In 1950s Dr. Ambedkar wrote an important paper in response to the Buddha's position on women. He was also trying to address the question as compare to the situation of women in Modern Hindu India. The notion of Caste is prevailing since thousands of years. This notion was never been interrupted. Even in modern times when Dr. Ambedkar was working to bring about the sea changes in oppressive Hindu culture, the practice of Hindu caste-system and untouchability was practiced at its severity. In fact, no period was an exceptional in this regard in the history of India till date. Dr. Ambedkar himself suffered from it very badly. In spite of he being the most educated man of his time from the world's prestigious universities and institutions like Columbia University, USA, London School of Economics, UK, and many other prestigious honors and degrees, on return back to his home land the hierarchical caste system made him feel undignified and insulted, even at times lesser human being.

In spite of being affected severely by the Hindu caste system Dr. Ambedkar produced the Constitution of India which was egalitarian in nature. It teaches Indian citizen to live in harmony without doing harms to any other caste, community, gender, or religion. He had been thinking deeply about the roots of inequality over many years, coming to understand that those roots are lay

in oppressive hierarchies produced by the religion. It is true that religion shapes the view and it produces a society and a culture on the basis of those views. For Dr. Ambedkar, real reforms come about only from a change in views, attitudes, and outlooks on the part of many people in the society. He was first Indian to break down the barriers in the way of advancement of views and transforming views about women in India was exceptional contribution at his part.

Dr. Ambedkar's attention on women's rights and dignity was never diverted while bringing about changes in the caste-based hierarchical society in India. His noted quote expressed his uncompromised position for women's dignity and freedom. He said in his speech delivered for Women's Conference, 1942, at Nagpur: "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress women have achieved." It was not merely in theory but Dr. Ambedkar through his writings and speeches, by making provisions for women's safeguards in Indian Constitution, and through educational policies made for women showed that how tirelessly he worked for it. He holds the view that there must be equality not only between men and men but men and women. In 1956, the great Indian statesman and Buddhist leader, Dr. Ambedkar, precipitated a social revolution in India on the basis of right view towards women where they were looked down by the society.

### **The Fall of Women**

There can be no doubt that there has been an utter downfall in position of women in India in ancient times. They did not occupy a very high position in the intellectual and social life of the country. This was not the case in position of women in India from what it once was. They did occupy a few phases in the history and played important role in the social life of India. There are references in Atharva Veda that woman was entitled to upanayana – where a girl is spoken of as being eligible for marriage having finished the brahmacharya. We know from Panini's Ashtadhāy that women attended Gurukul (College) and studied the various sections of the Vedas. Patanjali's Mahābhāshya shows that women were teachers and taught Vedas to girl students. It shows that in pre-Manu<sup>2</sup>'s time women could rise to the highest pinnacle of learning and education. Then question arises and needs an enquiry who was responsible for their fall?

Manu – the law giver for later Brahminic Vedic Culture prescribed sever punishments and insults for the Shudrās and for women. Under Manu's Brahminic Vedic culture taking sannyāsa (renunciation for spiritual life) was the ideal and in the end of it, was to realize the supreme goal of Vedas or Upanishadic doctrine which was the ātman ultimately merges with the param-ātman to realize the ultimate reality called Brahma. This right was mainly for upper caste men. Brahmins were dead opposed to the life and right of sannyāsa for a woman. Not only a woman but a shudrā was denied from this right. In famous Vedic Brahminical epic Ramayana, the King Rāma – the symbol of righteousness and justice killed a shudrā Saint Shambhooka on the basis and charge of him setting up an ashrama (the place for spiritual practices), for his efforts of acquiring the knowledge, and because he was teaching to the people of his time. He was assassinated by the King Rāma. This treatment for women and shudrā was continued. In later phase of history in another version of the same epic Rāmāyana composed by a Hindu Saint Tulasidas said:

Dhol, gawar sudra, pashu, naari,  
Sakal tarna ke adhikari.

All Drum, an Illiterate, shudrās (lower castes), animals and Women,  
All require a beating to get the best out of them.

<sup>2</sup> Manu – the law giver of the Vedic Hindu religion. Period 200 BC to 200 BCE. Scholars have various opinion on the historical periods of the text written by him called – *Manusruiti*.

Tulsidas essentially expressed in these sacred texts that Shudras and women are unworthy of acquiring any knowledge and worthy of beating.

It is important to understand the reason why the Brahmins denied women and Shudrās from the right to sannyasa? It is important to investigate because it helps to understand the attitude of the Vedic Brahmanical culture towards women and it was in sharp contrast with that of what the Buddha believed in. Another important text I would like to mention from ancient Indian history called – Manusmṛiti (the Laws of Manu), which also describes the sever punishments for Shudrās, for Untouchables, and for women. They have no right to study Vedas, women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the Vedas. The thought that Manu produced during the time still influencing the contemporary society and culture of India. This is the insult to shudrās and women in the past and still continues in modern time. It is this relationship of textual sacredness and oppressive divine authority perpetuated slavery of shudrās and women forever in the society. Under the Vedic culture and under the Laws of Manu both: shudrās and women were denied of the opportunity to acquire knowledge and treated as unclean. They were forbidden from any liberty. According to Manu, women’s life is signature by men from birth to death. She remains under men’s control in entire life. She should be under father’s control in childhood, under husband’s control in youth, and under her son’s control in old age; a woman is never for independence.<sup>3</sup> Thus, they denied the access to knowledge, path to reach the Brahma and therefore denied the liberation itself. Manu comes much later than the Buddha on Indian social scenario. He wanted to deprive women of the freedom they had under Buddhist regime. Manu was outraged by license and in putting a stop to it he deprived her of liberty. This shows how low was a woman in the opinion of Manu. Women are not to be free under any circumstances, according to him. Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the male (of) their (families) and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one’s control.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Rise of Women**

Unlike the Vedic view, the Buddha – a hero of Sramanic Culture, admitted women to the life of parivrājaka and removed the injustice and wrongs. He gave them the right to practice that enabled them to realize their spiritual potentialities and capacities as equal to men. It was both a revolutionary step and also the hope for the liberation of women in India. The freedom that Bhikkhunis experienced in the Sangha was not abstract but based on real experiences they attained by realizing the truth – the true nature of things as taught by the Buddha. On the contrary, Manu deprived the freedom for women they had under the Buddhist regime. Dr. Ambedkar rightly points this line of partition in terms of view the Manu Vedic culture hold- in his essay we are discussing in this paper.

It was in 1950s Dr. Ambedkar wrote an important essay titled “The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?” At the beginning of the paper, he quoted from an article: The Position of Women in Hinduism and Buddhism, by Lama Govinda which appeared in the journal of Mahabodhi in March, 1950. Dr. Ambedkar points out that Lama Govinda’s article was a rejoinder to an article which had appeared in Eve’s Weekly of January 21, 1950, and in which the Buddha was charged as being the man whose teaching was mainly responsible for the downfall of women in India. Lama Govinda did his duty as every Buddhist must in coming forward to refute the charge. Though time to time the question was raised and Buddhist masters and scholars scrutinized and defended the Buddha’s position, but the matter cannot be allowed to rest there. This is not the first time such a charge is made against the Buddha. It is generally the tone of modern scholars or

<sup>3</sup> *Manusmṛiti*, IX, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Manusmṛiti*, IX, 2.

discourses in feminism that they hold the view that the Buddha was not initially agreed and was responsible for restricting women's entry into the Sangha and was generally not happy with it. Therefore, matter needs to be seen at a deeper level in terms of view, in terms of canonical texts, and in the context of history that teaches us.

It is important to acknowledge the concerns that might have been expressed by the Buddha in the given circumstances. Some of the consideration and concerns that might have been present include the fact that Indian social system of his time had a risk of violence against women to lead a religious life as the general norms were against the celibacy and spiritual life of a woman. There might have been practical concerns as the women who requested for a monastic life have to give up families and the reality of living a reclusive life outdoors in jungle and caves might be difficult and dangerous. This must also be noticed that the current Sangha did not have any female teacher as the order was full of the only male. It could have been difficult to find enough teachers who would have been suitable to teach a large group of women. There could have been criticism than having women join the Sangha was breaking up families and therefore creating polarities in family lives of the people. He must have been also aware of the possible distractions in the lives of the monk who were practicing celibacy and were on the path that they decided not to be with a woman. All the monks were not enlightened and not all of them were sotāpannas or arahants. Therefore, this would be mistaken to say that the Buddha did not agree to allow women in the order and will reduce down the objections that the Buddha had at superficial thinking to judge about women's entry into the Sangha. These might be some of the reasons behind the Buddha's hesitation to allow women to join the Sangha

We also learn from the Pali Canon that when Ānanda asked the Buddha if women were capable of attaining spiritual enlightenment; the Buddha's answer was Yes and he acknowledged the equal potential of them as compared to men. We need to mark in the light of Vedic prejudiced society against women, that the Buddha was not prejudiced about their capacities and potentials. He clearly did not diminish them as a human being. It also needs to mark that this was the first time in the history of religion that a spiritual founder who was an enlightened leader declared openly that men and women are equal on spiritual grounds. As discussed above in the Hindu context the Vedas – the most sacred religious texts were allowed to read only by men for a long time. The Buddha in this regard was absolutely revolutionary and departed from the thinking that prevailed in his time. His teachings corrected the prevailing wrongs and transcended race, caste, gender, and even nations. He did not merely allow women just to join the monastic order but he in point of fact set up a separate Bhikkhuni Sangha for women. He set up the practicalities and practices for women not dependent on men and allowed them to run the Bhikkhuni Sangha independent of Bhikkhu Sangha. It was a revolution in itself of that time.

Although modern scholarship questions their validity, traditional renditions of this incident recount that the Buddha hesitated three times before admitting these women to the order, saying Be cautious, Gautamī, of the going forth of women from home into homelessness in the Dharma and the discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata. As mentioned, when the Ānanda questioned him concerning the spiritual capacities of women, the Buddha is said to have replied that women were as capable as men of achieving liberation, a fact verified by the multitude of women who achieved the state of an arahant during his lifetime. Having thus affirmed women's equal capacity for spiritual enlightenment, the Buddha is said to have relented and agreed to establish the female counterpart of the Bhikkhu Sangha.

## Analysis of Dr. Ambedkar

### a. Textual Analysis:

Dr. Ambedkar was keenly aware of the prevailing general criticism of the Buddha about women. Time to time scholars went into this question to know what was the Buddha's position on the matter. As it was not the first time such charges made on the Buddha, Ambedkar felt it was necessary to address the question deeply and felt as he mentions: it is, therefore necessary to go to the root of the matter and examine the very foundation of this oft-repeated charge. Dr. Ambedkar was deeply studied in the Pali canons. His method of analysis of historical texts was critical and investigative. He was keenly aware of the textual corruptions that happened in the past. He was also aware how Buddhism was not only attacked time to time but was also co-opted by Brahmanical forces in terms of misinterpreting the teachings of the Buddha in the past.

Therefore at the beginning of his essay, he goes straight into the heart of the matter by explaining such a charge against the Buddha can be supported on two grounds. In Chapter V of Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha's reply to Ānanda to have given to a question put to him. The passage reads as follows:

“How are we to conduct ourselves, (asked Ānanda)  
with regard to womenkind?

As not seeing them, Ananda.  
But if we should see them,  
what are we to do?  
Not talking, Ananda.  
But if they should speak to us,  
Lord, what are we to do?  
Keep wide awake, Ānanda.”<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar raises the question on the very passage from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, and points out that, the point is not whether the passage exists or not. The point is that if any argument is to be built upon this passage, it is not necessary to prove that the text is original and genuine and not a later interpolation by the Bhikkhus?<sup>6</sup> Ambedkar raises the objection that, Sutta Pitaka, the source of the above passage, is a later interpolation of by the Bhikkhus (males).

In the first place, the Sutta Pitaka was not reduced to writing until 400 years had passed after the death of the Buddha. Secondly, the Editors who compiled and edited them were Monks and the Monk Editors compiled and wrote for the Monk. The statement attributed to the Buddha is valuable for a Monks to his rule of celibacy and it is not unlikely for the Monk Editor to interpolate such rule.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that Pitakas were written after the Buddha's passing away as we find it now wrapped by the mythical drapery. There were also disfigured by later additions and one cannot deny the possibility of literary corruptions by addition of Vedic Brahmanical ideas which were foreign to the Buddhist thought. It is very much possible that the teachings of the Buddha might have been bewildered and distorted by the twists and turns given to the texts. It is important to notice that early teachings of the Buddha in later times was edited by the Monks and it was for the Monks to

<sup>5</sup> Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, DN:16

<sup>6</sup> Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?*, Vol. XVII, Part II, p. 110

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 111

protect Bhikkhu Vinaya (rules for monks). As Dr. Ambedkar acknowledges the Preface written by Mrs Rhys Davis to *Kindred Sayings* (Vol. II)<sup>8</sup> in support of his argument where she mentions:

... the teachings of the Buddha was reproduced on the basis of feelings by ages of successive narrators, of memory-schemes drawn up by teachers, not the teachers of the multitude but of orally learning pupils by efforts. Mrs Rhys Davis stresses that all the narrators, teachers, editors, were men whose choice of ideals of life differed from that of the rest of the world, differed the more in proportion as they were sincerely not of the world as well as not in it. Through this distorted medium he has to read, and ask himself which sayings, put into the mouth of a certain accredited 'teacher and way-shower' of truth, are likely to have come from such a man as he is recorded to have been?<sup>9</sup>

The thought that spouts in our mind today that the Buddha had been hesitant of giving permission for women to enter into the order leaves us under question. As Ambedkar investigates the text further and points out that in the Chinese version of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, does not contain this particular passage<sup>10</sup> which Ananda discussing the conduct with regard to women kind.

#### **b. Test of Probability:**

It is not just text but one needs to go into the essence of the matter to unwrap the meaning of the text. It is well inferred that the Buddha or Ānanda were certainly not against women. It is also very conspicuous from the teachings of the Buddha that he treated them equally and with humanity. There are plentiful shreds of evidences that the Buddha gave teachings to men and women even before the question of their entry into the Sangha. It is also a well-noted fact that Ānanda was kind to women and was aware of their position in the society of his time. Buddhism was keen to transform the self and society not on the basis caste, gender, or race but on the basis of self-efforts that alters the prejudiced views. The view that was advocating equality between men and women in general.

On the point as to whether there was any necessity for Ānanda to ask such a question, it is relevant to note that the Buddha describes how sweet was Ānanda and how he was loved by all. In amplifying the possibility of egalitarian spirits taught by the Buddha, Dr. Ambedkar cites the passage from *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* describing the equal and enlightened mind of Ānanda, indeed in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha.

Brethren, there are these four wonderful and marvellous qualities in Ananda.

If, brethren, a number of the brethren of the order should come to visit Ananda, they are filled with joy on beholding him; and if Ananda should then preach the truth to them, they are filled with the joy at the discourse...

... If Brethren, a number of sisters of the Order ... or of devout men, ... or of devout women, should behold him; and if Ananda should then preach the truth to them, they are filled with joy at discourse; while the company of sisters is ill at ease, brethren, when Ananda is silent.<sup>11</sup>

This exhibits clearly that it was natural and usual for Ānanda to meet women. They were not only sisters but devout women who were not members of the Order. It was at ease for Ānanda to meet and talk or to teach them. Ambedkar expressed the possibility in such a scenario why then Ānanda

<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Rhys Davis (trans.), *The Book of the Kindred Sayings*, Part II, Pali Text Society, London.

<sup>9</sup> Mentioned in, *Preface* Mrs. Rhys Davis, *Kindred Saying*, Vol. II, Pali Text Society, London.

<sup>10</sup> Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?*, Vol. XVII, Part II, p. 111

<sup>11</sup> *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, DN:16



should have asked such a question? It is clear that the Buddha knew the women use to meet and interact with Ānanda and he issued no objection to Ānanda about it. Why should he have thought of interdicting and forbidding all contacts with women? The whole passage is so unnatural that it must be regarded as a later monastic interpolation.<sup>12</sup> It is not mere justification or defence in terms of advocating or projecting Buddhism as pro-women but one needs to catch the essence of the teachings of the Buddha that practicing no difference among men and women in terms of their capacities and potentials were natural in the teachings of the Buddha and Dhamma prescribe to practice for both men and women.

Dr. Ambedkar's keen investigation shows further important reflection on Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, under his method of test of probability. It is true that Ānanda was one of the pioneering disciples of the Buddha who advocated and supported the practices and liberation of women. But there is another instance in the life of Ananda which stands in stark contrast with the passage in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. In the first council (sangīti) out of five charges were made against the Ānanda, I would like to mark the third and the fifth charge that has been made against Ananda.<sup>13</sup>

The third charge:

That he (Ānanda) accused the body of the departed blessed one Lord Buddha to be saluted first by women so that it was soiled by their tears.

The fifth charge:

That he was principally instrumental in getting women admitted to the Sangha.

Dr. Ambedkar rightly picks the third charge on Ānanda and tried to investigate it further to scrutinise the text and check the probability of its truth or falsity of the charges against the Ānanda. Ānanda should be charged or feel guilty or not is of least importance. What is of interest as per as the question of women comes – particularly in the charge third – Ambedkar emphasises:

... why did Ananda allow women to touch the body of the Master if the advice given by him as mentioned in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta is true as a fact? Would he so flagrantly and knowingly disobey the advice given by the Buddha a few minutes before? The answer must be in the negative. What follows from this negative answer? What follows is that the Buddha had not given such an advice as is alleged against him. For if he had given such an advice, Ananda could not have acted contrary to it. It therefore, stands to reason that no such advice had been given by the Buddha.<sup>14</sup>

Ambedkar makes the argument clyster clear by asking questions and therefore clarifying confusions that might have been brought by the society that was influenced by Brahmanical patriarchy. It is possible the text might have been interpreted by the existing norms of the prevalent society of that time which is much later version and fundamentally goes against the essence of the teachings of the Buddha. Even from the point of view of the Buddha as a person, one needs to question – would it have been natural for the Buddha to give such a reply? The answer to this question must depend upon Buddha's course of conduct towards women. As Dr. Ambedkar clarifies the doubt in his essay by asking: did the Buddha avoid meeting women as is suggested by the advice he is reported to have given to Ananda? Where are the facts?<sup>15</sup> In fact, the Buddha's position towards women was positive. According to the Dhananjānī Sutta, wife of the Brahmin Bhāradvāja, had deep faith in the Buddha. She persuaded her husband to speak with the Buddha, who later converted, ordained, and became an arahant. Pali canonical sources and Theri Gatha – verses of the elder nuns – are full of

<sup>12</sup> Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?* Vol. XVII, Part II, p. 112

<sup>13</sup> Both the charges are mentioned in *Mahāparinibbāna* sutta and also mentioned in, Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?* p. 112

<sup>14</sup> Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?*, Vol. XVII, Part II, p.113

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 113

praise of the Buddha by women lay and ordained for the path that the Buddha has shown for their liberation.

### **What the Buddha did for Women?**

The beauty of the Buddha's teaching is not nihilistic or pessimistic or eternalistic. He never leads questions or inquiry in a speculative way. But he sees through the illusions and teaches the true nature of reality. He is not biased or prejudiced, thus he never holds any polar views in terms of seeing things and making judgements about circumstances. His mind never hold any prejudices, rather his mind is luminous (pabassna citta) which gives light to dark minds that are engrossed in ignorance. He teaches the entirety of truth and not the one-sidedness of truth. He teaches the suffering and gives the path to end. This is the entire essence of his teaching. It does not hold any views or prejudices how can he be prejudiced about women or Shudrās or Untouchables. On the contrary, he did recognise the oppression of Shudrās or women or Untouchables, and certainly did show the path to liberation for them. He even admitted all of them in the Sangha.

Just as, O monks, the great rivers Gangâ, Yamunâ, Aciravati, Sarabhû, and Mahi, on reaching the ocean, lose their earlier name and identity and come to be reckoned as the great ocean, similarly, O monks, people of the four castes (vannas)... who leave the household and become homeless recluses under the Doctrine and Discipline declared by the Tathâgata, lose their previous names and identities and are reckoned as recluses who are sons of Sâkya" (Udâna 55).

Now, in this light, we need to consider the question from the side of the Buddha. Would it have been natural for the Buddha to give such a reply that forbids the potential and capacity of women? Would it have been natural for the Buddha to forbid the potential and capacity of so-called Shudras or Untouchables? Certainly not. The answer to such questions depends not upon the theories or thoughts of emancipation but must depend upon Buddha's course of conduct towards them.

Life of the Buddha teaches that he never avoided meeting women or men from any caste or class. He disregards the Vedic Brahmanical Verna / Caste-system. He also attacked the views based on gender biasedness in the process of attaining enlightenment; rather he appealed to people from all sections of the society and to all genders. His great revolution opened the door of deathlessness for everyone, even for women in this context. He preached that an individual is able to attain enlightenment in this life and held that caste or gender was not a punishment for deeds committed in a past life. Especially in the case of women where they looked down and impure by the patriarchal society. He opened the doors for them where they wouldn't have had access to otherwise for liberation. He did not merely teach or advised practices for them, but he set up an independent Sangha for them. He gave them an option for work outside the traditional sphere of family and home. History teaches us that the result is conspicuous in terms of the attaining arhathood; an ability to become Theris (great nuns).

Dr. Ambedkar cites two examples in his essay in response to the position and conduct of the Buddha regarding women. Visakha was one of the eighty chief disciples of the Buddha with the title of "Chief of Alm-givers."<sup>16</sup> While citing this example Ambedkar raises following questions in his essay:

1. Did not Visâkhâ at one time go to hear Buddha's speech?
2. Did she not enter his monastery?
3. Did the Buddha act towards Visakha in the manner he directed Ānanda to act towards women?

<sup>16</sup> Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?*, Vol. XVII, Part II, p. 113

4. What did the Bhikkhus present at the meeting do?
5. Did they leave the meeting?

The second incidence that Ambedkar cites while making his point was of Āmrapālī<sup>17</sup> of Vaiśālī. She went to see the Buddha and gave him and his monks an invitation for a meal at her house. While analysing and mentioning this incidence Ambedkar raises the issue and asks: did the Buddha and Bhikkhus avoid her? ... on the other hand, they accepted her invitation - rejecting the invitation of the Licchavis who felt quite insulted on that account and went to her home and partook of her food.<sup>18</sup>

Ambedkar shows clearly and keenly that the Buddha deeply cared for the welfare and emancipation of women. His literary understating and critical inquiry throws new light to see things as they were not quite as same as they were projected in later interpretations, of what the Buddha thought of women. There are immense examples of women who experienced the liberation and taught others how to attain it.

In Somā Sutta the nun Soma responds to the evil for Māra:

"What difference does womanhood make  
when the mind is serene,  
and knowledge is present  
as you rightly discern the Dhamma.

Surely someone who might think:  
'I am a woman', or 'I am a man',  
or 'I am' anything at all,  
is fit for Māra to address."

It is clear from the Mallika Sutta when King Prasenjit expressed disappointment when queen Mallika gives birth to a daughter, the Buddha was praising the birth of a daughter and corrected King's wrong view. The reports of the frequent visits of Queen Mallika to the Buddha for dhammic instructions are scattered in the Pali canons. In Samyutta Nikaya we found the reference that Kokanada, daughter of Pajjuna, when the night was far spent shedding radiance with her effulgent beauty over the whole Mahavana, came into the presence of the Buddha when he was staying at Vaisali.<sup>19</sup> The Nandakovada Sutta<sup>20</sup>, explains when the Buddha was staying near Sravasti at Jetā Grove, Mahāpajāpati Gotami having brought five hundred alms-women with her to the Buddha – which is a large number at that time especially when it comes to devout women – with a request that he should instruct them in his teachings and discipline. On this event the Buddha's response was:

Nandaka, Exhort the nuns, Nandaka. Instruct the nuns, Nandaka. Give the nuns a talk on Dhamma. The Buddha did not forbid his disciples or nuns from his teachings. He asked his disciples to treat them with dignity and respect and asked Nandaka to teach and train them in his teachings and discipline.

<sup>17</sup> Āmrapālī, also known as "Ambapālīka" or "Ambapali", was a nagarvadhu (royal courtesan) of the republic of Vaisali, contemporary to the Buddha's time. By practicing the path of the Buddha she attained an arhathood. She is well mentioned in the Pali Canons, especially with reference to conjunction with the Buddha staying at her Ambapali-vana (mango grove) which she donated to his order where the Buddha said to be taught the famous Ambapalika Sutta.

<sup>18</sup> Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?*, Vol. XVII, Part II, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid p. 114

<sup>20</sup> Majjima Nikaya, 146, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.146.than.html>

## Dr. Ambedkar's Vision for The Buddha and His Dhamma

One among many – The Buddha and His Dhamma – is a very significant book Dr. Ambedkar produce to teach Buddha's life and teachings in modern time. Before Dr. Ambedkar publicly embraced Buddhism and started the work of spreading of it, there was a pint-size presence of Buddhism and literature. He took great pain and labor to produce a document that would be available to people of India to understand the life and teachings of the Buddha in a very simple and clear language. Even non-Buddhist finds the text very easy to understand in terms of his doctrine. For Buddhists and for anyone who is not a Buddhist finds very difficult to understand the life and teachings of the Buddha at its essence. Depending on the Pali canonical records and archeological records, it is not as easy to understand the biography of the Buddha. It is true, books like *The Life of The Buddha According to the Pali Canon* by learned and scholarly monks like Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, helps greatly to unfold the biography of the Buddha. Ambedkar recognized the need to explain the life and teachings of the Buddha. It would not be an exaggeration to say that of all the founders of religions the presentation of the life and teachings of the founder of Buddhism presents a problem which is quite puzzling if not baffling.<sup>21</sup> Dr. Ambedkar not only revived Buddhism but he re-interpreted it to understand the vision of the Buddha in a lucid form. It brought a lot of change in the perspective about Buddhism of modern time.

Why I am referring to this book? Dr. Ambedkar in his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he devotes the Book II, Part VII exclusively to understand the conversion of women<sup>22</sup> by the Buddha. It is important to notice how Dr. Ambedkar makes the point by citing not just the conversion of the Buddha's maternal aunt but writes about the women who were considered lower castes by Vedic Brahmanical society. He writes the conversion of Buddha's maternal aunt and he writes about the conversion of Prakrati - a Chandālika (so-called untouchable women). As the story goes: when it so happened that Ānanda had gone to beg for arms, after eating his food, Ānanda was in need of water. He saw a girl on the river bank filling her pot and asked for some water. The girl, Prakrati refused to do so saying she was an untouchable (Chandālika). Ānanda requested for water and said: I am concerned with water and not with your caste. The girl was full of surprise as she experienced wonder; both breaking of the caste and gender prejudices from the mind of Ānanda. She followed him and discovered that he was staying at Jetavana and he was a follower of the Buddha. After receiving the teachings of the Buddha, she saluted him and said:

Owing to ignorance I was going in pursuit of Ananda. My mind is now enlightened. I am like a sailor whose ship after a mishap has reached the other bank. I am like an unprotected aged person who has found protection. I am like the blind who has got a new sight. The blessed Lord by his wise words of advice has awakened me from my sleep.<sup>23</sup>

It is clear what Prakrati attained from the wise words of the blessed one. I think it is equally important to notice what was the response of the Buddha after her attainment. The Buddha knew she did not only leave her old caste and gender-based identity – which was oppressive under Vedic culture – but she did become liberated from subjective prejudices and thus seen the objective world in a fresh light. The Buddha did acknowledge her enlightenment fully and encouraged her by saying: for though you were a Chandalika, you will be model for noblemen and for noblewomen. You were of low caste, but Brahmins will learn a lesson from you. Swerve not from the path of justice and righteousness and you will outline the royal glory of queens on the throne.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ambedkar B. R., mentioned in *Introduction, The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Buddha Bhoomi Publication, Nagpur.

<sup>22</sup> Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book II, Part VII, p. 193

<sup>23</sup> Mentioned in, Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book II, Part VII, p. 199

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 200

From these instances, it is clear that the Buddha did not shun women and women were not afraid of going to the Buddha. As Ambedkar rightly points out a caution that the Buddha did advise the Bhikkhus not to make it a habit to visit families of lay disciples for fear of human weakness yielding to frequent contacts with women. But he did not forbid such visits nor did he express any disdain about women as such.

It is true that the Buddha was keen on maintaining celibacy for monks and he was aware that interaction with the other sex – for both men and women – could be distracting but he never underestimated or judged the capacity and potential of men and women. He never advised to shun down all contact with women. Far from doing any such thing what he did was (as Ambedkar proceeds further in his essay) – to tell the Bhikkhus that whenever they met any women, do they call up the mother-mind, the sister mind, or the daughter-mind as the case may be i.e. regard women as you would your own mother, sister, or daughter.<sup>25</sup>

Above all, it is significant to understand that the Buddha expressed concern on the issue of joining women to his Order but he never opposed it on the basis of their potentiality. These are the known objections which opponents of the Buddha takes on the issue of women entering into the order.

Here needs the analysis of the situation as Dr. Ambedkar does:

Why did the Buddha oppose the demand of Mahāpajāpati Gotami to take parivraja (ordination)? Did he oppose it because he was of opinion that women were a low class whose admission would lower the status of the Sangha public esteem? Or did he oppose it because he was of opinion that women intellectually and morally were incapable of realizing the ideal of His Doctrine and His Discipline? The second of these two questions was definitely put to the Buddha by Ānanda in the course of the argument when he found the Buddha somewhat adamant.<sup>26</sup>

But the Buddha's response was totally contrasting to what has been understood by opponents of the Buddha. Ambedkar in his analysis of the situation cites the Buddha's response with a much clear position that Buddha took in regards to women:

The Buddha gave an unequivocal answer leaving no room for doubt or dispute. He said that women were fully capable of realizing His Doctrine and His Discipline and that was not the reason why he refused their demand for taking parivraja. It is clear from this that the Buddha did not regard woman as inferior to man either in point of intellect or character. That he opposed the admission of women because he held them in low esteem and feared that they might lower the prestige of the Sangha is an argument which is hardly worth mentioning. For if that was his feeling he would never admit them at all.<sup>27</sup>

Ambedkar also argues further on the question of the Bhikkhuni Sangha subordinate to the Bhikkhu Sangha. He raises two significant questions: a) should there be only one Sangha for men and women? b) If one for men and one for women – were they to be a quite independent and separate organisation or was there to be some sort of inter-relation between the two?

The Buddha took the uncompromised stand in practicing celibacy for both men and women. Ambedkar rightly points out of his critical investigation of the situation that the Buddha was concerned about a confraternity of men and women parivrajakas that the rule of celibacy would be

<sup>25</sup> Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?*, Vol. XVII, Part II, p. 114

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 115

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 115

lost. Thus, the Buddha decided to create a separate Sangha for Bhikkhunis. The Buddha knew what a great force the sex instinct is with life of both man as well as woman...to use the Buddha's own words it is this instinct which drives a man in woman's bondage and a woman in man's bondage.<sup>28</sup> Dr Ambedkar keenly noticed this insight of the Buddha without denying both men's and women's dignity and acknowledged the principle of equality in the thought of the Buddha. While sorting out the question of a separate Sangha for women, it is noticeable that the Buddha also gave them freedom and autonomy by setting up the Bhikkhuni Sangha independent of men. It would not be an exaggeration to submit that this was a revolutionary step from the side of the Buddha and in the history of religions which witnessed the setting of an independent Sangha just for women.

Having decided this he had to face the second question b) what would be the relationship between two Sangha? The women who joined the order were new and raw. They needed to be instructed in his teachings and they had to be trained in His rules of Discipline. There was a need before the Buddha who could undertake this task? It was obvious that he could not ask and assigned the job none except the male Bhikkhus of his order. They were trained in teachings and disciplines directly under the guidance of the Buddha; and this is what he did. Without addressing the necessary question of the relationship between the Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis the issue of subordination of Bhikkhunis to the Bhikkhus does not become quite clear. It is conspicuous from the development of the Sangha that their relationship becomes one of teacher and pupil. This might lead us to think in our times that the Bhikkhunis Sangha was subordinate to the Bhikkhu Sangha. One needs to acknowledge the fact that the relationship of teacher and pupil involve some authority for teacher over the pupil and some submission or subordination on the part of the pupil to the teacher. What more did the Buddha do?<sup>29</sup> This what Dr. Ambedkar was trying to express that there is absolutely no ground for the charge that the Buddha had a prejudice against women and was forever exhorting men to beware of each other.

We need to understand the situation before the Buddha; both in terms of the challenge he has to face in the society based on patriarchal Vedic customs and the need of teachers who would train them without failure in his disciplines. He had no option but his trained disciples. The Buddha even might have had a close watch and guidance while developing both the Sangha. This was indeed a radical step the Buddha took in his time.

It is true, this need not to be the case today. Modern education equipped with plenty of opportunities before women to study and practice the Dhamma even independent of male teachers. This is what Dr. Ambedkar was trying to get through his insight for the modern women to practice the Dhamma and to be independent of the male dominant society.

### **Theri Gatha: An Apex of Freedom**

It was this freedom – free from gender biasedness and the notion of Vedic Brahmanical purity as described in the Theri Gatha – the verses of the elder nuns. Despite the small size, it is a very significant document in the development of Bhikkhuni Sangha. This is important not only in the light of the life of Bhikkhunis but it is also the earliest known collection of women's literature. The touching verses manifest the verses of a mother who lost the only son. A former sex worker became a nun, a wealthy heiress who renounce the life of pleasure. The text even included with the verses by the Buddha's own aunt Mahāpajāpati Gotami. The text is full of profound experiences that bhikkhunis had on the path of enlightenment. Charles Hallisey one of the noted translators of Theri

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 116

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 116

Gatha commented that the Theri Gatha is an anthology of poems composed by some of the first Buddhist; while the poems of the Theri Gatha and of the first poems by women in India; as a collection the Theri Gatha is the first anthology of women's literature in the world... as such statement suggest, to use the adjective "first" is to point to something key to the value that these poems have for us.<sup>30</sup> This shows the pinnacle of women's expressive, imaginative, and aesthetic achievement. The Therigātha, like literature generally, can enable us to see things that we have not seen before and to imagine things that we have not dreamed of before... when reading the poems of the Therigātha, we can experience a surmising pleasure from the clarity and truth of the epiphanies they can trigger, but perhaps more important, when we experience such epiphanies, the poems gives us a chance to be free from ourselves and from our usual places in the world – at least free imaginatively – and to glimpse a different potential for ourselves in the light of that epiphanies.<sup>31</sup> The verses of Therigātha are about the freedom about the joy of being free, but an aesthetic impact they have on mind they also hold out the promise in the pleasure that has been delivered, gives an occasion for us making free too. How could such a profound literary text possible to produce from women's world more than two and half millennia ago which have the capacity to give us freedom and aesthetic pleasure, to speak to us about ourselves and about our world in astonishingly fresh and insightful ways is not easy to attain. But there is no doubt the teachings and disciplines of the Buddha's path made women capable of doing so. This is what the Buddha produced not merely in forms but in facts. The Buddha gave to the women of India is a fact of far greater importance. Both enlightened men and women in Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sangha experienced such liberation in their lives. It was this freedom which they keenly enjoyed and sang that expressed profoundly in Theri Gatha.

O free indeed! O gloriously free I am. Sang Mutta – a Bhikkhuni, who was a. Mettikka, another Bhikkhuni, also a Brahmin girl, sang – “ ... so sit I here upon a rock. And over my spirits sweeps the breath of liberty.”<sup>32</sup>

In the light of this Ambedkar argues about a theri (an enlightened woman) that they might claim equality with the highest of the fraternity. In his words:

I am sure that whoever reads references to women by the Buddha which occur in the sacred literature of the Buddhists will be convinced that far from doing anything which would have the effect of degrading the woman, the Buddha all along tried to enable woman and to elevate her.<sup>33</sup>

### **What Dr. Ambedkar did for Women?**

It is quite clear that Dr. Ambedkar was deeply inspired by the Buddha. He not only went into the heart of the matter about the liberation of women but also made substantial legal arrangements for the protection and dignity of a woman in India. He undoubtedly did it by analysing the historical texts including Pali cannons and by producing a severe critic of Vedic Brahmanical customs and Brahmanised version of ancient and modern Indian history.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Hallisey, *Therigāta*, Murty Classical Library of India, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2015, p. vii.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. ix

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in, Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?*, Vol. XVII, Part II, p. 120

<sup>33</sup> Ambedkar, *The Rise and Fall of The Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?*, Vol. XVII, Part II, p. 117

Ambedkar was not only the father of Indian Constitution; he was a great political leader, philosopher, economist, social reformer, revivalist of Buddhism and was first Indian to break down the barriers in the way of advancement of women in India. He laid down the foundation of concrete and sincere efforts by codifying the common Civil Code for Hindus and other sections of the Indian society. He stated that women should be given all-round development more importantly social education, their well-being, and socio-cultural rights. He emphasized that each and every section of Indian women be given their due share and it is a must to maintain and protect the dignity and modesty of women. Dr. Ambedkar always believed in movements led by women. He also added that if the women from all walks of life are taken into confidence, they may play a significant role in the social reforms. They have played a very massive and active role to eradicate social abuses. He insisted that every married woman must insist on the principle of equality.

The participation of women in the movement led by Dr Ambedkar was vivid. In the Kālāram Temple entry Satyagraha at Nasik in 1930, five hundred women participated and many of them were arrested along with men and ill-treated in jails. The encouragement of Dr. Ambedkar to empower women to speak boldly was seen when Radhabai Vadale addressed a press conference in 1931. Dr. Ambedkar believed in the strength of women and their role in the process of social transformation. Dr. Ambedkar led “Mahad Satyagraha” - struggle and march for drinking water to allow women and untouchables to use water in a public tank in Mahad, Maharashtra, on 20 March 1927. This struggle witnessed the participation of five hundred women along with men. The All India Depressed Classes organised a Women’s Conference at Nagpur, Maharashtra on 20 July 1942. In the proceeding there were lots of reforms were discussed for the welfare of women including divorce law, economic condition, education, law for appointing lady in services, representation of Depressed Class females in Legislature, and many other agendas were advocated by Dr. Ambedkar. He also established All-India Depressed Classes Women’s Federation to form a unity nationwide for strengthening women in India. There were 20,000 to 25,000 women assembled at the conference. Addressing this Women’s Conference, Dr. Ambedkar said:

Ever since I began to work among the Depressed Classes, I made it a point to carry women along with men. This is why you will see that our Conferences are always mixed Conferences. I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved, and when I see degree this assembly, I feel both convinced and happy that we have progressed.<sup>34</sup>

He opines that let every girl stand by their husband with equality and not as his slave / servant. He strongly advocated for family planning measures for women in Bombay Legislative Assembly so that they grow at fullest. In 1942, being a Labour Minister of Executive Council of Governor General, he introduced a Maternity Benefit Bill. He provided several provisions in the constitution for protecting the welfare and civil rights of women. Famously, he introduced the Hindu Code Bill in the Parliament and highlighted the issues about women’s property right. It advocated the introduction of the daughter's simultaneous succession with the son to the father's estate, the abolition of the barrier to inter-caste marriages, the assimilation of civil and sacramental marriages, and the introduction of divorce for the higher castes. By allowing for divorce, Ambedkar's version of the Hindu Code conflicted with traditional Hindu personal law, which did not sanction divorce. It allotted portions of inheritance to daughters, while giving widows complete property rights where they had previously been restricted. It was the intention of the government that this first draft should become the law on 1 January 1948. The bill received strong opposition from many political leaders. In turn, Dr. Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet as the bill was suspended by the first

<sup>34</sup> Dr Ambedkar at Women’s Conference, All-India Depressed Classes, Second Session, Nagpur, 1942. Mentioned in, W and S of D A, Vol 17 Part Three, p. 277.



Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru by citing the reason of priority of other bills and time.

Ambedkar saw the disability and unwillingness of Hindu mindset not ready to change their orthodox position regarding women. I was because of the beliefs and orthodox teachings of Hindu Shastras and texts. In response, Dr. Ambedkar in his long resignation said:

It has been said that the Bill had to be dropped because the opposition was strong... This Bill has been discussed several times in the Party and was carried to by the opponents....I was, therefore, quite unable to accept the Prime Minister's decision to abandon the Bill on the ground of time. I have been obliged to give this elaborate explanation for my resignation because some people have suggested that I am going because of my illness. I wish to repudiate any such suggestion. I am the last man to abandon my duty because of my illness.<sup>35</sup>

Addressing a meeting of women in Bombay on November 24, 1951, Dr. Ambedkar declared that the Hindu Code Bill would improve the condition of women and give them more rights and requested them to support the Bill and vote for candidates who would bring real democracy in the country. He regretted that some Congressmen were against the Bill, trying to delay it some way or other.<sup>36</sup> This shows Dr. Ambedkar gave up the power for principle. He was a man who lived for the egalitarian values and tirelessly fought for it. We, therefore, compelled to think in our time, we encounter the experiences in quite a contrast to what Dr. Ambedkar sacrificed for the principles; people do give up principles for power.

## Conclusion

1. Buddha never subordinated women to men. The reason for the separates rule for women Sangha was contingent upon the situation.
2. Dr. Ambedkar defended the Buddha's initiative to accord equal status to women in terms of their spiritual attainments.
3. Dr. Ambedkar unfolded the vision of liberation of men and women equally in the light of Buddha's teachings in our times.
4. In his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Dr. Ambedkar stresses in the Book III, Section IV: Dhamma to be Sadhamma must pull down all social barriers for radical equality. It must break down barriers between man and man. Dhamma to be Sadhamma must teach that worth and not birth is the measure of a man. Dhamma to be Sadhamma must promote equality between man and man. It indeed includes equality between men and women.
5. Dr. Ambedkar proved that the present status of women in the Hindu society was due to the caste system and codes imposed by Manu to enslave women and Shudrās
6. The counterrevolution against Buddhism by the Brahmanical forces resulted in the subjugation of both Shudrās and women.
7. Following the footsteps of the Buddha, Dr. Ambedkar started mobilizing women from the start of his social movement.
8. Dr. Ambedkar not only mobilized women for their rights but also encouraged organizations led by women.
9. He also noted that the philosophical challenge to codes of Manu was not enough. He advocated equal political rights to women resulting in the right to vote for women along

<sup>35</sup> Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. XIV Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, p. 1325.

<sup>36</sup> The Bombay Secret Abstract, dated 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1951. Mentioned in, Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. XVII, Part III, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, p. 455

with men when he drafted the constitution of India.

10. To challenge the unequal treatment to women in terms of marriages, divorces, inheritance, Dr. Ambedkar drafted "Hindu Code Bill" which bestowed upon women right to divorce, inherit the property, and equal participation in social life.
11. After his death, the Buddhist women have been organizing and producing literature of liberation of not only oppressed women but women and men from any background.

Gaining inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar, many women wrote on various topics in terms of women's liberation. The poetry and literature that flowered out of his inspiration were incredible. Women do lead themselves for their rights and liberation through the various organisation. But the goal is yet to achieve.

Let me conclude with the sentiments of the prison of the oppressive culture of caste and gender; therefore liberation from it is captured vividly and expressed beautifully by one of the noted Buddhist women poets,

Hira Bansode:

This is a complaint of mine  
 is against the orthodox culture  
 which has imprisoned us in a sealed room,  
 which has given us the charity of life completely boycotted.  
 Where the wind treats us as strangers,  
 where the monsoons give us only famines  
 where the water plays with us  
 the most inhuman games of mirage.  
 We are rejecting this  
 unclean and poisonous life.  
 And to escape from this cruel curses  
 will you give me  
 a bright and auspicious moon?  
 My countrymen, to your court  
 I have brought a complaint  
 Will you give me justice?<sup>37</sup>

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