



# Contemplating Women in the Teachings of Buddha and Basavanna

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**Abstract**— Gautham Buddha, of 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, and Basava, of 12<sup>th</sup> century AD, are the two great philosophers who were the first among those who strongly questioned and protested the humiliations, degradations and exploitations that happen to women in social set-ups. They contemplated deeply on human life and explored brand new values to make it all-beautiful which they personally adopted in their own lives while never distancing themselves from the masses. They are also the first among those who gave us new thoughts about faith, God, society, body, and soul; lived without differentiating between men and women; and worked hard for a common goal with an unflinching belief in the innate goodness of mankind.



**Keywords**— Gautham Buddha, Basavanna, Dhammapada, Vachanagalu, Buddha sangha, Anubhava Mantapa

## I. INTRODUCTION

Caste, class, and genders are the most important of the factors that have led to social inequalities in the history of India and have also resulted in injustice and exploitations of all kinds. Women are subjected to servitude and slavery since time immemorial. Gautham Buddha and Basavanna expounded their thinking in mercilessly criticized the vices, ignorance, superstitions, and general inhumanity prevalent during their times, and upheld freedom, equality, and social justice. They argued that faith is not something you practice for others to see but it is the epitome of human existence which is concerned about the well-being of human kind and the preserving of human values.

## II. BUDDHA'S VIEW ON WOMEN

Despite having all the luxuries of the world, one could wish for, Gautham Buddha sacrificed everything, went in search of truth, underwent penance, and did meditation for a very long time until he was enlightened and established the basic tenets of Buddhism. Gautham Buddha was the first philosopher and a socio-religious leader who wanted to build an equal society. He expounded his thinking

in Pali through which he mercilessly criticized the vices, ignorance, superstitions, and general inhumanity prevalent during his times, and upheld freedom, equality, and social justice. He argued that faith is not something you practice for others to see but it is the epitome of human existence which is concerned about the well-being of human kind and the preserving of human values. Hence, he who left the temples and palaces in search of Nirvana did not reach the god, but reached the hearts of people. Gautham Buddha was completely against a traditional religion and preached his followers about finding a real and true path of enlightenment through self-efforts. According to Buddhism, the condition of human existence is of supreme nature. A man is a master unto himself; no person or power can decide his future. Buddha told his followers to be their own protectors and not to search for one anywhere else. He advocated that a true religion was the one without any controls, rituals, God, scriptures, traditions and supernatural elements. Hence the establishment of the sangha's of the bhikshus. Buddha believed that since the sangha's were a commune where people of different classes convened, different opinions and thoughts would be exchanged here.

So, he gave a set of rules for the discipline at a sangha and asked each member to aim at a goal to be achieved by him.

Buddha's greatness lies in not the ideological foundation he gave to his new found religion but in achieving a total social reformation through it. He taught his followers that human beings were one beyond all the barriers of class, caste and gender. He was among the earliest to identify the uniqueness of women power that had been long subjugated under male domination and he declared that male and female was only a physical differentiation, we were all one fundamentally. He was a great philosopher who gave entry to women in the sangha's and invited everyone to the folds of spirituality and faith by establishing social justice, equality for women and freedom of expression.

Twelfth century is an important milestone in the history of Karnataka. It was the time of tremendous changes in social and literary spheres and a period of great achievements in spirituality. Basavanna is first among the thinkers who wanted to bring religious, social, educational, economic and political reformation in the land through non-violence. He gave us a new set of values to look at everyone in the society equally. His amazing teaching which wished well for everyone, treated the poor in par with the rich and gave the same rights to women as the men has remained ideal to the day. His urge to bring about a socio-religious and economic transformation based on the dignity of labour made him to adopt a new way of literature which could bring him closer to the masses. This paved the way for women and the Dalits to make an entry to the folds of literature which was highly improbable until then.

Basavanna wanted to build a harmonious society whose foundation was an all-encompassing equality. So, the '*anubhava mantapa*' was established. *anubhava mantapa* is not a building of four walls or pillars. The *vachanakaras* have always opposed *sthavaras* or any stagnant structures. So, the *anubhava mantapa* is not a structure, it is the primary driving force of a community of human beings. It was the first voice to end the royal power, the first creative media which broadcasted the common man's experiences through *vachanas* and the powerhouse of values which built a strong heritage to the cultural traditions of this country while continuously rejecting them. It was also the first organized attempt at a rebellion by the exploited against ages of exploitation. Basavanna's *anubhava mantapa* and Bhagavan Buddha's *bhikshu sangha* convey us the idea of society being above the individual. While Basavanna wanted a democratic exchange of ideas among all *vachanakaras* at the *anubhava mantapa*, Buddha gave the sangha or the community a place above the religion by saying '*sangham sharanam gachchami*' along with

'*Buddham sharanam gachchami, dharmam sharanam gachchami*'.

A quote in Pali of Buddha tells us the importance of sangha:

*Suppabuddham pabujani*

*sada gothama saavakaa*

*yesam divacha ratthocha*

*nichcham sangmagatha gati*

(Meaning: "The disciples of Bhagavan Buddha who practice *sanghyanusyathi* (**meditative praising** of sangha) are always in an enlightened bliss." People who are blissful usually lack awareness. So, they face a lot of problems. But the members of a bikku sangha are always in a state of awareness. One individual may stay careless, but not everyone. This is why a sangha becomes important.)

'Vinayapitaka' is a part of ancient samhitas of Buddhism. 'Patimokkha' (Prathimoksha) is also a part of it. Scholars opine that the rules of 'Patimokkha' must have been formulated during the time of Buddha himself. It contains 227 rules and it is the guide for practices of a bikku. These rules would be recited during the fortnightly gatherings of uposa (upavastha) on the new moon day and the full moon day. 'Patimokkha' is included in the *suttavibhanga* of 'Vinayapitaka' mentioned above. 'Mahavibhanga' and 'Bikkunevibhanga' are the guiding samhitas for the bikku and bikkunis, respectively. These are nothing but the continuations of 'Khandaka' (Skandaka) and 'Suttavibhaga'. 'Mahavagga' includes the 'vassavasa' (varshavasa) and 'upopatha' which are the rules to join a sangha in ten parts and the 'paravana' festival celebrated at the end of the 'vassavasa'. Both the 'thera' and 'theri' are the members of this sangha. 'Thera' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'sthavira'. The Buddhist bikkus are called 'thera' and the bikkunis are called 'theri'. The latter also means a senior nun. 'Buddha Tripitaka' says that those who have surrendered to Buddha and completed ten years of monastic life were called 'thera' and 'theri'. Buddha considered women as suitable as men to acquire the Bodhi.

Indian society has always maintained huge gaps between men and women since ancient times. Buddha knew that anyone trying to bridge the gap would face serious consequences. So he banned the initiation of women into the sanghas during the early days. But when his foster mother herself forced him to be initiated, he could not refuse. He could neither refuse the requests of other women once he had allowed her into the sangha. 'Therigatha,' the Buddhist scripture, makes a mention of this incident. Women of all classes were allowed the rights to hold rituals in the sangha. The sangha of Buddha had 500 bikkunis. Among them were queens, prostitutes, untouchables,

tradeswomen etc. who came from various strata of society. Buddha did not limit himself to being sympathetic towards the cause of women; he gave them equal religious rights. Hence the women of his time could achieve a complete personality development and realize their true potential. He rejected the gender inequality by declaring that women are as able as men to reach nirvana. He taught bikkunis that even women could attain nirvana within their life time by restraint on thoughts and by leading a virtuous life.

The teachings of Buddha instilled a feeling of freedom in the hearts of women and they started participating in religious ceremonies. They utilized their freedom and power for the betterment of society. 'Therigatha' mentions 32 women who attained nirvana, out of which 10 were married. Among them were three women named Shubha, Anupama and Sumedha who belonged to the affluent and royal families. Majority of the women remained spinsters throughout their lives and were called bikkunis. Those who did the work of dharma by staying within their families were called *upasikas*. Buddha teaches that a woman must lead a virtuous life with a good moral character. He believes that a woman's personality is not seen in her physical beauty and wealth; she must be beautiful by her character and behavior. He considered virtuous women worthy of worship, and respected women in general while giving extreme importance to morality. On couples who were members of the sangha, Buddha said that "Both of them must be equally devoted, of the same good character, of the same renouncing mind and of the same consciousness". The woman of Buddha's times had complete rights over her earnings and property. Bhadra Kapina, a married woman, who entered the folds of Buddha's sangha had fully distributed her wealth among her relatives before she became a bikkuni. A spinster named Sundari became a bikkuni in spite of her father trying to coerce her out of her decision with the rights to his complete property and also her mother's insistence to enjoy it. So we can be sure about women's right to property during Buddha's times. 'Therigatha' mentions a widow named Dhammadinna who inherits her deceased husband's property.

### III. BASAVANNA'S VIEW ON WOMEN

Basavanna took a revolutionary step when he proclaimed the equality of men and women in a society which took the *manusmruthi* that said 'na stree swatantrya marhati' (no woman has a right to freedom) as the single authority to establish male domination. Basavanna severely opposed all forms of gender discrimination and he advocated the necessity of religious and social freedom for women. He gave them the right to wear *linga* and worship

Shiva in par with men. He allowed them to freely deliberate on religious issues at an equal level with men at the *anubhava mantapa*. He was of the opinion that gender didn't matter when it came to worship of Shiva, physical labour, *linga deeksha* and the sharing of one's earnings. This allowed the women to get social respect through freedom of work and education while their lives were limited to four walls until then. He was so broad minded that he stopped the restrictions and humiliations imposed on women for biological events like menstruation and child birth. He also allowed the widows, forsaken women, slaves and prostitutes, who suffered punishment for no reason of their own, to enter the bonds of marriage and attain respect in the society. This was a highly revolutionary thought during those times which led to tremendous changes in the society.

By giving the *linga deeksha* to women, Basavanna proved that they were in no way inferior to men in spiritual matters. The *vachanakaras* were the first to reject gender discrimination. Basavanna adopted economic freedom, social equality and emancipation of women as a part of his struggle which he believed would make freedom of religion meaningful. When subjugation of women threatened human existence, he rejected all the existing values of the time to bring in new values that could uphold the dignity of human life. Basavanna was a great humanist, not a mere *sharana* or a philosopher. He gave spiritual greatness to the freedom of women by allowing them into *anubhava mantapa*. He gave rights to physical labour or *kayaka* for women like Aydakki Lakkamma, Aamuge Rayamma, Kalavve, Pittavve, Soole Sankavva, Remavve, Nimbavve, Molige Mahadevi, Goggavve, Neelambika, Gangambike, Lingamma and Akkamahadevi. By this, he could prove that a woman need not be a dependent individual and she, who was caught up in the currents of earthly life, could reach the heavens of spirituality. He was of the firm belief that if women could achieve equality through economic independence, then it would lead to cultural and social transformations. So, his insistence on physical labour and the sharing of earnings with all. One of the *vachanas* says:

"Nimbiyavva, my mother, earns her bread by watering

Chennayyaraya, my father, puts up the saddle

All are one and the same to me

My sister cooks in a bronze vessel

My lord, what I give in thy hands

Is the devotion of my ancestors".

The *sharanas* gave a high importance to the freedom of expression. Hence the female members of the group could freely present their ideas during any discussions in the *anubhava mantapa*. One of the most

interesting factors about this commune was that it included many married couples; some of the examples include the *vachanakaras* like Lakkamma-Marayya, Kalavve-Urilinga Peddi, Rayamma-Amugidevayya, Lingamma-Appanna, Edemathada Nagi Devayya-Masanamma, Haradara Machayya-Gangamma, Gondemanchanna-Lakshmamma, Gundayya-Kethaladevi, Kalakutayya-Rechavve etc. Similarly, plenty of examples exist of those couples who were provided with an opportunity for spiritual work together. Commenting on such spiritual companionship, the *vachanakaras* like Dasimayya said “Shiva is pleased with the devotion from the union of man and wife” and Basavanna praised them by saying “Live in love and trust like Dasa-Duggale and Siriyala-Changale”.

The following *vachana* would suffice to show us how the *vachanakaras* look upon women:

“A desire hidden inside the stomach was like fire

Like the sweetness of essence inside a stalk

Like the fragrance inside a bud

Love of my lord was like the attachment of a virgin”

It is important to note here that Basavanna saw his lord in the companionship of a virgin. The greatness of *sharanas*’ point of view and their humane concern can be seen in them making the women central to all religious practices which were forbidden to them earlier.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Women were able to attain new heights in the society due to the economic freedom and freedom of expression granted by Buddha. Bikkunis like Amrapali, Sujatha and Kisagothami thank Buddha for allowing women into the *sangha*. Similarly, Akkamahadevi says “Basavanna is my guide” and Mukhtayakka says “Basavanna is the master of all my feelings.” Kadire Remavva tells us “Basavanna is my all-encompassing entity,” and Punyastree Sankavve, the wife of Ganesha Masanayya, puts forward her words with great devotion while she lets us know that “Basavanna became my master by becoming my master’s master”.

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