

Women Empowerment in Buddhism: An Anthropological Encounter with Three Buddhist Women Monastics

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ABSTRACT: The present paper sheds light on the existing discourses of women empowerment in Buddhism by interpreting narratives of three Buddhist women monastics who are also world-renowned religious leaders in three different traditions of Buddhism: the *Mahayana*/Tibetan tradition, the *Theravada*/or the *Ajahn* Sumedho tradition and the *Navyana* /Ambedkarite tradition of Buddhism. The paper addresses the following questions: What is the relevance of women religious leadership in Buddhism? How do women religious leaders contribute to the phenomenon of women empowerment in Buddhism? Why is it necessary for Buddhist women in India to seek inspiration from lives of these 'western' women religious leaders? Findings reveal that existing discourses of women empowerment in Buddhism revolve around challenging notions of 'religious patriarchy' as Buddhist women resist the label of 'the subaltern'. Buddhist women leaders take up religious roles, challenging the hegemonic wrath, discrimination and marginalization which they encounter in the institutional spheres of Buddhism. With a Buddhist economy biased towards the male monastics, seeking inspiration from lives of these women religious leaders is important for the Buddhist women in India.

INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment in Buddhism is a contentious issue. In the present study I attempt to shed some light on the existing discourses of women's marginalization in Buddhism by interpreting the narrative voices of three world-renowned Buddhist Nuns who are also women monastics and religious leaders in three different traditions of Buddhism: the *Mahayana*/Tibetan tradition, the *Theravada*/ The Thai Forest monastic or the *Ajahn* Sumedho tradition and the *Navyana*/Ambedkarite or the *Navyana* tradition of Buddhism. Just like any other religions of the world have their own mythical, scriptural, and theological basis for either refuting or promoting

gender equality in their institutional spheres, Buddhism also engages in a debatable status of women in Buddhism, however, recently leaders of many Buddhist organizations, Buddhist new religious movements, Buddhist institutions have strongly critiqued Buddhism's patriarchal ideologies that have promoted marginalization of women in its institutional spheres and support the phenomenon of women religious leadership in Buddhism.

Feminist Buddhology scholars suggest that the issue of women empowerment in Buddhism must be discussed under the umbrella domain of 'gender and religion' rather than 'religion and gender' as the former perspective allows researchers to organically situate the elements of gender biasness and exploitative hierarchical structures that support religious

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patriarchy. On the contrary, the domain of 'religion and gender' encourages the valorization of women under the assumption that all world religions have an ethical basis of gender equity. As an anthropologist, I believe that the 'presentation' and re-presentation of the claims, stakes, and needs of the Buddhist women must be understood irrespective of any disciplinary boundaries.

In the present paper, I reflect upon the contemporary discourses of women empowerment in Buddhism by addressing the following questions: What is the relevance of women religious leadership in Buddhism? How do women religious leaders contribute to the empowerment of Buddhist women in India? Why is it necessary for Buddhist women in India to seek inspiration from lives of these women leaders to build up solidarity groups?

IDEOLOGICAL STANCES AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

I attempt to understand the marginalization of Buddhist women in light of 'the core-margin' debates in gender and anthropology and I also reflect upon a few significant ideas on women religious leadership as suggested by religion scholars. The core-margin categories can be interpreted in terms of binaries: central vs. peripheral, dominant vs. submissive, culture vs nature, men vs women. According, to the feminist scholar Spivak (1979), the core-margin categories must not be treated as binaries that must be reversed or collapsed but as binaries that must be displaced; a premise that seeks its inspiration from Derrida's deconstructionist approach. To justify my point, I must mention here how Spivak in her essay "Explanations and culture: marginalia" recalls her experiences of her participation in a symposium titled "explanation and culture" that was held at Southern California at centre of humanities in 1979. She remembers how she speaks of her marginality at a public session, where masculinist centrism was evident, she quotes:

"While pointing attention to Feminist marginality, as I have been attempting, not to win for ourselves, but to point at the irreducibility of margins in all explanations. That would not merely replace but displace the distinction between margin and centre. But in effect such pure innocence is not

possible (pushing all guilt to the margins) and paradoxically would put the very law of displacement and irreversibility into question. The only way I can hope to suggest how the centre itself is marginal is by not remaining outside in the margin and pointing my accusing finger at the centre. I might do it rather by implicating myself in the centre and seeing what politics makes it marginal. Since one's vote is at the limit for oneself, (assuming that one I am at my own disposal) the de-constructivist can use herself as a shuttle between the centre (inside) and the margin (outside) and thus narrate a displacement" (Spivak, 1979)

Hooks (1984) remembering the third wave of feminism writes her classic work "Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre" where she emphasises upon exploring intersectionality of variables of gender, ethnicity, race, class, nationality and religion while exploring the problem of women. Remembering the Feminine mystique, she states that the problem of women is a silent problem ready to be revolutionized in the form of a movement anytime.

According to Tsing (1994), "margins could be geographical, descriptive locations. Margins could be sites of deviance from social norms. Margins can even be zones of unpredictability that are at the edges of discursive stability where contradictory discourses overlap or where discrepant kind of meaning making converges. A margin can even be interpreted as a liminal zone of separation that can segregate the local from the global, exclusion from empowerment, oppression and emancipation".

Marginalisation of women in Buddhism must be dealt as a contentious issue considering the fact that the cultural authority of women remains unrepresented or misrepresented in the religious sphere of Buddhism. The scriptures, inscriptions, texts, and biographies that allow women some authentic representation of women in Buddhism or Buddhist women are insufficient as they are dissected with interpolations that promote patriarchal ideologies reducing the voices of women to qualify as mere vocal aesthetics of religion.

Feminist scholar of religion Antoinette E. Denapoli in an interview dated 20.03.2021 suggests, "while studying the lives of women one should prefer to drop the post-colonial labels of the sub-altern

(considering decolonising and transnational narratives of feminism. Labels draw our eyes to see in a particular way, while eliminating other ways of seeing. In the West, there is still a dominant assumption of women's powerlessness in Asia and South Asia. To use the label sub-altern I feel assigns the attribute of powerlessness to women's lives and automatically assumes women don't have it and then shows how they are disabused of power or how they create power. The challenge is to understand women's relationships through multiple discourses and practices leaving the label of the subaltern behind. In this light the question 'Should women be clubbed in the category of the sub-alterns?' becomes an important question to be answered". There runs a myth that the sub-altern can't speak for themselves because the moment they speak their identity ceases, in the case of Buddhist women this myth is breaking down as many Buddhist nuns are coming up with their monographs and autobiographies indicating that their voices have power, they can speak as well as be heard.

With reference to women religious leadership in Buddhism the voices of women constitute the voice of the sacred feminine that is intuitive, creative, robust and resilient. If any knowledge system ignores the power narratives of the sacred feminine, it may reduce the value of its cultural discourses. Many of these women religious leaders in Buddhism are Buddhist nuns who have had difficult trajectories in life but they are women of strength and convictions. According to Sharma (1977), sociologically the relative theory of deprivation may be one possible explanation as to why a woman becomes a Buddhist nun. He highlights that a woman could become a nun either by being influenced by Buddhism or by being motivated to escape the drudgeries of their deprived life. He also emphasizes that a woman can become a lay-devotee first and then a Buddhist nun or she could directly become a Buddhist nun.

Sponbergh (1992) has highlighted the four attitudes/barriers associated with Buddhist nuns, that of soteriological barriers, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny, and stereological androgyny. Soteriological barriers indicate that gender prevents no barrier in the liberation goal from suffering. Institutional androcentrism emphasizes that women

may pursue a religious career but on the condition of maintenance of institutional standards that support male authority and female subordination. Ascetic misogyny regards women as a threat to male celibacy and therefore condemns them. Soteriological androgyny regards that the attitude of the feminine is full of indispensable qualities leading to the revalorization of the women practitioners. Bartholomeusz (1994), an esteemed scholar of religion believes that her work on Buddhist nuns of Sri Lanka is very anthropological in nature. She has attempted relating to Protestant Buddhism (Buddhism against the British in general and the Christian missionaries) in relation to the resurgence of the Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. According to anthropologist Gutschow (2004), "The history and practice of monasticism must be rewritten to include both nuns and monks. Taking women seriously as an analytic category means far more than adding a few nuns in the historic record. It requires re-analyzing the historical record and the central role of Buddhist practices that have excluded or subordinated women". Feminist Scholars like Rita M. Gross and others choose to believe in non-dualistic philosophy while positioning women, emphasizing on soteriological inclusiveness (as recognized by Alan Sponberg). Scholar Byrne (2012) critiques this stance stating that Buddhist Feminists fail to see the dichotomy that exists between men and women based on dualities of the sacred or the profane, the conventional (socio-temporal/horizontal scale) and the ultimate (religious or transcendental/vertical scale) that positions women on the profane and conventional side rather than on the opposite side and discriminates the women from the men. In her article 'Why I am not a Buddhist Feminist', she questions the interweaving of Buddhist and Feminist thought by asking that how can Buddhism be Feminism and Feminism be Buddhism when sexism is evident in Buddhism structurally, textually and its practice is backed up dualistic thought. Byrne (2012) concludes that probably the non-duality in Buddhism emphasizes interconnectedness where women have the advantage to define themselves freely and traverse through representational politics. She feels if this interconnectedness is transformed into the lived experiences of nuns where they are not differentiated from men then it serves the real purpose. Salgado (2013), a renowned scholar of religion explores women

in Buddhism and explores renunciant identity of Buddhist women and states that her book discusses theoretical questions such as those of 'empowerment', 'agency', 'autonomy', 'freedom' and 'resistance' as translated in the lives of the Buddhist nuns. The book also discusses the politics of representation of the lives of the Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. Gross (2018) in one of her latest books stated that clinging to gender identities and roles may dismantle goals of enlightenment. This stance however has been critiqued considering the discrimination that Buddhist women face at the experiential levels. Tsomo (2020) suggests that there is still a long way left for Buddhist women to achieve gender equity. In her opinion women nuns have to face religiously sanctioned and gender-based power differential disadvantages that set stage for injustices. Women religious leaders can come forward to help Buddhist women to express their idea of gender equality and by doing this a powerhouse of human resources can be unleashed.

METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

Choosing Respondents and Analysing Narratives

I believe that ethnographers are also story tellers and story seekers, searching for and conveying narrative arcs in real life settings. Secondary data on women and Buddhism suggests that there are very few ethnographies attempted on the lives of Buddhist nuns, almost none by any Indian anthropologist. In the regular course, Buddhist monasteries and nunneries do not entertain academic researchers; according to Tsomo (2020), a professor of religious studies, a Buddhist nun herself, there have been earlier instances where academic researchers have conducted studies, published their books or produced their documentaries but have never come back to the nunneries to exhibit their work to the resident nuns. Moreover, monastic authorities believe that entry of researchers and academicians might disrupt the code of conduct, monastic protocols and the regular schedule of the nuns in nunneries. Also, most of the monasteries and nunneries for Buddhist women are located in remote geographical terrains of Himalayas which are accessible only for a few specific months of the year and also remain inaccessible for re-studies

or revisits for the purpose of a longitudinal study. In the present study, I was able to collect empirical data by meeting and interacting with the three Buddhist nuns in person at various retreat centers in Delhi, India and also through social media platforms.

As an anthropologist, I believe that the experiences of Buddhist nuns quite often remain hidden behind four walls of the monastic set ups, they only get an audience when these woman monastics decide to engage with the public audiences during retreats or workshops. For the purpose of the present research study, I was fortunate to arrange my meetings with three world-renowned Buddhist religious leaders in three different field settings on three different occasions. My first respondent was Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo (an American Buddhist nun ordained in the Tibetan tradition) who is also the leader of the Jamyang Foundation and the Head of Sakyadhita International world's only organization of Buddhist women. I arranged a meeting with her at the Tushita Mahayana Center, Delhi in January 2019. My second respondent was *Ajahn* Sunadara (a French born Buddhist siladhara in the tradition established by *Ajahn* Sumedho ordained in the Thai Forest monastic tradition) heading the Amravati Monastery in England. I was fortunate to interact with her at Aranya Vihara retreat center in Delhi, December 2018. My third respondent was *Ayya* Yeshe (an Australian national ordained in the Tibetan tradition but a believer of the Ambedkarite philosophy of Buddhism), whom I interviewed through a social media platform in 2022. I am glad that I could have intense deep conversations with all these three nuns, exploring their views on women empowerment in Buddhism.

Narrative analysis: I used narrative analysis as a method to collect and analyze response. In linguistics, narrative was one of the first discourse genres to be analyzed, and it has continued to be among the most intensively studied. Narratives, from the Latin word *narre* — to make known, to convey information. In narrative analysis, narrative as a genre has become a central concern in discourse analysis. In global world new discourses are emerging. Theorizing narrative as a discursive strategy becomes important. In context of my study, I rely upon the narratives of Buddhist nuns, as these nuns have had

different life histories and experiences which get reflected through their views, perspectives and voices. The nuns represent various religious traditions, so the narratives hold diversity. As the nuns are religious leaders, their position allows them to build up contemporary and future discourses of women empowerment in Buddhism.

FINDINGS

Given below is a brief summary of the responses I received as I collected as narratives while interacting with the three Buddhist women leaders/ woman monastics who represent three different traditions of Buddhism:

Venerable Karma LeksheTsono: Empowerment of Himalayan Nuns and Tibetan Nuns

I met Venerable Karma LeksheTsono (an 'American' Buddhist nun cum professor of religious studies) in the month of January 2019. The meeting was planned after seeking a prior appointment with her over an e-mail conversation while she was enroute to India. Ven. Karma LeksheTsono leads the Sakyadhita International, world's largest organization for Buddhist women in the world. She is also the director of the Jamyang foundation that champions the rights of the Tibetan Buddhist Nuns across the world. Ven.Tsono is also a specialist in Buddhist studies, she is a professor and an activist. She has taught in the USA since 2000 offering classes on Buddhist thought and culture, world religions, comparative religions, comparative religious ethics, religious and political identities, and religious diversity in India.

Ven.Tsono was supposed to administer a small talk and a meditative session to the members of Tushita Mahayana Centre, a Tibetan Buddhist center in Delhi, India on the 29.01.2019. I had registered myself for the one-day retreat program so that I could attend her meditation session on the theme of 'Bio-ethics of death'. After the meditation session ended, I got the opportunity to have an exclusive conversation with her for an hour. She was glad to know that I was an anthropologist interested in lives of Buddhist nuns of India. She promised to offer me all the support I needed to explore the cause of women empowerment in Buddhism.

I shared my concerns about the precarity that exists in the life struggles of Buddhist nuns in India. I asked her the following questions: why do women hold a secondary position in Buddhism? What differentiates a 'Buddhist woman' from a 'woman Buddhists?' What are the challenges which Buddhist nuns face in everyday life? What is the scope of religious leadership in Buddhism, in the Indian context?

Ven.Tsono suggested that my questions were genuine and rational and were much relevant to understand the present status of women empowerment in Buddhism, especially pertaining to the status of Buddhist nuns in the Indian context. According to her, "*many Tibetan women had stopped opting to become Buddhist nuns in Himalayan nunneries considering the struggles involved in living the life of a Buddhist nun. Instead, most of the Himalayan Buddhist nuns came from poor Hindu families, with uncertain future. Young women joined the Himalayan nunneries as nunnery life guaranteed them educational opportunities. With the help from monastic authorities and volunteers support, they are able to cope up with the basic needs*".

Ven.Tsono was hopeful that in present day contexts, many Buddhist nuns were coming forward to opt for religious leadership position to exercise their agency to challenge the hierarchy, power and authority established by male monastics in institutional realms of religion. They are interested in pursuing higher educational degrees so that they can stand at par with the male monastics and also could voice their opinion about their potential to attain Buddhahood, educate themselves and work for emancipation of other 'women Buddhists' by engaging in community service and obtaining a distinct identity for themselves: that of the 'Buddhist Women'.

Ven.Tsono mentioned, "*Jamyang Foundation is the only organization in India that dedicates itself towards the cause of the Himalayan Buddhist nuns, offering them education and life skills for their empowerment. As most of the Buddhist nunneries in India are located on high altitude mountainous terrains of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Ladakh etc., these nunneries remain inaccessible during the winters. Therefore, during winter season a set of nuns come to*

visit the Sanghamitra Institute at Bodh Gaya, Bihar”.

The Buddhist economy of these Himalayan nunneries is biased towards the Buddhist monks and this adds to the struggle of the nuns. From ordination possibilities to leadership roles, Buddhist women face a huge struggle to survive and sustain in difficult terrains.

Ven. Tsomo suggested “*the cause of women representation in Buddhism requires interest of young researchers to work as leaders to promote the cause of women in Buddhism*” Ven. Tsomo told me that she was one of the first - generation American women to have come to India and get ordained as a Buddhist nun in the Tibetan tradition. She mentioned that “*Buddhism at one time witnessed the rise of accidental leaders (usually the western converts) who indeed worked relentlessly after which the vulnerable condition of women in Buddhism as they struggled through their own basic needs*”. In her opinion, “*in contemporary times the rise of such accidental leaders is rare in Buddhism and therefore there is a need of leaders who hold a vision for the empowerment of Buddhist women in India, women who hold a strong conviction in the scope of women leadership in Buddhism*”.

Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo is a true champion of the rights of Buddhist women. She, believes that the voice of Buddhist women must be heard and Buddhist women should get representation and connections at global level. Her efforts in this direction can be interpreted through the numerous books and articles that she has written over the span of more than two decades. Very recently i.e., in the year 2020 she has come up with her remarkable book ‘Women in Buddhist Traditions’ (Tsomo, 2020) where she gives detailed account of the women in different world traditions of Buddhism (both in the east and the west), and also mentions about Buddhist women’s revolutionary movements and their social activism. My conversation with Ven. Tsomo ended with a note of hope that very soon I might be able get an opportunity to work as a volunteer in one of the Buddhist nunneries of India that would also give an opportunity to plant roots of my ethnographic study in a nunnery set up.

Ajahn Sunadara: Narratives of Empowerment of

Urban Buddhist Women in India

I met Ajahn Sunadara in the month of December

2018, during a small Buddhist retreat workshop at a small *Dhamma* centre in Delhi. The retreat was a silent meditation retreat (22-29 December 2018) and was led by three English Buddhist Nuns belonging to the *Ajahn Sumedho* tradition of Buddhism). *Ajahn Sunadara* is a French Buddhist nun who guides and supports a Buddhist community of nuns for last 20 years. In 1979, she joined the monastic community of Chithurst monastery where she was ordained as one of the first four women novice. In 1983, she was given the *Siladhara* (the ten precepts) by *Ajahn Sumedho*. She lives at the Amaravati Monastery in England. She was here in India, at the Aranya Vihara Trust, Delhi to administer a one-week retreat. The retreat had a rigorous schedule where participants were given an insight into mindfulness and meditation, including walking meditation.

At the end of the retreat, the women participants were given an exclusive communication session with *Ajahn* where they could address their questions and doubts to the nuns. Most of the questions of these women revolved around their dilemmas of realizing their spiritual cum religious identity as ‘women’ who were concerned about how to parallelly pursue a spiritual path alongside work-life balance or family responsibilities. They doubted the nature of their mindfulness practice as they felt they were lay practitioners trapped in material aspects of life and could not practice meditation in all its essence. A few women were inquisitive to know about the possibilities of ordination of women in monasteries in England. Women also had questions relating to problems such as anger and temper issues which prevented them to experience mindfulness in their everyday life, their ability to meditate with focus, and their aspiration to become good Buddhists.

Ajahn conveyed: “*monastic life undoubtedly offered a clear unrestricted path of merit accumulation where spiritual seekers could dedicate their total time in meditating and contemplating on Buddhist mindfulness techniques, but in her opinion monastic life was not the only authentic path towards ‘being or becoming a Buddhist’*”. In her opinion “*women who have responsibilities in material life can practice compassion, loving kindness, meditation in their everyday life activities and patiently overcome everyday challenge through*

techniques of mindfulness. In her view, women's identity is not determined by their role and rank but by transformation of their inner heart and mind taking steps towards fearlessness, wisdom, gratitude, and the Buddha Dharma". She suggested "that womanhood should never be defined by a woman's marriage, her ability of procreation or the power of their womb. According to Ajahn, women empowerment meant contributing to the Buddha Dharma and believing in such values and convictions that bring peace and happiness in the world".

The nuns agreed that life at the nunnery was not easy. They shared their personal experiences full of initial struggles in the nunnery. There were rules and regulations that the nuns needed to rigorously follow within monastic set ups but most importantly, the nuns had to share a common residential space in the nunnery with other nuns of different regions and cultures. Initially, as *sangha* members, they experienced culture shock in the nunnery but later it helped them to grow beyond their comfort zones and appreciate differences. Conflict of interest, hierarchical structures and the monotony of nunnery life often came as challenges. As a participant observer, I could sense how young and old Indian women in the audience could connect with the Buddhist nuns with shaven heads and dark contemplative brown robes. The nuns exhibited immense power as they sat silently for endless hours inspiring the audience to practice patience, discipline, devotion, conviction and loving kindness.

After the retreat ended, I somehow managed to get a chance to meet the *Ajahn* personally and address my concerns to her regarding ordination opportunities of women in monasteries/nunneries in England. *Ajahn* replied that once a woman sets in a Buddhist nunnery, she is not allowed to maintain any long-term connections with family members in the outside world, she also mentioned *"it is not necessary to be a celibate in order to be a Buddhist nun, a women could be a married woman but still ordain on the condition that once she is ordained she would not be allowed to be in relationship with their husband again, at least as long as they stayed in the nunnery"*. The nuns also told me that the Buddhist monasteries and nunneries nowadays have started opening their doors for the lay practitioners where they can stay as

guests for few days and engage in monastic life helping the Buddhist nuns and monks in running the day-to-day affairs of the monastery. Through this practice, the lay practitioners can learn how the monastics practice *metta* (a healing force) in their day-to-day life and also learn the skill of meditation through them. The *Ajahn* stated: *"Indian women are very vocal about their emotions and concerns and are very open in sharing their problems which was quite in contrast to the behavior of the English women who hesitated sharing their personal and family problems to the nuns in similar retreat sessions"*. *Ajahn* hinted that *"Indian women seemed quite empowered already at least in this context"*. *Ajahn* also indicated that *"the monasteries in England open their door for volunteer service where those interested in knowing deep about monastic life can experience monastic life by interacting with monks and nuns, serving them as volunteers and judge for themselves if they really wished to enter the monastery as a monk or a nun"*. Our dialogue ended with a warm note from *Ajahn* where she extended a warm invitation to her nunnery.

Ayya Yeshe: Narratives of Empowerment of the Dalit Buddhist Women

I contacted Ayya Yeshe, an Australian Buddhist nun through a social media platform where she actively engages in dialogues. Her biography suggests that she began her religious careers as a member of the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism but later became critic of it as she saw its hegemonic aspects privileging the men over women and the Tibetan nuns over 'white' nuns (the western women convertees). In order to experience a practical version of engaged Buddhism challenging all religious dogmas, she chose to establish her own monastery for Australian Buddhist nuns and also owns a non-governmental organization 'The Bodhichitta Foundation' in India that makes her presence visible through social media platforms like Facebook where she gives young scholars like us a place to interact. She states, *"For female monks especially the fully ordained ones, the situation is so bad as to be perilous. Everywhere, they are struggling to survive: to find support and training, to get their voices heard and to occupy the space Buddha gave them as counterparts to the*

monks” (Yeshe, 2017). In her opinion, “*Dharma can only prosper if resources of Tibetan Buddhism are shared among the western nuns and Tibetan nuns equally, overcoming the shackles of patriarchy and hegemony of the male dominated monastic world*”. Ayya Yeshe now runs her own institute ‘The Bodhichitta Foundation’ at Nagpur, Maharashtra, India to promote engaged Buddhist practices among the underprivileged communities that includes the Dalit families (especially the women and children). Ayya Yeshe also believes in empowering more women as leaders in Buddhism. It is needless to state that The Bodhichitta Foundation at Nagpur, India draws its inspiration from the philosophies and teachings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar that question the social maladies of casteism, poverty, human rights violation etc. Ayya Yeshe is quite active on social media platforms where she posts about her efforts to build a monastery exclusive for Buddhist nuns in Australia. Her social activism has made her a visible face of new age Buddhist nuns who break all shackles and come out courageously to voice the concerns of marginalized women.

Ayya Yeshe states, “*Buddhism in India is patriarchal and divided*”. According to her “*there are so many Buddhist caves in Maharashtra that have been neglected, forgotten or appropriated by Hindus. There is rich history of Buddhism. There also remains unanswered question of the true reasons Buddhism disappeared in India*”. She suggested me saying “*the relationships between Ambedkar’s women must be explored as they exemplify the real compassion of Buddhism and help address the unjust economic and social gaps in India*”. Our conversation ended exchanging warmth and promises that someday we would together be sharing a common platform to discuss and deliberate the cause of women empowerment in India.

DISCUSSIONS

The data available in form of short biographies of these Buddhist nuns and their personal narratives was analysed and interpreted in light of three concerns: the marginalisation of women, the cause of their representation of women in Buddhism and the phenomenon of women religious leadership in Buddhism. I, accordingly address each of the concern

in my discussions.

Marginalisation of Women in Buddhism

The Buddhist monastic women in the Tibetan tradition usually reside in geographically remote corners of the country, in isolated nunneries struggling for their everyday basic needs which includes food, clothing and shelter problems. The Buddhist economy is biased towards the male monks. \$1 a day is the minimum donation the Himalayan Buddhist nuns at monasteries receive as their per day budget. Ordination possibilities for women in Buddhism are difficult and educational opportunities are few. The best educational institutions are dominated by the monk scholars; the best libraries rarely have any women authored books. Renunciations of male monks are seen as signs of merit and rights but for women it seems as a sign of weakness and vulnerability. Among western converts, the white Buddhist women are condemned by the Tibetan counterparts. In case of Neo-Buddhist nuns of India, the backward caste or the Dalit identity question hits them hard adding layers to the vulnerability of these nuns. What adds to the agony of the women Buddhist in Indian context is that there is no common platform where Buddhist women come together to share their concerns of marginalisation of women in Buddhism.

In opinion of the Buddhist nuns, ‘representation’ of women in Buddhism is very significant as Buddhist traditions across the world vary in terms of the opportunities and experiences, they can offer to the Buddhist nuns and the Buddhist lay women. Buddhism seems to be an egalitarian religion with no male god idea but the inherent egalitarianism in it is deceiving. Buddhism has hierarchical arrangements in its institutional realms, and these hierarchical arrangements privilege the men in the group reducing women to second class citizens, sometimes to the level of even exploiting them and silencing their voices. It has been noted that all Buddhist traditions speak of the marginalisation of women and simultaneously create a space for women religious leaders to emerge and speak on behalf of their community. In the Tibetan Buddhism tradition, the idea of any Buddhist nun leading a lineage is laughed upon by male Tibetan Buddhists, it is something beyond imagination considering the fact that in the

Tibetan tradition, the lineage legacy of his Holiness the Dalai Lama must be maintained, still women religious leaders are taking up important positions as educators and mentors. Even in the Thai Forest Monastic tradition, only the male monks with shaven heads were allowed to set out for alms begging as forest pilgrimage, and meditation had its own challenges and it was assumed that women were unsuitable for it as they were physically docile. In present day contexts such assumptions are meaningless, the nuns are free to travel anywhere in the world for administering retreats as long as they exercise their freedom within the hierarchical set ups of monastic life. It is difficult to ignore the power of women in robes and shaven head. In the *Navyana* or the Ambedkarite tradition of Buddhism the Hindu Dalit women, the women of backward castes and classes, worship Baba Saheb Ambedkar, once again reducing egalitarian practices of Buddhism to idolatry and rituals, however claiming equality in society.

Representation of Women in Buddhism

As an anthropologist, I believe that the cause of representation of Buddhist women (especially women monastics) as religious leaders is strongly related to their 'identity politics' and to substantiate this conjecture 'an authentic' representation of their narratives is needed. The present study is a small attempt in the same direction. An authentic representation means that anthropologists should focus on life experiences of the Buddhist nuns rather than simply analyzing their narratives through presumed categories, categories that carry western bias and gender bias. Also, contemporary forces of social change must be taken in account while elaborating on changing life contexts of the nuns. New set of questions must emerge. How do Buddhist nuns connect to the world through 'engaged Buddhism' practices? Do women in Buddhism need social media platforms for their representation? How do Buddhist women in remote connect to one another? It must be noted that until few years back ordination and renunciation of women were believed to be choices of the weak and the vulnerable women. The new age Buddhist women leaders are defying this stereotype and creating new standards of women empowerment where women choose a Buddhist

identity for themselves, committing their life for the emancipation of vulnerable women in society, thereby building a strong women force in Buddhism.

Phenomenon of Religious Leadership in Buddhism

Buddhist monastics go beyond religion to choose 'secular ethics' over 'Buddhist Ethics' to pave a way to dissolve gender differences in Buddhism, however its efficiency has to be judged at operational levels with empirical realities. I strongly believe that any religion is critical, dialogical as long as it answers existential questions and answers in contemporary light. Women religious leaders in Buddhism understand this need and they relate Buddhism to all contemporary problems of Buddhist women across the world that go unaddressed. According to Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, voices of women in Buddhism go unheard; their problems remain unaddressed in Buddhist institutions. According to *Ajahn Sunadara* even lay Buddhist women can contribute to *Dhamma* by practicing Buddhism in their everyday life settings. According to *Ayya Yeshe*, women in Buddhism should reach out to the poor and needy for their development. These three Buddhist nuns have set examples that how women can break religiously sanctioned glass ceilings and dream for empowerment of Buddhist women in real sense by making it to the top of their respective monastic world. They inspire Buddhist women to stay informed and connected, and to work towards their own emancipation. In context of Indian women, as diversity in Buddhist traditions is huge and our Indian society is stratified, it is important to seek inspiration from these world leaders, stay connected and build solidarity groups to strengthen women's voices in India.

CONCLUSION

Buddhism promotes similar ethical standards for all its believers, but power interplay deflects these standards only to privilege the men in the group over the women, thereby diluting the ethical claims of a religion towards gender equality and threatening the very fate of the Buddhist nuns and Buddhist women and also undermines the significance participation of lay women Buddhist as the sacred feminine. The new age Buddhist women leaders are defying this stereotypical assumption and creating new standards of women empowerment through religious

leadership ensuring that it is not reduced to mere religious tokenism. The narratives of marginality need to be replaced with narratives of empowerment, the interpretation of women empowerment in Buddhism has to rise above its stereotypical meanings. Women's representation in Buddhist traditions requires acknowledgement of women's voices, opinions and perspectives and acknowledgement of their will to participate in community development practices. The Buddhist nuns need both freedom and support to emerge as leaders overcoming all hegemonic challenges that are rooted in patriarchal ideologies. The Buddhist nuns I interviewed strongly opine that the irreligious journeys combined with social activism can help them to exercise their agency and experience equal opportunities and equity in society. Buddhist women need to develop strong social networks, solidarity groups for sharing and communicating their concerns. In their opinion, the interpretation of women empowerment has to rise above its stereotypical meanings. Considering the peripheral position of women in Buddhism, it can be stated that the women in Buddhism are not aiming for any center stage but they are trying to create new centers and want an acknowledgement of their rights from the larger Buddhist world. As an anthropologist I am looking forward to take initiatives to explore such new centers (remotest of nunneries), where Buddhist women stay together to seek a common identity for themselves: that of 'Buddhist women'.

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