

An analysis of the term “marriage” from the Buddhist Perspective

N. A. Wimalasena

Department of History
University of Peradeniya
nawimalasena@gmail.com

Abstract:

The history of human society is nothing but the description of the evolution and diffusion of various institutions designed toward perpetuation, maintenance and survival of society. The institution of marriage occupies a unique place in the realm of institutions and it is this institution which is instrumental in perpetuating human society through regulations of conjugal and filial ties. The institution of marriage is as old as emergence of the world. As a social institution, it has taken different forms in different societies from time immemorial. It is very useful to analyze definition of what the marriage is. We have the numerous theories offered by social anthropologists about the origin and history of this important institution its various forms, modes and conditions in different epochs and societies. The family as the basis of marriage has been a self-contained unit with a division of functions on a sex basis, each partner performing his or her duties in the best interests of the family as a cooperative unit. The intermixing of cultures affects the institution of marriage and has been changing its shape in different societies in different epochs. Apart from this, the social political, moral and economic conditions of a particular social order have always affected the form of marriage in society. Buddhism has mainly affected to the marriage system. The major aim of this research is to discuss of the marriage as described in Buddhist literature.

Keywords: Buddhist perspective, Definition, Marriage, SingalovadaSutta, vivāha

Introduction

The history of human society is nothing but the description of the evolution and diffusion of various institutions designed toward perpetuation, maintenance and survival of society. The institution of marriage occupies a unique place in the realm of institutions and it is this institution which is instrumental in perpetuating human society through regulations of conjugal and filial ties. The institution of marriage is as old as emergence of the world. As a social institution, it has taken different forms in different societies from time immemorial. It is very useful to analyze definition of what the marriage is. We have the numerous theories offered by social anthropologists about the origin and history of this important institution its various forms, modes and conditions in different epochs and societies. The family as the basis of marriage has been a self-contained unit with a division of functions on a sex basis, each partner performing his or her duties in the best interests of the family as a cooperative unit. The intermixing of cultures affects the institution of marriage and has been changing its shape in different societies in different epochs. Apart from this, the social political, moral and economic conditions of a particular social order have always affected the form of marriage in society. Major aim is to discuss of the marriage as described in Buddhist literature.

Research Problem

What are the major Buddhist perspectives of marriage?

Objectives

To examine the marriage as described in Buddhist literature

To emphasize the influence of Buddhism greatly affected to Sri Lankan Society

Methodology

The chief sources of our knowledge about the topic are the literary and secondary sources which give us a glimpse of the picture regarding progress in this sphere.

Discussion

Many definitions which have been described by some sociologists have been examined in the above and it is necessary to discuss of the marriage as described in Buddhist literature. As essentially Buddhist society is originated in Sri Lanka, it is pertinent to discuss Buddhist perspectives of marriage. Firstly, we should understand the term marriage or *vivāha* as used in various dictionaries. It is called *vivāha* which means as leading away of the bride from her father's house, taking a wife and marriage with... in the *Sanskrit and English Dictionary*. Ram Jasan has described it as *vi* which means mutually and *vah* which means to take according to his *Sanskrit Dictionary*. A *Practical Sanskrit Dictionary* emphasizes the word *vivāhya* to mean what is connected with marriage and to be married. H. H. Wilson in his Dictionary mentions it as *vivāhak*. T. W. Rhys Davids opines the term *vivāha* as carrying or sending away. A *Dictionary of the Pali Language* has presented the word 'marriage' for the word *vivāho*.

The third precept of the five precepts prohibits one having sex outside one's married. Desire (*kāma*) means enjoying the five senses i. e. form, soul, smell and touching. Marriage is essentially connected with the enjoying the five senses. Therefore, if marriage is a bad behavior, it is contrary to Buddhism. But it is according to Buddhism. Hence, basically, in a marriage both the wife and husband should be faithful to one another. According to the opinions of many scholars, the third precept, refraining from misconduct (*kāmesu miccācārā*), is a very controversial one. One opinion is that *kāmesu* means in *rūpa*, *śabda*, *gandha*, *rasa*, *sparsha*. One should refrain from all these things, although *kāmesu* is a plural word, all these are suitable for males and females. Under mentioned verse of the Dhammapada also can be regarded as one very vital in this regard. A person, who is engaged in four evil deeds, invites his destruction. According to the view of Jotiya Dhirasekara, this precept is especially important in the male and female's sexual intercourse. *Mātāputta Sutta* also can be regarded as a very important Sutta relevant to this topic. It mentions that women's figure has *rūpa*, *śabda*, *gandha*, *rasa* and *sparsha*. Therefore, *kāmesu micchācārā* means refraining from misconduct. Many religions except Buddhism treat everything as given by God. Their main opinion is that the world and man as well as marriage were created by the God. But, according to Buddha's philosophy, marriage has emerged as a consequence of the evolution of the human beings. Its functions and responsibilities

are not relevant to the God but are kept in the person himself. Buddhism has described that marriage could be of maximum happiness (*sadāra santuṭṭhi*) and that life which is spent in a very good manner (*sadāra bramacariya*). Therefore, Walpola Rahula expressed as follows:

Love between husband and wife is considered almost religious or sacred. It is called sadara Bramacariya ‘sacred family life’. Here too, the significance of the term brahma should be noted: the highest respect is given to this relationship. Wives and husbands should be faithful, respectful and devoted to each other; the husband should always honour his wife and never be wanting in respect to her; he should love her and be faithful to her; should secure her position and comfort; and should please her by presenting her with clothing and jewellery. The wife in her turn should supervise and look after household affairs; should entertain guests, visitors, friends, relatives and employees; should love and be faithful to her husband; should protect his earnings; should be clever and energetic in all activities.”¹

Buddhist teachings mention about the marriages which are not suitable to the human life. For example, the Parābhava Sutta mentions that an old person should not marry a girl who has breasts similar to the *Timbiri* (Diospyros embryopteris) fruit. This verse is a very vital one, because age gap should also be considered according to the Buddhist discourses. In the present society, we can see some proposed marriages due to wealth, property and lust as well. These marriages are very impermanent ones and many disputes would arise between the husband and wife, due to incompatible physical or mental status. Therefore, Buddhism extremely stresses the importance of a suitable age gap between the life partners for a successful married life. According to the above mentioned facts, a married life would be fruitful, if the male and the female are sufficiently matched in age, ideas and behavior. John J. Robinson describes in his book “Of Servness” on love, connections of sexual inter courses and marriage.

Be careful. Do the activities in a healthy mentality. It is very easy to enter the married life than a divorce. If you had the correct male partner or female partner, the married life may become a divine one. If it was not, you will be gone to the hell which is chasing after you in twenty four hours.

According to the preceding passage, married life will become a divine one, if one has a correct female life partner. Buddhism also approves it. Paṭhama Saṃvāsa Sutta of the *Anguttara Nikāya* describes the nature of husband and wife. Living a dead body with a dead body (*Chavo chavāya saddhim saṃvasati*); Living a dead

¹ Walpola Rahula 1959. *What the Buddha Taught*, London: The Gordon Fraser gallery Limited Bedford, p. 79.

body with divine being (devangana), (*Chavo devāya saddhim saṃvasati*); Living a divine being with a dead body (*Devo chavāya saddhim saṃvasati*); Living a divine being with a divine being, (*Chavo devāya saddhim saṃvasati*)

Buddha has encouraged the type of living a divine being with a divine being. Thus a god should live with a goddess. God and goddess mean the faithful husband and wife who have ideal qualities for married life. Buddha's opinion was that both these partners should have Saddhā, Sila, Cāga and Paññā. If the husband and wife are similarly matched by these qualities, they can spend a happy married life and they are considered as a god and a goddess. Saddhā means not only the direction for Triple Gem, but also for the trustworthiness between the husband and wife. Sila means good behavior. Married life without Sila, is an unfortunate one with a variety of disputes. Cāga means that both partners should treat both of them equally. Paññā means taking every action by consciousness. If husband and wife equal by these qualities, Buddha has preached that they will affect even at the next birth.

Male and female who enter married life should have a mutual understanding. It could result in a real married life. Man has to endure traditional difficulties of women. Some of them mentioned in the Āveṇika Dukkha Sutta of the Mātugāma Saṅyutta in the Sutta Nipāta as follows. In the youth, woman has to go to the husband family and separates from relatives (*Mātugāmo daharo ca samānā patikulam gacchati. ñātakehi vinā hoti.*); Woman has to face action in menses which is a biological action. (*Mātugāmo utunī hoti.*); Woman has to face pregnancy (*Mātugāmo gabbhiṇī hoti*); Woman has to face the difficulty of delivering children. (*Mātugāmo vijāyati hoti*); Woman has to associate with the husband. (*Mātugāmo purisassa pāricariyā hoti*).

The husband should treat with kindness the wife in such situations, as it is incumbent upon him. If partners enter married life with mutual understanding of each other, problems can be minimized.

Before entering married life, a woman has to check the under mentioned qualities of the partner. Handsome (*rūpavāhoti*); Necessary physical resources. (*bhogavā hoti*); Discipline (*sīlavā hoti*); Cleverness and lack of lazy. (*dakkho ca hoti analaso*); Feasibility of giving children. (*pañcassa labhati*).

These points could be divided into two parts as artha and dhamma. A person should have both these qualities, when he enters married life. Except Discipline (sīla), all the other things can be regarded as artha. Artha means the development of resources. Specially, it means the profession of a person. Rūpavā hoti, the first point mentioned here, emphasizes handsomeness or personality of a person. After getting married, a woman has to depend on her husband. Although this is not directly connected to artha, it also can indirectly be connected to artha, due to the importance of personality on the benefit of the economic aspect. Bhogavā hoti can be given the meaning as the economic background of the male life partner. Husband

of the family has serious responsibilities after his marriage. There should be a sufficient economic background for constructing a marriage. At least, the basic needs have to be fulfilled. There are three basic needs in the Buddhist economic philosophy. Providing the basic needs (Food and beverage, costumes, homes and medicines.), those can be mentioned as comfortable life or *phāsu vihāra* and Road to the Nirvāna or *brahmacariyānuggahā*. Husband should endeavor aiming these three points for a successful married life. Next fact can be described as *dakkho ca hoti analaso* which means to be efficient but lazy. Male has a very responsible task to build a good foundation for the family. Male is the backbone of the family. The shortcomings in him will affect the whole affairs of the family. Cleverness and endeavors will develop family life. *Pañcassa labhati* is the next point of the artha. One of the main objectives of married life is procreation of children which could be regarded as a great resource.

Therefore, the wife expects children from the husband. The dhamma is the next aspect that should be referred to. It is *sīlavā hoti*. Although the male life partner is a very wealthy person, if he indulges in misbehavior, married life would a failure. *Sīlavā* means development of self-discipline high human qualities. Husband should develop *saddhā*, *sīla*, *cāga* and *paññā* as the human qualities as mentioned in Buddhist philosophy. *Saddhā* clears the road for the trustworthiness and *sīla* shows peace and harmony between the husband and wife. *Cāga* produces hardship and wisdom as well as the intellectual activities for both of them. Therefore, if married life needs to be more decorative, artha and dhamma should be in the male life partner.

It seems that there are three facts which are seen to make a married life a success. Those can be said as matching physically, matching mentally and economic background for building the institution of family. It can be seen that Buddhism has acknowledged these three facts to make family fruitful.

Buddha has discussed the reasons as to why there occurs love between man and woman. One is the form of the man and woman. (*imēhi kho bhikkhave aṭṭhahi ākārehi itthim purisaṃ bandhati. te bhikkhave sattā subaddhā ye phassena baddhāti*.) This connection specially occurs as a result of touching. Accordingly, the form of the man or woman should match each other in a married life. Mental matching between the man and woman, Buddhism has shown, will be a reason for unite the couple at the next birth. Paṭhama Puññahi Sandha Vagga of Catukka Nipāta in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* elaborates this point.

Ākaṃkheyyuṃ ce bhikkhave ubho jātipatayo
diṭṭheceva dhamme aññamañña passituṃ,
abhisamparāyaṃ ca ubho assu sama saddhā sama
sīlā sama cāgā sama paññā te diṭṭheva dhamme

aññamaññam passanti. Abhisamparāyam ca
aññamaññam passanti.²

It means as follows. If husband and wife like to meet in the next birth, they should be similar in devotion, sila, charity and wisdom. This gives the meaning as the matching of husband and wife mentally.

There are some factors which would contribute to smooth functioning of a married life. Buddha has admired the father of Visākhā, because he gave advice and guidance to his daughter Visākhā who was main female devotee of Buddha. It is mentioned in the *Manorathapūraṇi*. that there were advices as follows as; Personal activities of houses should not be given out side. (*anto aggi bahi na nīharitabbo*); Activities of outsiders should not be brought the home. (*bahi aggi anto na pavesetabbo*.); Giving should be given to givers. (*dadantassāva dātabbam.*); Giving should not be given for not givers. (*adadantassa na dātabbam.*); Beggars and poor relatives should be given. (*dadantassāpi adadantassāpi dātabbam*); Stay comfortably. (*sukhaṃ nisīditabbam*); Eat well (*sukhaṃ paribhuñgitabbam*); Should be seated suitable chair. (*sukhaṃ nipajjitabbam*); Should be respected to parents of husband. (*anto dve namassitabbam*).

Buddha has discussed in the Satta bhariya Sutta the categories of wives as follows. The wife always quarrels with her husband. (*vadhaka samā bhariyā*); The wife like a thief (*corasamā bhariyā*); She tries to surrender her husband (*ayyasamā bhariyā*); She is like the husband's mother (*mātusamā bhariyā*); She is like a sister of the husband (*bhaginīsamā bhariyā*); She always satisfies her husband and she does all the things for her husband; (*sakhisamā bhariyā*); She does all the things like a slave and she protects the husband very well. (*dāsīsamā bhariyā*).

Buddha emphasized ten major factors for a successful married life. Those are fulfilling the necessities of parents, fulfilling the welfare of children, fulfilling welfare of wife, understanding each other and behaving well, taking actions for fulfilling the necessities of relatives, respecting elders, paying homage to the gods, giving merits to relatives who have passed away, spending the life according to the existing rules and regulations of society and building a good and real family life. House holders who spend their lives happily, Sakkanamassa Sutta mentions that Gods also worship them. Mahā Tanhā Sankha Sutta describes the functions of a pregnant mother step by step. Dutiyā Sutta of *Samyutta Nikāya* says that confidence should mainly exist between the husband and wife. When Buddha stayed at Ghōshītārāma, Manāpakāyika Gods came and worshiped him and they asked what the reasons are to become Gods. Wives who have been living according to under mentioned facts successful in their lay lives and may become Gods in the next lives. Wife gets up earlier than others. She goes to sleep last. She behaves well and she asks all the things from the husband. She respects all adults such as husband, mother and clergy and she is very hospitable to all people. She helps the

² *Anguttara Nikāya*, 2005, p. 208.

internal industries of husband and works strategically. She organizes all the activities well. If there are workers of husbands, they may be treated well and treats patients as well. She pays the salaries on time. She protects the wealth of husband such as gold, silver and various crops. She consumes the asset in a well-planned manner. She lives as a lay devotee who observes the Triple Gem. She avoids five bad activities. She gives alms and donations.

Nakulamātu Manāpakayika Sutta can be shown as an important one with regard to marriage and Buddhism. When Buddha Stayed at Migadāya of Bhesakalā forest in Sunsumāragiri, Nakulamātā was preached about what kind of qualities should be there for a good wife and next she and husband will become are in the category of manāpakayika Gods.

According to the Sāleyyaka Sutta, there are two categories of mental features which should be controlled. Those are refraining from lust, not associating with younger women who are living under parents and relatives. Buddha said that stress should be eradicated in the married life and he said it could be controlled by the under mentioned seven facts. By seeing, (*dassanā pahātabbā*); By restraining, (*saṃvarā pahātabbā*); By using (*paṭisevanā pahātabbā*); By enduring, (*adhivāsana pahātabbā*); By avoiding (*parivajjanā pahātabbā*); By removing, (*vinōdanā pahātabbā*); By developing meditation (*bhāvanā pahātabbā*)

Singālovāda Sutta of *Digha Nikāya* emphasizes very important facts responsible for a successful marriage life. It describes the rights of husband and wife as well as various groups. There are five ways to minister to his wife by the husband such as respecting, courtesy, faithfulness, handing over the authority to her and providing her with adornment. And there are five ways to minister to her husband by the wife such as loving him, performing the duties well, and hospitality to the kin of both, faithfulness, watching over the goods he brings and skill and industry in discharging all her business. Many facts have been presented regarding marriage in many Suttas such as Vyaggapajja Sutta, Araṇavibhanga Sutta of *Majjhima Nikāya*, and Kalahavivāda Sutta of Sutta Nipāta.

In the ancient Sinhala customary law marriage at the highest level was derived from the Brahma form of marriage in Hindu Law, which constituted a Sanskāra or Sacrament thus having a religious significance. The Sinhala marriage had no religious significance as the Sinhala people were and are Buddhists and thus it was purely secular in character. The basis of the Brahma form of marriage was the Kanyādāna- giving away of a virgin to the prospective husband. About this Brahma form of marriage Manu says the gift of a maiden spontaneously after clothing and reverencing her to one learned in the Vēda (and of good character is called Brahma rite.) This form has been adopted by other castes who were not learned in the Vedas as pointed out by Mayne. Mayne showed this adoption in India when he said “the essence of the Brahma form of marriage is that it is a gift of the daughter in marriage. Accordingly it is said that the distinct mark of the Asura form is the payment of money for the bride as the absence of that payment is of the

approved form as originally the bridegroom in the Brahma form was a man learned in the Vedas it was inadmissible for a Śudra. But it has long since become lawful for all castes for whom the form came to be universally adopted by the Brahmins it was very probably followed by the other classes as a mark of higher social status. Mayne further says “the presumption of Hindu Law is always in favour of a marriage being in the Brahma or approved form as against it being in the Asura or unapproved form. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Brahmins among the early Sinhalese brought this form from India to meet their needs and thereafter, the chief castes the Khattiyas and others would have adopted it, although no learning in Vedas was necessary for a Buddhist society.

Conclusion

Apparently, it can be suggested that whatever marriage system that prevailed in Sri Lanka, the most popular fact was marriage was greatly admired by Buddhism and which has been stabilized in the whole of Sri Lanka.

Key Words: Buddhist perspective, Definition, Marriage, Singalovada Sutta, vivāha