

Reclaiming Women's Voices in Early Buddhist Sources and Their Relevance for Contemporary Feminist Thought

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Introduction

Feminist movements around the world over the last century have greatly influenced the reshaping of social attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours across many fields, including economic, political, professional, and educational, that are closely related to gender, power, and justice. Contemporary feminist movements emerged particularly in regions such as America, Europe, Egypt, and India during the late 18th and early 20th centuries. Across the three waves of feminist movements spanning three centuries, the primary objectives were to challenge systemic inequalities in social structures and to secure women's social, political, religious, cultural, and legal rights (Akram, 2025).

Advocacy for women's rights extends beyond recent feminist movements and can be traced to the Buddha's era, specifically the 6th-5th centuries BCE. Women of that period held a radical vision, challenging inequalities based on gender, caste, and religious and spiritual beliefs (Chakravarti, U. (1993). The establishment of the Bhikkhuni order (Buddhist nuns' tradition) demonstrates the Buddha's recognition of women's capacity for spiritual enlightenment and social liberation, despite the social oppression they faced under Brahmanical influence at the time. Early Buddhist texts, such as the Therigāthā and the Vinayapiṭaka, document women's struggles for religious freedom, spiritual practice, renunciation, and awakening, as well as institutional practices within the Buddhist tradition.

Scholars have made significant contributions to identifying early Buddhist teachings and sources that empower women's freedom and promote gender equality. The collection of essays 'Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies', edited by Collett, A. (2013), shows that the early Buddhist tradition (Bhikkhuni Order) allowed women to serve society as religious teachers, indicating their level of respect and spiritual authority. Wang, X. (2022), in his paper on 'Feminist Buddhist and Women Empowerment from a Contemporary Chinese Perspective,' attempts to reveal diverse approaches of Buddhism influential in China to resolve gender inequality issues through Chinese Buddhist doctrines and other Chinese traditions. Pallavi and colleagues (2025), in

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a study on ‘Gender and Authority in Buddhist History from enlightened masters to empowered matriarchs’, highlight changes in gender roles over the history of Buddhist traditions, including Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna, and how they reshaped male-centric perspectives in religions, leading to the production of female religious and spiritual leaders. Gross, R. M. (1993) argues that Buddhism contains significant resources for overcoming patriarchal interpretations in historical society.

Many studies on feminist perspectives in Buddhism have focused on textual history, monastic rules, and related topics, while the personal voices of Buddhist nuns and women in the Buddha’s era have been underexplored. Scholars also treat the Therīgāthā as literary works rather than as lived experiences of women’s agency and feminist ethics, emphasising their relevance to modern feminist movements. Moreover, many feminist movements today are rooted in Western perspectives, yet important aspects are tied to Asian cultures where these women’s voices emerged. Therefore, by highlighting ancient voices relevant to modern feminist concerns and comparing historical and cultural contexts, this study aims to propose a companionate and ethical guide for contemporary discussions on women’s rights, particularly in the South Asian region. These earliest records of women’s voices for rights and liberation, activities and ethics in Buddhist literature serve as a framework for global communities, reflecting women’s social and spiritual independence and its relevance to modern feminist movements.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

to explore how early Buddhist literature depicts women’s lived experiences of suffering, resistance, and religious and spiritual transformation in ancient India

to identify the ethical perspectives embedded in Buddhist literature that challenge the patriarchal social structure of the Buddha’s era,

to connect those ancient expressions of women to contemporary feminist initiatives, emphasising the ongoing relevance of discussions about gender-based rights, and

to propose a culturally grounded interpretation of early Buddhist literature to inform feminist initiatives in the South Asian region.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative textual analysis, drawing on Buddhist literature and contemporary feminist perspectives. Data were collected from selected verses in the Therīgāthā in Suttapiṭaka, the relevant sections in Vinayapiṭaka, and related Buddhist sources, and were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. This included interpretative discussion of narratives within their historical context and an emphasis on their contemporary relevance to feminist initiatives. Themes were generated through repeated reading and re-reading, and similar codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. Thematic analysis was employed because it enables the identification and interpretation of patterns of meaning across textual narratives, exploring women's lived experiences in the early Buddhist era. Furthermore, this analysis was guided by an interpretative framework that combines historical texts with contemporary feminist interpretations. The study is limited to Theravāda Buddhist sources, with reference to selected verses of the Therīgāthā, relevant parts of the Vinayapiṭaka, and the Suttapiṭaka.

Findings and Discussion

The textual analysis of the Buddhist sources identified six themes that reflect the diverse aspects of women's agency, spiritual independence, and social empowerment in early Buddhist society. These themes were further illustrated by a discussion of their relevance to contemporary feminist initiatives.

1. Patriarchal oppression and women's lived experiences of social suffering

Early Buddhist sources, particularly the Therīgāthā, offer vivid accounts of the social and psychological suffering of women under the Brahmanical social order of that time, which Chakravarti, U. (1993) terms 'Brahmanical patriarchy'. Many poems by enlightened women reveal how widows, abandoned wives, and young girls were forced into marriage and slavery. They were withdrawn from education and faced limited social mobility and religious autonomy. Buddhist sources document these conditions and preserve the voices of women who criticised these social injustices. For instance, Punṇā Therī (Punnikā) recalls her past as a slave in a royal family, being assaulted and threatened with punishment by her master. "I am a water carrier; even in the cold weather I have always gone down to the water, terrified by fear of punishments from noble ladies [masters], harassed by fear of (verbal) abuse and displeasure." (Therīgāthā, 236-251 verses). Additionally, Lady Punna's birth into a lower caste of slaves reflects how the upper-caste masters burdened them.

Similarly, Ambapālī Therī reflects on her early life as a form of commodification, having been a courtesan within the patriarchal social structure. Born an orphan and abandoned in a forest under mango trees, she was prostituted for the pleasure of royalty because of her exceptional beauty. She recalls her objectified beauty as a courtesan, saying, “My hair was black, like the colour of bees, with curly ends... covered with flowers, my head was fragrant like a perfumed box... Possessing fine pins, decorated with gold, adorned with plaits, it looked beautiful...” (Therīgāthā, 252-270 verses). These stories of women who became Bhikkhunis with the rise of Buddhism in early Indian society highlight how they became a counter voice to the oppressive social order of the time.

The issues surrounding the establishment of the Bhikkhuni order continue to be debated among modern scholars. It was not due to concerns about undermining women's spiritual and wisdom capabilities, but to social attitudes rooted in patriarchal culture. One concern is that the patriarchal assumptions within the social context at that time, and the codes of the established Bhikkhuni order, called *Aṣṭa Garu Dhamma*, were concessions to entrenched patriarchal norms, aimed at ensuring societal acceptance of a woman's monastic community, reflecting societal fears, and protecting nuns from public hostility (Vinayapitaka Vol. 5; Tsomo, 1996).

2. Women's struggle for spiritual agency and the Buddhist ethical intervention

As depicted in the Therīgāthā, many Buddhist nuns, after attaining enlightenment, recounted how they had to resist family pressure, social duties, and caste-based expectations to pursue a religious or spiritual life. In these stories, they praised the Buddha as a significant figure who recognised women's capacity for intellectual and spiritual development and awakening, and who intervened to challenge gender-based spiritual barriers. For instance, the narrative of Bhaddā Kundalakesī illustrates how ancient Indian women in a patriarchal society struggled for spiritual autonomy by engaging with various religious traditions, and how the Buddha ethically guided them towards their spiritual goals and liberation. “With hair cut off, wearing dust, formally I wanted, having only one robe, thinking there was a fault where there is no fault, and seeing no fault where there was a fault.... I saw the Buddha, attended by the order of Bhikkhus.” (Therīgāthā, 107-111 verses).

Furthermore, the stories of the Buddha's foster mother, Mahaprajāpati Gotamī (Therīgāthā, 157-162 verses; Vinaya Pitaka Cullavagga X., 1-4), Vimalā Therī (Therīgāthā, 72-78 verses), and Uttara Nandamāta, a laywoman who attained enlightenment (Therīgāthā, 186-195 verses), reveal women's struggle for spiritual autonomy and show how the Buddha laid an ethical path towards

their liberation. The story of the Sukka Theri illustrates how women were pressured by family responsibilities as caregivers and homemakers, aligning with social expectations, and how the Buddhist framework later created a significant space for female spiritual leadership, challenging gender limitations in speech, teaching, and religious and social authority (Therīgāthā, 204-212 verses).

3. Intellectual and spiritual equality of women

Early Buddhist sources, such as the Vinayaṭṭaka and Suttapitaka, contain numerous statements and stories about women's intellectual, moral, and spiritual equality within Indian culture. In a society dominated by Brahminical assumptions and male authority, women were considered inherently inferior in wisdom and purity. The Therīgāthā highlight women's achievements in attaining the same spiritual liberation and social status as men through insight, courage, and the purification of the mind.

The narratives of enlightened nuns not only challenged the patriarchal ideology of society but also offered a vision of women's intellectual and spiritual achievements, demonstrating that these insights are rooted in human cognitive capacity rather than in gender. For instance, Somā Theri once asked, "What does womanhood matter, when the mind is well concentrated, when knowledge is progressing, seeing is clearly, rightly, into Dhamma." (Sanyutta Nikaya 5.2: PTS S i 129). Additionally, many women who followed the Buddha's path attained liberation (*nibbāna*) regardless of gender by cultivating their minds.

4. Trauma, healing and psychological resilience of oppressed women

One of the most prominent themes in many narratives within the Therīgāthā is the portrayal of women's psychological recovery from social injustice and other obstacles. Many nuns (Theri), who had previously suffered as grieving mothers, faced discriminatory views and were exploited labourers, employed monastic practices to reclaim their lost dignity and restore psychological resilience. The story of Paṭacārā Theri is a notable example of this. She experienced profound grief early in life, losing her entire family to successive tragedies, and society regarded her as mentally ill or psychologically disturbed. Her poems reveal the severe trauma she endured and how she found healing through the Buddha by following the noble ethical path.

"I washed my feet and paid attention to waters, and seeing the foot-water come flowing downhill from the high land to the low land, then I collected my mind, as a noble through-bred horse... Then I took a needle and drew out the wick. The complete release of my mind was like the quenching of the lamp." (Therīgāthā, 112-116 verses).

As shown in the Therigāthā, many women experienced collective trauma under patriarchal oppression, including forced marriages, stigma surrounding widowhood, domestic violence, loss of autonomy, reproductive pressure, vulnerability to sexual harassment, forced labour, burdens of family roles, and a lack of respect for women's moral and intellectual voices. These stories of psychological healing and resilience are among the earliest texts demonstrating trauma recovery in modern feminist psychology.

5. Social mobility and self-determination

Early Buddhist texts, such as the Therigāthā and the Vinayapitaka, describe how Bhikkhuni ordination and monastic life offered women a route to social mobility, independence, and autonomy, enabling them to escape Brahmanical society. Many women joined the Buddhist monastic community to find safety from forced marriages, oppressive kinship ties, widowhood, slavery, or the emotional strain of family roles. For example, Vimalā Theri, a former courtesan (Therigāthā, 72-76), and Ambapālī, a renowned courtesan and benefactor (Therigāthā, 252-270; Vinayapitaka Vol 5), exemplify this shift. This transition enabled them to pursue spiritual goals while transforming their social identities, a development that strongly aligns with modern feminist theories.

6. Early Buddhist ethical framework for contemporary feminist discourse

As demonstrated by numerous narratives describing the lived experiences of Bhikkhunis in the 6th century BCE, Buddhist literature offers the earliest record of a framework for gender-based injustice in Indian society. Although the society in which the Buddha was born and attained enlightenment was a rigid patriarchal order (Chakravarti, 1993), criticisms of male dominance and signs of women's rights and liberation initiatives can be clearly identified. The rise of Buddhist thought provided an ethical foundation for social justice for women, challenging the limited roles of domesticity, reproduction, and service (Gross, 1993).

The Buddhist canonical texts present a range of philosophical perspectives on feminist initiatives at multiple levels. Firstly, they outline a path that demonstrates women's universal capacity for intellect, wisdom, insight, and enlightenment across social, religious, and spiritual dimensions. Secondly, they emphasise personal responsibility as the basis of ethical thought, positioning women as self-guided moral agents in line with modern feminist ethics of autonomy (Nussbaum, 2000).

Furthermore, Buddhist concepts such as non-self (*anatta*) offer an identity for individuals by rejecting the notion of the self, including gender, as a fixed characteristic. According to Butler (1990), gender is viewed as a

socially constructed concept, rather than a biological essence, and society often discriminates on this basis. However, Buddhist teachings such as enlightenment (*nibbāna*), alongside concepts like impermanence (*anicca*) and non-self (*anatta*), oppose gender-based discrimination, emphasising that gender is not essential to the cultivation of the mind. Gender is a conventional designation (*paññatti*), and it does not serve as an obstacle for success or liberation (*nibbāna*). These philosophical ideas in Buddhism reshape women's movements for liberation and can also serve as models for modern initiatives.

Conclusion

Buddhist literature provides the earliest frameworks in India for understanding women's capacity for autonomy, social and spiritual liberation, and wisdom. Challenging the patriarchal socio-cultural system of that era, women resisted oppression, reclaimed agency, and expressed their suffering through poetic forms. The narratives of the Therīgāthā and texts in the Vinayapiṭaka and Suttapiṭaka reveal the extent of gender-biased oppression against women and how Buddhism offered transformative paths. Although Buddhism emerged within a male-dominated society, its unique features, philosophical ideas, and ethical principles, such as universal norms, enlightenment, moral autonomy, and the deconstruction of gender identity, offer a framework that helps reshape modern feminist movements in India and across South Asia, as it systematically challenges the core elements of gender-based oppression in society.

Keywords - Bhikkhuni Ordination, Feminism and feminist movements, Modern Society, Therigatha and early Buddhism, Women's Voice

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