

THE FIRST BUDDHIST WOMEN: A STUDY OF THERIGATHA

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This paper is primarily an analysis of the *Therigatha*, a collection of 73 verses composed by *Theris* — the *Bhikkhunis* (nuns) belonging to the *Theravada* sect of the Buddhist religion. Since *Theravada* is the oldest sect of Buddhism, most of the *Theris* were contemporaries of Gotama Buddha. This analysis is another modest attempt to ascertain the status of women in ancient India.

Keywords: *Psalms, Buddhism, Theris, Therigatha, Bhikkhunis*

The Saga of the *Theris*

The foundations of the Buddhist religion were laid about 2,600 years ago — between 563 and 483 B.C. — by Gotama Buddha who belonged to the royalty of the mid-Ganga valley.¹ Historians have adequately debated the impact of the Buddhist religion on different sections of contemporaneous north Indian society, including the women. Some historians opine that Buddhism raised the status of women since the Buddha allowed their entry into the *Sangha* (Order). Though women became part of the *Sangha* in the time of the founder himself, the Master's initial hesitation in this regard, the rules formulated for the women's entry, and the restrictions imposed on their conduct inside the Order, betray the truth that Buddhism, too, remained under considerable influence of the patriarchal mode of thinking then prevalent in society.² However, it must be admitted that the Buddhist religion was not as fanatical towards women as the Vedic religion/Brahmanism.

In spite of the strict rules, women in large numbers left family life to join the *Sangha* as *Bhikkhunis*. Unarguably, they found the life of the *Sangha* better among alternatives available to them. Composed by women whose status this study attempts to analyse, the *Therigatha* is a rare historical source that helps us fathom early Buddhist religion and the traditional equations of women in society. Most other sources that the historians are forced to depend on, happen to be the works of male writers. The psalms of *Therigatha*, compiled with the names of their supposed authors several centuries after they were composed, distinctly constitute a unique repository of women's experience, which unfolds the sagas of their joys and sorrows, fears and desires, sentiments and aspirations. It is a worthy document of the woman's thought before the advent of feminist consciousness. The poems and hymns of the *Therigatha* capture the social, religious and spiritual experiences of women that

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enrich the history of human thought. These verses also introduce us to the strong will power of women with which they could rise above their emotional weaknesses and manage to overlook the difficult and unfavorable circumstances which had been the source of their perennial suffering. The women of the *Therigatha* frankly share the fortunes and misfortunes of their life before joining the *Sangha* which help us discover their status in society. Most of the *Theris* are known to be contemporaries of the Buddha and, therefore, most of their verses reflect the mores of the north Indian society in the sixth century before Christ.

Social Background of the *Theris*

Among the authors of the *Therigatha* are women of all classes and castes, including Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra.³ If some came from the apex of the economic pyramid, some others had a humble background. Four of them were former sex workers, namely, Addhakasi, mother of Abhaya, Vimala and Ambapali.⁴ The largest number (23) came from the royal families. The second largest number comprised of Brahmin women from different classes (seven from influential families, nine from ordinary and two from impoverished households). The *Sangha* cared nothing about the member's class, caste or ethnicity. Among the standard qualifications required for entrance into the *Sangha* were good health and freedom from debt or slavery. Those in government service were denied entry. The Buddhist religion marked a distinct identity with its egalitarian approach. The Vedic religion, by contrast, was known for social stratification wherein the Sudras and the women were considered unfit for asceticism, spirituality or *moksha* (deliverance from rebirth). To the Buddhists, the marital status of women was as unimportant as their economic or caste status. Among the *Theris* of the *Sangha*, we come across the spinster, the wedded and the widow.

Despite being egalitarian in its praxis, the *Sangha* took care not to cause ripples in the existing social set-up and, therefore, considered family's consent essential to a woman's entry into its fold. It was necessary for the unmarried women to obtain their parents' permission before joining the *Sangha*.⁵ Though the wedded ones were not required to take their husband's formal permission, they had to go through penance in case the husband felt discomfited.⁶ The rule of penance was obviously meant to be in harmony with the patriarchal society which was not prepared to grant women the right to decide her destiny. Rare were the cases in which the woman was allowed entry into the *Sangha* in honor of her own will.

It seems the *Sangha* had to attach more importance to the will of parents and husbands than that of the women seeking entry. A spinster unable to find a companion and facing a variety of family problems found it much easier to obtain the mandatory permission. Thus Abhirupananda and Uppalavana reached the *Sangha* without the usual hassles. Isidasi joined on her father's advice after failure of three successive nuptials. Sundari chose to renounce worldly life after her

brother's untimely demise, though her mother wanted her to inherit the mantle of the family. Siha, Gutta and Rohini, too, didn't find any difficulty in obtaining parents' consent⁷ though Sumedha did join the *Sangha* against her parents' will. The mother of Kumar Kashyap didn't get permission before marriage. She could enter the *Sangha* only with the permission of her husband.⁸

The cases of 'consent' or its refusal to the married *Theris* are noteworthy. If the husband himself wanted to become a *Bhikkhu*, he would willingly let his wife (or even cajole her to) join the *Sangha*. Thus Bhadda and her husband Pippali joined the *Sangha* together.⁹ And Dhammadinna could join only after refusing to return to her parents when her husband decided to enter the Order. In both cases, the women's decision to join the *Sangha* was prompted by a crisis situation. They perhaps thought that in the absence of the husband their personal and social life might become even more dry and difficult than the hard lifestyle of the *Sangha*.

The *Theri* named Sona¹⁰, who is said to be the mother of ten children, too, became a *Bhikkhuni* after her husband joined the *Sangha*. A verse betrays her suffering in old age after her husband renounced the world and the offspring ceased to support and respect her:

*Ten sons and daughters did I bear within
This heap of visible decay. Then weak
And old I drew near to a Bhikkhuni.
She taught to me the Norm, wherein I learnt
The factors, organs, bases of this self,
Impermanent compound. Hearing her words,
And cutting off my hair, I left the world.*¹¹

Khema, the beautiful queen of Bimbisar, the king of Magadha, who had personally no interest in Buddhism, accepted the *Sangha* at the request of her husband. Though there was no obvious element of force in this, Khema herself was never willing to join the Buddhist Sisters. The question, therefore, arises if Bimbisar had not been a follower of Buddhism, would he have easily allowed his queen to enter the *Sangha*?

The poems of two other married *Bhikkhunis* reflect on the wretched life of the housewives living with insensitive companions. Celebrating her freedom from the daily life of a domestic handmaiden to a crooked husband, says Mutta:

*O free, indeed! O gloriously free
Am I in freedom from three crooked things
From quern, from mortar, from my crookback'd lord!
Ay, but I'm free from rebirth and from death,
And all that dragged me back is hurled away.*¹²

A nameless *Bhikkhuni*, who is referred to as the mother of Sumangala, expresses similar sentiments:

*O woman well set free! How free am I?
 How thoroughly free from kitchen drudgery!
 Me stained and squalid 'mong my cooking-pots
 My brutal husband ranked as even less
 Than the sunshades he sits and weaves always.*¹³

The *Therigatha* also carries poems of three widows who came to the *Sangha* after their husband's death. They were Maha-Prajapati the Gotamid, Dhamma and Patacara.¹⁴ Maha-Prajapati was Buddha's mother Maha-Maya's younger sister who was married to his father after her sister's death. She was the first woman to join the *Sangha*. It was at her instance and insistence that Buddha reluctantly agreed to allow *Bhikkhunis* inside the *Sangha* after his father's death. Dhamma, born to a respectable family of Shravasti, wanted to join the *Sangha* when her husband was alive. When he did not agree, she patiently remained his companion and joined the Order after his death. Both Maha-Prajapati and Dhamma present the picture of ideal wives for whom husband's desire reigned supreme all through their family life. The *Therigatha* mentions another unnamed *Bhikkhuni* who had to wait a long time for her husband's consent.¹⁵ The whole scenario fits well into the concept of a male-dominated society.

Apart from the loss of husband, the untimely death of children has been another cause of women's deep suffering that led them to renounce the world and seek refuge in the *Sangha*. Kisa-gotami, Patacara, and Ubbiri have expressed their sorrow in the verses of the *Therigatha*. Kisa-gotami's story is indeed touching. She wanders here and there carrying the corpse of her son, who dies of snake-bite, madly groping for a magical cure. She weaves in her psalm, not only her own story, or the sadder saga of Patacara (who simultaneously loses her husband and sons), but the fate of the entire womenfolk:

*Woeful is the woman's lot! Hath he declared,
 Tamer and Driver of the hearts of men:
 Woeful when sharing home with hostile wives.
 Woeful when giving birth in bitter pain,
 Some seeking death, or e'er they suffer twice,
 Piercing the throat; the delicate poison take.
 Woe too when mother-murdering embryo
 Comes not to birth, and both alike find death.*

*Returning home to give birth to my child,
 I saw my husband in the jungle die.
 Nor could I reach my kin ere travail came.
 My baby boys I lost, my husband too.
 And when in misery I reached my home,
 Lo! Where together on a scanty pyre,
 My mother, father, and my brother burn!*¹⁶

Similarly, Ubbiri's grief of losing her infant daughter Jeeva drags her to the *Sangha*. Mother's attachment to her off-spring is very natural but to see life only as a tragic burden in the event of losing them is a concept imposed on women by a patriarchal system. A woman's identity and honor in such societies is incumbent upon the family, the husband and the offspring. Losing them naturally leads to a mental imbalance.

The women of the *Therigatha* also included strong personas that made adequate arrangements for the living and the guardianship of their children before leaving for the *Sangha*. The verses of the *Theris* like Sangha, Sakula, Kapa and the mother of Vaddha talk about the children they left behind. When Vaddha comes to meet his mother, she urges and counsels him:

*O nevermore, my Vaddha, do thou stray
Into the jungle of this world's desires.
Child of my heart! Come thou not back and forth
To share, reborn, in all the ills of life.*¹⁷

Inside the Sangha

Obedience to the eight *Garudhammas* (Chief Rules)¹⁸ as the first condition of women's entry into the *Sangha* underscores their status in the society of the Buddha's time. The rules were:

1. A nun who has been ordained even for a hundred years must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day.
2. A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there are no monks.¹⁹
3. Every half month a nun should desire two things from the Order of Monks: the asking as to the date of the Observance [*uposatha*] day, and the coming for the exhortation (*bhikkhunovada*).²⁰
4. After the rains a nun must 'invite' [*pavarana*] before both Orders in respect of three matters, namely what was seen, what was heard, what was suspected.²¹
5. A nun, offending against an important rule, must undergo *manatta* discipline for half a month before both Orders.
6. When, as a probationer, she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek higher ordination from both Orders.
7. A Monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.
8. From today, admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden.²²

The *Garudhammas*, which were in addition to the *Bhikkhuni* rules, are controversial since "they clearly put women in an inferior position" and have been challenged by the modern *Theravada* view which maintains that the Chief Rules

were not from the Buddha's teachings. Besides, there is enough documentary evidence that some of the *Garudhammas* were amended in favor of the *Bhikkhunis* due to "practical considerations". The *Theris* could, however, never be placed on an equal footing with the *Theras*.

There were more rules and regulations for the *Bhikkhunis* than for the *Bhikkhus*. Women seeking *Upasampada Abhishek* (higher ordination) had to obtain permission not only from the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* (Order of the Nuns) but also from the *Bhikkhu Sangha* (Order of the Monks). The only exception was the case of Bhadda Kundalakesa, formerly a follower of the Jaina religion, who was honored with the *Upasampada* by the Buddha himself.

The *Vinaya Pitaka* refers to various matters wherein the *Bhikkhus* (monks) contacted the Buddha to dispel their doubts and solve other problems. A similar contact was not possible between the *Bhikkhunis* and the Master. Not that the *Bhikkhunis* didn't have doubts or problems but it was far more challenging for them to take these to the Master. The *Bhikkhunis* first discussed the problems among themselves and then forwarded them to the Master through the members of the *Bhikkhu Sangha*. Maha-Prajapati was the only *Bhikkhuni* who didn't have to go through such chequered process.²³

The *Bhikkhunis* were also not allowed to go to secluded places even for meditation. In all probability, it was the fear of the women's safety that led to this restriction. The rape of *Bhikkhuni* Upplavana, who had ventured into the forest by herself, reinforces this view.²⁴ It is evident that the society of those times, too, saw woman only as a commodity. Even when she had renounced the world, she was still consumable.

Some *Bhikkhunis* did choose to return to their domestic life. The *Samyukta Nikaya* refers to a woman named Tissa who returned to family life.²⁵ *Vinaya Pitaka*, too, cites such cases.²⁶ Though the *Sangha* never forced anybody to remain a member, there are more cases of men leaving the Order than the women. The return of the *Bhikkhunis* was rare. Perhaps they had doubts whether their family would accept them back. How would they come back to terms with the wretched family life that had forced them to seek refuge in the *Sangha*? The rules regarding re-entry into the *Sangha* were strict and fraught with a number of problems.²⁷ They were obviously not in a position to change decisions as quickly as men. The attitude of the society as well as the *Sangha* seemed more liberal towards men, enabling them to exercise more freedom.

The suicide attempt by a *Bhikkhuni* named Siha is worth mentioning. The attempt was made out of frustration after failure of a seven-year struggle to become an *Arhat* (perfected person). When she felt she didn't have the capability to attain *nirvana*, she went into the jungle and attempted to hang herself from a tree. The incident was the result of Siha's complete disappointment with spiritual as well as worldly life:

*So did I fare for seven weary years,
In lean and sallow mis'ry of unrest.
I, wretched, found no ease by day or night,
So took a rope and plunged into the wood:
'Better for me a friendly gallows-tree!
I'll live again the low life of the world.'*²⁸

In some cases, *Bhikkhuni* were expelled from the *Sangha*. The *Vinaya Pitaka* mentions a *Bhikkhuni* named Mettiya who was expelled by the Buddha following a dispute between her and a *Bhikkhu*.²⁹ It seems from the description of the incident that perhaps Mettiya became a victim of a conspiracy hatched by the *Bhikkhus* since there is no reference to any violation by her of any rule of the *Sangha*. Sundarinanda was another *Bhikkhuni* who was forced to leave the *Sangha* after becoming pregnant.³⁰ The *Vinaya Pitaka* refers to a number of *Bhikkhus* who attempted to satisfy their sexual desires in liaison with the *Bhikkhunis*.

Struggling against discrimination within the society and the *Sangha*, some women did manage to win respectable positions in the Buddhist Order and religion. Sukka³¹ emerged as an able preceptor and Patacara³² as an expert of the *Vinaya Pitaka*. The latter attracted a good number of women to the Buddhist fold. Dhammadina, Vishakha and Khema, too, made important contributions.³³ All these women could avail of opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities through the tireless efforts of Maha-Prajapati the Gotamid. Her good will towards fellow women remained her most important contribution that gave a new hope, direction and identity to women in the annals of ancient India.

Notes

1. Reilly, Kevin: *Worlds of History—A Comprehensive Reader* (Vol. 1), St. Martin's Press, New York.
2. *Cullavagga, (Vinaya Pitaka) X, 1, 4.*
3. *Vinaya Pitaka*, p. 272.
4. See *Therigatha*, XXII, XXIV, XXXIX & LXVI.
5. *Mahavagga, (Vinaya Pitaka) I, 54; Cullavagga, (Vinaya Pitaka) X,17,1*
6. *Vinaya Pitaka*, IV, p. 334-35.
7. Dhammapal's commentary on *Therigatha* No. XI & LVI.
8. *Anguttara Nikaya* i, XIV.
9. Davids, C. A. Foley Rhys (1909): *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*, Pali Text Society, London, p. 48.
10. Dhammapal's commentary on *Therigatha* No. XLV.
11. *Therigatha*, XLV (Stanzas 102 to 103).
12. *Ibid*, XI (Stanza 11).
13. *Ibid*, XXI (Stanza 23).
14. *Ibid*, LVII & XLVII.

15. Ibid, I.
16. Canto X, Psalm of Eleven Verses (Stanzas 216 to 219).
17. Canto IX, Psalm of Nine Verses (Stanza 204).
18. Horner, I. B. (1936): *Women under Primitive Buddhism– Laywomen and Almswomen*, Reprinted (2007) by Motilal Banarasidas, New Delhi, pp. 118-161.
19. See Bhikkhuni Pac. 56: *Vinaya Pitaka*, IV. 313.
20. See Bhikkhuni Pac. 59: *Vinaya Pitaka*, IV. 315.
21. See Bhikkhuni Pac. 57: *Vinaya Pitaka*, IV. 314.
22. *Book of the Discipline*, (*Vinaya Pitaka*), V. 354-55.
23. *Vinaya Pitaka*, III, p. 234-35.
24. Horner, I. B. (1936): *Women under Primitive Buddhism– Laywomen and Almswomen*, Reprinted (2007) by Motilal Banarasidas, New Delhi, p. 155. Also see Murcott, Susan (1991): *First Buddhist Women–Poems and Stories of Awakening*, Parallax Press, Berkeley.
25. XVI; 10-11.
26. IV, P. 235-36.
27. *Cullavagga*, (*Vinaya Pitaka*) X, 26, 1 & 2.
28. *Therigatha* XL (Stanzas 79 to 80).
29. *Vinaya Pitaka*, IV, p. 235-36.
30. Ibid, IV, 216.
31. Dhammapal's commentary on *Therigatha*, XXXIV.
32. Ibid, XLVII.
33. Ibid, XII, XIII & LII.