

# STATUS OF WOMEN AS DEPICTED IN THE THERĪGĀTHĀ

## Abstract

This article focuses on the Therīgāthā, a text from the KhuddakaNikāya that details the spiritual journey of 73 enlightened women who left their worldly lives to join the *BhikkhunīSaṅgha*. It highlights the oppressive status of women during the Buddha's time and how the establishment of the *BhikkhunīSaṅgha* allowed women to break free from the shackles of the male-dominated patriarchal society. The article also explores how women's status improved after joining the *BhikkhunīSaṅgha* and how this is depicted in the Therīgāthā. Unlike other Pāli texts, the Therīgāthā contains no discrimination against women and features women as teachers for not only women but also men. The article emphasizes the significant role played by women in the growth and development of Buddhism and how the Therīgāthā serves as a testament to their empowerment.

Furthermore, the article discusses the prominent figures among the 73 enlightened women, such as Mahaprajapatigautamin (**Pāli: Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī**), Khemā, and **Paṭācārā** Dhammādinā, who made significant contributions to the development of Buddhism. These women were not only able to attain enlightenment but also became respected teachers of the Dhammā.

The Therīgāthā is a unique text that highlights the spiritual achievement of women and serves as a valuable source for understanding the status of women during the Buddha's time. The text portrays women not as inferior beings, but as capable of attaining enlightenment and contributing to the growth of Buddhism.

The establishment of the *BhikkhunīSaṅgha* was a significant milestone in

## Author

**Dr. Praveen Kumar**

Associate Professor

Tathagat Buddha Chair

Samrat Ashoka Subhati School of  
Buddhist Studies

Swami Vivekanand Subharti  
University

Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.

praveenkumar.kumar1976@gmail.com

the history of women's empowerment, providing women with a platform to pursue spiritual growth and become respected members of the Buddhist community. The Therīgāthā serves as a testament to the success of this movement and the remarkable achievements of women in the Buddhist tradition.

Overall, the article aims to shed light on the importance of the Therīgāthā in understanding the status of women in the Buddhist tradition and the empowering impact of the BhikkhunīSaṅgha. The text provides a valuable insight into the spiritual journey of these women and their contributions to the development of Buddhism, making it a crucial source for anyone interested in the history of women's empowerment and the evolution of the Buddhist tradition.

**Keywords:** BhikkhunīSaṅgha, Nibbāna, therīgāthā, bhāvanā-maya-paññā, Women empowerment.

The story of patacara informed us two important things. Buddha did not discriminate between his monk and non-disciples. He recognized them as per their merit and second important thing theri were not only light of wisdom for themselves only but they were light of wisdom for another female and male also.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The present article titled "The Status of Women as depicted in the Therīgāthā" delves into the spiritual journeys of several prominent Therīs, such as MahaprajapatiGautami (Pali: MahāpajāpatīGotamī), Paṭācārā, *Khemā*, Dhammadinnā, and Vaddha, as portrayed in the Therīgāthā. These remarkable women played pivotal roles in the development of Buddhism through their preaching and organizational skills, which they cultivated after joining the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha.

This article illuminates the fact that the doors of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha was open not only to women from privileged backgrounds but also to women from all walks of life, Whether princesses or prostitutes, widows or wives, royals or beggars. Women from diverse backgrounds were welcomed. The article extensively explores the revolutionary nature of this inclusivity in sixth-century B.C. India, where women were generally regarded as inferior in a male-dominated patriarchal society.

Furthermore, the article delves into the portrayal of women in the Therīgāthā as not only teachers for their fellow women but also as teachers for men—a groundbreaking development during that time. This absence of discrimination against women in their pursuit of spiritual enlightenment within the Therīgāthā is a significant aspect discussed in detail.

Through a thorough examination of the Therīgāthā, this article aims to provide valuable insights into the status of women in Buddhism, highlighting their immense contributions and the absence of gender-based obstacles in their quest for spiritual upliftment. By shedding light on these narratives, the article contributes to a broader understanding of women's empowerment and equality within the context of ancient Buddhist literature.

During the 6th century B.C, when Buddhism was evolving and growing in India, the society had become male-dominated and patriarchal. As a result of the rigid form of patriarchy, women lost several socio-economic and political rights that they had previously enjoyed during the early Vedic period. Women became objects of exploitation by men during the time of the Buddha, as seen in the stories of some therīs, such as Isidasi<sup>1</sup>, who was married four times and abandoned by her husband each time, despite her devoted service to him and his family. Other therīs like Vera<sup>2</sup> and Dhira<sup>3</sup> chose not to remember their past lives after joining the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. The stories of these women in the therīgāthā highlight the male dominance over women during the Buddha's era.

Despite the adverse social environment, Buddha opened the gates of his Saṅgha to a large number of women, creating an opportunity for them to break free from the shackles of the male-dominated patriarchal society. About 500 women, including MahaprajapatiGautami (Pali: MahāpajāpatīGotamī), entered the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. Some entered due to adverse circumstances in their lives, while others were drawn by the emergence of Pannā within them. Upon entering the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, some women emerged as eloquent preachers, while others displayed wisdom, intelligence, supernatural powers, and unobstructed vision<sup>4</sup>. Some were also well-versed in the vinaya rules set by the Buddha. The experiences and spiritual achievements of these women, known as therīs, are recorded in Therīgāthā, the ninth text of the *KhuddakaNikāya*.

One of the most revolutionary aspects of Therīgāthās is that there is no discrimination between men and women in the attainment of Nibbāna. The text speaks of gender equality, recognizing that men and women possess the same spiritual capacities. The Therīgāthā also features female enlightened arahants, or those who have achieved the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

Out of the 73 therīs in the Therīgāthā, 13 were considered the most important due to their particular good qualities. For instance, MahaprajapatiGautami (Pali:MahāpajāpatīGotamī) was the senior-most Bhikkhunī, Khemā therī possessed great wisdom, *Uppalavaṇṇā* therī had great supernormal power, and Paṭācārātherī bore the vinaya discipline. Dhammadinnā therī was an accomplished preacher, Nanda therī was energetic, Sona therī or Bahuputtika therī was absorbed in the Jhāna, Sakula therī possessed the Divine eye, Kundalakesā therī had quick penetrative knowledge, Bhaddakapilānī therī had the power to recollect past existence, Bhaddakaccana therī wore robes made from rags, and Singālakamatu therī had the highest confidence in the Triple Gem<sup>5</sup>.

All the above mentioned Therīs of Therīgāthā made extraordinary achievement in spiritual field as the Theras achieved. Their verses speak of complete annihilation of ignorance (*Avijjā*) and desire (*tanhā*) and the bliss of wisdom.<sup>6</sup>

Gender appeared to be insignificant in the Therīgāthā to practice the Buddha's Dhammā. Once somā therī was tempted by when travelling in the forest. Mara states that women are not intelligent enough to attain enlightenment, somā replies with a verse which indicates the insignificance of gender to spirituality.

“What does womenhood matter at all,  
When the mind is concentrated well,  
When knowledge flows on steadily,  
As one sees correctly into Dhammā,  
One to whom it might occur  
I am a woman or I am a man  
Or I am anything at all.  
Is fit for Māra to address.”<sup>7</sup>

Another important thing with regard to the status of women in the Therīgāthā appeared that woman in the form of therī became a teacher for another woman. Bhikkhunī *Paṭācārā* was such therī, who became a teacher for another 500 women.<sup>8</sup> After her marriage with her lover unfortunately she lost her son husband and parents. After this unfortunate event she became Bhikkhunī under the guidance of the Buddha. After becoming Bhikkhunī she became very enlightened by practising Vipassana meditation. She established herself as an expert on the vinaya among the Bhikkhunī as upali was the expert of the vinaya among the Bhikkhus. She was the source of inspiration for another 500 suffering women those who had lost their son husband and parents. All these 500 women entered into Bhikkhunī Saṅgha due to this unfortunate event in their life. They learnt Dhamma from *Paṭācārā*. As a consequence they understood the three characteristic of anitya dukkha and anatma character of this world and became very much enlightened. Now these 500 women as a suffered before becoming *Paṭācārā* disciple. Their mind had completely transformed which reflected from their verses appeared in Therīgāthā.

“We cannot know the way of coming men  
“We cannot see the way they have gone  
Why then suffer for him  
Shedding tears for him  
Stop crying for the life of man  
Don’t care he came and donot stop he went Ask yourself again  
You came down on earth for this moment  
One may come and another may go  
Human has to die and reborn  
So, Why should you cry  
In this way, Bhikkhunī *Paṭācārā*  
Taught those mothers, the natural death,  
The endless cycle of *Saṃsāra*, the life and death.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, they also received Bhikkhunī ordination and soon after, they too attained enlightenment.

### **They Mentioned their Enjoyment on the Following Statements:**

My mind is cured today,  
Liberation aroused in me.  
I go refuge to the Triple gem- The Buddha, the Dhammā and the Saṃgha.<sup>12</sup>

The story of *Paṭācārā* informed us two important things. Buddha did not discriminate between his monk and non-disciples. He recognized them as per their merit. SSSSecond important thing therī were not only light of wisdom for themselves only but they were light of wisdom for another female and male also.

There were several Therīs in the Therīgāthā who became teacher for their parents, and husband. Sumedhā and Dhammadinnā were foremost among them.<sup>13</sup>

Sumedhā shaved of her hair herself when she was staying with her family because she wanted to force her parents who were pushing her to get married. She, finally, succeeded to cancel her proposed marriage and got permits her to enter the Bhikkhunī saṅgha. But before she left home, Sumedhā convinced her whole family and its retinue of the validity of the Buddha’s message.

After that, Sumedhā gave a discourse to the audience on the great value of a human birth in the infinity of *Saṃsāra*. Human life is very rare to get, and it is also very rare occasion to meet with the Buddha since Buddhism offers the noble way leading to the end of *Saṃsāra* suffering, and or practicing the teachings of the Buddha. *Sumedhā* also spoke on the dangers of sensual pleasures and sensual desire. Then she spoke out about the noble eight fold path to her audience as follows:

When the immortal state (Amata) exists, why are you people pursuing in the sensual pleasures? For all who are enjoying in sensual pleasures, are burning alive on fire.

*Sumedhā* urges her family to look beyond such binding pleasures, and to follow the words of the Buddha which shows the way to ultimate peace. She encourages them to keep in mind their long-term benefit and not to try for momentary happiness with sensual desire she reminds them as a spiritual teacher that Desires of sensual pleasures burn those who do not let go.<sup>14</sup>

Another therī was Dhammadinnā.<sup>15</sup>

She was from mercantile family of Rajgir. She married to *Visākhā*. *Visākhā* had listened Dhammā from the Buddha and attained the state of Non Returner (Anāgāmi). Dhammadinnā knew the situation of her husband when she inquire *Visākhā* why he was no longer associated with her as a normal house holds life. Then she asked permission from her husband to enter Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and she became a Bhikkhunī. As soon as she became a Bhikkhunī, she decided to go to the forest and practiced meditation alone. In no longer time, she attained the state of Arahantship which was one step higher than her ex-husband. She then returned to the city. When *Visākhā* heard her sudden return, he decides to visit her to find out whether she was being dissatisfied in Samsāra or she had understood the Dhammā.

Rather than asking her directly, he decided to ask questions on the teaching and to judge her from the answers she gave. The discourse consists of a series of questions asked by *Visākhā* and the profound answers given by Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā<sup>16</sup>

In the history of Indian society, this is an extremely rare occurrence. The reason is that Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā who has achieved the highest level of spiritual enlightenment, and now she is teaching her former husband who is ready to learn from her. At the end of the discourse, all the doubts of *Visākhā* had passed. The Buddha himself praised that the teachings of Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā would be exactly the same if he would have given it himself, the words of the Buddha (Buddhavacana). The Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā's teachings are uniquely distinguished amongst the Bhikkhunī praised by the Buddha as Buddha vacana or the Buddha's word.

The advice of Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā can be found in the Therīgāthā:

“A mediator should have right effort, strong determination mindfulness. He who is against the sensual pleasures (Kāmaguna) is called the one who goes upstream.”<sup>17</sup>

This is the Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā's advice directed to her fellow women that reminds for the women in the world today. It seems that some people think that women are better to learn from men. But the example of Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā story proves that women have the opportunity as the same hold for men in teaching and learning of the Buddha's Dhammā. It is very important for women to have such exemplary Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā having lived as a foremost Dhammā preacher in this world. This is one of greatest blessings of the women rights to serve as an enlightened Dhammā preacher for all people of the world.

Besides, *Sumedhā* and Dhammadinnā, there were several Therīs in Therīgāthā, who became teacher for another women, son, and entire in laws family. For e.g. Therīs Like *Tissā*,

Dhira, Vira, Mitta, Bhadra, upassama Were taught by  
Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī,

So, She was imparting knowledge among the female laities and enhancing education among them.<sup>19</sup>

At the time of her *parinibbāna* of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha, declared about her Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī therī being the senior most.<sup>20</sup>

Vaddha's mother is one in which she specially guides her son in the Dhammā. This woman joined the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha when her son vaddha was a child, and she gave him to her relatives to take care later, her son was ordained in the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. One day, he went to visit his mother in the Bhikkhunī residences. When they met each other, she admonished him to achieve nibbāna (the highest goal of Buddhism) thus:

“O vaddha, you should not attach anything in this world. My son, you should not suffer again and again in this world of existence.”<sup>21</sup>

O vaddha, stay in the noble stage of mind, freedom from attachment, cut the doubt off, be calm, be without defilements. O vaddha, devote yourself, to the way leading to the end of suffering. Go to practice for the achievement of enlightenment.<sup>22</sup>

From this instruction, vaddha knew this mother's achievement in the Dhammā. She encouraged her son in the realization of the four Noble truths. After hearing his mother's inspiring words, he has finally attained his enlightenment.

Here it is found a woman's example of spiritual teacher combined with her timely Dhammā instruction, inspiring a man to put forth the most effort and attain complete liberation from Saṃsāra.

A woman who became a nun in Therīgāthā contributed a lot in the form of creating verses etc. like monks; these nuns did have their escalating utterances which became teaching for other women.<sup>23</sup>

Mention may be made by Ālavikā, Kisāgotamī, vijayā, *Uppalavaṇṇā*, sela and three other sisters cālā, upacalā and sīsūpacāla. The cūlavedallasutta was given by the nun Dhammadinnā. In the same way the entire paean of seventy three nuns are also testimonials of educational and intellectual developments of these nuns.<sup>24</sup>

These nuns propagated the teachings of the Buddha and in this course they educated women for their capacities to learn and to cope with the adverse situations or intricacies of life. In this process they decimated education among those women who could not manage mass education.

Therīgāthā, inform us that women had got priesthood right. This right has been given by Christianity to women folk during last part of the twentieth century. But the Buddha gave the women this right of becoming 2550 years before. This shows far sightedness of the Buddha.<sup>25</sup>

Based on the above writing, It appears that women in the form of therīs and Bhikkhunīs occupied good status in the Therīgāthā. There is no single discrimination against women appeared in the Therīgāthā. It does not consider women as inferior than men. It Consider that these biological and Physical differences of both sexes are nothing concerned with the individual realization of the four Noble truths. It recognizes that women are eligible to obtain the Buddhist final destination of Nibbāna and both men and women have equal rights in the way of spiritual practice and also equally useful to the society.

Moreover, most import thing with regard to the status of women in Therīgāthā appeared that women are the teacher of not only women but they are teacher of male also.

Women are shown to be teacher of her, son, husband, and entire family, and In-laws house. This was a greatest achievement for women in society like six-century be and it was an indeed revolutionary event.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Dr Vimal Kirti,therīgāthā.,Nagpur:2002 P257-259,See isidasi Theri.
- [2] Ibid P-38
- [3] Ibid P-36
- [4] Kumar Praveen,nuns in early Buddisim Patna 2019 P- 29
- [5] *Ekanipāta* of AṅguttaraNikāya Nalanda edition P 23-24
- [6] See the gathas of Therīgāthā particularly the theris like Kisā Gotamī Paṭacārā and *Khemā* they understood the reality of the world and their *Avijjā* and *Taṇhā* removed.
- [7] *Sagāthāvagga* samyutta pali SaṃyuttaNikāya12.9
- [8] Dr Vimalkirti Therīgāthā Nagpur 2002 see Paṭacārā theri P 143-144
- [9] Book published by vipassana Research Institue on Paṭacārā P 6
- [10] ibid
- [11] ibid
- [12] Theri APadana pali
- [13] For *Sumedhā therī* see swami Dwarikidas sastri Theragāthā Therīgāthā Pali varanasi 2008 P 309-320
- [14] ibid
- [15] Book published by vipassana Research Institute igatpuri on Dhammādina P 14-19
- [16] ibid
- [17] ibid
- [18] Kumar Praveen, nuns in early Buddhism Patna 2019 P 29-30
- [19] ibid
- [20] See book published by vipassana Research Institute on MahāpajāpatīGotamī.
- [21] Swami Dwarikadas Sastri Theragāthā,Therīgāthā Pali,Bauddha Bharti,Varanasi.P-272
- [22] ibid
- [23] kumar Praveen nuns in early Buddhism Patna 2019 P.42
- [24] ibid
- [25] ibid

## BIBLIOGRAHY

- [1] Swami Dwarika Das Sastri Theragāthā,Therīgāthā Pali Budda Bharti 2008.



- [2] Swami Dwarika Das Sastri, Culavagga Pali, Varanasi 1998.
- [3] The Jatakas  
Ed. V Fausbol, 7 vols (7 Vol. Index by D. Anderson) Trubner & Co London 1877-1897. Tr  
Various hands 6 vols the jatakas or the story of the buddhas Former  
Births, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1895-1907.
- [4] The Aṅguttaranikāya  
Ed. R Morris & E Hardy 5 vols. London PTS 1885-1900. The Translated references are  
from Gradual Sayings, tr F.L Woodward Vols. I, II V; E.M. Hare : Volm III & IV , London  
: PTS 1955-1970 (Reprints)  
The Samyutta Nikaya
- [5] Ed. M.L. Feer, 5 Vols London: PTS, 1884-1898. Tr C.A.F Rhys David and S.S Thera, Vol  
I; C.A.F Rhys Davids & F.L Woodward Vol, II; F.L Woodward Vols III, IV, V. The Book of  
Kindred Sayings London PTS, 1950-1956 (Reprints).
- [6] The Apadans  
Ed. M.E. Lilley, 2 vol, London PTS 1925-1927.

## SECONDARY SOURCE

- [1] Kumar Praveen Nuns in early Buddhism Patna 2019
- [2] Altekar As The position of women in Hindu civilization 3rd edition Delhi Motilal  
Banarasi Das 1974
- [3] Barenes Nancy s Buddhism A Sharma (ed.) women in religion Albany State University of  
New York 1987 105-133
- [4] Bartholomeus Tessa Women Under Bo tree a phd Dissertation submitted to the university  
of Virginia 1991 55-61
- [5] I. B. Horner *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen* 1930.