



DONORS & DISCIPLES: EXAMINING THE PATRONAGE AND AGENCY OF FEMALE DONORS IN BUDDHISM

Guest Faculty

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Abstract: This research paper studies the female patronage not merely a passive act of devotion but a powerful expression of agency. It challenges the traditional male-centric narrative of Buddhist history by highlighting the indispensable economic, social and spiritual contribution of female donors. Female donors have played a crucial role in development of Buddhism, particularly in Ancient India. Their patronage was beyond simple donations; it was an expression of patroness and means to gain a social standing, spiritual merit, and influence in Buddhism. Inscription and archaeological evidences from sites like Sanchi, Bharhut and Mathura reveals that there were large number of female patrons including both laywomen and nuns who were frequent and significant contributors to the construction and maintenance of stupas. The literature like *Therigatha* also provides information about contribution of the females in Buddhism.

This paper explores how female donors were not limited to the elite or royal class but includes females from diverse social, economic backgrounds like merchant, artisans, courtesans etc. This article explains that through patronage female donor transcended domestic limitation to become active participants in the public and religious spheres. It investigates the motivation behind donations- seeking spiritual liberation for themselves and families, gaining social legitimacy or asserting independence.

This research will provide details of complex dynamic between the misogynistic attitudes found in some Buddhist scriptures and the Epigraphical evidences of female empowered donors. This study will offer a more nuanced understanding of gender, power, and religious practice within the diverse landscape of Buddhist history.

Index Term: Female Donor, Patronage, Buddhism, Gender Identity

For over two thousand years, Buddhism, a religion and philosophy that originated in ancient India, had made a significant impact on Asia culture and thought. Its history is not just a record of monastic rules, customs and doctrines. Nonetheless, patronage has always played a significant role in its development, dissemination, and preservation, and it is closely related to this role. Patrons, ranging from ancient kings to contemporary lay worshippers, have given the sangha (monastic community) the financial support it needs to flourish, enabling monks and nuns to focus on their studies, spiritual practice, and sharing the Dharma (teachings). This paper examines the historical interplay between Buddhism and patronage, charting its development from the second century BCE to the third century CE in Northern India. It posits that patronage transcended mere financial transactions, establishing a symbiotic relationship that significantly influenced the evolution of Buddhism over time.

What do we mean by Patronage? Patronage of religious institutions means financial and social support. Buddhist Patrons and their inscription were motivated by non-religious interests. Aside from merit, donations to stupas or caves, images, and so on can provide social recognition as well as political and economic benefits. *Dāna* also served to increase the donor's visibility and showcase the individual identities of all donors, who preferred to portray their identities. Inscriptional data reveals a tendency of developing individual identification and recognition of participation in events centered on stupas, images, and so on. Any

contribution has the potential to create an infinite and self-replicating source of merit to a designated donor.

Patronage has a long history in Buddhism, dating back to the Buddha. The royal patronage was particularly concerned with the success and spread of Buddhism in ancient India and beyond its borders. The liberal support of kings, republican chiefs, and wealthy and important individuals was invaluable to Buddha. There were two main reasons for Buddha's acceptance of royal patronage: he was born to a republican chief and may have had connections to contemporary royal families. Second, despite the fact that he established a democratic organization for his sangh, he did not criticize or oppose the monarchical style of governance. He campaigned for great political authority.

As said by Prof A.L.Basham, 'the great numbers of the patrons of Buddhism were members of the rising middle class of merchants and craftsmen. We have large number of inscription in form of donatives inscription which indicates merchants or *Sethi* provided the funds for the construction of the great Stupa or monastery.'

A study of the Buddhist sect was conducted through inscriptions of donative nature or sculptures that flourished from second century BCE to third century CE. It played an essential role in people's religious lives. In Buddhism we get donatives inscriptions from the site of *Sanchi*, *Bharhut Mathura* and *Kausambi*. As a result for Buddhism we get large number of inscriptions to explain the gender roles in this sect.

Female patronage is crucial for the organizational continuation of any religion. Devotees have a significant role in instilling faith in their current and future generations. As a result, examining evolving feminine sponsorship of Buddhism from a regional and sub-regional viewpoint is important. This study may challenge long-held beliefs on Pan-Indian gender notions. In this study, an attempt will be made to comprehend the topic of patronage of Buddhism by women in northern India through an analysis of dedicatory inscriptions on Buddhist statues presented by them. A study of women's participation in Buddhism during this time period, based on an analysis of dedicatory and label inscriptions donated by them, has crucial implications for the social basis of Buddhist patronage and its gender notion.

Category for Division→ Site↓	Total	Not Votive	Unidentified	Individual	Joint	Collective
Sanchi	624	03 (44 Damaged)	15	512	24	26
Bharhut	198	78	03	111	-	1
Mathura	138	(1 Damaged 5 Later period)	29	80	09	14

Table 1: Based On Identities used in the inscriptions of various sites

Religious Donors→ Site↓	Bhikkhus	Bhikkhunis	Upasaka	Upasika
Sanchi	83	79	179	171
Bharhut	22	16	44	29

Table 2: Based on the Gender donations and Identity from Inscriptions

While examining these inscriptions, we discover that female identities did not decline as historians had claimed. The proportion for male to female in the inscription shows that female donors contributed equally and left markers. Study of these inscriptions from the second century B.C.E to the first century C.E. reveals their identities in the society.

The male-female ratio in votive inscriptions demonstrates that female donors continued to play an important role in the society. From above chart we find that male to female ratio was 1:3. The position of female donors as mothers, daughters, daughter-in-law and sister is seen in the familial identity and individual identity is seen through inscription of *nuns* and *Gaṇikā*.

This chapter primarily addresses three sub-themes of female's identity: as an individual, in a family, and in a profession. In Ancient India, a female identity was always linked to one of the male family members who had the authority over her life depending on her age—first, her father when she is a daughter, then her husband

when she is married, and finally, her son when she is a widow.

We shall begin our discussion with the case of a daughter in Ancient Indian society. Donation made by a daughter is expressed in the Sānchi inscription as the words *duhitu*, *dhitikaya*, and *dihitu*¹, which speak of the relationship between a father and daughter. Next, we discovered a mother-daughter relationship, mostly between a nun and her mother (*mātu&bhichuniya*) from Sānchi as an inscription records “*Ujeniyā Dhamayasāyā matu bhichuniya dānam*²” which reads as “The gift of the mother of the nun Dhamayasā from Ujjayini” another inscription records “*Seḍāya mātu pava[ji] ...*³” which means “the mother of Seḍa, a nun”.

An inscription from *Bharhut* reads as “*Dabhinikāya Mahamukhisa dhitu Badhikaya bhichhuniya dānam*⁴” means ‘the gift of the nun Badhikā, the daughter of Mahamukhi the Dabhinikā (inhabitant of Darbhina ?)’. Many scholars have studied this inscription as donation made by father and daughter (*Bhikshuni*) but if we see the palaeographical study of this inscription. The word ‘*Dabhinikā*’ is ending with *ā* which means it was used for a female as the Mahamukhi represent the post not a person name so it can be truly said that it was the donation made by father because in previous chapter we find women in independent occupational post.

The term like *Mātu* or *dhitu* represent the relationship between the donors whereas the term *bhichuniya* means nun and *Mātu* refers to mother. It shows that the nuns were somehow connected to their family which will be discussed further in the chapter.

It's interesting to note that the daughter mentions her relationship with her father but when she becomes nun then she mentions her mother. It's possible that after becoming nuns, they are more likely to gravitate towards their mothers or female relatives, which reflects matriarchal culture in *saṃgha*.

Similar to this, some daughters maintain ties to their maternal home even after getting married by mentioning their father's name as well as maintaining ties with their in-laws, demonstrating that daughters have a choice in the identity they choose. But there aren't many inscriptions like this one.

It's crucial to note that in this instance, when we noticed that donation made by the father and the son with their occupations, we came to the conclusion that the son was also connected to the same occupation, unlike in the case of the daughters.

An inscription from Sānchi “*Samikasa vānikasa putasaca'sa Siripālasa dānam*⁵” here *Samika* and his son *Siripāla* have made donations who was merchant (*vānikasa*). Hence, we believed that his son was also a merchant. Daughters were never seen having any professional identity in society other than being a homemaker. When they mention their father's occupation in the donation, there must be a possibility that their daughter is somehow connected to that occupation.

It's interesting that, despite the fact that the donatives records of female donors can be used to study their social power and presences, very little analysis has been done on this topic. The majority of the family members with whom the female donors have made appearances are male. It raises the question of whether female donors needed to confirm their association with male members in order to be accepted, given the popular association of male or patriarchy in society. But what about those female donor whose family ties aren't mentioned in the inscription? However, very few works has been done in this area.

Romila Thapar⁶ had some insightful questions after noticing the names of laywomen patrons engraved on the *Bharhut* ruins. Did they have any occupational identity? Did these female have the ability to inherit property? Did they make these donations using their *strī-dhana*, which they theoretically had complete control over? Was there a higher prevalence of this female patronage phenomenon in heterodox sects?

In *Bharhut* we find inscriptions of monks with epithets of ‘*ārya*’, ‘*Bhāndata*’, & ‘*bhānaka*’. The title ‘*ārya*’ means the venerable which have been used by the monks in Sanchi, *Bharhut* and Mathura. We don't find any inscriptions in which they have used this title for nuns. Here, Cunnigham⁷ used the word ‘*Bhānaka*’ as a place,

¹Monuments of Sānchi 80, 132, 523, 532, 667, 734

²Ibid no.60

³Ibid no.728

⁴Corpus inscriptionumindicarumVol.II, PartII, A 42: Plate VII

⁵Monuments of Sānchi, Pl.131,189-191

⁶Romila Thapar, Cultural Transaction and Early India: Tradition and Patronage,

⁷Cunnigham, The Stupa of *Bharhut*, pp.135-7

whereas Luders⁸ suggest it is preacher or reciter. Also, Barua understand the term as 'reciter of scared texts'. At Bharhut, there are two inscriptions⁹ where monks have used the title of '*Bhānaka*' and twice used together with the title of '*Bhādanta*'¹⁰. Here, at Sanchi and Mathura these epithets were not used also no women have used these titles at any sites.

Does it mean that oral traditions were more accessible to monks than nuns? We can also say that from the inscriptions from Bharhut that they were earlier from Sanchi. Also, *Sangh* were still continuing writings of texts as evident of oral traditions are found but only with the male members of the monastic order. It shows similarity with *Brahamanical* traditions in which women were denied of oral transmission of texts during this time period. It suggests that there were gendered discriminations in the sangh.

Although early literary evidence shows that nuns contributed to the transmission of the texts but inscriptions do not provide same. Literature like *therighata*, *Bhikkunī Patimokha*, *Bhikkuni Kammavacca* is believed to be written by *bhikkuni* (nuns). At Mathura and Sarnath we get inscription of *Buddhamitra* who have acquired title of *tripitika* who is well versed in three *pitikas*. But epigraphic records shows different ideas because we only get two evidences in which a nun is having a title related to education in the *Sangh*.

The title of 'Tripitika' is seen through inscription is given to Buddhist monks and nuns during this time period. The only title which we find in Buddhism having gender equality is 'Tripitikas'. The title of Tripitika is given to the Monk Bala as seen in the three inscriptions- Sarnath Buddhist pillar inscription¹¹ and Sahet-Mahet Buddhist image Inscriptions¹². Also from Kaushambi¹³ we discovered three inscriptions of Buddhamitra and her appellation to Tripitika during Kanishka time period. An interesting fact in these inscriptions were none of the Kaushambi inscription refers nun Buddhamitra relation to the monk Bala as found in the inscription from Mathura in the later period of nun Dhanavati, who was also sister of nun Buddhamitra.

This was the highest title achieved by any female Buddhist monastic member in the inscriptions of this time period. This raises the question of gender equality in Buddhist monastic order which is seen in the literature but not in inscriptions. Does Buddhism have gender equality in the sangha? With the study of these inscriptions and inscribed images we do find that there was gender inequality among the members. Female donors were not given title of *ārya* like male donors of the monastic order.

The difference in the title not only reveals the gender inequality in the Sangha but also inform about the education system and discrimination during this time period.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates that female patronage in early Buddhism was far from a passive act; instead, it served as a **powerful expression of agency** that significantly influenced the religion's development, dissemination, and preservation. Evidence from major archaeological sites like Sanchi, Bharhut, and Mathura reveals that women, including laywomen and nuns, were **indispensable contributors** to the maintenance and construction of religious monuments. The data from votive inscriptions shows a striking **1:3 male-to-female ratio**, effectively challenging historical narratives that claimed female identity was in decline during this period.

By providing financial support, women from diverse backgrounds—ranging from elite royalty and merchant classes to courtesans—were able to **transcend domestic limitations** and secure public visibility, social legitimacy, and spiritual merit. Crucially, the shifting patterns of identification, where nuns often highlighted their female kin rather than fathers or husbands, suggest the existence of a **matriarchal culture** within the *sangha* that provided a unique space for female autonomy.

However, the paper also highlights a **complex dynamic of gender inequality**. While women like the nun Buddhamitra achieved high titles such as *Tripitika*, most nuns were still denied venerable titles such as *ārya* and appear to have been excluded from recognized oral traditions like the *Bhānaka*. Ultimately, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of Buddhist history by reconciling **misogynistic scriptural attitudes**

⁸ H.Luders, CII part II Vol. II

⁹CII, Vol. II, Part II, no. A62

¹⁰Ibid, A39, A61

¹¹ Anamika Roy, Brahmi Inscription from Northern India, p.198

¹² Anamika Roy, Op.Cit. ,p.197

¹³ Anamika Roy, Op.Cit. p. 200

with the epigraphical reality of empowered, active female donors who shaped the religious landscape of Northern India

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