

Bhikṣuṇīs of Early Historic Śrāvastī: Some Gleanings from the Therīgāthā

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Abstract: *Therīgāthā provides knowledge of the social background and different experiences of Therīs.¹ They were belonging to different social categories like Royals, Brāhmaṇas, Merchants and Courtesans. But the information regarding familial background of some of Therīs is absent. These women become Bhikkhunī for different reasons like greed, lust and hate the household life. In Therīgāthā Bhikkhunī compiled the religious experience they came from several regions, which was a famous centre of Buddhism. Śrāvastī was one of them. Upāsikā Viśākha was lived in Śrāvastī. She built Vihara for Bhikkhunī as Pubbaram near Jetavana. Some famous Bhikkhunīs belonged to Śrāvastī like Paṭācārā, Kisāgotamī, Sumagalamata, Punnā or Paṇṇika. Before analyzing these social-religious experiences of Śrāvastī' Bhikkhunī. We try to understand the historical context of the Therīgāthā. This discussion is important because in this way we might get a clue about Śrāvastī's Bhikkhunī. Here, I will discuss the religious experience of 15 Bhikkhunīs of Śrāvastī.*

Keywords: *Sravastī, Bhikshuni, Therīgāthā, Sangha, Religious experiences.*

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Introduction

Among Indian religions, Buddhism was the earliest religion to witness the evolution of an order of nuns (*Bhikṣuṇīsangha*). *Bhikṣuṇīsangha* came into existence during the life of Śākyamuni Buddha. It seems to have declined sometime during the early medieval period.² These Buddhist nuns, sometimes referred to as *Therī* and sometimes as *Bhikkhunīs* in the early Pali sources, left an important historical work: the *Therīgāthā*, which provides information about many women who became nuns. *Therīgāthā* is part of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the collection of minor books in the *Sutta Piṭaka*. The *Therīgāthā* describes not only their experiences as nuns, but also provides some significant information about their lives before entering the *Bhikṣuṇīsangha*. Their social backgrounds are also frequently mentioned in this text.

Therīgāthā is considered to be the “only canonical document in the world’s faiths that is attributed to female authorship and that focuses primarily on women’s religious experiences”.³ The present paper aims to study the socio-cultural life of *Bhikṣuṇīs*, belonging to the Śrāvastī region through the study of the *Therīgāthā*. In addition to this, it will also try to look at their experiences before and after entering the *Bhikṣuṇīsangha*. The *Therīgāthā* is a collection of poems/songs by 73 *therīs* with 522 verses. It is said to be the first record of religious experiences and emotional expressions of *Bhikṣuṇīs*. The songs of the *Therīgāthā* were, most likely, influenced by folk music prevalent in the concerned society. These songs are usually sung in the first person; however, they are occasionally set in a third-person narrative as well.⁴ *Therīgāthā* is first-hand historical evidence of the emotional expression of socio-cultural values by women. Various women, young as well as old, joined the Saṅgha. These women are presented in their familial status as wives and widows, mothers and daughters. Their presentation as wealthy and poor, royal and even as prostitutes is present in the *Therīgāthā*. This text provides interesting information regarding the social status of women who joined the Saṅgha. Out of the 73 *Bhikṣuṇīs* that find mention in this text, 23 were from royal and other aristocratic families, 13 from the families of merchants, 18 from different Brāhmaṇa families, 4 from lower castes (Chāṇḍāla, etc.), 11 from unspecified castes, and 4 courtesans.⁵ Out of these 73 *Bhikṣuṇīs*, 15 *Bhikṣuṇīs* were related to Śrāvastī. In this paper, an attempt will be made to analyse the social background of these 15 *Bhikṣuṇīs* related to Śrāvastī.

The City of Śrāvastī and Its Early Association with Buddhism

Śrāvastī is known as *Sāvatt̥hi* in Pali and *Śrāvastī* in Sanskrit. In Jaina texts, it has been referred to with different names: Chandrikāpuri and Chandanapuri. It was the birthplace of Jaina Tīrthaṅkara Sambhavanātha and Chandraprabhanātha. 24th Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra spent many rainy seasons here. According to early Pali sources, Śrāvastī was the capital of Kośala *Mahājanapada*, and was a prosperous city.⁶ It was situated near the foothills of the Himalayas. A number of cities were connected with this city. It was located on the uttarāpatha, an important trade route in the Early Historical period. In the Kośala kingdom, many wealthy merchants used to patronise Śākyamuni Buddha and Buddhist mendicants. A rich merchant named Anāthapiṇḍika who lived in Śrāvastī met Śākyamuni Buddha for the first time in Magadha and was greatly influenced by him.⁷ He invited Śākyamuni Buddha to come to Śrāvastī. When Śākyamuni Buddha came to Śrāvastī, Anāthapiṇḍika decided to gift a *Vihāra* for the use of the *Bhikṣusangha*. So he decided to purchase a garden from prince Jeta. For this, Anāthapiṇḍika paid a price more than the fair price of the garden to prince Jeta in *Kāṛṣāpaṇas*.⁸ After purchasing this garden from prince Jeta, Anāthapiṇḍika got constructed a *Vihāra* at this site for the use of the *Bhikṣusangha*. It was known as Jetavana *Vihāra*. In Jetavana *Vihāra* Anāthapiṇḍika got built different buildings for *Bhikṣus*⁹, where *Bhikṣus* used to practice their spiritual activities. *Upāsikā* Viśākhā also made the donation of a particular *Vihāra* named as Pubbārāma near Jetavana. King Pasenadi also got built a *Vihāra* named Rājakārāma near Jetavana.¹⁰

Bhikṣuṇīs of Śrāvastī: Their Social Backgrounds

While there are many references to the establishments of different monasteries for the *Bhikṣusangha* at Śrāvastī, there is practically no information regarding the foundation of any nunnery at or near the same city. What we, rather, get is a list of different women who became *Bhikṣuṇīs* under different circumstances of their lives. In this regard, we get some interesting information from the *Therīgāthā*. The *Therīgāthā* discusses many categories of women who took *pabbajjā* to become *Bhikṣuṇīs*. The first category included those women who were already *Upāsikā* before taking *pabbajjā*. The

second category included those women who were not *Upāsikā* before their *pabbajjā*. Arvind Sharma categorizes *Bhikṣuṇīs* into three sections on the basis of taking *pabbajjā* in the Saṅgha.¹¹ In the first category, he included those women, who were impressed by the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha.¹² The second category included those women, who were impressed by the preaching of *Bhikṣuṇīs* of the Saṅgha. The third and last category included those women who were influenced by the philosophy and principles of Dhamma. The names of certain women, which could be placed in the first two of the above-mentioned categories, include Chandā (*Gāthā* No. 49), Uttarā (*Gāthā* No. 58), Muttā (*Gāthā* No. 2), and Punnā (*Gāthā* No. 3). Chittā (*Gāthā* No. 23), Mattikā (*Gāthā* No. 24), Uttamā (*Gāthā* No. 31), and Sīhā (*Gāthā* No. 40).¹³

15 *Bhikṣuṇīs* were related to the city of Śrāvastī. Their social backgrounds are summarized in the following table:

<i>Social background</i>	<i>Names of Bhikṣuṇīs</i>	<i>Total number</i>
From Brāhmaṇa families	Muttā, Dantikā, Sakulā, Guttā, Uttarā	5
From royal family	Sumanā, Ubbirī	2
From the families of different merchants	Puṇṇā, Uttamā, Paṭācārā, Uppalavaṇṇā	4
From poor families	Sumangala's mother, Kisā Gotamī, Dhamma	3
From slave families	Puṇṇikā	1

Women from Brāhmaṇa Families Becoming *Bhikṣuṇīs*

Muttā (*Gāthā* No. 2), Dantikā (*Gāthā* No. 32), Sakulā (*Gāthā* No. 44), Guttā (*Gāthā* No. 56), and Uttarā (*Gāthā* No. 58) belonged to different Brāhmaṇa families. These women joined Saṅgha and practiced spiritual activities. They reached a higher stage of spirituality.

After taking *pabbajjā* and becoming *Bhikṣuṇīs*, Muttā celebrated her newly found freedom in a particular verse of the *Therīgāthā*:

“*Sumuttāsādhumuttahitīhikhujjehimuttīyā*
Udukkhalenamusalena, patinākhujjakena ca
Muttamhijātimaraṇābhavanettisamūhatāti.”¹⁴

“The name I am called by means freed
 And I am quite free, well -free from three crooked things,
 I am freed from birth and death,
 What leads to rebirth had been rooted out.”¹⁵

Earlier, Dantikā was a lay follower of Śākyamuni Buddha. She had taken *pabbajjā* under Pajāpatī Gotamī.¹⁶ Sakulā was also known as Pakulā.¹⁷ She was influenced by her brother. She said that when “I heard a brother setting forth norm”¹⁸, she decided to take *pabbajjā* in Saṅgha. Like Dantikā, Guttā also took *pabbajjā* under Pajāpatī Gotamī.¹⁹ It may be noted that before taking *Pabbajjā*, she took permission from her parents. Uttarā joined under the influence of Paṭācārā.²⁰ Paṭācārā trained her for spiritual practices.

Women from Royal Family Becoming *Bhikṣuṇīs*

The women from the Royal households also took *pabbajjā* in the Saṅgha. In the case of Śrāvastī, two women related to the ruling king Pasenadi took *pabbajjā*. Pasenadi's sister Sumanā (*Gāthā* No. 16) and his wife Ubbirī (*Gāthā* No. 33) joined the Saṅgha. Sumanā, despite her desire to take *pabbajjā*,

decided to wait till the death of her grandmother's life.²¹ It basically indicates she fulfilled her social responsibility before becoming *Bhikṣuṇī*. After the death of her grandmother, she obtained permission from his brother to take *pabbajjā*. But the case of Ubbirī was different. After the death of her daughter, Ubbirī became deeply sad. She wanted to leave her sorrow behind. Her example indicates a deep sense of sadness and a search for peace after the death of a beloved family member. Śākyamuni Buddha provided that peace through his philosophy. She expressed that:

*“Abbahīvata me sallaṃduddasamhadayassitaṃ
Yaṃ me sokaparetāyadhītusokaṃvyapānudi.”*²²

“Lo! From my heart, the hidden shaft is gone!
The shaft that nestled there hath he removed.
And that consuming grief for my dead child
Which poisoned all the life of me is dead.”²³

It may be noted that Ubbirī did not take the permission of her husband (Pasenadi) to take *pabbajjā*, yet her entry to the *Bhikṣuṇīsaṅgha* was allowed by Śākyamuni Buddha.

Women from Merchants' Families Becoming *Bhikṣuṇīs*

In *Therīgāthā*, we get the references to women belonging to merchants' families, who took *pabbajjā*. These women were Puṇṇā (*Gāthā* No. 3), Uttamā (*Gāthā* No. 30), Paṭācārā (*Gāthā* No. 47), and Uppalavaṇṇā (*Gāthā* No. 64). It appears that they had a comfortable life in their childhoods. But growing social anxieties in their adulthood forced them to search for new meaning in life. Therefore, they decided to take *pabbajjā*. Some of them were also influenced by the preaching of other *Bhikṣuṇīs*. Thus, getting influenced by the preaching of Pajāpatī Gotamī, Puṇṇā took *pabbajjā* at an age of twenty years.²⁴ Uttamā too became a *Bhikṣuṇī* after getting influenced by the preaching of Pajāpatī Gotamī.²⁵

Paṭācārā was famous *Bhikṣuṇī* of Śrāvastī. Thirty *Bhikṣuṇīs* from different parts of north India had taken *pabbajjā* under Paṭācārā.²⁶ The *Therīgāthā* informs us some interesting facts regarding her pre-*pabbajjā* life. Paṭācārā's father was a wealthy person and he wanted to get her married in a wealthy family.²⁷ But she eloped with her lover, who was a servant of her father. After her marriage with her lover, her life became very painful due to a series of accidents. Her two children and husband died in an accident, which rendered her extremely sad and depressed. She took *pabbajjā* and joined the Saṅgha as a *Bhikṣuṇī* and attained great fame. Uppalavaṇṇā also belonged to a wealthy merchant family.²⁸ Uppalavaṇṇā did not want to marry because she got too many marriage proposals from very respectable and wealthy families. When she reached adulthood, kings, and commanders from many parts of north India wanted to marry her. Her father was confused as to whom to get her married to. He could think of no other solution to the problem except to advise Uppalavaṇṇā to take *pabbajjā* and become a *Bhikṣuṇī*.

Women from Poor Families Becoming *Bhikṣuṇīs*

The anxieties and tensions of household life based on patriarchal principles, were heavier for women than for men. Some verses of the *Therīgāthā* mention escape from bonds of marriage and their desire for entering the *Bhikṣuṇīsaṅgha*. Sumangala's mother²⁹ (*Gāthā* No. 21) was born in a poor family. She was married to a brush painter. She had suffered as a laywoman. For this reason, she explained in her experiences that she hated household life. In her *Gāthā* she states that:

“*Sumuttikesumuttikesādhumuttikamhimusalassa
Ahiriko me chattakaṃvāpiukkhalikā me deḍḍubhaṃvāti*”³⁰

“Dear one who is quite free, dear one who is quite freed,
I too am well-freed from pestle;
My shameless husband, even the sunshade he worked under,
And my pot that stinks like a water snake all disgust me.”³¹

Kisā Gotamī (*Gāthā* No. 63) belonged to a poor family and she had a difficult life.³² She was not respected by her in-laws till she gave birth to a child. Unfortunately, her child died, after which she againfaced the same disrespect from her family. In severe grief, she met Śākyamuni Buddha, who made her realize that there was not a single-family in Śrāvastī, which has not survived the death of a family member. She took *pabbajjā* after that. Her *Gāthā* narrates the problems she faced as a woman:

“*Dukkhoitthibhāvoakkhātōpurisadammasārathinā
Sapattikam pi hi dukkaṃappekaccāsakiṃvijātāyo.*”³³

“Being a woman is suffering,
That has been shown by the Buddha,
The tamer of those to be tamed.
Sharing a husband with another wife is suffering for some,
While for others, having a baby just once is more than enough suffering.”³⁴
Saṃyutta Nikāya also mentions that she defeated her weakness.³⁵

Dhamma (*Gāthā* No. 17) belonged to a respected family, she was influenced by Muttā and Punnā *Bhikṣuṇīs*. She wanted to take *pabbajjā* in Saṅgha. But her husband did not give her permission. She joined the Saṅgha after the death of her husband.

Woman from Slave Family Becoming *Bhikṣuṇī*

Puṇṇikā was the daughter of a slave of Anāthapiṇḍika. Puṇṇikā became *Bhikṣuṇī* after taking the necessary permission of his master Anāthapiṇḍika. She took *pabbajjā* and joined the Saṅgha. Her *Gāthā* (*Gāthā* No. 65) mentions a conversation with a Brāhmaṇa.³⁶ Puṇṇika questioned a Brāhmaṇa regarding his ritual of taking bath. The Brāhmaṇa replied that “anyone, who does evil acts, would be freed from the fruit of that evil by washing off in water”.³⁷ Puṇṇikā countered Brāhmaṇa by stating:

“*Sacebhāyasidukkhasasacetedukkhamaṃpiyaṃ
Upehisaṃaṃbuddhaṃdhammaṃ Saṅghaṃ ca tādinaṃ
Samādihiyāhisilānitaṃteatthāyahehiti*”³⁸

“If you fear suffering, if you dislike suffering,
Take refuge in the Buddha, the dhamma that he taught
And the Saṅgha that has qualities like his,
Develop your moral virtues, that will be for your benefit.”³⁹

This Brāhmaṇa, getting impressed by Puṇṇikā, stated that “I may be born in Brāhmaṇa family, but now I really am a Brāhmaṇa”.⁴⁰

Conclusion

An analysis of the social backgrounds of the *Bhikṣuṇīs* of Śrāvastī mentioned in the *Therīgāthā* offers some interesting inferences. We may note that women from *Brāhmaṇa*, royal and merchants' families constituted 11 out of 15 reported examples from Śrāvastī, indicating that Buddhism was able to enlist support from the elite section of the society of Śrāvastī. Women from poor families and even the daughter of a slave joined the *Bhikṣuṇīsangha*. In most of the cases, women could take *pabbajjā* only after obtaining the prior permission of their male relatives or masters (father, brother, or the master of a slave). That highlights the prevailing patriarchal nature of the society of Śrāvastī in which women could not take decisions independently in most of the cases.

Notes

1. <https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/theri> a senior nun
2. Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, Delhi, 2004, pp. 91-98. Ronald Davidson argues that the decline of the Bhiksunisangha by the late 6th century AD was one of the factors that heralded a gradual decline of Buddhism in different parts of India. Some recent studies, However, indicate that it survived in the Kiul-Lalhisarai area of Bihar till the late eleventh century or slightly later (Birendra Nath Prasad, *Archaeology of Religion in South Asia, Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jaina Religious Centres in Bihar and Bengal, c. AD 600-1200*, Routledge, London and New York, 2021, p. 297; Birendra Nath Prasad, *Rethinking Bihar and Bengal: History, Culture and Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 2021, pp. 85-93).
3. Kathryn Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of Buddha- the Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā.*, Curzon Press, 1988, p. 1.
4. Barbara Stoler Miller, *The Therīgāthā: Women's Songs of Early Buddhism*, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Asian Studies Center, pp. 129-135.
5. I. B. Horner, *op.cit.*, pp. 167-168.
6. Bimla Charan law, *Śrāvastī in Indian Literature*, Published by the Directed Journal of Archaeology Survey of India, Delhi, 1999 (reprint), p. 7. *Majjhima Nikāya* (trans.) Bhikkhu Nanamali & Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Discourse of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Mjjhima Nikāya*, Kandy: Srilanka, Buddhist Publication Society, p. 1995, p. 1090. *Majjhima Nikāya* provides information about Śrāvastī as a prosperous: "There is a friend, city in the northern country named sāvatthi, The Blessed on fully accomplished and fully enlightened in now living there."
7. *Jātaka* No. 40, *KhiraṇḍJātaka*. E. B. Cowell (trans.) *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Vol. I, 1895, pp. 100-104.
8. A type of coins, which was important in early India. E. B. Cowell translated mentions that Anāthapiṇḍika had spent eighteen million gold coins, which was known as Kasharpan. p. 346.
9. *Jātaka* No. 40, edited by Fausball E. B. Cowell. Vol. I. pp. 100-104.
10. D. C. Ahir, *Śrāvastī: Where the Buddha Spent 25 Retreats*, Buddhist World Press, Delhi, 2009, p. 35.
11. Arvind Sharma, 'How and Why did the Women in Ancient India Become Buddhist Nuns?', *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 36 No. 3, 1977, pp. 239-251.
12. Arvind Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 243-244.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
14. *Therīgāthā* translated by Charles Hallisey, *Therīgāthā: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 2015, pp. 10-11.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
16. *Therīgāthā* translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *op.cit.*, p. 38.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
18. *Ibid.*,
19. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
21. *Ibid.*, pp, 19-20.
22. *Therīgāthā* translated by Charles Hallisey, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
23. *Therīgāthā* translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.
25. *Ibid.*, 35-36.
26. *Ibid.*, *Gāthā*No. 48.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 68-69.
28. *Ibid.*, pp.111-115
29. *Therīgāthā*, P. 25-25, In *Therīgāthā* mentions that her name is unable to trace in Pali literature. She is known as unknown Therī and other names as Sumangala's mother.
30. *Therīgāthā* translated by Charles Hallisey, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
32. *Therīgāthā* translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 106-110.
33. *Therīgāthā* translated by Charles Hallisey, *op.cit.*, p. 110.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
35. *Bhikkhunī Saṃyutta* in *Saṃyutta Nikāya* translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourse of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Wisdom Publication, USA, 2000, p. 225.
36. *Therīgāthā* translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
38. *Ibid.*, p.126.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 127.