

## Research Article

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# Female Donors at Sārnāth: Issues of Gender, Endowments, and Autonomy

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**Abstract:** Buddhism has different threads of traits to be explored and scrutinized. One of the important aspects is to know role and status of women in Buddhism through their visual representations in religious ceremonies, donations of the images, etc. The role, rank and implications of their participation in religious ceremonies is matter of inquiry. In particular, it is quite stimulating to know that their engagement in religious activities are egalitarian or highly gendered. Sārnāth was intentionally chosen by the Buddha as the place of his first sermon and its importance in Buddhism became unforgettable till it was finally destroyed in the medieval period. The role of women in religious activities started in the age of the Buddha. This sacred complex shows the gender variances in ritualistic participation and donations. Here, the influence of Buddhism on women's autonomy in spiritual/sacred endowment is a subject of contemplation.

**Keywords:** Vajrayāna, Visual representations, religious autonomy, donations, gender imbalance.

Women's participation in sacred/ritualistic matters has frequently been linked with the opportunities and autonomy given to them in the society. The association between women's autonomy and Buddhism has been acknowledged in inscriptions, literary evidences and a few sources give comparisons across major Buddhist traditions and sects. Women participated in numerous religious activities and their names have been found in various donative records. The votive epigraphs credited to females, unravels a magnificent relationship between the Buddhism and its female adherents. Here the focus is on variations in levels of female decision-making autonomy

within a single religious tradition—Buddhism. Buddhism plays an enormous role in everyday life of monks, nuns and lay persons, however, the importance and implications of it may vary across different segments of women. In particular, people's engagement in religious activities, its causes, practices, and consequences are highly gendered. Thus, it is well-known that women are usually more religious than men and in surroundings where religious presence is not controlled by gender, women have higher levels of religious participation. Though descriptions for gender imbalance in religious activities, and more broadly for the gender variances in ritualistic participation are still a matter of debate. It has been argued that the Buddha was one of the precursors whose teachings is a source of transformation of gender relations and empowerment of women. Yet, the influence of Buddhism on women's autonomy in religious participation in the early India is still a source of inquiry. It is a matter of investigation that how women's autonomy fluctuates across different Buddhist denominations; and how women's autonomy and decision making links to women's religious participation and understanding of inter-organization movement. For it the socio-economic fabric of the society, ethnocultural spectrum, and religious contexts are inquired. The considerable attention has been given to introspect the transformation of the relationship between Buddhism and women's status as a replication of both social changes, especially women's entry into the formal rituals, as well as monastic responses to these changes. The first such kind of woman's role started in Buddhism even before its foundation as a religion. Siddhārtha was offered *madhu-pāyasa* by Sujātā just before his enlightenment. Sujātā was the daughter of a householder in a village Senanigama at Uruvelā. She had prayed to a certain banyan tree near Niranjanā river for an upright husband and for a son. When she had obtained what she desired for, she was enormously happy and decided to fulfil her vow to the tree-god for giving her all that she had wished for. As she was preparing milk-rice (*madhu-pāyasa*), she was surprised to see Punna, her maid running back from the place where she was sent to choose the

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suitable place of worshipping at the foot of the banyan tree. She was very delighted and thrilled because she misunderstood that the *ṛakshadevatā* (tree god) himself is meditating at the foot of the tree. Sujātā too was happy listen this. She prepared the milk-rice and poured it into a golden bowl to offer it to him. She did not know that he was in fact Siddhārtha. She bowed with respect and offered milk-rice.<sup>1</sup> In Sārnāth-Vārānāsī region many such donations by the *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, and lay followers have been found in literary sources. Suppiya was a lay-woman living in Vārānāsī. While visiting the monastery in Isipattana, she met a monk who looked-for meat soup to recuperate from his sickness. She instructed her servant to buy meat but he was unable to find it because of non-slaughter day. She cut a piece of flesh from her thigh and gave it to servant to prepare soup for the monk. The following day the Buddha was invited for a meal at her place. When he reached there, he came to know about the incident. After this incident the Buddha made the rule not to eat human flesh even in dire need.<sup>2</sup> Suppiya was declared foremost of women who had provided amenities for the sick persons and whole humankind.<sup>3</sup> The edicts of Aśoka found at Sāncī, Sārnāth, and Kauśāmbī are earliest epigraphic records mentioning *bhikkhunīs* and their role in the *saṃgha*. The Edicts say that if they will create fissiparous tendencies in the *saṃgha*, they will be white robed and expelled.<sup>4</sup> These inscriptions suggest many new dimensions of Buddhism prevalent there. One aspect is that warning to *bhikkhunī saṃgha* indicates existence of separate nunneries in all these places, not only within the monastic set up but also outside as royal officials were instructed to spread this message to *saṃgha* of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* and get it implemented through various means in their respective territories. The main cause of issuing of these inscriptions by Aśoka was deviation by *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* from original path of Buddhism. The leading section of the edict emphasizes the adherence of rules and practices that was not followed due to intrusion of outsiders and unfaithful who were living luxurious life out of *saṃgha* expenses. The *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* who were adherent of Buddhism may also be deviated from the original path advised by the Buddha. It might be suggested that votive donations on behalf of the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* existed in the age of Aśoka which he did not like. He could foresee that such

tendencies could harm Buddhism and he tried to stop it. The donations by the queens to the Buddhist *saṃgha* is already known in the age of Aśoka. The Queen's Edict at Allahabad mentions Karuvākī, the second chief queen who is the first Buddhist woman to figure by name in Indian inscriptions. She inscribed her donations as a command from the emperor to his *mahāmāttas* in not only Kauśāmbī but also in other parts of his empire.<sup>5</sup> With the establishments of new dynasties just after the Mauryas, the evidences are found in all important Buddhist monasteries including Sārnāth, where the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* were engaged in votive donations to monasteries. Such donative practices may be developed in the period of Aśoka or earlier but cultivated in period of the Kuṣānas, Śakas and Śātāvāhanas. Two votive inscriptions in Sārnāth are found engraved on two stone railings which show that donations to monasteries by the *bhikkhunīs* was in process. The first inscription is in Brahmi character of second century BCE with legend '*bhikkhunīkāye Saṃvāhikye dānaṃ alambanaṃ*' (The lower horizontal stone of rail was donated by *bhikkhunī Saṃvāhika*).<sup>6</sup> The second inscription belongs to same date and mentions the gift of Jāteyika together with Bhārini. The legend is '*Bhāriniye saḥam Jāteyikayē*'.<sup>7</sup> The Second Buddhist Council held at Vaiśālī suggests monk's involvement in corporeal matters which may be increased in the Mauryan period. The problem arises when the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* appeared as a donor, evidenced in the votive inscriptions found at Buddhist locations of early phases, as their main task was to be the dhamma educator. Sometimes these donations were accepted as a skillful mechanism to support the comfortable living of the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*. But the argument which is missed here is that the monastic community was not just as passive recipient but an active participant in the act of *dāna*, they endeavored to make themselves gift-worthy, to demonstrate themselves as the spiritual guide of the society and at times they also put in their efforts towards the prolongation of faith by contributing to the formation of permanent icons. Indeed, the patrons and lay followers were too liberal and Buddhist monasteries have always been endowed with wealth and prosperity.<sup>8</sup> In the age of Aśoka these tendencies may be looked as divisive but in

1 *Dīgha Nikāya*, II.135, *Dhammapad Aṭṭhakathā*, 1.71

2 *Vinaya Pitaka*, I, 216ff

3 *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.26

4 E. Hultzsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. I, *Inscription of Asoka*, New Delhi: Indological Book House, 1969, pp.161-63

5 E. Hultzsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, pp.158-59

6 J.H. Marshall and Sten Konow, 'Sārnāth' *ASIAR*, 1906-07, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1908, p.95

7 Marshall and Konow, 'Sārnāth', pp.95-96

8 Sushma Trivedi, 'Ascetic Donations at early Buddhist Sites, Transgression of Monastic Code or Case of Reciprocity Redirected' in *Dāna, Reciprocity and Patronage in Buddhism*, ed. Anand Singh, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2017, p. 118

the longer term it helps Buddhism to proliferate in different areas because without adaptation and absorption of local traditions and values it was an arduous journey for Buddhism to infiltrate into unknown and hostile terrains. The penetration of Buddhism in far off lands in the early centuries of common era suggests that it absorbed several regional traditions and practices. The sectorial division of Buddhism was already visible from second Buddhist council and donations to different sects presumably started in the same age. Though genesis of such tendencies could be clearly traceable only in the post Maurya age which became institutionalized in the period of the Guptas. One inscription engraved on Aśoka pillar belonging to Gupta age pays homage to the teachers of the Sammitiya and the Vatsiputtiya Schools. It shows affiliation of *saṃgha* community and lay-persons to different sects and traditions. The person who incised this inscription is not known but the purpose of this donation seems to be mundane and personal by which one shows his reverence in the form of commitments, vows, and rituals.<sup>9</sup> Since beginning to its end, *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* of all quarters, of different sects used to assembled and resided here with the result fissiparous crept in and widened among the *vihāras* of Sārnāth. Xuanzang informs that followers of Vatsiputtiya, Sarvastivāda, Sammitiya, Mahāyāna and Haruka sects were residing in Sārnāth.<sup>10</sup> In the age of Aśoka these differences started widening and the emperor himself took measure to subdue it. The so called, *saṃghabheda* edict was issued to keep in mind that holy spot of *Dhammacakkapavattana* should be free from rifts.

Image worship was another phenomenon where *bhikkhunīs* and lay-women of Sārnāth had substantial role to play. It has been stated that the venerating of the Buddha image started between the first century BCE or CE. Before image worship, a follower of Buddhism had to make conscious effort to associate his/her mind with symbols associated with the Buddha.<sup>11</sup> Generally the inscribed images mention the name of the benefactors/patrons together with parents, masters, teachers, and

fellows.<sup>12</sup> The earliest known inscription of image donation at Sārnāth mentioning a *bhikkhunī* belongs to the period of Kuṣānas. The inscription has been inscribed on the twenty-second day, in the of the third month of winter of the third year of Kanishka's rule. It says that Bhikkhu Bala erected an umbrella with post on an image together with *bhikkhu* Pushysvaddhi, *bhikkhunī* Buddhamita, Khatrapas Kharapallana, Vanaspara, together with parents, teachers and fellows.<sup>13</sup> Buddhamita is the first *bhikkhunī* associated with the gift of the images or *chattras*. The term 'antevasekehi' mentioned in the inscription indicates her status and in other inscriptions she is told as *bhikkhunī*. The Mathurā image inscription of 33<sup>rd</sup> year of Huvishka mentions her *bhikkhunī* and disciple of *bhikkhu* Bala. This inscription was issued by her niece *bhikkhunī* Dhanavati.<sup>14</sup> In Sārnāth an oval seal is found bearing the legend 'Buddhamitasa' in Kuṣāna script.<sup>15</sup> She may be the same as mentioned in above inscription and either seal was part of that donation or might be separate donation in her name. At Kauśāmbī, an image was set up by *bhikkhunī* Buddhamita, an expert in *tipitika*. The same Buddhamita carved out at least three separate images along the path where the Buddha travelled at Kauśāmbī: the first in the year 2<sup>nd</sup>, another in the year 6<sup>th</sup> year of Kanishka's rule, and a third in which date is missing.<sup>16</sup> It seems that Buddhamita was highly influential, erudite, and had wealthy patrons to support her cause to raise the images of the Buddha at different monastic locations. The linkage between monks-nuns and the beginnings of the image worship in Buddhist *vihāras* is quite observable, and in Ganga valley it can be apparently noticed by votive inscriptions of *bhikkhus* Bala, Pushyavaddhi, and *bhikkhunī* Buddhamita. This idea to raise image at different monastic locations considered to be first conceived at Mathurā and then images were sent to different places. The earliest Buddhist images at Kauśāmbī, Srāvastī and Sārnāth came from Mathurā, which is accepted by many as a place where the first Buddha image was carved out. The carving, conveyance, and consecration of all these images was caused by the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* of same monastic

9 Anand Singh, 'Patronage, Identity and Sacrality of Sārnāth, A Study Based on Inscriptions and Seals' in *Uttar Pradesh Through Ages*, ed. Afzal Hussain and S.Z.H. Jafri, New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2011, p.80

10 Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India (A.D. 629-645)*, New Delhi: LPP, 2004, vol. II, pp.47-48

11 Anand Singh, 'Dynamics of Dāna in Buddhism, From Subsistence of the Faithful to Sustenance of Faith' in *Dāna, Reciprocity and Patronage in Buddhism*, ed. Anand Singh, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2017, p.89

12 Anand Singh, *Buddhism at Sārnāth*, New Delhi: Primus Books, 2014, p.47

13 *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, 1905-06, p.173

14 *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, 1905-06, p.182

15 *Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum*, Seal no. 58

16 K. G. Goswami, 'Kosam inscription of the reign of Kanishka, the year 2' *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 24, 1938, pp. 210- 12 (Amalanand Ghosh, "Kosam inscription of Kanishka" *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 1934, pp.575 - 76; Ghosh reads the date "the 22<sup>nd</sup> year of Maharaja Kaniska")

tradition. All the evidence suggests that these erudite *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* were advocates for image worship, and they promoted installation of images at different places in an organized manner. The pious effort done by Buddhamita at Kauśāmbī would almost certainly have profound influence on the Buddhist community as a whole because she introduced here image worship.<sup>17</sup> One important dimension of this intermittent happenings in the Ganga valley is that the Buddhist textual evidences are silent about it and because of exclusive dependence on textual sources, the true observation on activities of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* in early Buddhism is little bit puzzling. Even the real contribution of *bhikkhunīs* are neglected because epigraphic and other archaeological accounts are not taken into due consideration. Though the numerical strengths of *bhikkhunīs* at any time in early Buddhism has been less than the *bhikkhus*, so it was also thought that they had little influence in growth of Buddhist monastic tradition. It was perceived that monastic structure and institution of Buddhism had been formed and shaped solely by men and for men. When Buddhism became institutionalized, it appropriated on the societal perspective of male preeminence reflecting not only cultural attitudes towards women but also the misogynist views of male celibates.<sup>18</sup> Though it is also acknowledged that Buddhist doctrine and its salvific course are essentially all-encompassing and do not differentiate between genders. The Buddhist canons, at its fundamental, once the societal and cultural trimmings are discarded, is free of any type of gender prejudice. This argument is substantiated by the momentous fact of the Buddha's acceptance, although with reluctance, formation of a *bhikkhunī saṃgha* and his unambiguous affirmation of their equivalence in intellectual and spiritual abilities in realizing the highest goals in the purification of the mind leading up to *nibbāna*. In addition, the Buddha is said to have told several times that his disciples comprised of both males and females of lay and monastic communities. Moreover, female disciples are depicted overall in a positive manner in the Pāli literature as robust, intelligent beings who were vulnerable like any other mortal but totally transformed and erudite when came into contact with the Dhamma. Some of them received even highest level of perfection and knowledge. They have been instrumental in supporting and disseminating the

Dhamma in the age of the Buddha and this tendency is still thriving where Buddhism is alive. They had substantial role in shaping and nurturing the Buddhist monastic institution.<sup>19</sup> The epigraphic sources throw valuable light into hitherto neglected area of Buddhism by investigating the complex and changing status of women in relation to Buddhist monastic system. The textual inquiry gives limited information about sporadic involvement of *bhikkhunīs* and lay women in the *saṃgha* activities. In these scriptures women are represented as segment of larger *saṃgha* hierarchy rather being active contestants in their own right. The other sources illustrate women as an independent and dynamic being in their religious domain, and as capable of donating and in some cases defining the expansion of Buddhism. Contrary to the Buddha's forecast that his doctrine would not lost long because of woman's admittance into the *saṃgha*, history demonstrates that woman's role at least in some cases may vigorously have been responsible for blooming of the religion in the Indian subcontinent and other parts of Asia. Moreover though the *bhikkhunī saṃgha* did not continue flourishing in later days, lay women did play a momentous role in supporting and sustaining the growth of Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> The Buddhist donative records associated with the images inform that at Sārnāth, Srāvastī, Kauśāmbī, and Mathurā the images of the Buddha or the Bodhisattva were carved out first time in the early Kuṣāna period and all these were installed by erudite *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*. It is also seen that the earliest dated images in the Northwest were the gifts of the erudite *bhikkhus*. In the monastic cave complexes at Kanherī, Kuda, and Ajantā image worship was familiarized by the mostly *bhikkhus* since the fourth - fifth century C. E. onwards. Though all these images were not donated same time but these images were almost always sponsored everywhere by either *bhikkhus* or *bhikkhunīs*. It is presumed that the image and its attendant cult were a major concern of *bhikkhus/bhikkhunīs* and in every monastic complex where they resided, introduced image worship and energetically patronized it. The *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* who were involved in large number of such image donations have not found suitable place in the Buddhist textual references. The Buddhist texts are dominantly giving references of those *bhikkhus* who were more engaged in traditional monastic learning

17 Gregory Schopen, 'Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism' *Artibus Asiae*, vol.49, no.1/2, 1988-89, pp.162-63

18 Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, London: G. Norman and Sons, 1882, p.381

19 Chand R. Sirimanne, 'Buddhism and Women-The Dhamma Has No Gender' *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 18(1), 2016, pp. 275-76

20 Janice D. Willis, 'Nuns and Benefactresses: The Role of Women in the Development of Buddhism' in *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly, New York: State University of New York, 1985, pp.76-77.

and philosophical pursuits.<sup>21</sup> It is appropriate here to say that the image worshipping in Buddhism was not patronized by any particular sect of Buddhism but *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* of different sects promoted it in different areas. While the monks promoting the image worshipping in the 4th - 5th century CE at Ajantā, Sārnāth, and Mathurā were predominately Mahāyāna monks and those introduced image worship at Srāvastī, Kauśambī, Mathurā, etc., in the Kuṣāna period belong to another sect. The widespread assumption that connects the image cult with the Mahāyāna is basically not substantiated.<sup>22</sup> It was a Mahāyāna practice to donate sacred objects such as images, votive *stūpas*, and manuscripts that developed in India during the early centuries of common era. It can be differed from Theravāda principally by literary language, way of meditation, rituals, and type of the images, but in its soteriological quest, theological attitude, and many of its ethical practices, Mahāyāna preserved the ideas already rooted and existed in Theravāda. The material evidence of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna that is, the sacred objects donated in the early common era through the twelfth centuries, frequently bears witness to the existence of its donors in the form of an inscription and portrait. It is observed that because of popularity of the image cult, Theravāda also adopted it, though it was a reluctant recognition. The religious donations by female devotees is a common feature around all the Buddhist sites, whether in capacity of *bhikkhunīs*, lay women, ladies of royal and noble families or the ordinary women. A picture of the actual Indian Buddhist *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* is progressively emerging and these *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* differ evidently from the ideal *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* which have been portrayed on the foundation of textual sources alone. The *bhikkhu* involved in donations of images, manuscripts etc., unlike the *bhikkhu* mentioned in the texts, appears to have been intensely involved in religious donation and image worshipping from the very beginning. He is preoccupied not with Theravāda notion of *nibbāna* but engaged themselves in welfare concerns following the ideals of the Bodhisattva and strongly felt obligation to his patron, parents, relatives and other family members, whether alive or dead. He was taking care of worries of his well-wishers and teachers. He appears to be very kind, generous, and very much

acquainted to mundane actions.<sup>23</sup> The image donation is exclusive domain of the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* are questionable and the people who sponsored these images were lay followers of Buddhism. In the Kuṣāna-Śaka age many such of donations were given by the laities such as queens and common women folk. Even one of the first donations of images by Bala was well supported by Kharapallāna and Vanaspara. From the Gupta period onwards though the image donations by the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* were continued but substantial epigraphic and donor's representation on images suggest that lay women participated energetically in such donations. Even women with their family members, child are well represented. The votive objects of Sārnāth suggests that representation of women in votive donations exists here since early Gupta period to early medieval period. First visual presentation of a female donor is probably from Sārnāth and it belongs to early Gupta period. This interesting statue is a Buddha sculpture seated in *dharmachakra-mudrā*. It is flanked by two deer, and five monks kneeling below on the right. The female figure with the child kneeling on left is donor.<sup>24</sup> This image is supposed to be bearing the figure of female donor and her child. The fiscal status of women is not known but this image is the most exclusive in the Sārnāth. It suggests that the donor had high material status and belonged to financially elite class. The Buddha image in the *bhumisparśa-mudrā* represents Gautama just before his enlightenment, assailed by Māra and touching the earth. Against the base, in high relief are four figures; to the left a kneeling female with a child joining its hand in veneration and to the right a woman with another child kneeling in front of it.<sup>25</sup> The image belongs to the Gupta period and it represents donor who is female with her child. The conspicuous absence of male shows individuality of women at least in the religious domain. However, the material source of this donation is not known. In another representation, Avalokiteśvara is carved in a relief and found at Chaukhandī *stūpa*. He was represented in *varada-mudrā*, the lotus flower in the left, and the Buddha figure in *dhyana-mudrā* in the head dress. On his right side a female figure is kneeling with folded hands, presumably a worshipper and donor.<sup>26</sup> It belongs to early medieval period and shows that women still continued to donate. The other sculpture shows Goddess

21 Schopen, 'Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism', p.167

22 D. Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors*, Vol.1, London: Serindia Publication, 1987, p.49,

23 Schopen, 'Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism' pp. 166-68

24 F. O. Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth' ASIAR, 1904-05, Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1908, p.82, plate.

25 Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth' p.81, plate XXVIII

26 Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth', p.82, plate, XXIX, a

Tārā sitting in *lalitasana-mudrā* holding a lotus in the left hand and right hand is in the *varada-mudrā*. A female is kneeling against her left knee.<sup>27</sup> She is considered to be the benefactor of the image. In one sculpture, Maricī or Vajravārahī with six arms and three heads is bearing thunderbolt. One of her head is boar's head. In a diadem over the middle head Vairocana in *dharmacakra-mudrā* has been inscribed. On the base seven boars surmounted by a figure of charioteer is depicted. In one corner a couple of human votaries and on right an inscription which is lost.<sup>28</sup> These votaries may be the donors. It can be observed that women's participation as *bhikkhunīs* and lay-women in donations to sacred complex of Sārnāth was continued up to 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E. but mode and nature of such donations were transformed from time to time. Earlier the images were carved out to venerate and remember the great *nibbānic* tradition and perfection attained by an extraordinary monk. The Theravāda followers considered it merely a token, a symbol, and a representation which helps him/her to recall or to remember the Buddha. The early sculptures showing women as donors are generally representing the Buddha but after approximately sixth century C.E. some new dimensions were added. The sculptures after sixth century CE were dominantly of Mahāyāna deities with some Buddhist creeds as inscriptions. These images of the Buddha/ Bodhisattva facilitated people to overlook their uncertainties, hindrances, and glitches. The same trends continued in later period but deities were majority related to Vajrayāna and the pantheon was extended with inclusion of number of female deities and other supporting gods.

It is widely debated that the role of women in Buddhist religious practices especially in the Ganga Valley started diminishing since later Gupta period onwards. The scholars like Jinah Kim, Miranda Shah, and R. M. Davidson have examined this from different viewpoints. One of the central ideas they have taken is visual representation of women in donative objects. Their studies are mainly based on Vajrayāna Buddhism of early medieval period, especially of the Pāla period. In early medieval period, one sees both lay women and *bhikkhunīs* disappearing from the Buddhist landscape. Davidson says that the percentage of participation of women in religious donations can be examined through epigraphic, ethnographic, and textual sources and it indicates a noteworthy idea that women probably constituted microscopic percentage of persons involving in numerous religious activities in the early medieval period. Though

their number cannot be exact but it shows number of women participating in religious activities were quickly declined during the period of Vajrayāna form of Buddhism. In case of women of elite and authoritative positions, this rate of decline was even faster. The Vajrayāna created more impediment to women's participation in religious activities especially those who were eager to participate as an independent woman and who desired to be at par with male counterparts. It is evident from the epigraphic sources that barring the few exceptions, majority of women participated in religious activities were in a subordinate position from early medieval period. The scrutiny to explore the status of peripheral or marginalized women can be done from archaeological sources which illustrates wide gap in women's position in Buddhism from early age to medieval period. The early Buddhism apparent in Sanci, Amarāvati, Bharhut, Takshaśila, Gandhāra, Sārnāth, Bodhgayā, and the other sites validate flourishing *bhikkhunī saṃgha*. At these places *bhikkhunīs* commanded enough influence to patronize the *saṃgha* and to make donations. Their patrons were generous and affluent who could sponsor railings, images, *chattra* etc., on their behalf and had their names inscribed on these donations. In early Buddhist institutions women seemingly enjoyed a great vivacity and vigorously involved themselves at both householder and monastic levels to a surprising degree. An appraisal of the epigraphic resources for the medieval period, though, does not indicate the enthusiastic contribution of women at this level.<sup>29</sup> The others perceive women both lay and *bhikkhunīs* were involved in rituals and traditions in Tāntric Buddhist spheres. They had equal sharing in religious ceremonies and were engaged in donations and other religious activities. This kind of Buddhism gave opportunity to every segment of the society including women and it also included the amalgamation of an numerous types of religious rituals which transformed Buddhism once again worthy of the trustworthiness of people from all sections of Indian society. Tāntric Buddhism attracted supporters from rival faiths like Śaivism and Śaktism and extended its geography into each part of the India, and continued outward on a victorious path of the Himalayas, East

<sup>27</sup> Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth', p.85, plate. XXX

<sup>28</sup> Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth', pp.87-88, plate. XXX, d

<sup>29</sup> R. M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, pp.93-96

Asia, and Southeast Asia.<sup>30</sup> These two viewpoints could not be taken as contradictions because their examples, local factors and situations are taken from different historical contexts and resources. The evidences for the argument of the decreased contribution of women in religious ceremonies and donations is taken primarily from the archeological and textual sources dating from the sixth through the twelfth centuries. In the post Gupta period, because of the meagerness of epigraphic sources, it has been presumed that women had disappeared from the religious fabric by the time Vajrayāna was blooming. Although it is proclaimed that archeologists have been enthusiastically searching for evidence of *bhikkhunīs* in early medieval Buddhist sites, it is significant that this search has not been done comprehensively. It has also been argued that deliberations on female patronage seldom replicate art historical evidences, such as the visual representations of donors, perhaps because of disciplinary predilection.<sup>31</sup> Shah says that because of lack of references in the Chinese pilgrims' accounts, majority of scholars accepted that Buddhist nunneries became extinct around the fourth century CE. She also records that the practice of metonymic characteristics in building male identity departed around the same time but the social nonconformity and liberal fabric of the Tāntric movement in the medieval India enabled women to contribute freely in getting desired religious quest. In the absence of any formal regulations to discard them in Tāntric rituals, women could freely imbibe to divine engagements and spiritual knowledge as their male counterparts. They attained spiritual perfection through their practice of meditation and other Vajrayāna practices, and exercised supremacy on basis of that experience rather than through consecration or ecclesiastical authority.<sup>32</sup> The visual representations of the donors are a common feature in Buddhist artistic production of the ninth through the twelfth centuries. Women and their children are often represented on the bottom of the sculptures. Sometimes they were represented with their names along with some Buddhist formula but occasionally

only figures are portrayed.<sup>33</sup> Donors are always located in the fringe space of a sculpture, at the bottom in the divine hierarchy because it gives imminence to the deity to whom donation was given. Female donors are usually depicted either with their husband, child or alone. The inscriptions inform that they used to seek blessings not only for the patrons and masters but also for father, husband, or son along with other relatives.<sup>34</sup> If the woman is depicted as a single donor that shows her upper status and active role in the social and religious affairs. It is obvious that the number of female donors visually represented in sculptures and mentioned in inscriptions is less in number than that of male donors.<sup>35</sup> Even if a sculpture exhibits a male as a donor with his wife and children, it shows she has been given due respect in decision making of that offering. When such visual representations of women are taken into account to examine their role in decision making, it confirms that Buddhist women had bigger share in rituals and Tāntric practices. When subscribe on those visual accounts, the idea of the disappearing women in Buddhist ritual practices in the early medieval period is challenged. It has been argued that women had more active roles to play in Tāntric traditions.<sup>36</sup> But this idea was also challenged because such examples focus chiefly on the Tantric literature from Tibet and elsewhere about women's role in Indian Buddhist traditions. Sometimes sources are not all carefully verified and archeological and historical data of the aforesaid period is more tentative and shrouded in mystery. It is said that Shah's fantastic accounts of powerful female Tāntric practitioners underline the active roles played by only some influential group of women in transmitting and developing Tāntric Buddhist teachings, but it generate little information on the social status of women, whether lay or monastic.<sup>37</sup> It is significant that how *bhikkhunīs* negotiated and redefined gender roles and disparities while remaining within the boundaries of the monastic patriarchal narrative. The consequential inconsistencies were incessantly resolved on regular basis

<sup>30</sup> R. A. Ray, 'Accomplished women in Tantric Buddhism of Medieval India and Tibet' in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's religious Lives in Non-Western cultures*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980, pp.227-42, Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp.21-22

<sup>31</sup> Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, p.95-96

<sup>32</sup> Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, pp. 102-03

<sup>33</sup> Claudine, Bautze-Picorn. 'Between Men and Gods: Small Motifs in the Buddhist Art of Eastern India, an Interpretation', in *Function and Meaning in Buddhist Art: Proceedings of a Seminar Held at Leiden University, 21-24 October, 1991*, ed. K.R. van Kooij and H. van der Veere, 1995, Groningen: Egbert Forsten, pp.60-61

<sup>34</sup> Kumkum Roy, 'Women and Men Donors at Sanchi: A Study of Inscriptional Evidence' in *Position and Status of Women in Ancient India*, ed. L. K. Tripathi, Varanasi: BHU-AIHC, 1988, pp.209-23

<sup>35</sup> Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, p.94-95

<sup>36</sup> Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, pp.52-53

<sup>37</sup> Jinah Kim, 'Unheard Voices: Women's Roles in Medieval Buddhist Artistic Production and Religious Practices in South Asia', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 80, no. 1, 2012, pp. 200-23

to soothe vibrant functioning of system. Sometimes it does not look for an explicit arrangement but a kind of readjustment of roles the *bhikkhu*'s and *bhikkhunī*'s in a particular the monastic periphery. Women's religious devotion is fully compatible with empowerment and generally conservative monasteries offered considerable scope for women (*bhikkhunīs*/lay-women) to negotiate personal authority and gender roles even without questioning the official monastic gender ideology and within-monastic gender stratification. The ethnographic portrayal of some of the *bhikkhunīs* shows that they actively challenged the convention of women's subordination even without compromising their religious liberalism. Significantly, the changing gender roles and social hierarchies is due to the social transformation and partly confines of day to day life. Although the contradictions between religious tenets and everyday practice of gender relations in conservative denominations have been the subject of scholarly inspection. In Buddhist context, similar apparent incongruences between religious teachings and women's changing societal roles and resulting simultaneous reaffirmation and redefinition of religious convictions, commitments, and practices have also characterized different Buddhist traditions. In different timeframe these traditions are often perceived as predominantly facilitating or antagonistic to gender equality.

The early Buddhist *stūpa* sites show many objects giving evidences of physical presence of donors. An important practice started to consecrate a sacred sculpture/seal with the Buddhist creed or dharma relic, which comprises the verse essence of the Buddha's teaching as illustrated in the *Pratityasamutpādagāthā*.<sup>38</sup> The formulaic expression (*deyadharmō'yam..*) and its multiple variations for recording a donor's existence and piety begins to appear in the Gupta period. It has been argued that the notion of transfer of merit is exclusive realm of Mahāyāna. But some of the references are available which show that it existed in Pāli sources and even in non-Buddhist sources.<sup>39</sup> The Pāli sources mention aim of transfer of merits by good actions. It leads to peace and happiness to the merit maker both in this world and in the hereafter. It will eventually encourage the people to attain the goal of *nibbāna*. The *kuśala kamma* always provide platform to a person to accrue merit which could be transferred to next

world. The progression of such transference (*parivatta*) is fairly unpretentious. The person who performs good deed can simply offer that the merit he/she had thereby gained should be transferred to someone in particular, if he/she so wishes, or to all sentient beings. It may be purely psychological or going together with by an expression of words.<sup>40</sup> Sometimes only four noble truth is inscribing in a dedicatory inscription, reminding the basic teaching of the Buddha. One such inscription has been found in Sārnāth This unique inscription of the 2nd century CE of Kuṣāna period has been inscribed in Pāli language and contains the sermon of four noble truth (*Chattār-imāni bhikkhavé ariya sachchāni..*).<sup>41</sup> The earliest Mahāyāna dedicatory formula of 4<sup>th</sup> century CE has been found on old rail stone which was put up as a lamp post in the *mūlgandhakutī* of Sārnāth. It was donated by lay person Kīrtti (*dēyadharmō yaṃ paramōpā[sa/si]ka Kīrttēh mūlagandhakutyāṃ...*).<sup>42</sup> The inscription is fragmented and the lay person may be *upāsaka/upāsika*. In sculptural donations which have inadequate empty space, the relic formula is often abbreviated. It would not be overstatement that the majority of the Buddhist sculptures carved in important monastic sites of ancient Magadha in the tenth to the twelfth centuries mention the verse of the dhamma relic, and over half of these sculptures bear donor inscriptions. Many of these images also bear visual representations of the donors.<sup>43</sup> If both dhamma relics and visual representations are accepted as indication of a donor's existence, then it may be said that it was almost a tradition for patrons to represent themselves on their Buddhist image donations. Despite these remarkable links to the past, the fairly consistent act of donating a religious object has received little scholarly contemplation due to the lack of interest in undated epigraphic sources. Thus, *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, lay men, and women who made pious donations are not reminisced or glamorized in hagiographic literature, nor they have earned a place in the majestic historical version of royal genealogies, monastic and Tantric teachers. Sārnāth became the scene of novel experience and expression for woman's participation in religious donations and inscribing the dhamma relic. Women in such a large number, coming of it independently to proclaim their religious faith in public is quite phenomenal. It seems that Buddhism as a

38 Daniel, Boucher, 'The Pratityasamutpādagāthā and its role in the Medieval cult of Relics' *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol.14 (1), 1991, pp.1-27

39 Gregory Schopen, 'Mahāyāna in Indian Inscriptions' *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol.21 (1), pp.5-8

40 G. P. Malalasekera, 'Transference of Merit' in Ceylonese Buddhism', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 17, No. 1(4) 1967, pp.85-86

41 Marshall and Konow, 'Sārnāth' p.95

42 Marshall and Konow, 'Sārnāth' p.97

43 Bautze-Picorn, 'Between Men and Gods: Small Motifs in the Buddhist Art of Eastern India, an Interpretation' pp.60-63

religion had a special appeal for women and its certain ideas touched them at the deepest. Buddhism appealed women at psycho-social level. It's basic essence of love and piety was something very close to the inherent nature of a women. There are several types of Buddhist creed (*dharma-paryāya*) have been inscribed on sculptures. The religious practice of incising this formula on sculptures, slabs and stamping it on seals started in the Gupta age. The oldest inscription on an image in Sārnāth belongs to fifth century CE. One is found on the detached hand of an image and other is found on the base of the Bodhisattva image which was donated by lay follower Suyātra for attainment of supreme knowledge by all sentient beings (*Om Deyadharmmo yaṃ paramopāsaka-viśayapati-Suyātrasya*).<sup>44</sup> But majority such examples belong to later date and these also include donations by female donors. One of the earliest dedicatory inscription donated by a female is supposed to be of Manjusri in *varada-mudrā* with head dress of Aksobhaya. Two small standing female figurines are represented on the either side on lotus flower. Buddhist formula is also inscribed on the back side of the image in the seventh century CE script. The term Arolika may be a female donor.<sup>45</sup> Several inscriptions inscribing Buddhist creed have been found from Sārnāth from 5<sup>th</sup> century CE to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. Some of them seem to be donated by the female donors or the female was part of the family donation. On some images only Buddhist creeds were mentioned but on some with the Buddhist creed, *stūpa* (one or seven) and mystic syllables were also engraved. One fragmented inscription of 9<sup>th</sup> century CE represents a female donor with inscription 'Mātāsirili'.<sup>46</sup> Between seventh century CE to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE nearly 80 percent donative inscriptions found from Sārnāth have Buddhist formula for happiness of sentient beings. Out of 18 inscriptions between 7<sup>th</sup> century CE to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE mentioned by Oertel, only 4 did not show Buddhist creed.<sup>47</sup> These inscriptions are highly fragmented and it is possible that these too have the same type of inscriptions. In search of their own being the assertion of their individual self that drove women to be honest and erudite and to make donations in their own personal name. Even if donation is made with the other family members, they make it a point

to insert their name in the epigraphs.

The development of Tantric Buddhism certainly had a positive impact on women's participation in Buddhist practices, especially among the laity. Textual and art historical evidences from the eleventh century onwards suggests that married lay couples could become vajra masters. Atisa prohibited *bhikkhus* to perform some of the vajra ceremonies having sexual orientation and recommended that these were to be performed by the lay persons only.<sup>48</sup> The Vimalaprabhā's commentary on the *Kālacakratānta* did not accept the practice of *bhikkhus* worshipping *Vajrācāryas* or *gṛhasthācāryas* as their teachers. Here celibacy was cardinal point for the monks to follow.<sup>49</sup> The growing religious role for lay couples in Vajrayāna does not indicate a raised status for women. It also does not subscribe the view that women were independent to take decision to participate in vajra rituals but it can be said that married women could indeed take part in Vajrayāna tradition with their husbands. The notion of individuality of the Buddhist doctrine was probably one of the greatest factors which attracted women towards it. No other religion has ever laid greater stress upon the power of an individual to work out his own salvation by his own effort, without any help from outside. Buddhism treated women as complete individual. The Buddha puts great stress upon the moral and ethical behavior which leads to a happy life in this world and after the death he or she reaches a blissful destination, the realms of the deva.<sup>50</sup> Some notable features of Buddhism combined with certain socio-psycho and economic factors enthused the followers to imbibe this phenomenon to take place.<sup>51</sup> Buddhism presented women, elite or commoner with a very appealing and welcome offer without shedding their social obligations they could make endeavours for their spiritual upliftment. In fact, Buddhist tradition for householders completely harmonized with the duties of a householder woman. This is illustrated in some general instructions which the Buddha gave to Visākhā about the responsibility of a virtuous woman, that she should look after and respect her husband's parents and show respect to recluses, be efficient in household work, become a lay devotees, observe five moral precepts and intended to be involved in charity.<sup>52</sup> Nakulmātā, the Buddha's

<sup>44</sup> Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth', p.90

<sup>45</sup> Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth' pp.81-82,90, Inscription no. XXI, XXIII.

<sup>46</sup> Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth', p.90 pp.103-04, Inscription no. XXI, XXIII.

<sup>47</sup> Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth' pp.103-04 (The inscriptions from XXIV to XLI have Buddhist creeds but inscriptions no. XXX, XXXII, XXXVI, XL, XLI do not directly mention it. It is possible that inscriptions were destroyed because these sculptures or stones are broken)

<sup>48</sup> Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism*, p.200

<sup>49</sup> Alexis Sanderson, 'Vajrayana: Origin and Function' in *Buddhism into the Year 2000*, ed. Dhammakaya Foundation, Bangkok: Dhammakaya Foundation, 1994, p.92

<sup>50</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya*, II.150

<sup>51</sup> Sushma Trivedi, 'Female Donors at Sanchi: Issues of Gender and Faith' *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Vol.66, 2005-06, p. 95.

<sup>52</sup> *Anguttara Nikāya*, III.295-98

ideal female follower lived sixteen years as celibate, still residing with her husband and taking care of her children. Just by being well-organized and virtuous in their daily life women could pave their path of spiritual wellbeing. Celibate practice is significant for a woman because women desiring higher levels of perfection could proceed further and may become *bhikkhuni*.<sup>53</sup> Celibacy for women is way to become autonomous which attack the societal structure of traditional womanhood and undermine the patriarchal social order. The sexual abstinence gave the Buddhist woman a network of opportunities for empowerment and liberation. This all-encompassing attitude of Buddhism was an added attraction towards it. Buddhism was not concerned with the past lives or the class and creed of its followers. People from all walks of life and from all classes were accepted with open arms. There are entrants from royal and noble families, at the same time there were women from merchant families. Even a domestic servant's daughter and some courtesans were accepted within the folds of religion without any discrimination. The donative records of Sārnāth visualized this notion. In Buddhism, an endowment is considered as regenerative. The people with common religious faith came together to establish the symbol of the power of their faith. This type of patronage may be called as municipal benefaction and could be reciprocated. Donations from patrons supported the *saṃgha* and this way it led to the enhancement of their social prestige. It is expressed by the names of the donors being added to the records, which is not needed in a religious act for purely spiritual gains. It is also a declaration of their social status and their prosperity. It has been already noted that the neo-rich class of mercantile communities was eager to prove their mark in society. Buddhism provided them this opportunity and platform. Charitability is graded very high among the means of accruing religious merit. Obviously for the ordinary women making material gift was the earnest and the most practical way to satisfy their religious impulse.

The large number of donative records bring the financial status of women into focus. If one leave patronage of Aśoka in Sārnāth, the most famous donative record here belongs to a woman. Kumaradevi, the wife of Gahadwāla king Govindracandra (12<sup>th</sup> century) was supposed to be last royal patron of Sārnāth. She built last but the largest monastery, Dharmachakrajina Vihāra partially over the ruins and partially encompassing several pre-existing early monasteries at Sārnāth. A *prasasti* informing the construction of this monastery has been discovered in the

ruins. It starts with worshipping of goddess Vasudhārā.<sup>54</sup> The financial status of *bhikkhunis* like Buddhāmīta, Saṃvāhika, Bharinī etc., are already discussed. Another important dimension of donative records of Sārnāth is absence of reference of caste affiliation of donors. In such an environment when the traditional mould of society was being broken in many ways, it would not be a farfetched assumption that women themselves took part in wealth generating activities. Looking at the number of independent female donors at various Buddhist sites it seems convincingly believable. The most perplexing aspect of Buddhist votive inscriptions from Sārnāth is the donation attributed to nuns and female ascetics. The donative records suggest the enduring presence of the *bhikkhuni saṃgha* and lay female donors in early centuries of common era. They had a considerable command over economic resources which could be utilized for religious donations and edifices. It is possible that the monks and nuns may have campaigned extensively to urge people to make donations to them which were redirected to the *saṃgha*. As monastic life under Buddhism does not demand a complete isolation and the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* remained in contact with society. They were seen as source of spiritual light and symbol of morality. They held highly exalted position in the hearts of common people. There might have been a tradition that people to honour particular nuns and monks, made donations in their names. Some of the donations may have been made by relatives of the members of the order. Monastic rules permit special favours from relatives of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*. This assumption is firmly supported by the finds at Sārnāth.

Innumerable number of small votive *stūpas* have been excavated in the sacred monastic complex of Sārnāth and even there were hundreds of thousands of even smaller donations in the form of little clay *stūpas*, both baked and unbaked from two to three inches in height. These tiny *stūpas* would appear to have been the common form of commemorative gifts for the common pilgrims. Though Buddhism declined in this part but ethnographic profile of the region suggests *stūpa* like vessels are still used both for domestic and ritual purposes. The different forms of earthen wares look like *stūpas* locally acknowledged in the region as *karwas* and *matkis* are used by local women.<sup>55</sup> Buddhism has vanished from this region, but its cultural traces are still in vogue. Interestingly, women are carriers of this culture. Conventionally, analysis and execution of the power of images has been vindicated in analysis,

53 Trivedi, 'Female Donors at Sānchi: Issues of Gender and Faith' p.98

54 *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. IX, pp.320-21

55 Oertel, 'Excavations at Sārnāth' p.72

creation, and reception of locating the real narratives about women in Buddhism. The visual representations on the images are identified for certain purposes: pedagogical, donative, devotional, and aesthetic. It also indicates spiritual or esoteric character of a ritual. The images, seals, and epigraphic sources are true representatives of exhibition of sacredness as well as economic assertion of particular gender or community. The survey of the visual presentations of female on Sārnāth images displays the distinct deviations in attitudes and insights of the feminine and the female. The intense dissimilarity in these personifications show almost absolute denial of the sensuality and sexuality of the female forms in Theravāda and Mahāyāna, and the amplex of its demonstration in Vajrayāna. It also visualizes different pattern in ritualistic tendencies and religious susceptibilities. Throughout the history of Sārnāth, however, there are descriptions and representations of the divine on the female as well as male form of images. There are significant examples of female imagery that exist either by analogy or as the embodiments of holiness in role of the *bhikkhunīs*/ lay-women despite women's subordinate positions in the religious hierarchy. Popular tradition, like Vajrayāna opened windows to get esoteric religious experiences to the so-called non-elite, or the marginalized social group countering ethnicity, race, and sexual preferences. These more populist alternatives focus on a goddess or female protagonist whose narratives or actions are fundamental to the day-to-day realm of women's understandings. It started with familial duties to religious engagements in the transformative stages of life. It might be recognized as gendered images expression much more than sexual identification. These are symbolic transferences through gestures, postures, attributes, and symbols that generate a graphic terminology relating the common experiences of being human, may be, of being male and female, in relation to Buddhist morals. In this way a comparative analysis of images pertaining to different sects such as representations of female votaries on base of the images of the Buddha or images of women with Tārā and Vajravārahī at Sārnāth effectively presents engendered interpretations of being male and female in Buddhism and the relationship with what they hold or consider to be sacred.

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