Women in the vanguard?
Reflections on early Indian Buddhism

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Buddhist women were active participants in the construction of early Buddhism in India. Nuns and laywomen were among the sponsors of monuments, monasteries, and statues of the Buddha across India, and a collection of verses attributed to nuns is among the earliest documents of female literature in India, or, perhaps, worldwide.

Were women merely donors, or were they also intellectual innovators?

In this paper, I reflect on this difficult and complex question.
2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE:
The Buddhist building boom

Watercolour, 2012
by Paritta Chalermpow Koanantakool
The earliest surviving Buddhist monuments were stupas built to house relics. Relics travelled first class across India, in processions of stately elephants. They were celebrated with music and dance.
Women and men celebrated the Buddha Śākyamuni through his relics. The housing of relics created new landscapes dominated by clusters of stupas and monastic structures, both on the hills and in the plains and valleys.

Stone coping from Vidisha (Gujari Mahal Museum, Gwalior (MP). 2nd-1st c. BCE. One of the donors was a lady named Asabhā. Photo P. Skilling, 2012.
In the mid-2nd century BCE, King Asoka went on pilgrimage to pay respect to sites connected with the Buddha. Asoka’s inscriptions express his deep concern for the welfare of the saṃgha, both monks and nuns, as well as for the male and female lay practitioners.

Inscribed relief depicting King Asoka (raya asoko) and his queen. Inscribed panel, Kanaganahalli, Karnataka (excavated during the 1997–98 season: Indian Archaeology, 1997-98, A Review, pl. 72).
Sarnath Pillar inscription of Asoka
Sarnath pillar-inscription

• But indeed that monk or nun who shall break up the samgha should be caused to put on white robes and to reside in non-residence. Thus this edict must be announced to the samgha of monks and to the samgha of nuns. Thus speaks Devanampriya (hevam iyam sasane bhikhu-samghasi ca bhikuni-samghasi ca vimnapayitaviye).
Collective donation

- The early stupas were built through collective donation by females and males from many walks of life and sectors of society. They were not sponsored by kings or members of the court. This great collective effort of Buddhist communities defined a significant turn in India cultural history. At this crucial moment, women were among the sponsors and planners. Many of these sponsors were nuns. Some were queens and princesses, but the majority were lay-followers.
Bhikṣunī inscriptions in India: an overview

Map: Pierre Pichard
bhikhunikāye saṃvahikāye dānaṃ ālaṃbanaṃ.

This base stone is the gift of the nun Saṃvahikā.

Sarnath, Brahmi characters, 2nd century BC.

ASI, AR 1906-07, pl. XXX 1; Tsukamoto IV Sarn 85.
Some of the oldest dedication inscriptions are on the stone pillars that once encircled the Bodhi tree, before the temple was erected. They date to about 2nd-1st century BCE.
Railing of the Mahabodhi Temple:

Many of the railings were sponsored by Āryā Kuraṃģī, a queen.
Āyāye Kurugiyē
dānaṃ:  
Gift of Āryā
Kuruṃģī:  
Mahabodhi railing
This pillar donated by Kuruṅgī is one of the few originals still kept at the temple.

Photo, P. Skilling, 29.10.2012.
Āyāye Kurugiyē dānaṃ:

Gift of Āryā Kurumgī:

Mahabodhi railing
Bodh Gaya: Railing pillar donated by Āryā Kuruṃgī (Bodh Gaya Museum)
Āyāye Kurugiyē dānaṃ
Sanchi Stupa I
(Regnier 1998, p. 58)
Pl. 128, 14. On a cross-bar (inside)

Samikāya bhichuniyā dānaṃ

The gift of the nun Sāmikā (Svāmikā).
Pl. 129, 47. On a cross-bar (outside)

[U]jeniyā Dhamayasāyā matu bhichuniyā dānaṃ

The gift of mother of the nun Dhamayasā (Dharmayaśā) from Ujjjenī (Ujjayinī).
Pl. 129, 58. On a Coping-bar (Outside)

Nāvagamikānā upasikānā dānaṃ

The gift of the female lay-worshippers of Navagāma (Navagrāma).
Pl. 129, 73 On a coping stone (outside)

Sagharakhitāya Koramikāya bhichuniyā dānaṃ

The gift of the nun Sagharakhita (Saṅgharakshita) a pupil of Koramikā.
Pl. 130, 125. On a cross-bar (outside)

Yakhiya bhichuniye Vedisā dānaṃ

The gift of the nun Yakhī (Yakshī) from Vedisa (Vedīśā).
Satdhara, a massive stupa as big as Sanchi Stupa No. 1, was surrounded by a railing.
Many of the crossbars and uprights of the now dismantled railing were donated by nuns and laywomen.
Bharhut Stupa
(Tsukamoto 1998. II, Fig. 24)
Moragirimha Nāgilāyā bhikhuniyā danaṃ thabhā… Pillars, the gift of the nun Nāgilā from Moragiri (Mayūragiri).
Bharhut dedication inscription No.12:

Dabhinikāya Mahamukhisa dhitu Badhikaya bhichuniya dānaṃ: Gift of the nun Badhikā, daughter of Mahamukhi, the Dabhinikā.

(CII, II, II A 44)
Bharhut dedication inscription No. 19

Kākaṃdiya Somāya bhichuniya dānaṃ
Gift of the nun Somā, from Kākaṃdi.
(CII, II, II A 44)
The Narmada valley from Panguraria: from Jabalpur to the sea
Panguraria, MP
Panguraria – “Western version” of MRE I (Sircar)
ASOKA’S VISIT TO PANGURARIA AS A PRINCE

Piyaḍasi nāma / rajakumāra va / saṃvasamāne i/-/ maṃ
desaṃ pāpunitha / vihāra(ya)tāy(e)

Piyaḍasi by name, when he was crown prince … came
to this place on a pleasure tour.
Parasol staff, Panguraria, Budni Tehsil, Dist. Sehore, MP. At Panguraria 2 Asoka inscriptions are engraved in a rock shelter overlooking the Narmada valley, a Minor Rock Edict I (Falk 89–90) and a separate edict (Falk 109–110) that records a visit paid to “this locality” (imam desam) by Asoka when he was crown prince. The staff and stone parasol were found near the largest stupa below the rock shelter. The two-line Prakrit inscription reads:
Saṃgharakhitāya bhicchuniya dāna Koraṃkāya atevasinihi karapitam/Pusaya ca Dhamarakhitaya ca arahaya ca. etā ateasiniyo karāpika chatasa,
This is the donation of Saṃgharahitā Bhikṣuṇī, made by her disciple nuns from Koraṃkā. Pusā, Dhamarakhitā, and Arahā had the parasol made.
Panguraria

Shaft of stone parasol with donative inscription in early Brahmi

Sanchi Museum, storage
Shaft of parasol donated by nuns: “This is the gift of the nun Sagharakhitā Koramikā. Her pupils caused it to be made. Pusā, Dhamarakhitā, and Arahā: these pupils caused the parasol to be made.

Note: Sagharakhitā Koramikā and Dhamarakhitā are also known from inscriptions at Sanchi.
Panguraria
Ribbed stone parasol donated by nuns
Pauni Stupa (Maharashtra):

Mucarido Nāga donated by a nun, pupil of Mahāyasā (National Museum, New Delhi)
Kanaganahalli, Karnataka: a newly excavated stupa. Here too, nuns and laywomen made a big contribution.
Kanaganahalli donors

• Bhikhuniya pusayāya deyadhamaṃmam: gift of the nun Pusā.

• Bhuyima bhikhuniya deyadhamaṃ: gift of the nun Bhuyima.

• Therasa āya Isirakhitasa atevāsinīya bhikhuniya Naguyāya deyadhama: Gift of the nun Nāguyā, disciple of the noble Thera Isirakhita

• Himarakhitāya atevāsinīya Vidhīya dānam: Gift of [the nun] Vidhi, pupil of [the nun] Himarakhitā
Cave residences: Sri Lanka
The cave of the nun Tissā [is given] to the Saṅgha.
• 14 Kaṇagama-ra[jhaśa] Tiśaha jhita Šavera-Šamaṇiya leṇe šagaśa

• The cave of the nun Savera, daughter of Tissa, king of Kaṇagama, is given [to the Saṅgha].

• 15 The same text as No. 14, but with the omission of the word šayaśa.

• 16 Parumaka-Humana-puta upaśasaka . . . . . . . dine*

• [The cave] of the lay-devotee . . . . . . son of the chief Sumana, is given [to the Saṅgha].
The cave of lord Nāga, and of lord Sumana, and of lord Sumanagutta, and of the female lay-devotee Rāmā, daughter of the chief Datta, is given to the Saṅgha, present and absent. Also of the nun Pālā, and of the Venerable Dhammagutta and of ...... raha.
The cave of the nun Rohinī, daughter of the chief [Pa]śudavela, is dedicated to the Saṅgha
The great cave of the Nun Nāgā, daughter of the chief Phussadeva, the Commander-in-Chief, [is given] to the Saṅgha.
The western caves

The pattern of donation in the cave temples, the earliest of which are contemporary with the great stupas, is different. Single caves shrines, assembly halls, and residences were often sponsored by single donors. Collective sponsorship is seen in the stupas and caityas.
Buddharūpa, Buddhapatimā: The image or statue of the Buddha

• Exactly when or where the first image of the Buddha was produced is unknown. We do know that some of the earliest colossal stone images were produced at Mathurā by monastics belonging to the Sarvāstivādin order. Dedicatory inscriptions reveal a group of learned monks and nuns connected by teacher-disciple relationships who sponsored images along the Yamuna River valley.
Bodhisatvo pratiṣṭhāpayati bhikhuṇī Buddhamitrā trepiṭikā bhagavato Buddhhasa caṅkrame.

(112 cm in height. Tripathi 2003, p. 84 and Fig. 54; Tsukamoto IV Kosa 2)
Pedestal of image dedicated by Bhiksuni Buddhhamitra, from Ghoṣitārāma, Kusana period, Kausambi, (Tripathi 2003, p. 86 and Col. Ill. 3)
Pedestal of image dedicated by Bhikṣuni Buddhamitra, Master of the Tripiṭaka, Kusana period, Kausambi, *(Tripathi 2003, p. 86–7 and Fig. 56)*
Bodhisattva dedicated by Bhikṣu Bala, Mathura (Vogel 1930, pl. xxviii a)

Bhikṣu Bala, a Sarvāstivādin Tripiṭaka master, set up 2 images with sheltering parasol at Śrāvastī (Tsukamoto IV SaMa 2.2, 3,4) and 2 at Sarnath (Tsukamoto IV Sarn 4, 5).

Bhikṣuṇī Buddhhamitrā was one of his disciples (Tsukamoto IV Math 11.1)
Bodhisatva image dedicated by Bhikhuni Dhanavati, disciple of Buddhhamitra the disciple of Bhikṣu Bala. From Mathura. (EI VIII, 181–183; Tsukamoto IV Math 11).
Buddhadāsi Bhikṣuṇī, “for the benefit and happiness of all beings” (*sarvasatvānaṃ hitasukhāye*). Seated Buddha, Mathura.
(Tsukamoto IV Math 114; Shrava 1993, No. 239)
Pedestal of Bodhisattva
dedicated by Bhiksunī Pusahathina and Bhiksunī Buddhadeva, Huviska year 39.

(Shrava 1993, No. 85)
Bhiksuni Buddhadeva’s image of seated Buddha, dedicated “for the welfare and happiness of all beings”.

Mathura, reign of Huvishka [Vogel 1930, pl. XXVIb.]
Standing Buddha dedicated by Upasika Khvasicha, Huviska year 45

(Shrava 1993, No. 89)
Surviving portion of large standing image of “the Blessed One, the Incomparable Sakyamuni” dedicated by Upasika Khvasicha, Huviska year 45.

Mathura, red sandstone. 74.5 x 33.5 cm. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, Mumbai. (Chandra 1974, pl. 61)
Image dedicated by Śākya Bhikṣuṇī Jayabhaṭṭā at Yaśavihāra, Mathura

• Tsukamoto IV Math 9; Joanna Williams, A Mathura Gupta Buddha Reconsidered, Lalit Kalā 17, 28–32, Pl. XI. Rubbing, Fleet CII V pl. xl D.

• (R.C. Sharma, Buddhist Art: Mathura School (New Delhi, 1995), fig. 125).
Donatory inscriptions of nuns in Gandhara are rare. According to the Kharosthi inscription, this reliquary, from Hazara Dist., Pakistan, was donated by Bhikṣuṇī Uttarā.
This gilded schist reliquary from Swat, Pakistan, contained an inscribed gold plate as well as golden flowers and jewelry.
The gold plate bears a long inscription recording the meritorious deeds of King Senavarma, addressed to the “twofold community that has assembled”. This refers to the presence of the community of monks and the community of nuns.
Bronze Buddha Dedicated by Sakya Bhiksuni Parisuddhamati at Yamgval Monastery CE 539 Nepal/Eastern Uttar Pradesh, 7th century.

(Cleveland Museum of Art. Ray et al. 1986, Fig. 26)
Tara from Kurkihar, dedicated by Shakya-bhiksuni Gunamati

(Bhattacharya 1996, Fig. 5)
Bronze image of standing Buddha dedicated by Vidyadharasvamini, mother of Mahapratihara Anandavatsa. From Phophnar, Madhya Pradesh; height 45.7 cm including pedestal. 5th-6th century. [Venkataramayya 2005, fig. 9]
Tara, perhaps from Kurkihara (Bihar), now in Russek collection, Switzerland. 9th century.

“Gift of Umaduka, wife of Eddaka.”

Bhattacharya in Haque (ed.) 2000, fig. 50.9
Simhanada Lokesvara dedicated by Sakya-Sthavira Vijaya-sri-bhadra. 12th century. Lakhai Sarai, Bihar.

(MIK, Berlin. Bautze-Picron 1998, Cat. no. 72.)
Thank you!