

**EXPLORING SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS THROUGH THE
JĀTAKAS AND THERĪGĀTHĀ: A REVIEW OF EARLY BUDDHIST
NARRATIVES AND THEIR CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE**

Dr Bharti Tyagi¹

Professor & Head, Dept. of English D. J. College Baraut, UP

Indresh Prasad Purohit²

Research Scholar

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Abstract:

This study explores the socio-cultural dimensions embedded within early Buddhist narratives, focusing specifically on the *Jātakas* and the *Therīgāthā*. These canonical texts serve as rich reservoirs of cultural, ethical, and gendered insights, offering a subtle understanding of ancient Indian society through the lens of Buddhist thought. The *Jātakas*, comprising moral tales of the Buddha's previous lives, reflect societal norms, values, and the collective imagination of early Buddhist communities. Meanwhile, the *Therīgāthā*, a collection of verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns, provides rare and powerful expressions of women's spiritual agency, resistance, and social roles in a patriarchal milieu. Through a critical review of these texts, this paper examines how they convey themes of gender dynamics and social justice. The study also assesses their contemporary relevance, particularly in discussions on gender equality and cultural identity. By bridging ancient narratives with modern socio-cultural discourses, the paper underscores the enduring significance of early Buddhist literature in shaping contemporary thought and values.

Keywords: Ancient Indian, Jātakas, Therīgāthā, Buddhist, Socio-Cultural, Women

1. Introduction

The rich body of early Buddhist literature offers profound insights not only into spiritual doctrines but also into the socio-cultural realities of ancient India. Among these, the *Jātakas* and the *Therīgāthā* occupy a significant place as narrative texts that transcend mere religious instruction to engage with the lived experiences and societal structures of their time. The *Jātakas*, a collection of stories detailing the

Buddha's past lives, function as ethical parables that reflect the values, norms, and socio-political hierarchies prevalent in early Indian society. Simultaneously, the *Therīgāthā*, a unique anthology of verses composed by early Buddhist nuns, offers rare autobiographical accounts of women's spiritual quests, shedding light on their inner lives, struggles, and resistance against societal expectations.

Together, these texts provide a valuable lens through which to examine the intersections of morality, gender, class, and cultural identity in Ancient India. They not only illustrate the doctrinal aspects of Buddhism but also critique and reflect upon broader human experiences, especially in relation to the pursuit of liberation and ethical living. This paper seeks to explore the socio-cultural dimensions embedded in the *Jātakas* and *Therīgāthā*, with a dual aim: first, to analyse how these narratives articulate and contest social norms of their time, and second, to assess their enduring relevance in contemporary discussions on gender equality and cultural heritage (Rao et al. 2020). This paper aims to examine how these texts reflect and critique societal values, particularly in relation to gender roles, social justice, and the human condition, while also exploring their relevance in contemporary society.

2. Literature review

Roha Romsha et al. (2024) The legends of the *Jātakas* include abundant data on women. Some people admire women for their altruism and nurturing nature, whereas the majority see them as morally corrupt. In a different group of stories, women are portrayed in a more subdued manner, without any overtly sexualised images. Because of the *Jātakas*' special place in Ancient Indian literature, the different ways women are portrayed in them need to be explored. *Jātakas*, being folktales, mirrored the complex social realities. They had to find a middle ground between the orthodox demand for celibacy and the popular demand for equality in Buddhism because of their ties to Buddhism.

Rohit Kumar et al. (2022) *Therīgāthā* offers insight into the social history and diverse life experiences of the people involved. They belonged to many social classes, including the nobles, the *brāhmaṇas*, the merchants, and the courtesans. However, details about the family histories of a few of the *Therīs* are lacking. Various factors, such as money, lust, and hatred of household life, lead these women to become *Bhikkhunīs*. They arrived from many locations and compiled their religious experiences in *Therīgāthā Bhikkhunī*. One of their number was *Śrāvastī*. *Śrāvastī* was the dwelling place of *Upāsikā Viśākha*. It was near Jetavana that she constructed the *Vihara* for *Bhikkhunī*, also known as *Pubbārām*. *Paṭācārā*, *Kisāgotamī*, *Sumagalamātā*, *Punnā*, and *Puṇṇikā* were among the renowned *Bhikkhunis* who belonged to *Śrāvastī*. *Śrāvastī*' *Bhikkhunī*'s social-religious experiences must be

examined prior to that. We make an effort to comprehend the *Therīgāthā* within its historical framework. The reason this conversation holds significance is that it could lead us to discover something about Śrāvastī's Bhikkhunī.

2.1 Work on the *Jātaka Tales*

The *Jātaka* corpus, which recounts the Buddha's past lives, has long been a subject of literary, anthropological, and pedagogical interest due to its moral and didactic narratives.

- T.W. Rhys Davids and Robert Chalmers (1895–1907) undertook extensive translations in the *Sacred Books of the East* series, providing access to hundreds of *Jātaka* stories in English. Their work established the literary and moral importance of these tales in Buddhist studies.
- E.B. Cowell's multi-volume *Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* remains a seminal edition, notable for its comprehensive range and detailed footnotes.
- John Strong investigated how the *Jātakas* function as tools of religious propagation and moral instruction, especially in lay Buddhist communities.
- Naomi Appleton offered innovative interpretations by analyzing the cosmological implications and narrative strategies within the *Jātakas*, particularly focusing on ideas of karma and rebirth.
- A.K. Warder examined how the *Jātakas* preserved ancient folklore while embedding Buddhist ethical teachings.

Scholars have also studied the *Jātakas* as sources of cultural memory, exploring themes like kingship, animal symbolism, and ethical dilemmas in both historical and pedagogical contexts.

2.2 Work on the *Therīgāthā*

The *Therīgāthā*, a unique anthology of verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns, has been the subject of increasing scholarly interest, particularly in the fields of religious studies, feminist hermeneutics, and early Indian literature.

- K.R. Norman (1971) provided a philologically rigorous translation and commentary in *The Elders' Verses II*, which remains one of the most authoritative sources for understanding the text's linguistic nuances and historical evolution.

- Carolyn Rhys Davids (1909) in *Psalms of the Sisters* was one of the first to translate these verses into English, focusing on their devotional and emotional aspects. Though dated, her work helped popularize the text among Western scholars.
- Susan Murcott (1991) in *The First Buddhist Women* reinterpreted the *Therīgāthā* through a feminist lens, emphasizing the nuns' autonomy and spiritual agency.
- Liz Wilson explored the ritual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of women's renunciation and suffering, showing how the verses reflect a negotiation between patriarchy and liberation.
- Ute Hüsken examined ordination rituals and institutional limitations faced by women, drawing connections between textual ideals and historical realities.

These works collectively highlight the *Therīgāthā* as a powerful record of early female voices in Indian religiosity and provide insight into how women navigated spiritual paths in a male-dominated monastic system.

2.3 Overview of the Jātakas and Therīgāthā

The *Jātakas* and the *Therīgāthā* are two foundational texts within early Buddhist literature, each offering unique insights into the religious, ethical, and social consciousness of early Buddhist communities. While differing in form and focus, both texts serve as didactic tools designed to guide practitioners on the path of moral and spiritual development.

The *Jātakas* are a vast collection of moralistic tales that recount the numerous past lives of the Buddha prior to his final incarnation and enlightenment. In these narratives, the Buddha appears in various forms—human and animal—each story illustrating the cultivation of a particular virtue such as compassion, patience, generosity, or wisdom. The tales frequently revolve around moral dilemmas, interactions across different social strata, and the karmic consequences of ethical or unethical behaviour. The *Jātakas* not only reflect the moral teachings of Buddhism but also provide valuable depictions of ancient Indian society, including insights into social hierarchies, familial roles, economic life, and political systems. Their engaging, story-based format made them especially effective as pedagogical tools for gender studies of both monastic and lay audiences.

The *Therīgāthā*, on the other hand, is a collection of verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns (*therīs*), preserved in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the *Pāli Canon*. These verses are deeply personal expressions of the spiritual journeys undertaken by these

women, often involving narratives of hardship, renunciation, inner struggle, and eventual liberation (Russell webb et al. 1991). Through their poetry, the nuns recount experiences such as widowhood, motherhood, aging, social oppression, and the pursuit of spiritual truth. The *Therīgāthā* stands as one of the earliest records of female religious literature in the world and offers a rare glimpse into the agency and voices of women in a predominantly patriarchal society (Pragati Sahni et al. 2020). It is both a testament to the spiritual capabilities of women and a powerful affirmation of the inclusive ideals of early Buddhism.

Both the *Jātakas* and the *Therīgāthā* are profoundly didactic. They were composed not only to preserve historical and doctrinal narratives but also to inspire ethical conduct and spiritual awakening. While the *Jātakas* provide illustrative examples of moral behaviour across lifetimes, the *Therīgāthā* presents the transformative power of personal spiritual experience. Together, they enrich our understanding of gender roles, complementing each other, and continue to offer timeless guidance for socio-cultural study of the age.

3. Socio-Cultural Themes in the *Jātakas*

The *Jātakas* provide more than just moral lessons; they serve as a cultural and ethical mirror reflecting the complexities of ancient Indian society. Through their engaging and often allegorical narratives, these tales present a multifaceted view of social structures, values, and relationships, offering insight into both idealized and problematic aspects of human conduct and societal organization.

3.1 Caste and Social Hierarchy

One of the most prominent themes in the *Jātakas* is the depiction of the caste system and the associated social hierarchy. Characters in the stories come from all levels of society—from Brahmins and kings to outcastes and animals—reflecting the inclusive and didactic intent of the narratives. While the caste system is often acknowledged, the *Jātakas* also subtly challenge its rigidity. In several tales, the moral or spiritual superiority of individuals from lower castes contrasts with the moral failings of those in higher social positions, suggesting a karmic egalitarianism that transcends birth-based discrimination.

3.2 Familial Duties and Relationships

The *Jātakas* often explore the dynamics of family life, highlighting values such as filial piety, marital fidelity, parental sacrifice, and sibling loyalty. These

relationships are depicted as both sources of support and as moral testing grounds where virtues such as patience, compassion, and detachment are cultivated. The tales reinforce the importance of ethical conduct within the family unit as a foundation for broader social harmony.

3.3 The Role of Women

Women appear in a variety of roles throughout the *Jātakas*—as mothers, wives, queens, sages, and temptresses. While some stories reinforce traditional gender norms and roles, others depict women as wise, courageous, and morally upright, capable of making significant spiritual and ethical contributions. In particular, female characters who exhibit intelligence and virtue are often portrayed as worthy of admiration and respect, indicating a subtle view of gender within the narrative tradition.

3.4 Critique of Social Ills

While largely didactic, the *Jātakas* are not uncritical of society. They often expose and critique vices such as greed, corruption, deceit, cruelty, and exploitation. Characters who embody these traits usually suffer dire consequences, serving as cautionary examples. These narratives thus act as moral critiques, urging individuals and communities to aspire toward higher ethical standards.

4. Socio-Cultural Insights from the *Therīgāthā*

The *Therīgāthā*, a unique anthology of verses composed by early Buddhist nuns (therīs), stands as one of the earliest and most powerful records of female spiritual expression in world literature. As part of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* in the *Pāli Canon*, this text not only chronicles the personal journeys of women who attained enlightenment but also serves as a poignant commentary on the socio-cultural conditions they navigated. (Drishti Kalra et al. 2024) These verses are not just religious utterances—they are windows into the lived experiences of women in ancient India, revealing deep socio-cultural insights through poetic and autobiographical expression.

4.1 Gender Inequality and Social Constraints

A recurring theme in the *Therīgāthā* is the struggle against entrenched gender norms and societal expectations. The poems often reveal the limited roles available

to women in conventional society, where they were typically valued for their roles as daughters, wives, or mothers. (Kyung peggy mell et al. 2020) Many therīs speak of domestic drudgery, forced marriages, widowhood, and the pain of losing children. In choosing the monastic path, these women broke away from patriarchal structures that confined them to lives of dependency and subordination.

4.2 The Quest for Autonomy and Identity

The verses of the *Therīgāthā* express a profound yearning for autonomy—not merely in the physical sense but as a search for spiritual and existential freedom. The decision to join the Sangha (monastic community) often represented an act of radical self-determination. In a world where women's voices were often marginalized, these verses reclaim narrative agency. The therīs speak for themselves, narrate their own stories, and affirm their identities as spiritual seekers and awakened beings. This assertion of self in a religious context served as both personal empowerment and communal inspiration.

4.3 Spiritual Liberation and Equality

One of the most significant contributions of the *Therīgāthā* is its affirmation of spiritual equality. Despite societal prejudices, the verses demonstrate that women were fully capable of achieving *arahantship* (enlightenment) through dedication, insight, and discipline. Many of the therīs recount moments of awakening, often arising from deep meditation on impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*). In doing so, the *Therīgāthā* reinforces the core Buddhist teaching that liberation is not bound by gender, caste, or social status.

4.4 Resilience and Inner Strength

Themes of resilience and inner strength permeate the verses. Many of the poets came from difficult circumstances—orphans, courtesans, widows, or women who had suffered profound loss—yet they transformed their suffering into spiritual resolve. Their verses are often marked by honesty, emotional intensity, and philosophical clarity. This narrative of overcoming adversity to attain peace and insight contributes to a collective image of the therīs as paragons of both human courage and spiritual victory.

4.5 Expressions of Suffering and Impermanence

Another key theme in the *Therīgāthā* is the reflection on suffering and the transient nature of life. The poems contain vivid portrayals of grief, aging, illness, and death—not as ends in themselves but as catalysts for spiritual awakening. In many verses, physical decay and loss serve as reminders of the urgency of renunciation and the pursuit of the *Dhamma*. The ability of the *therīs* to confront suffering with clarity and equanimity offers timeless insights into the Buddhist path.

5. Comparative Analysis and Contemporary Relevance

Although the *Jātakas* and the *Therīgāthā* differ significantly in literary form and focus, they exhibit striking thematic parallels that reflect the core values of early gender studies within Buddhism. Together, they offer a comprehensive view of lived conditions of women and across different social contexts.

In the *Therīgāthā*, suffering is more explicitly personal and existential. The verses are filled with raw expressions of sorrow; loss of loved ones, aging, sickness, and emotional pain. Yet, rather than resigning to these realities, the nuns reflect on impermanence (*anicca*) and use their suffering as a catalyst for spiritual awakening. The *Therīgāthā* thus powerfully demonstrates the possibility of liberation within a single lifetime, even for those marginalized by society.

Despite their stylistic differences, both the *Jātakas* and the *Therīgāthā* function complimentary literature to each other in presenting the altruistic picture of the socio-cultural milieu. The *Jātakas*, often told as parables, served as tools for understanding the general attitudes of lay audiences and monastics alike towards their womenfolk. They use relatable characters and vivid scenarios to convey such meanings.

The *Therīgāthā* holds particular significance for contemporary feminist scholarship and activism. By amplifying the voices of early Buddhist nuns, the text challenges patriarchal assumptions embedded within religious traditions and affirms the spiritual agency and capabilities of women. The candid verses of the *therīs* offer a model for reclaiming women's experiences and contributions in religious history, serving as a source of empowerment and inspiration. In modern feminist discourse, the *Therīgāthā* is often cited as a pioneering example of women's religious literature that validates female subjectivity, autonomy, and liberation, thereby enriching conversations about gender justice in both Buddhist and broader spiritual communities.

6. Comparative Studies of *Therīgāthā* and *Jātaka*

Comparative analysis of the *Therīgāthā* and the *Jātakas* tales remains a relatively under-researched area, although some recent efforts highlight how these texts complement and contrast with each other.

1. The *Therīgāthā* presents subjective, first-person accounts, often centered on existential suffering and spiritual awakening. In contrast, the *Jātakas* adopt a third-person, omniscient narrative voice and are structured to deliver moral lessons for a broader, often lay, audience.
2. The portrayal of women differs significantly: In the *Therīgāthā*, women express their own struggles and achievements, whereas in the *Jātakas*, women are more often presented as secondary characters—sometimes virtuous, but frequently flawed or cautionary.
3. Some feminist scholars argue that reading the texts together helps recover the submerged histories of women in early Buddhism—where *Therīgāthā* speaks to lived realities and *Jātakas* to moral ideals.

This comparative lens shows how both texts construct, reflect, and sometimes contest the roles of women within early Indian society and Buddhist cosmology.

7. Research Gaps

Despite the depth of available research, several critical gaps persist:

- Integrated Analyses: Few studies examine the *Jātakas* and *Therīgāthā* in together to explore overlapping socio-cultural themes especially that of gender and power.
- Intersectional Perspectives: There is a lack of intersectional analysis addressing how gender, caste, and social status intersect in these texts to shape the lived experiences of the nuns.
- Contemporary Relevance: While individual scholars have noted the continuing relevance of Buddhist moral teachings, systematic studies that link ancient narratives with modern socio-political concerns (e.g., feminism, social justice, identity politics) are limited.
- Role of Subaltern and Marginalized Voices: Though *Therīgāthā* offers rare insight into women's lives, there remains under-exploration of how both texts represent or silence marginalized women (in theological terms).

8. Scope of the Present Study

This paper aims to bridge these gaps by providing a comparative analysis of the *Jātakas* and *Therīgāthā*, drawing thematic parallels on gender roles and liberation

of women. Highlighting the socio-cultural dimensions of early Buddhist society as reflected in these texts, particularly focusing on gender dynamics and social critique. Demonstrating the relevance of these narratives in contemporary discourses, especially regarding feminist thought and cultural identity. By doing so, this study contributes to a more integrated and contextually enriched understanding of early Buddhist literature and its enduring significance in shaping ethical and cultural frameworks across time.

9. Conclusion

The *Jātakas* and *Therīgāthā* are not merely religious texts; they are cultural artifacts that encapsulate the ethical, social, and spiritual concerns of their time. Their enduring relevance lies in their capacity to speak to contemporary audiences across cultures and contexts, providing timeless lessons on morality, social justice, and human dignity. Through a critical engagement with these texts, modern readers can gain a deeper appreciation of the rich socio-cultural fabric of early Buddhism and its implications for today's world.

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