

**LOOKING AT NUNS IN  
TIBETAN BUDDHISM  
THROUGH A  
GENDERED LENS**

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**SONAM CHODEN**





ZUBAAN

128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor

NEW DELHI 110 049

EMAIL: [contact@zubaanbooks.com](mailto:contact@zubaanbooks.com)

WEBSITE: [www.zubaanbooks.com](http://www.zubaanbooks.com)

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## LOOKING AT NUNS IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM THROUGH A GENDERED LENS

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Realization of ‘selflessness’ is Buddhism’s essential goal. When the self is dissolved, the dualistic nature of mind is also dissolved. Eminent feminist scholar Rita Gross asserts that Buddhism has a colossal potential for deconstructing gender if we affirm Buddha’s teachings. Yet, the religion which addresses principles of egalitarianism appears to be enormously misogynistic in certain contexts if not entirely. So this brings me to the question: Is Buddhism really an egalitarian religion? Does it provide equal space and agency to its female followers? The lesser visibility of Buddhist nuns in Sikkim tells a different story. This came at a time when I was trying to gain more clarity on why women are treated the way they are treated, which brought me to gradually understand the utmost need to tell stories of a variety of women because women do not experience patriarchy in the same manner as a result of various intersections. So, this is my humble attempt to unravel the general state of things pertaining to nuns under Vajrayana Buddhism. An attempt to comprehend the everyday experiences of nuns keeping in mind the Sikkim<sup>1</sup> landscape and furthermore, to

explore their understanding of being nuns in a larger monastic context. The essay may come across as Sikkim state specific, but it finds itself representing the larger picture of nuns and lay women from the Himalayan region who follow the Vajrayana tradition. In addition, the paper partially looks at the construction of the female body and sexuality in Buddhist textual representations. I have been a late entrant to the world of feminism, and since then, the road leading to liberation even on a personal level has been empowering yet challenging at the same time. Feminism has given me a lens to analyse the actions of people around me, see disparities, recognise sexism within the religion and most importantly question the archaic belief system which I would not otherwise have been able to do. On a personal level, I started confronting the reality of what I read and made a plan with one simple rule: to read more literature by women. So, for every author I read, I got a point!

Therefore, this paper is a culmination of two things, the first being my deep belief and commitment towards making feminism an agent of change; and second, the ritualistic and architectural aspects and non-discriminatory philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism keeping in mind its potential to create an egalitarian society. I wish to infer stories of women's leadership and stories of attempts made to break the rigid power structure and how all this translates into the idea of a woman as a woman.

Vajrayana Buddhism has flourished in Tibet since the 8th century CE, and its forms have expanded to influence neighbouring countries closer to the mighty Himalayas. It has been able to amass followers in the western world because of the relevance of its teachings in the contemporary world. Several prominent Buddhist feminist scholars from the West have looked into the intersection of women and religion on an intimate level and have laid the path for feminist theology studies in Buddhism. Rita Gross, Miranda Shaw, Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Kim Gutshow have offered sublime vantage points for researchers to shape and build their work further. Most writings on nuns have been authored by western scholars, and there is a pressing need for more

women from the Himalayan region with a Buddhism rich environment to correct this with insider's perspectives in order to develop an eastern scholarship. A perspective that depicts the everydayness of women, their stories of struggle and constant resistance to the gendered world, and which otherwise is hidden under the righteous blanket of Buddhism. Reclaiming women centric narrative becomes increasingly relevant to more number of feminist researchers displaying an interest in the historical and contemporary agency of Buddhist women. Much of the existing literature suggests that conventional Buddhist studies have privileged doctrine over practice, text over local informants, classical sources over the vernacular and monks over nuns (Gutshow, 2001). The elimination of nuns from Buddhist scholarship has always been a problem--Gutshow attributes this partially to the failure of scholars that have ignored and misrecognized nuns in their accounts of Buddhism in Zangskar (Kashmir). In Sikkim, the honorific term 'Lama' is used for addressing monks which denotes a position of utmost respect, whereas the nuns are addressed using a simple lay person's term 'Ani', which simply translates to aunt. The realisation came after an ordained nun explained the need to use 'venerable' instead of 'Ani' because it is not very respectful towards nuns. The generic manner in which nuns are addressed is also an indicator of how a substantial population has been overlooked for decades because monks have invariably acted as spiritual guides and are comparatively favoured over nuns; this is made evident subsequently. 'Venerable', a more gender-neutral term, is preferred by nuns who have been vocal in questioning age old misogynistic practices in Buddhism, but it could also be viewed as an effort to demand a more equal status by making little shifts and changes.<sup>2</sup> However, this push has only come from nuns who have realised the misogynistic aspects of the religion.' The erasure of nuns in historical records is due more to the way in which monks and kings dominated the Buddhist economy of merit than the real absence of nuns or female renunciants, which are alluded to in both written and oral sources' (Gutshow, 2001:187). The erasure Gutshow talks about has strong resemblance to the invisibility of nuns

in Tibetan Buddhist society today because the monastic spaces are by and large monopolised by monks. Gutshow further reiterates scholars' failure to include the nuns of Zangskar (Gutshow, 2001)<sup>3</sup> in historical literature due to sheer ignorance and a doctrinal image of how a nun should be. The Zangskar nuns are often described as divorcees, widows, single mothers or unhappy women who were not able to find a husband by the local people around them. Thus, it becomes even more important to render history accountable for the narrative that exists today because what we know of history is how it has been handed down to us. The lives of Zangskar, Spiti and Ladakh nuns have been extensively documented by feminist researchers for a very long time. Our neighbouring country Bhutan has shown a committed involvement to improve self reliance and participation of women through projects like the Bhutan Nuns Foundation.<sup>4</sup> However, very little to no literature is available on Sikkimese Nuns.

The stories we heard while growing up had an ongoing impact on us, both 'good' stories and 'bad'. Often we try to put a particular mould on stories by quickly judging them, because we just want to look at the brighter side of things and are eager to label a situation at any given time. Reality is much more fluid and has a lot to teach. I believe that the stories have given me a space to proceed openly with curiosity and wonder. It requires a conscious process of learning, unlearning and questioning. I see meaningful story telling as a powerful tool to have. So, holding on to the belief that stories have secured their place as one of the most important traditions that human beings follow, a historical analysis of Buddha's early life (stories) can set the stage for feminist thinkers to build on. The story of Gautama Buddha, a prince who gave up all his wealth and riches to follow the spiritual journey is familiar and widely known. What remains unknown is the idea of "Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha abandoning his wife and new-born infant because he was convinced that they were an obstacle to his own spiritual development and liberation. Is it possible for a religion to be founded by such a man who negated women's interests and needs?" (Gross, 1993:18). This story has been widely celebrated as an act

of Buddha's love for all sentient beings while the woman left behind without her consent is rarely spoken of. Are women not counted as sentient beings? This particular story has been well presented in *Cullavagga Vinaya*.<sup>5</sup> Misogyny and Buddhism have not been synonymous because the systematic segregation of women is rarely discussed or left rather 'unfelt' owing to rigorous conditioning and contemporary perception of the Buddha as an immaculate figure. The glorification of the Buddha abandoning his family simply reiterates the existing perceptions about women and sexuality – as obstructions in reaching an enlightened position. Hence, the need to abandon sex and women to achieve a certain elevated stage further pushes the idea of women's role as being limited to that of just sexual beings and mere distractions. The story may not scream sexism for a lay reader or listener, but it immediately places the 'man' in a position of hierarchy since he is the protagonist who combats the 'obstacles' that are portrayed in the story. Gross, in her landmark book *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993), does an analysis of different layers of patriarchy in Buddhism. The first stratum which consists of the faction that took charge of the texts to conserve them was more inclined to adopt values given by men. The second layer talks about the accounts of women practitioners that have been conveniently ignored. Finally, present day Buddhism continues to place importance on masculine interests and emphasises the authority of men over women (Brown, 2011).

The second widely known story is about the Buddha's reluctance to accept women into his Sangha. According to tradition, the first ever nun ordained was the Buddha's stepmother, Mahaprajapati. Her story appears in most *vinayas* as well as in *Madhyamagāma*<sup>6</sup> (Heirman, 2001). It was only after persistent requests by Mahaprajapati that he finally allowed women into the Sangha after much reluctance. Although the reactions on the ordination of Mahaprajapati were not positive in 5th century China, women candidates for ordination still referred to her as an example to follow (Heirman, 2001). This story, however, has only been limited to *Srilankan Vinaya* texts, *Mulasarvastivadavinaya*. It is believed that a community of nuns already

existed even before Mahaprajapati begged to be ordained. A few of the rules (*pratimokshā*) pointed out by Heirman in these texts are: 1) even when a nun has been ordained for a period of a 100 years, she must stand up from her seat on seeing a freshly ordained monk; 2) a nun may not confront a monk saying that he has done something wrong; 3) a nun cannot punish a monk whereas a monk may admonish a nun; 4) when a nun has committed an offence she has to face penance; 5) every fortnight, the nuns have to ask the monks for instructions (Heirman, 2001). Heirman further brings out the account of Mahaprajapati stating that soteriologically women are not inferior to men; but socially and institutionally, they are. This also seems to be the reason why, according to the story, women are viewed as a danger to the community as they weaken the community and thus the doctrine by making it less respected. This danger can only be countered if the monks control the nuns' community socially and institutionally. These stories delineate the construction of women as 'women' and also reiterate the importance of historical textual representations shaping the narratives about women. These rules may never have been mentioned by the Buddha himself, however their effect continues to exist for the longest time (Gross, 1993). Such representations have been conducive for discrimination towards women. The notion of women as the second sex has always been inherent not just in Buddhist canonical texts but also as symbolised in the *Bible* where Eve is said to be born out of Adam's rib. 'The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,' said Aristotle, 'we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness' (Beauvoir, 1949). Stories have been active agents in bringing in a form of disciplinary control to the nun community through patriarchal androcentric gender relations which exist to date.

Shifting the focus from a dismissive portrayal and perusing it through constructive representation presents an opportunity to reconstruct history, which becomes imperative especially when we are trying to shape newer narratives of women in Buddhism. Paraphrasing Samdarshi (2017), the word 'Buddha' has often been



viewed as being 'male' though the term is more about the concept of awakening and therefore surpasses gender. The Buddhist way of analysing is deconstructive, so the concept of emptiness is of profound importance. That the qualities of male and female are largely artificially human-designated does not matter; they are usually man-made and rarely woman-made for they are the exclusive property of neither men nor women, but belong to both and need to be equally valued (Watson, 2010). Like every other religion, Buddhism is not devoid of complexities and contradictions. While we may stress on how negative stories pertaining to women may have led to their derogatory construction, the presence of a positive portrayal of women cannot be left unnoticed. The female bodhisattva Tara is widely worshipped as the goddess of liberation and wisdom.<sup>7</sup> One story surrounding Tara is how she was at one time a human being engaged in meditative practices. 'After much practice, she finally experienced an awakened mind. The monks around her suggested that she could (and should) now take rebirth as a male.<sup>8</sup> Instead of doing so, she told them, "In this life, there is no such distinction as 'male' and 'female'... and therefore, attachment to ideas of 'male' and 'female' is quite worthless." She then vowed to take the female form continuously as an enlightened Bodhisattva' (Gross, 2008:293). Further, taking a look at the female deities worshipped in Tibetan Buddhism provides an excellent platform for feminist thinkers who are on a quest to discover positive portrayals of women in Tibetan Buddhism to move beyond iconographies. The popular practice of silent retreat called 'nyung-ne' was pioneered by Bhikkuni Palmo. Goddess Palden Lhamo is worshipped as a fierce protectress of Tibet, a guardian of the dharma. The Buddhist fraternity is well aware of Venerable Tenzin Palmo, the first western nun to spend 23 years inside a cave in Himachal Pradesh. These are some archetypes, and there are numerous examples of great female yoginis, but the figures are still down from the average for the present day female Buddhist practitioners. In the Vajrayana (Tibetan) tradition, tantra techniques are very much embedded in esoteric spiritual practices. Tantra has been an integral part of several

ancient Indic-religious traditions. Its roots are very old, presumably as old as the Mohenjo-Daro civilization. All the tantra traditions have a live engagement with the feminine divine. The Vajrayana especially has been permeated with a wide range Buddhist female divinities. In Buddhist tantra, the symbolism of tantric goddesses and their appearances and practices is backed by profound philosophical doctrines. The non-theistic framework of Buddhism does not consider the intrinsic existence of tantric goddesses, and their appearances are meant to serve the purpose of transcending all sorts of dualistic thoughts for attaining enlightenment (Samdarshi, 2014). Shaw(1994) provides more perspective by propounding tantric texts as works depicting spiritually independent and powerful women who inspired awe and dependence. Further, the texts do not seek to legitimize or justify male authority and superiority, nor do they suggest that women should not practice, teach or assume leadership in tantric circles.<sup>9</sup> Stories of yogis failing to recognize women as tantric gurus just because they were women have been well presented in the book *Passionate Enlightenment*.<sup>10</sup> In tantra, some concepts of the higher consciousness are depicted through the union of the male and female. The female is said to represent wisdom (*prajna*), and the male depicts compassionate qualities (*upāya*). It becomes equally important for both these elements to unite in the process of enlightenment. This portrayal of male and female is not only limited to texts but is present as a wide representation in Buddhist iconography as well.<sup>11</sup> The images and concepts may seem abstract to a casual observer, but these esoteric practices have been well explained in ancient texts. Despite the presence of positive annals, narratives such as these never make it to the mainstream conversation while discussing Buddhism. I have distinct memories of reading stories about demons disguised as ‘attractive women’ trying to distract the Buddha from his meditative state. Some interpreters of tantric art and literature have maintained that the positive female imagery does not reflect women’s lives or accomplishments. Rather, historians have held that tantric Buddhism was an oppressive movement in which women were at best marginal

and subordinate and at worst degraded and exploited<sup>12</sup> (Shaw, 1994). The central principle which feminist historians have come to agree on is the need to reclaim the historical agency of women which concentrates on how women acted rather than how they were acted upon, and considering how women viewed events rather than how women were viewed (Shaw, 1994). Shaw admits the need for women to be viewed as active shapers and interpreters of their own personal journeys rather than as passive objects or victims of history. That is why it becomes critical to identify voices and peel as many layers of a history largely constructed by men reluctant to share power.

One of the few available works on nuns solely focusing on the Sikkimese context talks about the concept of Gatshel and Gatshelma derived from the monastic narratives in Sikkim monasteries. Here, the status is packed with a gendered hierarchical system which is further accentuated by the positioning of the monks and nuns in Sutrayana. According to this classification, the first phase is known as Gatshel for monks and Gatshelma for nuns. Both are required to follow the 10 precepts without any discrimination. Following these precepts religiously paves the way for becoming eligible to move higher up to the next position known as Galong for monks and Galongma for nuns. Two hundred and fifty vows have to be followed by the monks to qualify for the Galong position, whereas nuns are expected to follow 364 vows, which makes it 114 more vows than the monks. The monks unanimously attribute the low status of women to them being the biologically weaker sex (Sachdeva and Chowdhury, 2018:49). The vinaya or rules have rejected the very notion of women by placing more archaic rules that the nun community needs to follow. The rigid patriarchal set-up delivers a platform to examine the impact of interpretations, gender roles and biases which extend beyond language, folklore, literature and food. The layers unfold problematic aspects of Tibetan Buddhism towards women. The additional vows for nuns, lack of access to sacred texts, doctrinal depictions that assign lower status to women uncover disparities from the journey which ironically should lead to the realm where duality is just a state

of mind and concepts like gender, man and woman do not matter. These narratives are further cemented duality into the very fabric of what represents space, considered to be free of archaic beliefs. My concern emerges from issues like non acceptability of nuns in leading ceremonial rituals, lack of self-reliant institutions, not having access to texts and the 'Geshema'<sup>13</sup> degree. The disparity is staggering. The following section shows women in Tibetan Buddhism negotiating spaces within the structures of power and misogyny in their daily lives.

### **DHARMA OVER GENDER? OR GENDER OVER DHARMA?**

Sikkim is home to five nunneries with only about 400 nuns or less. The notable presence and influence of Tibetan Buddhist values and Buddhist/architecture in the region makes it a propitious environment for their growth. Intricate Buddhist artwork comprising of Buddhist holy symbols adorns public infrastructure and private living spaces because cultural and religious syncretism is unique to Sikkimese society. The region has been able to retain its multi ethnicity quite peacefully. The belief remains that Buddhism was brought to Sikkim from Tibet in the 8th century by Guru Padmasambhava, generally referred to as Guru Rinpoche which translates to 'precious master' or the 'lotus born.' Sikkim does not have a nun-rich environment, unlike her other counterparts in India like Ladakh, Spiti, Dharamshala and a few South Indian states, despite having massive Buddhist followers. Multi-ethnicity, warm welcoming people, lower crime rates are factors that stand out in this tiny state. Sikkimese society might present a very progressive picture to an outside observer, but on a closer inspection and actual experience, the Himalayan state is becoming witness to a rapidly changing socio-cultural ecosystem, loss of environmentally conscious cultures, increasing materialism, lowcoping and problem solving skills, and hence the erosion of a tight- knit community. These social problems often do not exist in isolation because they are mutually

related and to be examined together. The state is also considered the safest for women in comparison to the other Indian states and has reported lower crime rates against women, but very little is uncovered about women still living with internalised patriarchy which takes shape in various traditional roles of rearing, bearing, setting unrealistic beauty standards and glorified gender roles. As you dig deeper, you shouldn't be shocked to find more nuanced constructions of gender, notions of modesty, family values, beliefs and assumptions, self-concept; these are useful for connecting the dots to see how this fits into the larger scheme of things. The need to redefine the understanding of crime is crucial because it need not be abhorrent for it to be boxed in the category of 'crime'. Failure to recognise patriarchy as a gateway to gender imbalance has tricked people into thinking that things have been running quite 'smoothly'. This perpetuates gender stereotypes to relegate women into being second class citizens. The primary reason for lower crimes against women has also been attributed to Sikkimese people being remarkably shy and timid. The people are undoubtedly most governable and have a history of being silent spectators to issues of sublime importance – 'Small Silent Sikkim' as some would like to label. Adequate understanding of situations that pave way to gender based violence is habitually overlooked and issues of domestic violence are still viewed as normal. One shouldn't be surprised to encounter sexist comments regularly because patriarchy operates in vicious ways to keep women 'grounded'. I remember having a conversation with a lay Buddhist woman in which she shared with 'pride' that her husband does not let her have social media accounts. I was appalled because she was visibly unperturbed; clearly her agency to take ownership of her personal life is limited due to the internalised patriarchal notions of how a woman should behave. I have had personal experiences of encountering people during my journey of writing this paper who seemed relatively fine despite experiencing physical and emotional abuse because it is supposed to be a 'private matter'. The constructed everyday narratives about gender keep men on a pedestal even when contributions from women are almost double. My mother quit wearing

a particular piece of clothing because my father did not quite approve of it, and a young me grew up learning perceived notions about women. It took me time to unlearn them, and years of growing up surrounded by demeaning ideas of how a woman should act had done the damage quite well. The Sikkim State Commission for Women was constituted to help and support women in distress and ‘to act on the violation of women rights’. Since its formation in 2001 under the State Commission for Women Act ‘1015 cases were settled out of 1050 cases and 35 cases were referred to the courts.’ Women are still struggling to make major decisions, economic or otherwise, because these spaces have been dominated by men for aeons. The old laws of Sikkim did not provide any property inheritance rights to Sikkimese women. Women were barred to have ownership rights over family property if they married a non-Sikkimese man. However, the same rule did not apply to men. A notification was circulated in 2018, which stated that Sikkimese women married to non Sikkimese men can have property rights, but the property acquired cannot be transferred to the husband or the kids. The amendment still seems hazy because the state is further trying to perpetuate patriarchy by denying inheritance rights to the woman’s children by placing tremendous weight on patrilineal lineage as the ‘valid’ form of ancestry or bloodline. Our existence has been interweaved with multiple roles except as ‘women’, devoid of extensions of husbands and fathers. The examples cited here are common to what women are facing everywhere; the only difference is that some are blatantly out there and some invisible, as in case of Sikkim.

The lay women are still able to enjoy socioeconomic independence and a greater visibility as compared to nuns. The nunneries in the western and eastern region of Sikkim provided several insights into the structure and their relations with the gendered monastic system. Once you are in a nunnery, an endless supply of *boccha*<sup>15</sup> is guaranteed. It is a crucial part of both ceremonial and social life. Their humble living quarters contain shelves adorned with traditional Buddhist paraphernalia ranging from photo frames of deities to more elaborate

handmade items that have symbolic and ritualistic importance. All these items occupy the same space, like they are living in harmony. It represents the coexistence of a living and religious space. The novice nuns are from Ladakh, Nepal and surrounding villages; very few are from Sikkim (Names of the people and institutions involved in this study have been changed for anonymity). The nuns in west Sikkim nunnery start the day at dawn as they begin their morning prayers. The younger ones who have been tonsured recently are made to read and write Tibetan scriptures supervised by a senior nun. They wrap up after five hours of rigorous prayers (primarily rote memorisation of prayers). Some pujas are held for a full day, some a full night or even several days in a row. They take turns to chant, play ceremonial instruments and prepare all the meals in the nunnery. The older ones act as guides to the younger ones, both spiritually and religiously. Tashi, aged eight, practices her prayer chanting. Like her sisters, she will spend a minimum of five hours everyday chanting sacred mantras, for as long as she remains a nun. She has found herself a sense of community and belonging in the nunnery. Sundays are dedicated to monastic and personal chores. Sexual abstinence is a basic tenet for spiritual practice, and neglecting the required responsibility invites punishment in the form of permanent removal from the monastic community, though this applies to both nuns and monks. Moreover, non compliance to the rules contradict the very essence of Buddhist philosophy of non-attachment and desire. The nuns share their experiences of achieving greater freedom in their spiritual interests because there is a lot of focus on providing education to the nuns. An in-house tutor, a nun from Bhutan has been brought in by the Rimpoche for teaching Buddhist philosophy, prayers and meditation. The nunnery has flourished under the guidance of His Eminence Shogtse Rimpoche who has shown a great interest in providing monastic education to the nuns seeing potential in these young intelligent women for a nuanced understanding of dharma. The traditional Buddhist institution has always made education for nuns a low priority. The West Sikkim nunnery has a progressive approach towards education. In

addition to providing basic educational requirements, the Rimpoche facilitates their yearly trip to Bodhgaya, where the Buddha achieved enlightenment during the puja months. Educating the nuns to achieve similar academic standards just as the monks is a much needed step to bring in equality within the monastic space, but the road to higher education is still not accessible to them. The Tibetan Nuns Project<sup>16</sup> has been a stepping-stone for the nuns in Dharamshala to set long term solutions for the genuine independence and empowerment of nuns and bring in some radical shifts like providing access to higher education which otherwise was limited to monks. More and more nuns have now been able to achieve the Geshema degree (previously the prerogative of Tibetan Buddhist monks only) for completing the Buddhist Tantric studies programme in Dharamshala due to the constant guidance and encouragement from His Holiness the Dalai Lama in association with Tibetan Women's Association. This has been considered a ground-breaking move to empower Tibetan women in exile, and nuns have exhibited immense capability to excel in their studies. Discrimination on the basis of differences has created fewer opportunities for women, and the nuns being equally skilled to achieve a degree now is an apt representation of what Buddhists call 'the mind is the main'. This instilled hope in Sikkimese Nuns as I shared the news with them; the journey seems to be bumpy but eventually worthwhile. As the nunnery offered generous mobility to senior nuns, they were able to move out and visit nearby villages without prior permission from the male abbot, but this was limited to senior nuns. Male involvement on a day to day level is limited as the everyday management is taken care of by the nuns including making 'tormas' (intricate ritual offerings placed near shrines). The myriad colours, shapes and sizes of tormas are used to represent multiple aspects of the religious ceremony. They initially learn to make some basic forms, gradually progressing to the finer details just as the monks do it. It's a tedious process which requires patience and an eye for detail. The nunneries become economically and spiritually dependent on male patronage because major decisions regarding monastic affairs are taken



by the male head, who is also responsible for bringing in sponsorship. Devotees make generous donations/offerings at times, but it is often meagre compared to the sponsorship received by monasteries. It was difficult for me to find a nunnery which was entirely headed by a woman for women; this gives us a glimpse on positions of power and authority being centred on men.

Merit by undertaking virtuous acts is a peculiar feature of Tibetan Buddhism, so joining religious spaces is also considered an act of merit or 'dharma'. Some nuns who chose to walk the Buddhist spiritual path and cultivate spiritual awareness wished to practice dharma to benefit themselves by ensuring a good rebirth and well being of all sentient beings. They have humble rural backgrounds where faith and religion play an enormous role, especially in a tight-knit Buddhist community. Based on the principles of the 'Four Noble Truths' and 'The Eight-Fold Path'<sup>1,7</sup> the nuns dedicate their lives to generating merit. The practice comes from a simple concept of being responsible for all sentient beings to reach the highest realm of peace. Dharma believes that each one of us should help others to achieve happiness and eliminate suffering. Buddhism secures a significant position in governing the daily lives of people, but we have failed to understand the true essence of it (i.e. implementing it on a personal level) and focus more on the ritualistic aspects without much comprehension. Each of these rituals have a deeper meaning which ultimately boils down to compassion, cutting ignorance, self cherishing attitude, non discrimination, peace and loving kindness. The surface show nuns taking a spiritual path to cultivate spiritual awareness based on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold paths, but do we need to look for stories within stories? There may be a hidden transcript beneath a superficial story because poverty, lack of access to a formal education system and simple acts of resistance against the institution of marriage would slip through the cracks unless you make a note about each one.

A senior nun at the 'Ani Gumpa' in West Sikkim was quoted as saying, 'After my sister got married, it was my turn to get married. A man came to see me at home. In my village, the custom requires us to

get married to the person who arrives with a marriage proposal. We do not have the choice to select our partners. I could not do it because society would not approve, and I would be held accountable for my actions. My parents would lose face. Both my sisters were married off and it was my turn. There was no schooling opportunity either.'

The inherent desire to practice dharma is not the sole reason that motivates nuns to enter the monastic life; sometimes death in a family acts as a trigger to choose a life of celibacy. Renunciation can also be seen as an act of 'self-imposition.' A nun narrates an instance of her father's death that brought a sweeping change in her life which led her to commit herself to spiritual sensitivity.

'The first thing that happened was my father's death, and I was grieving. It gave me a greater awareness about death and disease. I wanted answers, so I thought joining a nunnery would help me overcome my grief and understand the world better. Death of the only earning member in the family brings more responsibilities for the ones left behind and shouldering them is a difficult task.'

Nunneries are seen as a viable option for pursuing studies, practicing dharma and contemplation. Nuns are able to negotiate spaces within the family because the nunnery provides an agency for them to escape the gendered world. Unfortunately, the monastic space that nuns take refuge in is also pervaded by defined notions of duality. Another interesting aspect is the fact that nuns barely leave the nunnery and integrate themselves into the lay community again or 'renounce' the monastic institution, but there are few exceptions because there are nuns who disrobed, got married and some others who went for higher education in local educational institutions.

Ani Pema quit the nunnery to study in a government college in Gangtok. She recalls the reason for choosing to become a nun rather than staying home – an escape from her abusive alcoholic father to a more secure environment. She saw the nunnery as a viable option. We live in an era where an individual's right to make informed choices has garnered much praise and support, but the choices we as women make often come with an attached set of terms and conditions. However, the

agency to leave a nunnery does not often rest with the nuns because they have to take care of multiple aspects with the process of social re-adjustment being the first. They share incidents where they have been mocked for being ‘drifters’. Then comes the family, torchbearers of patriarchal ethos. The burden to escape societal pressure post exiting a nunnery is too big a problem to address for them, so the nuns often choose not to do it at all. Whereas in the case of monks, it is not an uncommon sight to see them give up monastic life to embrace family life. They may be subject to ridicule, but the degree is always higher for nuns who leave nunneries.

Ani Pemu, choosing lay life over a monastic one was met with backlash from her relatives. She tells me ‘I was told that my life was ruined because I chose college over staying in a nunnery. They told me that nunnery was a secure place for me, as I don’t have to worry about the future; but now that I have chosen to quit, my future is uncertain.’

Nunneries do provide a sense of security to nuns coming from low income backgrounds, but is this ‘sense of security’ real? Nunneries aren’t self-reliant, sustainable institutions since they have to constantly rely on patronage from the male authority. The problem isn’t just centred around ‘male patronage’ because it is ‘male’, but the larger problem is the lack of female leadership, managers, teachers, administrators.

Monks receive ample sponsorship to visit foreign lands to perform pujas, but nuns are barely given that opportunity. Abbot Tenzing from Sribadam Monastery has been taking Spoken English lessons so that it can prove handy during his third religious foreign trip. He has been to Hong Kong and Singapore previously on sponsorships. The trips are sponsored by devotees who fly in monks to perform rituals for them. Monasteries are headed by influential abbots, and they are able to channel sponsorships and donations in cash and kind towards monastic education and infrastructure (the Lingdum monastery in Ranka, East Sikkim has a well functioning cafe and a full fledged monastic college for monks within the monastery vicinity). I remember visiting a nunnery in Kullu, Himacha Pradesh in spring 2017, which

housed a cafeteria solely run by nuns; I believe this gives a little sense of economic security and self reliance. There are kind devotees though who have sponsored trips for the nuns to Bodhgaya to attend Monlams<sup>18</sup> as in the case of the Ranka and West Sikkim nunneries.

Is the idea of renunciation any different from the 'laity' life when both spaces are permeated with androcentrism. It does not guarantee freedom from persistent fear that women have to live with. Many nuns who wished to stay in caves or live a life of solitary confinement for some time had major concerns regarding their safety.

Ani Pemu said, 'A monk can go into the forest, reside in a cave, meditate and go wherever he wishes, but nuns unfortunately don't have the freedom to do things as per will. Our mobility is largely restricted. We have to be constantly aware of our safety.'

Ani Zangmu added, 'I would like to stay alone and meditate for as long as I can; this is what I want. After studying more, I want to go into retreats. We cannot wander off to faraway places without company, so it gets difficult for us. We have to stay in a group. We have to be worried about our safety.' The wish to go in for a retreat in a cave remains a wish because nuns do not do it. To combat this, nunneries have small living quarters built next to the nunneries to facilitate meditative retreats that can stretch anywhere between months and years. Lingdum Nunnery has a spacious structure built just above the nunnery to help nuns meditate in a safe space.

The safety issue reiterates the need to acknowledge the fear that has pervaded every woman due to oppressive patriarchal structures. The agency to practice retreat is clearly missing also because nuns have not actively voiced for it. An elderly nun is of the opinion that indulging in 'aggressive' activities could sabotage the reputation of the nunnery thereby affecting the nunnery-sponsor relationship. The perceived low status held by nuns reinforces their 'perceived' inferior position. They attribute the lower status to being 'nuns', and moreover to being women.

Ani Kesang regarded monks as superior beings because they hold positions of power and authority. 'I don't feel they should be

superior to us, but people say that monks are superior to nuns.’ The reluctance to share power is made apparent through Sikkim’s peculiar Sangha assembly where a seat is reserved only for monks coming from registered monasteries to contest for the lone seat further depriving the nuns from getting representation.

A young nun (Ani Lhadol) said, ‘Due to the nature of our being we have received this life which I consider to be a waste. We have committed negative deeds, which have led us to this situation (being women). If we compare a man and a woman, a man is many levels higher than a woman. Trying to compete with them is futile because they have a higher birth than us, the lower ones.’

I have had a personal experience of a relative ‘advising’ me to wish for a man’s life. Encountering visible gender hierarchies and deep rooted notions of inferiority reminded me of Hannah Gadsby’s<sup>19</sup> thoughts on self-deprecating humour.

Would the existing community of monks give up their privilege and deconstruct what has been accepted as a norm? Lama Tashi asserts, ‘there can’t be great Buddhist female masters; they will be men because it is easier for men in every aspect, not just in staying alone but in other things too. Can you think of the difficulties that women will have to go through? That is the major difference. You should also understand the roles women and men carry out based on their gender.’

Such demeaning conceptions based on the physicality of women (the fact that women bleed and bear children is considered to be the greatest parameter to label them as ‘inferior beings’) reflect the deeply ingrained dualistic thinking in our society. The bigoted patriarchal ethos supersedes Buddhist philosophy of non attachment, and has worldly ideas about gender, as evident by the way Lama Tashi thinks of women.

However, Ani Tshering from Taktse nunnery tries to see things differently. She tells me about her wish to take re-birth as a nun, a woman, because she cherishes this life she’s been blessed with. She’s aware of discriminatory attitudes towards nuns, but that hasn’t been a deterrent for her make minor shifts within the patriarchal setup.

She was the first one to ‘make humble suggestions’ to the monastic authority to let nuns sit in the same row as monks because nuns are expected to be seated behind monks. She plans on to lead her community of nuns to be better monastics, teachers and dharma practitioners. Tulku Nawang Jigdral, a Vajrayana master who graduated from the Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies, contested the idea of binaries. He explained that Vajrayana is about nature/energy. Gender becomes irrelevant because ultimately the mind is the main factor, and one should work to master the mind’s true nature. A discriminatory quality is an example of the least evolved mind. He further contends that anybody can achieve enlightenment, and it is not just limited to men and women. Flowers and stones have an equal capacity to attain enlightenment. ‘Everybody can attain enlightenment, and Tara is considered to be the mother of all the female Buddhas. Tara took a female form because she wanted to benefit all the sentient beings as a woman. Buddhahood can be found in trees, stones and animals. It is not necessary that it has to manifest in a human body. Great leaders like Guru Padmasambhava took the human form because it is easier to explain the sacred teachings in a human form,’ he explained. When further questioned if he would be willing to give up his privilege to share power with the nuns, he doubts the feasibility of it. Enlightenment is still an abstract concept. The idea is very progressive as it exists, but the present-day practices and beliefs have led to nuns taking subordinate position.

Geshey Nima, an abbot at Sribadam Monastery explained, ‘first and foremost we have to understand the context for why Buddha was not willing to take in his aunt Mahaprajapati into his Sangha. It was at a time when society was so oppressive and discriminatory that even if the Buddha wanted to take a revolutionary step by permitting women into the Sangha, it would have received immense backlash from society. The oppressive society displayed a lackadaisical spirit in favour of women hence they were deprived of education. Tulku/Rimpoche are honorific terms used in the Tibetan language which translate to ‘the precious one’. During the days of the Buddha, only men had access to

higher education, which set the stage for the cycle of reincarnation of highly accomplished teachers. Since women were historically denied this opportunity, there are not that many reincarnated Buddhist female teachers.'

His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama has unapologetically announced time and again that his successor could possibly be a woman. The question remains whether the laity would show genuine acceptance to female teachers and regard them as precious teachers. Nuns are not requested to perform rituals by the villagers, and even if they are, the rituals during funerals, marriages, making tormas<sup>20</sup> and expelling demons are officiated by monks. Performing rituals, reading the scriptures and leading ceremonies are departments limited to monks. They walk away with donations and get to act as spiritual guides to the community including nuns. My devout Buddhist household has countless rituals but nuns never make it to lead ceremonies. However, that is going to change henceforth. Sometimes, it may depend on the availability of nuns and the presence of a nunnery in the village because in our case both are absent, which sheds light on the partial presence of nunneries as compared to monasteries. Worldly constructed ideas about gender should not matter if the goal is to attain enlightenment, or at least if one has vowed to follow the non-discriminatory Buddhist way of life. But the presence of a highly gendered hierarchical setup cannot be overlooked. Moreover, this applies to lay people and the global community irrespective of any religion. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama while promoting secular ethics has talked about how a Christian can totally adopt Buddhist ethics of love, compassion, meditation and vice versa. Buddhism should be seen as a path to liberation instead of shackles binding one to a cycle of gender and duality.

Should the focus be on equality or liberation? I like Acqui Thami's<sup>21</sup> idea of liberation which posits women as non-liberated beings. The struggle for liberation is far from over, and the demand for equality seems futile without liberation. In the context of this paper, some nuns carried rigid internalised notions of inferiority, suppressed

by patriarchy, and some were like a ray of hope with an informed awareness of archaic conceptions of duality. The presence of highly gendered monastic spaces bears a direct relation to misogynistic Buddhist texts which see a larger influence of the patriarchal social set-up. The problem of inequality is systemic and demands continuous efforts in recognising our privileges to forfeit years of conditioning. However, all this again brings me to the complicated question of enlightenment (nirvana) because it remains important to think about Buddhism as a philosophy advocating principles of selflessness and non-attachment. The principle of non-attachment is meant to proceed beyond concepts of gender, hierarchy and duality but unfortunately we are stuck in a vicious cycle of *samsara*<sup>22</sup>, too big a burden to carry.

## NOTES

1. 'The Native State, commonly called Sikkim is situated in the Eastern Himalayan Mountains, and is bounded on the north and north east by Tibet, on the south east by Bhutan, and on the west by Nepal' (Risley, 1928).
2. Karma Lekshe Tsomo is an ordained nun, social activist, scholar and a professor at the University of San Diego. She co-founded the Shakyadhita International Association for Buddhist Women and conducts international conferences for Buddhist women at the global level.
3. A formerly Buddhist kingdom once ruled by a direct descendant of the last king in Tibet's early dynasty which has been Buddhist almost as long as Tibet has, Zangskar today forms the southern and safer half of Kargil district. Its extreme aridity and elevation at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau make it one of the least populated regions of India. Monks and nuns, who make up about 4 per cent of the total population, live in nine nunneries and seven monasteries.
4. Bhutan Nuns Foundation works to empower and educate nuns by uplifting their living conditions, spirituality, and creating economic and intellectual self-sufficiency among them.
5. *Vinaya Pitaka* (basket of monastic conduct) has three parts: a. Suttavibhanga, b. Khandhaka, and c. Parivara. The Khandhaka consists of two parts: a. Mahavagga b. Cullavagga. Culla means small. Varga means class or division.



In addition to an elaborate description of the monastic codes and duties, Cullavagga also explains the rules and procedures for addressing offences that may be committed within the monastic system. It also includes some details about the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha.

6. *Madhyam-agama* is a Buddhist scripture-- the second of the five *agamas* (direct teachings of Buddha) or *nikayas*, or collections in the *Sutra Pitaka*. In the Chinese/Tibetan tradition, they derive their canon from Sanskrit sources so the term *Agama* is used. In Pali (Sri Lankan tradition) it is called *Majjhima Nikaya*. Literal meaning of *Madhyagama* is 'middle length discourses.' *Agama* connotes the texts that are supposed to be spoken by the Buddha.
7. Beyer (1988) represents a first step to understand the complexities of Tibetan Buddhist rituals and simultaneously does an extensive study on the relativity and importance of Tara worship in Tibetan Buddhism.
8. The *Bodhisattvabhumi*, a 4th century text, argues that completely perfected Buddhas are not women. And why? Precisely because a bodhisattva [that is, one on his way to complete enlightenment] has completely abandoned the state of womanhood. Ascending to the most excellent throne of enlightenment, he is never again reborn as a woman. All women are by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence. And not by one who is by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence, is completely perfected Buddhahood attained (Shaw, 1994).
9. Shaw (1994) points out that the positive depictions of women in tantric literature have not been positively accepted by western scholars because they do not fit in with the expectations of most western academics in terms of gender relations.
10. See Shaw (1994, pp. 47–53)
11. Shaw (1994) challenges the prevailing view of women in tantric Buddhism by bringing in new historical and textual evidence and reinterpreting central motifs.
12. Shaw (1994) challenges the prevailing view of the women in tantric Buddhism by bringing in new historical and textual evidence and reinterpreting central motifs.
13. The Geshema degree offers a 17-year unique curriculum to the nuns who wish to pursue further education in Buddhist philosophy. They also receive training to sculpt and make mandalas. May 2013 marked the beginning of the first Geshema examinations where 24 nuns were awarded their Geshema degrees for the first time ever.

14. The practice of 'Dzumsa,' local self-governance restricts women from taking political decisions or being a representative in general.
15. Tibetan salted tea.
16. The Tibetan Nuns Project is based in Dharamshala. The project aims to use education as a tool to empower and strengthen the nuns. They support over 700 nuns in India.
17. The four noble truths are the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of the suffering, the truth of the end of the suffering and the truth of the path which leads to the elimination of suffering. The Eight-Fold Path encompasses the principles -- Right View, Right Intentions, Right Speech, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration, Right Livelihood, Right Effort and Right Action.
18. The term represents the path of aspiration and is a form of prayer. In the context of Bodhgaya, the yearly gathering for offering prayers marks the beginning of the Tibetan New Year. The devotees involved recite prayer verses to liberate all beings.
19. Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby wrote and performed a powerful live comedy show called *Nannette* which included commentaries on issues like LGBTQ issues and feminism, basically transcending from comedy to commentary. The line that resonated with me the most was: 'Do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It's not humility, it's humiliation.'
20. Figurines made out of butter and flour mostly used in tantric Buddhist rituals as offerings in Tibetan Buddhism. They are dyed in an array of colours.
21. Acqui Thami is an artist who brings together art and activism to create art that celebrates works by women.
22. Endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth

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