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Bhupendra Pratap Sabar

Lecturer in History, SSD
Mahavidyalaya, Gurudijhatia,
Odisha, India

Rajani Biswal

Lecturer in History, SSD
Mahavidyalaya, Gurudijhatia,
Odisha, India

Women in Buddhism and Hinduism: A feminist perspective comparative perspectives on gender roles and spirituality

Bhupendra Pratap Sabar and Rajani Biswal

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Abstract

This research explores the roles, status, and spiritual experiences of women in Buddhism and Hinduism through a feminist lens. It examines how sacred texts, rituals, and societal norms have historically shaped gender dynamics in these religions. In Hinduism, women are celebrated as powerful goddesses but are often constrained by patriarchal interpretations of scriptures like the *Manusmriti*. Similarly, while Buddhism recognizes women's potential for enlightenment, structural barriers, such as the Eight *Garudhammas*, reflect gender hierarchies within monastic traditions. The study also highlights modern feminist reinterpretations and movements advocating for gender equity on religious practices, including the revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha and the inclusion of women in spiritual leadership roles. Through comparative analysis, the research underscores the tension between traditional doctrine and contemporary efforts to redefine women's place in these faiths.

Keywords: Buddhism, Feminist, Manusmriti, enlightenment, Garudhammas, Bhikkhuni Sangha

Introduction

Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to examine the roles, status, and representation of women in Buddhism and Hinduism through a feminist lens. It aims to:

1. Analyze how sacred texts, rituals, and cultural practices have historically shaped the perception and treatment of women in these religions.
2. Explore the tensions between patriarchal interpretations and feminist perspectives within religious traditions.
3. Highlight the contributions and agency of women in shaping and practicing these faiths.
4. Investigate contemporary feminist movements and reinterpretations that advocate for gender equality in religious spaces.
5. Provide a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in the experiences of women within Buddhism and Hinduism, offering insights into broader discussions on gender and spirituality.

Feminist interpretations of Buddhism and Hinduism reveal how deeply entrenched patriarchal structures have shaped the roles, status, and perceptions of women in these religious traditions. By critically analyzing sacred texts, practices, and historical developments, feminist scholars uncover both the limitations imposed on women and the spaces for their empowerment.

Women in Hinduism: A feminist perspective

Hinduism offers a complex and multifaceted view of women's roles, status, and spiritual significance. Through a feminist lens, it becomes evident that while Hinduism venerates the divine feminine and acknowledges women's spiritual potential, patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts and societal norms have historically constrained women's autonomy and agency. Hinduism is often seen as a religion that venerates the feminine divine through goddesses like Durga, Kali, Saraswati, and Lakshmi. However, the lived experiences of women often contrast with these exalted depictions.

a) Sacred texts and patriarchy

- The Manusmriti prescribes strict roles for women, portraying them as dependent on men throughout their lives- first on their fathers, then on their husbands, and later on them

Corresponding Author:

Bhupendra Pratap Sabar

Lecturer in History, SSD
Mahavidyalaya, Gurudijhatia,
Odisha, India

sons. Feminist critics argue that such texts institutionalize women's subordination and restrict their autonomy. Epic texts often idealize women as embodiments of sacrifice and devotion. Sita in the Ramayana is celebrated for her loyalty but criticized for her passive acceptance of patriarchal expectations. Draupadi in the Mahabharata, although assertive and strong-willed, is subjected to humiliation, symbolizing the vulnerability of women in patriarchal society. Feminist readings of these texts reclaim figures like Sita and Draupadi as symbols of resistance and resilience, challenging traditional interpretations that emphasize submissiveness.

- In contrast, the Vedas and Upanishads include instances where women like Gargi and Maitreyi participate in philosophical debates, reflecting an acknowledgment of women's intellectual and spiritual capacities, suggesting that ancient Hindu society offered some spaces for intellectual agency. The concept of shakti portrays women as the source of cosmic energy, indispensable for creation and balance in the universe.
 - Women are central to household rituals, emphasizing their roles as nurturers and preservers of family traditions. Practices such as dowry, child marriage, and restrictions during menstruation are rooted in patriarchal interpretations of purity and social order. Feminists argue that these practices perpetuate inequality and seek to reinterpret rituals in ways that promote inclusion and equity. Movements advocating for the equal participation of women in temple rituals and priesthood are challenging long-standing exclusionary traditions.
- b) Goddesses and feminine power**
- Feminists interpret goddess worship as a form of empowerment, where the feminine is seen as the source of creation, preservation, and destruction. Hinduism is unique in its worship of goddesses, who embody power, wisdom, prosperity, and transformation. Durga and Kali symbolize strength and the ability to confront and destroy evil. Saraswati and Lakshmi represent wisdom and abundance, showcasing ideals of knowledge and prosperity. Shaktism places the feminine energy (Shakti) at the center of creation, positioning women as inherently powerful.
 - The separation of divine femininity from the human experience reflects a disconnection between religious ideals and societal norms. Despite the veneration of goddesses, real women's roles often remain restricted by patriarchal norms. Feminist scholars argue that the separation of divine femininity from the human experiences perpetuates a paradox where women are celebrated in theory but marginalized in practice.
- c) Contemporary developments**
- Modern feminist movements within Hinduism challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for greater inclusion of women in spiritual leadership.
 - The rise of women priests and reinterpretation of rituals to include women highlight a growing shift toward gender equality in Hindu religious practices. Women are increasingly taking on roles as priests, especially in reformist and progressive Hindu communities, breaking centuries-old barriers. Practices that marginalize women, such as restrictions during menstruation, are being questioned and reformed. Shaktism emphasis on

the divine feminine aligns with feminist ideals, offering a spiritual framework that celebrates women's power and autonomy.

- Feminist perspectives highlight the tension between tradition and modernity in Hinduism. While patriarchal interpretations of texts and rituals often marginalize women, the inherent diversity of Hinduism allows for reinterpretation and reform. Modern feminist movements aim to reconcile Hindu spiritual ideals with contemporary demands for gender equality, fostering a more inclusive understanding of women's roles.

Women in Buddhism: A feminist perspective

Buddhism is often considered more egalitarian than Hinduism, particularly due to the Buddhas recognition of women's potential for enlightenment. Buddhism emphasizes equality in its core teachings, particularly the idea that all beings have the potential to achieve enlightenment regardless of gender. The concept of *anatta* (no-self) challenges rigid gender identities, suggesting that ultimate reality transcends binary distinctions. However, feminist interpretations reveal underlying patriarchal attitude in early Buddhist institutions and texts.

a) Early Buddhist teaching

- The Buddha initially hesitated to ordain women, only relenting after persuasion from his disciple Ananda and his foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami.
- The establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangh (order of nuns) was accompanied by the *Eight Garudhammas* (rules) that placed nuns in a subordinate position to monks. Feminist scholars argue that these rules institutionalized gender hierarchy within Buddhism.

b) Women in Buddhist texts

- Early Buddhist texts often portray women as obstacles to spiritual progress, associating them with desire and attachment. Feminists critique these portrayals for reinforcing stereotypes of women as distractions or lesser beings.
- The Therigatha (verses of the elder nuns) offers a counter-narrative, showcasing the spiritual achievements and struggles of early Buddhist women. These poems reflect women's agency and their capacity for liberation.

c) Revival of the Bhikkhuni sangha

- The Bhikkhuni Sangha declined in Theravada traditions for centuries. In recent years, feminist movements within Buddhism have worked to restore full ordination for women.
- Feminist Buddhists argue that structural reforms are necessary to dismantle patriarchal barriers and provide women equal opportunities for spiritual leadership.

Comparative analysis

Feminist interpretations of Buddhism and Hinduism reveal both commonalities and differences:

- **Similarities:** Both traditions reflect patriarchal structures that have historically marginalized women. Sacred texts in both religions offer examples of both empowerment and subjugation.
- **Differences:** Hinduism places significant emphasis on divine femininity, while Buddhism focuses on the individual's path to liberation, which is often complicated by gender-specific rules.
- **Contemporary trends:** Both religions are witnessing

feminist reinterpretations that seek to reconcile traditional beliefs with modern ideals of gender equality.

Key findings

Patriarchal structures in religious practices: Both Buddhism and Hinduism have historically institutionalized patriarchal norms, often limiting women's autonomy and religious participation. In Hinduism, texts like the Manusmriti perpetuate gender hierarchies, while in Buddhism, the Eight Garudhammas impose subordinate roles for women in monastic life.

Empowering representations in sacred texts: Hinduism venerates the divine feminine through goddesses like Durga, Kali, and Saraswati, symbolizing power, wisdom, and creativity. Buddhist texts like the Therigatha highlight the spiritual achievements and resilience of early Buddhist nuns, offering a counter-narrative to patriarchal depictions.

Contradictions between ideals and realities: While Hinduism idealizes femininity through goddess worship, the societal treatment of women often fails to reflect these values. Buddhism preaches equality and the potential for enlightenment for all, yet institutional barriers have historically restricted women's full participation.

Contemporary feminist reinterpretations: Modern feminist movements in both religions challenge traditional interpretations and advocate for gender equity. The revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Theravada Buddhism and the inclusion of women as Hindu priests reflect significant progress.

Comparative insights

Hinduism emphasizes the symbolic and ritualistic veneration of women, whereas Buddhism focuses on the individual's spiritual journey, though both face challenges in reconciling traditional gender roles with feminist ideals. Feminist efforts in both traditions highlight shared struggles against systemic patriarchy and the potential for inclusive reforms.

Conclusion

Feminist interpretations provide a critical framework for understanding the complex roles of women in Buddhism and Hinduism. While both traditions have historically perpetuated patriarchal norms, they also offer resources for empowerment and spiritual growth. A feminist perspective on women in Buddhism reveals both the promise and challenges within the tradition. While Buddhist teachings offer profound tools for liberation, historical and cultural practices have often limited women's access to these resources. Feminist engagement with Buddhism not only seeks to rectify these the ongoing feminist reimagining of these religions represents a broader movement toward inclusivity and gender justice in spiritual spaces.

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