



Feminine Wisdom, Sustainable Peace, and Unsung Agency: Contemporary Tibetan *Bhikkhuni Saṅgha* in Exile as Faith-Based Healers of Conflict Trauma

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The Need for a Gender-Inclusive Policy in Administrating Spiritual Cultural Spaces:

Misinterpretation of religious texts, rigid ideologies, and differences in the analysis of philosophical traditions due to societal conditionings give rise to a lot of gender-based discrimination, even gender-based violence, and male dominance in the religiosity of a community. This adds to the sufferings of women in their struggle to define women-friendly spiritual space and pursuance of spiritual aspirations.¹ Faith-Based frameworks need to empower the basic right of performing religions in a manner more relatable to women without consciously or unconsciously adhering to any androcentric bias. A question that immediately haunts the mind is why women do not have the authority to make decisions in religious frameworks when participation in religious rituals and festivals in societies has always been led by women very actively. Ethical values and allied spiritual practices largely based on faith are widely reflected by women, utilising their support to society as caregivers and agents of emotional well-being. Why in most cases the authority of religious decision lies with male authorities and predominantly religious councils are headed by men? How is the agency of female spiritual practitioners being celebrated when religious texts are mainly edited and composed by men and religious practices are very much influenced by interpretations of narratives experienced by men? The order of Buddhist nuns was founded by the maternal aunt of the Buddha Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī along with five hundred Śakyan women, probably one of the earliest examples of the spiritually driven women-led movement seeking an alternative career, breaking stereotypes of household-based gendered roles. In modern-day Asia, the female order of Buddhist renunciant can be found in India, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, Myanmar, Taiwan, China, Japan etc. The Tibetan nuns are not fully ordained, meaning they are merely novice nuns due to the lack of a quorum of fully ordained nuns which is essential for the dual order ordination.² The lack of full ordination limits their access to higher philosophical education which is mainly easily accessed by the monks. Though HH The 14th Dalai Lama and HH the 17th Karmapa has been a long-term advocate of the full ordination of Buddhist nuns in Tibetan traditions still it remains an unfulfilled dream. After the Cultural Revolution of China and the Chinese control of Tibet now renamed as Tibetan Autonomous region, several monks and nuns fled their homeland in search of a safe shelter in the Indian Himalayas, adhering to an unknown mental struggle to shape themselves in a country with multi-religiosity and multiple faith systems. Presently their status is that of refugees according to Indian laws and the life of a Tibetan Buddhist nun in exile is adversely impacted by a twofold suffering of their struggle for basic necessities to continue their ritualistic practices and burdens of excessive monastic legal rules that adds on to the burden in exile.

¹ Brian Grim and Jo-Ann Lyon, "Religion Holds back Women or does it?" *World Economic Forum*. Accessed at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/religion-holds-women-back-or-does-it/> on 22/03/2023 at 12:00 P.M

² Bhikṣuṇī Jampa Tsedroen, "Buddhist Nuns' Ordination in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya Tradition: Two Possible Approaches," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* Volume 23, 2016: 165-246. Accessed at <https://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2016/11/Tsedroen-Ordination-final-1.pdf> on 22/03/2023 at 12:16 P.M



In such a scenario the question that should be well comprehended is how both the Government of India and the Central Tibetan Administration in exile may act upon adopting women-friendly foreign policies to ensure the spiritual autonomy of female Buddhist monastic in exile and transnational women in Buddhist faith-practicing the *dharmā* in India, far away from their country of origin? Both the Indian and Tibetan authorities need to act on preserving the living tradition of spiritual women-led movement for the broader interest of inspiring women's participation in the process of identity creation in a broader diplomatic context accelerating Asian interconnections, shared Buddhist heritage, and a Philosophical school of thought.

The post-conflict experience after the Cultural Revolution of China, conflict memories, and traumas of displacement are differently experienced by men and women. Women are keener to act towards the well-being of the family and children at a micro level. At a broader macro level participation, women shape the space that fosters a community to relate more to religiosity and faith-based rituals that is an essential part of the unification of beliefs. To some, the advent of Tibetan nuns in the Indian spiritual ethos is indeed an opportunity in the veil, as India is considered the mainland of *dharmā*, where the religion of Buddhism was taught. India holds the legacy of the first order of Buddhist female monastic going forth to the state of homelessness in search of an independent spiritual quest (MN 142).

Why not aspect of Faith in Women Friendly Foreign Policy?

The question that must be addressed by policymakers is why women experience conflict in a much different way than men and how to address this major gap in post-conflict governance frameworks.³ The voice of women remained muted and overlooked on the perception of the relation between religious faith and conflict and on the other hand the role of faith in healing conflict traumas. Women's perseverance in holding on to faith as capital to establish peace in the face of conflict, and restrict potential discrimination based on gaps largely due to power dynamics based on gender, caste, and societal status needs to be examined further by policy analysts and scholars adopting a multi-disciplinary methodology. Society has stereotypically correlated religions as a parameter that gives rise to division while the potential of shared faith-based values in celebrating unity in diversity remains majorly overlooked.

Adaptation of Feminist Foreign policies is the greatest need of the hour in countries where war victims and migrated communities are struggling to search for an identity in a foreign land and their allied religiosity must be taken into account. Women in displacement with strong religious values always inherit a bigger potential to welcome the spiritual values of women in the host country promoting better social cohesion. They are more compassionate and accommodating in caring for the sentiments and emotional quotient of the people of the host country.⁴ In the Tibetan context in exile, the Tibetan nuns are caregivers and a source of inspiration to young Himalayan Indian women to lead a life of dignity, and wisdom and celebrate women's independence in their spiritual path, shaping women's friendly narrative of agency creation. In displacement, there is always emotional taxation and a struggle to adapt to the newer culture while creating a cushion for the trauma of

³ See Women Between War and Peace at [Women between war and peace | UN Women – Headquarters](#) Accessed on 23/03/2023 at 6:31 P.M

⁴ Carolyn M Warner, and Stephen G. Walker. "Thinking about the Role of Religion in Foreign Policy: A Framework for Analysis." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 1 (2011): 113–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24909818>



displacement and loss of cultural habitat.⁵ Taking, the example of Buddhism, women all over Asia can relate more to the shared beliefs of generosity, compassion, and merit-making rather than segregation based on nationality. The aspect of uniting as the daughter of the Buddha plays a larger role in promoting shared values and deepening the sense of belongingness essential to celebrate the spiritual achievements of extraordinary women in propagating ethical teachings and countering seeds of hatred.

Emperor Āśoka after the Kalinga war embraced Buddhism as the modality of diplomacy. He commissioned her daughter princess nun Mahatherī Ven. Sanghamitta as the peace ambassador (also recognised as the first woman environmental ambassador who carried the sapling of the sacred Bodhi tree from India to Sri Lanka), in the third century B.C.E. The royal patronage of recognising a princess Buddhist nun as an ambassador established friendly diplomatic relations between the two countries. This can be noted as a remarkable example of how peacebuilding can be effective with appropriate policies to include women in diplomatic strategies.

As suggested in the *Pāli* canon we see the Buddha himself sensitise King Pasenadi (SN 3.16) to rejoice at the birth of his daughter with her queen, while the King was worried about the question of an heir to his throne mainly perceived to be a prince in early Indian tradition. The historical Buddha strongly affirmed the fact that the world should celebrate the wisdom, and faculty of a daughter which may be better than that of men. Further, he recognised the extraordinary potential of women to develop a deep understanding of his teachings and their capability to propagate the *dhamma* probably in the same manner as he would have taught to the common people with high standards of perfection. He recognised two early *Bhikkhunis* as foremost nuns namely Bhikkhuni Khemā (SN 44.1) and *Bhikkhuni* Uppalavaṇṇā (SN 5.5). The true nature of the Buddha's *dhamma* is always non-dual beyond false notions of discrimination based on biological grounds.

Way Forward and Suggestions: The recommendations for policymakers and researchers would be:

1. To connect nunneries in last mile villages under international faith-based associations to make the nunneries hubs of girl child education, skill building, and prevention hubs of any sort of GBV (early warning systems), Monitoring, and Evaluation hubs.
2. To include Buddhist nuns in cultural diplomatic missions to ensure peacebuilding in form of interfaith and Inter-Religious dialogues and ensure their representation in religious councils.
3. To recognise the Tibetan Nuns in the Himalayas as key participants in achieving environmental conservation, and skill development teachers for Himalayan women.
4. To form monastic women-led councils supported by Ministries to develop policies in healing conflict trauma specifically in the best interest of women and children.

⁵Douglas S Massey and Monica Espinoza Higgins, "The Effect of Immigration on Religious Belief and Practice: A Theologizing or Alienating Experience?," *Soc Sci Res.* 2011 Sep;40(5):1371-1389. doi: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2010.04.012. PMID: 23606773; PMCID: PMC3629734.



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