Bodhi International Journal of
Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

Vol. 10 No. 1 October 2025
E-ISSN: 2456-5571

Women's Spiritual Voices in Early India: A Comparative Study of the *Therīgāthā* and the *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad*

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Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2025-OCT-024

Subject: Philosophy

Received : 10.09.2025
Accepted : 16.09.2025
Published : 31.10.2025

DOI:10.64938/bijri.v10n1.25.Oct024

Abstract

Given their social standing at the time, women's participation in the religious sphere of ancient India appears to have been an almost impractical aspiration. Nevertheless, traces of female voices are found in some of the earliest Indian religious texts. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, a seminal Vedic text, and the Therīgāthā, a Buddhist work that forms part of the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Pāli Canon, both preserve significant expressions of women's thought and experience. Though emerging from distinct traditions, these writings reflect comparable voices of women negotiating spaces of spirituality within patriarchal structures. The Therīgāthā is particularly remarkable as the earliest extant work of literature composed by women themselves. It records the struggles, reflections, and spiritual triumphs of early Buddhist nuns, some of whom boldly challenged prevailing gender norms and articulated their own paths to liberation. In contrast, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, authored by men, only occasionally includes women philosophers—such as Maitreyī and Gārgī—whose presence nonetheless demonstrates the possibility of female intellectual engagement within the Vedic tradition. This article, therefore, seeks to foreground the voices of these women, examining how they represented early forms of feminist consciousness in ancient India, as preserved in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad and the Therīgāthā.

Keywords: Therīgāthā, Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Women's voices, Feminism, Ancient India.

Introduction

The early society was predominantly patriarchal and male-dominated, where women were deprived not only of participation in the social and political spheres but also excluded from the religious domain. In ancient India, women were denied independent identity, agency, or inheritance rights; they could neither be the lineage-bearers of property nor of the family. Their entire lives were regulated by male authority, and even in matters of spiritual choice, such as seeking ordination, they required permission from male guardians. Despite being admitted into the Saṅgha, their journey was fraught with challenges, as their presence was often met with indifference and hesitation.

"Examining the position in ancient India, it is clear from the evidence in the Rigveda, the earliest literature of the Indo-Aryans, that women held an honourable place in early Indian society……Later when the priestly caste of Brahmins dominated society and religion lost its spontaneity and became a mass of ritual, we see a downward trend in the position accorded to women…… It is against this background that one has to view the impact of

Buddhism in the 5th century B.C. " (Dewaraja, 10-12)

Yet, many women accepted these challenges, sought ordination, and pursued enlightenment. At a time when society largely confined women to household roles—as wives, daughters, mothers, or ritual partners—their voices found expression in two early and remarkable literary works: the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad and the Therīgāthā. The Therīgāthā, the first women-authored text in Indian religious history, stands out as a rare repository of female voices recorded with striking freedom and authenticity. Through their verses, early Buddhist nuns expressed determination, resilience, and joy as they charted their own spiritual paths, often in defiance of the patriarchal order.

In the Vedic tradition, during the intellectual transition from ritualism to philosophical speculation, women too asserted their presence. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad preserves the voices of Maitreyī and Gārgī, the latter of whom, in a celebrated debate with the sage Yājñavalkya, stood among male philosophers and fearlessly raised profound metaphysical questions. Though initially dismissed, her persistence in inquiry demonstrated resistance to patriarchal norms and affirmed her intellectual agency. Similarly, in the Buddhist context, certain therīs challenged the notion that women were incapable of attaining the highest liberation, thereby echoing the same spirit of resistance and self-assertion. Taken together, these voices reveal that even within patriarchal structures, women carved out spaces for themselves in the spiritual sphere—whether through poetic self-expression in the Therīgāthā or intellectual debate in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad. Their presence not only challenges the dominant narrative of exclusion but also reflects an early articulation of feminist consciousness in ancient India.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach, focusing on textual interpretation and analysis with particular emphasis on primary sources. The core texts examined are the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad and the Therīgāthā. Within the Upaniṣadic corpus, close readings will be undertaken of the dialogues between Yājñavalkya and Gārgī, as well as between Yājñavalkya and Maitreyī, to explore the philosophical and gendered dimensions of these exchanges. The verses of the Therīgāthā will be studied through an interpretative and reflective lens, highlighting the voices of early Buddhist women and how they articulated their spiritual journeys within a patriarchal context.

Women's voices in Therīgāthā

At a time when women's voices were largely unheard, the women of the Therīgāthā made a significant mark in several ways. First, by "going forth," that is, by voicing their choice to leave worldly life; secondly, by openly narrating their journeys of enlightenment and celebrating their emancipation; and thirdly, by at times directly countering the patriarchal attitudes of their era. The verses in Therīgāthā were composed and recorded by the first Buddhist women during the early years of their ordination, contemporaneous with the Buddha nearly 2,500 years ago. The text contains seventy-three poems, with a total of 494 verses spoken by distinct women, making it one of the earliest records of women's spiritual voices. These verses provide unique autobiographical testimonies of struggle and triumph in the pursuit of liberation. In their verses, many openly celebrate release from household chores, oppressive marriages, and familial bonds that had once confined them.

For example, Muttā (Verse 11) exclaims with relief at being freed from the "crooked husband, mortar and pestle," symbolizing both oppressive domestic duty and marital subjugation. Moreover, the verses also reveal an acute awareness of the patriarchal structures and limitations imposed upon women. Through their voices, these early Buddhist nuns resisted and redefined their identities beyond societal expectations. Let us reflect on verses falling under the chapter of eleven-

"Womanhood is suffering, as declared by trainer of tamable men;

Having same husband is also suffering, for some bearing [child] even once.

"They slit their throats, delicate ones eat poison;

Unborn child having breeched, both experience misfortune. (Mahendra 51-52) Verse no. 216-217.

In the verses above, the woman reflected on how the very concept of womanhood had been preconditioned by men and framed within a patriarchal worldview. From a male perspective, to be born a woman was already considered a form of suffering, defined by vulnerability and subordination. This patriarchal voice equated a woman's existence with unavoidable pain: whether through the burden of sharing a husband with a daughter or the biological suffering of childbirth. Against such conditions, the voice of the therī liberation strikes a remarkable contrast.

Among these voices, the most openly rebellious is that of Soma, who directly challenges the very notion of women's spiritual incapacity. In her verses, she responds to Māra, who had attempted to belittle and subjugate women by claiming that a woman, occupied only with her "two-finger skill" of testing whether rice is properly cooked, could never hope to attain the spiritual heights achieved by male sages. This metaphor reduced women to their domestic role, suggesting that their identity and capacity were confined to household duties.

Soma's reply stands as a bold repudiation of such patriarchal attitudes. She asserts that enlightenment does not depend on gender but on the mind's cultivation through the Buddha's teaching. Once the mind is steady, concentrated, and filled with knowledge, she insists, liberation is equally attainable for anyone—man or woman. With this declaration, Soma not only silenced Māra's attempt at subjugation but also dismantled the entrenched belief that women were inherently spiritually inferior. Her verses resonate as a radical assertion of equality, affirming that the path to awakening transcends bodily identity and gendered limitations. The conversation is stated as follows

Māra: "Whatever was reached by the sages, a state hard to originate;

Women with two-fingered wisdom, cannot reach it".

Soma confronts him by saying that:

"What matters womanhood, when mind is well-restrained;

With presence of knowledge, seeing phenomena rightly with insight."(Mahendra 18) Verse no.61

Thus, their echoing of liberation in the verses of Therīgāthā points us in two dimensions: on one hand, freedom from the psychological and physical oppression of patriarchal structures, and on the other, the attainment of inner peace through the Dhamma. The imagery of household tools and domestic chores, once symbols of confinement, is inverted into metaphors of emancipation, making the women's voices strikingly personal and universally resonant even today.

Women's voices as recorded in the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad

Much like the Vedas and many other religious scriptures, the knowledge of the Upaniṣads was transmitted and composed with male heirs in mind. This male-centered structure ensured that teachers, disciples, and compilers were predominantly men, and even the concept of divinity was largely imagined in male terms. Despite this overtly androcentric framework, female voices did emerge, especially in one of the oldest and most significant texts, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (c. 8th–6th century BCE). Within this text, two striking women stand out for their intellectual courage and spiritual aspirations: Gārgī Vācaknavī and Maitreyī. Unlike the Therīgāthā, where women's voices are expressed through autobiographical verse reflecting personal struggles and liberation, the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad frames women's voices within the sphere of philosophical dialogue. In this setting, women such as Gārgī and Maitreyī confront the male-dominated order not through lament or narrative, but through rigorous debate and inquiry. Gārgī's participation in debate is not passive but assertive, as she raises difficult metaphysical questions concerning the ultimate substance of reality. By engaging in discussion with one of the most revered sages of her time, Gārgī's voice becomes an act of intellectual resistance, asserting the authority of female inquiry in a space overwhelmingly dominated by men. Now, let us turn more closely to Gārgī Vācaknavī and Maitreyī's remarkable voices in debate and inquiry in the early Indian philosophical tradition.

Gārgī Vācaknavī's voice in the Debate

In Sanskrit Vedic literature, Gārgī Vācaknavī, dated between 800 and 500 BCE, is described as the daughter of the sage Vācaknu of the Karka lineage. She features prominently in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad during the Rājasūya yajña held by King Janaka of Videha, where a philosophical contest was organized to determine who possessed the highest knowledge of Brahman. The debate took the form of inquiry-based questioning, where participants were required to respond to metaphysical questions concerning existence and ultimate reality. Gārgī distinguished herself by repeatedly testing Yājñavalkya's knowledge. She begins her inquiry by asking: "Yajnavalkya," she said, "tell me—since this whole world is woven back and forth on water, on what, then, is water woven back and forth" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.7.1). Unsatisfied with his initial replies, she continues to press him with further questions, each linked to his previous answers. Irritated, Yājñavalkya finally responds with a warning in a patriarchal tone: "Don't ask too many questions, Gargi, or your head will shatter apart! You are asking too many questions about a deity about whom one should not ask too many questions. So, Gargi, don't ask too many questions!"(Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.7.1). His dismissive remark reflects not only his discomfort with her persistent interrogation but also a broader patriarchal impulse to silence a woman's inquisitiveness.

Yet Gārgī refuses to be silenced. Later, she rises again, this time boldly challenging Yājñavalkya with the declaration: "I rise to challenge you, Yajnavalkya, with two questions, much as a fierce warrior of Kasi or Videha, stringing his unstrung bow and taking two deadly arrows in his hand, would rise to challenge a rival. Give me the answers to them!" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.8.11). Her imagery casts her not as a submissive participant but as a fierce intellectual combatant, unwilling to be subdued. With each reply from Yājñavalkya, she carefully weighs the adequacy of his answers. When satisfied, she acknowledges: "All honor to you, Yajnavalkya. You really cleared that up for me! Get ready for the second" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.8.11). Eventually, after a series of demanding inquiries, Gārgī concedes that Yājñavalkya is unmatched, declaring before the assembly: "Distinguished Brahmins!" said Gargi. "You should consider yourself lucky if you escape from this man by merely paying him your respects. None of you will ever defeat him in a theological debate" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.9.6). Her acknowledgment, however, does not diminish her own role; rather, it positions her as the only woman in a male-dominated contest who dared to test and measure the intellectual weight of one of the foremost sages of the Upaniṣads.

In this philosophical arena, Gārgī's persistence is striking. Although initially dismissed for "asking too many questions," she reemerges with even greater force, much like a warrior rising after a blow, illustrating her disapproval of attempts to silence her. As the lone female debater in a male-dominated setting, Gārgī's refusal to yield demonstrates both the intellectual capacity of women and their right to inquiry. By sustaining her voice and asserting her authority in the debate, she departed from traditional expectations of women's roles as confined to domestic labor. While she ultimately affirmed Yājñavalkya's supremacy, her participation itself established her authority as a thinker who could challenge men on equal footing, thereby affirming that intellectual determination, not class or gender, legitimizes one's place in the pursuit of truth.

Maitreyī's Inquiry

Maitreyī emerges as one of the most distinguished female figures who foregrounds her voice beyond the boundaries of familial concerns by engaging in intellectual debate during the post-Vedic period. Her presence is most vividly recorded in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, where her inquiry exemplifies the rare moment of a woman questioning not domestic obligations, but the nature of immortality and ultimate truth.

The context of the dialogue arises when Yājñavalkya, preparing to renounce household life in favor of austerity, informs his two wives, Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī, that he intends to divide his wealth between them. Maitreyī, however, rejects the proposal with a probing question: if she were to possess the entire world filled with wealth, would that grant her immortality? This question is remarkable in its departure from conventional roles expected of

women, for Maitreyī prioritizes her own spiritual concerns above material comfort or social security. She explicitly voices her dissatisfaction, declaring that if wealth cannot secure immortality, then it is ultimately worthless. Instead, she urges her husband to share his spiritual knowledge: "What is the point in getting something that will not make me immortal?" retorted Maitreyi. "Tell me instead, sir, all that you know" (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.5.6). Her insistence leads Yājñavalkya to deliver one of the most profound discourses on ātman and immortality, revealing that the self, rather than wealth, is the true foundation of immortality. Maitreyī's questions thus compel the sage to articulate knowledge that has since become central to Upaniṣadic philosophy.

Together with Gārgī, Maitreyī represents a powerful counterpoint to the male-dominated intellectual tradition of her time. Their inquiries are not casual but deeply philosophical, reflecting a determination to pursue knowledge of the self with seriousness and fearlessness. By insisting on their right to seek the ultimate truth, they break away from the socially prescribed roles of women confined to household duties. Their voices demonstrate that the pursuit of spiritual knowledge is not limited by gender but open to all who are determined to seek it.

A Comparative Study

In both the Therīgāthā and the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, women emerge as strong voices challenging patriarchal structures, though in distinct modes of expression. Unlike the Therīgāthā, where women are authors of their own testimonies, the Upaniṣad preserves women's voices only as interlocutors within a male-centered tradition. Nevertheless, Gārgī and Maitreyī embody intellectual boldness, legitimizing women's philosophical agency in Vedic thought. Gārgī, the lone female debater, fearlessly questioned Yājñavalkya in a manner both curious and provocative, pressing him relentlessly until he dismissed her with a patriarchal warning. Maitreyī, in turn, rejected material wealth to prioritize ātma-vidyā, asserting her own spiritual quest. Unlike male-authored narratives, the Therīgāthā allows women to speak in their own voices, blending existential suffering with emancipatory realization. It remains the earliest record of a woman's spiritual literary tradition in world history, while the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad preserves evidence of women's intellectual resistance within a predominantly androcentric framework.

Conclusion

The Therīgāthā and the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, though products of different traditions, both preserve women's voices in profound ways. The former represents a collective female-authored testimony of suffering transformed into enlightenment, while the latter highlights individual women who assert intellectual and spiritual authority within a patriarchal discourse. Read through a feminist lens, the Therīgāthā is radical in its unapologetic female authorship and existential honesty. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad is less inclusive, yet its acknowledgment of women as serious seekers destabilizes rigid gender hierarchies in the Vedic tradition. Together, these texts demonstrate that early Indian women were not merely passive participants but active contributors to the shaping of spiritual and philosophical discourse.

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Vol. 10 No. 1 October 2025
E-ISSN: 2456-5571

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