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PARIVRĀJIKĀ AND *PRAVRAJITĀ*: CATEGORIES OF ASCETIC WOMEN IN DHARMAŚĀSTRA AND VINAYA COMMENTARIES*

Considering that renunciant women in ancient India are depicted as existing on the margins of society – and, according to some, were not supposed to exist at all – the abundance of textual references to them and the proliferation of terms used to designate them is startling. Words denoting women who have departed from domestic life, presumably for religious reasons, include *śramaṇī*, *tāpasī*, *tapasvinī*, *yoginī*, *bhikṣukī*, and the ones I will focus on here, *parivrājikā* and *pravrajitā*. Modern conventions of translation seem to have sanctioned rendering practically any one of these terms variously as ‘female ascetic,’ ‘wandering female mendicant,’ ‘Buddhist nun,’ ‘Jain nun,’ or ‘Brahmanical nun.’ Yet in most cases the attribution of a specific sectarian identity or ascetic lifestyle is a good guess at best. So far, we have little real clarity about the distinctions between these terms and the identities of the women they designate.

The terms *parivrājikā* and *pravrajitā* are perhaps particularly ambiguous and fluid. They appear in various *śāstras*, Buddhist Vinaya texts, inscriptions, and Sanskrit drama and narrative, but as generic terms rather than sectarian labels. As I will argue below, their respective semantic ranges were as debatable for early Indian authors and

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commentators as they are for us. Thus these words constitute an ideal site for an inquiry into the processes through which meanings and identities are assigned, assumed, or refuted. This paper surveys instances of these two terms, *parivrājikā* and *pravrajitā*, in various śāstric and Buddhist texts, in an effort to clarify our understanding of the representations of renunciant women in premodern Indian texts. I have enlisted the help of certain authoritative commentators on Dharmaśāstras and Pāli Buddhist texts, whose glosses can shed light on the denotative and connotative ranges of these terms and their association with specific kinds of religious females. Even a preliminary survey of such passages reveals some interesting contradictions in how the different commentators understand and use these terms. Therefore, I have found it fruitful to read them against one another and examine how particular texts and authors deploy the ambiguity of this terminology in order to construct certain kinds of ascetic identities. For, while derived from the same root (\sqrt{vraj}), the terms *parivrājikā* and *pravrajitā* carry different connotations that are critical for drawing boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate, desirable and undesirable ascetic identities¹.

This inquiry is not an exercise in taxonomy for its own sake. What is at stake is our ability to make sense of a puzzling paradox: namely, the disjuncture between Dharmaśāstric proscriptions of women's renunciation, on the one hand, and the incontestable presence of ascetic women of various stripes in Indian texts, on the other. When texts refer to renunciant women who do not seem to fall neatly into the categories of Buddhist, Jain, or Ājīvika nuns, whom are they describing? Who are the women sometimes labeled "Brahmanical nuns," when Brahmanical authorities state nearly unanimously that women are not eligible to renounce the world? (The adoption of this vague and inadequate translation probably attests to the unwieldiness of the Indic term in question – which, in most cases, turns out to be

1. These two terms emerged as the focus of this essay because of their relatively frequent occurrence in Indic inscriptional and textual sources, and the lack of corresponding attention to them in modern scholarly discussions. They are particularly interesting – and problematic – because of their multivalence and consequent potential to signify a range of roles and identities.

parivrājikā or *pravrajitā*)². Only a few scholars have noted this contradiction, and fewer still have attempted to offer explanations for it³.

The normative Brahmanical stance regarding women's renunciation is succinctly voiced in a quote attributed to Yama: *striyāḥ śrutau vā śāstre vā pravrajyā na vidhīyate*, "the ascetic life is not prescribed for women, either in the Vedas or in the Śāstras"⁴. As Olivelle points out, in discussions of eligibility for formal renunciation, the case of women is considered analogous to that of *śūdras*: both groups are excluded from taking *saṃnyāsa* on the grounds that they have no entitlement to its two basic prerequisites, Vedic initiation and Vedic ritual⁵. Women, however, face further impediments. They do not qualify for renunciation, the śāstric argument goes, because they are ill-suited to act independently of male authorities, and because their dharma is defined by their domestic and reproductive roles⁶. The pattern of life of the four *āśramas*, with its sanctioned renunciatory stages of *brahmacarya* and *saṃnyāsa*, simply does not apply to women.

2. The problem of translation is certainly not specific to these two terms, but relates to the wider issue of how applicable or adequate is our use of terms from modern European languages, derived from Greek or Latin, such as 'monk,' 'nun' or 'ascetic,' to characterize Indian renunciants.

3. Patrick Olivelle, "Renouncer and Renunciation in the Dharmaśāstras," in Richard W. Lariviere (ed.), *Studies in Dharmaśāstra* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1984), 114; P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. II, pt. II (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968), 945-46; Haripada Chakraborti, *Asceticism in Ancient India in Brahmanical, Buddhist, Jaina, and Ajivika Societies* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1973), 94-95; Har Dutt Sharma, *Contributions to the History of Brāhmanical Asceticism (Saṃnyāsa)* (Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1939), 53.

4. Devaṇṇabhaṭṭa, *Smṛticandrikā*, ed. L. Srinivasacharya (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1988), 596.

5. Olivelle, "Renouncer and Renunciation in the Dharmaśāstras," 114.

6. Several śāstric maxims reflect an urgent sense that a woman must be under male control. An oft-quoted example is *Manu-smṛti* 5.147-49; see Patrick Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law: the Critical Edition and Translation of Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 146. The same classic triad of male guardians – father, husband, and son – is mentioned in *Viṣṇu-smṛti* 25.12, 13 and in *Yājñavalkya-smṛti* 1.85. The *Smṛticandrikā* quote attributed to Yama cited above, *striyāḥ śrutau vā śāstre vā pravrajyā na vidhīyate*, further specifies that a woman's dharma is defined by her marital and reproductive role: *prajā hi tasyāḥ svo dharmāḥ savarṇād iti dhāraṇā*, "Progeny by a male of the same caste is her proper dharma; this is the fixed rule." Devaṇṇabhaṭṭa, *Smṛticandrikā*, 596.

Some lone dissenting voices have come down to us, however. Vijñāneśvara's commentary on *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 3.58 cites a *sūtra* of Baudhāyana stating that some teachers consider women to be eligible for renunciation. The same passage is quoted verbatim, but without comment, in Vāsudeva's *Yatidharmaprakāśa*, a treatise on renunciation: "'Rejoicing in solitude' means not associating with another renouncer or with female renouncers (*saṃnyāsiniḥ*) because renunciation is declared by Baudhāyana also for women: 'Some (permit the renunciation) also of women'"⁷. However, the passage in question has not been found in any extant version of Baudhāyana, a fact that may reflect historically changing attitudes towards both śāstric textual authority in general, and the issue of female renunciation in particular.

At the same time, scattered references to female ascetics abound in texts spanning several centuries and cutting across various textual genres. One of the earliest instances is a passing mention in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (c. second century BCE) of a wandering female religious mendicant (*parivrājikā*) named Śaṅkarā⁸. Female ascetic characters appear in the epics and Purāṇas, including both pious wives who practice asceticism alongside their husbands and women who lead a life of celibate asceticism⁹. By the time of classical Sanskrit drama, they are stock figures in the dramatist's imagination, as illustrated by Kālidāsa's

7. *Yājñavalkyasmṛti with the Mitākṣarā commentary of Vijñāneśvara*, ed. Umesh Chandra Pandey (Varanasi: Chaukhambha Sanskrit Sansthan, 1983), 444; *Vāsudevāśrama Yatidharmaprakāśa: A Treatise on World-Renunciation*, ed. and trans. Patrick Olivelle (Vienna: Indological Institute, University of Vienna, 1977), 33-34, 175.

8. Patañjali, *Vyākaraṇa-Mahābhāṣya*, ed. F. Kielhorn, vol. II (Poona: Dandekar, 1965), 100 on Pāṇini 3.2.14.

9. Among the female ascetics of the *Mahābhārata* are Śrutavatī, Arundhatī, the daughter of Kuṇigarga, and the daughter of Śaṅḍilya, most of whom practice strict tapas in order to obtain a boon. (MBh. 9.47.1-59; 9.51; 9.53.1-8). The *Rāmāyaṇa* mentions Śabarī (III. 74), Svayamprabhā (IV. 50-52), and Vedavatī (VII. 17), who are called *tāpasī* or *śramanī*, dressed in the ascetic garb of bark and animal skin, and engaged in ascetic practices. The figure of a pious wife (often a queen) who practices asceticism also occurs in Purāṇic narratives; as examples we may cite Queen Madālasā in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* and Devahūti, wife of Kardama, in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, trans. F. Eden Pargiter (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1969), ch. 27-36; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, trans. Ganesh Vasudev Tagare (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976), 3.21-33.

Mālavikāgnimitra, Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava*¹⁰, Mahendravarman's *Mattavilāsaprahasana*¹¹, and Jayanta Bhaṭṭa's *Āgamaḍambara*¹². These female ascetics of drama, who are typically of the unmarried variety, begin to take on increasingly disreputable characteristics and are depicted as malicious, licentious, farcical, or even dangerous.

In other words, female ascetics certainly seem to have occupied a place in the Indian literary and religious imagination even during the centuries when there was no śāstric sanction for their existence. As we shall see, even the Śāstras themselves, while stating that women are not eligible to pursue this mode of life, include various rules intended to regulate the interaction of female ascetics with the rest of the society. This, of course, raises some questions about how we should approach these presumably normative texts, an issue to which I will return in the conclusion. What is worth noting here is that the words used most frequently in such contexts are *parivrājikā* and *pravrajitā*. These terms thus merit closer analysis as one point of entry into a curious phenomenon in the history of Indian religion and law – the existence of persons who were illegitimate and marginal according to some authors and textual genres, yet were recognized in law and authenticated by textual sources.

Pravrajitā

Pravrajyā (*Pāli pabbajjā*), “going forth,” is a cross-sectarian term for renunciation and for initiation into an ascetic or monastic order¹³. In Pāli Buddhist texts, we find the standard phrase *agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajati*, “[one] leaves home for homelessness.” *Pravrajyā* is the technical term signifying the novice ordination in the

10. Bhavabhūti, *Malatīmādhava*, trans. M.R. Kāle (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967), Act V.

11. *Mattavilāsa Prahasana (The Farce of Drunken Sport)* by King Mahendravikramavarma Pallava, trans. Michael Lockwood and A. Vishnu Bhat (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1981).

12. *Much Ado about Religion* by Bhatta Jayanta, ed. and trans. Csaba Dezső (New York: Clay Sanskrit Library, 2005), 93.

13. Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India: Their History and Their Contribution to Indian Culture* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1962), 41.

Buddhist *saṅgha*. According to the Sanskrit Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin school, for example, the status of a nun is gained by undergoing the two ordinations: *dharmavinaye pravrajyā-upasampadā bhikṣuṇībhāvo*¹⁴. Thus a *pravrajitā* is a woman who has undergone (at least) the initial ordination of a Buddhist nun. However, it is worth stressing that the term is not exclusively Buddhist; it can be attributed to any woman who has gone forth from home.

In early Prakrit Brāhmī inscriptions, *pravrajitā* and its variants – *pavajitā*, *pavajitikā*, *pavacitā*, *pavaītikā*, and so on – appear commonly alongside *bhikṣuṇī* as terms for renunciant women donors at Buddhist sites. For example, a Besnagar Buddhist rail inscription records the gift of a *pavajitā* named Nadikā, while another from Kuḍā mentions the gift of a cave by a *pavaītikā*¹⁵. From Amarāvati and Kanheri, we have inscriptions of two women described as *pavajitā* who seem to be mother and daughter¹⁶. Whether or not these terms are synonymous with the more specifically Buddhist *bhikṣuṇī* and *therī* is unclear; Peter Skilling suggests that, in most cases, *pravrajitā* and its variants do practically mean a nun¹⁷. In one cave inscription from Kanheri, the terms *pavaītikā* and *therī* seem to be referring to the same woman, which would indicate that *pravrajitā* was, indeed, applied to ordained Buddhist nuns¹⁸. Yet was it only applied to them? Were the women designated by this title in inscriptions necessarily ordained, or necessarily Buddhist? Why was this the term of choice, and not *bhikṣuṇī* or *therī*, which would have signaled the seniority of one's status more conclusively?

14. *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya: Manual of Discipline for Buddhist Nuns*, ed. Gustav Roth (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1970), 7.

15. H. Lüders, "A List of Brāhmī Inscriptions from the Earliest Times to about A.D. 400 with the Exception of those of Asoka," Appendix to *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. X (Calcutta, 1912), nos. 674, 1006.

16. *Ibid.*, nos. 1041, 1060. See also 1128, 1240, 1262.

17. "[I]n most cases this term should mean bhikkhuni" (Peter Skilling, "A Note on the History of the Bhikkhuni-saṅgha (II): The Order of Nuns after the Parinirvāna," W.F.B. Review vol. XXXI, 1 [1993]: 30). *Bhikṣuṇī* and *therī* are also among the many terms used for Jain nuns, although far more common are *nirgranthī* (*niggranthī*), *āryā* (*ajjā*), and *sādhvī* (S. B. Deo, *History of Jaina Monachism from Inscriptions and Literature* [Poona: Deccan College, 1956], 470-71).

18. Lüders, "A List of Brāhmī Inscriptions," no. 1006.

The term **pabbajikā* does not appear anywhere in the Pāli canon as a title. The past passive participle *pabbajitā* is simply used adjectivally for women who have “renounced” or “gone forth,” not as a title. As examples of this kind of usage we find, in the *Therī-apadāna*, the phrase *yassāthāya pabbajitā*, “for the sake of which [I] have gone forth”¹⁹. In Buddhaghosa’s commentary on *Majjhima Nikāya*, nuns are described as *imā mahākulā pabbajitā bhikkhuniyo*, “these nuns of great family who have gone forth”²⁰. In instances such as these, the term signals renunciation and discipline, both of which are marked as unquestionably positive in Buddhist monastic discourse.

In the Dharmaśāstras, we find the term *pravrajitā* occurring in a very different context: in discussions of punishments imposed on men for sexual transgressions. In a passage from *Manu-smṛti*, which prohibits conversing in secret with another man’s wife (8.356-58), an exception is made for the wives of traveling actors and procurers. Then follows a further specification:

*kiṃcid eva tu dāpyaḥ syāt sambhāṣāṃ tābhir ācaran |
preṣyāsu caikabhaktāsu rahaḥ pravrajitāsu ca ||*

When someone engages in secret conversations with such women, as also with female slaves serving a single master and with female wandering ascetics, he shall be compelled to pay a small fine²¹.

While the text itself does not define the word *pravrajitā*, several commentators have had their say about how it is to be understood. Two of them are content with explaining that these are women who subsist on alms: Sarvajñanārāyaṇa defines them as *pravrajitāsu bhikṣukīprabhṛtiṣu*, “*pravrajitā* [means] mendicant women and so on,” while Nandana’s gloss is *ṛcchīpravartitāsu*, “women who have set out to beg”²².

19. *Therī-apadāna of the Khuddaka-Nikāya*, ed. Mary E. Lilley (London: Pali Text Society, 1927), 557, 564, 569.

20. Or, alternatively, ‘these nuns who have gone forth from great families.’ *Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakathā of Buddhaghosācariya*, ed. J. H. Woods and D. Kosambi (London: Pali Text Society, 1922), I, 147

21. Translated in Olivelle, *Manu’s Code of Law: the Critical Edition and Translation of Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, 187.

Three commentators identify *pravrajitā* explicitly as referring to Buddhist nuns or women who have taken some kinds of Buddhist vows. Rāmacandra's gloss is *bauddhāvṛtticārīṇyaḥ*, "women practicing the mode of life of followers of the Buddha." Kullūka explains the offense being discussed as *bauddhābhir brahmacārīṇibhir sambhāṣaṃ kurvan* "conversing with Buddhist celibate women [nuns?]."

The earliest of the complete extant commentaries, that of Medhātithi, makes perhaps the most revealing statement. He defines *pravrajitā* as referring to "women without protectors, such as Śīlāmitrā. For they, being lustful women, are disguised in the dress (of ascetics)"²³. Medhātithi sees as the defining characteristic of a *pravrajitā* the fact that she is unprotected, i.e. not under the protection of male family members. Moreover, he insinuates that these women's ascetic garb is merely an outward show: they are in fact promiscuous women disguised as ascetics.

Rāghavānanda seems to imply something similar when he comments, *pravrajitāsu bauddhādivratabrahmacārīṇīṣu nityaṃvrajanaśīlāsu kulaṭāsu vā*, "pravrajitās, that is, celibate women who have taken vows of Buddhists and so on, those who practice constant wandering, or unchaste women." Glossing *pravrajitā* with the word *kulaṭā* only adds to the ambiguity of the statement since *kulaṭā* can mean either 'an unchaste woman' or 'a respectable female mendicant.' The word appears in Pāṇini, and the *Kāśīka* commentators provide the following etymology: *kulāny aṭāṭi kulaṭā*, a woman who wanders from family to family²⁴. However, such a woman can be either of low moral character (*kulāny aṭanti śīlam bhinatti*), or a woman who roams in order to beg but is not necessarily unvirtuous (*yā punar bhikṣālipsayā suśīlāpi kulāny aṭati*)²⁵. These contradictory commentarial glosses provide an

22. All the references to the commentaries are from *Mānava-dharma Śāstra (Institutes of Manu)*, with the commentaries of Medhātithi, Sarvajñanārāyaṇa, Kullūka, Rāghavānanda, Nandana, and Rāmachandra, ed. Vishvanath Narayan Mandlik (Bombay: Ganpat Krishnaji's Press, 1886), 8, 1086-1087.

23. *pravrajitāḥ arakṣakāḥ śīlāmitrādayaḥ / tā hi kāmukaiva liṅgapracchannāḥ*. The reference to 'Śīlāmitrā' is unclear.

24. *Kāśīkā: A Commentary on Pāṇini's Grammar*, by Vāmana and Jayāditya, ed. Aryendra Sharma and Khanderao Deshpande (Hyderabad: Sanskrit Academy, 1969), 351 (on Pāṇini 4.1.127).

25. *The Aṣṭadhyāyī of Pāṇini*, trans. and ed. Rama Nath Sharma (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1987-2003), 4.1.127 (p. 117).

excellent illustration of the ambiguity intrinsic to the idea of a renunciant woman: the fact that she wanders around freely can mean either that she is a mendicant who has given up domestic attachments, or that she is an unrestrained woman of loose morals²⁶. In the glosses of some of these commentators, as we have seen, these two senses are practically conflated.

Two other brief examples may be given from Dharmasāstra commentaries where *pravrajitās* are mentioned in the context of punishments for intercourse with unsuitable partners. Aparārka's twelfth-century commentary on such a passage in *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*, discussing intercourse with *pravrajitās*, glosses the latter as *śramaṇikādikā*²⁷. *Śramaṇikā* here is the feminine form of *śramaṇa* which, of course, is also ambiguous: it is commonly applied to non-Brahmanical ascetics, Buddhists, Jains, and Ājīvikas²⁸, yet it could be used for Brahmanical ascetics as well²⁹. In Nandapaṇḍita's commentary on *Viṣṇusmṛti* 36.7, *pravrajitā* is explained as *saṃnyastā*, "one who is renounced"³⁰. This gloss is interesting because here the woman is not the one renouncing; rather, she is relinquished or renounced by another. Perhaps this usage reflects the notion, prevailing even today, that ascetic women must surely be either widows or women rejected by men³¹.

26. I have translated *kulaṭā* here as 'an unchaste woman' because this usage seems more common. Kṣemakīrti's *vṛtti* on the Jain *Bṛhatkalpachedasūtra*, for example, explains *kulaṭā* as *svairiṇyaḥ veśyastriyā*, "unrestrained women, prostitutes." *Āgama-suttāṇi bhāga* 19, *Bṛhatkalpachedasūtra*, ed. Muni Dīparatnasāgara (Ahmedabad: Āgamaśrutaparakāśana, 2000), 2306 (vol. 2, p. 52).

27. *yaś ca pravrajitām śramaṇikādikām upaiti. Aparārkaṅgārahābhīdhāparāditya-viracitaṭikāsametā Yājñavalkyasmṛtiḥ* (Poona: Ānandāśramamudraṅālaya, 1903-1904), 2. 292.

28. The Buddha himself is addressed as *śramaṇa* or *samaṇa* by non-Buddhists (e.g. *Dīgha Nikāya* I.4, 87; *Suttanipāta*; *Vin.* I.8, 350)

29. Chakraborty, *Asceticism in Ancient India*, 95.

30. *Viṣṇusmṛti with the Commentary Keśavavaijayanī of Nandapaṇḍita*, ed. V. Krishnamacharya (Madras: Adyar Library and Research Institute, 1964), 482.

31. As Meena Khandelwal notes, "It is often assumed by scholars and lay Hindus alike that most female ascetics are widows" (Khandelwal, *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation* [Albany: SUNY Press, 2004], 11). Her comment is also corroborated by my experience while interviewing contemporary Hindu female ascetics in Varanasi in 2002-03: the conceptual conflation of the categories of 'widow' and 'female ascetic' in the eyes of most lay Hindus became evident in the process of trying to locate female ascetics in the city. Many women ascetics them-

Thus we notice, among some Dharmasāstra authors and commentators, a real ambivalence as to whether *pravrajitā* women are to be regarded as honorable celibate mendicants or as quite the opposite. The fact that they are discussed in the context of sexual transgressions itself calls into question their morality and discipline. Medhātithi and Rāghavānanda quite explicitly characterize them as women of dubious motivations or unchaste character. Yet others simply draw attention to the practices or discipline they observe, without raising questions about their authenticity: they subsist on alms (*bhikṣukī*), observe vows of celibacy (*brahmacāriṇī*), or follow a specific religious mode of life (as in *baudhāvṛtticāriṇī*).

Parivrājikā

The negative connotations of a woman who wanders around become accentuated in the term *parivrājikā*, which implies a more specifically peripatetic lifestyle. Among the early Brāhmī inscriptions collected by Lüders, not a single one identifies the donor as *parivrājikā*. Nor have I found textual passages where a woman characterizes herself, or a religious community describes its members, as such. It is worth posing the question why. Is it because *parivrājikā* and male *parivrājaka* communities left no inscriptions or texts? Or is it because these were not terms that one would use to self-identify?

It is certainly the case that *parivrājikās* are generally portrayed in less than flattering light. The Arthaśāstra, in describing the appropriate course of action for renunciant women (the terms used here are *parivrājikā* or *bhikṣukī*) who are employed as roving spies, describes them as follows:

parivrājikā vṛttikāmā daridrā vidhavā pragalbhābrāhmaṇy³² antaḥpure

selves spoke of the social or familial resistance to their chosen way of life, which sometimes manifested in comments to the effect that these women, especially the young ones, became *saṃnyāsiniś* because they “could not find a husband” or because there was “something wrong with them.”

32. Here I have amended *pragalbhā brāhmaṇy* in Venkatanatha’s edition to read *pragalbhā abrahmaṇy*, since otherwise there is a contradiction with the following sentence which specifies that these women are *vṛṣalyah*, women of lower castes.

*kṛtasatkārā mahāmātrakulāny adhigacchet || etayā muṇḍā vṛṣalyo
vyākhyātāḥ | iti sañcārāḥ |*

Parivrājikā women, desiring a means of livelihood, who are poor, widowed, bold, non-Brahmin by caste, and honored in the palace, should approach the houses of high officials. By this [term] are explained shaven-headed, low-caste women. These are roving spies³³.

The description of shaven-headed, wandering women certainly evokes the standard portrayals of Buddhist and Jain nuns. Whether or not such an association is intended in Kauṭilya's text, it is precisely what Buddhist and Jain manuals of monastic discipline try to refute and counteract. First of all, neither Buddhist nor Jain nuns are allowed to wander alone, which would enable one to engage in suspicious activities such as espionage³⁴. Secondly, the texts also try to distance proper monastics from *parivrājikās* and male *parivrājakas*. In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha warns the monks of the easy morals of such non-Buddhist wanderers, who “take to gulping down sensual pleasures and divert themselves with women wanderers (*paribbājikā*) who wear their hair bound in a topknot”³⁵. Women described as *paribbājikās* even try to defame the Buddha by spreading rumors that they are having illicit relations with him – the most famous case being the notorious and unfortunate Ciñcamāṇavikā in the *Dhammapa-dāṭṭhakathā*³⁶. The monk Ānanda is also subjected to their mockery: when he gives food to a female wanderer, other female wanderers

33. *Arthaśāstra* 1.12.4-5. *Kauṭilya Arthaśāstram*, ed. N. S. Venkatanatha (Mysore: Mysore University, 1960), 21.

34. *Vinaya Piṭakam*, ed. by Hermann Oldenberg (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879–1883), IV. 227-28 (*yā pana bhikkhuṇi ekā gāmantaraṃ gaccheyya... saṃghadisesan ti*). The Pāli Vinaya is henceforth abbreviated as *Vin. Bṛhatkalpachedasūtra* 5. 15-18 (Dīparatnasāgara [ed.], *Āgama-suttāni bhāga* 19, *Bṛhatkalpachedasūtra*, vol. 3, 316).

35. This is one of the few places where some physical description of *paribbājikās* is given: their heads are not shaven. *Majjhima Nikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner (London: Pali Text Society, 1888), I. 305. Translation: *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001).

36. *The Commentary on the Dhammapada*, ed. H. C. Norman (London: Pali Text Society, 1970), 178-183.

teasingly call him her lover³⁷. One *paribbājikā* character in the *Udāna* of the *Khuddaka-Nikāya* is pregnant, which implies that her commitment to a celibate life is not to be taken seriously³⁸.

Given that *paribbājikās* figure as disreputable and potentially threatening to the public image of celibate Buddhists, it is not surprising that the monastic rules proscribe the monks' and nuns' interactions with them. After Ānanda has been embarrassed by the group of female ascetics, the Buddha forbids monks from giving food to naked ascetics or to male or female wanderers. Nuns are not allowed to give them food or robes³⁹. Buddhist monastic discourse attempts to create a difference – to draw visible distinctions, both in terms of language and external behavior – that would set Buddhist monks and nuns apart from those dubious others. In the Pāli Vinaya, *paribbājikā* is defined as follows: “*paribbājikā*, that is, excluding a nun and a probationer and a novice, whoever has reached the state of being a *paribbājikā*”⁴⁰. In other words, the term refers to a female renunciant who does not have any kind of a status in the Buddhist order. It is therefore in contrast with *pravrajitā* which, as we saw earlier, signals that one has received ordination into the Buddhist monastic community.

It remains for us to consider whether *paribbājikā*, this excluded “Other” of the Buddhist canon, refers to *all* the others – as an umbrella term for any non-Buddhist wandering females – or only to members of a specific sect. Instances of the corresponding masculine term, *parivrājika/ parivrājaka/ paribbājaka*, suggest both possibilities. The traditional list of heretical sects in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* mentions the *paribbājaka* category as one among various distinct sectarian options, alongside Jains, matted-hair ascetics, those carrying the triple staff, and followers of Gotama (not to be confused with Gotama the Buddha)⁴¹.

37. Vin. 4.91-92; see also Vin. 3.131.

38. *Udānam*, ed. Paul Steinthal (London: Pali Text Society, 1885), II.6 (Gabbhinisuttam).

39. *yā pana bhikkhunī agārikassa vā paribbājakassa vā paribbājikāya vā samañcivaram dadeyya, pācittyan ti* (Vin. 4.2, 285, 302).

40. *paribbājikā nāma bhikkhuniñ ca sikkhamānañ ca sāmañeriñ ca tḥapetvā yā kāci paribbājikāsamāpannā* (Vin. 4.92; 4.285).

41. *nigañtho... muṇḍasāvako... jaṭilako... paribbājako... māgaṇḍiko... tedaṇḍiko... aviruddhako... gotamako* (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*, ed. Richard Morris and Edmund Hardy [London: Pali Text Society, 1955], I.276). This same set of terms cir-

In the Sanskrit Mahāsaṃghika *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya*, however, *parivrājika* seems to function more as a generic term that is then illustrated by specific examples: *parivrājikehi gautama-jaṭilaka-paryantehi*, “extending up to followers of Gotama and matted-hair ascetics”⁴².

Passages discussing female representatives of the *parivrājika* category also suggest that the term was applied to all those who did not conform to Buddhist styles of female renunciation, rather than to members of a specific sect. A subcommentary on the Pāli Vinaya explains the usage of *paribbājikā* as follows: *ete ca sabbe aññatitthiyā veditabbā*, “These are to be understood as [women] of all the other sects”⁴³. Finally, in the commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya*, we find the term defined simply as *paribbājikāhīti tāpasaparibbājikāhi*, “*paribbājikās*, that is, renunciants who practice *tapas*”⁴⁴. *Tapas* is also a sufficiently vague term for ascetic austerities to leave the definition quite open. What it does do, since it is rarely if ever the term of choice for Buddhist ascetic practice, is further emphasize the non-Buddhist identity of such women.

However, this discursive distinction is found only in Buddhist texts. As we saw before, the Arthaśāstra uses *parivrājikā* interchangeably with *bhikṣukī* for female spies involved in courtly intrigues whose appearance resembles that of Buddhist or Jain nuns. Moreover, in a later commentary on the *Daśakumāracarita*, we even come across

culates, in different combinations, in later Indian Buddhist texts listing various sorts of non-Buddhist ascetics. In *Lalitavistara* (2.21), we find *carakaparivrājaka-vrddhaśrāvaka-gautamanirgranthājīvikādayas* (*Lalita Vistara*, ed. S. Lefmann [Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1902], 380). The *Śikṣāsamuccaya*’s list of sects is as follows: *te carakāḥ parivrājaka tīrthyāḥ tāpasagotamamonacarāṇam* (*Śikṣāsamuccaya: A Compendium of Buddhist Teaching Compiled by Śāntideva*, ed. Cecil Bendall [S. Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1957], 331). Finally, the *Mahāvastu* 3.412.7 lists *anyatīrthika caraka parivrājaka traidaṇḍakam ānandika guruputraka gautamadharmacintika vrddhaśrāvaka*; see C. Bendall, “Ancient Indian Texts and Orders Mentioned by Buddhist Writers,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1901): 125-26. Franklin Edgerton has suggested that *caraka* and *parivrājaka* might denote “a single sect or class of persons” (Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, vol. II [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998], 225).

42. *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya: Manual of Discipline for Buddhist Nuns*, 108.

43. *Kaṅkhāvitaraṇīpurāṇa-ṭīkā. Dhammagiri-Pali-ganthamala* 106 (Igatapuri: Vipasyana Visodhana Vinyasa, 1998), on Pācittiya 41.

44. *Majjhimanikāyaṭṭhakathā of Buddhaghosācariya*, II. 371.

the term *bauddhaparivrājikā*, a Buddhist *parivrājikā*, used for a morally dubious character named Arhantikā⁴⁵.

Parivrājikā, then, seems to be a curious term in that it is used by other people and for other people – that is, for the female ascetics or nuns of other sects, never of one’s own. To borrow a phrase from Mikhail Bakhtin, “the word does not exist in a neutral or impersonal language [but rather] in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions”⁴⁶. *Parivrājikā* is not a neutral term but evokes rather undesirable associations of questionable ascetic virtue. It lends itself particularly well to being used in rhetorical positioning of “us versus them,” being employed quite deliberately for polemical purposes by authors wishing to highlight the suspect, wicked, or even farcical nature of female wanderers – again, of other communities.

Conclusion

The questions of how these textual references relate to each other in history, and how the usage of the terms *parivrājikā* and *pravrajitā* may have evolved and changed in the course of time, remain outside the scope of this paper. Given the difficulties in establishing even a relative chronology for many of these sources, I have contented myself, for the time being, with simply surveying some of the usages and definitions of these two terms, as a point of entry into an understudied subject. Much more remains to be done before we can begin to answer historical questions in a responsible manner. However, the foregoing discussion of texts, spanning much of the first millennium CE and more, suggests in the very least some continuities in usage. In the commentaries discussed here, we have seen attempts to align particular terms and identities with ascetic virtue and respectability, and others with a lack of moral restraint, particularly of sexual control or self-control.

45. *The Daśakumāracarita of Daṇḍin*, ed. Narayana Balkrishna Godabole (Bombay: Tukaram Javaji, 1910), 231.

46. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 294.

The case of *pravrajitā* is complex: it seems to have been used as a generic term for a woman of any affiliation who has renounced domestic life, but at the same time was primarily associated with women in Buddhist robes. In Buddhist texts, it is marked as positive, signaling renunciation and discipline. In contrast, the Dharmasāstra commentaries – even while noting that *pravrajitās* should, in theory, be celibate – discuss them only as potential, if illicit, sexual partners or conversation partners. Their unrestrained movement and perceived freedom from male control labels them “loose women,” which is not surprising in light of the Dharmasāstras’ insistence that women need to live constantly under the protection of men.

The term *parivrājikā*, on the other hand, is unanimously assigned negative connotations. Consequently, Buddhist authors strive to distinguish women who are under that category from Buddhist nuns – a trend which continues from the early Vinayas to medieval *īkās* – while other texts blur this distinction. It seems worth noting, however, that Buddhist definitions of this term never single out Jain or Ājīvika nuns as the primary referents. On the contrary, insofar as a *paribbājikā* is, in the Pāli tradition, characterized as having her hair bound in a topknot (as opposed to shaved or plucked), the definition seems at the least to exclude Jain nuns. Moreover, in the important *Aṅguttara Nikāya* list, *paribbājaka* appears to be a sectarian name used alongside with, but not as inclusive of, the Jain *nigaṇṭha*. Our evidence therefore seems to corroborate the existence of traditions of female asceticism other than the two monastic orders for women, Buddhist and Jain, that are most famous and most accessible to us by virtue of considerable early textual and inscriptional evidence. Where exactly these other women are to be situated in the sectarian landscape of ancient India requires further study.

As for the paradox of simultaneous prohibitions against and references to women’s asceticism in the Dharmasāstras, it seems less a paradox than an instance of textual authorities making normative claims that did not necessarily correspond to, and may even have been trying to suppress, what was occurring in social practice. This requires some further thinking about how we are to read the various genres of texts that I have consulted in this discussion. Surely, śāstric and Vinaya texts and commentaries present us with elaborate lists of prohibitions and

exhortations that seem to invite us to read them as authoritative and prescriptive, as dictating a precise vision of the ideal moral order. Yet at the same time, as Anne Monius remarks, they “betray a quintessentially realistic view of human fallibility,” recognizing that these carefully crafted and articulated laws will nevertheless be violated by less-than-perfect humans, and making concessions for such cases⁴⁷. Indeed, we may ask whether these texts are best approached as prescriptive codes, or as articulations of an ideal vision that also accommodate practical reality. In pronouncements regarding female renunciants, then, what we perhaps witness is the idea that in a properly ordered society, women should not embark on the ascetic life; but since some women will nevertheless do so, other members of society should at least try to avoid inappropriate kind of contact with them.

It is in this context of efforts to set moral and legal standards and draw lines, and of the need to negotiate them, that we can best understand the deployment of *parivrājikā* and *pravrajitā*, as semantically fluid terms, in commentarial literature. The question of such women’s identities and authenticity is inextricably linked to the politics of who gets to define whom and for what purposes. The fact that these two terms alone have proven to be so complex and ambiguous, and have touched on so many important questions about sectarian identity, ascetic authenticity, and gender, is an indication of how important and potentially fruitful this line of inquiry could be.

47. Anne E. Monius, “Origins of Hindu Ethics,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, ed. William Schweiker (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 335.

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