



## The Iconography of Female Musicians in Indian Buddhist Art



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### Abstract

*This paper examines the visual and symbolic representations of female musicians in Buddhist art from ancient and medieval India. An interdisciplinary approach that combines art history, gender studies, and religious studies, the research examines how these depictions reflect the sociocultural roles of women, the aesthetic ideals of the time, and the significance of music within the Buddhist tradition. By analyzing sculptural and mural evidence from key Buddhist sites, including Ajanta, Amaravati, Bagh Caves, Pitalkhora, Bharhut, Bhaja, Gandhara, and Nagarjunakonda, the study highlights the nuanced portrayals of female musicians. The paper analyzes iconographical materials to identify the musical instruments and how these figures navigated both musical and cultural significance to contemporary gender status. This study applies a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that combines perspectives from art history, gender studies, and religious studies. The primary source material includes visual representations—such as sculptures and murals—found at significant Buddhist sites, including Sanchi, Ajanta, Amaravati, Bagh Caves, Pitalkhora, Bharhut, Mathura, Gandhara, and Nagarjunakonda. Therefore, the study highlights the significance of music and female agency within the visual culture of Indian Buddhism, providing new insights into the intersection of art, devotion, and gender.*

**Key words :** Buddhist Art, Female Musicians, Iconography, Gender Representation, Indian Arts

### Research Paper

#### Introduction and Background

Buddhist texts and artwork depict women in diverse roles, ranging from domestic identities, such as mothers and wives, to spiritual figures, including nuns and enlightened beings. These depictions often mirror the cultural norms of their time while engaging with Buddhism's spiritual ideals (Labde, Mar. 19, 2021). Buddhist art and texts depict women as central figures in the monastic community, with some roles emphasizing the equality and potential for spiritual realization, despite initial reluctance to fully include women in the monastic order. Buddhism acknowledges the significance and potential of women for spiritual development, while addressing the intricate interplay between societal perceptions and religious teachings.

Two thousand five hundred years ago, Buddhism was a revolution in India, which is recognized in the history of religions as one of the greatest revolutions in humankind (Bapat, 2500 Years of Buddhism). While the message of the Buddha led to a fundamental reorientation of attitudes towards life, one aspect that was not affected much was the gender question. The Buddha preached the quality of all human beings in an age when society was stratified based on caste and economy. Further, the Buddha preached that the way to enlightenment was not dependent on any other outside agency but was entirely due to the individual's actions, Karma.

The question of women in Buddhism is a topic that briefly surfaced during the life of the Buddha and was later pushed to the background. To get a clear idea of the

Buddhist religion and the question of gender, one needs to have a basic idea of the context and the different Buddhist societies that have evolved over 2500 years. The Buddha was a historical figure who lived in the sixth Century BC in North India in the context of a rapid transition from a pastoral to an agrarian society characterized by the rise of agrarian surplus to towns. During this period, we see the rise of territorial units of administration known as the Mahajanapadas and the Republican states. It is important that Buddha was born in the Shakyas Republic and, therefore, had democratic ideals.

The Buddhist community, the Buddhist Sangha, consisted of four components: monks and laypeople. The Buddhist Sangha consists of the monks and nuns known as the bhikkhus and the bhikkunis, respectively, and the upasakas and the upasikas, known as laymen and laywomen. The origin of the order of the nuns in Buddhism is also an interesting episode in the history of religions. The traditional Buddhist accounts narrate the story that the aunt of the Buddha, Prajapati Gautami, requested the Buddha to start the order of the nuns, and the Buddha was apprehensive that the entry of women into the order would lead to a lack of focus and moral decay. Ultimately, Prajapati Gotami led the 500 Sakyan women who wore the robes, shaved their heads, and accepted workers into the Sangha (Labde, Mar. 19, 2021). However, when Ananda approached him on behalf of Mahapajapati Gotami, he finally agreed, though not without misgivings about the ultimate result of such a step. At the same time, he laid down certain conditions that imply women's subservience to men. In his day, this was a significant step forward. In religious life, women enjoyed the same right of access to the highest position, that of Arhatship, for instance, as it recognised that women could also be as learned and wise as men, the names of distinguished nuns like Khema, Patacara, and Dhammadinna in this connection. Outside the Sangha, women like Sujata, Visakha, and Samavati all achieved positions of eminence in different spheres. Even courtesans like Amrapali did not deny opportunities to embrace the religious life. In Theri-gatha, women like Uppalavanna, Subha, Kisa Gotami and Soma have renounced the world out of unhappiness with life. They accepted a life of devotion to overcome mundane suffering, and it says that they made the best use of the opportunities religion offered (Bapat, pp. 3).

Thus, this study examines female musicians' visual and symbolic representations in Buddhist art from ancient and medieval India. Significantly, it observes art history, gender studies, and religious studies to explore how these

figures depict and what their portrayals reveal as a source for music. The research problem centers on the limited scholarly attention given to the gendered portrayal of musicians in Buddhist visual culture, particularly the role and meaning of female figures within monastic and devotional settings. "How does the iconography of female musicians in Indian Buddhist art reflect changing perceptions of gender, devotion, and aesthetics from the early historic period through the medieval era?" is the research problem of the study. The hypothesis developed by this research is that the depiction of female musicians in Indian Buddhist art was not merely decorative, but also served symbolic functions relevant to the history of music at the time, or embodied Buddhist ideals such as joy and devotion. An interdisciplinary approach that combines art history, gender studies, and religious studies, the research examines how these depictions reflect the sociocultural roles of women, the aesthetic ideals of the time, and the significance of music within the Buddhist tradition. The primary source material includes visual representations—such as sculptures and murals—found at significant Buddhist sites, including Ajanta, Amaravati, Bagh Caves, Pitalkhora, Bharhut, Bhaja, Gandhara, and Nagarjunakonda. Therefore, the study highlights the significance of music and female agency within the visual culture of Indian Buddhism, providing new insights into the intersection of art, devotion, and gender.

## Methodology

This research involved a qualitative, descriptive, and historical methodology to analyze the iconography of female musicians in Indian Buddhist art. The study employs Erwin Panofsky's method of iconological analysis (Panofsky, 1972, pp. 5–7), which provides a layered framework for interpreting visual materials.

Panofsky's three-tiered approach to iconology includes: 1. Primary, or natural subject matter – pre-iconographical description; 2. Secondary or conventional subject matter – iconographical analysis; Intrinsic meaning, symbolical values; 3. Iconological interpretation. The process involves identifying the basic visual elements of the artwork—such as figures, gestures, instruments, playing techniques, and arrangements—with their symbolic meaning. It is the level of formal analysis and direct observation. Iconographical analysis (Secondary or conventional subject matter): It considers broader themes such as the role of women in Buddhism, the symbolic function of music, and how these reflect the philosophical and social attitudes of the period.



Primary textual sources included such as the Tripiṭaka, Jātaka tales, and other canonical Buddhist texts that reference music, women, or devotional practices. Secondary scholarly studies in art history, Buddhist studies, musicology, and gender studies provide critical interpretations and comparative insights included as literature surveys.

Library and archival surveys for accessing classical and contemporary academic work related to Indian Buddhist art. Additionally, archaeological findings and visual data will form a core part of the study, including Field visits to important Buddhist sites and monuments to observe firsthand sculptures, reliefs, and murals.

### Survey of Literature

Japanese scholar J. Chong (2018) in the paper titled 'Deep Temple Bell, Celestial Female Musicians' has presented a study aimed at examining the visual and historical analysis of the painted tennyō (Tennyō, or the Buddhist Japanese term for celestial handmaiden musicians playing in praise of Buddha, Hokoji Temple) discovered in situ during a field visit to the temple in 2018. According to the study, Tennyō often depicts female-type musicians with bird-like bodies and female heads with superpowers for flying and strength. In the study described, in Buddhist visual traditions, the tennyō are divine maidens believed to traverse the skies of the Pure Land, often depicted scattering flowers, burning incense, or playing celestial music in honor of the Buddha. Their iconography traces its origins to Apsaras in Indian mythology, later transformed into fei tian in China, before evolving into the Japanese tennyō (Ito, 1999; Wong, 2004). These celestial beings symbolize the movement of Buddhist cosmology across Asia, undergoing aesthetic and theological adaptation in each cultural context .

Niroshi Senevirathne (2019) in her article, "Descriptions of Women Musicians in Ancient Sri Lankan Temple Frescoes (with special reference to MulKirigala Temple) examines the portrayal of female musicians in ancient Buddhist frescoes in Sri Lanka. She provides an analysis of gender representation in the context of music, arguing that these depictions serve as indicators of women's roles in religious rituals and their contributions to the musical life of ancient Buddhist society. This research is particularly relevant as it intersects the themes of gender, music, and religious practice in Sri Lankan Buddhist iconography. However, she focused her research only on the frescoes of the MulKirigala Buddhist cave Temple in Sri Lanka.

Manoj Alawathukotuwa (2019), in his study, "Depiction of Musical Instruments, Social Status, and Gender of Musicians through Temple Paintings of Sri Lanka," explores how musicians and their instruments are represented in the mural frescoes of Sri Lanka's Kandyan temples. A notable focus is the Telapatta Jatakaya scene in Cave 5 of the shrine room on the outer front wall of the MulKirigala Temple. Through a careful analysis grounded in both primary and secondary sources, Alawathukotuwa traces how these depictions evolved across the Kandyan Kingdom period (1469–1815), offering insights into the social and historical contexts in which they were created. His research also highlights the nuanced impact of colonial rule on Sri Lankan art and society, identifying ideological and cultural shifts brought about by the Portuguese (1505–1602), Dutch (1602–1802), and British (1802–1948) during their respective periods of control. Contrary to earlier claims, such as those by the German Orientalist Wilhelm Ludwig Geiger (1856–1943), who argued that women in temple murals were only shown as dancers, Alawathukotuwa's findings reveal a more inclusive picture. Women are depicted not only as dancers but also as instrumentalists, including players of the tālampaṭa (cymbals), horaṇāva (Sri Lankan oboe), and rabāna (a type of small hand drum). Together, these scholarly contributions offer a more accurate understanding of gender roles in traditional Sri Lankan music and challenge outdated interpretations that have long overlooked the presence and significance of female musicians in historical temple art .

Feminine Beauty & Social Life As Reflected In Early Buddhist Sculptural Art Of Central India, Dr Vinay Kumar (February 28, 2023) presents a paper proposing to discuss the multidimensional role of women depicted in early Buddhist art of the central part of India, like Bharhut, Sāñcī, Sonārī, Satadhārā, Bhojapur, and Andher, which were situated at the point of intersections between the south and north. With the help of plates, the paper intends to explore various acts of women in performing their social responsibilities and expressing their feminine desires through sculptural representations in early Buddhist art of central India. No details regarding music or female musicians can be found in his research work.

A study of sculptural and mural depictions of dance and music in Buddhist art of India, Nilofar Shamim Haja and Dakshina Chitra (October 2007) examine the depictions of celebratory events found in hundreds of panels, friezes, slabs, gateways and medallions of scores of Buddhist sites across India; this project takes a peek



at seven of these regions, namely, Ajanta (West), Sanchi, Bharhut (East), Mathura (Central), Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda (South) and Gandhara (Pakistan). Apart from listing out a brief survey of the examples of dance and music depicted in these sites, each site's regional variations and stylistic qualities have been analyzed and contrasted. However, they have not analyzed the gender status or female musicians in this research.

Swami Prajnanananda mentions a female veena player engraving in Pitalkhora Buddhist caves in his works, *A History of Indian Music* (1963) and *A Historical Study of Indian Music* (1981). Furthermore, he mentions that Veena and their plectrum were found among some sculptures in Cave No. 4. Whereas two sculptures contain the representations of males, the other one represents a female and a male partner. The female figure depicted in the sculpture is playing a Veena with her right hand. The Veena is placed on her lap, and she holds the plectrum (Kona) with her thumb and forefinger of the same hand. However, he has not analyzed the figure as a gender or a female musician, nor has he conducted any further exploration.

## Results and Discussion

The Ajanta Caves indeed provide a fascinating glimpse into the cultural and social dynamics of ancient India, particularly in terms of music, gender roles, and the intersection of art and religion. The murals and sculptures found within these caves, dating from around the 2nd century BCE to the 6th century CE, offer valuable insights into the religious, artistic, and everyday life of the time, with music playing a prominent role. The depictions of musicians in the Ajanta Caves reflect the vibrant musical culture of ancient India.

The role of women in the musical depictions at Ajanta is particularly noteworthy. Unlike many other ancient cultures, where women's contributions to music were often marginalized or overlooked, the murals at Ajanta reveal that women were not only involved in music but were portrayed as skilled musicians. Women are depicted playing various instruments such as the lute (Veena), flute, and drum, often alongside male musicians. This highlights the significant role of women in the cultural and musical life of the time.

In Cave No. 1, a visual representation of the MahaJanaka Jataka tale depicts a female dancer accompanied by Female musicians playing various instruments (Fig.1). The orchestra consists of more than five performers, with two flute players on the right side of the dancer,

two cymbal players, one female musician playing a pair of vertical drums, another playing a small double drum (with a narrow ring in the middle), and a female musician holding a stringed instrument, possibly a gourd (Tumba) covered instrument like a Veena). Additionally, Cave No. 1 represents three musical instruments: a flute, a conch (seashell horn), and a drum (similar to the Mridang) (Fig.2). Cave No. 17, which depicts God Indra with his celestial musicians (Fig. 3), also showcases four female musicians, including a flautist.

The other type of stringed instrument, which female musicians play in the Ajanta caves, features a bow or harp shape, which is depicted in the upper part decoration of the entrance door and outside wall decorations of cave no.01 (Fig.4) and inside wall upper part of the musicians' depictions on cave no. 02 (Fig.5). In these scenes, the first and second female harp players are handling the fingerboard with their left hand and playing the strings with their right hand, while the third player is holding the harp oppositely. This posture is similar to that of modern harps and Svarmandal.

The Pitalkhora Buddhist caves, carved in the Satmala range on the northern fringe of the Aurangabad District of Maharashtra, lie 50 miles southwest of the Ajanta caves and 23 miles northwest of Ellora. These rock-cut caves date back from the 2nd Century BCE to the 1st Century CE. The harp-shaped Veena (Seven-string Veena), together with their plectrums, was found among some sculptures in Cave No. 4. The sculptures are three in number: whereas two sculptures contain the representations of males, the other one represents a female (Fig.6). The female figure depicted in the sculpture shown in Fig. 06 is playing a Veena with her right hand. The Veena is placed on her lap, and she holds the plectrum (Kona) with her thumb and forefinger of the same hand, plucking the second string.

The Bharhut Stupa is an ancient Buddhist monument located in Madhya Pradesh, India, originally constructed around 100 BCE and later expanded under the Sunga dynasty. The sculptures on the railing and gateways depict scenes from the Jataka tales (Buddha's previous lives) and the Buddha's life, making it a significant example of early Buddhist narrative art.

The female figures in the Bharhut Stupa engravings are in two positions: one is seated, while the other is standing with a harp-shaped Veena. The seated female player is playing a harp resting on her lap (Fig. 7). She plucks a string with her right hand, using her thumb and forefinger to do so. It is almost identical to the female



Veena player in the Pitalkhora engraving (Fig. 6). The other female player, depicted in a standing position, plays her Veena with her left hand, as shown in the engraving (Fig. 8).

The female veena players are featured in sculptures from Amaravati (2nd century CE) (Fig.9) and Nagarjunakonda (Fig.10) (2nd century CE), depicted in a perpendicular shape with a belly, similar to the modern Indian Sarod.

Bagh Caves in Madhya Pradesh date back to the 4th to 6th Centuries AD. Decorated with portraits of bodhisattvas and scenes from secular life during the Classical Gupta Period (319–605 AD), the powerful line-work is in mineral colours. Hallis Lasya [folk dance] is one of the gallery's two large-format reproductions. The artwork depicts groups of women performing music and dance, providing a vivid look into secular life during the 5th century AD (Fig.11)( Rama toshi,2018). In this mural, one of the women holds a long-necked string instrument, which, although stylised, can be identified as belonging to the broader Veena family. The instrument features an elongated resonating body, characteristics typical of early Indian lutes depicted in ancient art. Its presence serves as valuable iconographical evidence of the types of folk or semi-classical string instruments used during the period. It resembles the Ravanahattha veena and features a fingerboard (without frets), along with a few keys (pegs) for tuning the strings.

Rock carvings from Gandhara Buddhist art offer evidence of the rich musical repertoire of ancient India, which blended Indian and Hellenistic artistic traditions. The highlighted female figure (Fig.12) is holding a long-necked lute, making it a significant piece of evidence for the early development of chordophones in the Indian subcontinent. The image displayed in Figure 13 is a carved schist relief from the Gandhara region, likely dating to the 2nd-3rd century. The sculpture depicts the Birth of the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) (Fig.13). In this depiction, three female musicians play instruments such as a Drum, a Harp, and a solid instrument like cymbals around Queen Mahamaya, the mother of Prince Siddhartha.

A woman playing a two pair drum, as depicted in the Bhaja caves, Lonavala, Maharashtra, is significant in the history of percussion instruments, featuring two parts similar to those of a modern tabla (Fig.14). The Buddhist excavations at Bhaja are a small series of early Hinayana (Theravada) caves datable to the 2nd Century BC to 1st Century BCE and consist 29 excavations. The depictions in the Bhaja caves consist of female veena

players and women percussionists. A woman playing a two pair drum, as depicted in the Bhaja caves, Lonavala, Maharashtra, is significant in the history of percussion instruments, featuring two parts similar to those of a modern tabla (Fig.14). The Buddhist excavations at Bhaja are a small series of early Hinayana (Theravada) caves datable to the 2nd Century BC to 1st Century BCE. The depiction of a woman percussion player is significant evidence that women are involved in music, including as drum players. Drumming is done mainly by male players in India due to its energetic nature.

In the sculpture, a woman holding a fan waves it at the king, who is seated on a throne. In front of him, a dancer is dancing, and a Veena player is engrossed in playing. Nearby, a female player stands, playing two leather-bound percussion instruments kept in front of her with both hands. The pair of instruments seen in front of the female percussionist is similar to a tabla. However, this ancient Bhaja craft clearly and authentically depicts the earlier form of the Tabla, and this proves that in the second century BC, instruments like the Tabla were in vogue in India, and women also played it (Dr.E.Mistry, pp.119).

## Conclusion

The visual evidence from Ajanta, Pitalkhora, Bharhut, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Bagh, Gandhara, and Bhaja demonstrates the presence and significance of women in the musical traditions of ancient India. Across these sites—spanning from the 2nd century BCE to the 6th century CE—women appear not as peripheral figures but as skilled, confident, and diverse practitioners of music. Their depictions reveal mastery over a wide range of instruments, including stringed instruments such as various forms of the veena and the harp, wind instruments like the flute and conch, and percussion instruments ranging from early double drums to prototypes resembling the modern tabla.

At Ajanta and Bagh, they appear in courtly, devotional, and narrative scenes, while the reliefs of Pitalkhora, Bharhut, and Gandhara highlight their roles in broader cultural and ceremonial life. The presence of women performing complex musical tasks—such as plucking multi-stringed veenas with plectrums, executing rhythmic patterns on double drums, and accompanying Dance—demonstrates their artistic proficiency and challenges assumptions that musical performance, especially drumming, was historically male-dominated. These findings provide that ancient Indian Buddhist Art



and society neglected gender and valued women's contributions to music, both as instrumentalists and as integral members of musical ensembles and Dance as well as society.

**Figers**



**Fig.1**



**Fig.2**



**Fig.3**



**Fig.4**

**Fig.5**



**Fig.6**



**Fig.7**



**Fig.8**



Fig.9



Fig.10



Fig.11



Fig.12



Fig.13



Fig.14



## List of Figers

1. Maha Janaka Jataka, Cave no.01, Yazdani, G. 1930–1955. *Ajanta: The Colour and Monochrome Reproductions of the Ajanta Frescoes Based on Photography*. London: Oxford University Press. 4 volumes. Vol. 1, plates XII–XIV.
- 2 & 3. <https://www.indian-heritage.org/painting/ajanta/ajanta15.htm>
- 4&5. Harp player, entrance door upper part decorations, cave no.01, outside wall upper side, cave no.01; inside wall upper side, cave no.02, captured by author.
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12. Chakhil-i-Ghondi Stupa-Peshawar museum a stone slab depicts Prince Siddhartha enjoying worldly life where we have representation of the drum, flute and the harp; Suchandra Ghosh, p.48
13. The Birth of the Buddha, AD 1 –200, Ancient Gandhara, Pakistan, Schist, (<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O65750/birth-of-the-buddha-relief-panel-unknown/>)
14. Bhaja Caves, Lonavala, Maharashtra, India.

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