The Fourfold Assembly Reimagined: Mapping Catuparisā As A Social Ecosystem In Early Buddhism

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Abstract—**This article reimagines the** *catuparisā* **bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, upāsakas, and upāsikās as an interdependent social ecosystem rather than a static institutional list. Drawing on Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya materials, read alongside socio-historical context, it employs a mixed-method approach: close textual analysis, historical-sociological reconstruction of sites, actors, and events, and network/ecological metaphors to model flows of resources, knowledge, legitimacy, and regulation. Treating assemblies as "species," monastic settlements and urban hubs as "habitats," and** *dāna*, **teaching, and Vinaya as circulatory and regulatory systems, the study identifies feedback loops of generosity, stability, instruction, and merit that generated resilience under environmental and political disturbance. Case sketches of patrons and centres (e.g., merchant and household networks) demonstrate how lay–monastic reciprocity distributed risk and enabled mobility. At the same time, women's roles as bhikkhunīs and upāsikās functioned as stabilizers, brokers, and financiers through distinctive channels of moral authority. The model clarifies how authority and continuity emerged from redundancy and modularity across assemblies.**

Index Terms—**catuparisā, social-ecological system, lay–lay-monastic reciprocity, gendered agency, merit economy**

I. INTRODUCTION

Lists can be tidy, but they can also be misleading. The *catuparisā* bhikkhus (monks), bhikkhunīs (nuns), upāsakas (laymen), and upāsikās (laywomen) are often presented as a four-item inventory appended to doctrinal summaries or institutional histories. This article argues that such cataloguing obscures a dynamic web of relations through which early Buddhist communities actually lived, learned, and endured. Treating the Fourfold Assembly as a living system foregrounds flows of food and textiles, of instruction and ritual competence, of legitimacy and merit, of rules and sanctions rather than static categories. It also allows us to examine how gender, status, and geography influenced those flows, and how environmental and political shocks exposed (and sometimes reinforced) the system's underlying architecture.

Three research questions guide the analysis: (1) What kinds of flows (resources, authority, knowledge, merit) bound the four assemblies into a functioning whole? (2) How did gendered positions, social rank, and spatial setting (forest hermitage, market town, royal court) shape roles, bottlenecks, and feedback loops? (3) Which disturbances, such as famines, infectious diseases, royal realignments, doctrinal disputes, or schisms, made the system's dependencies visible and tested its capacity to adapt?

The thesis advanced here is that early Buddhist communities operated as a resilient, distributed ecosystem, in which lay–monastic reciprocity and women's participation were not peripheral add-ons but core stabilizers. Reciprocity synchronized the "circulatory system" (gift and sustenance) with the "nervous system" (teaching and discipline). Women, as bhikkhunīs and upāsikās, supplied distinctive channels of moral authority, funding, mediation, and caretaking labour that reduced risk, sustained mobility, and buffered shocks.

The scope is deliberately circumscribed: the argument is built primarily on the Pāli Nikāyas and Vinaya, with selective notes from parallel Āgamas where they clarify institutional patterns. The payoff of the ecosystem lens is twofold. Analytically, it offers a vocabulary—the language of networks, niches, and feedback—to model interdependence without collapsing difference. Historically, it reframes Buddhist social life as a set of adaptive strategies

distributed across monastic and lay actors, rather than a one-way cascade of renunciant charisma to passive householders. The rest of the essay develops this claim, moving from literature review and method to a conceptual framework, case studies, and implications.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Classic portraits of the Fourfold Assembly tend to appear in two registers. The first is doctrinal-institutional: the *catuparisā* marks the Buddha's success when all four groups assemble around him, signalling legitimacy and completeness. The second is administrative: monastic histories track the organization of the bhikkhu and bhikkhunī Sangha, occasionally gesturing to lay supporters as financial appendages or as beneficiaries of the teachings. Both registers establish an indispensable baseline, yet they often separate what the sources present as entangled: preaching and provisioning, ritual and regulation, household economies and monastic schedules.

In recent decades, scholarship has shifted toward social histories of monasticism, foregrounding geography, patronage, and everyday religion. Studies of lay agency emphasize donors, guilds, and mercantile networks, complicating the picture of householders as merely "supportive." Research on the economics of dāna examines gift exchange, reputation, and the performative aspects of generosity. Research on the bhikkhunī order, including its formation, regulation, and periods of contraction and revival, has re-centredwomen's roles within both monastic and lay spheres, opening questions about authority, lineage, and llabour These currents, complemented by more experimental methods (prosopography, spatial history, and, increasingly, network analysis), have established a robust platform for rethinking Buddhist communities.

Even so, gaps remain. Interactions are often treated piecemeal, case by case, site by site, without a synthetic model of system-level feedback. The literature richly documents gifts, rules, or sermons, but less frequently maps how these domains co-produce stability or fragility over time. Gendered dynamics are described either in normative Vinaya terms or in exemplary narratives; their systemic effects (e.g., risk distribution, redundancy, brokerage roles) are rarely quantified or modelled. Finally, disturbances such as famines, political turnover, or doctrinal conflicts are narrated as episodes rather than as stress tests that reveal the architecture of interdependence. This article addresses these gaps by presenting a social-ecological framework that integrates flows, roles, and shocks into a unified analytical vocabulary, inviting both qualitative interpretation and future quantitative testing.

III. SOURCES & METHODOLOGY

Primary sources. The analysis primarily draws on the Pāli canon, specifically the Vinaya texts for their regulatory architecture and case law, as well as the Dīgha, Majjhima, Saṃyutta, and Aṅguttara Nikāyas for their sermons, narrative vignettes, and episodic community dynamics. Prototypical figures such as Anāthapiṇḍika, Visākhā, and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī anchor discussions of patronage, household leadership, and ordination politics. Where appropriate, parallels from the Āgamas are used selectively to triangulate institutional practices and avoid overfitting to a single textual tradition.

Method. The approach is mixed and cumulative:

1. Textual analysis identifies rules, exhortations, stories, and situational conflicts, reading them as traces of practice rather than as merely prescriptive ideals.

2. Prosopography aggregates information about named individuals, monastics, householders, merchants, and officials to detect patterns of repeated interaction, roles, and influence.

3. Social network lens models ties (material support, instruction, co-residence, ritual cooperation), nodes (assemblies, sites), and structural features (hubs, brokers, bridges), attending to how lay and monastic subnetworks interpenetrate.

4. Ecological metaphors such as niches, mutualism, trophic flows, and resilience serve as heuristic tools to describe interdependence without claiming biological causation. The metaphors are used critically: they must clarify textual patterns and be falsifiable by counterexamples.

5. The data schema (events–actors–sites–flows) organizes evidence for reuse: each episode is coded by location, the assemblies present, the resources exchanged, the knowledge transmitted, the rules invoked, and the outcomes. This supports both qualitative comparison and future computational modelling.

Analytic stance. The article treats prescriptive and narrative materials as co-informative: rules indicate desired equilibria and common failure modes; stories reveal informal workarounds, charisma, and community sentiment. Temporal inference remains cautious: despite redaction layers, recurrent motifs across textual strata can still disclose durable social mechanics. The aim is neither antiquarian reconstruction nor modernization, but the articulation of a portable model—explicit enough to be criticized, yet flexible enough to travel across sites and periods.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM

The Fourfold Assembly is treated here as a *social-ecological system* composed of interdependent actors, habitats, flows, and feedbacks. Actors as "species." Bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs specialize in teaching, ritual competence, and the custodianship of the Vinaya; upāsakas and upāsikās specialize in provisioning, logistics, and social mediation. Within each, sub-niches proliferate: novices and elders, donors and guild heads, charismatic preachers and rule-savvy stewards, household managers and ritual organizers. Specialization reduces coordination costs while allowing redundancy across the system.Habitats. Monastic settlements (*vihāras*), forest hermitages, groves and parks, urban peripheries, caravan routes, and royal courts form distinct "ecotones." Each habitat structures access to resources (alms density, water, timber), audiences (merchants, officials, villagers), and risks (banditry, court politics, exposure to famine). Assemblies move across habitats seasonally (e.g., *vassa*), rebalancing flows.

Flows. Material flows (*dāna*, building materials, medicines) sustain bodies and buildings; informational flows (sermons, precept instruction) sustain doctrine and practice; symbolic flows (merit, reputation, legitimacy) sustain motivation and social capital; regulatory flows (Vinaya procedures) maintain order. Flows are not independent: material support enables teaching; teaching produces merit; merit motivates further support; regulation governs access and corrects imbalances—resilience vs. fragility. Resilience follows from redundancy (multiple patrons, parallel women's networks), modularity (semi-autonomous monasteries), and mobility (itinerant preaching). Fragility stems from over-concentration (single-patron dependence), habitat monotony (limited to either forests or cities), or regulatory capture (where rules are bent to the benefit of a faction). This framework guides the reading of institutions, roles, and case studies that follow.

V. INSTITUTIONS AND INFRASTRUCTURES

Monastic settlements (*vihāras*). Built environments embodied moral economies. Refectories, wells, boundary markers (*sīmā*), and residential cells organized daily rhythms of teaching, meditation, and governance. The rainy-season retreat (*vassa*) synchronized calendars across sites, concentrating instruction and adjudication while stabilizing local alms circuits. Refectory economies. Kitchens and halls were logistical hubs where lay provisioning met monastic scheduling. Storage practices, rules about food types and timing, and labor divisions (including women's often under-acknowledged contributions in preparation and financing) shaped the cadence of communal life. Such infrastructures materialized trust: predictable meals signal institutional reliability, which draws novices and donors.

Donor infrastructures. Householders and guilds financed land, buildings, robes, lamps, and medicines. Endowments sometimes tied to specific observances (e.g., lighting, bathing facilities, care for the sick) created stable revenue streams. Donors did not simply "give and forget"; they stewarded projects, mediated conflicts, and publicly performed generosity, converting wealth into social and moral capital that circulated back into community care.

Mobility and communication. Itinerant preaching, festival circuits, and pilgrimage routes knitted dispersed nodes into a recognizable Saṅgha "mesh." Portable ritual competence (ordination, discipline procedures) enabled pop-up governance during travels. Messaging travelled with textiles, caravans, and rumour; the reputation of a monastery, a teacher, or a donor functioned as a low-cost coordination device.

Interface with courts and markets. Royal patronage could amplify capacity (through land grants, protection) while increasing risks (politicization, factionalization). Market proximity diversified resource inflows and audiences but introduced competition for attention and prestige. Institutions that

balanced forest seclusion with urban accessibility tended to display robust feedback loops: enough quiet to train, enough density to teach and provision.

VI. . ROLES AND AGENCY ACROSS THE FOUR ASSEMBLIES

Bhikkhus. Monks were teachers, ritual specialists, and stewards of Vinaya. They curated curricula, certified competence, and administered communal acts (*saṅghakamma*). Beyond the lecture hall, monks brokered relations with lay guilds and officials, negotiated land use, and managed succession tasks that required social intelligence as much as doctrinal mastery.

Bhikkhunīs. Nuns cultivated parallel networks of instruction and care, often specializing in mentorship of women and youth, healing, and moral adjudication within households. Regulatory constraints shaped their mobility and ordination pipelines, yet within those constraints, bhikkhunīs developed resilient circuits of education, reputation, and mutual aid. Their visibility expanded the system's reach into domestic spaces that male monastics could not easily access.

Upāsakas. Laymen appear as merchants, craftsmen, and officials who enabled long-distance patronage and logistical support. Their guild memberships provided capital pools, transport, and legal leverage. As ritual organizers and temple managers, they translated monastic ideals into civic projects, roads, wells, and hospitals, broadening the social footprint of Buddhist ethics.

Upāsikās. Laywomen led household religious life, financed key infrastructures, and mediated conflicts. Figures like Visākhā exemplify how women combined wealth management with moral instruction, coordinating alms-days, robe distributions, and care for the sick. Their reputational capital moved through kinship and marriage networks, stabilizing support across generations and locales.

Cross-cutting roles. Translators, message-carriers, and cultural brokers moved between court, market, and monastery, aligning calendars and expectations. Novices, stewards, and ritual attendants formed the system's "middle management," handling granular labour that made lofty ideals workable. Across all roles, agency was relational: authority accrued from reliably channelling flows of food, knowledge,

legitimacy where they were most needed, when they were most fragile.

VII. CASE STUDIES (MICRO-ECOLOGIES)

Sāvatthī / Jetavana: an urban hub. In high-density settings, donor ecologies clustered around renowned teachers. Anāthapiṇḍika, the paradigmatic mercantile patron, functioned as a keystone node, coordinating construction, provisioning, and publicity. The monastery's proximity to markets produced thick flows: steady alms, constant audiences, and a pipeline of novices. Rules adjudicated by locally respected elders maintained order amid bustle, while festivals amplified teaching-merit cycles. Disturbances, price shocks, and court intrigue were buffered by diversified donor sets and the site's reputational magnetism.

Women's patronage circuits. Visākhā's endowments illustrate how upāsikās combined wealth, organization, and moral suasion. Her projects regular meals, garments, lighting, and bathing facilities, reduced uncertainty for monastics and signalled inclusion to laywomen, who found access points for participation beyond sporadic almsgiving. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's ordination narrative, by contrast, shows the contentious birth of institutional innovation. The downstream effects of new educational networks, revised procedures, and contested authority exposed the system's capacity to adapt rules without unravelling cohesion.

Frontier/forest sites. Resource-scarce hermitages depended on charisma-driven recruitment and caravans that ferried supplies and news. Here, mobility and redundancy were paramount: when one supply line failed, teachers leveraged reputation to open new circuits. Regulatory clarity (boundaries, ordination competence) mattered because informal ties could drift without periodic formal acts. Disturbances, banditry, and drought forced creative re-routing: temporary moves to towns during *vassa*, new donor appeals, or merger with a larger monastery's provisioning network.

Comparative lens across cases. Each micro-ecology can be read through the same template actors, flows, rules, disturbances, outcomes. Urban hubs excel in scale and diversity; women's circuits excel in continuity and care; frontier sites excel in flexibility and focus. Together, they demonstrate that resilience is not a single trait, but a composite of redundancy,

modularity, and credible leadership, distributed differently across habitats and assemblies.

VIII. ECONOMY OF MERIT AND MATERIAL EXCHANGE

Dāna is often portrayed as a form of unilateral generosity. Re-read as a relational exchange, it becomes the system's circulatory engine. Household resources rice, robes, lamps, medicines, timber, land move toward monasteries; instruction, ritual competence, and counsel flow outward; merit and reputation circulate through both, binding parties over time. This is not a market with prices, but neither is it pure altruism. Gifts are performative: they publicly index values, establish exemplars, and invite imitation. Reputation accrues to donors who reliably meet communal needs; to monastics who teach clearly, live simply, and steward resources transparently.

Merit accounting, whether explicit or tacit, organises expectations. Named festivals, commemorative gifts, and visible infrastructures make benefits legible, such as, lighted halls, clean bathing spaces, and cared-for patients,s which in turn justify further giving. The social production of trust lowers the "transaction costs" of generosity: donors know where goods go, monastics know when to ask, and auditors whether formal or informal monitor their use. Over time, steady exchanges foster strong ties that withstand short-term shocks.

Season and agrarian rhythm pattern the economy. Harvest times loosen purse strings; lean seasons demand rationing and careful scheduling of alms rounds. *Vassa* concentrates both teaching and provisioning, allowing communities to reset norms and resolve conflicts. Risk diversification is a hallmark of mature ecologies: monasteries cultivate multiple patron blocs; donors support several monastic sites and both male and female communities; households distribute gifts across needs (food, medicine, textiles), reducing exposure to any single failure.

Reciprocity extends beyond materiality. Teaching that reduces fear, blame, and confusion in households around illness, death, and conflict—leads to stability, volunteer labour, and advocacy. In this sense, merit is not an abstract currency but a social medium that funds resilience: it motivates care that keeps infrastructures running, reputations intact, and channels open when scarcity or strife arrives.

IX. NORMS, LAW, AND GOVERNANCE

The Vinaya is the ecosystem's regulatory apparatus: it defines admissible flows, sanctions leaks, and choreographs collective action. Rules concerning robe-making, food storage, medicine, property, and travel manage material risk; procedures for confession, probation, and reinstatement manage moral hazard; protocols for ordination and boundary marking (*sīmā*) manage institutional growth and coherence.

Conflict resolution. Disputes over property, speech, or doctrine are addressed through graded, publicly legible processes. *Saṅghakamma* actions, collective decisions executed under quorum with prescribed formulas, generate legitimacy by making governance visible and repeatable. This formalism keeps everyday friction from metastasizing into factional schism, especially in dense urban monasteries where reputational stakes are high.

Ordination pipelines. Entry, training, and certification reproduce the system's core competencies. The parallel existence of bhikkhu and bhikkhunī lines increases redundancy but requires coordination to maintain standards and lineage integrity. Screening candidates, mentoring novices, and evaluating teachers ensure that the teaching merit loop remains credible—property and stewardship. Vinaya guidance on communal assets, steward roles, and donor intent helps deter capture by charismatic individuals and guards against a drift toward household-style ownership. Clear categories of what is communal, what is stewarded, and what may be consumed stabilize expectations for donors and monastics alike, reducing the ambiguity that invites conflict.

Doctrinal coherence across nodes. Mobility and modularity threaten uniformity; governance counters with itinerant oversight, shared liturgies, and standardized adjudication. Teachers carry procedures as much as sermons, ensuring that dispersed nodes can execute identical acts under different skies. In crises such as famine, disease, or political interference, governance provides a script for triage: prioritize the sick, reallocate resources, suspend travel, and convene assemblies to de-escalate blame. Governance, then, is not a separate sphere; it is the grammar of

interdependence. By shaping who may do what, when, and with whose authorization, Vinaya practices align local incentives with systemic resilience, enabling adaptation without dissolving identity.

X. GENDERED DYNAMICS & POWER

Gender in early Buddhist communities is neither a mere constraint nor a simple opening; it is a set of structured possibilities through which labor, authority, and care are distributed. Formal constraints rules governing ordination, training, travel, and adjudication—bounded bhikkhunīs' and upāsikās' movement and institutional leverage. Yet, within those bounds, women organized parallel channels of agency that proved indispensable to the system's stability. As bhikkhunīs, women established educational networks for novices and laywomen, offered counsel on domestic matters, and exemplified disciplined renunciation. Their visibility normalized women's religious ambitions, creating downstream effects on household decisions about resource allocation and children's education. As upāsikās, women commanded household budgets, coordinated festivals, and stewarded endowments. Their kinship ties and neighbourhood presence made them credible mediators in disputes and effective mobilizers during crises (illness, famine, funerals). The reputational capital of exemplar donors is often remembered by name and circulated as a persuasive technology, inspiring imitation and securing continuity across generations.

Power here is relational, not only positional. Women's brokerage between market and monastery, court and household routed resources where official channels were slow or blocked. Their labour in care and provisioning, often undervalued in formal narratives, underpinned the daily viability of monastic practice. Conversely, when women's participation contracted due to political hostility, resource scarcity, or doctrinal retrenchment the system's redundancy declined: fewer parallel networks, thinner lay–monastic ties, and heightened vulnerability to shocks.

Comparison with other Śramaṇa movements and Brahmanical patronage suggests both parallels and divergences. Many traditions depended on elite women for funding and legitimacy; fewer institutionalized women's renunciant communities with comparable procedural detail. Recognising

gendered agency does not romanticise constraint; it clarifies how, within limits, women's roles stabilised feedback loops turning generosity into durable infrastructures and doctrine into everyday guidance thereby enhancing the ecosystem's resilience.

XI. DISTURBANCES, ADAPTATION, AND RESILIENCE

No community is tested in fair weather. Disturbances, environmental, political, epidemiological, and doctrinal, function as stress tests that reveal hidden dependencies and adaptive capacities.

Environmental shocks. Crop failures and drought tighten alms circuits. In response, monasteries shorten travel, consolidate stores, and prioritize the care of the sick. Lay patrons diversify support, switching from capital projects to staples and medicines. Women's networks often become first responders, organizing kitchens, stitching robes, and coordinating caregiving, thus preserving the teaching schedule that keeps morale and merit circulating. Disease. Epidemics disrupt co-residence and preaching. Rules for quarantine-like separation, care of the ill, and funeral rites become salient. Reputation of a monastery's prudence and compassion either attracts aid or erodes trust. Communities with redundant caregivers and clear procedures rebound faster.

Political realignments. Royal favour can flip with succession, faction, or policy. Monasteries reduce exposure by maintaining multiple patron blocs and by cultivating apolitical reputations. Mobility enables teachers to navigate unfriendly regimes in peripheral sites, preserving lineages until conditions improve. Doctrinal conflict and schism. Disagreement over rules or teachings threatens identity. Formal processes—such as public hearings, appeals to precedent, and collective acts aim to absorb disagreement without rupture. When a schism occurs, modularity limits damage: distinct nodes continue to function, often competing for lay trust. Over time, reputational markets punish opportunism and reward transparent governance.

Adaptive repertoire. The system's core adaptations include: (1) Redundancy parallel networks (notably women's) and multiple donors; (2) Modularity semi-autonomous monasteries that localize failure; (3) Mobility itinerancy that re-routes teaching and provisioning; (4) Procedural memory codified acts

that can be executed under stress; (5) Moral suasion—exemplar behavior that catalyzes aid without coercion. Resilience is not invulnerability; it is the capacity to suffer disturbance without losing identity or basic function. The Fourfold Assembly's distributed design reciprocity across assemblies, shared but local governance, and overlapping care networks made that capacity more than an accident: it was a cultivated skill.

XII. VISUAL/ANALYTIC MODELS (FIGURES YOU CAN INCLUDE)

Network map (bipartite/multiplex). Represent the four assemblies as node classes; overlay edges for material support, instruction, co-residence, and ritual cooperation. Weight edges by frequency or intensity (e.g., festival participation, endowment size). Centrality metrics (degree, betweenness) identify hubs (keystone donors, master teachers) and brokers (upāsikās mediating households to monasteries). Community detection may reveal clusters—urban hubs, forest rings, women's circuits—whose boundaries align with known habitats.

Sankey diagram (flow). Visualize *dāna* streams from lay actors into monastic functions (food, robes, construction, medicine) and onward into outputs (teaching hours, ordinations, pastoral care). A secondary band tracks symbolic returns (merit acknowledgments, reputational mentions) to donors, making visible the reciprocal economy that textual narratives often dramatize.Timeline (institutional consolidation). Mark the emergence of key monastic centers, ordination events, codification moments, and major disturbances (famines, political shifts). Layer in periods of intensified women's patronage or expansion/contraction of bhikkhunī networks. This temporal spine helps correlate shocks with institutional innovations.

Tabular model (roles and responsibilities). A matrix listing assemblies against functional domains, provisioning, teaching, governance, and care, with example texts and known actors. Such a table clarifies complementarity and potential bottlenecks (e.g., if women's networks thin, care and provisioning scores dip, threatening teaching cadence). Methodological note. Each figure should be reproducible from a structured dataset with fields for actors, sites, events, and flows. Ambiguity must be encoded (confidence scores, date ranges) to avoid spurious precision. Visuals are not decorations; they are arguments that expose hypotheses to critique. By aligning metaphors (ecosystem) with metrics (centrality, redundancy, throughput), the figures invite both humanistic interpretation and computational refinement.

XIII. COMPARATIVE/ECHOES

Jain caturvidha-saṅgha. The Jain fourfold community (monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen) offers a near-structural cousin. Shared features include valorization of lay discipline, strong women's renunciant presence, and reliance on merchant patronage. Yet the ecology differs: Jain ascetic mobility patterns, dietary strictness, and city-centred mercantile ties generate distinct risk profiles and reputational economies. Comparing the two clarifies which features are generic to urban South Asian religiosity and which are specific to Buddhist pedagogical and Vinaya regimes.
Brahmanical patronage. Brahmanical networks exhibit powerful court connections, temple-centred land management, and hereditary custodianship. The flow regime balances sacrificial competence and scriptural teaching with ritual services for kings and households. Here, resilience leans on lineage continuity and land control, whereas Buddhist ecologies lean more on modular monasteries and itinerant teaching. The contrast sharpens our sense of how different regulatory grammars (Smṛti versus Vinaya) and different "habitats" (court-temple versus vihāra–market–forest) shape redundancy and adaptation.
Later echoes (Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia). Medieval and early modern formations show the portability of the Buddhist ecosystem: women's endowments, lay guild patronage, and monastic scholastic hubs recur in new geographies. Periods of contraction (war, plague, colonial disruption) are met with the familiar repertoire of mobility, donor re-networking, and reconstruction around charismatic teachers. These echoes do not prove unbroken continuity; they illustrate how a social-ecological design, distributed reciprocity governed by portable procedures, reappears because it solves recurrent problems.
Comparative payoff. The ecosystem lens travels well because it is agnostic about doctrine and attentive to flows, roles, and rules. Differences across traditions help diagnose which design features most enhance

resilience (e.g., robust women's networks, diversified patronage, transparent governance). Similarities suggest convergent solutions to the shared challenges of sustaining renunciant communities in complex economies.

XIV. DISCUSSION

What does the ecosystem model explain that institutional lists miss? First, causality: it links generosity, teaching, and regulation through feedback loops that account for stability and failure. Second, heterogeneity: it accommodates multiple habitats and role-specializations without collapsing them into a single "monastic" story. Third, gendered agency: by tracking who moves which resources where, the model makes women's contributions visible as structural rather than anecdotal. Fourth, disturbance response: resilience emerges as a property of design (redundancy, modularity, mobility), not as an accidental outcome of saintly endurance.

There are trade-offs. Ecological metaphors can over-smooth contingency or smuggle in biological determinism. To guard against anachronism, the article treats metaphors as testable heuristics: they must illuminate textual patterns and survive counterexamples. Another risk is metric seduction: network graphs can suggest greater precision than the sources' resolution allows. The antidote is to encode uncertainty, cross-check narratives, and keep qualitative judgment in the loop.

Methodologically, the model invites new questions. If upāsikā networks are critical, how do we identify them when texts name women only by their titles? If redundancy predicts resilience, can we approximate it by counting the number of distinct donor families per monastery or the number of different teaching circuits per season? If mobility buffers shock, what language in the sources flags itinerancy versus settlement? Such questions encourage collaboration across philology, history, and data science.

Finally, there are implications for interpreting authority, charisma, and everyday religion. Authority looks less like solitary mastery and more like reliable participation in shared procedures. Charisma is not only magnetic speech; it is logistical competence under stress. Every day religion emerges as the principal arena of resilience: kitchens, storerooms, sewing circles, and sickrooms where flows are braided and buffered. In short, the ecosystem model does not replace doctrinal narratives; it furnishes the social mechanics that make those narratives livable.

XV. CONCLUSION

Reimagining the *catuparisā* as a social ecosystem reframes the early Buddhist community from a static tableau to a kinetic network of interdependent roles, habitats, flows, and rules. The central claim that lay–monastic reciprocity and women's participation were core stabilisers rests on reading canonical prescriptions in conjunction with narrative practice, and on modelling how generosity, teaching, legitimacy, and regulation reinforce one another. When shocks strike famine, disease, political turn, doctrinal dispute the system's resilience tracks design features: redundancy (especially via women's networks and diversified patronage), modularity (semi-autonomous monasteries), mobility (itinerant teaching), and procedural memory (Vinaya governance).

The contribution is threefold. Conceptually, an ecosystem lens provides a portable grammar niches, feedback, resilience that organises dispersed evidence without flattening differences. Substantively, it renders visible the infrastructural and gendered labor that keeps doctrine in motion: refectories and robes, schedules and sickrooms, reputations and rules. Methodologically, it proposes a data schema (events–actors–sites–flows) and visual models (network, Sankey, timeline, tables) that future researchers can populate, challenge, and refine.

This is a beginning, not a capstone. Future work might involve assembling a prosopography of named patrons and teachers to quantify brokerage, mapping sites and routes with GIS to correlate habitat with resilience, comparing Pāli materials with Āgamas to test portability, and extending the analysis to later periods and regions to track echoes, ruptures, and reinventions. None of this is a mere academic exercise. By clarifying how communities endure through reciprocity governed by transparent procedures and stabilized by often-unseen women's labour, the model offers more than a historical account; it illuminates durable patterns of social care that remain instructive wherever everyday infrastructures must sustain ideals.

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