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Life of a Contemporary Therāvāda Bhikkhuni Order in Sri-lankā and India: An Overview

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Abstract:

This academic article presents a comprehensive study on the daily life, practices, and challenges faced by Bhikkhunis in a contemporary Sri Lankan monastery. As an exploration of the lived experiences within a Bhikkhuni community, the study sheds light on the intricacies of monastic life, offering valuable insights into the cultural, social, and institutional contexts that shape the existence of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka. Recently few Indian women also became a part of a contemporary Bhikkhuni Order, they are often seen in Indian Buddhist Community. Well accepted by Sri-lankā and India but not accepted by other Therāvāda Buddhist Countries like Myanmar and Thailand.

Introduction:

Sri Lanka, with its rich Buddhist heritage, has been a cradle of Theravada Buddhism for centuries. Despite historical challenges, the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka has experienced a revival in recent times supported by Indian Buddhist Community. This case study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the life of Bhikkhunis in a contemporary Sri Lankan monastery, delving into their daily routines, spiritual practices, and the unique challenges they encounter.

Background:

Historically, the Bhikkhuni Sangha faced obstacles in Sri Lanka, and the lineage was thought to be extinct. Theravāda monks order from Myanmar and Thailand strongly do not accept contemporary Bhikkhuni order as the lineage was already broken. The Bhikkhuni Sangha, an order of nuns in Theravāda Buddhism, has faced significant resistance in Myanmar and Thailand due to historical challenges and a perceived break in lineage. Traditionalists argue that the Sangha ceased to exist due to a lack of ordained nuns and teachers, disrupting the direct transmission of Bhikkhuni ordination. The Vinaya Pitaka, the monastic code of discipline, is interpreted conservatively in these regions, requiring a lineage traceable to the original ordination. Authenticity concerns and conservative societal norms also contribute to the reluctance to accept Bhikkhunis. Limited reforms and efforts have been made to revive the Sangha, but these efforts face resistance and institutional support. The complexities of reconciling historical traditions with contemporary aspirations for gender equity within Theravāda Buddhist monastic communities highlight the complexity of this issue. However, efforts towards revival have gained momentum in the past few decades. The study takes place in a monastery actively engaged in the Bhikkhuni revival movement, allowing for an exploration of the

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dynamics surrounding their lives.

Methodology:

This case study employs library-method approach, observations of daily rituals, and an examination of relevant monastic documents and related published research papers.

Revival Process of the Contemporary Therāvāda Bhikkhuni Order:

Bhikkhu Anālayo have discussed this issue in detail in his learned article he referred to (Kusum “Religious” 937-943) stating that

“Until recently, the only avenue for Sri Lankan women to become a nun was as a *dasasil mātā*. The *dasasil mātā* movement goes back to the beginnings of the 20th century when a Sri Lankan nun took the precepts in the Burmese *thila shin* tradition and brought this tradition to Sri Lanka. The dress of the *dasasila mātās* developed into its present form of wearing ochre robes that are alike to monastic robes in colour, but on closer inspection differ in as much as they are not made out of the patchwork style cloth worn by male novices and *bhikkhus*. The way *dasasila mātās* usually take the ten precepts differs from the way these are taken by laity, but also from the way these are taken by male novices”¹.

This tradition of female ordination as a *thila shin* started in Myanmar and which was never a full Bhikkhuni ordination. Until now all *thila shin* are not allowed to observe all ten precepts unless they are from rich family or they are highly educated. But in Sri-Lanka and India women who ordained as *dasasila mātā* claimed that they are fully ordained nun. They also observe all ten precepts.

Daily Life and Practices:

The daily lives of Therāvāda Bhikkhunis in a monastery are characterized by a blend of meditation, study, communal activities, rituals, and ceremonies. Meditation is the core practice, focusing on mindfulness, breath awareness, and loving-kindness. Education is highly valued in Therāvāda Buddhism, with Bhikkhunis dedicating significant time to studying Buddhist scriptures and philosophical texts. Community activities, such as cleaning and cooking, foster unity and cooperation. Rituals and ceremonies, such as *Pūjās* and *Upasatha* observances, reinforce Bhikkhunis' commitment to the

Buddhist path. The monastery provides a conducive environment for spiritual progress, emphasizing the pursuit of enlightenment. Community cohesion is also crucial, with regular meetings, discussions, and Dhamma talks contributing to the monastic community's cohesion. The interplay of individual and communal aspects within their daily lives reflects their profound commitment to the teachings of the Buddha and the pursuit of *Nibbāna*.

Challenges Faced by Bhikkhunis:

A significant portion of the case study is dedicated to identifying and analysing the challenges faced by Bhikkhunis in the Sri Lankan context. Contemporary Bhikkhunis face numerous challenges in their pursuit of enlightenment and monastic life. These include historical disruptions, limited institutional support, gender inequality, access to education and resources, economic sustainability, interactions within monastic communities, and social stigma and criticism. Historical disruptions in Therāvāda countries, such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, have led to debates about the authenticity of the ordination process. Limited institutional support within established monastic structures also hinders their access to essential resources, education, and spiritual leadership opportunities. Gender inequality and societal norms also impact Bhikkhunis' access to education and resources, leading to a knowledge gap and hindering their ability to engage in scholarly pursuits. Economic sustainability is a significant challenge for Bhikkhunis, especially in regions with limited resources. Interactions within monastic communities also present challenges, such as resistance or exclusion from certain rituals. Social stigma and criticism also contribute to the socio-cultural environment, requiring collective efforts within the global Buddhist community to promote inclusivity and support for Bhikkhuni Sanghas.

Cultural and Social Context:

The case study places a particular emphasis on the cultural and social contexts that influence the lives of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka. The cultural and social context in Sri Lanka significantly influences the lives of Bhikkhunis, affecting their acceptance and integration within society and the monastic community. Traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained, often associated with domestic roles and caregiving. Bhikkhunis, who choose a monastic path traditionally associated with male monks,

challenge these norms, leading to resistance and scepticism. The monastic community faces challenges, as traditionalist views may hinder the full integration of Bhikkhunis into monastic structures. Despite these challenges, the cultural context is not static. Evolving societal dynamics, progressive voices advocating for gender equality, and a growing awareness of diverse perspectives within Buddhism contribute to changing attitudes. The evolving role of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka reflects a complex interplay between tradition and progress, with cultural context playing a crucial determinant of their lived experiences.

Conclusion:

This study explores the lives of Bhikkhunis in a Sri Lankan monastery, focusing on their daily practices, challenges, and the cultural and social landscape. The study highlights the dedication of Bhikkhunis to spiritual pursuits, including meditation, study, communal activities, and rituals, which foster unity and cohesion within the monastic community. The resilience and adaptability of Bhikkhunis in their pursuit of the Dhamma are highlighted. The study also highlights the challenges faced by Bhikkhunis, such as historical disruptions, limited institutional support, and cultural perceptions of gender roles. Despite these challenges, the research identifies signs of change, with progressive voices and evolving societal dynamics contributing to a more inclusive vision of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. The implications of this study extend beyond Sri Lanka, offering valuable insights for future initiatives aimed at supporting and empowering Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka and the global context.

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