

Critics on Feminist Influence for the New *Bhikkhunī* Revival Debate in Sri Lanka: Ethnographical Inquiry

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Abstract

Feminist academia and activists are the pioneers of revival of *bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka. These International and local proponents are being criticized for their very attempt. Thus, the main objective of this study is to recognize *dasasilmātās*' responses towards this intermediation of feminist activism, as *dasasilmātās* are the oldest alternative form of female renunciant group, who highly affected by the new status of *bhikkhunī*-hood. This ethnographical study has conducted using observation and interview methods, employing ten executive members of *Silmata Jathika Mandalaya* (SMJMEC), five *dasasilmātās* in western province, four *bhikkhunīs* and one government officer under purposive sampling method. According to ethnographical findings, most of *dasasilmātās* do not accept International *bhikkhunī* higher ordination ceremonies and contribution made to them by local and international feminist (female) activists. But, they do not mention about *bhikkhu* activists as feminist activists. However while criticizing, they highlight the Western feminist influence. Therefore, they hardly identify the high profile of Asian feminist involvement in revival of *bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka. For instances, in reality there were multiple transnational *bhikkhunī* advocacy projects. *Dasasilmātās* not only equates feminism with the West, but also with elite class status. Further, inner disagreements or fractions among local feminists and activists in the early period of the *bhikkhunī* revival movement are important concerns.

Keywords: *Feminist, Revival, Higher Ordination, Transnational, elite*

Introduction

The *bhikkhunī* order which declined from around the 11th century in Sri Lanka, has emphasized the necessity of four fold Buddhist community, including *bhikkhu*, *bhikkhunī*, *upāsaka* and *upāsikā* in Theravāda tradition. The disappearance of *bhikkhunī*-hood caused difficulties for Buddhist women to renunciate their lay life within the institutionalized religious sphere as it is solely controlled by the patriarchal hierarchies. According to feminist scholars, institutional patriarchal religious hierarchies needed to keep religious women

under a subjugated and submissive framework, where women were restricted for achieving their spiritual liberation in institutionalized manner. Therewith, the conservatives or opponents considered the very attempt of reestablishment of *bhikkhunī* higher ordination (*upasampadā*) as a violation of law of Buddha or defilement of pure Buddhism. Nevertheless, the new *bhikkhunī* movement, empowered by its transnational Buddhist feminist networks could not be easily brought to an end by those supreme authorities (Tomalin 2013: 108). These Buddhist feminist movements, which were sponsored by feminist scholarship and community is regarded as an inevitable or unstoppable movement that spread into areas even where there was no *bhikkhunī* order previously (De Silva 2009: 25).

Thus, the underlying principles of the attempt of resurgence of *bhikkhunī* higher ordination again become problematic when it comes to view that is more critical. The attempt of resurgence of *bhikkhunī*-hood is not just mere action, but has underlying principles of acquiring liberal notion of equality and freedom. This has made the *bhikkhunī*-hood, a transnational or a global project for constructing the ideal of the higher ordained *bhikkhunī*. Creating such a discursive space for female renunciants is in fact a product of the transnational project. “The ideal of higher ordained nun... represents a homogeneous ideal that evokes the egalitarian vision of a sisterhood among Buddhist nuns across the globe” (Salgado 2013: 211-213). Chandra T. Mohanty comments on the characterization of women’s condition as globally homogeneous. She recognizes them as an assumption of “women as a unified group on the basis of secondary Sociological universals. What binds women together is an ahistorical notion of the sameness of their oppression and, consequently, the sameness of their struggles” (1991, 51-80). If we understand the global project of *bhikkhunī* revival in terms of Mohanty’s argument, the dominant global ideal of *bhikkhunī*-hood has evaded the differences among and within female renunciants. In that sense, it has forced to accept the *bhikkhunī* deal. In turn, it not only becomes a problem of reclaiming the women’s religious rights, but an increasing tension and controversy between the local and the transnational conceptions of female renunciation. As Borchert (2007) argues, “contemporary Buddhism is marked by a tension between the transnational and the national” (2007, 529).

Therefore, imposing an external influence on different cultural setting is not a simple phenomenon; in fact, there will be counter responses to above local and transnational forces. Thus, it is important to look into the lived lives of the female renunciants who might be ignores such influences or what these alternative groups of non-*bhikkhunīs* think about the higher ordination opportunities that are offered to them. Specifically, *dasasilmātās* as an alternative form of female renunciants do not accept what they are granted. Instead, resistances, striking against could be visible. Therefore, this essay

will focus on *dasasilmātās* responses to the feminist involvement, as they are pioneers who brought the *bhikkhunī* order to Sri Lanka. Although, responses of *dasasilmātās* to the new *bhikkhunī* order carried a huge debate, here I will bring only the critics on feminist influence (female) and internal disagreements within the proponents of the *bhikkhunī* movement.

Research Methodology

This ethnographic study was carried out for the very purpose of documenting the lived lives of Sri Lankan Buddhist female renunciants. As a qualitative study, ethnography is the most appropriate research tool for this study, as it involves documenting beliefs of female renunciants and practices from their own perspective. According to Fetterman (2010) “ethnography is about telling a credible, rigorous, and authentic story. Ethnography gives voice to people in their own local context, typically relying on verbatim quotations and a ‘thick’ description of events” (2010: 1). This thick description of human experiences comes under the phenomenological methodological tradition, which allows for an interpretive understanding of the social world. Thus, it was expected to interpret the renunciants responses in order to gain the constant meaning from the dialog with them.

Observation is a main tool in an ethnographer’s toolbox. Mostly, ethnographers use different forms of participant observation. “Participant and nonparticipant observation are at two ends of a continuum, and most ethnographers engage in a mix of participant and nonparticipant observation, depending upon the context and circumstances” (Fetterman 2010: 21). Therefore, the observation method that I have used in the present study is mixed of participant and non-participant observation method. In-depth interview was also part of this ethnographic fieldwork. Thus, these two methods were important as they could use in documenting views of female renunciants in broader way. All the respondents were given assumed names (allonym) in the study.

Brief History of New Bhikkhunī Revival Movement in Sri Lanka

Revival of *bhikkhunī* Order has been regarded as one of the most controversial issues within the mainstream Buddhism recently. Due to the overwhelming attention that has been paid to the above issue academically and socially it has turned into complex level. However, the recent history of *bhikkhunī* is unfolding. It is sometimes assumed that, the efforts in restoring the *bhikkhunī* order arise only under the influence of the Western Buddhist feminist movement around 1980s (Barnes 1994: 144; Boucher 1988: 91-92). Nevertheless, arguments regarding reestablishment of the *bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka came into sight much earlier. Anagarika Dharmapala advocated restoration of the order in 1890s. He encouraged activities of female renunciants and wrote that, they

were necessary for the welfare of Buddhism (Bartholomeusz, 1944: 44-48). From the 1930s, the topic was debated in the newspapers and among *bhikkus* and scholars in Sri Lanka.

Sakyadhita (daughters of the Buddha), an international Buddhist women's association, who work for achieve Buddhist women's rights, has been played a significant role in this regard. One of the stated objectives of Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women was "to assist women who wish to obtain ordination and work toward establishing full ordination for Buddhist women in countries where it is not currently available," where it does not currently exist (Mrozik 2009: 360). When it comes to the reestablishment of the *bhikkhuni* order in Sri Lanka noticeable efforts were seen in late 1990's. But, in 1988, the first group of five Sri Lankan *dasasilmātās* (including Ayya Khema) travelled to Los Angeles to receive higher ordination at Hsi Lai Monastery from Taiwanese *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* (Foguangshan) (<http://www.bhikkhuni.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/International-Bhikkhuni-Day-2011.pdf>). Upon their return to Sri Lanka, however, they did not receive public recognition as *bhikkhunīs*. As a result, they have continued to live as *dasasilmātās* as they did before.

In 1996 ten Sri Lankan *dasasilmātās* travelled to Sarnath, India to participate in the dual higher ordination led by the Sri Lankan Ven. Mapalagama Wipulasara together with the Sri Lankan *bhikkhu sangha* and the Korean *bhikkhunī sangha*, led by the President of the Council of Korean *bhikkhunīs*, Kwang Woo Sunim. The first President of Sakyadhita in Sri Lanka, Kusuma Devendra, decided to become a renunciant and was fully ordained as one of the first *bhikkhunīs*. In 1998, twenty Sri Lankan *dasasilmātās* received *bhikkhunī* precepts at an International Higher Ordination arranged by Master Hsing Yun and Foguangshan at Bodhgaya in India together with 132 women from 22 countries (De Silva 2004: 128-129).

It would be a mistake to think that Sakyadhita is the only organization that sponsors the *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka. International ordination ceremonies were criticized as they were influenced by the Mahāyāna Tradition. A group of people who were having these kinds of intentions laid by Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala, the abbot of the Golden temple in Dambulla, engaged in promoting the reestablishment movement. The Sri Lanka 'Bhikkhunī Re-awaking Organization' (*bhikkhunī Sāsana abhiviruddhi Samvidhanaya*) with, Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala Thera as its president, sent about four hundred letters to *dasasilmātā* in Sri Lanka describing plans for a *bhikkhunī* ordination, and invitations to apply for it (De Silva 2009: 31). Out of the two hundred applicants, a committee including four nuns, one monk, and a lay follower selected eighty *dasasilmātā*. "On 12 July, 1997, twenty-six of the selected women were ordained as novices by Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala. They were

educated for nine months in a remote meditation center in Kalundewa near Dambulla” (De Silva 2009: 31). Nevertheless, this project was given up when there was an invitation from the Foguangshan in Taiwan arrived to participate in the International full Ordination program in Bodhgaya.

However, in 1998, further Sri Lankan *dasasilmātās* received the dual higher ordination in their own country from Sri Lankan *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs*. On March 14, soon after the *bhikkhunīs* returned from Bodhgaya, Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala organized and administered ordination to 22 *dasasilmātās* that had completed their training at his center. With the assistance of the *bhikkhunīs* that had been ordained in Bodhgaya, five senior monks conducted a *bhikkhunīs* ordination at the Rangiri Dambulla Monastery in the same hall where monks ordinarily receive their ordination (De Silva 2004: 129). This *bhikkhunī* ordination was the first to be held on Sri Lanka over 1000 years. Further groups of *dasasilmātās* are currently being trained to receive the higher ordination in Sri Lanka. Beside Dambulla there are three other training centers are at Newgala (Kegalle), Millaniya (Horana-Kalutara) and Eheliyagoda. Although, these *bhikkhunīs* now perform certain religious and ecclesiastical activities on an equal footing with the monks, and thus enjoy better religious and social status – nevertheless they are still waiting to be officially recognized as part of the Buddhist *sangha* in Sri Lanka.

Criticism for Feminist Influence

“Feminist influence” is a buzzword used in related to the *bhikkhunī* revival debate equivocally. Therefore, as Mrozik (2009) has pointed out, concepts such as gender equality, rights, and feminism are frequently characterized by both supporters of and opponents of *bhikkhunī* ordination as Western secular concern alien to Asian Buddhist religious communities (See more in Mrozik 2009). Therefore, it should be very careful while raising the arguments about the feminist influence over the *bhikkhunī* debate, whether the perceived arguments are going to be depicted in famous stereotypes as feminism is ‘Western’ or the reality of multiple transnational *bhikkhunī* advocacy projects.

Newly established *bhikkhunī* revival movement was highly criticized by *dasasilmātās* as a whole. Some *dasasilmātās* even rejected the presence of *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka. According to them, even addressing them as *bhikkhunī* is similar to giving sanction over them. The first International *bhikkhunī* higher ordination ceremony (in 1996) was heavily criticized when compared to the other ordination ceremonies. Every aspect of it such as the background, sponsors, organizers, the international participants and the ordination proceedings were subjected to criticism by the *dasasilmātās*.

However, I would like to start the discussion of feminist influence with the views of Deputy Commissioner of the Department of Buddhist Affairs as his views reflects the government, *mahānāyaka sangha* and the SMJM. As one could expect, he criticized the involvement of feminism in the matters of *bhikkhunī*. He identified the intermediation of feminists as:

It is just like waves, which derive time to time and decline in the world. There are so many movements likewise. If there is no donation, gradually they will end up. Therefore, there is no need to worry about them (Field data, 2011-12).

Although, he tried to blurb the movement as a temporary awakening, this is clearly refused by the scholars, *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* and lay supporters who think the movement as an unstoppable one (De Silva 2009; Mrozić 2009). Even this was echoed by the *bhikkhunī* respondents. For instance, Subodha *bhikkhunī* who was a former *dasasilmātā* said that, “we never turn back, as we are the daughters of Buddha. It is our right to become *bhikkhunīs* (Field data, 2011-12).” Seemingly, Subodha *bhikkhunī* who is inspired by feminist ideas is not going to recede on any matter. However, deputy commissioner protested against considering the religious rights as women’s rights. According to him, feminists have misinterpreted the *bhikkhunī* ordination as a women’s right. He interrogated about how anyone can change the traditional religious matters for any reason. Accordingly, there is an accepted method to do it. Thus, it would be a violation of established rules. Therefore, “if someone considers *bhikkhunī* ordination as a women’s right, it is a problem of his or her aim (Field data, 2011-12).” When this was asked from the *bhikkhunī* respondents, Vajira *bhikkhunī* pointed out that, “there is no legal recognition for *bhikkhunī*-hood that is why we have to struggle over the *bhikkhunī* ordination. If it is fully sanctioned no one need to worry (Field data, 2011-12).” The statement echoes that, *bhikkhunī* higher ordination has become an acquiring of women right due to the lack of recognition. The necessity of higher ordination has arose within a context of deprivation as there had been many prior attempts to resurgence of *bhikkhunī* order in some of the Theravāda traditions, but those attempts were relinquished. These abandoned attempts have been given a new face, strengthened up and empowered by putting forward feminist ideals such as gender equity, rights etc. Therefore, *bhikkhunīs* are emphasizing that, feminist influence over the *bhikkhunī* matter is not something spontaneous, rather pervasive due to the lack of concerns over the issues of Buddhist renunciants in general and *bhikkhunīs* in particular by the pertinent authorities. Vajira *bhikkhunī* added that,

This is not something about women’s right, but we asked for our monastic rights. We are not just laywomen, but a part of the monastic community. Why can’t we have our monastic rights? (Field data, 2011-12)

On the one hand, this demonstrates that once a woman gets ordained, she no longer considers femininity (Salgado 2013: 6-7). Likewise, when a man renunciate his lay life, no longer his masculinity or men's rights going to be considered. Because his rights are going to be identified under the monastic rights. But, for female renunciants it does not work so. Their rights for monasticism always recognized as women's right or in laywomen's position. This lack of recognition is a result of the ambiguous position of Buddhist female renunciation in the society. Therefore, people who work for female monastic rights often are being labeled and stigmatized under the group of women's right. On the other hand, Vajira *bhikkhunī* might reluctant to mention *bhikkhunī*-hood as a women's right, after having knowledge and experience on possible oppositions can be aroused. Therefore, she might tactfully avoid in saying so. However, the way the Vajira *bhikkhunī* claimed for her monastic rights undoubtedly challenges the conservative view. In the light of these views, although it seems that the Deputy Commissioner is concerned about the protection of the *sāsanaya*, his voice reflects the patriarchal values which expect to keep Buddhist female renunciants under the control of institutionalized monasticism. However, *bhikkhunīs* seem to be well aware of these counter views.

Further, *dasasilmātās* especially the SMJM executive committee members demonstrate the same point of view as the government officer. Padma *dasasilmātā* (SMJMEC) added her views in this regard,

Sāsanaya is like an ocean. Rubbish comes to ocean from everywhere. But it does not remain and cleanse itself. Do not worry about those rubbish waves. They will cleanse up. The people who plug the sand soon will understand the reality... (Field data, 2011-12)

Although Padma *dasasilmātā* did not mention about the feminists directly, indirectly she included all the international and local activists who try to meet with their demands over the *bhikkhunī*-hood. She gibes the attempts and resembles it to a purposeless one. By doing so, she devalued the whole attempt, which she thinks that never will be a part of *sāsanaya* even in the future. On the one hand, this statement expresses the tension that she is to encounter as an alternative group of Buddhist renunciants. On the other hand, criticisms and condemnations are used as a means of labeling the *bhikkhunī* movement and its activists. By doing so, she just ignores the pressure upon them, which has become almost out of their control.

The above statement reveals the tension and the counter response that *dasasilmātās* bring forth against the *bhikkhunī* revival debate. Gothami *dasasilmātā* stated the underlying reasons, why *dasasilmātās* have to respond

in such a manner. She questions the intentions of the people who worked for revival of *bhikkhunī* order both locally and internationally.

We should be shame of ourselves for not being able to come to an agreement on *bhikkhunī* matter. There is nothing but our timidity. *Bhikkhus* allow them to do this and that. Then they scold others for no reason. These Westerners give us what they desire, in the manner they expect. They are absorbing the spirit from us, but bestow it back as their own belonging (Field data, 2011-12).

This graduate *dasasilmātā* who has experience both as a *bhikkhunī* and *dasasilmātā* perceive the issue in the light of alienation. Accordingly, as she has explained furthermore, Buddhism has spread into the ‘Western world’ from its ‘native lands.’ Now it is being reintroduced in new forms. Thus, feminist involvement is regarded as such a form, although she did not name it directly here. Undoubtedly, these new phenomena are bringing changes with many positive and negative impacts from time to time. The problem is the way it is carried-out or the underlying meaning. In her work, Cheng stressed about this.

... The implication hidden behind such arguments are that goes like this: not only should Asian Buddhists appreciate and even celebrate the changes brought by Western feminists, but also if Asian Buddhists do not change according to the suggestions made by Western feminists, Asian Buddhism will forever be patriarchal, unable to change and unworthy of practicing (<http://dharmafolk.org/2008/11/24/western-buddhist-feminist-oppressors/>).

Thus, there would be no change in these Asian lands unless Westerners bring in new transformations. For instance, Sandy Boucher has suggested that Western women transform Buddhism and make Buddhism a better and more humanitarian religion (1988: 148- 206). On the one hand, such claims marginalize the Asian people and their effort in changing the prevailing practices. Thus, the Westerners expect a mentality of dependence to maintain their superiority. As Cheng suggests Western women did not come along to transform Buddhism it is Buddhism that is always transforming (<http://dharmafolk.org/2008/11/24/western-buddhist-feminist-oppressors/>). Therefore, not all these Sri Lankan female renunciants are seeking salvation through the Western feminist involvement but they are rather willing to improve their own monastic status. However, the question is about the correct leadership and guidance. Here Gothami *dasasilmāta* not only blames the international parties, including feminist, but the pertinent authorities who are silent over the issue. The *bhikkhunī* issue was escalated to such a level due to the negligence of the pertinent authorities. But, here I would like to raise one more issue as I have mentioned in the very begging of argument under

the feminist influence, Gothami *dasasilmāta* has resemble all the attempts of reintroduction of *bhikkhunī*-hood under the broader category of 'Western Buddhism.' This explanation has an impact on efface or neglect the influence of the East Asian countries made over *bhikkhunī* debate.

Here, I would like to move the discussion further into *dasasilmātās* responses towards mediation of the local female feminist activists. Several influential female figures who have undertaken the task of bringing *bhikkhunī* order to Sri Lanka can be identified in this regard. They are *bhikkhunī* Kusuma, Ranjani De Silva and Hema Goonathilaka. Apart from *bhikkhunī* Kusuma, most of the *dasasilmātās* and even some of the executive committee members of SMJM are not well known other activists. However, some of the *dasasilmātās* have got to know about them, as they conduct some research on these *dasasilmātās*. For instance, one of the pioneering activists (not mention the name) has contacted Dhammadhira *dasasilmātā* (SMJMEC) over the phone once and she has thought that activists was from one of the women's organizations. In her words,

Those women organizations are not doing anything. She (not mention the name) phoned me once. Even she did not come to meet me. I told her that, although I did not have a degree, I have acquired knowledge through life experiences. They say that, they talk on behalf of us, but nothing happens. Can you see any improvement in the status of *dasasilmātā*? They just take information, but nothing going to be done. Everyone come and asks about our difficulties, but nothing changed. Those '*loku nōnala*' (elite women) get together and just talk nonsense. They do not understand anything, because they just think of us staying inside the cold rooms (Field data, 2011-12).

Although this is not solely about that activist, she was part of the story. This *dasasilmātās*, who has faced numerous troubles with an unregistered *dasasilmātā* education center, seems to express her protest against those who have taken information from them but have done nothing in return. When Dhammadhira *dasasilmātā* was contacted for present research, she refused at once, saying she does not want to talk with one who represents a women's organization. She was frustrated on such organizations. Her concern is that although there is numerous government and non-government organizations working on women's rights the burning issues of Buddhist renunciants have not been addressed by any party. When she was asked about the feminist involvement in the *bhikkhunī* issue, she replied saying that,

They have created all these endless troubles. I know about some of my *bhikkhunī* friends who are worried about recognition of government and *mahānāyaka sangha*. I myself do not like to live in such a pressure.

That is why I am not going to become a *bhikkhunī*. Otherwise, I join the Order (Field data, 2011-12).

She seems to put all the blame on feminist activists. The reason behind such a response is the incapability of these feminist activists and other progressives to provide possible solutions to the present problems (Unsanctioned *bhikkhunī*-hood, identity card problem and lack of education facilities). According to her, although the *bhikkhunī* revival movement is initiated with the strong backing of feminist activists, when it comes to legal sanction *bhikkhunīs* have to bargain it with their own effort. Even the feminist activists were not in a position to change it. That is why Dhammadhira *dasasilmātā* mentioned this as an endless trouble. In other words, she hinted that, although there are many groups to support newly ordained *bhikkhunī* in the outset, when it comes to above said troubles, *bhikkhunīs* who have selected it as their new renunciation path have to face the problems alone. As Cook (2010) pointed out, some *mae chees* respond to local feminist activists in Thailand in a similar manner. For instance, one *mae chee* said that, “Chatsumarn is a women’s rights campaigner. If lay people didn’t pay attention to her, she would disrobe and find another way to campaign” (2010, 164). Although Cook has identified, “both the monasticization of *mae chee* and the *bhikkhuni* movement must be understood as part of a broader context in which women are increasingly being recognized in positions of privilege and respect” possible objections was alarmed against the feminist involvement in the debate by local alternative female renunciants (Cook 2010: 164).

However, if we turn back to the above discussion again, this not indicate that, feminist activists of the *bhikkhunī* issue did not do anything for claiming the legal sanction for the *bhikkhunī* issue, but they were not succeed in it, in before inflexible *sangha* authority. For instance, Hema Goonathilaka was the only female member of the Presidential Steering Committee of the 2600th Anniversary Commemoration of the Buddha’s Enlightenment. According to her, she was not in a position to speak on behalf of Buddhist renunciants in that committee, although she was willing to do something in the presence of the President (Academic workshop on the Sri Lankan *Bhikkhunī* Revival, 2012). She may have gained that position in the committee due to her contribution as a Buddhist scholar and activist. However, there was no any representation from the Buddhist female renunciants. Instead, they have appointed a laywoman (although she is a scholar), where it was to constitute a parliamentary bill on *dasasilmātās*. However, even Hema Goonathilake was speechless on the matters of *bhikkhunī*-hood in the committee. Although, parliamentary bill was formed instantaneously, still the Department of Buddhist affairs is revising it. Though it seems that *dasasilmātās* are silent over the omission of the bill, they censured their resistance over it. Dhammadhira *dasasilmātā* expresses

the passivity of her position in the SMJM, and how she has become a ‘yes-women.’

We heard about that parliament bill at the annual meeting of the SMJM. But, nothing was discussed further. They make them and implement them. Other than that, we can do nothing. We even are looking for this said bill... (Field data, 2011-12)

Dhammadhira *dasasilmātā* above explanation is a good example of the reflection of inner disagreements in SMJM and their relationship with government and *sangha* authorities. Although she had to be a *yes-women* in SMJM meetings, there are hidden counter responses.

However, here I would like to move back to the Dhammadhira *dasasilmātā* statements as it provided a prime example of how the *dasasilmātās* perceive these local feminist activists vice a versa to their expectations. I would argue that *dasasilmātās* not only equate feminism with the ‘West,’ but also with the elite class status. If we move to the initial stage of local feminist involvement in very brief, especially local feminist activists believe that, they made all the change come true regarding ambiguous status of female renunciants in Sri Lanka. As Ranjani De Silva once stated, “nuns in Sri Lanka were helpless and called as ‘*pottani genu*’ (women who carry their belongings baggage)... by seeing the nuns in all over the world participated for the conference, I wanted to change it” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_yeu6RrJ2g). Although she intended to change the ambiguous status of the Sri Lankan renunciants, her statement reflects the mindset over the *dasasilmātās* by a different higher social strata. Moreover, it reflects the general social image of *dasasilmātās* at that time. But, there were some prominent *dasasilmātās* and *dasasilmātās ārāma* at that time.

However, Ranjani De Silva joined with Ayya Khema and went to the Sakyadhita International conference on Buddhist nuns, Bodhgaya, in India in 1987. As she mentioned, by seeing the higher status of renunciants all over the world, she wanted to change the *dasasilmātās* submissive position. Hereafter, with a group of elite women she meddled with organizing huge projects such as organizing the Sakyadhita conference in Sri Lanka in 1993 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_yeu6RrJ2g). Meanwhile, though they did small-scale projects and programs to female renunciants, but it did not take the attention. Rather continuously implementing other types of projects which can be useful to *dasasilmātās* (promoting education, providing material stuff, practical knowledge of social services likewise counseling), they moved to *bhikkhunī* project. According to what I have observed, they did not create an appropriate prior background, which was a necessity to re-establishment to the *bhikkhunī* ordination. Although they made considerable changes in status of

dasasilmātās, it was not trickled down as their effort. For instance, *bhikkhunī* Kusuma was able to meet all the high ranked politicians and officers, including former President Jayawardena, Elina Jayawardena, Minister of Buddhist Affaires Mr. Hurulle, Commissioner of Buddhist affaire Eardly Ratwatte and made some new room to *dasasilmātās* as she stated (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_yu6RrJ2g). But, even this effort was not identified as her, but the government and *sangha* authority. In other words, she is not admired for these attempts by most of the *dasasilmātās*.

When they came to the decision of changing the submissive status empowered through *bhikkhunī* ideal, but they seems did not consider *dasasilmātās*' views. Although these, pioneering activists has been already conducted surveys on *dasasilmātās*, *vinaya* reflections etc. they paid less attention to the most affected group that would be influenced by. They did not answer well enough to the possible questions such as, are they willing to accept (*bhikkhunī*-hood), are they ready to accept it, what the possible reactions would be? That is why new *bhikkhunī* movement becomes problematic in terms of social movement. In this sense, it is a movement that reflected the expectations of a particular elite stratum at that time. Although they tried to tackle down with *bhikkhunī* issue as a *vinaya* problem, it was not worked well. *Vinaya* argument was not well accepted as a solution.

Moreover, disparities between these feminist activists and *dasasilmātās* were still visible. For instance, while these activists work for the female renunciants, they use to differentiate themselves from the rest of the *dasasilmātās*. They keep gap which impact on creating disparities between the *dasasilmātās* and the activists. Therefore, no surprise if *dasasilmātās* resist against the *bhikkhunī* activists who comes from different higher social strata. It is not only local feminist activists and *dasasilmātās* views were contradictory with each other, but I could find some inner disagreements over certain issues among the activists. It has badly harmed to the work that they has done on the revival of *bhikkhunī*-hood. Moreover, this has led to create inner fractions within the newly established *bhikkhunī* movement as the activists are working on their own agendas.

Conclusion

The new *bhikkhunī* revival has brought considerable attention to the contemporary female renunciants than ever before, due to the globalized social waves, such as the feminist movement since 1970s. With the influence of feminism, female renunciants in Theravāda tradition were able to create an institutionalized higher ordained space for themselves, which was prohibited or tabooed. Yet, conservative Theravāda tradition in many countries is not sensitive to the issue and reluctant to give legal sanction. *Bhikkhunī* revival

movement gained its impetus from some of the Sri Lankan leading *bhikkhus* and few women from the elite class background who were inspired by International Buddhist Women's Organizations. In this sense, there is an issue in considering the *bhikkhunī* resurgence as a social movement. The new *bhikkhunī* movement was severely criticized by *dasasilmātās*. Thus, one of the noticeable facts so far is the denunciation of the feminist influence on the *bhikkhunī* issue. The views demonstrated the assumption that advocates for *bhikkhunī* ordination are giving into the pressures of "Western" feminists. But, in reality there were multiple transnational *bhikkhunī* advocacy projects. *Dasasilmātās* not only equates feminism with the West, but also with elite class status. Therefore, they refuse to accept that local feminist activists have brought considerable changes to the present ambiguous status of female renunciation. Moreover, inner disagreements or factions in the early period of the *bhikkhunī* revival movement could be visible. Finally, *Dasasilmātā* do not accept whatever they have been granted, instead counter responses are visible. This indicates the present complex nature of contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism.

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