

EMPOWERED WOMEN IN DHARMA AND EMPOWERMENT OF DHARMA: REDEFINING THE ROLE OF DAS SILA MĀTAS IN SRI LANKAN BUDDHISM

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Introduction

Buddhism in Sri Lanka has certain distinctive features which remain unparalleled. It has been open to external creative influences as well as induced by the internal spirit of reformation. Buddhist world is deeply indebted to Sinhala Buddhists for formulating modernized concept of Buddhism which is relevant to the contemporary world, at the same time preserving the fundamentals of Theravāda tradition. Hence, enhancement of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is crucial for strengthening of the faith universally. Buddhist modernism, as preached by such legendaries as Anagārika Dharmapāla, lay great stress upon social orientation of the adherents and their commitment towards service of the mankind. The Das Sila Māta tradition of Sri Lankan Buddhism embraces this ideal, their growing numbers over the years and their social engagement at different levels indicates that it has immense potential to popularize Buddhism through its effective community service.

Material & Methodology

Women have enjoyed a special status in Buddhism and its teachings held a strong appeal for them as is evidenced in large numbers of votive records from many early sites of India. It is the first Asian religion to have allowed woman to enter the stage of homelessness and to have institutionalized it within five years of the inception of Sangha for the male ascetics. Outside of India, Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Sangha was the earliest one

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to have come into being in 3rd c. B.C. Unfortunately the tradition discontinued somewhere in the middle. With the Buddhist reformation in nineteenth and early twentieth century, voices were raised for the revival of lineage of Bhikkhuni Sangha of Sri Lanka. Since almost a century Sri Lankan Buddhist women have waged a spirited struggle for full ordination and recognition. Though the issue has remained surrounded by controversies, great success was achieved in 1998, the final resolve is yet awaited. The most positive aspect of this movement of Sri Lankan Buddhist women is that alongside, they channelized their energies into constructive direction. They organized themselves as Das Sila Mātas. Das Sila Mātas act as a bridge between the lay worshippers and fully ordained nuns.

This study aims to enquire into the position, contribution and prospects of Das Sila Māta tradition within the conceptual framework of gender role in Buddhism. A historical survey of this tradition will be presented with evaluation of its impact on Buddhist and non-Buddhist population, nature of their interaction and their sphere of influence. The second part of the study will focus on the present state of affairs in Das Sila Māta tradition. Information regarding their spiritual attainment, training, their intellectual ability and level of motivation to serve the religion and the humanity will be gathered. This will prepare ground for ascertainment of viability of Das Sila Mātas in strengthening Buddhist modernism in Sri Lank. The evidences for this are derived from the survey by the Department of Buddhist Affairs under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of Sri Lanka conducted in 1984, recent researches and scholarly articles.

Result

It is often lamented upon that Das Sila Mātas have 'limited horizon' (Berkwitz, 2012:37) as they are usually expected to serve in monasteries for monks, and are deprived of opportunity of receiving training and to practice. The horizon could be broadened and opportunity could be increased with empowerment of Das Sila Mātas in spiritual as well as social sense, both being interlinked. In the present era of globalization, nations are plagued

with the problems of degeneration of values, erosion of cultures and crisis of identity, new roles could be carved out for Das Sila Mātas.

Discussion

The study will discuss and present a detailed account of scheme for harnessing the potential of Das Sila Mātas with specifications.

Conclusion

This study argues that with lesser fetters of monastic codes around them Das Sila Mātas could be more communicative with different sections of society. It suggests a new approach towards training and curriculum of Das Sila Mātas which may equip them with efficiency in different fields such as counseling of school children, social counseling, courses in peace and harmony, essentially based on Buddhist principle. As Goonatilake (2014, p. 30) has remarked that Das Sila Mātas are 'self motivated', they could make valuable contribution which in turn could lead to the betterment of their soteriological prospects.

Keywords: Dasa Sila Mātas, ordination, sangha, soteriology.

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