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JOURNAL  
SYSTEMS



## Buddho Journal

<https://so13.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Buddho>

ISSN: 3057-1200 (ONLINE)

## Bhikkhuni and Social Role in Sri Lanka

**Author & Corresponding Author\***

**1. Nongluk Phanthanaphruet\***

**Affiliation:**

1. Acharaya Nagarjuna University, Department of Social Science, India.

Email: nonglukphanthana@gmail.com

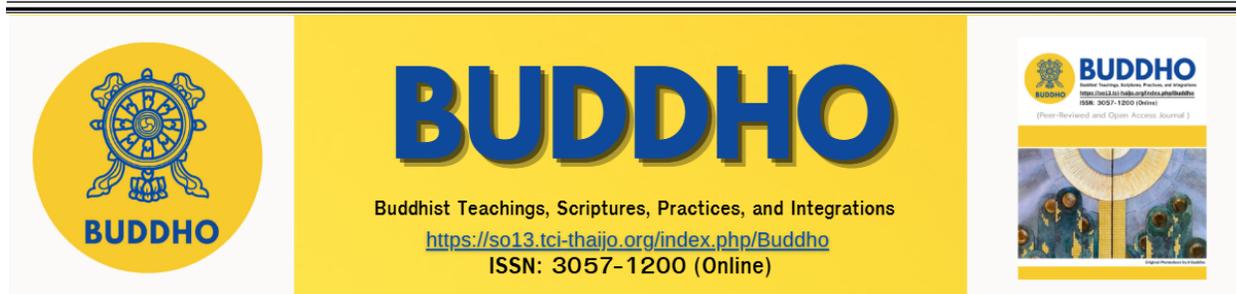
**Article history:**

Received: 02/11/2023, Revised: 11/12/2023,

Accepted: 25/12/2023, Available online: 01/01/2024

**How to Cite:**

Phanthanaphruet, N. (2024). Bhikkhuni and Social Role in Sri Lanka. *Buddho Journal*, 3(1), 31-39.



Academic Review Articles

## **Bhikkhuni and Social Role in Sri Lanka Nongluk Phanthanaphruet\***

### **Abstract**

The Bhikkhuni Sangha, or the Buddhist order of fully ordained female monastics, has played a significant social and religious role in Sri Lanka since its establishment in the third century BCE by Sanghamitta Theri. Despite a historical decline and subsequent revival, the contributions of Bhikkhunis to Sri Lankan society remain substantial in religious, educational, and social welfare domains. This paper examines the historical development of the Bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka, its social roles, and contemporary challenges. It also explores the impact of Bhikkhuni-led initiatives on education, healthcare, and women's empowerment in Sri Lankan society. The research utilizes historical analysis and contemporary studies to highlight the evolving role of Bhikkhunis in the sociocultural landscape. The findings indicate that while Bhikkhunis continue to be instrumental in social and religious activities, challenges related to institutional recognition and societal acceptance persist. Addressing these issues is crucial for the full integration and empowerment of Bhikkhunis in modern Sri Lankan Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Bhikkhuni, Sri Lanka, Buddhist monasticism, social role, gender, religious leadership

### **Introduction**

The Bhikkhuni Sangha, the community of fully ordained Buddhist nuns, has been an integral part of Theravāda Buddhism in Sri Lanka since its establishment by Sanghamitta Theri during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa in the third century BCE (Anālayo, 2016). As one of the earliest monastic institutions for women, the Bhikkhuni Sangha played a crucial role in religious education, moral guidance, and social welfare. However, due to historical and political factors, the order faced extinction around the 11th century CE, leading to a long-standing debate over the legitimacy of its revival in the modern era (Wijayaratna, 1990). In recent decades, efforts to re-establish the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka have gained momentum, with increasing numbers of women seeking full ordination and active engagement in social service (Tsomo, 2002).

Bhikkhunis have contributed significantly to various societal dimensions, including education, healthcare, and gender empowerment. Nevertheless, their status remains contested within some Buddhist institutions, raising questions about religious authority, gender roles, and social acceptance (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988). This paper aims to explore the social role of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka by analyzing their historical contributions, contemporary influence, and the challenges they face in gaining full institutional recognition. The study employs a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on historical texts, ethnographic studies, and contemporary academic discourse to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Bhikkhuni order's evolving role in Sri Lankan society. By addressing the opportunities and obstacles faced by Bhikkhunis, this research contributes to broader discussions on gender and religious leadership within Theravāda Buddhism.

### **Historical Development and Revival of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka**

The Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka traces its roots to the introduction of Buddhism by Emperor Ashoka's daughter, Sanghamitta Theri, in the 3rd century BCE. The Theravāda Bhikkhuni lineage flourished for centuries but eventually declined due to socio-political and religious factors. The revival movement in the late 20th century, spearheaded by Sri Lankan monastic and lay communities, led to the re-establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order, despite doctrinal debates regarding its legitimacy in Theravāda Buddhism (Anālayo, 2016).

The Bhikkhuni Order, the female monastic community in Buddhism, has played a significant role in the spiritual and social history of Sri Lanka. The order, initially established during the time of the Buddha, flourished in Sri Lanka until its decline in the medieval period. In recent decades, there has been a significant movement to revive the Bhikkhuni Order, bringing both opportunities and challenges. This essay examines the historical evolution, decline, and contemporary revival of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka, supported by scholarly sources.

1. **Origins and Early Development of the Bhikkhuni Order** The Bhikkhuni Order was established by the Buddha in the 6th century BCE when Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's aunt and foster mother, requested ordination (Anālayo, 2016). Initially hesitant, the Buddha granted permission with the imposition of the *garudhammas*, eight strict rules that governed the conduct of Bhikkhunis in relation to monks (Gombrich, 2006). The order spread to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa in the 3rd century BCE through the efforts of Sanghamitta Theri, daughter of Emperor Ashoka (Wijayaratna, 1990). This marked the formal establishment of the Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni lineage, which thrived for centuries.

2. **Decline of the Bhikkhuni Order** Despite its early success, the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka suffered setbacks due to political turmoil and foreign invasions. By the 11th century CE, the order had declined, primarily due to the Chola invasions and subsequent disruptions in the monastic lineage (Holt, 1991). Since traditional Theravāda ordination required an existing quorum of Bhikkhunis to ordain new members, the disappearance of the order in Sri Lanka led to the belief that full Bhikkhuni ordination had become impossible within Theravāda Buddhism (Anālayo, 2013).

3. Revival Efforts in the 20th and 21st Centuries The modern revival of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka has been a topic of extensive debate among Buddhist scholars and monastic communities. In the late 20th century, Sri Lankan women interested in ordination sought guidance from Mahayana Buddhist communities in Taiwan and South Korea, where the Bhikkhuni lineage had been preserved (Kawanami, 2007). In 1996, a group of Sri Lankan women received full ordination in Sarnath, India, under the guidance of both Mahayana and Theravāda monks (Anālayo, 2016). This event marked the formal re-establishment of the order in Sri Lanka, though it was met with resistance from conservative Theravāda authorities.

4. Challenges and Contemporary Recognition The reintroduction of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka has faced opposition from segments of the Sangha who argue that the unbroken Theravāda lineage was lost and cannot be revived through Mahayana ordination (Gombrich, 2006). However, proponents argue that the essence of the Vinaya allows for the restoration of the order through valid ordination methods (Anālayo, 2013). Today, many Bhikkhunis are actively engaged in social work, education, and meditation training, contributing significantly to Sri Lankan society (Kawanami, 2007). Government and monastic institutions have shown increased acceptance, with some officially recognizing Bhikkhuni ordination. The re-establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka presents a significant moment in Buddhist history. It challenges the traditional Theravāda monastic structure and initiates discussions on the Vinaya (monastic code) and its adaptability in the modern era. The revival also reflects a growing recognition of gender equality within Buddhist communities, influenced by international Buddhist organizations and Mahāyāna traditions, which preserved a continuous Bhikkhuni lineage (Kawanami, 2020). The historical trajectory of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka illustrates both the resilience and challenges of female monasticism in Theravāda Buddhism. While the medieval decline posed significant obstacles, the modern revival represents a crucial step toward gender equality in Buddhist monasticism. As recognition grows, the Bhikkhuni Order is poised to play a more prominent role in Sri Lanka's religious and social landscape.

### **The Bhikkhuni's Role in Social Welfare and Community Development**

Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis have played a vital role in social welfare by providing education, healthcare, and psychological support, particularly for marginalized communities. Many Bhikkhunis establish meditation centers, schools, and women's shelters, offering both spiritual and material assistance to laypeople (Salgado, 2013). The active engagement of Bhikkhunis in humanitarian efforts aligns with the Buddhist concept of compassionate action (*karuṇā*) and selfless service (*dāna*). The Bhikkhuni Order, or female monastic community in Buddhism, has played a vital role in social welfare and community development throughout history. While their contributions were often overshadowed by those of male monastics, Bhikkhunis have been instrumental in promoting education, healthcare, and social services, particularly in contemporary Buddhist societies. This essay explores the historical and modern roles of Bhikkhunis in social welfare and community development, highlighting their contributions and challenges within Buddhist traditions.

1. **Historical Contributions to Social Welfare** From the time of the Buddha, Bhikkhunis have been engaged in various forms of community service. The earliest Bhikkhunis, including Mahapajapati Gotami, the first woman to be ordained, were actively involved in caring for the sick and providing moral guidance to lay communities (Anālayo, 2016). Throughout Buddhist history, Bhikkhunis established monasteries that served as centers of learning, healthcare, and refuge for marginalized groups, including women and children (Kawanami, 2007).

2. **Modern Engagement in Social Welfare** In contemporary Buddhist societies, Bhikkhunis continue to play a significant role in social welfare by establishing schools, healthcare centers, and meditation retreats. In Sri Lanka, for example, Bhikkhunis provide vocational training and counseling services for women and children affected by poverty and domestic violence (De Silva, 2017). Similarly, in Thailand, Bhikkhunis work alongside non-governmental organizations to combat human trafficking and promote gender equality (Tisdale, 2018).

3. **Education and Community Development** Education has been a cornerstone of the Bhikkhuni mission, both historically and in modern times. Bhikkhunis operate Buddhist schools that provide religious and secular education to children from underprivileged backgrounds (Gombrich, 2006). Additionally, they offer literacy programs for adult women, empowering them to participate more actively in their communities (Wijayaratna, 1990). The emphasis on education not only preserves Buddhist teachings but also fosters social mobility and community resilience.

4. **Healthcare and Humanitarian Efforts** Healthcare initiatives led by Bhikkhunis have significantly improved public health in Buddhist societies. Many Bhikkhuni monasteries run free medical clinics that provide treatment and herbal medicine to those in need (Anālayo, 2013). In times of natural disasters, Bhikkhunis have been at the forefront of humanitarian aid, organizing relief efforts and distributing essential supplies (Kawanami, 2007). These activities reinforce Buddhist principles of compassion and service to others.

5. **Challenges and Institutional Barriers** Despite their immense contributions, Bhikkhunis face considerable institutional challenges. The lack of full recognition within Theravāda Buddhism has restricted their access to resources and limited their ability to expand social welfare programs (Tisdale, 2018). Furthermore, traditional gender norms continue to marginalize female monastics, creating obstacles for those seeking leadership roles within Buddhist institutions (Gombrich, 2006). Bhikkhunis contribute significantly to Sri Lankan society by addressing social issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, and poverty. Their engagement in social activism not only reinforces the ethical dimensions of Buddhism but also challenges gender-based limitations in monastic leadership. Their role extends beyond traditional religious functions, demonstrating how Buddhist monasticism can be an agent of social change (Tanner, 2021). Bhikkhunis have historically been and continue to be pivotal figures in social welfare and community development. Through education, healthcare, and humanitarian efforts, they provide critical services to society while upholding the ethical and spiritual teachings of Buddhism. Despite facing institutional barriers, Bhikkhunis persist in their mission to serve communities and promote social justice, reinforcing the relevance of their role in modern Buddhist societies

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## Challenges and Controversies Surrounding the Bhikkhuni Order

The Bhikkhuni Order, the female monastic community in Buddhism, has been a subject of debate and controversy throughout history. Although the order was established by the Buddha, its continuity faced significant challenges due to sociocultural, institutional, and doctrinal factors. In modern times, efforts to revive the Bhikkhuni Order have sparked intense discussions regarding legitimacy, gender equality, and traditional Buddhist practices. This essay explores the major challenges and controversies surrounding the Bhikkhuni Order, examining historical, doctrinal, and contemporary perspectives. Despite its revival, the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka faces resistance from certain Theravāda monastic factions, which argue that the ordination process lacks canonical validity due to the absence of a continuous Theravāda Bhikkhuni lineage (Anālayo, 2017). Institutional and legal barriers persist, including limited recognition by Sri Lankan monastic councils and exclusion from certain state-funded religious programs.

1. **Historical Challenges and Decline** The Bhikkhuni Order was formally established in the 6th century BCE when Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's foster mother, sought ordination (Anālayo, 2016). Despite initial resistance, the Buddha permitted women to be ordained under the condition that they adhere to the *garudhammas*, a set of eight additional rules reinforcing male monastic authority (Gombrich, 2006). Over time, the order flourished in various Buddhist regions, particularly in Sri Lanka and China (Wijayaratna, 1990). However, the Bhikkhuni Order suffered a major decline, particularly in Theravāda Buddhist countries, due to wars, political instability, and the inability to sustain an unbroken ordination lineage (Holt, 1991). By the 11th century CE, the Theravāda Bhikkhuni lineage had disappeared from Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, raising questions about the feasibility of its revival (Anālayo, 2013).

2. **Doctrinal and Institutional Barriers** One of the most significant controversies surrounding the Bhikkhuni Order is the doctrinal argument concerning its legitimacy. Traditional Theravāda Buddhism holds that a valid Bhikkhuni ordination requires the presence of an existing Bhikkhuni Sangha, which was lost centuries ago (Gombrich, 2006). Critics argue that attempts to reinstate the order through Mahayana ordination, as seen in Taiwan and Korea, do not conform to Theravāda Vinaya principles (Anālayo, 2013). Additionally, institutional resistance has hindered Bhikkhuni recognition. Many senior monks and Buddhist councils in Theravāda countries, including Thailand and Myanmar, have opposed full Bhikkhuni ordination, arguing that it violates traditional monastic codes (Kawanami, 2007). This has led to Bhikkhunis facing legal and social discrimination, limiting their access to monastic education and resources (De Silva, 2017).

3. **Modern Efforts and Resistance** Despite these challenges, contemporary movements have sought to restore the Bhikkhuni Order. In 1996, a group of Sri Lankan women received full ordination in India with the support of both Theravāda and Mahayana monks, leading to a gradual resurgence of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka (Anālayo, 2016). However, these efforts have faced backlash from conservative Buddhist institutions, some of which refuse to recognize ordained Bhikkhunis (Tisdale, 2018). Bhikkhunis also struggle with societal discrimination. In Thailand, for example, they are not officially recognized by the government, preventing them from receiving state support and monastic privileges (Kawanami, 2007). In Myanmar, women seeking ordination

often have to travel abroad, as local monastic authorities do not permit Bhikkhuni ordinations (De Silva, 2017). The challenges and controversies surrounding the Bhikkhuni Order highlight the complex interplay between tradition, doctrine, and modern aspirations for gender equality in Buddhism. While efforts to revive the order have gained momentum, institutional and doctrinal obstacles remain. As discussions continue, the future of the Bhikkhuni Order will depend on ongoing dialogue between traditional Buddhist institutions and advocates for gender inclusivity.

## **Conclusion**

The role of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka extends beyond religious practice to significant contributions in education, healthcare, and community service. Their efforts have provided essential support to marginalized groups and strengthened social cohesion. However, despite their contributions, Bhikkhunis continue to face institutional barriers and societal resistance. Recognizing and supporting the Bhikkhuni Order is essential for the progression of gender equality within Buddhist traditions and the broader Sri Lankan society. Moving forward, further acceptance and integration of Bhikkhunis into the mainstream monastic structure will ensure their continued positive impact on social welfare and community development. The Bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka embodies resilience, dedication, and a commitment to both religious and social service. While challenges remain, ongoing efforts to strengthen and recognize the Bhikkhuni Sangha highlight the importance of gender inclusivity in Buddhism. As Sri Lanka continues to be a focal point for Bhikkhuni revival, the role of Buddhist nuns in shaping a compassionate and equitable society cannot be overlooked.

## **Suggestion**

1. **Historical Context:** Provide an overview of the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka, tracing its origins from the Theravāda tradition and its decline and revival.
2. **Religious Contributions:** Discuss the spiritual and doctrinal roles of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lankan Buddhism, including teaching, meditation, and community guidance.
3. **Social Impact:** Explore how Bhikkhunis contribute to education, social welfare, and gender empowerment in contemporary Sri Lanka.
4. **Challenges and Revival Efforts:** Analyze the obstacles faced by Bhikkhunis, such as social acceptance and institutional recognition, and highlight efforts to revive full ordination.
5. **Comparison with Other Traditions:** Compare the status and roles of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka with those in other Buddhist countries like Thailand and Myanmar.

## **Body of Knowledge**

1. **Historical Background** the Bhikkhuni Sangha was first established in Sri Lanka during the 3rd century BCE when Sanghamitta Theri, the daughter of Emperor Ashoka, brought the ordination tradition. This lineage flourished for centuries, contributing to Buddhist scholarship and community service. However, by the 11th century CE, due to political upheavals and foreign invasions, the Bhikkhuni lineage in Sri Lanka was lost. Revival attempts began in the 20th century,

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with ordination being sought from the East Asian Mahāyāna tradition, leading to a resurgence of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka.

2. Religious Contributions Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka engage in significant religious activities, including Dhamma teaching, meditation training, and guiding laywomen in spiritual practices. They conduct rituals, deliver sermons, and provide ethical leadership within communities. Some monastic institutions specifically train Bhikkhunis in Vinaya (monastic discipline) and Buddhist philosophy, empowering them to take on authoritative religious roles.

3. Social and Educational Contributions Beyond religious practices, Bhikkhunis play a crucial role in education and social welfare. They establish schools, meditation centers, and vocational training programs, particularly targeting underprivileged women and children. Bhikkhuni-led initiatives focus on social issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, and poverty alleviation, reflecting their broader societal impact. Many contemporary Bhikkhunis advocate for women's rights and social equity, positioning themselves as agents of change within Sri Lankan society.

4. Challenges and Recognition Despite their contributions, Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka continue to face institutional and societal challenges. The Sri Lankan Buddhist establishment, largely male-dominated, has been reluctant to officially recognize Bhikkhuni ordination under the Theravāda Vinaya. This lack of recognition affects Bhikkhunis' access to resources, legal rights, and public acknowledgment. However, with the growing support from international Buddhist communities and lay devotees, efforts are underway to gain official status and broader acceptance for Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka.

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