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Reclaiming Dignity and Democracy: The Re-emergence of Buddhist Nuns in India

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Abstract

The paper traces the story of revival of the monastic order of the Buddhist nuns (bhikkhunisangha) in India in the larger socio-political domain of identification and assertion of a ‘new identity’ of the female Dalits through a socio-cultural revolution, i.e. the ‘Navayana Buddhism’ locating it in Nagpur, Maharashtra. The resurgence of Buddhism in India, strengthened by B.R. Ambedkar with his conversion in 1956 is taken as the point of advent and an attempt is made to trace this religion’s development as a cultural revolution in the larger political sphere of establishing ‘social democracy’ with the assistance of the Buddhist sangha. Nagpur, the site of the historic conversion is studied in a historical context through oral history to understand how a space of socio-political assertion was already available for the Dalits, prior to Ambedkar’s conversion. The second section of the paper is based on the interviews of Indian bhikkhunis (ordained nuns), samaneris (novice nuns) and the upasikas (female lay disciples) to understand how these politically conscious women with their roles as ‘social servants’ are reclaiming their space of assertion within the ‘democratic’ sangha and in the society. The story of the three generations of bhikkhunis in India that began in 1967, will unfold amidst the twin issues of ‘identity’ and ‘religion’. How the bhikkhunis’ quest for dignity and democracy is obstructed with the non-cooperation and non-recognition of their cohorts will be studied conjointly with the challenges faced by the movement of socio-political liberation of young Dalits, launched by the politically prudent bhikkhunis of the sangha.

Introduction

“I will not pass away until I have nun disciples who are wise, well-trained and self-confident and learned.”¹

The Buddha as per the *Mahaparinibbana-sutta*, had vowed that he would go on living until the sanghas of monks, nuns, male and female lay disciples had been established and had proven successful. Nancy Schuster Barnes highlights this instance and goes on to assert the notion of ‘doctrinal egalitarianism’ in Buddhism, which suggests that both male and female disciples had the same spiritual path to attain the same goal and by shaving their heads, they

¹ Citing the *Mahaparinibbana-sutta* of the Digha Nikaya (DN 16 at DN II: 105, 8) from the Pali canon: *na... parinibbāyissāmi yāva me bhikkhuniyo na sāvika bhavissanti viyattā vinīta visāradā bahussutā*, Analayo also cites the Sanskrit and the Tibetan parallel of the same in his article, ‘Women’s Renunciation in Early Buddhism: The Four Assemblies and the Foundation of the Order of Nuns’, in Thea Mohr and Jampa Tsedroen (eds.), *Dignity and Disciplines: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010, p. 66.

even looked the same.² Alan Sponberg refers to this aspect as the ‘soteriological inclusiveness’ of Buddhism.³ We thus find that, at the onset and initial spread of Buddhism, both men and women walked the similar spiritual and ritual paths and their respective monastic orders were deemed equal in terms of significance, even by the Buddha. However, with the passage of time the bhikkhunisangha (the monastic order of the nuns) did not survive the social scrutiny. One of the major factors is believed to be the prevalent attitudes towards women, entrenched in patriarchy and misogyny that went on to pervade the boundaries of the egalitarian Buddhist sangha. This eventually led to the disappearance of the bhikkhunisangha from the Theravada sect/tradition around the twelfth century, only to be revived 900 years later.

In a momentous event in December 1996, 10 Sri Lankan women attained ordination as bhikkhunis at Sarnath in India, to announce the official revival of the bhikkhunisangha in India.⁴ It was followed by a grand international *upasampada* ceremony⁵ (higher ordination) for the bhikkhunis at Bodhgaya, India in February, 1998. Twenty-nine samaneris (novice nuns) from Nagpur, India participated in this event and attained higher ordination, only to be resented by the bhikkhus when they returned. With 94% of its population following Buddhism (primarily the Theravada tradition) with effective state-sponsorship, the first woman to be officially ordained as a bhikkhuni in Thailand and who was successful in establishing a bhikkhunisangha, was Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in the year 2003.⁶

As can be easily deduced, the misogyny travelled through centuries to obstruct even the revival of the bhikkhunisangha. But the story is not so facile and differs fundamentally in both of these countries. Despite the absence of a bhikkhunisangha, Theravada Buddhism flourished in Thailand with a bhikkhusangha, male and female lay-disciples and women called ‘*maechis*’ who had an indeterminate status and fell somewhere in-between the lay disciples and ordained nuns, because of the denied higher ordination (*upasampada*). In India, which witnessed the altogether disappearance of Buddhism around the twelfth-thirteenth cent. CE, a new interpretation of Theravada Buddhism, called ‘Navayana Buddhism’ was born with the mass conversion of the Dalits⁷ into Buddhism led by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar on 14th October, 1956.

² N.S. Barnes, ‘Buddhism’, in Arvind Sharma (ed.), *Women in World Religion*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987, p. 107.

³ Alan, ‘Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism’, in J.I. Cabezon (ed.), *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1992.

⁴ Prior to this, an international ordination for the bhikkhunis was held in the HsiLai temple, Los Angeles, USA in 1988, with the participation of bhikkhunis from Nepal, Thailand and Sri Lanka. However, once they returned none of them were able to establish a monastic order for the bhikkhunis in their respective countries. The five ordained bhikkhunis from Sri Lanka eventually had to return to their previous life as Silamatas- the ten-precept nuns.

⁵ The ordination as a permanent member of the sangha is a two-fold process: the first ordination is called ‘pabbajja’ which means going from home to homelessness and after a period of training as a novice monk or nun, one receives the higher ordination called the *upasampada*.

⁶ It is told by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda that before her, two Thai bhikkhunis were ordained at the 1988 ceremony in USA but were unsuccessful in establishing the monastic order for the bhikkhunis in Thailand.

⁷ The term ‘dalit’ is used to refer to the members of the Scheduled Castes- the constitutional term for the ex-untouchables or outcastes of the Hindu society. However, the term holds both political and historical significance given its use in popular anti-caste movements. A number of anti-caste organizations such as the ‘Dalit Panthers’ recognize and associate with the term as one of assertion of the oppressed identity and consequently as resistance to the status quo.

This paper attempts to explore the story of revival of the bhikkhunisangha in India in the larger socio-political domain of the identification and assertion of female Dalit identity through the politico-cultural revolution, the 'Navayana Buddhism'. The resurgence of Buddhism in India, initiated by B.R. Ambedkar, is taken as the point of advent. An attempt has then been made to trace this religion's development as a 'socio-cultural revolution' in the larger political sphere of establishing 'social democracy' through the process of creation and assertion of a 'new identity': that of Ambedkarite Bhikkhunis within the Buddhist sangha and outside it.

An elaborate discussion will follow on the role of the bhikkhunis as politically conscious 'social servants' locating them in Nagpur, Maharashtra. It will be seen, how a place of assertion for the Dalits was already present in Nagpur, prior to the mass conversion led by Ambedkar. The city in the 1940s rendered a vibrant oral tradition through which revolutionary and radical ideas were transmitted by the Dalit bards who sang about contemporary issues and events, such as the Hindu-Mahar Riots of 1946 and the events surrounding India's struggle for Independence, giving us a perspective of the marginalised.

The second section of the paper will discuss the reclaiming of space of assertion by the bhikkhunis within the 'democratic' sangha. This study is based on 30 published and unpublished interviews of the Indian and some Thai bhikkhunis (ordained nuns), samaneris (novice nuns) and upasikas (female lay-disciples) that were taken from February to September, 2020. The short history of the revived tradition of the Indian bhikkhunis can be categorised into three phases:⁸ the first phase (1967-1990s) accounts for the first Ambedkarite women who took the robes but remained unrecognised; the second phase (1998-2013) explores the process of recognition and organisation of the Indian Bhikkhunisangha for the first time since the revival of Buddhism in India and the third phase (2013-present) accounts for the current on-going quest for socio-political liberation in the sangha and the society at large. It emphasises the role of the International alliances, the contribution of the lay-disciples and the role of the politically-conscious young educated women in carrying forward the legacy of the Indian Bhikkhunisangha.

Given the short history of its revival, umpteen challenges tread the path of the bhikkhunis' quest for democracy in the sangha. A reflection on some of these would reveal how the movement of socio-political liberation of the young Dalits, launched by the politically prudent new bhikkhunis of the sangha, is obstructed by the non-cooperation and non-recognition of the bhikkhunisangha and their agency, by their own cohorts and supporters.

Significance of oral history for this study

Oral history plays a crucial role for this study for three noteworthy reasons: first, the revival of Buddhism in India and that of the bhikkhunisangha in the Theravada tradition does not have a long history. Not much work and documentation is available for their study and in the absence of a proper school or training centre for bhikkhunis in India, the transfer of the knowledge of the revived tradition is generational and oral. Second, this is a study of a living tradition that traces its lineage from a classical tradition that for centuries existed and lived as

⁸ The classification is my own.

an oral tradition itself. In a way it is an attempt to bridge the gap between the past and the present by making it a study of a continuous tradition, studied via different sources, the textual for the past and the oral for the living, neither of which is less significant. The oral testimonies used in this paper, when studied in a historical context appear to substantiate the vision with which B.R. Ambedkar brought the Buddhist tradition back to life in India. The attempt here is to bring a new approach to the methodology of oral history writing wherein the lived-experiences of the present generations can be used as sites of experiment to check the feasibility of the theories and expectations envisioned for them, in the past.

Finally, though the critique of oral history often makes historians accept it as a mere supplementary or corroborative source, the emergence of oral history has also enabled historians to explore the voices and experiences of people who were previously excluded or marginalized within the historical narrative.⁹ Both Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin have talked about the politics of power in controlling the traditions and history and speak of the ruling class taking control of the 'stocks of tradition'.¹⁰

Dalit women in India have been subject to the generational two-fold oppression and assault, by the socially and religiously sanctioned institutions of patriarchy and the caste system, for centuries. In a news article titled, 'On an Average, India Reported 10 Cases of Rape of Dalit Women Daily in 2019, NCRB Data Shows', according to the latest National Crime Record Bureau's (NCRB) report, in the last one decade crimes against Dalits have risen by 37% while the conviction rate in such crimes increased by merely 2.5%.¹¹ The stark increase in the percentage could possibly be because of the increased reporting of these crimes, if not in the actual crime rate. The efforts of Ambedkar, fondly called *Babasaheb* by his followers ensured rights to social, economic and political equality and opportunity, through special provisions (Reservation system) enshrined in the Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution of India to the socially and economically deprived.

Later years also witnessed more measures such as 'The Scheduled Castes and Tribes, Prevention of Atrocities (POA) Act', 1989, to ensure safety and dignity of the marginalised and the oppressed sections. However, the ground reality offers an unfortunate tale which more often than not evades both the public and academic domains. It is through oral history primarily, that the lived traumatic experiences of the marginalised and those subject to caste atrocities have started registering their presence and significance in the public and intellectual domain.

⁹ Vanita Sharma, 'Inherited Memories', *Cultural and Social History*, 6:4, pp. 411-428, Stable URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14780038.2009.11425870>, Accessed on: 17/08/2020 16:43 UTC.

¹⁰ M. Foucault, 'The Historical a priori and the Archive', *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York: Routledge, 1969. Walter Benjamin in his article, 'On the Concept of History', Eiland Howard and Jennings Michael (eds.), *Selected Writings*, vol., 4, 1938-40, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, argues that:

"When the empathy is subsided with the ruling elites, their history comes to light and when it is displayed for the oppressed, their history which otherwise exist as a tall tower of 'debris' because of the 'storm of progressive history', can then be brought into the frame. The debris keeps on accumulating and progress proceeds and conceals this debris. This debris can infact be understood as the archive of the oppressed past which occurs as an image and is in reality a remembrance, a mere memory."

¹¹ Rajiv Kumar, 'On an Average, India Reported 10 Cases of Rape of Dalit Women Daily in 2019, NCRB Data Shows', October 3, 2020, Stable URL: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/on-an-average-india-reported-10-cases-of-rape-of-dalit-women-daily-in-2019-ncrb-data-shows-2930179.html>, Accessed on: 3/10/2020 17:34 UTC.

This study is an attempt to merely introduce the means and measures adopted by female Dalits asserting their identity as ‘Ambedkarite Bhikkhunis’ in hopes to liberate their community and bring about the ‘social democracy’ Ambedkar envisioned in his last speech to the Constituent Assembly, which rests on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, both in the sangha and the society.¹² Apart from the interviews of the Indian and some Thai bhikkhunis (ordained nuns), samaneris (novice nuns) and upasikas (female lay-disciples), the speeches of Ambedkar and the poems, songs and *qawwalis* (sufi style of singing) of the Dalit Balladeers of Nagpur in the 1940s form important source material for this study.

Revival of Buddhism in India: The Birth of Navayana Buddhism

Prior to the advent of Ambedkar, the Buddhist revivalist movement had already begun in different parts of India. Some of the pioneers of the Buddhist revival movement in India were Anagarika Dharmapala of Sri Lanka who founded the The Maha Bodhi Society in 1891 and Kripasharan who set up the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha in the same year. In South India Pandit Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) established the Sakya Buddhist Society (also known as the South Indian Buddhist Association).¹³ Gail Omvedt registers this as the establishment of Buddhism as a religion of the Dalits.¹⁴ But neither of the movements in the nineteenth grew to become as big as Ambedkar made it through his conversion to Buddhism in 1956.

Even before his conversion, Ambedkar’s inclination towards Buddhism was reflected in his speeches and writings. For instance, in his last speech at the constituent assembly, he mentioned how the Buddhist sangha operated on the principles of democracy.¹⁵ However, one would wonder that after ensuring the political and economic rights of the marginalised are safeguarded through the Constitution, why did Ambedkar felt the need for a different religion at all? Were the constitutionally guaranteed rights and protection not enough? What he said in his last speech at the Constituent Assembly will help in understanding this aspect, better:

“We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy...”

We must begin by acknowledging the fact that there is complete absence of two things in Indian Society. One of these is equality (the other is fraternity). On the social plane, we have in India a society based on the principle of graded inequality which we have a society in which there are some who have immense wealth as

¹² By ‘social democracy’ he meant the trinity of liberty, equality and fraternity be accepted as the principles of life, not divorced from each other.

B.R. Ambedkar, ‘Last speech in the Constituent Assembly on Adoption of The Constitution’, November 25, 1949, velivada.com, Stable URL: <https://velivada.com/2020/01/25/dr-ambedkars-last-speech-in-the-constituent-assembly-on-adoption-of-the-constitution/>, Accessed on: 23/08/2020 13:45 UTC.

¹³ Upinder Singh, ‘Exile and Return: The Reinvention of Buddhism and Buddhist Sites in Modern India’, *South Asian Studies*, 26:2, 193-217, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2010.514744>, Accessed on: 31/05/2020 13:32 UTC, p. 195.

¹⁴ Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, p. 236.

¹⁵ “It is not that India did not know what Democracy is... A study of the Buddhist Bhikshu Sanghas discloses that not only there were Parliaments-for the Sanghas were nothing but Parliaments – but the Sanghas knew and observed all the rules of Parliamentary Procedure known to modern times. They had rules regarding seating arrangements, rules regarding Motions, Resolutions, Quorum, Whip, Counting of Votes, Voting by Ballot, Censure Motion, Regularization, etc.”

B.R. Ambedkar, ‘Last speech in the Constituent Assembly on Adoption of The Constitution’, November 25, 1949.

against many who live in abject poverty. On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality.”¹⁶

Ambedkar acknowledged that the democracy that took birth in India when the Constitution of India came into effect on 26th January, 1950 was merely political and the social and economic lives of the marginalised and the oppressed were still as vulnerable as before. The Hindu religious system also upheld a definite social order through the caste system functioning effectively through endogamy, for centuries. Despite repeated attempts at reforms in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries to eradicate the practise of ‘untouchability’ and other social evils, the Hindu socio-religious order was found incapable of reform to accommodate the ‘lower-castes’ and guarantee them a life of dignity, by Ambedkar. As a result, in 1935 he declared that: “Though he is born a Hindu, he will not die a Hindu.” With this began his search for a new religion for his community. He carefully read the other religions, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism for over 20 years which eventually brought him to his decision of converting to Buddhism. According to Ambedkar, religion was a necessity, predominantly for the poor, something that he proclaimed in his speech, a day after his conversion:

“For the poor, religion is a necessity. Religion is necessary for people in distress. The poor man lives on hope. 'Hope!' The source of life is hope. If this hope is destroyed, then how will life go on? Religion makes one hopeful, and to those in pain, to the poor, it gives a message: "Don't be afraid; life will be hopeful, it will be." So poor and distressed mankind clings to religion.”¹⁷

Second, Ambedkar firmly believed in the idea of ‘sacred morality’ being necessary to build a human society on a moral code of mutual respect and to prevent exploitation of humans by humans. Elaborating upon this aspect, Omvedt writes:

“In sociology, Emile Durkheim had given a broader definition focusing on the element of the ‘sacred’ in religion and its role in providing a binding force for social relationships. In this sense, Buddhism was a religion. It was not simply morality but ‘sacred morality’. He substantiates this by saying that without sacredness no common rules of morality will exist. He concludes that in a society not bound by a common morality protecting individual rights, exploitation will remain.”¹⁸

Ambedkar found another important principle of ‘fraternity’, to exist only in Buddhism, which could be achieved through the monastic-laity nexus. Thus, in Buddhism Ambedkar saw all three ideals that he found necessary for the establishment of ‘social democracy’: liberty,

¹⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, ‘Last speech in the Constituent Assembly on Adoption of The Constitution’, November 25, 1949, velivada.com, Stable URL: <https://velivada.com/2020/01/25/dr-ambedkars-last-speech-in-the-constituent-assembly-on-adoption-of-the-constitution/>, Accessed on: 23/08/2020 13:45 UTC.

¹⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, ‘Why was Nagpur Chosen?’, Speech, Nagpur, October, 14, 1956, Frances W. Pritchett (ed.), Rekha Damle and Eleanor Zelliott (unpublished translation from Marathi to English, August-September, 1964), Indira Peterson (trans. of Pali passages), columbia.edu, Stable URL: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_conversion.html, Accessed on: 28/09/2020 16:24 UTC. First published (in Marathi), *Prabuddh Bharat*, October, 27, 1956, pp. 5-12, 18.

¹⁸ Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003, pp. 259-260.

equality and fraternity. However, Ambedkar gave a new and different interpretation to Buddhism and called it the 'Navayana' which was significantly different from the already existing sects.

Ambedkar's Navayana gave Buddhism a new meaning, interpretation and intention. Omvedt summarises Ambedkar's interpretation and rejections of some of the fundamental ideas of Buddhism as the 'four denials': (i) The reason for Siddhartha to leave home; (ii) Four Aryan truth are not part of the original teaching; (iii) Contradiction between the doctrine of rebirth and kamma and Buddha's denial of the existence of a soul; (iv) Claims that the Bhikkhu can be the 'hope of Buddhism' only if he is a social servant and not a 'perfect man'.¹⁹

Ambedkar is not the first and the only scholar to question the validity of the first three aspects. The first three are open-ended debates in the study of early Buddhism. These are still pertinent question amongst the scholars of Early Buddhism. Richard Gombrich points out that the early sections of the Pali canon does not include the story of Gotama leaving home due to the sight of an aged, diseased and dead man and even the name Siddhartha is not known.²⁰ According to C.A.F. Rhys Davids the original teachings of the Buddha were somewhat different from what they are traditionally reported to have been. She held that a few crucial elements of early Buddhism such as the Four Noble Truths were not an integral part of the original doctrine of Buddhism.²¹

The point of emphasis here is to understand Ambedkar's intention behind reaching the conclusions of his interpretation. He was looking for a socio-political emancipatory mechanism for his community by instilling the ideal of 'sacred morality'. Ambedkar had expressed his discontent and disapproval of the state of affairs of the bodies that were representative of Buddhism during his time therefore, he brought a new interpretation. It will be an incomplete understanding of 'Navayana Buddhism' to look at it as a lay-person's religion only, as has been argued by scholars such as Upinder Singh.²² Ambedkar had a clear vision for the monastic order- the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis were meant to be 'social servants' and not perfect beings. His intent at conversion was not merely a cultural and social departure from the socio-religious order that oppressed the Dalits, but a vision at community building, community empowerment and political and social emancipation through Buddhism. That is what is implied by the nexus between the four pillars of Buddhism: the bhikkhusangha; the bhikkhunisangha; the upasakasangha and the upasikasangha (order of the male and female lay disciples). The first attempt to build a nexus between these four pillars came with the construction of Samaj bhavans (a place for community gathering) initiated by Ambedkar, in every village where untouchables lived so that all communities and castes would assemble there to organise meetings and programmes. These Samaj Bhavans were later converted to Buddha Viharas.²³ And from here began the journey of Navayana Buddhism not merely as a counter-religion but also as a socio-politico cultural revolution with the mass conversion of

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

²¹ C.A.F. Rhys Davids as cited in N.N. Bhattacharya, *Buddhism in the History of Ideas*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1993, p. 38.

²² Upinder Singh, 'Exile and Return: The Reinvention of Buddhism and Buddhist Sites in Modern India', p. 196.

²³ Bhikkhuni, 'Buddhism and Bhikkhunis in India', in Amarjiva Lochan (ed.) *Bhikkhunis and Buddhist World: Issues in Contemporary Society*, Bangkok: RuenKaew Printing House, 2017. 'Buddha Vihara' refers to the place of residence for the monastics that also comprises of a community hall for mass gathering.

Ambedkar and almost 380,000 of his followers to Buddhism at Deekshabhumi, Nagpur on 14th October, 1956.

Why Nagpur became the Site of Resurgence

According to the Census of 2011, 75% of the district population of Nagpur are Hindus, while the Buddhists constitute about 14.4%. In a country where the Buddhist population is 0.8%, that is a significantly high number.²⁴ Maharashtra with 5.8%²⁵ is the only state with a significant population that follows Buddhism (Navayana). Other states with a significant population of the Dalits such as Uttar Pradesh witnessed attempts at the assertion of the Dalit identity and voice through political means, but Maharashtra is the only state that saw a successful socio-cultural revolution through 'Navayana Buddhism', with Nagpur as the epicentre. This is primarily because a space of assertion was already available in Maharashtra, in Nagpur in particular, much before the historic conversion.

During the colonial rule, a thriving textile industry emerged in the cities of Bombay and Nagpur, providing employment to peasants, artisans and Dalits. By the 20th century, Dalits were about 20 per cent of the textile workforce in Bombay and 40 per cent of that in Nagpur. And among these Dalits, the Mahars (to which Ambedkar belonged) were the largest community.²⁶ Gail Omvedt argues that the relatively equalitarian situation of the main peasant castes as well as the assertiveness of Dalit communities like the Mahars provided a material base for a relatively democratic social tradition from the 19th century onwards²⁷ setting the stage for the revolutionary changes to be brought by Ambedkar, a few decades later.

Vasant Moon's autobiography *Vasti*, describes this process in one of the large Mahar communities of Nagpur. It talks about the youth who organised to stop participation in Hindu festivals, and soon adopted Buddhism and the dhamma once they came in contact with the members of the Mahabodhi Society who were propagating it in Nagpur.²⁸ Moon's account also gives a glimpse of a vibrant oral tradition through which revolutionary and radical ideas were transmitted by the Dalit bards.

The Oral Tradition in Nagpur in the 1940s

Moon writes about a number of bards and balladeers from the Dalit community, in the 1930s and 1940s, who would perform at cultural events singing poems, *qawwalis* and songs. Their compositions ranged from praises of Ambedkar to the contemporary issues giving us an idea about how these communities perceived issues of national importance. Let us now look at some of the compositions.

²⁴ 'District Census Handbook: Nagpur, Village and Town Directory, Directorate of Census Operations', Maharashtra, Census of India 2011: Maharashtra, Series-28, Part XII.

²⁵ census2011.co.in, Stable URL: <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/5-buddhism.html>, Accessed on: 23/08/2020 12:34 UTC.

²⁶ Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, p. 245.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

The lines of one of the most popular songs of a *qawwal* Ratan Mehtar, who belonged to the sweeper community were:

The procession of Bhim²⁹ is marching
through India,
We have awakened, the victory is ours!³⁰

One famous group of balladeers was called the ‘Das Bhajan Mandai’. One Hindi *qawwali* of this group spread far and wide:

“From the moment that the glance of Bhim fell upon the poor
From that day our strength also grew
To win freedom Gandhi and Jinnah met each other
They did not ask Ambedkar, nor were they going
to ask,
Pandit Jawahar Nehru also tried a new trick
When Bhim learned the secret his eyes were opened,
The tyrannical Hindu people wanted to destroy us,
Hearing the voice of Bhim they lost their zest,
Pandit Jawahar Nehru himself fell silent
The moment that the glance of Bhim fell upon the poor
From that day our strength grew and grew.”³¹

Some songs were created with the hopes to instil courage in the community. Giving a call to Dalits, one of the compositions said:

“Rise, all Dalits, from among Hindus.
Your sleeping fortunes have awakened now.
Bhim is number one in writing the Constitution.
They have not won, we have not been
defeated.”³²

It is evident from these songs and poems that the by the 1940s, the movement and many Dalit communities had attained a position of some strength in India. Dalits were now not simply victims seeking a refuge, but conscious awakened human beings concerned about shaping their future and the future of India.³³ It is with this background that the emergence of the ‘Ambedkarite Bhikkhunis’ can be put to a comprehensive study.

The Emergence of the ‘Ambedkarite Bhikkhunis’

Prior to opening a discussion about the ‘new Bhikkhunis’, let us take a brief look at the agency of the first-ever bhikkhunis in the Buddhist tradition through their own testimonies, as

²⁹ Bhim refers to B.R. Ambedkar.

³⁰ Vasant Moon, *Vasti*, Mumbai: Granthali, 1995. Translated from Marathi by Gail Omvedt, *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000, p. 154.

³¹ Ibid. p. 150.

³² Ibid. p. 155.

³³ Ibid., p. 259.

they are recorded in the *Therigatha*, a classical Pali language text, believed to be the first compiled anthology of poems by the women anywhere in the world. The *Therigatha* reports the first-hand accounts of the first bhikkhunis that joined the sangha. Similar to the rest of the compilations in the Pali canon, this compilation too was transmitted orally for centuries before being written down. Dhammapala wrote his commentary on the *Therigatha* around the sixth century CE. Many a times, these classical texts reflected the general societal attitudes through characters that featured in them. Following is an abstract from one of the poems of the *Therigatha* that describes the conversation between bhikkhuni Soma and Mara, the god of death and desire.

Spoken by Mara:

“It is hard to get to the place that sages want to reach,
It’s not possible for a woman,
Especially not one with only two fingers’ worth of wisdom”

Soma replied:

“What does being a woman have to do with it?
What counts is that the heart is settled
And that one sees what really is.
What you take as pleasures are not for me,
The mass of mental darkness is split open.
Know this, evil one, you are defeated, you are finished.”³⁴

As the above mentioned poem clearly shows, how the society perceived the capability of women, the point of emphasis however should be the response of Bhikkhuni Soma who gives a befitting reply to the god of desire, Mara mentioning that women too are fully capable of attaining enlightenment.

With this historical precedent, let us now look at the women who dared to take up the task Ambedkar envisioned for the Buddhist monastics to emancipate their community by spreading the message of dhamma and register a new identity, i.e. from being politically liberated Ambedkarite women to also becoming ‘social servants’ as ‘Ambedkarite Bhikkhunis’. Clearly, their task was much bigger than to simply be ‘religious teachers’, the underlying intention was to bring about a socio-cultural revolution by disbanding the customs and rituals of the Hindu tradition and adopting the rationality and ‘sacred morality’ offered by Buddhism and to empower the community to lead a dignified life.

The emergence of Indian bhikkhunis in Nagpur had a significant historical aspect which was given substantial attention in the previous sections. The socio-political environ of Maharashtra and Nagpur in particular led to the birth of strong, assertive and politically conscious Dalit Ambedkarites who either converted to or followed Buddhism, at the behest of their leader, *Babasaheb*. Though a number of men turned to monastic life and took the task to work as social servants for their community, it took 13 years after the mass conversion in 1956, for the first Ambedkarite woman, Bhikkhuni Vishakha Mahatheri, to take the robes and become a bhikkhuni and another 30 years to finally be recognised as a bhikkhuni in the Theravada lineage. This story of struggle will now be discussed in detail.

Three Generations of the Indian Bhikkhunis

³⁴ Charles Hallisey, (trans.), *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 45.

As mentioned earlier, the history of the revived tradition of the Indian bhikkhunis can be categorised into three phases: the first phase (1967-1990s) accounts for the first Ambedkarite women who took the robes but remained unrecognised as they were denied higher ordination till the International ordination in 1998; the second phase (1998-2013) reckons for the efforts of the ‘dhamma sisters’³⁵, Bhikkhuni Suniti and Bhikkhuni Vijaya Maitriya and the process of recognition and organisation of the Indian Bhikkhunisangha for the first time since the revival of Buddhism in India and; the third phase (2013-present) which accounts for the current on-going quest for socio-political liberation in the sangha and the society at large. It emphasises the role of the International alliances, the contribution of the lay-disciples and the role of the politically-conscious young educated women in carrying forward the legacy of the Indian Bhikkhunisangha along with the challenges they have to face.

The First Phase (1960s-1990s):

According to the members of the Indian bhikkhunisangha, the first Indian woman to be ordained as a bhikkhuni was Bhikkhuni Vishakha Mahatheri who was given ordination in Maharashtra by bhikkhu, Bhante Dhammakirti in 1967, yet her ordination and stature as a bhikkhuni remained unrecognised. However, after she received her higher ordination she was recognised as the oldest and the senior-most bhikkhuni across all countries that follow the Theravada tradition. Another senior bhikkhuni from the first generation is Bhikkhuni Sheelachara Mahatheri who was born in 1948 in Maharashtra as Sumitra Maronti Bhongale. Since a young age she was inspired by *Babasaheb* and was actively participant in social work. After spending 13 years in marital life she went against the will of her family and took ordination under Bhante Dharmakirti Mahathero and Bhikkhuni Vishakha on 14th April (the birth anniversary of Ambedkar) in 1973.

Recalling the decades of 1970s and 80s when she was a newly ordained samaneri and would accompany Bhikkhuni Vishakha village to village for the propagation of dhamma and desana³⁶ she said, “though they would often find kind upasakas but sometimes they could not even find a place to stay.”³⁷ It was then that both of bhikkhunis pledged to get a Buddha Vihar constructed for the Bhikkhunis. This came true in 1991 with the donation of a plot by some benevolent upasakas in Nagpur and the first vihara for bhikkhunis was constructed which they named after the first bhikkhuni and Buddha’s foster-mother, Mahapajapati Gotami. Bhikkhuni Sheelachara Mahatheri came to receiver her higher ordination (*upasampada*) at the first International Bhikkhuni Ordination on 15th February 1998 in Bodhgaya. She believes that “it is the difficulties that makes one self-dependent and when that happens, we transform from being people to ideas.”³⁸

During the time of the Buddha, most of the first bhikkhunis were from royal and other well-to-do households, though some unprivileged and marginalised women too joined the sangha as can be seen from the poem given below:

Chanda’s poem:

³⁵ ‘Dhamma Sisters’ is the name of the blog by Bhikkhuni Vijaya Maitriya on WordPress, in which she writes about the work she does along with her sister, Bhikkhuni Suniti.

³⁶ Desana refers to sermons and preaching.

³⁷ Bhikkhuni Sheelachara Mahatheri, Interview by Prajakta Lata Likhitarao Ramteke, *The Cover*, August 22, 2020.

³⁸ Ibid.

“In the past, I was poor, a widow, without children,
without friends or relatives, I did not get food or clothing,
Taking a bowl and stick, I went begging from family to family,
I wandered for seven years, tormented by cold and heat.
Then I saw a nun as she was receiving food and drink.
Approaching her, I said, “Make me go forth to homelessness.”³⁹

However, the women in the new revived tradition of Buddhism, i.e. the Navayana came largely from the unprivileged and marginalised backgrounds. While the first bhikkhunis of the classical tradition credit the Buddha for liberating them from their miseries, those in the revived tradition sought their liberation in the Buddha only when it is mediated by Ambedkar. Bhikkhuni Vinayasheela who decided to take the robes in 2007 after the passing away of her husband within one year of marriage, and received higher ordination in 2013 says that, “Buddha showed a path free from superstition while *Babasaheb* ensured the constitutional rights for the oppressed, paving way to lead a life of dignity.”⁴⁰

Similar sentiment is shared by Bhikkhuni Dhammnaina who finds her inspiration and emancipator in *Babasaheb* and says, “If he had thought about himself and his family, the rights that we have today would have been mere dreams.”⁴¹ Her husband who was a reputed officer in the government services was a follower of a mystic saint, which was in stark contrast to the 22 vows of Ambedkar. When her principles stood compromised, Bhikkhuni Dhammnaina decided to take the robes. When requested by her daughter to come back home, she firmly denied it with the following statement:

“Now I have an identity of my own. Neither am I known by my father’s name, nor by my husband or children’s. My own name is my identity to the world.”

Bhikkhuni Sumedha, who was born in 1946 and took the robes in 2009, reiterates the same and says: “I have found complete freedom after my *upasampada* in 2013. Today I am not a single person’s daughter, I am everyone’s daughter. I am not one person’s mother, I am everyone’s mother. It is because of Babasaheb Ambedkar that I could tread the path shown by the Buddha. If I am a bhikkhuni today, it is because of the constitutional rights given to us by *Babasaheb* that empowered women and because of his conversion to Buddhism. Earlier I would only hear about compassion for fellow beings, now I practise it.”⁴²

It took four decades for the first women who took the robes to not just construct a residence for the bhikkhunis but to be officially recognised as bhikkhunis too. On the other hand, a number of men were ordained across the country with a sturdy support from the politically prudent lay followers of Ambedkar. A very significant reason for this was the hostility of the bhikkhus towards the bhikkhunis, which then was eventually shared by the lay community as well. The first 29 women who received higher ordination in the first International ceremony reportedly faced resentment from the bhikkhus who publicly disapproved of their ordination and stature and refused to treat them as equal, despite a number of valid arguments being provided by the revivalists citing the same classical sources that the conservatives used to

³⁹ Charles Hallisey, (trans.), *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, p. 71.

⁴⁰ Bhikkhuni Vinayasheela, Interview by Pragati Ranjana Rajhans Borkar, *The Cover*, August 13, 2020.

⁴¹ Bhikkhuni Dhammnaina, Interview by Pratiksha Singh, *The Cover*; September 1, 2020.

⁴² Sumedha, Bhikkhuni, Interview by author, Sirpur, February 8, 2020.

deny the ordination.⁴³ This is striking given the common goal of socio-political emancipation of an entire community that had been marginalised and faced collective oppression for centuries. This hostility amplified the challenges of both those who already took the robes and those who wished for it, as the ordained bhikkhunis did not ordain any new bhikkhuni for at least ten years after the first official ordination. This changed when a well-read and well-accomplished advocate, Pratishtha, decided to take robes and became Bhikkhuni Suniti.

The Second Phase (early 2000s-2013): The Coming of the ‘Dhamma Sisters’

The second phase primarily marks the efforts of Bhante Suniti, later joined by her sister, Bhikkhuni Vijaya Maitriya, in organising the bhikkhunis to finally form a legally registered bhikkhunisangha and their work towards organising the youth of the community to carry forward the cause. Bhante Suniti was born as Pratishtha in an Ambedkarite household in 1963 and grew up to become an advocate and social servant (1990s-early 2000s). The primary objective of any Ambedkarite organisation or person is to fight against the caste-based atrocities, and packed with the same intention, Pratishtha joined multiple social action groups such as NCDHR (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights), HRLN (Human Rights Law Network) and BMAAS, and fought for the rights of the marginalised and marginalised women in particular and against caste-based atrocities. However, one question that she describes that always troubled her was, “Why do we take an action only when an atrocity has already taken place? Why don’t we do something to prevent it? After all, the POA Act that aims to safeguard the SC/STs⁴⁴ itself is called ‘Prevention of Atrocities Act.’”⁴⁵ With this resolve she decided to take the robes and work at the ground level to bring about a change and instill the idea of ‘sacred morality’ through the introduction of Buddha’s dhamma.

Dhamma-Yatras⁴⁶ in the Interiors of India (2006-2008)

After taking the first ordination, Bhikkhuni Suniti decided to conduct a country-wide survey, traveling from village to village to interact with the Dalit communities and gather more information about them. Beginning her journey in 2006, she travelled through 20 villages in four districts of the Konkan region in one month and covered all 32 districts of Tamil Nadu in the same year. The following year in August, she surveyed 24 districts in Uttar Pradesh and 15 districts in Odisha in January, 2008. She continued her journey and travelled to multiple villages and cities in Haryana, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and other states. Recalling an instance in Haryana, ironically with a laugh she says, “I was once thrown out from a house in Haryana, when the husband of the woman I was talking to, accused me of instigating and turning his wife against him.” She continues, “I did not get perturbed at all and continued my journey. Fortunately, I was welcomed by a Professor to his house who also asked me to give a lecture in his college the next day. The lecture had an audience of over 250 students who

⁴³ The book *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full ordination for Buddhist nuns* carry selected articles that were originally presented at an International Congress held in 2007 in Hamburg, Germany that aimed at discussing the revival and re-establishment of full ordination of the bhikkhunis across all Buddhist traditions.

⁴⁴ In the Indian Constitution ‘Scheduled Castes’ is the term used to refer to the Dalits and ‘Scheduled Tribes’ refer to those from the adivasi/tribal community.

⁴⁵ Bhikkhuni Suniti, Interview by author, Sirpur, February 9, 2020 and Phone Interview, September 25, 2020.

⁴⁶ Dhamma visits for sermons and preachings.

recited the ‘Trisaran Panchasheel’⁴⁷, so in a way what happened to me, turned out to be good,⁴⁸ she narrated with a smile.

Bhikkhuni Suniti was joined by her sister who for years remained in robes by getting ordained repeatedly as a samaneri and finally took ordination as a bhikkhuni and became Bhikkhuni Vijaya Maitriya. Prior to taking the robes, she too worked as a social activist at NCDHR (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights) and worked primarily on the Dalit victims seeking justice under SC/ST POA (Prevention of Atrocities Act). Recalling an incident when a male co-worker expressed concern for her safety, as she would often travel alone to villages which would lose electricity and transportation in the evening, following was her reply to him:

“I am fearless because I have enabled my children to carry forward my work and even fight for me if any ill incident were to happen to me. But if an untoward incident happens to you as you are under the same threat as me, have you empowered your wife enough that she can fight for you?”⁴⁹

During their visits to the villages and tribal-dominant areas of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Konkan, etc., some of the frequently asked questions by the lay-women are:

“If you are here, who is cooking at home for your husband? How can a woman abandon her house? Did your family members allow you to shave your head and take the robes? What about your children? Don’t you feel scared? If we abandon the Hindu rituals and practises, which rituals should we adopt and follow?”⁵⁰

These surveys, interactions with the people, and questions like these that reflect the familial obligations acting as the biggest barriers in letting women take the robes, enabled these bhikkhunis in chartering out the means and measures to be adopted if they wished to bring a significant change. Two means emerged as solutions: (i) simplifying the fundamental teachings of the Buddha such as the ‘trisaran panchasheel’ to better communicate with the people and (ii) working closely with the youth with as much emphasis on education as the dhamma.

Realising that the mere recitation is similar to the already existing rituals and customs of the Hindu tradition, Bhikkhuni Suniti found it important to simplify and also modify these precepts as per the language and the needs of present day society.⁵¹ Therefore, simple killing now included fist-fights and quarrels; stealing also meant to not touch others’ belongings without permission; most importantly, sexual misconduct came to cover a broad range of offensive acts to include eve-teasing, verbal and physical sexual assaults; lying was broadened to reject the use of abusive language and mindless gossiping; and finally, the pledge against intoxication covered a broad range of intoxicants available today. These five precepts were

⁴⁷ ‘Trisaran Panchasheel’ refers to the tri-recitation of the five precepts laid down by the Buddha, to be followed by the lay-disciples. They are as follows: not kill, not steal, not lie, not to indulge in sexual misconduct and not to get intoxicated.

⁴⁸ Bhikkhuni Suniti, Interview by author, Sirpur, February 9, 2020.

⁴⁹ Bhikkhuni Vijayamaitriya, Interview by author, February 10, 2020.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Bhikkhuni Suniti, Interview by author, Sirpur, February 9, 2020.

translated into many vernacular languages and distributed among the people. The bhikkhunis report that a number of women reached out to them and talked about how their husbands brought a change in their behaviour and habits since these practises were preached by the Buddha. The bhikkhunis further encouraged the women to use rationale and reason in decision-making citing the *Kalama-sutta*,⁵² according to which one must make decisions using their rationale and reasoning, instead of following the traditional sayings, prevalent teachings and given by the scriptures. They also encourage and emphasise acquiring education with hopes to challenge the conventional power structures.

Their second major focus is on working with the youth of the community and through their efforts a number of young Dalits were not only made aware but were motivated to join the cause working closely with both the bhikkhunis. The bhikkhunisangha started with organising a ten-day samaneri (novice nun) camp for the young females of the community. The first camp was in Akola District in May 2009 with the assistance of the upasikas (the lay female disciples). 18 girls shaved their heads to become samaneris while 18 became Angarikas (women who do not shave their head but become permanent disciples following the eight precepts) and took to white outfits. The Metta (Maitri) Sangha that aimed to work for the promotion of the bhikkhunisangha was set up which helped in organising four more samaneri camps in Nagpur and one in a small village in the Kohlapur district. Over the years multiple samaneri camps have been organised.

However, it has been observed that the youth of the community is inclined more towards political assertion rather than pledging to the socio-cultural movement of identity assertion. Even if they adopt Buddhism, few and even fewer among the women are eager to shave their head and take the robes. In order to make the programme more appealing to the younger folks, the schedule is devised as follows: in the morning, the sessions are on education and career choice, in the afternoon on the writings and vision of Ambedkar and the evening is allotted to the teachings of the Dhamma. Clearly, the attempt is to build a balance between two disciplines, 'polity' and 'socio-religious studies' in order to make the youth of the community, politically prudent and assertive of their socio-religious identity as well. A participant in one of these camps, Prajakta Lata Likhitrao Ramteke, a final year graduation student from Nagpur says:

“My Mother always gives the example of Dr. Ambedkar who fought for education and the rights of his people without giving excuses, while today’s youngsters choose to give up without fighting. For me, Dr. Ambedkar is like ‘the wick of a lamp’ the wick burned itself to ensure a better future for coming generations. It is upto us now to keep that lamp burning.”⁵³

Clearly, Ambedkar’s intervention of Buddhism has been well internalised within the Dalit community and therefore, it is difficult to imagine any dalit Buddhist who is not an

⁵² "Come, Kalamas, do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence [of a speaker], or because you think: 'The ascetic is our guru.' But when you know for yourselves: 'These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to welfare and happiness/then you should live in accordance with them.'" - Kalama Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya (AN. III.65)

⁵³ Prajakta Lata Likhitarao Ramteke, Interview by author, Sirpur, February 10, 2020.

Ambedkarite. It is important to emphasise what is meant by an ‘Ambedkarite’ in the socio-religious sense: it does not simply translate to mean one who has converted to/practises Buddhism. The conversion is complete only when they also adopt the 22 vows Ambedkar took on the day of his conversion. The initial few vows (1-6) are refusals to worship any Hindu god/goddess, therefore, Dalit Buddhist is one who accepts Buddhism only after completely rejecting Hinduism. A lot of new measures are being adopted to create more awareness about Ambedkar and the Buddha. Bhikkhuni Vijaya Maitriya’s daughter, Mayura Choudhari, who is a journalist/writer/filmmaker and also an upasika and active participant in the social action events organised by her mother and aunt informs about one such means. She says: “There is a surge in the use of cultural tools for dissemination of knowledge about Babasaheb and Buddha and against caste oppression. Various kinds of artists and cultural activists are working towards the cause, amplifying the already existing awareness campaign and strengthening the movement.”

Another work in progress in this direction is the attempt to build a training centre or school for the Bhikkhunis to train young samaneris for two years (which is the traditional training period as per the monastic law books) after which those who wish to continue can take the robes, while those who wish to go back to household life can do so. The bhikkhunis have already devised a proper curriculum and syllabus to be taught at these training centres, which include courses on Buddha, his dhamma as well as Ambedkar. Their objective is to create strong, feminist, independent Ambedkarite Dhamma followers to fight caste atrocities. Bhikkhuni Vijaya Maitriya says that they do not wish to increase the number of bhikkhunis, but expect sincere dedication from those who join.⁵⁴

At the organisational level, it is through the efforts of both these women that a legally recognised body of the Indian bhikkhunis came into existence when the newly ordained Bhikkhuni Suniti along with Bhikkhuni Sanghamitra of Mumbai declared the formation of the Indian Bhikkhuni Sangha on October 15th, 2006. The Sangha acquired legal sanction in June 2013 and was given the name: *All India Bhikkhuni Sangha* with Bhikkhuni Vishakha Mahatheri as its President. Another significant change that came to strengthen the bhikkhunisangha as an organised body was seen when, under the guidance of the senior bhikkhunis, the monthly⁵⁵ recitation of the Patimokkha (the traditional practise of reciting all the monastic rules) at the Mahapajapati Gotami Vihara was started. Gradually, multiple batches of Bhikkhunis received *upasampada* (higher ordination) at International events in 2009, 2012, 2013. There are currently 80-90 ordained bhikkhunis and in between 100-150 samaneris in the country. Out of the 400 viharas in Nagpur city, some 15 are under the care of the bhikkhunis.

The Third Phase (2013-Present): The Struggle for Democracy within the Sangha

As was previously mentioned the 29 Indian bhikkhunis who received higher ordination at the first International Ordination ceremony received a hostile welcome by the bhikkhusangha upon their return to Nagpur. However, the major support for the bhikkhunis came from the upasaka/upasikas. Given the hostility, disrespect and their own lack of confidence, the bhikkhunis did not give ‘pabbajja’ (first ordination) to any women for the first ten years after their ordination. Most of them were uneducated and felt under-confident to come together for

⁵⁴ Bhikkhuni Vijayamaitriya, Interview by author, February 10, 2020.

⁵⁵ The traditional recitation of the patimokkha as per the monastic law book (vinaya) is done bi-monthly.

organised sangha programmes. This changed during the second phases and through the efforts of the politically prudent bhikkhunis such as Bhikkhuni Suniti. This section will look at the means through which the bhikkhunis began and are carrying forward their struggle to reclaim democracy within the Buddhist sangha.

The first big support in their struggle came through the International alliances. Through the encouragement and support of the *International Bhikkhuni Sangha*, a training programme was organised for the Indian samaneris in November 2013. Bhikkhunis from Vietnam and Thailand came to Nagpur to train the bhikkhunis and samaneris. The Indian Bhikkhunis have been a regular participant at the *International Sakhyadhita Conference* (an annual conglomeration of Bhikkhunis and lay disciples from around the world), registering their presence in 2011, 2013 and 2015. In 2015, a few Indian Bhikkhunis were invited to Thailand for vassavasa (rain-retreat) and training.⁵⁶ It is important to note that majority of the Indian bhikkhunis do not converse in English, which has proved to be a major drawback at solidifying these alliances. Another important event in consolidating these alliances has been the *International Sirpur Conclave* which has successfully organised three annual events with the participation of hundreds of bhikkhu/bhikkhunis from around the world.

However, a big set-back for the bhikkhunis was observed during the third conclave which was dedicated to the Buddhist women and was called the 'First International Conclave of Bhikkhuni and Dhamma Discourse'. While over 300 bhikkhus attended the conclave in the previous two years, less than 100 bhikkhus were present for this. During one of the sessions, a heated debate broke out between the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, wherein the bhikkhu reiterated how the Buddha was against the entry of women. A comment of an upasika was registered who said, "The bhikkhunis must know how to behave. They should be the epitome of a good conduct."

And an even bigger impediment came from within the bhikkhunisangha when the senior-most bhikkhuni displayed utmost remorse and was highly apologetic for sitting on stage (a pedestal higher than the bhikkhus) while the bhikkhus sat down in the audience, for which she apologised to them with folded hands. Following the traditionalist ideals, the senior bhikkhunis do not completely approve of the means and methods of the new bhikkhunis. Similarly, the bhikkhus who express solidarity with the cause of the bhikkhunis are met with hostility by other bhikkhus.

The discouragement and hostility that the bhikkhunis are subjected to from within the 'democratic' monastic order has been a serious limitation of the revived Buddhist tradition. The non-cooperation of the senior bhikkhunis who are often silenced by the patriarchal elements who seem to let them be visible for mere tokenism, create onerous situations and draw unfavourable attitudes from the laity towards the more vocal and politically prudent junior bhikkhunis who register their dissent vigorously at the public platforms. The lay disciples have not shown as much favour towards the bhikkhunis as they have towards the bhikkhus and the bhikkhunis are often excluded from most events and initiatives. This is one of the major reasons that the bhikkhunisangha struggles with launching a Bhikkhuni Training Centre even to this day. Though it would be incorrect to say that the support and assistance of

⁵⁶ Bhikkhuni Suniti, 'Buddhism and Bhikkhunis in India', in Amarjiva Lochan (ed.) *Bhikkhunīs and Buddhist World: Issues in Contemporary Society*, Bangkok: RuenKaew Printing House, 2017, pp. 52-54; Bhikkhuni Suniti, Interview by author, Phone Interview, September 25, 2020.

the laity is completely absent, the emphasis is on the fact that there is no way forward without the support of the laity.

Observations and Challenges

It can be observed that the Indian bhikkhunis share some fundamental differences with those from Thailand. The former is a political conscious, social servant, trying to bring about emancipation of the oppressed community by instilling ‘sacred morality’ through the Buddha’s dhamma, while the Thai bhikkhunis are traditionalists, following a personalised aim when they take the robe. State sponsorship is present in the case of the latter which aims at the propagation of the religion to sustain state-governed Buddhist subjects. However, the Bhikkhunisangha in India could achieve whatever little success it did in reaching out to the marginalised households only with the assistance of some active upasaka and upasikas and strong will of a few politically prudent bhikkhunis. Thus it can be said that monastic-laity nexus is imperative for the continuity of the tradition. The International collaboration proved to be crucial in registering the presence of the Indian bhikkhunis. It was also seen that educated girls with the ambition of working at the grassroots level are encouraged to join the sangha. This is a breakaway from the traditionalist role of a bhikkhunisangha which has been assumed to be no more than a centre of refuge and rehabilitation of the women struck by miseries. Women in the newly set up bhikkhunisangha are expected to take up the new identity of an Ambedkarite Bhikkhuni who is politically empowered and socially dedicated.

To talk about the challenges, it is without a doubt that the non-cooperation of the bhikkhus is the biggest hurdle of the bhikkhunis today. The misogynist attitudes of the society at large and the ‘institutional androcentrism’⁵⁷ within the Buddhist sangha even after centuries only reflect how further along have we come as a society (or not). The absence of a ‘Bhikkhuni Training Centre’ further creates an obstacle of a common curriculum and hence a common road map to plan the future of the bhikkhunisangha. The International assistance, although it has proved significant, is limited as these bodies refuse to fund training centres if they would have courses on Ambedkar. They fail to identify the significance of Ambedkar in the lives of that section of the Indian community that is eager to convert to Buddhism. Another obstacle is the lack of networking at a national level which leads to unaccounted individual efforts that still have not received recognition. The bhikkhunis also express their concern about the competition from the fully-sponsored and well-furnished Vipassana centres that are gradually becoming popular in India and around the globe. The bhikkhunis describe the ten-day retreat programme carried out in these centres as escapism instead of offering a permanent solution to the miseries of people.

In conclusion, it can be said that as a consequence of the aggressive forces of Hindutva with their intimidating campaigns like ‘ghar wapasi’ and the idea of establishing a ‘Hindu rashtra’ over a secular India, the twin issue of ‘identity’ and ‘religion’ are at the forefront of social and political discourse in India.⁵⁸ The retort is not sought in violence but in a widely accepted cultural-counter, conversion. Buddhism has always appeared as a natural and favourable choice for the Ambedkarites, given Ambedkar’s conversion to it. In response to the recent caste-based sexual assault and murder of a Dalit girl from the valmiki⁵⁹ community, in

⁵⁷ Alan Sponberg, ‘Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism’, in J.I. Cabezón (ed.), *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1992, p. 13.

⁵⁸ Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*.

⁵⁹ As per the caste system of the Hindu social order, the valmiki caste is associated with cleaning, sweeping and scavenging.

Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, 236 valmiki families converted to Buddhism on October 14, 2020, the same day Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956.⁶⁰ Such instances occur independently and once in a while. After Ambedkar, there has never been a second call to a mass conversion led by a well-recognised political leader. Therefore, not much can be said about the future of this socio-cultural counter in the current circumstances. However, with the women at the forefront of carrying out most of the ritualistic traditions and customs observed by all households, it is the bhikkhunis with easier accessibility to the women of the community who can act as catalysts in this movement. If any significant impact is expected out of this socio-cultural revolution it can be achieved only through a nexus of a democratic bhikkhu-bhikkhuni sangha well-aided by a network of the lay-disciples at a national level. Nonetheless, only time will tell if India would ever achieve 'social democracy' and witness a strong politically conscious and socially emancipated community of the marginalised and the oppressed, one that was envisioned by their beloved leader, *Babasaheb*.

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