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BUDDHIST NUNS AND CIVIL ACTIVISM IN TRANSITIONAL MYANMAR

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Introduction

On the international level, the contributions of the Buddhists to the conceptualization and actualization of nonviolent action for social justice have been so great that two recent Nobel Peace prizes have gone to Buddhist leaders, the Dalai Lama of Tibet and Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar (Burma).

— Queen and King (1996: ix)

To be a Burmese is to be a Buddhist, and I will do whatever it takes to maintain this.

— Research participant (Conversation, Meiktila: November 2019)

Myanmar, formerly called Burma, is now infamously known for what the United Nations has termed “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” or for the February 2021 military coup that transformed the semi-civilian democracy of the country to stratocracy and declared a year-long emergency. Myanmar, since its independence from the British in 1948, has undergone several multidimensional transformations as a national unit. The internal civil wars, which began shortly after independence from the British, continue even to this day and have gravely affected the country’s stability. While some long-simmering ethnic conflicts have been less extensively covered by the international media, the Rohingya crisis has coerced the world to reimagine the potency of communal violence. On 23 January 2020, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) based in The Hague ordered Myanmar to take immediate measures to prevent the genocide of the stateless Rohingya Muslim minority, based in the northern Rakhine state. The court indicated four specific “provisional measures” in this regard, as requested by The Gambia in its 11 November 2019 application to the ICJ seeking proceedings against Myanmar for violating the 1948 Genocide Convention. Principally, the nation-state in Myanmar is a postcolonial construct, and not until 2010 were there national elections that propounded pro-democracy ideologies. Since its independence, the multi-religious and multi-ethnic set-up of the country has both challenged and inspired the daunting task of nation-building and socioeconomic development. The tensions between an unstable government, military rule and the ever-changing constitutional arrangements have mired the efforts to combat, mitigate or end
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conflicts. This grants powerful incentives for social movements that are infused with activism and agency. Prasse-Freeman (2016) observed that one of the most significant phenomena that has emerged since the transition from the military to semi-authoritarian setting in Myanmar is the “explosion of the collective social action” for mobilising the country for a macroeconomic and macro-political agenda (2016: 69), where these collective movements seek to recognise and redress issues of communal and national importance.

My aim in this chapter is to focus on the participation of Buddhist nuns, or ‘thilashin’ (in the Burmese vernacular), in civil activism in Myanmar as they negotiate their positionalities and navigate their roles. Buddhist nuns in Myanmar are not fully ordained as ‘bhikkhunis’ and are not considered to be formal members of the Buddhist sangha. Although the bhikkhuni ordination existed in Myanmar until around the 11th century (Queen and King 1996)—and since then there have been several attempts at reviving it—as of today, there are no bhikkhuni in Myanmar, only thilashins. The thilashins follow the Ten Precepts and their position is ‘in between’ laity and monastics. Kawanami (1990) describes their status as “ambiguous” and Carbonnel (2009) as “ambivalent”. In this chapter, I address the underlying tensions between religion, gender and activism, with the aim of shedding light on the ways in which Buddhist nuns conceptualise and actualise activism. Within this archaeology of agency-activism, I demonstrate how a nunnery as a ‘space’ can serve as a significant locale for activism and will conclude by suggesting the need to include more diverse voices and experiences in the realm of activism. While the popular narrative continues to be that “Buddhist nuns are women whose sons are dead, who are widowed, bankrupt, in debt heartbroken” (Kawanami 2016: 295), my findings are similar to Kawanami’s (2016) where I discover this to be far from the truth. Kawanami presents accounts of nuns who are independent, opinionated and resilient and actively deploy their agency in a meaningful way. Along similar lines, many of the nuns I engaged with not only were highly educated and politically aware, but also were vocal representatives of the religious and civil communities they were part of. In order to examine the contributions of these nuns, I discuss three national movements: Revolution 1988; the Saffron Revolution in 2007; and the ongoing 969 movement.

I unpack how these national movements impact the community of the Buddhist nuns and how these nuns impact the national movements. Although the Buddhist nuns have been involved in activism of different forms and in several capacities, their contributions have been underreported, and their motivations even less understood. As one key research participant explained, “we have always been involved in activism of some sort. In the past we operated underground, now we have emerged over the ground”. This study focuses on civil society activism and the contributions of the thilashins, as conceived, communicated and comprehended by them. It identifies two action frames that the thilashins perceivably are most interested in. Firstly, activism against the unjust discernments of the state and secondly, against those they categorise as a threat to the propagation of sangha and sāsana.

In this chapter, I consciously use the term ‘civil’, not ‘political’, to refer to these movements because, in principle, the thilashin (and also the monks/bhikkhus) are constitutionally disallowed from participating in politics or political movements. The government in Myanmar is wary of the influence of the clergy since, as Kawanami suggests (1990), they have the potential to undermine its authority. The thilashins tend to use the word pyithu, which means ‘movements’ in Burmese, to describe their activism, a word that refers to civil or public movements, therefore making a distinction with ‘naing gan yae’ (political movements). The data in this chapter is drawn from anthropological fieldwork conducted between September 2019 and January 2020, where everyday interactions and conversational analyses have been the prime ethnomethodology (Heritage 2013). The conversational approach emerged as an alternative to semi-structured and open-ended interviews because in a context of cultural repression, perpetual insurgencies,
sustained violence and enforced governmental monitoring, people are not very keen to respond to interview questions. In addition, conversations allow for a great degree of freedom, adaptability and in-depth probing (Valenzuela and Shrivastava 2002). This method, in addition to participant observations, has been useful in engaging with cultural idioms beyond the superficial levels. My research involved 88 Buddhist nuns, ranging in age from 17 to 91 years, with a median age of 55. They were selected by means of the popular ‘snowballing’ method whereby word of mouth publicity and recommendations from respondents helped in identifying research participants. The research was conducted in five cities: Mandalay, Meiktila, Mingun, Sagaing, and Yangon, of which I spent longer durations in Sagaing and Yangon.

**Contextualising Buddhist monasticism and activism**

Walpola Rāhula, a Buddhist monk and a scholar of Buddhist hermeneutics, noted, “The Buddha was just as clear on politics, on war, and peace” (Rāhula 1974: 84) as he was on other dynamics of culture. Rāhula studied the Dhammapadatthakatha—a key Buddhist text—and found that the Buddha made comments on ‘good governance’. Drawing on his interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings, Rāhula argued that politics has the potential to ‘hypnotise’ or mislead people by the use of the terms such as ‘national’, ‘international’, or ‘the state’; therefore, it is imperative to comprehend the ambivalence of political discourse before engaging with it. Despite the interpretation of Rāhula and others that the religious-moral domain encapsulated by the monastic community should refrain from politics, Queen and King (1996) observed that Buddhism in Asia is intricately associated with activism. In his study of Buddhist activism in Sri Lanka, Matthews (1996) argued that Buddhism, which is intricately related to Sinhalese identity and nationhood, is harnessed by those in power to respond to socio-political and economic crises, with some political parties having monks in leadership roles who have influenced the country’s political decisions (Tambiah 1992). Letizia (2014) showed how social activism has become a duty of the monks in Nepal’s adaptation of Buddhism where they dynamically organise and participate in social change and community-building causes. Ip argued in his (2009) study of Chinese Buddhism that the political activism that has been wired throughout the history of Buddhism needs to become an organic part of and accounted for in social everydayness in Buddhist communities. Nelson (2013), writing about Japan, maintained that with modernity, where the meanings of religion and society are heterogenous and fluid, monks were able to experiment with the manner in which Buddhism is interpreted and practiced, including enabling them to participate in political work. He recognised that the Buddhist clergy are eminent players in public life and that their voices and opinions can facilitate progressive social change.

These accounts feed into what the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh termed “Engaged Buddhism”,8 which proposes that the real essence of Buddhism is not to withdraw from the world but, rather, to engage in combating social and political injustices. Engaged Buddhism is perceived to be neither a defined sect nor a centralised movement (King 2009); instead, is a contemporary trend across different Buddhist traditions that focuses on practices rather than doctrine, though it draws from and expands traditional values of Buddhism (Rothberg 1992). It maintains that being non-violently and actively involved in a society is not a deviation from spirituality, but is rather an expression of the same. Engaged Buddhism, in conjunction with the ‘mediatised’ imagery of Buddhism as peaceful and otherworldly, points to the need to deconstruct the separation of the religious from socio-political life (Borup 2016). When Time magazine published an article on ‘The Face of Buddhist Terror’ in July 2013, it sharply contrasted its findings against the perceived image of Buddhism. It described monk Wirathu, the front-liner of the 969 movement9 and a founding member of MaBaTha,10 as the “Burmese Bin Laden”
against the otherwise accepted peaceful and calm narrative of Buddhism. It also made reference to ‘engaged Buddhism’ by detailing how the Buddhist clergy affects aspects of socio-cultural life, directly and indirectly. My study considers that the thilashins embody aspects of ‘engaged Buddhism’ while challenging our normative liberal conceptions of activism.

During Myanmar’s 2011 democratic national elections, the marriage between politics and religion did not emerge as a prominent pillar (Walton 2015). Buddhist identity or Buddhist rhetoric were not cardinal to election campaigns or policymaking; however, in subtle ways, the monastic community did impact national politics. The 2007 Saffron Revolution is an example of the interaction of the monastics and politics in Myanmar. During a research conversation, a lay Dhamma educator in her elucidation of this alliance between politics and religion elaborated that monastic people bring with them the notion of “sacred space”, and given the high regard every Burmese has for them, their messages have magnifying and lasting impacts. Myanmar does not have a state religion; however, implicitly, it has a “strong tradition of Theravada Buddhism” (Walton 2015). Even though Myanmar has witnessed the confluence of monasticism and politics since its precolonial era, this association, in partnership with the current ethno-nationalist agenda, is redefining the country’s political system. As Than (2015) noted, monks have engaged in distressing violent movements in order to defend their land and religion from the “perceived threat of the Muslims or Bengalis” (2015: 12), and they are rationalising violence in the garb of protecting their religion. Monks, in their sermons, encourage Buddhists to boycott Muslim communities and businesses, rendering them isolated and economically unstable. Than (2015) argued that the monks have been historically politicised and the alliance of religion and politics is exhorted because the monks are seen as vanguards of not just Buddhism, but also the race and nation. Buddhism is seen as the elixir to address all ills, and the monks are vested with the agency to mediate and facilitate this. In the words of a key research participant,

the monks have simply taken a stand against the military and political bureaucracy that was impeding the nation’s progress—they are doing it for the common public. Had the government prioritised the welfare of the ‘native’ people, the monks would not have to take to the streets and could stay away from politics. The thilashins will do what they can to support and honour what the monks do.

(Conversation, Sagaing: October 2019)

This feeds into the observations made by Queen and King (1996) that the justification of activism in Buddhist communities is entrenched in Buddhist identities and is often defined in terms of love, responsibility, and selflessness, even if it appears to be the opposite.

### Contextualising civil activism in Myanmar

The British left Myanmar in 1948 and the military took over the country in 1962. The military rule spanned for decades until 2010, when the country had its first democratic national elections. Turnell (2011) described this transition as a desirable detour from the “disciplined democracy” that the junta propagated. Although Myanmar’s democracy and economy continue to underperform, the country and its people have enjoyed better degrees of freedom since March 2011, though the situation since February 2021 has dramatically altered. As a monk who participated in the 2007 Saffron Revolution (see later) said, “we need democracy to talk about democracy” (Conversation, Mandalay: November 2019). Since the latter half of the 20th century, Myanmar has launched a series of political movements, and their activism has
been central in confronting the hegemony of power (Nelson 2013). There have been several uprisings in Myanmar, but one that laid the foundation for its fervent democracy is the 8888 Revolution (also called 88 or Revolution 1988). When Aung San Suu Kyi—who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her resilient efforts to help Myanmar transition from military rule to a democratic country and became state counsellor of Myanmar representing the National League of Democracy in 2011—returned to Myanmar after living in India and the UK in 1988, she confirmed her support for the liberation movements. On 8 August 1988, students, monks, and nuns assembled around Suu Kyi's house and shouted slogans of democracy and held placards against oppression by military rule. Recollecting the time, an old thilashin narrated that the country was in complete shambles, and people were so deprived of anything basic that Myanmar swelled with protests nationwide to challenge the grisly coup of 1962 (Conversation, Yangon: October 2019). A businessman, a student back in 1988, who was taken as a political prisoner revealed that there was no alternative left than to remonstrate because the injustice was beyond words. He substantiated this with an example he vividly remembers where “human shields were used by people in power to protect themselves; monks were beaten and tortured; and monasteries were vandalised” (Conversation, Yangon: October 2019). Milbrandt (2012) found 8888 to be the largest organised uprising in Myanmar's history and believed that it typified modern activism in the Burmese context.

The Saffron Revolution of 2007 was in many ways a follow-up to the 88 Revolution (Selth 2008), and it manifested the complex intersectionality of the monastic community and politics. Monks were central to this movement, and the colour saffron alludes to the colour of their robes. This mutiny occurred in response to the muted latitude of the military government and the harsh economic and political decisions that mobilised the entire country. A monk who planned the initial protests in Pakokku—in the Magway region of Myanmar and the town in which the Saffron Revolution was planned and started—narrated with pride that he still must attend the court for hearings because he was prosecuted for demonstrating against the military regime. However, this does not bother him; he is convinced the movement altered the course of Myanmar's political discourse for the better leading to a semi-democratic government until February 2021. What he, and some of his friends, started as fringe actions in opposition of the government's harsh regulatory norms was gradually adopted and endorsed by most of the country (Conversation, Mandalay: November 2019).

Lastly, the uprising that has taken centre stage and has impacted geopolitics internally and outside Myanmar is the 969 movement, which is primarily designed on the principles of religious chauvinism, ethnocentrism, and ultra-nationalism, rendering more than 730,000 people stateless as of 2018. 969 is symbolic of the three jewels (or Triyana) of Buddhism: Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha—969 is a skilful adaptation of 786 as it is symbolic of similar sentiments across both the traditions, and 969 is a bigger number than 786, which is symbolic of power. Section 361 of the constitution in Myanmar acknowledges that there is a “special position of Buddhism as the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens”, while Section 362 maintains that the country's legislation also “recognises Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism”. Despite the secular visions presented in the constitution, intercommunal tensions have been consistent with Myanmar's history. Horsey (2015) observed that religious dogmatism not only is popular, but also enjoys tremendous support from the masses. He noted that the Ministry of Religious Affairs that was set up in 1948 engages chiefly in Buddhist affairs and their political mandates conspicuously favoured the Buddhist community. Horsey confirmed that the robust grassroots support, especially from the Buddhist clergy, influenced legislation greatly. Than (2015), in her study on Wunthanu (Burmese term for nationalist movements), reflected on the distressing thought of having to watch and read about monks and nuns with weapons.
in nationalist movements, and how they justify their actions veiled under *loving one’s race*. The ubiquity of religious interference and bias in Myanmar where the Buddhist clergy regularly interact with the policy matters renders the government’s attempt at a secular-liberal political framework a ruse.

**Thilashins and activism in transitional Myanmar**

In addition to the essentialisation of Buddhism as an intrinsically peaceful religion, some scholars (e.g. Findly 2000; Faure 2009) argue that Buddhism is one of the most gender-egalitarian traditions. Others dispute this interpretation (e.g. Sponberg 1992; Gross 1993; Gethin 1998; Salgado 2013) and argue that even where women are given positions of leadership in Buddhism they will always be inferior to men. However, in Myanmar, women being unable to obtain full ordination status is intimately tied into gendered discrimination, and some thilashins employ the route of activism to reinstate this. For instance, Daw Su Santi, a thilashin in Yangon, shared with me that her sister was the first from Myanmar to attempt to get ordained and travelled to Sri Lanka where the bhikkhuni ordination is possible. However, on returning to Myanmar she was imprisoned, and therefore not allowed to be a bhikkhuni. After negotiations at the courts and in sangha meetings, she was released six months later, and in her words, “was forced to leave Myanmar” and now lives in the USA. Daw Su Santi is herself seeking ordination in Thailand, encouraged by her sister to fulfil the spiritual aspirations that she could not (Conversation, Yangon: January 2020).

While thilashin might be aware of gender disparities in Buddhism and sometimes seek to address them (as with the example of seeking ordination), one must be mindful of the possibility of “narrative disjunction” (Salgado 2013: 7), where the reality of the researcher and the researched may vary. In my studies around gender, I have found that thilashins place themselves within two categories. Some think of themselves as renunciants before women, as Salgado (2013) also noted with respect to her research in Sri Lanka, and do not see gender discrimination as might be understood in the West. Others not only are expressive about their discriminated status, but also apply the term “feminism” to substantiate their standpoints, in ways as might be understood in the Western context, although it is important to emphasise heterogeneity in each of these contexts.

Broadly, women in Myanmar are viewed as second-class citizens. For instance, women are not recruited for active duty in the Burmese military, and this has a direct impact on their right to political participation because, even in democratic Myanmar, it is difficult for individuals to occupy leadership positions without military experience (Bhagowati 2014). Exceptions only exist for elite women connected to men in politics (Aung 2017). Moreover, Burmese women’s activism is mainly supported by young women from urban areas and women who have obtained higher education (Maber 2016). Neither women nor their contributions are acknowledged in political movements, and when they are, it is presumed to be exclusively from secondary positions (Steinberg 2013). Women in religious robes further problematise the gendered functioning of the Burmese communities, and the ambit of activism is no exception. Women religious leaders experience a ‘double discrimination complex’ as they are marginalised as women and as women renunciants. For these women renunciants to participate and enable activism is often treated with not just confusion, but also contestations.

The rise of what Frydenlund (2020) called ‘Buddhist protectionism’ in Myanmar has offered space for the monastic community not only to express their fears in the public domain, but also to mobilise the religious community in Myanmar to manifest their concerns through activism in a more systematic fashion. ‘Buddhist protectionism’ refers to the rhetoric and discourse that
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aims to protect Buddhism from all influences that are perceived as a hindrance to its practice and growth, particularly against the threats of ‘Islamisation’. While much has been studied about male monastics participating in (or taking advantage of) ‘Buddhist protectionism’, the thilashins and their contributions are less known. This is part of a broader androcentric trend within scholarship and meaning making in Buddhism, which has tended to treat monks as key informants (Kawanami 2013). In the following sections, I draw on my ethnographic research to outline how thilashins impact activism, and how activism impacts the thilashins.

**The 88 revolution**

One of the most fearless women I met during my time in Myanmar was a chief-thilashin of a cluster of nunneries in Mandalay. She laid out at the very beginning of our conversations that “Buddhism is my life, I can do anything to protect it—even if it means sacrificing my life for it”. When talking about revolutionary movements, her eyes lit up and she narrated with utter pride,

> I not only planned, I held the flag right up and high during the 88 demonstrations. During the protests, I was not scared of the military crackdown; but gradually after being witness to the indiscriminate beatings and killings, I was afraid of being arrested or beaten.

*(Conversation, Mandalay: October 2019)*

She was in her 70s but swift to open her old rusted-steel cupboard to fish out the badge she wore on her arm during the demonstrations. She confessed that in the climate of high political surveillance,17 most thilashins are scared to own their contributions in the revolution for fear of being imprisoned; and alongside admitting her reluctance and reservations in sharing her story, she said that as she is getting old she thinks there is a need for these stories to be told before they are lost.

Despite the participation of the thilashins in the 88 uprising, there are barely any media reports or literature that documents their contributions. An abbess I had detailed conversations with seemed to have difficulty in acknowledging that the thilashins have contributed or could contribute to activism. She maintained that the thilashins are perpetually and indiscriminately subjacent, and only the monks are capable of initiating social change. This is testimonial to the extent to which gendered roles are normalised in Myanmar. I had to be borderline provocative and to rearticulate the question in order for her to reorient her thoughts. I asked, “given that the monks imperil their lives for the country and religion, how do the thilashins support them?” Carefully wording her sentences, she thereafter shared stories18 that underpin and intensify the roles of the thilashins in activism. Throughout her accounts, she used the phrase ‘Tà cho thilashin’ which translates to ‘some thilashins’, indicative of generalisation and almost circumventing particularities. She narrated that some thilashins wrote powerful poems and prose on the topics such as religion, freedom, race and motherland using pen names or in anonymity, while others printed and distributed them. Later, on an independent occasion, she showed me a newsletter that even though banned by the government continued to operate undercover with the help of networks that involved the thilashins. Furthermore, oftentimes the printing presses were housed in the nunneries. These newsletters and some brochures were usually distributed by the thilashins when they went to gather alms or when their donors visited their nunneries. Several people who read these articles became inspired and subsequently joined the movement. She joked that if I were with the police, she could be arrested for telling me these stories. Politics around censorship are complex in Myanmar, and people are wary of the comments and commitments
they make, especially concerning political loyalties and sensibilities. This brings into question the anthropological dilemma where it is an ethical imperative to acknowledge the underlying fear of the research participants and what that may reveal. As Linda Green (1995) suggests, fear is the response to danger, and it can penetrate social memory. Initially we think of this as a reaction, but on deeper and prolonged examinations we understand it can be a condition. The fear has surfaced in blatant and subtle forms throughout my research, and my deliberations and analyses of my data have accounted for that. For instance, the thilashins were in perpetual fear of the military and the police even in their absence, and they often corroborated their feeling by narrating some experiences of brutality during the military rule. In retrospect, this condition of fear is testimony to the viciousness of policy and practice of the military. Understanding and contextualising fear in this context is important because the politics of fear has dominated the public discourse in Myanmar for years (Frydenlund 2020).

The Saffron Revolution

There is a consensus among scholars that the single act that undermined the legitimacy of the junta was the violent suppression of the so-called Saffron Revolution in 2007 (Rogers 2008; Selth 2008; Steinberg 2013). Rooted in economic frustrations, the protests of 2007 quickly gained momentum. The demonstrators walked past Aung San Suu Kyi’s residence, where she greeted them at her gate although she was under house arrest. In response, the junta violently suppressed the protests, and the clergy were not exempt (Rogers 2008). When the Buddhist monks suffered at the hands of the military, it was received as a wake-up call for the people to rise in resistance and revolt. This eventually resulted in a regime change from the military to a semi-civilian government led by ex-general President Thein Sein. Rogers (2008), Steinberg (2013), and Aung (2017) acknowledged the cursory roles of women as supporters who helped with the distribution of water and food, but not as much as a radical force that stimulated change. One of the monks who had conceptualised the movement and drafted parts of its agenda accepted graciously that the thilashins helped to mobilise the grassroots and amplify the effects nationwide. In his opinion, involving the thilashins added ‘cultural value’ to the movement. This observation lends itself to Kumari Jayawardena’s (2016) propositions that women in nationalist movements embody and represent cultural and ethical traits that enable favourable conditions for the movement.

On recollecting her thoughts and experiences of the 2007 uprising, a thilashin narrated,

The monks are the vanguards of this country and Buddhism, followed by the thilashins, then the soldiers, and then the rest. The monks live a life only to help the society prosper. If the government did their jobs right, the monks would not have to venture into politics. The monks had to pick up bamboo sticks only in order to protect us and the future of the country.

(Conversation, Mandalay: October 2019)

Even before I could follow up, she asserted, “protecting the land is the will of The Buddha, and the monks are only mediating the process”. She also emphasised the role of young people and described them as the strength of the movement, illustrating how young monks’ association members would often visit the nunneries to help the thilashins prepare for the revolution. Another thilashin who bonded with me over English language lessons and our mutual interest in Bollywood movies shared with me a story in passing that unmasked a pervasive and profound underlying strategy of activism with socio-political and economic bearing. She disclosed that
for the 2007 Saffron Revolution, the process of alms collection was sometimes used to gather, process and distribute information. She claimed that even the police were less sceptical of the thilashins, and this allowed the thilashins to correspond with and coordinate between the monks and the laity in order to effectively organise the protests. Internet was less accessible and cyber censorship during that time was at its highest, thus rendering online media less useful in mobilising and organising people (Conversation, Yangon: October 2019). However, this has drastically changed in recent times, and the internet has a vital role in the ongoing movements in Myanmar.

**The 969 movement**

There is no denying that the ongoing 969 movement is the most difficult and problematic one to discuss given that the people (both monastic and lay alike) are conspicuously distraught with the elevated levels of patrolling from the government and the rigid criticisms this has received from across the world. MaBaTha, the most prominent ultra-nationalist organisation in Myanmar, has the core mandate to protect race and religion, and as rightly described by the International Crisis Group Report (2017), 19 “the nature of MaBaTha and the extent of its popularity are widely misunderstood, including by the government”.

A senior office holder, who is most likely to succeed Wirathu, revealed that their workforce comprises large numbers of women, including thilashins. He said, “women feel empowered and valued associating themselves with the community welfare works” (Conversation, Meiktila: December 2019). MaBaTha trains women members in community welfare work, offers scholarship and education loans, prioritises them in times of natural disasters, provides counselling and legal help in marital matters and most importantly gives them a sense of agency and belonging. In turn, the women feel that their participation elevates their political agency and helps them to voice their concerns and enable their community-level outreach.

A thilashin I met in Mingun showed me a picture of her at the Rakhine-Bangladesh border volunteering to distribute items for relief measures. Scrolling through her phone’s gallery, she narrated that she believes in the cause of MaBaTha because what they do is a form of reaction/response to what Buddhists have been subjected to, and to do justice and rectify the “wrong-doing” of other communities. She said that her activism is not against anyone; rather, for Buddhism; and the people/communities that may cause hindrances in her objectives will face consequences. She underscored that Myanmar is a country for Buddhists and all are welcome; but they should accept their status as ‘guests’. Throughout the conversation she was careful to not mention any specific ‘other’, and reiterated that in the garb of protecting Buddhism, MaBaTha is securing the future of their religion and the country. She supported her statements by narrating that MaBaTha undertakes fundraisers for the cause of education, and her nunnery, which is home to several thilashins in the age group 3–7 from the war-torn regions, benefits greatly from their grants (Conversation, Mingun: December 2019). Another thilashin, an educator I met in Wirathu’s monastery in Mandalay, shared with a thrill that she had a chance to meet Wirathu once and was inspired by his vision for the country. She seemed disappointed at the media’s role in presenting the 969 in a negative light and insisted that it had failed to capture the impact it has had at the grassroots. She was convinced that the powerful Muslim-majority countries had a role in influencing the international media. When the Meiktila conflict happened in 2013, she was a witness. Her nunnery rescued people from the “violent men” who “harmed” the Buddhist community irrespective of them being elderly, children or women. She told me, “The Muslim men at the central mosque in Meiktila used loudspeakers to announce
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that they want to bathe with the blood of the monks! How do you think such things can be
tolerated? Only Buddhists can tolerate such things; but enough is enough” (Conversation, Man-
dalay: October 2019). There was a curfew for a week, and the thilashins provided for the people
taking shelter in their nunnery. She told me that she had recently attended the sixth anniversary
meeting of MaBaTha, which was an undisclosed event only for proactive members, and has
pledged to continue to volunteer with them. Her activism is to “teach” the Muslims that the
Buddhists too can have a patience threshold.

The nunnery as a space for activism

Pierre Bourdieu in Outline of a Theory of Practice argued, “a space has no meanings apart from
practice; the systems of generative and structuring dispositions, or habitus, constitutes and is
constituted by actors’ movement through space” (Bourdieu 1977: 214). This implies that the
significance and function of the nunnery is shaped by what the people in the nunnery prac-
tice. This is in line with Jerryson’s (2009) observation that monasteries in Thailand, following
the imposition of martial law in 2006, served as spaces for different arrays of shared identi-
ties and had discreet relationships with the state, the military and politics, where the state
militarised Buddhist space and, with it, Buddhist identities (Jerryson 2009: 25). Likewise,
a nunnery can be viewed as a ‘moral geography’ (Smith 2000)—in which morality, space
and power intersect—where the nuns and those concerned utilise the space for not just reli-
gious and communal purposes, but also socio-political activities. The nunnery is founded on
moralties, and in turn, it shapes moralities. Besides this, nunneries are also spaces symbolic
of safety and security. They are home, for instance, to young female children who are left at
the doorsteps of the nunneries after their families have died or fled as a consequence of civil
war; here, the nunnery turns into a space for humanitarian action. Most of these children
eventually become thilashins. A thilashin from Meiktila, recalling the Buddhist-Muslim riots
of 2013, revealed,

The police, junta, or Muslims may dare to enter monasteries, but they do not come to
the nunneries, usually. Many who were scared thinking that the violence may escalate,
took shelter in our nunnery for weeks. Nobody thinks of nunneries as a place beyond
a religious one.

(Conversation, Meiktila: November 2020)

A thilashin from Sittwe, Rakhine, who moved to Yangon as a consequence of the war, told me
that when the Buddhist-Muslim violence was still in its nascent stage, people from both sides of
the community would seek temporary shelter in the nunnery, and the thilashins would comply.
She also revealed that her nunnery in Sittwe was located on the main road connecting “Muslim
quarters”223 to the Buddhist neighbourhoods, so she, along with her few other thilashins, often
notified monks and lay Buddhist community leaders when they observed anything alarming in
the Muslim quarters (Conversation, Yangon: January 2020).

Some newsletters, including some that the MaBaTha strongly advocate, were embargoed by
the government. Nunneries were found to be places where the processing of these magazines
and newsletters could continue. Many thilashins I spoke with were convinced that doing this
would help them earn merit, because ultimately, this is done to assist the highly reputed monks
in service of the Buddha and the country. While the nunnery as a physical space for activism
continues, cyberspace supports online activism that enables sharing information and mobilising
people. An abbess in Sagaing explained to me how some thilashins came into the nunnery as

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children and have never really connected with the outer world. Social media is another outlet where the thilashins exercise agency in the discourse of activism. Social media gives them a sense of ‘being involved’ in the topical discussions that are ‘trending’, and they also feel empowered to be able to contribute in some ways to the ongoing political discussions and movements. A few nunneries have wireless internet connection in their compound, and the abbess of one such nunnery conceded that cyberspace is the new geography for activism. She substantiated with examples:

We have Facebook pages where we implore the government to remove charges against Wirathu—he has done so much for our country. We also post notifications about donation ceremonies, events, protest marches, and meetings on social media—it is the best place for advocacy these days.

(Conversation, Sagaing: November 2019)

Conclusions

Since the military took over in February 2021, there have been severe internet blackouts and ban on media usage across Myanmar. Some days ago, I read a newspaper article twenty-four on how the nuns are actively taking to the streets to protest, spreading awareness, volunteering in makeshift hospitals, and offering shelter to those in need—all while being fully aware that the military are randomly shooting people on the streets and have resorted to indiscriminate killings. I thought I recognised a thilashin from Mandalay who was interviewed in that newspaper article and I decided to reach out to her. My concern was that her name was not anonymised, and she could be in peril for that. Much to my relief, I was able to connect with her and learnt that she was featured for her fearless strategies to challenge the military and for her work in the local community. On expressing my concern around her not de-identifying herself in the article, she said,

I stand by what I said about the military and that I will protest against it. My activism is rooted in my conviction of what I think is good for my country and my people; and where there is such a sense of conviction, there is no place for doubt or fear. . . . Be it the 88 revolution or my work with the MaBaTha, my activism is my identity—it is my way to show I care, and it is my way to tell myself that I have done my bit. . . . I insisted the journalist reporting on the stories mention my name.

This conversation underscores the strength and the vigour with which the thilashins participate in activism and furthers the relationship between agency and activism. Activism for some, particularly women who embody Buddhist and spiritual leadership, may be perceived as transgressions; therefore, it is important to engage with activism that is lesser known and even lesser understood. The intersectionality of the female faithful, culture and civil activism often spells out chaos and tension; and in these tensions, there is space for renewed agency (Rapoport 1996). Scholarship on activism should be willing to accommodate beliefs and practices that may be incongruous to the mundane objectives of the movement. For instance, female renunciants and their interactions with activism are often seen as deviations or derivations from convention frameworks of activism. Continuing to invest in theoretically informed deliberations backed with accounts of lived experiences of activism will critically explore the inspiration for and implications of civil activism. Focusing on dynamics that are often too obvious or conveniently
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snubbed may offer novel understandings of the concept of activism in a wider sense of the term. Also, conducting ethnography to examine activism is highly significant as it enables access to the lived realities of activism.

To conclude, I construct an imaginary matrix where, at one end, we visualise Buddhist nuns as being victims of social biases and conflicts and, on the other extreme, these women in religious robes and shaven heads are leading protest marches and affecting grassroots changes. These two images occur in parallel worlds and sometimes simultaneously. However, it is problematic that the former imagery often eclipses the latter. The positionality of the thilashins continues to be ambiguous and in between the “social perceptions and their actual standing” (Kawanami 1990: 36). The dilemma they face concerning their status and roles are culturally conditioned; however, it can sometimes enable them to escape their struggles and reassert their agency. The role blockage has not been able to dissuade them from actively participating in the socio-political movements for the causes they think are just, and that has made room for what I call an ‘alternate identity’ where the thilashins are self-identifying with roles other than what is traditionally offered for them. It is important to unpack the layers of these complexities and tensions within the realm of alternate identity and address the broader issues of the gendered discourse of activism, and monastic women and activism. There are diverse ways in which thilashins imagine, participate in, describe and validate their activism, where their activism helps them make meaning of their agency. It is the avenue for them to express and experience resilience and dignity. Their civil voluntarism establishes a dialectical relationship between constraint and agency. Assessing the motivations and methods of participation of the thilashins in culturally scripted roles or those that are perceived as transgressions, especially in times of heightened nationalism painted in religious schisms, offers significant insights and alterities to social structuration as we understand it. A systematic reading of the civil activism of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar invites our attention to the larger debates surrounding activism and gender, activism and religious actors, activism and social change. The subject of activism, especially in the context of a nation under transition, is important. Irrespective of activism reaching its desired objective, what remains substantial is the process and what that means for the country and its people. Myanmar’s ongoing civil disobedience movement against its military regime has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2022, and varying modes of this nationwide activism has thilashins at their forefront. Myanmar may or may not win the Nobel for their incessant and powerful methods of advocacy against the brutality of the junta, but they will continue to inspire the world by their activism.

Notes

2 The military or Tāmajnaw (in Burmese) seized power of the country on the 1 February 2021 by detaining Aung San Suu Kyi and other politically elected leaders declaring an emergency in the country for a year. The commander-in-chief of the armed forces is now in control.
3 The provisional measures are applied by the ICJ to protect the parties involved in the judicial case until the final verdict in the matter is reached and to ensure that the situation is not aggravated.
5 Sangha is the most integral organisation of the Buddhist community traditionally comprising four groups of people—monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. They organise and curate all activities within the community—social, religious, political and even legal.
6 Ten Precepts, or dasa-sīla in Pali, refers to the ten (dasa) morality (sīla) codes that the thilashins must vow to abstain from, and this is the core of their spiritual existence.
Śāsana in Pali or Sanskrit translates to doctrine. In the Buddhist context, it refers to the teachings of the Buddha.


969 is the nationalist movement that aims at protecting and promoting Buddhist values in Myanmar and refers to the nine virtues of the Buddha, the six core practices of Buddhism, and the nine principles of the Buddhist community. I will discuss this movement in greater depth in the ensuing sections.

MaBaTha is the Burmese acronym for Ah-myo Batha Thathana Sanh Shaung Ye a-Pwe which is translated to English as ‘Association for Protection of Race and Religion’. This is an informally organised group comprising the monastic and the laity that is aimed at protecting and promoting Buddhism.

Dhammā in Pali (and Dharma in Sanskrit) refers to a host of meanings that are loosely translated to English as righteousness, fundamental path, or the most important principle in the life of a Buddhist. Literally, the word is derived from ‘to bear, support or hold together’. The Dhamma is the natural law that holds together the cosmos physically and morally, which the Buddha is believed to have taught.

Theravada Buddhism is the oldest known surviving school of Buddhism that is prevalent mostly in Southeast Asia, and the adherents believe that the Pali Canon is the highest authority on Dhammā.


The values attached to feminism in the West, and the liberation that accompanies it, may not be the same in the East. Here, thinking of the East and West as homogenous or uniform categories too is problematic. However, feminism in the West, generally speaking, is characterised by protecting, respecting and empowering women and exhorting greater degrees of intervention and influence of women in public discourses.

‘Buddhist protectionism’ is the politics around Buddhist understanding of religious freedom in Myanmar where they maintain that they need to protect Buddhism from the perceived threats of Islam and the Muslim people.

I did my fieldwork in 2019–2020 during Suu Kyi’s government. Despite that, the people were conspicuously scared of the military and were convinced that they were being watched and their actions were being noted.

She changed her mind because she thinks she is bound by duty to help the monks in their efforts to protect the nation and the religion; however, she is convinced she is incapable of doing so on her own. This attitude is widespread, and this is seen as modesty and ensuring that the monks are always at the centre view, while the thilashins help only in fringe roles.


The civil war continues to severely affect Shan and Kachin regions of Myanmar. The children whose parents die as a result of the violence, or flee to countries like Thailand or China, are left in the nunneries. Many of these children are as young as two and three. They are accepted by the nuns, and the adult nuns look after these children. I am told that the best way to let them continue to live in the nunneries and provide for their education, clothing, and health is by making the children thilashins.

In March 2013 a riot broke out between Buddhist and Muslims in Meiktila where two people died and about 60 were injured. Of all the terrifying things this conflict displayed, a monk being burnt alive and a mosque being completely vandalised were the most disturbing occurring. Even to this day, there are ghettos (the locals call it “quarters”) where the Muslims live, and the social interaction between these two communities is very low.

A ‘moral geography’, as per DM Smith (2000) in his work Moral Geographies Ethics in a World of Difference, is a space where morality is key to its existence and where the everyday practices in that space are regulated by morality/moralities.

Muslim quarters were colloquially used to refer to Muslim ghettos—these separated spatial arrangements have been normalised in several cities in Myanmar.

The article was published by The Christian Science Monitor but was later taken down for concerns around security of the Burmese people mentioned in it.
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References


