

A Survey Study of The Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi Conventions

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Abstract

At present, the monastery-centered Bhikkhu Vinaya faces various challenges. In response, contemporary scholars have proposed the establishment of a modern convention. However, a review of the Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi conventions reveals that past reform efforts were undertaken through similar conventions in response to disciplinary decline. Yet there remains no definitive understanding as to whether conventions can serve as valid models for modern reform of discipline. Therefore, it has become necessary to investigate whether such conventions in the medieval period effectively functioned as reform mechanisms to prevent the deterioration of monastic discipline, and whether adequate studies on this matter already exist. The aim of this study is to

critically review the existing research and, if any gap is identified, to address it. Accordingly, employing a qualitative, literature-based methodology, this study analyzes data drawn from primary Pāli sources, medieval inscriptions, and commentarial literature, alongside secondary research published between 1906 and 2025. A bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer software is also conducted to identify research trends and gaps between 1960 and 2020. These findings highlight a significant lack of modern focused research on the Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi conventions. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of revisiting these historical precedents in order to assess the feasibility of a modern convention, particularly in terms of bridging classical disciplinary traditions with present-day realities.

Keywords: Buddhist Monastic Law, Conventions, Dambadeṇi Katikāvata, Modern Vinaya, Poḷonnaru Katikāvata

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Introduction

This survey study is undertaken with the objective of exploring the Polonnaru and Dambadeni Conventions of Sri Lanka. The need to conduct such a study arises particularly in light of the limited scope of previous research and the evident research gap concerning this subject, especially between the years 2020 and 2025, even within widely accepted academic websites and scholarly publications on Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. This investigation aims to fill that gap by examining the critical discourse surrounding the current monastic Vinaya system among Sri Lankan Theravāda monks and the growing proposal for establishing a modern convention. Through this, it seeks to critically assess whether such a convention could indeed serve as a viable solution to contemporary issues in monastic discipline. To accomplish this, the study intends to analyze the signs of decline in monastic discipline during the medieval era, particularly in the periods of Polonnaruwa and Dambadeniya, and how conventions were used as reformatory tools to address such crises. The research will assess whether these conventions effectively safeguarded the integrity of the Saṅgha by adapting timely and appropriate disciplinary reforms. Accordingly, due to the scarcity of modern comprehensive prior studies on this specific theme, conducting a literature review on the existing body of research becomes a central aim of this study. This review will not only establish the present state of scholarly works but will also clarify the necessity and direction of the current investigation.

In the year 1883, the Polonnaru Convention, also known as the Mahāparākramabāhu Convention, entered the scholarly world as a printed text. This prompted many scholars to study it with particular attention. Since then, scholars have gradually been motivated to introduce to the wider world various conventions established by Sri Lankan Theravāda monks concerning the Vinaya, through different objectives. Although the Polonnaru Convention was regarded as an archaeological inscription, other conventions have also been presented through both archaeological and written sources, as evidenced in historical records. In 1922, D. B. Jayatilaka presented his work titled *Katikāvat saṅgarā*, and later scholars examined this work as a manuscript, also directing special attention toward studying the Dambadeni *Katikāvat*. In 1995, Venerable Yatadolawatte Dhammavisuddhi published his research work under the title *Polonnaru-hā-Dambadeni-Katikāvat*, presenting a study on the nature of the monastic community in medieval Sri Lanka.

At present, within the Sri Lankan context, many scholars who are dissatisfied with the current state of Bhikkhu Vinaya are proposing the establishment of a modern convention. Against this backdrop, scholars have turned their attention once again to the study of historical conventions with renewed interest. It can be observed that during the medieval period of Sri Lanka, the Polonnaru and Dambadeni conventions played a significant role within the religious framework by engaging in the process of Vinaya

reform. However, what is expected in this study is not merely a historical analysis, but rather an understanding of the evolutionary characteristics within the Bhikkhu Vinaya relevant to each era, and the reformist solutions adopted in response. It also aims to explore whether these conventions were successful in offering timely solutions to the issues of their time. Accordingly, this study seeks to identify the evolutionary and reformative characteristics presented in the Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi conventions and assess whether such characteristics can serve as a reliable foundation for solving contemporary Vinaya related issues. In this problematic background, the historical experiences of Sri Lankan Theravādins may offer valuable insights and responses. From 1833 onward, scholars have engaged in related research, and from 2020 to 2025, articles published in recognized scholarly journals, such as printed research journals, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, and Google Scholar, have also been examined. This helped identify the gap necessary for this research.

Research Problem

There is a notable lack of scholarly research on the historical Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi conventions, making it difficult to assess the relevance of past reform models for addressing today's monastic disciplinary challenges. This survey study seeks to fill that gap by critically examining the research that has already been conducted, while also highlighting the lack of sufficient contemporary research. It further aims

to draw on past experiences, building a bridge between the past and the present, in order to identify a methodology for addressing modern issues.

Accordingly, the research problem of this study is to investigate whether sufficient research on conventions is being carried out in the present, and whether a solid foundation exists for developing new methods to resolve contemporary disciplinary issues by appropriately integrating past experiences with present needs.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to assess the contemporary relevance of the Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi conventions as foundational models for addressing current challenges in monastic discipline through modern Vinaya reform, and to identify gaps in existing scholarship, particularly in the period between 2020 and 2025, which highlight the necessity for renewed academic attention to this subject.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive research methodology grounded in historical and textual analysis. It focuses on examining the evolutionary and reformative characteristics reflected in the Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi Katikāvatas within the context of monastic discipline in medieval Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. The research draws on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include original Katikāvata inscriptions and Vinaya texts from the

Pāli Canon, such as the Mahāvagga, Cullavagga, and Pātimokkha, as well as medieval commentarial literature like the Pālimuttaka-Vinaya-Vinicchaya. Secondary sources encompass a wide range of scholarly writings from 1950 to 2025, including academic articles, conference proceedings, and critical editions. Particular emphasis is placed on research published between 2020 and 2025, with the intention of identifying current academic trends and gaps in the field. The study adopts a comparative-historical approach by analyzing the role of Katikāvatas in both the medieval period and in current proposals for a modern convention. Additionally, an interpretive lens is used to assess how disciplinary reform was articulated and institutionalized through conventions. A critical review of past research also allows for the identification of shortcomings in prior analyses, especially regarding doctrinal consistency and scholarly rigor, thereby justifying the need for the present investigation.

Discussion

Accordingly, based on the following keywords: Poḷonnaru Katikāvata, Conventions (Katikāvata-s), Dambadeni Katikāvata, Buddhist Monastic Law (Ecclesiastical Acts), and Suggestions for a Modern Convention, this study discusses the research works that have been conducted in relation to these themes.

Poḷonnaru Katikāvata

After Edward Muller published the Poḷonnaru Katikāvata as the first printed source in 1883, D. M. de Zilva Wickramasinghe revised and republished it. In the preface to his book, Venerable Yatadolawatte Dhammavisuddhi mentioned that these publications provided scholars with the first opportunity to study the Katikāvatas in depth. However, in the account given in *Epigraphia Zeylanica* under the title *Mahāparākramabāhu Katikāvata* by Wickramasinghe, the textual content of the Gal Vihara inscription in Poḷonnaruwa has been transliterated from Sinhala characters and translated into English. Although the archaeological context and details about the inscription are described, no interpretation or analysis of its content has been provided (Wickremasinghe, 1928).

In this keyword, it was difficult to find studies and analyses that focused exclusively on the Poḷonnaru Convention. In most cases, the research that includes the Poḷonnaru Convention has been presented under a broader keyword along with other conventions, rather than as a distinct subject of study.

Conventions

With following this keyword, it can be seen the first attempt in the subject area of Katikāvata to introduce reforms which could be found in published literature is the book “*Purāṇa Katikāvat*” (ancient katikāvata-s) by Venerable Doḍanduwe Piyarathana Tissa in 1906. He has compiled it by

using the information obtained from various documents and archeological sources and wrote it with the aim of introducing Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi Katikāvatas (Piyarathanatissa, 1906).

This was followed by the book “Katikāvat Sangarā” (journals of Katikāvatas) by, D.B Jayathilake which was published in 1922. Its main objective had been to gather the constitutions or the Katikāvatas established from the Poḷonnaru Katikāvata concerning the community of Buddhist Sangha. However, he has not discussed the constitutions related to discipline of Sri Lankan monks since the Anuradhapura period. It could be identified that he has started to discuss first about the nature of the community of monks which gradually emerges through the Katikāvatas (Jayathilake, 2002).

A few years later, Wimala Wijesuriya, who has perused both books mentioned above, published a book titled “Katikāvatē Vikāśaya” (evolution of Katikāvata) in 1961. The author’s intention there had been to publicize Katikāvata since its inception is evinced from this publication (Wijesuriya, 1961).

In 1969, Venerable Kothmale Amarawansa, engaged in archaeological studies, introduced not only inscriptions but also placed special focus on Katikāvatas in his book titled Lakdiva Sellipi. In it, the Poḷonnaru Katikāvata is presented in a manner similar to the account given by Wickramasinghe in Epigraphia Zeylanica. In addition, brief introductions to other monastic

and ecclesiastical Katikāvatas are also included (Amaravansa, 1969).

A. V. Suraweera conducted a detailed study of all the Saṅgha conventions held since the introduction of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. As a result, in 1971 he published a book titled Sinhala Katikāvat hā Bhikṣu Samājaya (Sinhalese Katikāvatas and the Community of Buddhist Monks). In this work, he first provides an introduction to the Buddhist monastic community and then presents the contents of original texts of various vihāra katikāvatas (monastic codes) and śāsana katikāvatas (ecclesiastical codes). He also includes descriptions of three more recent katikāvatas, treating them as modern conventions. However, the book does not offer any further critical analysis or interpretation of the katikāvatas themselves (Suraweera, 1985).

Nandasena Ratnapala also published a book titled The Katikāvatas in 1971 on the same subject. His primary aim was to highlight the legal norms that prevailed within the Buddhist monastic order in Ceylon between the 12th and 18th centuries. Accordingly, he discussed several key katikāvatas, including the Mahāparākramabāhu Convention, the Dambadeṇi Convention, the Kīrti Śrī Rājasinha I Convention, the Kīrti Śrī Rājasinha II Convention, and the Rājādhirājasinha Convention. He transliterated the Sinhala manuscripts of each convention, translated them into English, and provided interpretive commentary along with a historical study of the respective time periods to which they belonged. At present,

Ratnapala's English translation of the Dambadeṇi Convention is the most widely used version among scholars for academic reference (Rathnapala, 1971).

Later, Venerable Yatadolawatte Dhammavisuddhi conducted a study with the aim of uncovering information about the medieval Sri Lankan community of monks with reference in relation to the Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi Katikāvata-s. His book titled "Poḷonnaru hā Dambadeṇi Katikāvat". Which was published in 1995 and is the most comprehensive work covering the topic under investigation. Topics discussed here had been Katikāvatas, Sangha conventions, Bhikkhu Vinaya, the situation in Sri Lanka during the medieval period, etc. He incorporates factual information in his work as a comprehensive overview of previous studies and numerous academic works on medieval society. In this research, the Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi Katikāvatas are also examined with a distinct focus. (Dhammavisuddhi, 1995). Accordingly, from 1906 to 1995, the scholars of the aforementioned studies have conducted their research by focusing on all Vinaya conventions collectively. Notably, their efforts appear to have been aimed at introducing the concept of these conventions to the academic world, as is evident from their studies. However, Venerable Yatadolawatte Dhammavisuddhi's research stands out, as it focuses exclusively on the Poḷonnaru and Dambadeṇi Conventions, thereby making a significant contribution to academic scholarship.

Dambadeṇi Katikāvata

In 1958, the Sāhitya journal, published by the Department of Cultural Affairs, featured a special issue titled Dambadeṇiya, in which several articles by various authors discussed the Dambadeṇi Katikāvata in detail. Among them, the article Dambadeṇi Katikāvata hā Śāsana Tattvaya (The Dambadeṇi Katikāvata and the State of the saṅgha) by M. Śrī Rammandala, Katikāvat-valin Helivana-Toraturu (Information Revealed through the Katikāvatas) by Herbert Pathirana, and Dambadeṇi Samayē Paṇḍivaru hā Piriven (Monks and Monastic Colleges during the Dambadeṇi ya Period) by Venerable Māda-uyangoda Vimalakitti present detailed explanations concerning the Dambadeṇi Convention and its relevance to the religious and institutional context of the time. And another article titled Saku-Bas-Dānuma (Knowledge of the Sanskrit Language) during the Dambadeṇiya period by Venerable Moratuwe Sāsanarathana was also included in the same issue. These articles collectively provided a valuable body of information for the study of the Dambadeṇi Katikāvata ('Sāhitya', 1958).

The second part of the work compiled under the title Dambadeṇi-yugaya was written in 1961 by Venerable Degammāda Sumanajoti and is a study related to history. However, it can be pointed out as a highly valuable work for understanding the socio, economic context of the Dambadeṇiya period (Sumanajoti, 1961).

It was difficult to find studies conducted specifically on the Dambadeni Convention following the article published in the journal as far back as 1958. Although numerous studies mention the Dambadeni Convention alongside other conventions, few have made it the primary focus of research. However, these references have nevertheless allowed for some scholarly attention to be directed toward the Dambadeni Convention. Accordingly, it becomes clear that there is a renewed need to focus on this subject in the present context, especially as a valuable model that may help minimize contemporary monastic issues.

Buddhist Monastic Law

A considerable number of studies can be identified relating to Monastic Law, or more specifically, the monastic discipline of Sri Lankan monks. One significant work relevant to discussions on the content of the *katikāvatas* is the text titled *Kudu-sika*, which was revised and republished by Venerable Harumalgoda Sri Sumangala in 1928. The analysis of *Vinaya* (monastic discipline) included in this work has been used in the present study when discussing certain issues (Sumangala, 1928).

The research work titled *Anurādhapura-Yugaya*, compiled by Amaradasa Liyana Gamage and Ranaweera Gunawardhane and published in 1961, presents various aspects of society, economy, and politics centered around the Anurādhapura Kingdom. This work plays a significant role in this study by

contributing to the discussion of how the evolutionary characteristics of Buddhist culture influenced the tendencies within monastic discipline (Gamage and Gunawardhana, 1961).

Similarly, the work *Laṃkā Ithihāsayā-I*, compiled by N. K. Sirisena in 1961, presents information regarding the socio-economic and political background of early Sri Lanka. Among these, aspects such as the system of governance and the establishment of settlements in ancient Sri Lanka are particularly noteworthy (Sirisena, 1961).

The work titled *Prātimokṣa Vivaraṇaya*, written by Venerable Bujjampola Dharmapārāyanatissa and published in 1971, presents a concise analysis of the *Bhikkhu Vinaya* (monastic discipline). Accordingly, it includes a discussion based on primary sources regarding the content of the *Theravāda Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhunī Vinaya*, including topics such as *uposatha* and *pavāraṇā* (Dhammaparayanatissa, 1971).

The work titled *Sri Lankāve-Saṅgha-Sanvidhānaya* (Saṅgha Organization in Sri Lanka), compiled by Mandis Rohanadheera in 1974, is particularly significant. It provides a clear understanding of the nature of the monastic organization in Sri Lanka, which is essential for identifying the underlying causes of certain issues that emerged within the *Bhikkhu Vinaya*, as well as the background against which solutions to these issues were formulated (Rohanadheera, 1974).

The book 'The Buddhist Monastic Law in Ancient Sri Lanka', compiled by Anuradha Seneviratne in 1975, presents a detailed account of the early phase of the Buddhist order in Sri Lanka along with an analysis of the monastic law pertaining to monks. A notable feature of this work is its particular attention to the Vattakkhandhaka, especially the duties and responsibilities (vatta) outlined therein, which adds further value to the study (Seneviratne, 1975).

Furthermore, in 1989, Amaradasa Liyanagamage compiled the work titled *Madhya-Kālīna-Laṅkā-Itihāsa* (The History of Medieval Sri Lanka), in which he successfully presents the socio-economic and political background of Sri Lankan society during the medieval period, particularly focusing on the Polonnaruwa and Dambadeniya eras. Accordingly, the information included in this publication contributes valuable insights for the study of the tendencies and developments within Buddhist culture during that time (Liyanagamage, 1989).

Another important work by Mandis Rohanadheera, titled *Sāṅghika-Dēpala*, serves as a significant source of information for this research. In particular, this publication presents a specialized study on topics such as lands belonging to the Buddhist Saṅgha, vihāra properties, dependents affiliated with specific monasteries, and lay lineages connected to the Saṅgha. As such, it offers valuable insights into the socio-economic foundations of the Buddhist monastic establishment (Rohanadheera, 2001).

The work titled *Madhya-kālīna-laṅkāve-āgam*, compiled by Mangala Ilangasinghe and published in 2005, does not primarily focus on religions in medieval Sri Lanka but instead presents a comprehensive collection of information related to medieval Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. In particular, the details provided about the *aṣṭamūlāyatanas*, the various saṅgha groups, and Buddhist lineages are especially useful for this study (Ilangasinghe, 2005).

The *Pālimuttaka-vinaya-vinicchaya* is an ancient work compiled during the Polonnaruwa period by the venerable commentator Ven. Śāriputra Saṅgharāja. The distinctive feature of the edition prepared by Ven. Madihe Sugathasiri lies not merely in its editorial work on the contents of the *Pālimuttaka-vinaya-Vinicchaya* but more importantly in the critical analysis conducted within it. This study provides a valuable opportunity to thoroughly understand how new trends in the monastic discipline (Vinaya) developed within the Sri Lankan Buddhist context (Sugathasiri, 2015). Although this keyword is not directly related to the Polonnaru and Dambadeni Conventions, there are studies that play a significant role in providing the background for the development of disciplinary matters presented within those conventions.

Modern Vinaya

Contemporary researchers are increasingly focusing on a new wave of studies related to these conventions, exploring them through various

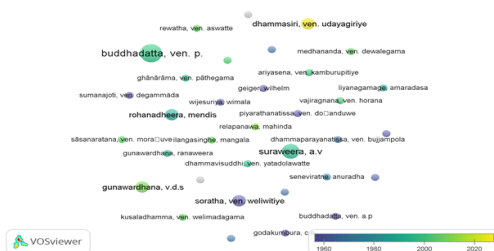
objectives. Among these, some scholars also highlight the necessity of a modern convention in this context. For instance, an online article by Venerable Kamburupitiye Ariyasena emphasizes the need for a modern constitutional solution to renew the Bhikkhu Vinaya. In his article titled “Bhikṣuva-saha-visi-ek-vana (21)-Siyavasa” (Monk and the Twenty-First Century), Venerable Kamburupitiye Ariyasena discusses the necessity for a modern Katikāvata (Ariyasena, 1999).

In 2019, the academic journal *Anveśanā* published an article titled “Pāraṇi-katikāvat-valin-sūcitha-kālina-katikāvatak-sadahā-vana-mārgopadeśa” (Guidelines for a Contemporary Katikāvata from historical katikāvatas,) which outlines specific recommendations for modern scholarly discussions by Venerable Miriswaththe Wimalagnana. Among other important points he highlights in his article, a proposal regarding the type of convention that should be compiled is clearly presented on pages 79, 80 of the proceedings of the 2016 conference held at the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, which focused on Bhikkhu Vinaya, Katikāvatas, and contemporary challenges. According to this, although there has been some delay in directing research towards this in modern times, it is especially significant that contemporary scholars and respected ordained monks of present day Buddhism have expressed the view and proposed that a modern convention should be convened (Padmasiri and Attanayake, 2019). As Venerable Vimalajñāna points out,

although numerous proposals have emerged in the present day regarding the establishment of a new convention, the concern arises as to how such proposals can be modeled without a proper study of the earlier conventions. This highlights the lack of sufficient scholarly attention given to the study of past conventions in contemporary times.

Results

The data mentioned here was analyzed using contextual analysis with the assistance of the VOSviewer software. The analysis of studies published between 1960 and 2020 is illustrated in the diagram below. Furthermore, when searching under the aforementioned keywords on ResearchGate, Academia.edu, and Google Scholar, no articles related to this topic published between 2020 and 2025 could be found.



Conclusion

The VOSviewer author map offers a comprehensive visual overview of six decades of scholars related to Vinaya reforms in Sri Lanka. It underscores the foundational contributions of established scholars while also highlighting the emergence of a new generation of digitally engaged authors, indicating evolving trends in the discourse surrounding conventions.

Recognizing the interconnections between these generations of scholars enables contemporary researchers to position their work more strategically bridging classical philological analysis with present-day reform narratives and addressing a notable gap in the existing body of survey. Accordingly, in light of the current proposals to establish a new convention, it can be concluded that there remains a significant lack of research examining whether a convention is a valid and effective method for addressing issues in monastic discipline.

Accordingly, although proposals are being put forward to establish a modern convention, it can be concluded that there is a lack of utilization of the Polonnaru convention and Dambadeni convention by researchers in contemporary studies.

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