

The Social Support Role of Buddhist Monks During Myanmar's 2025 Earthquake

Pan Di Ta

Abstract

The March 28, 2025 earthquake in central Myanmar occurred amid a broader polycrisis characterized by armed conflict, economic instability, political fragmentation, and large-scale displacement. This study examines how Buddhist monastic networks responded to the compounded humanitarian challenges generated by the disaster. Using a qualitative case-study design based on participant observation, informal interviews, documentary analysis, and field-based relief experience, the research investigates the humanitarian functions performed by monasteries in Mandalay, Sagaing, and Mingun. The findings reveal that these monasteries rapidly transformed into community-based humanitarian infrastructures, functioning as emergency shelters, food-distribution sites, and spaces for psychosocial care. Amidst severe state and formal organizational constraints, monks utilized their moral authority to mobilize donations, coordinate volunteers, and mediate access to conflict-affected zones, while diaspora-connected digital networks facilitated crucial transnational fundraising.

Crucially, this study identifies a profound paradox at the heart of trust-based humanitarianism: while the Sangha's symbolic capital serves as a critical protective umbrella that enables rapid relief, it simultaneously places immense operational burdens on monks, forcing continuous negotiations regarding their religious role boundaries and the monastic code (Vinaya). Ultimately, the paper argues that while public trust is vital for rapid response, this moral authority must be reinforced with a synergistic division of labor between spiritual leadership and secular relief coordination, alongside technical capacities in disaster risk reduction and digital security. This study contributes to the broader scholarship on religious humanitarianism, civil society, and community resilience in Southeast Asia.