

Kumaratunga that it had helped elect broke its heart and its will to live. The failures of the new regime, especially in subversion of the electoral process in 2000, are revitalizing the activists, recalling the pattern of resistance to the Jayawardene government during which the movement was initially born. Anticipating widespread irregularities on election day, the movement organized a 'Yellow Ribbon Campaign' symbolizing concern and protest, and thousands went to the polls wearing the ribbon. The idea caught on, extending beyond the election campaign. For example, a yellow ribbon was part of the ensemble that bronze medal-winner Susanthika Jayasinghe wore when she ran for Sri Lanka at the 2000 Olympics. The movement, which has grown into a coalition of some seventy different activist groups, is preparing to launch a 'Golden Postcards' campaign to send the President a million yellow postcards advocating 'civilized government' – free media, an independent judiciary and civil service, a police commission, independent election and so forth. In addition, the movement demands action on specific matters which include the abolition of the present presidency with its extraordinary concentration of power without accountability, the appointment of a commission of inquiry into the irregularities of the 2000 election, the removal of the Chief Justice, alleged to be a pawn of the President, promulgation of an enforceable code of ethics for MPs and cabinet ministers, and the forging of a national consensus on religious, ethnic and linguistic rights. The progressive monks are undoubtedly invigorated by this: their yellow robe is gaining an additional dash of colour from the ribbons and the postcards. What we are witnessing again is the lay initiative as the springboard for monastic activism which goes back to Dharmapala a century ago. Whether this new and more enlightened activism will grow to be a force in the Sangha is yet unclear: all we can do at this stage is chronicle the mixed signals.

The data used here are derived from over three years of fieldwork carried out intermittently between 1991 and 1996. The paper reflects the author's conviction that anthropology must not only make academic analyses but contribute directly or indirectly to solving problems. Accordingly, the paper contemplates the directions in which Sri Lanka must move if it is to emerge from its present malaise and launch itself on the path to peaceful and prosperous nationhood. The most important observation that a field worker can make about Sangha/lay relations in Sri Lanka is that the laity

overwhelmingly sees the Sangha's role as religious and ritualist, and not social and political. Based on long acquaintance with Sri Lanka both as a member of the culture and an experienced field worker, I firmly believe that monks have no influence over the ballot box, and that the view that they do is a phobia of power greedy politicians and a figment of the imagination of the city elites and Western observers. The politicians' phobia of the monks and the resulting reluctance to move towards power-sharing compromises the prospects for peace and civilized government. An honest and courageous social policy is a more sure and more lasting path to win the hearts and minds of voters. The essentials of such a policy are included in the list of demands by the activists of the Yellow Ribbon Campaign, cited above.

Courtesy, *Anthropology Today*

Notes

1 Dharmapala's activities, his definition of the role of the contemporary Buddhist monk, as well as the consequences of that definition, are discussed in greater detail in my book *The Work of Kings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

2 The Sinhala original was published in 1946 under the title *Bhiksuvage Urumaya*. English translation published in 1974 by Grove Press, New York.

3 See C.C.R. Gunawardene et al. *Report of the University Commission*. Sessional paper 16 of 1963. Colombo: The Government Press. A scholarly paper dealing with the public debate on this question is W.A. Wiswa Warnapala, 'Sangha and politics in Sri Lanka: Nature of the continuing controversy,' *Indian Journal of Politics* 12(1-2), April-August 1978: 66-76.

4 See for example D. Amarasiri Weeraratne, 'Devolution package and the Maha Sangha,' *The Sunday Observer*, 17 March 1996; and Lucien Rajakarunanayake, 'Trade and politics amidst the yellow robes,' *Sunday Leader*, 18 or 28 February 1996. A cogent Sinhala language critique, in the form of a booklet, is Bo Nandisara, *Loku Hamuduruwan vetatayi* ("To my abbot"), Haputale: New Royal Press, 1991.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka. H.L. Seneviratne, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

The nondescript title and subdued cover of this book will ensure that it does not attract to itself the vituperation that was vented upon Stanley Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed?* And led to its banning in this country. But in its treatment of the same theme, the recent history of the Sri Lankan Buddhist order, Seneviratne's book cuts far deeper than the older title. While Tambiah's mild and generally conciliatory study focused upon the historical events that drew the Sangha into political activism, Seneviratne looks below the surface for the underlying roots of this phenomenon. As an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia, he casts his project in the form of an anthropological inquiry revolving around the question of whether the Sangha is capable of implementing the values of tolerance, openness, and pluralism essential to modern civil society. The answer he arrives at, based on this case study, is not an optimistic one.

Seneviratne begins his narrative with Anagarika Dharmapala, the charismatic leader of the Buddhist revival at the turn of the last century. He discerns in Dharmapala's thought two major strands each pointing to a separate line of future development. One, which he calls the "economic and pragmatic" strand, emphasized the need to improve the village-based economy through a revitalization of Buddhist lay ethics. The other, the "political and ideological" stand, drew upon an idealized picture of ancient Sinhala civilization as a model of national reawakening. What was distinctive about this picture was its blend of politics, religion, and ethnicity – a blend that was to prove so momentous as the story unfolds.

Dharmapala saw the task of guiding the Buddhist revival as devolving on the monks, whom he urged in his often fiery essays and speeches to give up their temple comforts in order to preach "true Buddhism" to the backward villagers, mired in ritualism and superstition. Partly under Christian influence, Dharmapala believed that national regeneration required the adoption of such workaday virtues as diligence, thrift, sobriety, punctuality and honesty. By propagating these virtues among the people, he held, the monks could promote the "twofold good" of economic and spiritual progress.

While Dharmapala's message caused only slight ripples in the Sangha during his own lifetime, beginning in the 1930s his words began to take effect. As Seneviratne sees it, his message made its impact in two great waves corresponding to the two strands of his vision. In the 1930s the economic-pragmatic prong of his agenda

took off and inspired a number of dedicated, energetic monks to throw their weight behind the Village Development movement. Seneviratne describes in detail the careers of three such monastic "hero-giants," who moved among the villagers teaching them the disciplines needed for economic betterment.

Despite their earnest efforts, the Village Development movement ultimately failed, bringing to an end the attempts to implement the "economic-pragmatic" part of Dharmapala's agenda. At just about this time, however, the political-ideological aspect of his message was picked up by a group of monks based at the Vidyalkara College. These resourceful monks, whose most articulate spokesman was Ven. Walpola Rahula, heartily endorsed the idea that the task of the modern bhikkhu is social service. But in their eyes, commitment to social service meant above all participation in politics. Their political activism, moreover, was not governed by benign impartiality but had a distinctly racial orientation. Its rallying call was the idea that Sri Lanka is essentially a Sinhalese Buddhist country, to be governed as such with the advice and guidance of the Sangha.

Though controversial in the early days of independence, the political monks were able to ride the waves of changing social conditions and new educational opportunities to secure for themselves a decisive voice in national affairs. In Seneviratne's view, it was just this politicization of the Sangha in the guise of "social service" that was largely responsible for plunging the island into the prolonged ethnic crisis that has engulfed it since the late 1950s. While the monks viewed themselves as the guardians of "country, nation, and religion," Seneviratne holds that in practice this conviction has amounted to an ethnic chauvinism with tragic consequences for people of all communities. In using politics to foster ethnic hegemony, he insists, the monks have not only ventured into a domain where they utterly lack competence, but far more seriously, they have exchanged the universalistic ethic of early Buddhism for a parochialism rooted in racial identity.

In his chapter "The Anatomy of a Vocation" Seneviratne follows the evolving role of the monk into the 1980s and 1990s. He shows how the redefinition of the bhikkhu's task as social service has led to nothing less than "an opening of the floodgates" which allows the younger monks to do almost anything they please. Educated in secular universities, dazzled by urban culture, these new monks have exchanged traditional monastic roles for a secular lifestyle that blurs the lines separating the renunciant from the lay person.

While most social service monks pursue humble careers as salaried school teachers, the smartest and most enterprising have constituted themselves into a powerful monastic elite having close ties to politicians and business leaders. Their ranks even include a Provincial Council member and a union president: strange vocations for men who have ostensibly renounced the world to seek Nibbana!

The moral petrification of the Sangha has drawn sharp criticism both from younger monks and the laity. Seneviratne surveys the main criticisms that have been voiced in pamphlets, songs, and the press, but the deepest and most trenchant critique is his own. Nevertheless, as sharp as his insights may be (and they are often brilliant), one is left feeling that his analysis suffers from a lack of constructive counter-proposals to halt and reverse the decadence he so acutely describes. Perhaps as an anthropologist it is his job merely to report what he has observed and to leave the task of envisaging alternatives to others. All the same, the book would have benefitted from some positive ideas about how the monks can meet the demands of modernity while remaining true to the spirit of their vocation.

In his critique of the politically vocal monks, Seneviratne lapses into a dubious generalization by treating them as a single block

without acknowledging the diversity of views that actually exists within the Sangha. Ethnocentric attitudes are no doubt dominant, but the order also includes influential monks who have consistently stood up for a just and peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict, doing so precisely on the basis of the universalist ethic of Buddhism. Though Seneviratne nods in the direction of these monks, in my view he fails to give them the full credit they deserve.

Seneviratne arrives in the end at two major conclusions drawn from his study: first, in the ethnically diverse civil society of modern Sri Lanka, the majoritarian Sangha still pursues a narrow hegemonic agenda even though such an agenda is detrimental to social harmony; and second, parochial ideology is so deeply entrenched in the Sangha's leadership that prospects for self-correction seem dim. These are indeed deeply troubling conclusions about a monastic order pledged to non-discrimination and universal compassion, and one can only hope events will prove them to have been wrong. But right or wrong, Seneviratne has written a very important book of rare moral courage and intellectual honesty. I hope at least parts of it will find their way into an accurate Sinhala translation, for the benefit of those lacking fluency in English.

Courtesy *Buddhist Publications Society newsletter*.

AN ARMY OF MONKS?

Nirupama Subramanian

Eight-year-old Suresh Saman Kumara is not old enough yet to attach the prefix Venerable to his name. But from now on, he will bear all the other trappings of a Buddhist monk — orange robes, shaven head, a begging bowl, an umbrella, and the new name of Kandegama Rajithawansa Lankara. He was one of 118 boys—the youngest of them just five years old—ordained earlier this month at the Dimbulagala temple in Polonnaruwa, north-central Sri Lanka.

The new recruits will learn everything they would have at a school, in addition to the Buddhist scriptures. From the very first day, they will also be taught to train their minds and bodies, including controlling hunger from noon to dawn.

The ordainment ceremony was part of a recruitment drive by Sri Lanka's Ministry of Buddhist Affairs, headed by the Prime Minister, Mr. Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, to increase the ranks of the clergy. Mr. Wickramanayake believes the clergy's present strength of about 37,000 is insufficient, and the main reason for the decline in Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The drive has attracted some 700 recruits so far, the Prime Minister's information secretary, Mr. Seelarathne Senarath, told *The Hindu*.

"These boys will grow up to guide the destiny of Sri Lanka. Bhikkus are the main leaders of our people. We have undertaken the campaign for the benefit of the country, because the more bhikkhus we have, the better the people will be served," says Mr. L. Sugunadasa, Secretary to the Ministry of Buddhasasana.

But the recruitment has come in for sharp criticism from others. "Buddhism is in decline in Sri Lanka not because there are not enough monks. It is because the monks are becoming too worldly and are not interested in performing their parish roles any more," says Prof. Gananath Obeyesekere, who taught sociology at Princeton University and is the author of several books and articles on Sri Lankan Buddhism.

From holding shares in banks and accepting luxury cars as gifts to heading trade unions, Buddhist monks, especially the urbanized leaders of the clergy, are firmly plugged in to the real world. They consider themselves the key stake-holders in the political process of Sri Lanka and important members of its power elite. They are particularly vocal when they feel that the country's Sinhala identity is under threat, and have been at the forefront of protests against giving political concessions to the island's ethnic minorities.

"In such a situation, it is better to have a few good monks than a whole lot of potentially bad ones," says Prof. Obeyesekere.

Critics have questioned if mass recruitment drives can attract those truly committed to Buddhist principles, particularly as the boys are of an age at which they are not expected to know their minds. The writers of a feminist column in the daily *Island*, known by the pseudonym Cat's Eye, have demanded that the minimum age for ordination be raised to 18 to give a person the democratic right of choice of vocation. At present, there is no minimum age.

At the Dimbulagala ordination ceremony, many of the new recruits were from families struggling to eke out a living in the harsh and dry conditions of the region, which borders the conflict zone of the north-east and where the threat of LTTE attacks on civilians is ever present.

There were three brothers, aged between five and ten, from one family. Their parents appeared not to be present for the ordination ceremony. Suresh Kumara's mother, Dayawanthie, a daily wage, had sacrificed a day's work to witness her son's ordination but her husband, who is bed-ridden with a chest ailment, could not make it.

As many as 38 boys from Suresh Kumara's village were ordained that day. "Their families are too poor to bring them up. They have sent them here so that they will at least get an education and proper food," said Mr. H. W. Ariyaratne, a school teacher from the village.

It is anyone's guess how many will continue to remain monks later in life. "We have told our school pupils who are here that even if they wish to drop out, they should do so only after getting an

education, so that they can make something of their lives when they come out," said Mr. Ariyaratne.

While monkhood may offer upward mobility to the poor, critics believe that Buddhism cannot benefit from such recruitment drives and that the motives behind it are purely political. "One possible result of this recruitment is that it will add to the number of 'political monks', that is, lobbyists and pressure groups who act as stooges of politicians in perpetuating ideas of Sinhala glory, superiority and hegemony, and the so-called 'ekiya' or unitary state, which historically never existed," says Prof. H. L. Seneviratne, who teaches anthropology at the University of Virginia and is the author of the acclaimed book on Buddhism in Sri Lanka, *The Work of Kings*.

Prof. Seneviratne sees the recruitment of monks as the "twin" to the recruitment of soldiers, especially in the light of the Prime Minister's recent exhortation to the Sinhalese to produce more babies so that there would be more volunteers to the clergy and the army. "This recalls the Mahavamsa idea of the monk as warrior, and it echoes the Sinhala paranoia that the numbers of Muslims, Tamils and Christians are increasing and the Sinhals decreasing." He described Mr. Wickramanayake's call as "an economically disastrous, and socially retrograde" project, which would only create more divisions in society and obstruct nation-building.

As they struggled with their voluminous new orange attire and learnt to chant "Buddham Sharanam Gachchammi," the young boys at the Dimbulagala temple could not have been more oblivious to the impact of their mass ordainment on Sri Lanka, Buddhism or Sinhala society, or even on themselves. It was only as they bid goodbye to their family at the end of the ceremony that the tears came rolling down.

Courtesy *The Hindu* July 2001

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