



## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Banning the LTTE   | 03 |
| Sub - Judice?<br>by Jayadeva Uyangoda  | 05 |
| May Day! Mayday!!<br>by Charles Abeysekera                                   | 07 |
| The Re - Making of Vesak   | 08 |
| Wesak<br>Editorial from<br><i>The Buddhist</i> 1889                          | 11 |
| Buddhism of Dissent<br>by Uma Chakravarti                                    | 12 |
| Buddhism and Gender Bias:<br>A Jataka Tale<br>by Kornvipa Boonsue            | 19 |
| Sinhala Buddhism and the<br>'Daughters of the Soil'<br>by Kumari Jayawardena | 24 |
| The Changing 'State'<br>of the Frontier<br>by Michael Woost                  | 27 |
| Dedan Kimathi:<br>Observations<br>by Sonali Dhanapala                        | 30 |
| Making 'Opera Wonyosi'<br>Trilingual<br>Neloufer de Mel Interviewed          | 31 |
| A Grief Ago: Review<br>by Neluka Silva                                       | 33 |
| Bashing Amnesty  | 36 |

**Pravada in contemporary Sinhalese usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.**

## PARADOXES OF BUDDHISM

What is happening to Buddhism in Sri Lanka? Even a cursory look will reveal many new changes, as well as the selective strengthening of some older practices, taking place in the religious domain of Sinhalese Buddhists. Innovations in spirit cults, the incorporation of the Hindu god-man Sai Baba into the pantheon as a living saviour, the spread of meditation practices among the urban gentry and the emergence of congregational worship, particularly in the form of *bodhi poojas*, are some of the most visible ones. The appearance of *Vesak* greeting cards, with pictures of movie star lovers and verses of amorous wish-fulfillment, created a controversy last year, pointing to the uneasy co-existence of the sacred and the profane in the social construction of contemporary Sinhalese Buddhism.

Among the most significant developments is the state appropriation of Buddhist practices which has now entered a vigorous new phase. The combination of the state's compelling need for legitimacy and mass domestication and the requirements of private rentier capital, otherwise known as black money, for state patronage are the characteristics of this phase. Its visible symbols are many: *Bodhi Poojas* to invoke blessings on politicians whose sense of the impermanence of life is heightened in the context of political turmoil; erection of the replicas of ancient *chetiyas* (pagodas) in remote villages to coincide with annual state spectacles; and now the decoration of an entire street in Colombo to mark the *Vesak* festival. Religion, private capital

and the state—not a new synthesis, but a reconstitution of an old synthesis that probably emerged in the first few centuries after a particular official version of Buddhism was established in Sri Lanka at the behest of the Indian Emperor Asoka.

Buddhism is a highly politicized and political religion in Sri Lanka. Buddhist interest lobbies have been tremendously active in politics since independence. Politicians seek the support of organized Buddhist groups as well as of the Buddhist clergy at elections and their presence at ceremonies which are instruments of political mobilisation. The Buddhist "church" too depends on the state. This symbiotic relationship between the state and the institution of Buddhism was given juridical recognition in 1972 when Buddhism received a constitutional status as the foremost religion in the then Socialist-Democratic Republic. Amidst these political trappings, however, the all pervasive problematic of contemporary Sinhalese Buddhism remains its Sinhalese ethnicization.

Symptomatic of a deep seated crisis of Sinhalese Buddhism as a religion as well as a social-ethnic ideology is the recent war mongering of leading Buddhist intellectuals, monks and lay persons alike. In fact, whenever the idea of a negotiated settlement to the ethnic question has entered the political debate, the mainstream Buddhist intelligentsia has not only opposed it, but has also openly advocated war. One leading spokesperson of this Buddhist war lobby recently stated in the Sinhalese press that the prohibition laid



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tion-laid by the Buddha on killing applied only to the *sangha* and not to lay society. No Sinhalese-Buddhist intellectual has so far come forward to refute or contradict this doctrinal justification for a Sinhalese-Buddhist holy war. Similarly, when a group of Buddhist monks on a 'peace mission' visited Jaffna to meet with the LTTE leadership, Buddhist intellectual leaders, supported by the Sinhala press, denounced it as an act of treachery.

The question that emerges in this context is the absence of a peace content in modern Sinhalese Buddhism, despite rhetorical claims about Buddhism's role in making the entire universe a peaceful utopia. It further leads to a yet more fundamental problem about Sri Lanka's Buddhism. Both as a doctrine and an institution, it has not yet gone through a process of democratic modernization. It still remains socially and ideologically archaic. A few intellectual streams of contemporary Buddhism—those associ-

ated with Henry Olcott, K. N. Jayatilleke, E.W. Adikaram, G. P. Malalasekere, for example—have made attempts to identify Buddhist philosophy and teachings with Western science, rationalism and empiricist epistemology. Some others—Revs. Henpitagedera Gnanasiha, Kotagama Vachissara and Bambarande Siri Seevali—have re-interpreted the social philosophy of Buddhism and identified it closely with the egalitarian socialism of the Marxist tradition. However, these have remained minor currents within modern intellectual Buddhism and have not been able to make a lasting contribution to making Sinhalese Buddhism modern, democratic and humanistic. Hence the intellectual space that exists for militaristic doctrinal interventions.

The paradox of Buddhism is that it is not a religion without room for a social-reformist hermeneutics to emerge. As Uma Chakravarti's article in this issue makes clear, at least in classical canonical Buddhism with its tradition of dissent from Brahmin orthodoxy, there is a useful ideological basis for social peace, social tolerance and pluralism, all of which should be essential components of a modernizing Buddhism.

Why is it, then, that contemporary Sinhalese Buddhism has not evolved in this way? For an explanation, we must look critically at the transformation that Sri Lanka's Buddhism has experienced in the past 150 years. The Buddhism which is hegemonic among the Sinhalese community today is certainly not the same doctrine that is supposed to have been preached by the Buddha some two-and-half millennia ago. It is a Buddhism which has gone through many waves of transformation. A decisive change occurred during the colonial period when the feudal, social and economic bases of Buddhism were re-inforced, partly due to the paternalistic attitude of colonial rulers to Buddhism and partly by the property-based ecclesiastical responses to colonial rule. This was a re-feudalization of Buddhism while the society in general was entering a phase of capitalist transformation.

Then came the urbanization of Buddhism which generated a strong social ideology of ethnic exclusivity *à la* Dharmapala. The so-called Buddhist renaissance in the Western and Southern provinces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contained within it the ethnic antagonisms of the urban Sinhalese merchant and professional classes. Thus emerged a strong secular ideology in urban Sinhalese society, transforming Buddhism into an ethnic identity marker of an exclusivist kind.

The nature of state-religion relationships developed during and after colonial rule is another problem facing Buddhism. Contrary to popular opinion, the British colonial state did not abandon its institutional relationship with the Sangha hierarchy or the ritual role expected from it. What appears to have happened during the British colonial rule was a reconstitution of the state-Sangha relations with the state playing a direct role in maintaining the feudalistic structures of Sangha-hierarchies while depriving the latter of a direct political role in regulating or influencing state power. The post-independence period, in contrast, witnessed the re-entry of the Sangha and of the lay Buddhist leadership to state power structures, with all the paraphernalia of a power centre - lobbying, electioneering, intrigues and all. This enabled the powerful Buddhist lobbies to protect and preserve their archaic property relations. It is indeed a social anachronism that the Sri Lankan state is not yet ready to subject ecclesiastical property to any form of land reform. Neither the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 nor the Land Reform Law of 1972-74 could alter the pre-capitalist property relations that govern the extensive land holdings and the production and exchange relations of the Buddhist church.

Capitalism, nevertheless, has entered the Buddhist economic domain, with the growth, yet in a rather surreptitious way, of enterprising Buddhist institutions. Veiled in secrecy, protected by the politically powerful and tolerated by lay

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patrons, a variety of profit-seeking businesses, associated with temples or monks, appear to flourish in urban centers. Meanwhile, Buddhist links with international capital too are growing, indicating that large scale capital accumulation is welcome in these expanding islands of ecclesiastical capitalism. Yet these are not encouraging indications of a modernist economic or social transformation within the organized Sinhalese Buddhism; they are only symbols of a deformed modernity.

The task of coming to terms with these transformations is complicated by the unwillingness of the Buddhist intelligentsia to accept the need for reforms. Nevertheless, Buddhism, like all other religions, has never been static. Except for those bigots who claim doctrinal purity, there is no inflexibility towards innovation, incorporation and change in the popular construction of Buddhism. Popular Buddhism is flexible, pluralistic, and non-exclusivistic. It can induct into its pan-

theon of worship even a living god-man of Hinduism, once denounced by the rationalist Mr. Kovoov as a con-man. The point then is that there is ample structural space for a modernizing agency also to intervene in contemporary Sinhalese Buddhism.

However, contemporary debate among leading Buddhist intellectuals in Sri Lanka does not address these issues. Rather, it attempts to take Buddhism back into the past, to the antiquated world of pre-capitalist orthodoxies. Opposition to the ordination of women, antipathy to Mahayana Buddhism, and the militant opposition to any form of Buddhist intervention in seeking a peaceful resolution of the ethnic question are some recent examples of this fundamental lacunae in the contemporary Sinhalese Buddhist intellectual formation. ■

## Notes and Comments

### Banning the LTTE: From Narasimha to Ranasinghe

**T**he banning of the LTTE by the Indian government has led to a new controversy in Colombo. Opposition political parties, groups and sections of the press are demanding that the Sri Lankan government too should proscribe the LTTE.

It is difficult to understand the logic behind the 'ban LTTE' campaign, because for all practical purposes the LTTE is being treated by the Sri Lankan government as an illegal entity. The war that the armed forces of the state are engaged in is exclusively against the LTTE. In Colombo and elsewhere in the South too, suspected LTTEers are being arrested and detained on a regular basis. Unlike in Tamil Nadu, there are no newspapers, political parties or individuals here to campaign openly for the LTTE. Besides, banned or not being makes no difference at all to the LTTE in its military campaign in the Northern and Eastern provinces of the island.

Examining opposition reasoning, one would fail to find a compelling argument for the proscription of the Tiger movement. What exists is merely a reactive proposition; 'Rao has done it; Why should Premadasa not do it?'

The meaning of the opposition campaign, nonetheless, has to be found elsewhere, in their current strategy to make

things rather difficult for the Premadasa administration. In the aftermath of a sustained campaign carried out by Sinhala chauvinist newspapers against the Thondaman proposals, the opposition parties appear to be ready to pick up the thread fallen from the grip of Gamani Jayasuriya and company.

If the Premadasa administration is compelled to ban the LTTE—let us not forget that this is a populist regime—it will certainly rule out, in the short-term, any room for political negotiations with the LTTE.

As Prime Minister Narasimha Rao is reported to have said recently, the LTTE is not India's problem; it is Sri Lanka's problem. The ease with which the Central and Tamil Nadu governments in India have moved from friendly to adversarial dealings with the Tigers, depending on changing circumstances, is not available to Sri Lanka. It would perhaps be easy to ban the LTTE with a mere legal stroke. Yet, what next? Obviously, Minister Thondaman may not again propose talks with an illegal organization. Nor would groups of Christian or Buddhist clergy feel comfortable anymore to go to Jaffna for peace parleys with LTTE leaders. Extremist Sinhalese groups and even anti-LTTE Tamil groups will also be jubilant with a sense of accomplishment. But, what then? Then, there will remain a very big question mark. →