

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 bhikkus 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 wageer, 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 Sinhalese 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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