

## 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 Vidyalankara 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*. ■

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## AN ARMY OF MONKS?

Nirupama Subramanian

**E**ight-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.