

BEYOND OLCOTT AND DHARMAPALA: COMING TO TERMS WITH BUDDHIST RITUAL AND TRADITION?

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Blackburn M. Anne 2010, *Location of Buddhism*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association. Pages 237, price Rs. 850/-

Post War Sri Lanka seems to be experiencing a Buddhist Revival: Mass *Pinkamas* are held at historical temples, where thousands lamps are lit and thousands of trays of jasmine are offered to the Buddha. Mass ordinations of young boys are frequent. One cannot ignore the influx of young monks from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Cambodia in the Buddhist monasteries. More and more universities and academies offer degrees and diploma courses in Buddhist Studies attracting monks and students from the Asian region. New disciplines such as Buddhist Psychotherapy keep emerging. Preaching in verse (*kavi bana*) and recitation of *Paritta* texts (*pirith*) are available on CDs sold side by side with Sinhala pop songs. Buddhist TV channels and radio stations bring spirituality to the living room. Frequent exhibitions of relics too can be added to the list. The Sri Lankan pilgrim's itinerary too has expanded to the North and the East visiting new sites re-claimed for Buddhists in former LTTE-occupied areas to witness miracles at these sites. A critical edition of the *Tripitaka* using texts from Myanmar, Thailand and Laos enhancing digital technology are some novel features. Can such a surge in religious activity be seen as a Buddhist Revival? If not, when was the last Buddhist Revival?

Anne C. Blackburn's latest book *Locations of Buddhism* (2010) harks back to a period in the early colonial days when Buddhist monks active in the *pirivenas* and gentry from the Sabaragamuwa province and entrepreneurs in the upcoming towns and cities of the south and the South and Western provinces launched many projects to nurture Buddhist scholarship and address the missionary activity of the British. Much has been written about Colonel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala, but little information is available about the projects launched by Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala (1827–1911). The book is published at a time when Buddhists of Sri Lanka, living in a multi-religious background, articulate grievances and challenges to be faced in a new millennium of globalized politics and competitive entrepreneurship.

What most fascinates me is the novel style of Blackburn's book. The *Preface* takes the reader back to the 1820s when

“a well connected, high-caste Buddhist family had a horoscope made for the newest addition to their family, a son” (Blackburn 2010 p. ix). The biography of this scholar monk is not narrated in the typical linear way, which often is boring to the reader. It is broken from time to time, when the author takes the reader back to the society and politics of the earliest years of British rule. Already in the *Preface* Blackburn very swiftly sketches the growing economy of the coastal belt around the Galle harbor and the Christian presence and missionary activities in the island. New ritual space was necessary for Buddhists moving into the new cities and towns to meet these challenges. As such, the functions of the Buddhist temple had to be redefined. Above all since 1815, when the British took over the control of the entire county, Buddhism lost the royal patronage. Buddhist monks were divided into three fraternities: “Siyam”, “Amarapura” and much later “Ramannya”. According to Blackburn's study, one of the key interests of Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala was to unite the *Sangha* (Buddhist clergy) under royal patronage, through his networks in south-east-Asia; an aspect many researchers have overlooked. Visiting some temples in Akurāssa, Hikkaduva, Kathaluva, Dodanduva, Ginivella, Ambalangoda and Kalutara, I am often confronted with the nagging question of the sponsorship of the temples. The vast expanse of interesting murals in the *viharas*, elaborate preaching halls with beautifully carved preaching thrones, libraries with comprehensive collections of palm leaf manuscripts indicate that these coastal areas were a hive of Buddhist activity in the mid 19th century. After reading Blackburn's study, I feel that the populist notion that Buddhist consciousness was revived when the printed information of the Buddhist-Christian debates between the years 1873 to 1877 reached the theosophist Colonel Olcott in the United States, needs rethinking.

Blackburn traces Buddhist scholarship to the years beyond Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala: The names Mohottivatte Gunananda, Ratmalane Dhammaloka and his pupil Ratmalane Dharmarama, Valane Siddhartha, Vaskaduve Sri Subhuti and Battaramulle Sri Subhuti, may show a somewhat shaky but unbroken tradition going back to the great revival movement under King Kirti Sri Rajasimha and Ven. Vālivita Saranamkara of the mid-eighteenth century.

The reader in the first chapter is transported to 1868 when “an edited manuscript of the *Vinaya* (a collection of Pali texts on monastic life and discipline) was brought in state from the Sabaragamuwa town of Pelmadulla downriver to Kalutara on the southern coast and, then through a series of southern towns and villages to the major port city of Galle.” (Blackburn 2010 p. 1). One of the chief editors of the editorial council and *Sangiti* (recitation of canonical texts to establish consensus regarding variants in reading) was Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala, who was officiating as the chief monk of *Sri Pada* (Adam’s Peak) since 1867. Sixty monks had been invited to the formidable project to edit the Pali texts of the *Tripitaka*, using Siamese and Burmese manuscripts to Pelmadulla. Sponsorship for this historical project was borne by the *radala*- leaders of the Sabaragamuwa region. Iddamalgoda, the chief custodian (*Basnayaka nilame*) of the *Maha Saman Devalaya* in Ratnapura took over the patronage previously held by the king.

Blackburn then shows the importance of this project in the backdrop of the Buddhist-Christian tensions of the late 1840s and the intra-monastic *Vinaya*-debates between the established Siyam Nikaya and the newly ordained monks of the Amarapura Nikaya. Her source material for these chapters vary from Tissa Kariyawasam’s Ph. D dissertation (1973), Ven. Yagirigala Prajnananda’s two volumes written in Sinhala on Ven. Sri Sumangala (1947) and published writings of Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala.

Blackburn gives the title *Locations of Buddhism* to her book. One may understand the locations as geographical locations, Pelmadulla, Hikkaduva, Ratmalana, to Kotahena, Maligakanda where Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala establishes the Vidyodaya Pirivena in 1873. What is most fascinating to read are the names of *dayakayas* associated with each location which may hint on their own political and agendas in entrepreneurship. Reading between the lines, one may be able to answer question why these towns on the coastal belt or locations in Colombo came to be sites of resistance. For example, it is not a coincidence that the Vidyodaya Pirivena is located vis-à-vis to the Maha Bodhi Society, surrounded by Sinhala printing establishments in Maligakanda, close to the location where the Ananda College stands today in Maradana.

The middle chapters bring in the new agents of the 1880s and 1890s in the common quest of addressing the challenges posed by colonial rule and Christianity: Colonel Henry Steele Olcott and Don David Hevavitarana (later known as

Anagarika Dharmapala) are introduced here. Blackburn first compares how Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala and Olcott understood “Buddhism”, reviewing the agendas of the Ven. Sri Sumangala’s Vidyodaya Pirivena and Olcott’s Buddhist Theosophical Society. She then moves to printing activities of the newly established presses publishing two news papers: *Sarasavi Sandaräsa* of Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala and the “*Theosophist*” of Olcott. The spoken word at the temple is now available on print, using Sinhala typography.

For the section on Anagarika Dharmapala, Blackburn draws much from the seminal work of Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1988), Obeyesekere (1972 and 1992), Michael Roberts (1997 and 2000) and Alain Trevithick (2007). Blackburn’s stance on Anagarika Dharmapala is interesting: She introduces him: “D. D. Hevavitarana was sixteen when Olcott and his colleague Helena Blavatsky first arrived in Lanka”, “When Olcott and Blavatsky first reached Lanka, young Hevavitarana was at loose ends”... “he worked as a clerk for the Department of Public instruction”... “he offered translation services to Olcott, became involved as an editor of *Sarasavi Sandaräsa*”. In the next section she narrates: “In 1891 after a transformative visit to Bodh Gaya (...) Hevavitarana, (who in 1883 had adopted the heroic and optimistic name “Dharmapala” or “Dharma Guardian”) became consumed by the prospect of bringing Bodh Gaya under Buddhist control and protection (Blackburn p.116-118). She very clearly shows the emerging new generation of activism, which maybe was less engaged in promoting Sinhala education and Buddhist scholarship but following an agenda to defend. Disputes between Ven. Sumangala, Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala are spelled out well, although the Hevavitarana family regarded Ven. Sumangala as the “family priest”.

The fifth chapter is titled *Sasana and Empire*. “In April 1897, the Siamese King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) reached Sri Lanka on a state visit en route to Europe. From the perspective of Hikkaduve and many other Lankan Buddhists leaders it was a celebrated opportunity, a chance to make direct personal contact with the only Buddhist monarch, who had retained a degree of independence in the face of French and British imperial designs on southern Asia” (Blackburn 2010 p. 143). The opening of this new chapter explains its objective. Citing Pali and Sinhala correspondence and newspaper articles, it brings in new material to the research of the revival movement of the *fin de siècle*.

The theoretical background which academics generally insist should be placed in the beginning of the research, emerges finally, only in the concluding sixth chapter. This does not mean that Blackburn, working on the lines of historical sociology and hermeneutics, does not value the importance of what academic supervisors call “theoretical underpinning”. She narrates a biography with a strong conviction of what she wishes to project through her study, may be in a more “inductive way”.

In the sixth and concluding chapter called *Horizons Not Washed Away* she locates her study of “Colonialism and Modernity” in the context of the body of research available in authoritative writings: Kithsiri Malalgoda (1976), Richard Gombrich (1988), Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere (1988) and George Bond (1988) and the earlier lesser cited works of C.D.S. Siriwardana (1966), Smith (1966), Swearer (1970) and Wriggins (1960) representing one school of thought which saw a shift in Buddhist activity from “monastic to lay authority” and another strand under the key words “modernization” and “modernity” emphasized in the works of Ames (1963 and 1973) and Bechert (1963 and 1973). Quoting Obeyesekere’s research of 1972 Blackburn sees the term “Protestant Buddhism” having two meanings: (a) “Its norms and organizational forms are historical derivatives from Protestant Christianity (b) more importantly, from the more contemporary point of view, it is a protest *against* Christianity and its associated Western political dominance prior to independence” (Blackburn 2010 p. 198). She further comments: “The terms *Buddhist Revival*, *Protestant Buddhism* and *Buddhist Modernism* have now long been used as comprehensive terms with which to describe the character of late nineteenth – and early twentieth-century Buddhism in Sri Lanka, despite periodic attempts by historians of religion and colonialism, and critical theorists of colonialism, to further nuance claims made in the name of Protestant Buddhism ... The preceding chapters make very clear that, even in central urban Buddhist institutions and associations linked to new forms of lay Buddhist participation, we do not see a substantial decline of monastic power and prestige, but rather continued collaboration between laypeople and monastics”(Blackburn 2010 p.199-200 emphasis added).

The style of this chapter is compact and requires more than one concentrated reading. Thankfully it is not placed at the beginning. The reader may turn the pages back to the beginning and look for details in the first five chapters. Blackburn’s arguments inspire one to re-read the works she cites. Her *Locations of Buddhism* are centered around the *Pirivena*- Monasteries, *Sri Pada* or Adam’s Peak and the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. As such, she does not force herself to view Ven. Sumangala’s engagements in “traditional” and “enlightened” categories or in “things pertaining to salvation” and “things of this world”, as Gombrich and Obeyesekere named them in 1988. Above all, Blackburn does not overlook the ritual significance of important temples nor juxtapose Buddhist scholarship and ritual practice of Buddhists to carve out a “pure Buddhism” that appeals to the West.

This book shows the networks operating before the advent of “Protestant Buddhism” moving from the much hackneyed track followed by the researchers that opens with the Buddhist-Christian confrontation of the 1870s. For the reader acquainted with writings of the 1970s, Blackburn’s book poses many questions, inviting the reader to look beyond Olcott and Dharmapala and also to review Buddhist revival movements from a more broad-based and multidisciplinary standpoint. This means taking endeavours of monks in the field of education, preaching, networking with south-Asian monks and royalty into consideration. It also incorporates the agendas of local urban entrepreneurs who sponsored the projects, Kandyan and Sabaragamuwa aristocracy taking up the role of patrons and usage of modern media of that time, like the printing press, into the study. Much of this information is available in Sinhala recorded in the “*Charitapadanas*” or eulogies written on Buddhist monks and newspapers of that time. To me, *Locations of Buddhism* has shown that the endeavours of Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala were not to “revive” but energize Buddhism receiving less patronage from the colonial ruler. After a lapse of over twenty years, a deep study of Buddhism of the colonial day based on texts has finally emerged, which can show methodologies for new research on Buddhist activism of post war Sri Lanka. ■

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