

Sinhala Buddhism and the 'Daughters of the Soil'

Kumari Jayawardena

Pious Buddhists often remind us of the potentialities for feminism in Buddhism and of the fact that the *Sangha Ratna* once included bhikkunis who wrote 'feminist' poetry. But in looking at Sinhala Buddhism over the last 100 years, several questions arise. Why have Sinhala Buddhist ideologues shied away from feminism? And why have they (even while praising the ancient Bhikkuni Order and the role of Sangamitta) failed to raise the key issue of reviving this Order which has been extinct in Sri Lanka for over 1000 years?

In many Asian countries, the years of national awakening, modernisation and resistance to foreign rulers brought the democratic issue of women's rights to the fore. Nationalists and revolutionaries, such as Sun Yat Sen, Nehru, Mao Ze dong, Kemal Ataturk, Sukarno and Ho Chi Minh, believed not only in the elimination of obscurantist and retrograde practices deriving from old religious and social traditions, but also in the modernisation of society and the emancipation of women. Their message was clear: women had to be educated, had to come out of their homes into schools, universities, factories and offices, and had to be an integral part of the struggle for national liberation and social change.

In Sri Lanka however, the issue of women's emancipation did not figure either in the Sinhala Buddhist revival or in nationalist discourse. In fact, the trend was the opposite - to denounce modernization and promote traditional attitudes to women. In 1888, when some women started the Buddhist Women's Education Society to launch an English school for Buddhist girls, they were praised for "most meritorious efforts for the *advancement of religion* (*The Buddhist*, Vol.1, No.15, emphasis added). The aim was clearly the production of good Buddhist wives and mothers, not of freedom fighters against colonial rule.

Why did Sri Lanka lag behind the Asian countries in highlighting 'the woman question'? Perhaps it was the belief that Buddhism had liberated women and the fact that there were no glaring social evils such as foot-binding, *sati* and *purdah* which could shame the country in the eyes of the world; (but

if not as glaring, there were still plenty of other areas of women's exploitation and oppression in Sri Lanka that could have been taken up by Buddhists). Another reason may have been the absence of a militant nationalist or revolutionary movement which would have raised issues of women's liberation in order to mobilize women to participate in on-going political struggles.

Religious and ethnic consciousness preceded political nationalism in Sri Lanka in the late 19th century and never left the stage, even in later years of moderate nationalism. Sinhala Buddhists began to assert an exclusive ethnic and religious identity rather than a Sri Lankan identity. They projected themselves (in gender terms) as *sons* of the soil, confining the daughters of the soil, as well as minority groups into a space determined for them by the men of the majority group. An attempt was made to confine Sinhala women to the narrow and strictly defined role of reproducing the Sinhala nation.

The Imagined Aryan Woman

One of the foundations of Sinhala - Buddhist consciousness formulated during this period was the myth of Aryan origin. In Sri Lanka, the myth was used to strengthen claims of racial superiority and to mark out clear gender roles for 'respectable' women. The construction of a specifically 'Aryan' Sinhala Buddhist woman pervaded the revivalist debate and early nationalist discourse and even the work of Sinhala novelists and poets. Their main concern was women of reproductive age. The correct way a Sinhala Buddhist wife/mother should behave dress and conduct herself in society was categorically defined. Women followers of the Buddha and the queens and heroines of early Sri Lankan history were projected in the Sinhala press as role models.

While being exhorted to follow the patterns of conduct laid down in the discourses of the Buddha, women were given the added roles of guardians of the 'Aryan' Sinhala race and the inspirers of their men - dissuading them from alcohol, meat-eating, immorality and imitation of the despised foreigners. Anagarika Dharmapala (1861-1933), the most outspoken ideologue of the Buddhist revival (and friend of Blavatsky, Annie Besant and many liberated women) often wrote about the imagined Aryan family. "The Aryan husband trains his wife to take care of his

Kumari Jayawardena, author and researcher, has written widely on questions concerning gender.

parents and attend on holy men, on his friends and relations. The glory of woman is in her chastity, in the performance of her household duties and obedience to her husband. This is the Aryan ideal wife." (A. Guruge, *Return to Righteousness*, 1965:345)

A pamphlet (in Sinhala) on correct conduct for male and female laity (*gihi vinaya*) published by Dharmapala in 1898 was a continuous best-seller. In this book great stress was laid on women's correct behaviour rather than their emancipation; of the 200 rules (under 22 headings), the large chunk of 30 rules was on 'how females should conduct themselves. These rules were "to keep the house and personal belongings, clothes and the body clean; to beautify the garden with flowering plants; to wear saris and shun blouses that expose the midriff; not to address children or servants with pejorative pronouns; not to spend time lazily chewing betel; not to comb one's hair or pick lice in the presence of others". As Obeyesekere remarks, these rules for bourgeois households incorporating many Protestant values were an attempt to reform rustic habits. "The condemnation of peasant manners is based on Western notions of propriety... Dharmapala's social reform provided a value system to a new class, an emerging bourgeoisie" (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, 1989: 214-5).

The Great Confusion

Dharmapala and the Buddhist revivalists expressed particular animosity against missionaries and the 'Christianisation' and 'Westernisation' of students by European and Burgher teachers. The latter being partly European and English speaking, were pioneers of the modernising process, and from the mid-19th century, they dominated the teaching staff of schools; by the late 19th century, they had also become nurses, secretaries and doctors. The modernisation and Westernization of women was resisted by the orthodox who felt that their women were losing all traditional virtues in the pursuit of Western ideals. Dharmapala warned that Sinhala Buddhist women of noble character were rare because of Western influences and marriages to Christians. Buddhist women had given up their pleasing Aryan names for those of foreigners. Clothes worn by European women were offensive to the eye, he said, and criticised women of the local bourgeoisie who had taken to wearing ridiculous hats and stockings and dresses that exposed their legs (Guruge, *Dharmapala Lipi*, 1965:77-94).

The Christian woman began to figure in the polemics and diatribes of the period and in works of fiction. European women were depicted as whores and the Virgin Mary was written about in obscene terms. The Burgher woman became the standard stereotype of the immoral temptress who not only appeared in public with men, but danced and drank with them. When Westernised Sinhala women began to dress in European fashion and socialise freely with men, they were denounced as 'loose' women who had been contaminated by Christian and Burgher influences. This mixture of race and culture was seen

as a sign of the decline of the Sinhala nation, visible in its most deplorable form in the behaviour of women; if the women were impure then their progeny too would be corrupt and the Sinhala nation would have no future. The protection of Sinhala womanhood against this degeneration became one of the ethnic and religious duties of the Sinhala Buddhist revival. Rather than women's rights, the accepted slogan was that of the purity of both Buddhist women and the Sinhala ethnic group.

Although Sinhala Buddhist consciousness has passed through some changes of emphasis during the subsequent periods, these themes have persisted over time and have found their way into popular art. In the first decade of the 20th century, the novels of Piyadasa Sirisena illustrated the decline of the Sinhalese with stories of virtuous Sinhala Buddhist youth being led astray by Christians and Burghers. Significantly one of Sirisena's novels was called *Maha Viyavula* ('The Great Confusion', 1909) in which a Sinhala woman from a wealthy family declines into poverty after becoming the mistress of a Burgher who is eventually reduced to earning a living by repairing shoes (Michael Roberts *et al*, *People In between*, 1989: 254). What is implied is that an even greater confusion would result from this miscegenation, since the progeny would not be brought up to be proper Sinhala Buddhists.

Accepted roles

While Buddhist nationalists did not advance rights for women beyond those of limited female education, there was some freedom and recognition sanctioned for widows and women who were past the age of reproduction. Several rich Buddhist widows became national figures and were honored for their donations to Buddhist causes - their munificence becoming legendary. The best-known included Selestina Dias, widow of one of Panadura's largest land owners and liquor traders who gave a large donation to Visakha Vidyalaya, the leading Buddhist women's School in Colombo. Mallika Hewavitarana, (mother of Anagarika Dharmapala), fund raiser for orphanages, schools and old age homes, and Bhadravathie Fernando (widow of the wealthy W. D. Fernando), who financed numerous Buddhist institutions.

The other accepted role for Buddhist woman was that of the *dasa sil matha* (mother of the Ten Precepts), who are lay women with shaven heads wearing white or yellow robes. This is as far as a woman can go in terms of the life of the religieuse. From the days of the Buddhist revival to the present, the leading monks have resisted any idea of women's ordination, although a *bhikkuni* order existed in Sri Lanka upto the 10th century. Recently monks have publicly criticised *dasa sil mathas* for acting as if they were *bhikkunis*. In July 1991, Rev. W. Rahula condemned their use of yellow robes like male monks, but did not mention the need for an order of nuns. This led to a lively correspondence in the press; one writer alluded to

Rev. Rahula as one of the "anti feminists" in the *Sangwa* and added: "[t]he proposal to demote Dasa Sil Mathas, give them white robes and oppose ordaining them as Bhikkunis...should be condemned and resisted" and noted that "[t]he Sinhalese Sangha has an unenviable history of monopolism, casteism... and male chauvinism" (*Sunday Observer*, 11, Aug. 1991). One may add that Buddhist lay leaders are no different.

Opposition to radicalising Buddhist women

In spite of the lack of support for women's rights from Buddhist ideologues, and their timidity on 'the woman question', Sinhala Buddhist women themselves moved ahead in education, employment and political participation.² In the early 1930s, some women from Buddhist Theosophical schools joined the early anti-imperialist and socialist movements. They included Vivienne Gunawardena, Selina Perera, Caroline (Gunawardena) Antonympillai and Kusuma Gunawardena. Moreover a British Socialist, Doreen Wickremasinghe (nee Young), wife of the Left leader Dr.S.A.Wickremasinghe, was successively the principal of two Buddhist girls' schools, Sujatha Vidyalaya in Matara (from 1930 to 1932) and Ananda Balika Vidyalaya in Colombo (from 1933 to 1935).

The *Suriya Mal* movement, organised by radical groups as a counter to the Poppy Day of the colonial power, had its nerve centre at Ananda Balika Vidyalaya, and led by Doreen Wickremasinghe. Teachers and pupils eagerly participated in its activities, and in the process, mixed freely with young men of the Left of different caste and ethnic origins. These trends, however, were not welcome to the conservative elements of the Buddhist educational establishment. When Doreen Wickremasinghe was offered the post of principal of Visakha Vidyalaya in 1933, the offer was withdrawn when it was discovered that she was to marry Dr.S.A.Wickremasinghe that year. Again in 1936, she was replaced as principal of Ananda Balika because some Buddhists were alarmed that the school had become a centre for controversial anti-British and Left activities, and that young socialist men were moving freely with the teachers and students (K. Jayawardena, *Doreen Wickremasinghe, A Western Radical in Sri Lanka*, 1991).

The concern of Buddhists at the appearance of such women political activists was reflected in a Piyadasa Sirisena novel of the 1940s; he categorises the 'bad woman' as one who travels about on her own, attends political meetings, addresses public meetings, considers household work demeaning and shows scant respect to parents. What is more revealing, however, is that a character in the book, who talks in favour of education, employment, sports, theatre and other independent activities for women, is told: "If anybody accepts all that you have said, then he or she must necessarily be a Communist or a Samasamajist". (Piyadasa Sirisena, *Debara Kella*, 1945). This illustrates the view among some Buddhists that socialism meant women going out of control. The fact that many women

on the Left made cross-caste and cross-ethnic marriages and that foreign women socialists had married local men increased their concern.

Sinhala Buddhist ideology has passed through many phases; it has undergone changes and nuances of emphasis in response to changing politico-economic circumstances. However, there have recently been greater attempts at welding the many and sometimes contradictory elements of this consciousness into a coherent ideology. During the last decade, a group of the intelligentsia (the new Sinhala Buddhist revivalists) have attempted the articulation of a *jathika chintanaya* or national ideology. While stressing the Sinhala Buddhist nature of Sri Lankan society and the need to preserve it, they have developed a set of arguments based on ideas of cultural relativism. They have reinterpreted history to invent the picture of an egalitarian and harmonious society that existed in Sri Lanka in pre-colonial times and whose restoration is the aim of their project. Their attitude to gender remains traditional, they claim that Judaeo-Christian civilization is inherently oppressive of women unlike Buddhist culture which gives them an equal role with men. Since women are defined as already having equality, no changes are required in the basic status-quo as far as women are concerned.

But while the condition of women in terms of their physical quality of life has materially advanced, and the rhetoric of women's rights is freely indulged in, women in Sri Lanka are yet subordinated. Messages to women, couched in religious and ethnic terms, have remained remarkably traditional. Buddhist monks, supported by lay intellectuals, still emphasize correct patterns of conduct; women are urged not to follow 'Western' alien and demoralising examples; preventing the entry of such intrusions is seen as the duty of a righteous government. And the ultimate 'Other' is still the Western (or Burgher) woman. In such a situation, significantly, few women leaders professing to be Buddhists take up feminist causes and radical women agitating for women's rights do not seek support among the Buddhist religious and lay hierarchies.

Endnotes

1. In many Sinhala films, upto the present day, the virtuous Sinhala hero is temporarily 'bewitched' by a 'loose' Burgher woman. In popular television serials, an alliance with a non-Sinhala or Burgher woman inevitably corrupts the male; he is diverted not only from the path of filial and familial duty, but also (more importantly) from ethnic duty. Marriage to a non-Sinhala and the creation of half-Sinhala or non-Buddhist children continues to be perceived as a real threat to the Sinhala Buddhist nation.
2. The first Sinhala Buddhist woman doctors qualified at the turn of the century; educated Buddhist women started entering other professions such as teaching and nursing. In the 1920s, they began to be active in politics; some of them entered the Ceylon National Congress and the Ceylon Labour Party, while others joined the trade union movement. Buddhist women were also members of the Women's Franchise Union, an autonomous women's organisation which agitated for women's suffrage.