BUDDHIST MONKS AND ETHNIC POLITICS

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A War Zone in an Island Paradise

The chronic conflict in Sri Lanka, once considered an island paradise, derives from the political and moral deficiencies of both the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority. In this paper I am dealing with the Sinhala side of the issue, and not with the ramifications of Tamil morality and politics. Specifically, my concern in this paper is a new stratum of Buddhist monks who in the 1940s played a leading role in bringing about a nationalist revolution which unfortunately deteriorated into a narrow ethnic chauvinism. They are now a major obstacle to peace, which can only be achieved by sharing power with the Tamils. This is not to blame the Sangha (the Order of Buddhist monks) as a whole, if only because the Sangha is not a monolithic structure with one defining ideology, as will become clear in the discussion below. Besides, monks are only one part of a complex political game in which the laity are the overwhelmingly dominant players. We must also remember that the targeting of Buddhist monks and Buddhist sacred sites by the Tamil Tigers may have encouraged or aggravated monastic militancy, and that the Tamil Tigers may not be ready for peace even if monks become less militant. Nevertheless, opposition in principle to a meaningful devolution of power is indefensible, and only reveals an absence of both political realism and political morality.

Ideally, and perhaps the earliest culture of Buddhism, the monk was a person who renounced material goods and lived on the generosity of the householder, devoting all of his time to the quest for liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Early in the history of Buddhism, this total dependence of the renouncer on the laity for material sustenance led to a social relationship which, at its core, was one of gift exchange – returning the laity's gift of material goods with the spiritual guidance which is explicitly understood in Buddhism as the gift that surpasses all other gifts. This eventually evolved into an ornately wrought priestly and pedagogic role. Despite periodic 'declines' in Buddhism, the monk's anchor in the code of monastic discipline (*vinaya*) was firm, the foundations of his belief in it unshattered, and his relations with the laity maintained within clearly demarcated boundaries. It is within this framework of monk/lay relations that the social role of the monk in Sri Lanka was defined through the centuries.

Monks and 'Social Service'

The educated monks of today, however, define their role quite differently. They label it as *samaja sevaya*, 'social service,' which covers a broad spectrum of advice and guidance in wholly secular activity, conspicuously including political activity, understood as the right to make and unmake governments, and to exert pressure on the elected representatives of the people. They further hold that this was always their role, going back to the establishment of Buddhism two thousand years ago. This belief is now tacitly accepted by the laity, especially the middle classes. Upon close observation, however, it becomes clear that this conception of the monastic role is not ancient, but an innovation of the nationalist reformer Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933).[1] Dharmapala's project of nationalist regeneration needed an indigenous leader, and he found the monk to be the ideal choice. In making this choice, Dharmapala elevated the monk to a position he never held before, and invested him with the specific secular role which the modern monk has come to believe is his heritage, as explicitly stated in Walpola Rahula's masterpiece charter for monastic activism, *The Heritage of the Bhikku*.[2]

Dharmapala understood the task of the monastery-led national regeneration to be twofold – economic and cultural. The economic project was taken up in the 1930s and 1940s by a section of the monks, primarily those of the Vidyodaya monastic college in Colombo. Their project, following Dharmapala's plan, was *gramasamvardhana*, 'rural development,' which meant the encouragement of methodical activity among the impoverished peasantry and instructing them in scientific agriculture, health, conflict resolution, rural self-government and, not least, a Buddhism sanitized of magical belief. In their rural development work, and in their general outlook, these monks accepted ethnic and cultural diversity as a fact of Sri Lankan life. In this they represent a continuity with the dominant current of the island's history which was inclusivist and accommodatory. We can refer to these monks as 'pragmatic monks.'

The cultural aspect of Dharmapala's nationalist project was taken up primarily by the monks of Vidyalankara, the other prominent monastic college of the island, also located in Colombo. This part of the project came to the fore in the mid-1940s, reaching its climax in the electoral victory of the nationalist forces in 1956. Unlike the rural development monks of the Vidyodaya College, these monks advocated an exclusivist and hegemonic appropriation of the country for the majority ethnic group, Sinhalas, and their religion, Buddhism. They borrowed Dharmapala's slogan 'country, nation and religion' and made it a rallying cry for the Sinhala Buddhists to justify depriving the Tamils and other minorities of their rights to equal citizenship. Unfortunately for the country, this cultural part of the Dharmapalite agenda triumphed over the more sober and benevolent economic part, yielding a bitter harvest of social

turmoil, economic stagnation and civil war. These monks can be labeled 'ideological monks.' The terms 'pragmatic' and 'ideological' are used here only to describe a state of mind, and not the exclusive location of one or other type of monk at one or the other of the two monastic colleges.

Among the rewards that the monks received from the nationalist regime elected in 1956 was the granting of university status to these two colleges. As universities, Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara produced a substantial body of young monks educated in secular subjects who were employable as salaried workers or who could otherwise seek profit in a modern economy. A monk involved in such profitable activity is no longer dependent on the laity for his material sustenance, and he has developed a new sense of 'self-respect' that does not allow him to accept lay generosity. Correspondingly, he does not feel obliged to offer any religious or ritual service to the laity, although he might perform some such function as a personal favour. Because of his full-time occupation, he does not have the time to work for the laity anyway, even if he so desires. These changes have generated the new doctrine that the monk/lay relation is not only a hierarchical exchange of economic goods for ritual services, but also where appropriate, an egalitarian exchange of goods, services and social favours. The effect of this is a secularization of the Sangha not seen since the *ganinnanse* institution of the 18th century, when monks took to both economic productivity and family life, prompting a royally instituted religious revival that climaxed in the importation of ordination from Thailand. These educationally qualified monks hold the view that a monk can practise almost any art or craft, science or profession.

Today, there are monks who teach for a salary. Some are managing directors of well-funded nursery schools. Some are investment specialists. Some own car repair shops and taxi services. Some are active in politics. Some practise astrology and the occult sciences. One is the president of the Nurses' Union. One is a songwriter with a good-sized fan club, and another writes stirring battle songs for the soldiers in the ethnic war. Some are novelists. One is a prolific painter and another a sculptor. One holds meditation classes for foreign tourists. Another is the President of the local Rotary Club. Except for the monks who are professional teachers, the numbers of monks who engage in the activities are few. But this numerical insignificance masks the pervasive nature of the change that has occurred in the culture of the monastery.

Most of the activities listed above belong broadly to the economic sphere, and are contrary to the orthodox monastic ideals. But, albeit in different guises, economic activities have existed and prospered from very early times in the history of Buddhist monasticism. Only a religious purist would object to the monks engaging in such activity, at least up to a point. However, when we move on from these economic enterprises to the cultural agenda of the monks (derived from Dharmapala), we are faced with quite a different picture, that of the establishment of majority hegemony, to the detriment of the rights of the minorities, which cannot go unchallenged.

As observed above, the new monks have mobilized themselves against legislative attempts to accommodate the minorities by devolution of power, and they have done so on every occasion that such attempts have been made. By way of illustration I shall briefly refer to the very first. Having created a majority versus minority problem the proportions of which it did not seem to have anticipated, the nationalist government of 1956, led by Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, tried to ease the situation by entering into an agreement, in 1957, with the Tamil leader S.J.V. Chelvanayagam. The central idea in this agreement, known as the 'B-C Pact,' was a scheme of power sharing by means of Provincial Councils linked into Regional Councils, in effect creating a unit of local self-government consisting of the Northern and Eastern provinces of the island, where Tamils predominate. In reaction to this, a group of vociferous monks staged a sit-in protest in front of the Prime Minister's residence, which led the latter to hastily abrogate the pact. It is now widely accepted, with the benefit of hindsight, that had the monks not prevented this agreement, the problem would have been nipped in the bud, and the country spared the trauma that has taken 609,000 lives, displaced a million, dismantled democratic institutions, and derailed attempts to lay the foundations of a sound economy. Politicians have not learnt the lesson of this sad history, and until they do the conflict is not likely to be resolved.

I have so far dealt mostly with the socially undesirable effects of the Sangha's new role. Let me now consider the possibility of a socially positive and beneficial monastic role, created by a cosmopolitan and progressive Sangha that might conceivably act as a countervailing force to the abuse of state power, and as a guardian of civil society and democratic values. Such a development would confer new meaning on the hackneyed phrase 'guardian deities of the nation' that the monks often use to describe themselves. The view that the monk's role is social service can be a liberating doctrine, potentially enabling the rise of an ethnically based liberal humanist Sangha. I am only too well aware of how remote this possibility is, but recent developments warrant some speculation.

A New Lay Critique of the Monks

When the Dharmapalite idea that the monk's work is social service was first restated and amplified by Walpola Rahula in his *The Heritage of the Bhikku* half a century ago, the laity's critique of that position was based on religious-moral grounds.[3] They expressed fear that social service would inevitably lead the monk to compromise monastic discipline. With the gradual acceptance of the idea that the monk's work is social service, a new and secular criterion to assess the worth of the monk has come into being. As opposed to the religious-moral criterion, this is an ethical and liberal-humanist criterion of social responsibility. According to these lay critics, the monks do not measure up, unlike, for example, some of the more liberal and radical sections of the Christian priesthood.

This new lay critique was articulated intermittently throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s.[4] The ethnic problem, in particular the support of the monks for escalating the war, has provided fertile ground for a more systematic articulation of this critique. The stand of the monks on the ethnic issue is cited by these critics as illustrative of the Sangha's internal contradictions and moral bankruptcy. During the election campaign of 1994 this critique became more focused, cogent and unmistakable.

The rise of this critique also parallels another significant development, namely the break-up of the Sangha coalition which had been built in the turmoil before the 1956 elections. Prior to this date, politically inclined monks were divided into two broad groups – those who supported the conservative rightist but pluralist politicians, and those who opposed them. As the historic victory of the nationalist forces in 1956 became established, the rightist, hitherto pluralist conservatives reversed their policies and embraced the nationalist, hegemonist agenda. Correspondingly, the more sober voices of the Sangha epitomized by the pragmatic monks of the Vidyodaya were silenced, and the Sangha as a whole became a single force championing the nationalist, hegemonist agenda.

The 1994 campaign signaled a possible return to the days of division in the Sangha, this time around between the exclusivist, hegemonist monks discussed above and a possibly growing group of progressive, liberal-humanist inclusivists. This can be seen as a new version of the division between what we have termed the ideological and the pragmatic monks. The contribution of the lay critique of monks to this development is considerable. As we noted above, this critique was most clearly articulated during the 1994 campaign. It came from both independent writers and groups, notably a group of journalists called the Free Media Movement and radical writers and columnists of the Sinhala weekly paper, *Ravaya*, and writers from the Vibhavi Cultural Centre. It formed part of a larger critique of the abysmal state into which an authoritarian, murderous and war-mongering regime had precipitated the country. Part of the paraphernalia that shored up at the regime was a Sangha unified in its religious-ethnic hegemony, as expressed in a stratum of favoured monks who could be induced at will by the government to issue what were in effect endorsements of corruption, tyranny and war. In the face of such violation of fundamental ethical principles, individuals were increasingly emboldened to express their disgust and scorn at both the political regime and the monastic hierarchy that propped it up.

The sentiment is a far cry from the traditional lay critique of the monks on grounds of *sila* or Buddhist morality, the critique advanced, as mentioned above, in 1946 when Rahula's *The Heritage of the Bhikku* was published. Lay critics are now treating these monks almost as a secular social group, which they are entitled to do given the monks' own insistence that their work is social service. These lay critics also suggest that the monks have sunk to their lowest level, but are potentially reformable and socially useful. Somewhat like Dharmapala, these lay groups are trying to tap the monks as a resource for building a nation, though quite a different one from that which Dharmapala envisaged.

The Monk and Social Responsibility

The 1994 government itself played a role in focusing attention on the idea of a socially responsible liberal-humanist or progressive monk. The government's peace platform during the 1994 electoral campaign, and the promise of a political solution to the ethnic problem, appealed to a handful of monks. Echoing the pragmatic monks of Vidyodaya half a century ago, who carried the message of regeneration through rural development, a band of these neo-pragmatic monks traversed the country during the 1994 campaign holding meetings and explaining the idea of devolution to the people.

A recent incident gives us an indication of the role of the devolution proposals, known as 'The Package,' in potential regeneration of a socially responsible Sangha. The proposals drew intense hostility from the nationalist standard-bearers of both the laity and the Sangha. One manifestation of this and of the propagandist zeal aimed at derailing the proposals was the appointment of a commission (by a coalition of Buddhist hegemonist groups) to enquire into the injustices done to the Sinhala Buddhist majority over the last few centuries, and the further harm that would surely come the way of the majority if the devolution proposals were enacted into law.

Then, in an unusual turn of events, Mangala Samaraweera, a high-ranking cabinet minister, publicly condemned the report, describing it as a document eminently fit for the 'garbage bin of history.' This enraged the nationalist monks, who organized a three-thousand-strong protest and demanded an apology. They then went to Matara, the central town of the minister's constituency, and staged a ritual in front of the town's famous Bodhi Tree to curse the minister. Coconuts were brought to the site and ritually cracked by dashing them on stone, to the accompaniment of magically poisonous verses, reportedly composed by a professor. Arrangements had also been made to dash a hundred thousand coconuts in different parts of the country to curse the minister a hundred thousand times. Not content with this, the monks called for the severest punishment that the Sangha can inflict on a layman, the *patta nikujjana kamma*, the formal act of 'turning over the bowl,' which amounts to a spiritual death sentence, a Buddhist *fatwah*. Thus, the monks ransacked both Buddhism and the folk religion to find the ritual weaponry to cause the minister symbolic death. A sceptical informant has, however, reported that while the composer of the killer verses was dead within a week, the minister continues to be a picture of physical and political health.

This display by the monks, given full coverage by the media, rekindled the lay critique of the Sangha, which reached an unprecedented level of candour and outspokenness. *The Observer*, a pro-government newspaper, devoted its 7 October 1998 editorial

to condemnation of the event, commenting that the ritual revealed 'the dirty little secrets of the Sinhala-Buddhist psyche.' Some writers likened the monks to the clerics who decreed death sentences on Salman Rushdie and the Bangladeshi feminist novelist Taslima Nasreen. The monks were described as intolerant and fascist, their participation in the actual dashing of the coconuts as uncouth and unbecoming, and the language of the monks as 'abusive, angry and full of hate.' Monks were also described as overfed, with plump faces like overgrown rose apples, and insensitive to the poverty and suffering of the poor who put up with them only out of the deep respect and veneration they have for the religion's founder. Equally uncomplimentary to the monks was one columnist's insinuation that these monks, unable to understand S.J. Tambiah's book *Buddhism Betrayed?* had become willing pawns of an arms dealer who also owns the Island Group of newspapers. The reference here was to the Island Group's campaign against Tambiah's book, and the allegation that the newspaper group's owner is an arms dealer, which would hardly qualify him to give an impartial review of a book about peace. Writers also drew attention to the money-making operations monks have built under the cover of social service, and in general to their reprehensible lifestyle.

At this point the lay critics were boosted by a further piece of news. The abbot of the ancient and wealthy monastery Vadihitikanda Vihara, at Kataragama, was alleged to have held three sisters – three young girls aged between twelve and eighteen – captive in a dungeon in the monastery for six months, abusing them sexually. He allegedly made the girls perform various acts for which he provided instructions by the use of a pornographic film. This unflattering piece of news was followed by another, that a monk who alleged abused teenage and younger girls at an orphanage he ran was now going to open, in a suspiciously inaccessible jungle village, a garment factory employing young girls. These examples gave more grounds – if any were needed – for the critics to portray the coconut-dashing ritual as a metaphor for the moral decrepitude of the monks.

A few days later the progressive monks held a counter-rally in Colombo. They called this rally and others held in different parts of the island *Adhisthana Puja,* 'offerings of determination.' Attended by a thousand monks, this rally staged its own ritual with its own coconut symbolism. They distributed a hundred thousand coconuts among the poor.

The activities of the progressive monks were hailed by the lay critics as the positive result of the coconut-dashing ritual. At long last, these critics claimed, an inner critique and a genuine social consciousness is emerging in the Sangha, and monks are realizing that their own house needs to be put into some order. But the events between the coconut-dashing in 1998 and now (2001) provide ample evidence that this is still a distant goal, its path littered with obstacles placed by the vociferous hegemonist monks. However, equally evident is the increase in the ranks of the progressive monks, who in the parliamentary elections of 2000 assisted in the re-election of the government that initiated (unsuccessfully) a devolution package. The 2000 elections itself was marked by irregularities which puts any believer in democracy and parliamentary government in a very difficult position; such a person has to support the government's championing of devolution, while at the same time condemning the government as a whole for its reprehensible record, since it has done no more than further fuel the breakdown of civilized society rooted in the hegemonist policies inaugurated in 1956 and exacerbated by the authorization of previous regimes.

Buddhist Modernism and Lay Leadership

A striking feature of Sri Lankan Buddhist modernism is the laity's conspicuous role in *religious* leadership, arising from the failure of the monks to adapt imaginatively to social changes and initiate reforms within their own organization. The liberal humanism of the progressive monks we have talked about is owed in no small measure to broader lay movements of radical protest against the conservative and authoritarian policies of the J.R. Jayawardene regime elected in 1977. This protest includes the advocacy of a peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict. Surveys conducted by sociologists at Colombo University and the independent Sinhala-language newspaper *Ravaya* clearly indicate that the majority of the people support a peaceful solution, and warmongers are a minority of about only 7 per cent. Their voice, however, is disproportionately loud because it is amplified by the major independent newspaper group in the country, the Island Group. It is indeed a measure of the irresponsibility of these newspapers, the English-language daily the *Island* and its Sinhala counterpart *Divayina,* that they have relentlessly been doing their best to tarnish the one bright spot in the contemporary gloom of Sri Lanka, namely the relatively harmonious relations between the different religions. The *Divayina*, in particular in its Sunday special section, frequently carries articles alleging dark schemes hatched by the Muslims and Christians to eradicate the majority Sinhala Buddhists. (Interestingly enough, Hindus are rarely perceived this way, as if in secret acknowledgement of the fact that the Buddhist authors of these hysterical writings are often ardent Hindu ritualists.) These newspapers also regularly target the most visible of the organizations that advocate democratic values, the NGOs. The major objective of their propaganda is to derail peace efforts, as manifested most recently in their attacks on attempts at mediation by Norway.

If, in recent times, the laity has been the Sangha's guide to better behaviour rather than the other way round, we must continue to believe in the prospect that the Sangha's inner critique will grow, even though it may not progress smoothly. Why? Because the lay critique itself, which I have argued is the forerunner of the Sangha's, is alive and well. The broad movement for equal citizenship and civilized government was born in the opposition to the authoritarian regime elected in 1977. In 1994 the movement played a major role in the electoral defeat of that regime, but the deep disappointment engendered by the new government of President Chandrika

Kumaratunga that it had helped elect broke its heart and its will to live. The failures of the new regime, especially in subversion of the electoral process in 2000, are revitalizing the activists, recalling the pattern of resistance to the Jayawardene government during which the movement was initially born. Anticipating widespread irregularities on election day, the movement organized a 'Yellow Ribbon Campaign' symbolizing concern and protest, and thousands went to the polls wearing the ribbon. The idea caught on, extending beyond the election campaign. For example, a yellow ribbon was part of the ensemble that bronze medal-winner Susanthika Jayasinghe wore when she ran for Sri Lanka at the 2000 Olympics. The movement, which has grown into a coalition of some seventy different activist groups, is preparing to launch a 'Golden Postcards' campaign to send the President a million yellow postcards advocating 'civilized government' – free media, an independent judiciary and civil service, a police commission, independent election and so forth. In addition, the movement demands action on specific matters which include the abolition of the present presidency with its extraordinary concentration of power without accountability, the appointment of a commission of inquiry into the irregularities of the 2000 election, the removal of the Chief Justice, alleged to be a pawn of the President, promulgation of an enforceable code of ethics for MPs and cabinet ministers, and the forging of a national consensus on religious, ethnic and linguistic rights. The progressive monks are undoubtedly invigorated by this: their yellow robe is gaining an additional dash of colour from the ribbons and the postcards. What we are witnessing again is the lay initiative as the springboard for monastic activism which goes back to Dharmapala a century ago. Whether this new and more enlightened activism will grow to be a force in the Sangha is yet unclear: all we can do at this stage is chronicle the mixed signals.

The data used here are derived from over three years of fieldwork carried out intermittently between 1991 and 1996. The paper reflects the author's conviction that anthropology must not only make academic analyses but contribute directly or indirectly to solving problems. Accordingly, the paper contemplates the directions in which Sri Lanka must move if it is to emerge from its present malaise and launch itself on the path to peaceful and prosperous nationhood. The most important observation that a field worker can make about Sangha/lay relations in Sri Lanka is that the laity overwhelmingly sees the Sangha's role as religious and ritualist, and not social and political. Based on long acquaintance with Sri Lanka both as a member of the culture and an experienced field worker, I firmly believe that monks have no influence over the ballot box, and that the view that they do is a phobia of power greedy politicians and a figment of the imagination of the city elites and Western observers. The politicians' phobia of the monks and the resulting reluctance to move towards power-sharing compromises the prospects for peace and civilized government. An honest and courageous social policy is a more sure and more lasting path to win the hearts and minds of voters. The essentials of such a policy are included in the list of demands by the activists of the Yellow Ribbon Campaign, cited above.

Courtesy, *Anthropology Today*

Notes

1 Dharmapala's activities, his definition of the role of the contemporary Buddhist monk, as well as the consequences of that definition, are discussed in greater detail in my book *The Work of Kings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

2 The Sinhala original was published in 1946 under the title *Bhiksuvage Urumaya.* English translation published in 1974 by Grove Press, New York.

3 See C.C.R. Gunawardene et al. *Report of the University Commission.* Sessional paper 16 of 1963. Colombo: The Government Press. A scholarly paper dealing with the public debate on this question is W.A. Wiswa Warnapala, 'Sangha and politics in Sri Lanka: Nature of the continuing controversy,' *Indian Journal of Politics* 12(1-2), April-August 1978: 66-76.

4 See for example D. Amarasiri Weeraratne, 'Devolution package and the Maha Sangha,' *The Sunday Observer,* 17 March 1996; and Lucien Rajakarunanayake, 'Trade and politics amidst the yellow robes,' *Sunday Leader*, 18 or 28 February 1996. A cogent Sinhala language critique, in the form of a booklet, is Bo Nandisara, *Loku Hamuduruwan vetatayi* ("To my abbot"), Haputale: New Royal Press, 1991. ■

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