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Introduction

The involvement and the role of the Buddhist monk in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has been discussed widely. It is believed that the Sinhala-Buddhist ideology held by Buddhist monks (meaning a larger majority of them) in Sri Lanka has been a key factor in the etiology of the Tamil separatist movement operating mainly in the North and East of the island. The separatist problem and the ensuing violence can be regarded as the most formidable political challenge faced by Sri Lanka in the recent past. In so far as its role is questioned, it is equally true to say that the issue of Tamil separatism is the main test Sri Lankan Buddhism has been facing in the post-independent history of the country. It is therefore very important, both politically and religiously, that right understanding is achieved regarding the problem. The present paper is an attempt in that direction.

The criticism levelled at the Sangha in connection with Tamil separatism contains two claims: one is that the Sangha has, over time, developed an ideology of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in which that particular identity is given prominence over the identities of the minority ethnic groups of the country. The second is the resultant exclusivist attitude and behaviour of the Sangha toward the Tamil

minority in particular and the other minorities in general. It is further stated, as following from the above two claims, that it is due to this attitude that some Tamil factions have decided to create a country of their own within Sri Lanka and that they have taken up arms as a way of realizing their objective.

In the first part of this paper, I shall examine two representative works of the genre mentioned above. Subsequently, I will try to highlight some key aspects of the role of the Sangha in the conflict and try to develop some constructive suggestions toward achieving a stable solution to the problem.

Seneviratne's *The Work of Kings*

H.L. Seneviratne's *The Work of Kings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) is a major contribution to the study of the contemporary Sangha in Sri Lanka. The work is very much a continuation of the kind of study found in S.J.Tambiah's *Buddhism Betrayed?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.). However Seneviratne's work differs from the former in being much wider in its perspective and much more far-reaching in its criticism. The main task Seneviratne undertakes in this work is to 'explore' how Buddhist modernism in Sri Lanka could not usher a civil society characterized by such universalist values of tolerance, nonviolence and pluralism. Seneviratne begins his exploration with Anagarika Dharmapala, the founder of Buddhist modernism, who defined the Buddhist monk's role as 'a caretaker of the flock and a social worker' (p.27). The new role attributed by Dharmapala to the monk had two distinct aspects, namely, economic and pragmatic and ideological and political. The former was the need to uplift the living standards and the quality of life of the ordinary people in the country. The latter was to revive what Dharmapala thought to be the ideal Sinhalese Buddhist culture of ancient Sri Lanka. Of these two tasks, the first was taken up by a group of monks associated with Vidyodaya Pirivena, one of the two

prominent centers of Buddhist learning established in 1873 and the other being Vidyalankara Pirivena established after two years, the members of which undertook to materialize the second aspect of Dharmapala's interpretation of the monk's role.

Under the category of those who took to village upliftment and rural development Seneviratne studies in detail the work of three leading monks, namely, Kalukondayave Pannasekhara, Hinatiyana Dhammaloka and Hendiyagala Seelaratana. In Seneviratne's assessment, these monks 'separated ideological from the pragmatic' and did their best for the course chosen by them although ultimately 'they simply had neither the vision nor the qualifications to launch a meaningful activist project' (pp.127-8). Seneviratne sums up his conclusions regarding the activism of these monks in the following words:

But these monks had their heart in the right place. Because they were convinced of the truth and feasibility of Dharmapala's message, they tried to do what he told them to do to the best of their capacity. They represent a pragmatic nationalism as opposed to a nationalist ideology with built-in propensities for degeneration into narrow ethnic and religious chauvinism. Their education and socialization was traditional as was their "monkness" about which the Vidyalankara monks made a loud, self-conscious and futile defense, and which for these monks was unnecessary because they had nothing to hide. They did not explicitly talk about their monkness or have to define or defend it because their lifestyle conformed to accepted rules of monkness, and they had no personal or ideological reason to change that lifestyle. They were patriots without being narrow nationalists and they were able to conceptualize in principle a social order in which the economic was primary, with the potential for economic self-interest to triumph over ideology, sided by the inner-worldly asceticism they, after Dharmapala, were able to fashion (p.128).

These remarks of Seneviratne anticipate the critique he would develop in discussing the role of Vidyalankara faction of monks who, in 1940s, undertook to articulate the ideological vision of Dharmapala which 'by the mid 1950s (it) turned into a hegemonic Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism' (p.131). The turning point in the Vidyalankara ideology was *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* by Walpola Rahula which, according to Seneviratne, is 'a work that has influenced the monkhood more than any other in the recent history of Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism' (p.135). The key characteristics of the project proposed by *The Heritage* are: advocating secular education for the monks; discouraging monks from participating in their traditional religious (ritualistic) functions; advocating social service, meaning thereby basically the involvement in politics, as the proper vocation for monks. This way of life was embraced by the monks who accepted the ideology of *The Heritage* and the result was the emergence of a monastic middle class with money and power who paid only a 'lip service' (p.334) to proper Buddhist monastic ideals. 'These new monks', Seneviratne says,

'never intended any such [social service] in the first place. What they meant by social service was a license for them to have greater involvement with secular society beginning with politics' (p.338).

The general appearance of this genre of monks is something like the following:

...going overseas and establishing themselves in foreign lands, facilitated by both philanthropists of those lands and by expatriate communities of Buddhists. A few of these monks control vast revenues and live the life of busy executives, replete with symbols like Mercedes Benzes, BMWs, and cellular phones. These monks have a foothold both in the country of their adoption and in Sri Lanka, and some hold immigrant status in

several countries. At the lower end of this financially comfortable class are the salary-earning monks, mostly graduates, who, especially if they also have support from the laity as well as productive land, are able to invest money in businesses like repair shops, taxi services, rental properties and tuition classes. A small minority also commercially practice astrology, medicine, and various occultisms, the "beastly arts" that are taboo for monks. Throughout history there were monks who practiced these, but now they do so with a new sense of legitimacy and commercialism. These come from the new definition of monk's role as social service (P.336).

'Stated differently', the author says,

'the Vidyalankara idea that the monk's vocation is social service has been revolutionary in that it has provided the monks with an excuse to seek profit and other secular goals and satisfaction in an unprecedented manner. It has opened the flood gates and given rise to a new monkhood that many thoughtful members of the culture view with alarm (p.195).

The most serious defect in the new definition by Rahula of the monk's role is that it replaces the ascetic ideal which is the source of the sense of morality in the monkhood with social service which does not have any such inner obligation. Seneviratne says:

The true and clear commitment of the monk is the other-worldly goal, and when that is taken away, the monkhood is freed of its basis and monks can engage in any activity. ...But when the floodgates are open , as when knowledge is elevated over practice, there is no inner way to control the activities of monks, whereas such control is the essence of the renouncer's commitment (p.172).

...in *The Heritage and in The History* [of Buddhism in Ceylon] it suits Rahula to be an advocate of a Buddhism that glorifies social intercourse with lay society...the receipt of salaries and other forms of material remuneration; ethnic exclusivism and Sinhala Buddhist hegemony; militancy in politics; and violence, war and the spilling of blood in the name of "preserving the religion." (p.186).

In this connection, Seneviratne discusses several specimens of 'social service' as performed by some of the leading monks representing this field (see his chapter on: *Social Service: The Anatomy of a Vacation*). The main thrust of Seneviratne's argument is that there has not developed, nor is there any room for development of a civil society characterizing such virtues as tolerance, pluralism, universalism in the contemporary Buddhist monastic tradition and hence the exclusivist, hegemonic Sinhala Buddhist nationalism which does not allow anyone other than Sinhala and Buddhist to be the legitimate inhabitants of the island. The reason for this unsatisfactory state of affairs is the mistaken or skewed adoption by Vidyānāyaka monks headed by Rahula (and Yakkadūwe Pannarama) of Dharmapala's definition of the role of the Buddhist monk as socially active caretaker of the flock.

This brief sketch is never meant to be a comprehensive summary of Seneviratne's work pregnant with an invaluable mine of first-hand information upon which he develops his deep and incisive appraisal of the contemporary Sangha in Sri Lanka. I will speak, at a later stage, on the implications of this work on the life of the Sangha. At the moment, my main concern is to see how far Seneviratne's analysis is helpful in understanding the role of the Sangha in the conflict in Sri Lanka.

There is no doubt that explaining the arising and the perpetuation of what Seneviratne considers to be the Sinhala Buddhist hegemonic tendencies or chauvinism of the Sangha and the resultant

discrimination against the Tamil community of Sri Lanka is, if not the key objective, one of the key objectives of his essay. The argument is: The Heritage by Rahula gave a new secular twist to Dharmapalite definition of the Buddhist monk. As a result of the adoption of this definition the Sri Lankan Sangha discarded the inner, other-worldly element, which is the most important element in its monastic life. This opened the flood gates of the traditional monastic life and there came to be a new monastic middle class hungry for money, power and prestige. The final conclusion of the argument is that this development ultimately produced the Sinhala Buddhist hegemonic exclusivist world-view which "ensured the preparation of the ground for the subversion of democratic institutions, adventure capitalism, terror, anomic and violent call for a separate state" (p.204). I do not have a problem with the premises of this argument. But I do not see how the specific conclusion follows from these premises. This is not to deny that the people Seneviratne discusses do not have these tendencies; they may or they may not have them. But the rejection of traditional morality, damaging one's monkhood, being capitalist, cherishing Mercedes or BMWs, none of these things has any logical connection with some of the leading members of the Sri Lankan Sangha being Sinhala- Buddhist-chauvinist and inhuman, 'so attracted to murder and murderers' (p.305) monsters, as Seneviratne wants us to believe. In other words, ethnic or religious exclusivism is not a necessary entailment of 'worldly individualism', that, as Seneviratne reveals in a masterly manner, emerged within the Sri Lankan Sangha.

There are several difficulties in the manner Seneviratne goes about in articulating his argument. In the first place, the depiction of Vidyalandara and Vidyodaya as absolute black and white entities, to say the least, is unrealistic and naive. In particular, I do not really know how far an anthropologist can legitimately go in making moral pronouncements on people, let alone making such pronouncements that are not easily substantiated. Seneviratne does refer to a Vidyalandara

monk who allegedly smuggled precious stones concealed inside statues (p.196). I can understand why, contrary to his usual method, he does not mention the name. But such information would not support his argument any more than 'bath-well' gossip would. But given the situation I am going to describe next, this kind of behaviour on the part of the Sangha can well happen irrespective of place or time.

Emergence of capitalism and worldly individualism may well be explained as a natural evolution of events. It is well known that land-lordism was very much there with the Sangha. It is quite natural that from this feudalist state capitalism follows. Whether The Heritage was there or not this was taking place in the Sangha. The present monastic order was started with the revival of Saranankara Sangharja in the mid 17th century. Some of those who received upasampada (higher-ordination) at this occasion were none other than these land-lords. It is also recorded that some of these monks who received upsampada gave it up and became samaneras (novices) in order to resume their more worldly activities. (At least this suggests that they were serious about their monkhood!). I see that this process continued without a break amidst the more enlightened members of the Sangha who were busy with ideological issues. It is true that those who wanted an excuse were provided with one by Rahula. But whether it was there or not capitalism was bound to come up. Capitalism does not need excuses or explanations. Money itself is both. I contend that among the people that Seneviratne discusses in the fifth chapter of his book there are only a few who are interested in national or religious activities; most of the others are simply money-makers who wouldn't give a damn about nation or religion, although some of them may have social organizations as camouflage(1). I think that Seneviratne should have made a distinction between these two groups. The group that is involved in the national problem in particular deserves to be put in a different category no matter whether or not one may agree with their ideological position.

How they came to hold the kind of position attributed to them has to be explained on different grounds.

In making a distinction between Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara, it is true that Seneviratne is making a broad generalization in which there can be exceptions. Such exceptions usually would not affect the main thesis as such. There is, however, an exception which cannot be overlooked without damaging his main claim considerably. Seneviratne does not overlook Madihe Pannasiha Nayaka Thera altogether. He refers to him mainly in two contexts, namely, his acceptance of the Agga-maha-pandita title from Myanmar and the critique of him by an unnamed member of the Sangha. Apart from these two negative contexts Seneviratne does not see in him any relevance to his study. The curious fact is that Madihe does not fit into either of the two categories of the Sangha Seneviratne constructs. He cuts across Seneviratne's categories. Although his teacher, Pelene, was a student of Vidyodaya, he was not. He was pretty much a domestic product of Wajiraramaya as many others of Wajiraramaya were. Contrary to the view of his teacher Madihe accepted social service as his mission. His social service has both village reconstruction or economic and pragmatic aspect of Vidyodaya and the ideological and political aspect of Vidyalankara (in so far as these two centres represent these two trends). Now, from the point of view of monkness and seriousness of the monastic purpose none including his detractors would have any misgiving. Of all what we know and hear he is the very embodiment, the ideal of Buddhist monasticism.

Seneviratne says that Vidyodaya activism suddenly came to an end in the 1940s. But Madihe proves that it did not. In some respects, there is evidence to show that Madihe went even farther than Vidyodaya social workers. As a young monk, he studied the Tamil language and preached in Nuwaraeliya to estate Tamils. At a later stage he made contact with Tamils in the North, in particular, those Tamils who were

considered as low-caste and helped them in their education. Seneviratne finds fault, I think rightly, with the Sangha who has not seen the significance of propagating Buddhism among the Tamils, in particular, the low-caste Tamils.

It [parochial identification of Buddhism with the Sinhala] also explains the failure, surprising for a missionary religion, to explore the proselytizing possibilities of neighboring non-Buddhist populations, in particular the low-caste Tamils subjected to religious discrimination by the upper-caste Jaffan Hindu Tamil establishment (p.324).

We find, in Madihe, at least, one counter-example, which is quite weighty. As my own study on Madihe Nayaka Thera (Madihe Maha Na Himi: *Caritaya ha Cintanaya*, 1998, Colombo. pp. 396) shows that he is a text-book example of a harmonious amalgamation of traditional morality or pristine monkhood with political and social activism⁽²⁾. If Madihe is a Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist, and undoubtedly he is according to Seneviratne, the phenomenon has to be explained differently. Madihe cannot be considered an unimportant lonely exception for he has been probably the foremost political activist among the Sangha during, in particular, the 60s through 80s.

Furthermore it is not easy to establish a direct influence of Dharmapala on Madihe. But this is not very important for the influence can well be indirectly. The point I wish to make, however, is that it is possible that Madihe chose social activism simply on the ground that it was a proper thing to do by a renouncer. It is a major claim of Seneviratne that social service by the Sangha is not an integral aspect of the teaching of the Buddha and that it became the accepted goal of the Buddhist monk only as a result of Dharmapala's efforts. Seneviratne says:

The role in that task Dharmapala attributed to the monk in traditional Sri Lankan society, and which he wanted the monks to regain, was more a need of his paradigm and project than a fact of history (p.35).

It is the essence of the Buddha's doctrine to lead men on the vibhavagami path. The doctrine has no essential link with or interest in the progress of society. ...This does not mean that Buddhism has no relevance for mundane society. As a middle path that avoids extremes, it obviously contains numerous teachings that are relevant for the welfare of society. However, if behaviour resulting from such teachings contributes to social welfare, that is a by-product that constitutes a benefit to society but not the achievement of the distinctively Buddhist goal (p.163).

There are two claims here, one historical and the other doctrinal, both are open to debate. In my opinion, the very acceptance by the Buddha of men and women householders as making up the four components of the Sangha(3) is strong proof that the Buddha cannot have considered their worldly upliftment as secondary or incidental. (There is so much more material relevant here which I do not mention for professional Buddhist scholars would find it tedious.) With regard to the historical claim: it is clear that Dharmapala made this attribution with passion; that, however, does not mean that he invented it based on his experience with Christianity. Throughout the history of Buddhism there seem to have been two categories of monks, or rather, monks with two different slants. The best example for this kind of division is the two great elders of the time of the Buddha, namely, Maha Kassapa and Ananda. The former was the epitome of relentless ascetic practice and austerity characterized by living in the forest, dislike for women etc., clearly, even more austere than the Buddha himself. Ananda was the total opposite, city-dwelling, active, busy, a perfect private secretary,

coordinator and champion of the liberation of women, visiting and meeting people. The texts say that Ananda could not attain arahanthood, the perfection of the path, till the Buddha attained parinibbana. But the ironical situation is that the person who lived closest to the Buddha and who kept the entire teaching in his memory was unable to realize the main goal of his monastic life. Had Ananda not spent his time for things like preservation of the teaching he would have attained arahanthood much earlier but posterity would have been deprived of the opportunity of following the teaching of the Buddha after he was gone. As Seneviratne holds, the dhamma is to be practised and not to be protected. But it does not seem that we can easily escape the hard reality exemplified in the story of Ananda. It is true that not all were like Ananda or even followed him. But the modes of behaviour exemplified in the lives of the two elders has been persisting throughout the history of Buddhism. Such categories as gantha-dhura and vipassana-dhura, dhamma-kathika and pansukulika, and gama-vasi and aranna-vasi that became the vogue in the subsequent history of Buddhism may be traced back to the two elders.

De Silva and Bartholomeusz on The Role of the Sangha in the Reconciliation Process

The paper by C. R. de Silva and T. Bartholomeusz falls within the larger category of scholarly research focussing on the nature of the relationship between the two major communities in Sri Lanka. The contribution it seeks to make to this already extensive scholarship is to underscore the possibility that the 'sangha is situated to play a major role in the ongoing, though elusive, reconciliation process in Sri Lanka' (p.1). In the opinion of the authors, this point has not received due attention. A key point in their argument is that the education which Buddhist monks receive is largely responsible for the 'negative perceptions of Sinhala-Tamil power sharing' (p.1). They hold that the

appropriate changes in the monastic education system will make the Sangha of Sri Lanka adopt a more inclusive attitude toward the other communities including, in particular, the Tamils. The paper ends with the suggestion that the education of the Sangha and education about the Sangha should receive the highest priority.

The authors begin their discussion by highlighting the distinction between 'buddhaputra' and 'bhumiputra' and the tensions arising in ideology and practise of the Sangha from simultaneous adoption of these two identities not compatible with each other. According to the authors, ideology-wise bhumiputra attitude is in conflict with the ideal Buddhist virtues such as loving-kindness and non-violence. Practise-wise it has made the Sangha to believe that they, namely, the Sinhala, alone were 'the legitimate inhabitants of the island' (p.6) and their language is 'the language of the sons of the soil' (p.5). This ideology was also instrumental in treating the non-Sinhala as 'foreign' communities (p.7). Owing to this bhumiputra ideology, they say, the Sangha can be described as fundamentalists. The ultimate result of this way of thinking and behaving is the arising of a 'competing bhumiputra ideology' among the Tamils.

Subsequently the authors discuss the divisions within the Sangha and its concern about the unity among its own members and the implications of this phenomenon for national reconciliation. The argument of this section is that the Sri Lankan Sangha is divided and is very worried about its divided state and yearns for unity. It carries this mentality to the issue of national reconciliation, and consequently, are unable to see any possibility of reconciliation while existing as separate groups. Here the authors refer to Seneviratne's suggestion that the Sangha should draw inspiration from 'the model of decentralized authority among the sangha' (p.20). It may not be too inappropriate to mention at this juncture that how Seneviratne perceives the

phenomenon of the split in the Sangha is very different from the attitude of the two authors. For Seneviratne, the Sangha is living under a highly decentralized system. Living in that manner, it is strange that they do not allow the rest of society to enjoy the benefits of such a devolved system. Seneviratne says: 'It is therefore incomprehensible to say the least for the monks not to allow the same principle, which has worked so well for Buddhism ensuring its luxurious variety and longevity, to be applied to the secular social order' (p.271). Seneviratne's assessment on this matter seems right historically. The two authors, however, seem to me right in articulating the real sentiments of the Sri Lankan Sangha on the phenomenon of plurality of the chapters of the Sangha which is usually described with the highly charged expression of 'sangha-bheda' (schism of the Sangha) which is considered to be one of the most serious akusala kammās that a monk is capable of committing. In other words, what this means is that the Sri Lankan Sangha, in particular, cannot view the multiplicity of the chapters as a salutary phenomenon. In such a mental frame it is unrealistic to expect from them any support for devolution on that count. This is not an argument to the effect that therefore they must not support devolution of power. The real dislike for devolution of power on the part of the Sangha I think lies elsewhere.

The authors come to the issue of monastic education as the last part of their argument. They discuss the history and the extent of the Pirivena education for the young members of the Sangha. According to the authors the problem with this education is that 'they [members of the Sangha] have limited knowledge of the culture and religious beliefs of the minorities in Sri Lanka and this has implications for shaping attitudes toward minority rights' (p.22). The authors conclude that 'it is imperative that all those who wish for an enlightened Sangha should pay much greater attention to the training of young Buddhist monks' (p.22). In concluding their essay the authors lay emphasis on the need to be

conscious of the roots of the dominant ideology of the Sangha and to attempt to forge links among all opinion groups in the Sangha as means necessary for building peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

I find the general atmosphere of the Silva/Bartholomeusz essay positive and optimistic. A glance at the vast amount of literature devoted for discussing the role of the Sangha in the conflict in Sri Lanka, however, would show that the main claim of the paper is nothing new. What is new, perhaps, is the positive articulation of it, namely, that, given a proper education, the Sangha can play a decisive role in bringing about harmony between the two communities and that the involvement of the Sangha is a must. I think the conclusion is more instructive than informative. Also it is interesting, particularly, in the context of the near loss of hope articulated by Seneviratne:

It is one of the stark facts of the contemporary elite monastic scene in Sri Lanka that we do not have a single monk who would fit the basic requirements to qualify as an urbane, cosmopolitan, modern intellectual who alone would be qualified to play the role of "guardian deity" (p.339).

In spite of my agreement with the broad flavour of the paper I find that certain basic claims made are questionable. For instance: the authors agree with earlier writers like Sarath Amunugama in holding that the Sangha in Sri Lanka have adopted a bhumi putra ideology. Accordingly, as we saw earlier, it is claimed that the Sangha considers itself (namely, Sinhala) alone as the 'legitimate' sons of the soil and the others as 'illegitimate'. In his paper ('Buddhaputra and Bhumi putra? Dilemmas of Modern Sinhala Buddhist Monks in Relation to Ethnic and Political Conflict'), Amunugama introduces the two terms in the context of Maubima Surakeeme Viyaparaya, an organization of JVP oriented young monks which was active in the late 80s. Obviously the terms have a limited relevance in Amunugama. I do not know of any instance,

excepting a political party which has the term 'bhumi putra' as a part of its name and for which the support of the Saᅅgha is minimal, the latter using this particular term to describe its self-identity, although one's own articulation of oneself may not always convey one's real nature. The closest to this view held by the Saᅅgha is that resources of the country should be shared among its people in proportion to the ratio of its population. A relevant example is Madihe Pannasiha Nayaka Thera who has held such a position as the right way of assuring social justice (Madihe Maha Na Himi. p.180ff). May be this 'majoritarian' view is still faulty. But it does not seem fair to attribute a kind of bhumi putra ideology as described by the two authors to the Sri Lankan Saᅅgha. It is a known fact, in the recent history of Sri Lanka, that it is by the Tamil militants that a real bhumi putra type ideology was taken up. According to the authors, this Tamil ideology came as a reaction ("asserting a competing bhumi putra ideology" p.6) to the similar ideology by the Sinhala. I do not see any explanatory potential of this assertion except, of course, that it lends legitimacy to the ethnic cleansing carried out by the Tamil militants in the North and North-eastern regions of the island. The fact of the matter, however, is that the so-called Sinhala bhumi putras' response to Tamil bhumi putra ideology was to assert that the entire island is the bhumi of all communities living there.

The authors' reference to 'Sinhala homeland or dhammadipa' is equally problematic. In the first place, it is difficult to see how 'dhammadipa' means Sinhala homeland. Perhaps the authors may have taken 'dhammadipa' as the island of the Dhamma which means the Dhamma of the Buddha (Buddha-dhamma) and this latter being the dhamma of the Sinhala, the island of Dhamma could mean the island of Sinhala. It is really doubtful whether or not the term was used in this sense; even if it was used in that sense it does not mean Sinhala homeland. What is meant by the term by those who use it is the righteous land or the land that adheres to the Dhamma. If Sinhala

'fundamentalists are talking in terms of a homeland what the authors should have done is to quote them without taking pains to produce far-fetched interpretations.

In their essay, the authors refer to what they call 'Sinhala Buddhist fundamentalism' and define it as 'the penchant for drawing on 'mytho-history' as a charter for the special position of Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka and the justification of the belief in Sinhala linguistic, political, religious and economic hegemony' (p.3). The authors refer to their previous work: *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities in Sri Lanka*, (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1998) in which they discuss this category in detail and try to show in what sense these Buddhists are fundamentalist. According to them there are certain family resemblances between Buddhist fundamentalists and the others of that sort. There are, however, important differences, they say. The trouble with this definition is that it is too broad and too vague; hardly anyone who takes religion as a valid form of behaviour will be spared by this definition. According to this definition, all the Buddhist activists past and present are fundamentalists except those whom they call 'traditional Buddhists', a category not very clear. Equally fundamentalist are those Buddhists in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries who saw western culture and Christian mission as 'the main alien force' (p.3). I fail to see how else they could have seen these phenomena. The question ultimately is: what is it that the authors are trying to achieve by invoking this name? Surely they have contributed to introducing a new category and new concept that could serve as an attractive label in academic discussions of Sri Lankan conflict. But it cannot bite too much.

When one reads the two works discussed in this section one cannot help getting the impression that the entire problem lies in the 'hegemonic' attitudes of the Sangha and once the Sangha is reformed

everything will be perfectly alright and everybody will be able to live happily ever after. This is, undoubtedly, a very high estimation of the role of the Sangha, on the one hand. On the other hand, however, the two analyses suffer from being totally and absolutely one-sided. Such efforts, undertaken even with the loftiest of sentiments stop at being nothing more than political sloganeering serving one against another.

Comparative Remarks

The above account of mine does not mean that everything is perfectly alright with the Sangha and that they should just keep on doing what they are doing right now exactly in the same manner. Before trying to articulate some of the measures that I feel that the Sangha should take let me briefly look at how and why the Sangha has come to identify itself with the Sinhala people and the role of protecting these institutions. It is a truism to say that one's self-identity and self-definition do not arise in a vacuum. The very need to define oneself arises as against the presence of 'the other'. This other in the context of ancient Sri Lanka was invaders from South India. The *Mahavamsa* reports that a number of invasions and attacks of this sort took place from a very early period. The first recorded attack came from two merchants called Sena and Guttika in 177 BCE. Ever since this incident, till the arrival of Europeans in the 15th century, these attacks continued periodically. The worst attack from which the country never fully recovered happened towards the end of the Polonnaruva period (1215-36). It was the invader called Magha who destroyed practically the entire power-base, religion and the culture of the country. The *Mahavamsa* has the following to say on the disaster:

They wrecked the image houses, destroyed many cetiyas, ravaged the vihara and maltreated the lay brethren. They flogged the children, tormented the five (groups of the) comrades of the Order, made the people carry burdens and forced them to do heavy labour. Many books known and famous they tore from their code and strewed them hither

and thither. The beautiful, vast, proud cetiyas like the Ratnavali (cetiya) and others which embodied as it were, the glory of the former pious kings, they destroyed by overthrowing them and allowing alas! Many of the bodily relics, their souls as it were, to disappear. Thus the Damila warriors in imitation of the warriors of Mara, destroyed in the evil of their nature, the laity and the order (Emphasis added.) (Culavamsa, ch.80: 54-80).

What is significant is not whether these things happened exactly in the manner described but the fact that the particular incident was perceived in that manner. The threat to the religion was always there. The extent of the invasion and the destruction of religion by the time of Dutugamunu are elaborately described in the Mahavamsa. There is no reason to believe that the Buddhist monks had to invent these incidents against Tamils. Given the possibility that the country was invaded and the religion was attacked it is quite natural that the Sangha developed a mind-set in which the protection of religion and the country was paramount. On the other hand, the Sangha depended on Sinhala people who were the only Buddhists they had around and the Sinhala kings for the protection of their religion. A mutual bond was gradually created in this manner.

The history of the island till today shows that the threats from abroad were a part of its life. Up to the 15th century the invaders came from south India. After that the invasion was from Europe. Again the religion was a main target. With the arrival of the Europeans there was an added threat, namely, the forced introduction of a new religion. I do not need to tread the familiar grounds of discriminations against the people and the religions (both Buddhism and Hinduism) of the island(4). The threats were real and they continue to be present even today. At the moment there are several hundred new Christian missionary organizations operative in the country surreptitiously under the

camouflage of business ventures. Earlier the conversions were done under muscle power; today they are taking place under the cover of freedom of expression and freedom of religion. In the political arena, it is true that the Sangha has opposed any attempt at devolution of power beyond certain limits. The reason has been that separatism has been always there overtly or covertly. If this is an unrealistic fear on the part of the Sangha nothing has been done to remove it by the Tamil politicians. Hegemonic views and attitudes are not created in a ideological vacuum. Things are dependently co-arisen and this is true for both sides of the controversy.

The deeper 'philosophical' question arising from this situation is: What should a monk do when one's religion, the people and the country associated with it are in danger? Following a religion and protecting a religion are obviously two different things in the sense they involve different sorts of actions. In particular, when one's religious tradition is physically in danger there is no doubt that one has to do something. But what is the limit of such action? Can he be aggressive or use violence in the process? What is the degree of such aggressiveness or violence? The Sangha in Sri Lanka, in addition to their somewhat similar experiences such as Brahmana-tissa famine during Vattagamini Abhaya (1st century B.C.E.), had the experience of India where Buddhism was physically destroyed by the invading Islamic forces. It does not seem that there was any specifically Buddhist effort to arrest the situation in India. As a result, we know that, till Anagarika Dharmapala introduced Buddhism to India again, the story of Buddhism was a thing of the past. What should a monk do in a situation such as this? The Maha Silava Jataka says that the Bodhisatva king waited, surrounded by his ministers, till the enemy came and got hold of his kingdom. Is that what a monk who is true to his religion should do? I am not just using rhetoric here.

Seneviratne seems to think that vibhavagami patipada is the only one proper thing for a monk to do. In addition to the various statements he makes to this effect, his view becomes clear in what he quotes at the beginning of his book. His quotes from *The Questions of Milinda* and the *Majjhima nikaya* highlight this attitude to the Sangha life. The kind of Buddhism Seneviratne has in his mind is what may be called early or ideal Buddhism in which the sole occupation of the monk is to strive to attain arahanthood. We know that this ideal of perfection got somewhat softened in Sri Lanka. It does not mean that the ideal was totally rejected. While there were always those who opted to follow the ideal, Buddhism for a larger majority of the Sangha proper life was one of service to people while occupying a religious position a little higher than that of ordinary lay persons. Here we come across the age-old dilemma exemplified in Maha Kassapa and Ananda referred to earlier. If the Ananda was very serious about his inner life there is a good possibility that Buddhism wouldn't have lasted long and we might not have so-called Sinhala chauvinist Buddhist monks to kick around!

Contrary to what Seneviratne maintains, I propose that a larger majority of monks who hold a so-called Sinhala-Buddhist hegemonic ideology are not necessarily liberal individualists who have money and pleasure as their ultimate aim, but are serious people who are faced with a moral dilemma: dilemma of choosing between Maha Kassapa and Ananda; or choosing between dispassionate inaction and compassionate action. One thing they seem to know for sure is that, on the face of being destroyed by another, suicide, either active or passive, is not the answer. Seneviratne discusses the debate that occurred between 'the preachers of the Dhamma' and 'those who followed ascetic practices' (dhammakathika and pansukulika) during Vattagamini Abhaya on the status of learnedness and practice (pariyatti and patipatti). The fact that the section that represented learnedness won in the debate indicates that a significant group of the Sri Lankan Sangha took a turn toward

practicality at an early date of its history. Although 'doers' are more important than 'talkers', a distinction Seneviratne employs, the ironical situation is that the former cannot survive in the absence of the latter. Putting it more specifically, one cannot follow the Dhamma if there is no one to teach him what the Dhamma is. History has accommodated both groups and lay society has found a particular group more useful than the other depending on the occasion or need. Going back to what I would like to describe as the deeper philosophical problem: It is necessary to acknowledge the fact that the Sangha operates with the assumption of the validity of such categories as religion, ethnicity and culture. In its ideal constitution the Sangha is universal; in its practical constitution, however, the Sri Lankan Sangha is local. In balancing these two trends the Sangha has to constantly evaluate the situations that arise anew. The task is not easy and requires, as Seneviratne rightly points out, lot of skills. I agree with all three authors I discuss here on the deficiencies of monastic education. By education I do not mean, as very often it seems to mean, that monks must be trained to think in a manner that categories such as religion and culture are not valid and should be done away with. As in everything else, the Sangha must be trained to follow a middle path in such issues too as a part of their formal education. I do not think that the dilemmas and contradictions visible in the contemporary monastic life can be resolved by going back to the ideal Buddhism of ancient India. It is imperative, nevertheless, that the Sangha should review its path from time to time and make necessary adjustments in a collective manner.

Seneviratne points out the lost possibility of propagating the Dhamma among the Tamils. While it is true that the Sri Lankan Sangha did not make use of this opportunity, I see this inaction as a result of historical suspicion carried down throughout without much contemplation. As I made clear earlier, it is perfectly understandable why the Buddhist Sangha had to develop a special linkage with the

Sinhala people. This should not mean, however, that Sinhala people alone can be the protectors of the religion. It is a historical event that Sinhala people built up a close association with Buddhism in Sri Lanka. There cannot be anything intrinsically against Buddhism in Tamil. As Seneviratne rightly points out many contemporary Sangha does not know that the great Pali commentators such as Buddadatta and Dhammapala, on whom traditional Theravada orthodoxy so much depends on for the right interpretation of the word of the Master, are from Southern India and could well be Tamil. Now the question is: should past perceptions be carried to the future without subjecting them to scrutiny? It is a shame that Buddhism which existed in the country for more than 23 centuries does not have a Tamil Buddhist community. Although there w/ere individual actors who thought differently and learnt Tamil and extended their service to them the outcome does not seem to have changed the main picture. Here I think that post-independent enlightened Sangha has failed in its duty and as a result they have also lost the opportunity of being effective mediators in the ongoing conflict.

Finally, I would like to go back to Seneviratne's book: *The Work of Kings*. While the academic critiques of the role of the Sangha are not uncommon in recent history Seneviratne stands out as the most open, straight and ruthless. Seneviratne's conclusions are mostly negative and does not leave much hope for this time-tested organization. His sentimental involvement can, however, be understood as resulting from the methodology of being an observer participant instead of being the other way round (see p.6). In this sense , Seneviratne's effort needs to be understood as resulting from a deep interest in human welfare which necessarily includes the welfare of the Sangha in it. The Sri Lankan Sangha needs to take Seneviratne in the same spirit as an eye-opener the glare of which cannot be toned down and as a wake-up call the bang of which will be heard by all but the deaf and by those who don't want to

hear. I do not think anyone who is deeply concerned about the welfare of the Sangha can overlook Seneviratne. If his warning of rising commercialism, capitalism and individualism is not taken seriously and done something about it (perhaps re-establishing 'sanghika' system), the Sangha will not be able to arrest the already decadent nature of some of its members and will ultimately be reduced to being a priestly class with wealth and power but devoid of moral authority. Although I still do not see how being a capitalist, liberal individualist entails being a chauvinist, I think, if taken in a positive and constructive manner, The Work of Kings is the best that happened to the Sri Lankan Sangha in its recent history.

Notes

(1) Here I am reminded of a newspaper article (The Island 22nd May, 2002) by Sasanka Perera. Discussing the enthusiasm of the Sri Lankan business community in starting business in LTTE run areas, he says the following: All that is required would be to pay the required taxes, totally adhere to LTTE rules and make sure that human rights and democracy are not priorities. Given the past track record of the business community in public intervention and civic consciousness as outlined above, it would not be very difficult for these individuals to do business very successfully with the LTTE. There is no reason to believe that the Buddhist monastic business community would behave differently. [Return to text.](#)

(2) For his ninetieth birth day that falls on 21st June, 2002 I happened to interview him for ITN Television in Sri Lanka. As my last question I asked him what did he have to say to the younger generation of monks. His prompt response was: Do social service without damaging your monkness! [Return to text.](#)

(3) See *Anguttara Nikaya* II (Pali Text Society, London), p. 8. [Return to text.](#)

(4) On the alleged discrimination against Buddhist education by the colonial power, Tambiah says the following: With regard to the charge that the colonial government policy favoured the Christian missions' grant -aided schools, and placed obstacles to the founding of Buddhist (and Hindu) schools, it clearly seems that by and large the authors of *The Betrayal of Buddhism* were correct in their allegations (*Buddhism Betrayed?* p.183). [Return to text.](#)

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