

IX (1)

BUDDHISM IN POST-INDEPENDENCE SRI LANKA

KITSIRI MALALGODA

The Buddhist 'revival' of the nineteenth century apparently had potential for development into a mass nationalist movement, but it was only in the years after independence that Buddhism in fact entered the political arena. The movement towards national independence, as has frequently been noted, was an elitist and secular one organised by leaders belonging to several religions, and their political agitations were focussed mainly on reforms of the constitution. In trying to account for the manner in which Buddhism entered the political arena in the post-Independence years, one has to take into consideration the vitality and strength that this religion derived as a result of changes which occurred under colonial rule, but between the colonial and post-colonial periods it is possible to discern some significant differences.

The Buddhist revival of the nineteenth century was very much a product of the colonial order—an order which differed radically from the traditional Sinhalese-Buddhist kingdoms. In place of the interdependence of Buddhism and political authority which had prevailed under traditional kingdoms there was now a separation of the two. The persistence of Buddhist practices and organizations, therefore, depended on voluntary efforts rather than on state patronage. The British, in contrast to their colonial predecessors, professed a policy of religious liberty, and this policy, however qualified or attenuated it was in actual practice, nonetheless had significance in that it allowed the free operation of voluntary efforts to promote Buddhism. Without such freedom (which was not available in the Portuguese and early Dutch times) and without indeed a separation of political and religious (Buddhist) establishments the formation of new and autonomous monastic fraternities in the low country—and in particular *non-goyigama* fraternities—would have been impossible at the time.

As in the formation of new monastic fraternities so in the campaign against Christian missionaries, voluntary efforts and associations played a vital role. In organising these associations, the Buddhists consciously followed the Christian ones that they opposed. "If you ask how we should organise our forces", Olcott advised them, "I point you to your great enemy, Christianity, and bid you look at their large and wealthy Bible, Tract, Sunday School, and Missionary Societies—the tremendous agencies they support to keep alive and spread their religion. We

must form similar societies, and make our most practical and honest men of business their managers".¹

There were, to be sure, many Buddhists who expected direct support from the colonial government for the maintenance of their religion, or who remained demoralised by the lack of it, or who complained that the government or its agents were actively working against Buddhism. But the Theosophists remained unimpressed by these arguments. Olcott repeatedly asked Buddhists how and why they expected the colonial government to support their religion if they were not keen to support it themselves. His one-time colleague and representative in Sri Lanka, J. B. Daly, asserted: "The English Government never yet interfered with the religion of any of its dependencies. The English people would not tolerate it; the parliament would not tolerate it; the Queen would not tolerate it; if an Agent or an official tries to do so, he acts outside his authority, without the sanction of Government. Leave those who want to interfere to me, and I shall deal with them".²

Thus voluntary self-help, in a background of formal religious neutrality on the part of the government, was the means with which Buddhism was revived in the nineteenth century, and changes in social stratification which had occurred under colonial rule provided the social base of the revival. The formation of new monastic fraternities was preceded or accompanied by the upward mobility of some non-*goyigama* castes, and the new social strata (entrepreneurs, lawyers, teachers, journalists and the like) which had come into being as a result of economic and social changes introduced under British rule supplied the leadership of associations such as the Buddhist Theosophical Society, Maha Bodhi Society and the Young Men's Buddhist Associations. The nature and aims of these associations were such that westernised laymen were more capable of handling them than were the monks. It was no accident, therefore, that Olcott stressed the necessity of making "our most practical and honest men of business their managers".

The emergence of the lay intelligentsia necessarily implied a displacement of monks from some of their traditional positions of leadership. The role of monk was defined by the lay leadership in a narrow 'religious' sense, and they defined their own position as leaders of Buddhist organisations too in a non-political sense. At the level of ideology this was perhaps a result of their commitment to nineteenth century British liberalism; and at the level of practical politics they deliberately avoided—after the temperance agitation and the communal riots of 1915—confrontations with colonial authorities who were consistently suspicious of mass movements.³ In the early part of the twentieth century there were Buddhist leaders like D. B. Jayatilaka and W. A. de Silva who gained prominence in politics, but they felt it necessary to try to keep their two major spheres of public activity—politics and religion—separated from each other. A similar stance was maintained by D. S. Sena-

1. *Old Diary Leaves*, Iv (1882-1892) (Madras, 1931), p. 120.

2. *The Buddhist*, 16 January 1891.

3. K. M. de Silva, 'The Formation and Character of the Ceylon National Congress', *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, X (January-December 1967) 72-74.

nayake, who soon after independence, firmly resisted growing demands for special concessions to Buddhists.⁴ He was also a strong critic of 'political monks', and a major target for the latter's attacks.⁵

But already in D. S. Senanayake, one is able to discern the search for inspiration from the pre-colonial past and traditional sources of legitimacy—in his grand schemes to restore irrigation works (Minneriya, Kahagama, Minipe and Parakrama Samudra etc.) and, at a less official and more personal level, a major Buddhist shrine (Mahiyangana) in Raja Rata. Though Senanayake himself was not inclined to take it, it was but a short step from there—in view of the age-old practices that kings of Sri Lanka had resorted to in order to gain legitimacy and popularity⁶—to extend state support to Buddhist activities; and not long after Senanayake's death such extension was in fact made on the occasion of the preparations for the celebration of the Buddha Jayanthi. The formal proposal to celebrate the Buddha Jayanthi with the active initiative and participation of the government came from the then ex-prime Minister, Dudley Senanayake, and was accepted by the government headed by Sir John Kotelawala. The Lanka Bauddha Mandalaya was appointed by the government in October 1954 to organise and direct the Buddha Jayanthi activities, and it embarked on an ambitious and costly programme of activities continuing into the Jayanthi year 1956-1957 as well as well beyond it. Since that time both the United National Party and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party have proclaimed protecting and supporting Buddhism as one of their major aims, and each has at different times accused the other of failing to practise it. Thus post-Independence politics clearly indicates a departure from the principles of the separation of politics and religion and the formal religious neutrality of the government.

This convergence of Buddhism and politics has been viewed as a solution to the problem of identity of an independent new nation,⁷ though in a multi-religious society such as Sri Lanka the identification of the nation with the majority group necessarily produced problems regarding the position of the minorities. It was in fact the all too natural desire to win the support of the majority that induced politicians to promise a privileged position for Buddhism just as it was the frustrations of competition with the minorities that drove the Buddhist leadership—as represented in particular by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress—to agitate for special concessions to Buddhists. Open competition between different religious groups, to protect and if possible extend their own interests, within a broad framework of 'free enterprise' in religion (with the government taking a stand of formal neutrality) had prevailed since the late nineteenth century, and although the Buddhists, through organisations such as the Bud-

4. Donald E. Smith, 'The Sinhalese Buddhist Revolution', in Donald E. Smith (Ed.) *South Asian Politics and Religion* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1966), pp. 456-457.

5. Walpola Rahula, *Bhikshuvage Urumaya*, 2nd ed. (Colombo, 1948), pp. viii-xi.

6. On these, see Edmund Leach, 'Buddhism in the Post-colonial Political Order in Burma and Ceylon', *Daedalus*, 102 (1973) 34.

7. H. Howard Wriggins, *Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1960) pp. 171-174.

dhist Theosophical Society, had made significant progress in this competition, they were not entirely in a position to congratulate themselves. In the field of education, for instance, Christians continued to hold their supremacy with regard to both the number of schools under their management and the amount of grants that they received from the government for the maintenance of those schools; and in the public service, business and professions, Buddhists remained under-represented in proportion to their numbers in the population. Their explanation of this situation—elaborated at length in documents like the report of the Buddhist Committee of Inquiry (1956)—was that the competition between different religious groups had never been an 'open' one but had always been heavily biased against Buddhists, and their solution to it was state intervention in place of 'free enterprise'. Neither the explanation nor the solution would have appealed very much to early leaders like Olcott or Daly who were entirely willing to accept the challenge of competition and who were primarily concerned with building voluntary and autonomous organisations among Buddhists which would be strong enough to compete with the Christian ones. Thus, as among politicians so among Buddhist lay leaders, one notices a difference in attitudes and strategies between the colonial and post-colonial times.

A similar change was also noticeable among a sizable section of monks. They derived no satisfaction out of having been kept in the background not merely by the colonial authorities but also by the Buddhist lay leadership who had assigned to them a narrow 'religious' role. Walpola Rahula's *Bhikshuvage Urumaya* ('The Heritage of the Monk') which was published just before independence and at the early stages of the debate over 'political monks' was a forceful rejection of this restricted role in favour of the varied social roles—as teachers, scholars, literary men, artists, physicians, advisers to laymen, peace-makers, agitators and patriots, etc.—that monks had played in the course of the history of Sri Lanka. The aspiration, clearly, was to recapture the lost social supremacy. Rahula not merely had no objections to the term 'political monk'; he viewed the rise of 'political monks' as significant and desirable a process as the emergence of *grantha-dhura* (vocation of books, as against the *vidar-sanā-dhura* or the vocation of meditation) in the early history of Buddhism.

The new attitudes and aspirations found expression in new organisational forms. Among the monks, over and above the more traditional *nikāyas* or monastic fraternities which had multiplied since the nineteenth century making their recruitments mainly on the basis of ascriptive criteria such as caste and locality, there now emerged new organisations like the Eksath Bhikkshu Mandalaya (United Council of Monks) and Eksath Bhikkshu Peramuna (United Front of Monks) which cut across *nikāya* and caste boundaries and followed the idiom and tactics of Colombo-based national political associations and interest-groups. Similarly among laymen the early emulation of Christian organisations and practices—as was explicitly advocated by Olcott—was followed by new organisations of a distinctly more political character—the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, the Bauddha Jatika Balavegaya, etc.

The activities of these new organisations helped to bring together what had in the immediate past been by and large kept separate; politics and religion on the hand,

and the lay leadership of those elements that gave Buddhism in the post-Independence years a prominence which it had lacked in the earlier decades.

This prominence, however, did not necessarily entail greater strength for Buddhist organisations in the long run. On the contrary, government intervention, for which the Buddhist leadership itself had agitated, gradually undermined the strength of voluntary organisations and institutions which had been developed over several decades. The nationalisation of schools led to the extinction of organisations like the Buddhist Theosophical Society, and the Buddhist leadership thereby lost a good deal of their independent power, influence and patronage in the field of education. Within a few years of the elevation of Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara Pirivenas to university status, monks lost control over these institutions and the two new universities came to have very little continuity with their past except merely in their names. In religion and education, as in other spheres like the economic, government intervention inevitably resulted in greater power being concentrated in the hands of the professional politician and the bureaucrat and a corresponding decrease in initiative and activity independent of centralised control. Had the controversial recommendations of the Buddha Sasana Commission of 1959 (which included the creation of an incorporated body with wide powers over the order of monks in such areas as recruitment, adjudication of disputes, dismissals from the order, residence and education, employment, participation in social and political activities, collection of funds and building of monasteries, and publications on Buddhism) been implemented, the process of centralisation and bureaucratisation would have gone very much further.⁸

8. For an account of the controversy over the Sasana Commission, see Donald E. Smith, 'The Political Monks and Monastic Reform' in Donald E. Smith (Ed.), *op. cit.* pp. 500-508. Rather ironically the Sasana Commission met with qualified or full support from the Ramanya and Amrapura Nikayas and sustained opposition from the Siyam Nikaya. Historically, the Siyam Nikaya has had close links with secular authorities and had also sought centralised control of the order of monks while the origin of the other Nikayas was possible, *inter alia*, precisely because there was no central authority to regulate the affairs of the order in colonial times.