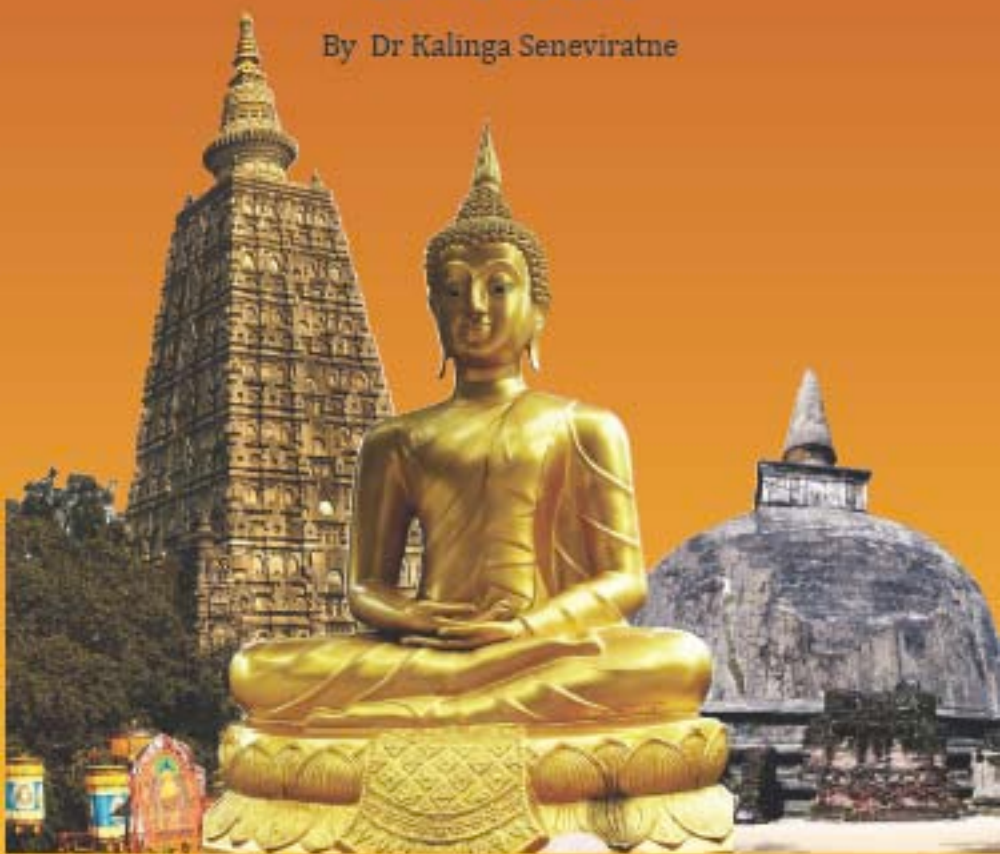


EMPOWER FROM WITHIN: PATH TO PROTECT BUDDHISM IN ASIA

By Dr Kalinga Seneviratne



Lotus Communication Network

EMPOWER FROM WITHIN: PATH TO PROTECT BUDDHISM IN ASIA

*Communication Needs of Buddhist Communities
in South and Southeast Asia*

By Dr Kalinga Seneviratne

**A Consultative Report Prepared for the
International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) and
Other Buddhist Organisations in Asia Supported
by Funding From Buddhist Foundations and
Individuals Across Asia.**



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Dr Kalinga Seneviratne

Chapter 1

Introduction – Communicating Buddhism Across Asia

Since the 'parinibbana' of Gauthama Buddha over 2500 years ago, his teachings - the 'dhamma' – have spread far and wide across Asia and lately into Europe, North America and Africa. Buddha asked his devotees (especially the 'sangha' - the community of monks) before his death, to go forth and spread the dhamma. It was, however, during the reign of Emperor Ashoka during the Kalinga kingdom around 300 BCE that Buddhism began to spread outside of India.

Emperor Ashoka sent his son Mahinda (Mahendra) to Sri Lanka where he met local King Devanampiyatissa and was able to convince him about the value of the dhamma. His conversion to Buddhism is an important landmark in the spread of Theravada Buddhism across Southeast Asia. Later his daughter Bhikkuni Sanghamitta brought a sampling of the Bo-Tree under which Prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment to Sri Lanka, which is still flourishing in Anuradhapura and attracts pilgrims in their thousands from Sri Lanka and across Asia.

The spread of Buddhism was slow until the time of Emperor Ashoka the Great, who ruled most of the Indian subcontinent from 268 to 232 BCE. He supported the spread of Buddhism, as did his descendants, and mighty efforts were put into the construction of religious memorials and the spread of Buddhism throughout Central Asia and south into Sri Lanka. The Central Asia effort is what eventually brought Buddhism to China, while the Sri Lankan mission helped spread the religion to the coastal lands of Southeast Asia. Ashoka sent out emissaries to many of the lands west of India, reaching Hellenistic countries in Central and West Asia, and even the Mediterranean, and some evidence indicate that these emissaries were accompanied by Buddhist missionaries¹.

Emperor Ashoka's missionaries also went overland to Southeast Asia to Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia in particular. Many of the missionaries have accompanied Indian traders, like the ones who took Buddhism to Thaton (Myanmar), which was an important trading hub in those days. From the 1st century CE onwards when trading between India and Myanmar increased, Buddhist missionaries also started coming in numbers. Thus, Thaton became an important center for Theravada Buddhism (Bhattacharya in Thick Nhat Tu, 2019, p 569).

Buddhism came to Thailand in the 3rd century BCE through 2 missionaries sent by Emperor Asoka, Sona and Uttara, to Nakon Pathom of Suvarnabhumi. From there Buddhist missionaries have spread to the Srivijaya kingdom in Sumatra beginning in the 5th century CE (Bhattacharya in Thick Nhat Tu, 2019, p 572).

Indian influence began to spread to Cambodia by the end of the 4th century CE, but, it was mainly Hinduism, which the rulers adopted

¹ <http://www.silk-road.com/artl/buddhism.shtml>

through the 5th and 6th centuries CE. It was only in the 9th century that rulers began giving importance to Buddhism (Bhattacharya in Thick Nhat Tu, 2019, p 573).

However, there was another flow of Buddhism across the Bay of Bengal from Sri Lanka that helped to establish Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia with a strong educational focus based on the Tripitaka. This will be discussed later in this chapter.

Buddhism Spreading Along The Silk Routes



Map of ancient Silk Routes by land and sea
Source: UNESCO

At the same time Emperor Ashoka's missionaries started to travel across India and into other lands, the ancient Silk Routes started, originally as a route where the Chinese were venturing out towards India in search of horses and trade opportunities. It also turned into a route of cultural exchanges spreading out West into Central Asia, where Buddhist traders and missionaries ventured out in a peaceful mission to spread the dhamma, and one may also argue, as a result, develop a peaceful system of trading and not conquest - occupation of land and massacres and enslavement of people.

The route was treacherous and crossed huge deserts, as well as difficult mountain passes and steep valleys. A well organised expedition relied on camels and good knowledge of local watering holes. From about the first century BCE, Buddhism began to spread along the Silk Road. As it traveled and was accepted, whole communities took the message on board and monks lived along the way.

An important landmark in the spread of Buddhism to Central Asia is the acceptance of Buddhism by the Kushan ruler Kanishka, who reigned from 144 to 172 CE. The Kushans controlled an area stretching from today's Hindu Kush to Kabul, Gandhara, northern Pakistan and northwest India. It is through these lands the caravans of the ancient Silk Routes passed to reach the Middle East

and Europe. Once Kanishak converted to Buddhism, the Buddhist settlement of Gandhara (in today's northern Pakistan) flourished and it was here that a very distinct Graeco-Buddhist art form developed. This art style would eventually come to have a major impact on Buddhist art in many parts of Central and Eastern Asia. It is believed that the Buddha statues one sees across Asia today originated here.

The monastic communities that developed in Bamiyan (in today's Central Afghanistan) are part of the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia during this period. For much of the 2nd millennium of the CE, Bamiyan was a crucial hub of cultural exchanges between the Indians, Persians, Greeks, Turks and Chinese. Even after the region became Muslim, the 3 huge Buddha statues erected during this period there survived for over 1200 years, until the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime blew it up in 2001.

The Uighur Turks who have been driven out of Mongolia, have adopted Buddhism around 850 CE. A 10th century envoy from China reports that Koachang, located near Turfan, was a flourishing Buddhist center with roughly 50 Buddhist convents and an extensive library holding Chinese Buddhist texts. Turfan remained the focal point of Turkish Buddhism until the late 1600s when its ruler converted to Islam².

The famous Kublai Khan, who ruled the Mongol Empire from 1260 to 1294 CE, had a strong preference for Buddhism and promoted it in various ways. He had a great influence over the Silk Road and could help aid the safety of Buddhist missionaries traveling along with it through Mongol-controlled regions. Many Mongol peoples eventually converted to Islam, but Kublai Khan's direct successors continued as fervent promoters of the Buddhist religion and ensured the translation of a wide range of Buddhist texts into Mongolian³.

In the middle of the first century CE, a Han Chinese Emperor became interested in Buddhism and he sent envoys to India. They returned with sacred Buddhist texts and paintings as well as Indian priests to explain the teaching of the Buddha to the Emperor. According to ancient records, monks, missionaries and pilgrims began traveling from India to Central Asia and then on to China, bringing Buddhist writings and paintings, while Chinese converts followed the Silk Road West.

During the 4th century CE, the Central Asian Buddhist Kumarajiva set up a translation bureau that became very productive, translating approximately a hundred Buddhist works from various languages into Chinese. 52 of them have survived into our time⁴.

An important episode in the spread of Buddhism from India to China is the journey of Chinese scholar-monk Xuanzang to India in the 7th century CE, where he is believed to have spent 13 years at Nalanda University. He has traveled through Central Asia via modern-day Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, to reach India. When he returned to China in 645 CE via today's Bangladesh and Myanmar, he

² <http://www.silk-road.com/artl/buddhism.shtml>

³ <http://www.silk-road.com/artl/buddhism.shtml>

⁴ <http://www.silk-road.com/artl/stirrup.shtml>

has carried with him over 600 Buddhist texts, and he spent the rest of his life at a monastery in modern-day Xian, to translate these texts – he died in 664 CE. The monastery in Xian where he spent 20 years translating the texts is today a national monument and a popular tourist and pilgrim site.

Translating Buddhist texts in China to spread the dhamma to Central Asia was blocked by the Arabs in the 8th century, and the land connections to Buddhists in Central Asia and India were curtailed. This perhaps helped in the Islamic expansion in the region.

From China, Buddhism spread into Korea in the fourth century CE and soon after into Japan. Tibet was one of the last countries to accept the Buddhist message and it may have come via the kingdom of Sikkim in the northeast of the Indian sub-continent. When Buddhist texts from India were being translated to Chinese and later to Korean and Japanese, the need to spread texts contributed to the development of block printing techniques in China. Its contribution to the development of mass communications will be discussed in chapter 2.

Theravada Buddhism Across The Bay of Bengal

The Buddhism that spread to China and from there to East Asia is today known as the Mahayana School of Buddhism. The Theravada or the Pureland school of Buddhism developed after the introduction of the dhamma to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE. It spread to Southeast Asia via maritime trade routes across the Bay of Bengal. It gathered momentum after the Tripitaka was written in Sri Lanka in the 1st century BCE.

The Buddha's teachings were written into ola-leaves for the first time in Sri Lanka when the Buddhist Sinhalese kingdoms around Anuradhapura were ruled by Chola generals who have come from South India and the island was ravaged by famine. Senior Buddhist monks and Sinhalese leaders saw that Buddhism was under threat in Sri Lanka. The oral tradition of the 3 Pitakas, which had so far been handed down from teacher to pupil, appeared no longer possible under the prevailing conditions. The primary concern of the sangha during this tragic period was to preserve the teachings of the Buddha (Rahula, 1956).

Thus, in the 1st century BCE, on the advice of the sangha, King Vattagamani (Valagamba) assembled over a hundred Buddhist monks at the Aluvihare Temple in Matale to put all the Buddhist teachings to text. This was the first Buddhist Council to be held outside India. The Theravada Pali Buddhist canon 'Tipitaka' was compiled here. Until then Buddha's teachings were orally transmitted. This Pali cannon has been preserved in its purest form up till today and has been instrumental in the spread of Buddhism across Southeast Asia (Seneviratne, 2017)

In the 12th century CE, one of Sri Lanka's greatest kings Parakramabahu was able to reunify the sangha of the Abhayagiri, Jetavana, and other Mahavihara sects into the Theravada fold. This paved the way for the spread of Theravada Buddhism to Southeast Asia and monks like Capata Thera from Myanmar came to Sri Lanka to benefit from the revival of Buddhist educational institutions. Similarly, Sri Lankan scholars went to Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand to teach Buddhism. Buddhism made great strides and Sri Lanka became the metropolis

of the whole of Southeast Asia. Sinhala literary works were studied, copied, preserved and imitated in those countries, and the study of Sri Lankan history seems to have a special attraction (Guruge, UNESCO, 1993).

Hema Goonatilake (2010) notes that from the beginning of the founding of Myanmar, Sinhala Bhikkhus have taught the Tipitaka and the Pali language, incidentally through the Sinhala script. After the founding of Laos in 1353 by Prince Fa Ngum, his Queen, a fervent Buddhist got her husband to introduce Buddhism. Her father sent a delegation headed by three Sinhalese monks and his proudest possession, the Buddha image Prabang with "miraculous powers" which had been gifted to him by a Sinhalese king. This image became the national Palladium of the country, and its capital was renamed after it as Luang Prabang. King Fa Ngum conferred the Sinhalese monks with the highest honorific titles designating them chief monks of the two major monasteries. Goonatilake argues that from the 11th century to the 15th century CE, Sinhalese religious and cultural influence impacted heavily on Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. From there, it spread to southern Vietnam and the Yunnan province of China.

As maritime trade increased and with its strategic position in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka's important trade routes across the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal contributed to Buddhism spreading from Sri Lanka to the Southeast Asian region. Ideas, philosophy and goods flowed freely both ways. Between the 9th to 15th centuries these flows reached their peak with Sinhalese culture even



Bell-shaped Sri Lankan stupa in Sukhothai

influencing the architecture of the region such as the role of Sinhalese architects from Polonnaruwa helping to build the new capital of Siam Sukhothai in the 13th century CE. The bell-shaped Sri Lankan stupa was introduced to the region in this period. These were almost exclusively peaceful interactions between the kingdoms in modern-day Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Ann Blackburn (2015) has done a comprehensive study of the Buddhist interactions between the kingdoms of modern-day Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka and found a shared southern Asian Buddhist world characterized by a long and continuous history of integration across the Bay of Bengal region, dating at least to the third century BCE reign of the Indic King Asoka.



3rd century BCE Ruwanvelisaya Stupa in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka

Blackburn (2015, p 256) argues that Sri Lanka's authoritative position was due partly to the island's long-standing and positive image within Buddhist contexts.

Lankā had a long and impeccable pedigree as a center of Buddhist life. “It was celebrated by early Buddhist chronicles as a site honored by Gautama Buddha himself, said to have predicted Lankan guardianship of Buddhist teachings”.

Buddhism Across The Himalayas

Although other places in Central Asia like Khotan had come under the influence of Buddhism even before the beginning of the Common Era, Tibet and Mongolia remained virtually untouched until much later. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, Tibet and Mongolia lay off the main caravan routes along which merchants and pilgrims traveled between India and China. Secondly, the Tibetan and Mongolian people who were nomads and warlike were generally indifferent to the Teaching of the Buddha and the higher level of culture that came with it (BuddhaNet)⁵.

Things began to change in the 7th century when Tibetans were united under king Srong-tsangam-po who later married a Chinese and a Nepali princess who were both Buddhists. He sent representatives to India and China to study the Buddhist scripts and bring back the teachings to Tibet. Many translations of the Buddhist texts were made and a catalogue of translations was also prepared. Teams of Indian and Tibetan monks worked together to accomplish this.

Over several centuries, not only did many outstanding Indian masters visit Tibet, but also many Tibetans made the difficult journey over the Himalayas to study the Dharma in India. They brought back with them the Buddhist philosophy of India and also the knowledge of music, medicine, logic and art. Within a relatively short period, Tibetan society had been transformed (BuddhaNet).

In the 13th century, Mongolian power began to rise in Central Asia under Genghis Khan, a brilliant chieftain. Mongols soon made their influence felt throughout the region and by the middle of the century, links had been established between the Mongol court and Tibetan Buddhist masters. Sakya Pandita, the most outstanding Tibetan religious teacher of the time, was asked to negotiate with the Mongols. He succeeded in converting the Mongol prince and his court to Buddhism. He began the work of translating the Buddhist scriptures into Mongolian and taught the Dharma to the Mongols until his death (BuddhaNet).

The introduction of Buddhism to Bhutan occurred in the 7th century CE, when Tibetan king Srongtsen Gampo (627-49 CE), a convert to Buddhism, ordered the construction of two Buddhist temples, at Bumthang in central Bhutan and at Kyichu in the Paro Valley. But, it was in 747 CE, when a Buddhist saint, Guru Padmasambhava (known in Bhutan as Guru Rimpoche), came to Bhutan from India at the invitation of one of the numerous local kings that Buddhism began to take root there. Guru Rimpoche later moved on to Tibet, but, upon his return from Tibet, he oversaw the construction of new monasteries in the Paro Valley and set up his headquarters in Bumthang.

⁵ <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/to-himalayas.htm>

There was no central government during this period. Instead, small independent monarchies began to develop by the early 9th century. Each was ruled by a *deb* (king), some of whom claimed divine origins. The kingdom of Bumthang was the most prominent among these small entities. Buddhism replaced but did not eliminate the Bon religious practices that had also been prevalent in Tibet until the late 6th century CE. Instead, Buddhism absorbed Bon and its believers. As the country developed in its many fertile valleys, Buddhism matured and became a unifying element. It was Buddhist literature and chronicles that began the recorded history of Bhutan⁶.

Buddhism was introduced to Sikkim, also in the 8th century by Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche). He was the teacher of mysticism at the Nalanda University in northern India, and was well versed in Tantricism, an amalgam of Buddhism with primitive beliefs and nature worship, then current in India. Guru Rinpoche, whose fame as a mystic and teacher had spread across the Himalayas into Tibet was invited by the Tibetan King, Thi-Strong De-Tsang. Before the incursions of Buddhism, the original religion of the Lepchas and the Bhutias was a form of nature worship, variously referred to as Pon (also spelled as Bon) or Shamanism. It was a mixture of witchcraft and sorcery with the worship of spirits and ghosts. In the late 8th century CE and through conversion the first community of the lamas was established in Sikkim. There are four Tibetan Buddhist traditions, namely Gelug, Kagyu, Nyingma and Sakya. Nyingma, is the oldest school of Buddhism, based on the early translations of Indian Buddhist texts, under the supervision of Guru Rinpoche (Raj, 2015).

Due to its vicinity to Tibet, Mahayana Buddhism practiced in Sikkim is heavily influenced by Tibetan culture. Yet, Sikkimese – especially its indigenous Bhutia people – feels that they have a unique form of Buddhism. When Buddhism traveled from the ancient Nalanda University to Tibet it went through the caravan convoys that passed through the mountains of Sikkim. Thus, Buddhism here predates that in Tibet. Since 1604 CE Sikkim has been a Buddhist kingdom until it was annexed by India in 1973 and made part of the Indian Union.



Namgyal Institute of Tibetology
in Gangtok, Sikkim

Sikkim has played a particularly interesting role in facilitating the carrying of the Buddhist faith from India to Tibet, and back to India from Tibet. In the 8th century CE, Guru Padmasambhava crossed Sikkim en route to Tibet where he propagated the Buddhist faith. Centuries later, many precious Buddhist idols and religious texts found their way to the Namgyal Institute in Sikkim, carried on the back of fleeing Tibetans over the very

same path where border trade has once flourished between India and

⁶ <http://countrystudies.us/bhutan/4.htm>

Tibet. Incidentally, many precious treatises lost in the original Indian languages have survived in Tibetan translations, and been thus returned to the land of the birth of Buddhism (Namgyal Institute of Tibetology introductory brochure).

The Demise of Srivijaya Buddhist Civilization

Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra were on the trade routes between the Arab world, India and China even before the 1st century CE. Thus, there were many interactions between the civilizations of these 3 regions that led to the rise and fall of the Hindu-Buddhist civilization of Srivijaya, and the Islamisation of modern-day Indonesia.

Buddhism thrived across much of Java and Sumatra between 6th to the 14th centuries when the islands were ruled by Srivijaya and Majapahit empires. These islands were major centers of Buddhist scholarship and learning, where pilgrims traveling between China and India spend months and years learning about Buddhism. It was at this time that the world-famous Borobodur temple was built.



Borobudur Buddhist Temple in Central Java on Vesak Day

Though there are many arguments with regards to the arrival of Buddhism in the Indonesian archipelago, the most reliable records are found in the Fa Hien travelogues, a Buddhist missionary from China, who spent time there around the year 414 CE, where he describes Buddhist communities on the island of Java. Another historical record dates to 421 CE, where Bhikku Gunawarman, came to Java and translated scriptures that were taught there. There are also historic records of Chinese monk I-Tsing, who has lived for some time in Sriwijaya in Palembang in Southern Sumatra Island (685-695 CE).

In the 7th and 8th centuries, there were a lot of interactions between India and China not only in trade but also in science and Buddhism. Between the years of 618 to 907 CE, China ruled by Tang dynasty had a lot of cultural interaction with India. At that time, many travelers and monks from China made the pilgrimage to the holy places of Buddhism in India. In the mid-7th century as this grew, ports on the banks of the waters of the straits of Malacca, became important transit points for the ships sailing between China and India. Thus, Srivijaya

became a center of trade and intellectual interaction, which helped Buddhism to flourish along with a Shiva cult as well. Both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism are believed to have been practiced there with Sanskrit as the language of interaction. The writings of I-Tsing indicate that Srivijaya became a center of Buddhism in the region with over 1000 Buddhist educational institutions modeled on Nalanda.

Ditthisampanno (2016), notes that especially Java was not isolated at all from other advanced Buddhist development centers in India, Sri Lanka, and China, before, during, and probably after the Borobudur construction period. There were probably more two-way communications going on among those countries at this early period than what history might know about.

It is believed that the great Buddhist civilization that built Borobudur started to decline with the fall of the Majapahit kingdom in the 15th century CE when it was overcome by Hindu Tantric practices and corruption of the monkhood that indulged in black magic. Venerable Pannyavaro⁷, who resides at Mendut monastery in Borobudur argues that Buddhism got mixed up with a Hindu Shiva cult at the time. "Buddhist sangha behaved like Brahmin priests and people resented such attitude and (at the time) when Muslim traders arrived and they said in Islam in front of God everyone is equal, it attracted the ordinary people to Islam". Only about 1 percent of Indonesia's 240 million population – numbering about 1.7 million – are Buddhists today.

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⁷ Interview with author in Borobudur, May 2019.

Chapter 2

Buddhist Communication – From Ashoka Edicts to Digital Communication

Buddhism is one of the great religions of the world that has had a profound impact on mankind. It has influenced religious, philosophical, moral, cultural and ethical thinking in very significant ways. For a religion to have that kind of impact, it must possess very interesting approaches to the issue of human communication (Wimal Dissanayake, 2014)

Though the Buddha was of royal lineage, his message was absorbed by people of all backgrounds because he used a simple language and related it to their everyday concerns. As Buddhism began to spread across Asia, many advanced educational and intellectual institutions were set up, which tend to indulge in intellectual discourses that may be beyond the grasp of ordinary people. Yet, where Buddhism took root and survived, the order of monks – the sangha – was able to communicate in simple language similar to the time of the Buddha, to explain the Buddhist philosophy to the people. In later chapters, some of these methodologies and communications practices will be discussed.



Pilgrims at Bodhgaya

As Dissanayake (2014) argues Buddha preached to the people in a language (it was Pali at the time) that was readily understandable and paying great care and attention to the psychological background and perceivable disposition of his potential audiences. “He structured his messages in a way that would readily appeal to the lay persons,” he notes. “From a communications viewpoint, the rhetorical strategies adopted by the Buddha in his teachings are multi-faceted and most fascinating and merit close study”.

It is of paramount importance to Buddhist communicators of today to closely study this methodology as Buddhist communities across Asia are facing multiple threats from well-funded religious groups with sophisticated communication tools, trying to convince Buddhists to adopt their religious teachings.

Another distinguishing feature that marked the importance of the Buddha as a communicator was his efficacious use of diverse rhetorical strategies. As a supremely persuasive communicator, the Buddha often deployed various narrative strategies to convey his intended message, argues Dissanayake (2014). Many a time during his lifetime, in interesting exchanges that centers on material security and spiritual emancipation, illusion and reality, it is the vivid deployment of the rhetorical strategies of dramatic parallelisms and verbal puns that gets the message across. It is primarily through these, communication devices that the intended effects are secured.

An important element of Buddhist communications that distinguishes it from Judeo-Christian Euro-centric communication theories is the idea that verbal communication is based on convention and social practices, which has no truck to the divine origins of language. Social institutions, then, were not created by some divine power or creator but by the dynamics of social growth. Hinduism stresses, the fact, that the world was produced by Brahma, as well as the caste system. Buddhism maintains that they were the outcome of social evolution, and language is one such result (Dissanayake, 2014).

Thus, Buddhists take the stand that language and communication are not a divine creation and language has to be understood as a social practice inflected by convention and agreed upon by the people who use it.

In Western communication theory, until recent times, the process of communication was conceptualized in terms of solitary addressers and addressees or communicators and receivers, and the focus was how messages were conveyed from one solitary mind to the other. This is indeed a Cartesian legacy. What this leaves out of consideration is the all too important fact that verbal communication takes place within specific contexts of operation. What the Buddhist attitude to language does is to focus on the commonly shared world that communicators and receivers share and how it constitutes a very important facet of the communicated meaning and the communicative event. Contexts and conventions that Buddhism focuses on are sets of practices and concerns that deepen the communicative act that is being performed. Hence, the Buddhist way of re-conceptualizing verbal communication opens up very productive pathways of inquiry (Dissanayake, 2014,p 231).

The Buddha has once said addressing a group of monks (cited in Dissanayake, 2014,p 231):

Speech which has four characteristics is speech well spoken, blameless and not censured by the wise; namely, the speech of a monk who speaks only what is wholesome and not what is unwholesome, who speaks only what is worthy and not that is unworthy, who speaks only what is pleasant and not what is unpleasant, who speaks only what is truthful and not what is untruthful. Speech characterized by these factors is well spoken, and not ill spoken, blameless and not censured by the wise.

Chuang and Chen (2003) argue that Buddhist philosophy offers abundant guidelines on how people should communicate and what standards and rules should guide peoples' conduct in the process. They note 5 principles that are similar to the above.

On the behavioral level, Chuang and Chen argues that the Buddhist emphasis on harmony, mutual dependence, selflessness, compassion, and ethics that aim to reach enlightenment directly shows its impact on East Asians' communication behaviors. The Buddhist influence could be seen in five characteristics of such communications, such as: intuition, the emphasis of silence, empathic, emotional control, and avoidance of being aggressive. "The intuitive style of

communication influenced by Buddhism rejects the Western linear or abstract thinking pattern, as well the Confucian preoccupation of conventional knowledge," they argue, pointing out to some Taoist thinking on inner liberation through a direct understanding of life.

Silence as a form of speech in East Asian cultures is greatly influenced by both the Buddhist and Taoist emphasis of integrating creative intuition and ontological experience based on tranquillity. It is the mind-sounding insider, rather than the mouth talking outside. To Buddhism, the internal mind working for a spiritual breakthrough in the quest for enlightenment represents a nonmechanical process to reach internal and external confirmation without relying on verbal expressions. Silence then becomes an effective nonverbal expression for mutual understanding (Chuang and Chen, 2003)

Kalama Sutra – Blueprint of Free Inquiry

Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.' Kalamas, when you yourselves know: 'These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,' enter on and abide in them (Anguttara Nikaya, Sutta no 65, verse 10⁸).

The above verse comes from Gautama Buddha's sermon to a group of Kalamas at the town of Kesapputa when they went to consult him about the efficacy of various philosophical ideas disseminating in the society. Popularly known as 'Kalama Sutra' this sermon and particularly the above verse is often quoted in discussions on Buddhist teachings and its emphasis on careful consideration of facts and ideas before accepting them. It is also known as the Buddhist 'Charter of Free Inquiry' and can be used as a guide for critical thinking.

"It is comparatively short but addresses to the point, revealing how one should exercise one's ability to critically investigate on practical grounds and to discover what is true and wholesome among the divergent religious and philosophical views," notes Venerable Dr Pategama Gnanarama (2003). "It succinctly lays out a blueprint to distinguish different views from one another from a pragmatic angle of vision. He argues that this discourse could be regarded as the Magna Carta⁹ of Buddhist philosophical thought.

Ven. Gnanarama argues, that, the free inquiry aspects of Kalama Sutra puts the

⁸ Kalama Sutta, The Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry, translated from the Pali by Soma Thera – retrievable from <https://web.archive.org/web/20130204141603/http://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>

⁹ Magna Carta is the charter sealed by King John of England in 1215 CE which has been upheld as the statement of civil rights.

Buddhist approach to critical thinking and free inquiry in synergy with that of science. “Both science and Buddhism are committed to discovering the truth about the world” he argues. “Buddhism applies a spiritual dimension to its approach (while) science (is an approach of) a phenomenal dimension”. Another difference is that science focuses its attention on the external world while the main concern of Buddhism is the inner world of personality. “Buddhism seeks inner perfection and wisdom through moral discipline where life is held sacred. Nevertheless, both rely on experience and follow the methodology of investigation and observance based on experimentation” points out Ven Gananarama.

In the Kalama Sutra Buddha has also addressed what is called the “three poisons” in Buddhism – greed, hatred and delusion – that influence the deciding of what is proper and improper. This is a critical element of critical thinking and communication. Bhikkhu Bodhi¹⁰ argues that the practice of free inquiry needs to take into account the understanding of these 3 poisons, which are the “primary causes of all bondage and suffering — and the entire practice of the dhamma can be viewed as the task of eradicating these evil roots by developing to perfection their antidotes — dispassion, kindness and wisdom”.

In an interesting paper titled ‘Malaysiakini – An Asian Online News Template of Virtuous Journalism’ by Malaysian communications researchers Carmen Lai Jia Weng and Krishnamoorthy Muthaly (2019) argues, applying the principles of free inquiry in Kalama Sutra, that Malaysiakini alternative news portal practices a model of “Virtuous journalism”. They found that the principles of free inquiry are Malaysiakini’s primary practice and news editor Steven Gan has said that he is very clear on being free to investigate anything that is wrong. This point, and the Buddhist approach to use the principles of the 3 poisons and the Four Noble Truths, in contemporary investigative reporting under a mindful communication strategy, will be discussed later in the chapter.

Communicating Via Pillars – The Ashoka Edicts



The great Mauryan Emperor Ashoka issued edicts carved on stone or pillars that depict his ideas on the practice of dhamma. His edicts were addressed to the entire populace, thus often on well-polished sandstone pillars, in places where people were likely to congregate such as places of Buddhist pilgrimage in Lumbini or Sravasti. These would carry dhamma messages such as on universal law, social order, piety, or righteousness. These could be points of reference to delve deeper into the study or practice of the dhamma. It may also be guidance to his subjects by the emperor of good or righteous behavior.

The Ashoka Pillar at Mayadevi Temple in Lumbini, Nepal

¹⁰ http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_09.html

Thus, the main focus of the edicts of Ashoka is on social and moral values rather than religious practices or the philosophical dimension of Buddhism argues Varanasi based historian Dr Nikarika¹¹. It proclaims his belief in the Buddhist concept of dhamma and his efforts to develop the dhamma throughout his kingdom. Thus Ashoka's religious thoughts are well communicated through his rock edicts.

Ashoka defines the main principles of dhamma as nonviolence, tolerance of all sects and opinions, obedience to parents, respect for the Brahmins and other religious teachers and priests, liberality toward friends, humane treatment of servants, and generosity toward all. These suggest a general ethic of behaviour to which no religious or social group could object. They also could act as a focus of loyalty to weld together the diverse strands that made up the empire (Britannica¹).

Nikarika gives as an example, the rock edict of Girnar, which communicates his policy of non-violence, when he disapproves of those 'samajas' (societies) which are violent, though it is not very clear if he appreciates those which are non-violent. The first part of the edict contains disapproval of bloody sacrifices and the second is devoted to his vegetarian practice, where he says that he will reduce eating non-vegetarian food in the future. "The pillars, rocks and caves were a unique medium of communication and with these, he was also giving orders to his officials" notes Nikarika.

In the 17th century, Bhutanese Kings have used stone addicts to make inscriptions of public announcements. It was primarily to state the code of law for public behavior of monks, ministers of state and their deputies. Ardussi (in Center for Bhutan Studies, 2007) argues that these are the earliest public media in Bhutan – a form of government injunction to the citizenry.

Origin of Mass Communication

People across the globe believe that mass media was born in Europe. We teach in universities across the world – including Asia - that it originated with the Gutenberg Bibles printed in movable type in the 15th century in Germany.

Mumbai University academic Dr Sanjay Ranade (2015) argues that between China, Korea and India, printing as mass media was as significant in every respect – from the technological innovations to the use and effect of this technology on the masses – as in Europe. The history of printing in the East is closely related to the history of the spread of Buddhism.

In contrast to some of the Indian Buddhists who preferred to transmit their teachings orally or through rock carvings, the Chinese placed more emphasis on the written word—nothing had real value unless it was recorded. In addition, numerous Buddhist sutras proclaimed the great virtue of reading, copying, and distributing sacred texts for one's own merit and the salvation of all living beings. This gave an edge to Buddhism over the Vedic religion being practiced in the Indian subcontinent at the time because of the overarching emphasis on oral communication and specific religious injunctions on writing. The new religion also challenged the Confucian system of thought that was

¹¹https://www.academia.edu/39779238/Emperor_Ashoka_s_Communication_Skills_His_Pillars_Rocks_Caves_and_Edicts

dominant in China, Korea as well as Japan then. Thus, there is no doubt that Buddhism challenged existing philosophical and social thinking in the region through promoting literacy, education and mass printing of religious and philosophical texts much before Gutenberg (Ranade, 2015)

Over 600 years before Gutenberg got ink on his fingers, the Chinese have printed the Buddhist Diamond Sutra on the block type and the book was discovered by a Chinese monk in a cave in the Gobi Desert while clearing some sand in a meditation cave in 1900. The monk, Abbot Wang Yuanlu, broke in and discovered a small chamber, about nine feet square and full from floor to ceiling with scrolls. They had been hidden and perfectly preserved in the dark, dry grotto for 1,000 years. Although he didn't know it, among the nearly 60,000 scrolls was the Diamond Sutra of 868 A.D, a woodblock printed scroll, more than 16 feet long, complete and dated, with an instruction that it be given away for free (Morgon, 2012).

Buddhism had the largest influence in spreading the usage of print technology, which in turn led to an increase in the dissemination of secular printing and literacy as well as wielding an important influence on economics, government, and competing religions/philosophies (Wikipedia).

After the Tripitaka was written at Aluvihare in Sri Lanka in the 1st century CE, it was the written word that spread Buddhism across Asia and as mentioned in chapter 1, Xuanzhang's translations were ultimately printed when Buddhism began to spread across China and East Asia.

The above fact (in box) reflects that Buddhism and the invention of block printing in the East have created a mass media many centuries before Europe got into the act. When the Tripitaka was written it was on ola leaf. But, as print technology became available in the East one can safely assume that these Buddhist scriptures were block printed. The first translation of a Buddhist text appeared in China in the 2nd century CE and by the 3rd century, the volume of translations had increased a great deal. During the Sui Dynasty (581-618 CE), Buddhism enjoyed an explosion in the production of printed texts. This is partly due to the reunification of the empire and partly because Emperor Wen decreed that all Buddhist texts then in print were to be copied and placed in temple libraries in all the major cities. Another factor that influenced this increase in printing was the creation of a bureau in 606 CE for the translation of Buddhist texts at the behest of Emperor Yang. Mogol invasions have destroyed most of these. Yet, As large-scale carving of woodblocks to print the Tripitaka was undertaken starting sometime around 1014 in China. Buddhism was, therefore, probably the most important factor in the development of printing (Wikipedia).

There is evidence of the printing of Buddhist texts in Japan going back to the 8th century CE. The Hyakumantō Darani, which are slips of paper with Buddhist texts printed on them, have been printed and installed in the miniature pagodas that were placed at various locations in Nara. By 727 the government had established a sutra scriptorium (the Shakyōjo) in Nara that was the center of sutra-copying. The number of surviving printed Buddhist texts, as opposed to printed secular texts, helps to illustrate the influence Buddhism had on printing. Buddhism has also played a role in the development of printing in Korea going back to the 10th century CE. The zealotry of Korea to acquire Buddhist texts also provided an impetus for the printing of texts. By the end of the 11th century, Korea had better copies of common texts as well as rare copies of

certain editions than China (Wikipedia)

However, Karma Phuntsho (2007) has a different view of why the Europeans claim Gutenberg started the mass communication process.

Although the printing tradition took off in Asia much before the landmark achievement of Johann Gutenberg with his Bible in 1456 in Europe, the practice was mostly limited to the production of liturgical materials or literary and religious literature. These printed texts substituted the manuscripts providing similar elegance but at less cost, much like incunabula of the early printing tradition in 15th century Europe. However, in contrast to Asia, the printing press in Europe assumed a much greater role with the mass publication of pamphlets and single sheets, most notably used for Luther's challenge of the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation. The printed material, which were produced relatively, easily and in profusion, became tools in a war of propaganda and the 'press' acquired a new and significant meaning.

Engaged Buddhism – Community Development Via Buddhist Communication

Prominent Buddhist monks and laypeople like Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh from Vietnam, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa and Sulak Sivaraksa from Thailand have been pioneers in aiming to reform Buddhist society to address contemporary development issues communicating ideas from Buddhism for grassroots action. This is today popularly known as 'Engaged Buddhism'.

The term was introduced by the Thien Buddhist teacher venerable Thich Nhat Hanh in a series of articles during the Vietnam War days drawing attention to the need for the Buddhist sangha to take a more active stand in resolving urgent social issues. He formed the Order of Interbeing (Tiep Hien) in the mid-1960s and ordained 3 men and 3 women, at a time when the Vietnam War was escalation and there was an urgent need to combat the hatred, violence and divisiveness enveloping his country (Mikheeva, 2019).

Initially, Ven Hanh called this approach "Wordly Buddhism" and his 6 ordainees were required to follow 14 precepts, which is a combination of traditional Buddhist training and contemporary social concerns. A fundamental difference between the traditional precepts and these were that it opened up rules for knowledge transmission which is not bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, and to avoid being narrow-minded and be open to ideas from others. This opens up cooperation with others and for inter-religious conflict resolution (Mikheeva, 2019).

Thus, Ven Hanh and his followers were able to set up peace-oriented educational and religious institutions during the Vietnam War, and led anti-war protests, rebuild villages, resettle refugees and publish articles and books communicating the crisis facing his country and Buddhism. The 1963 photograph of a burning monk in Saigon not only demonstrated the determination of the Engaged Buddhists to stop the conflict, but it also galvanized global opinion and led to the anti-war protests that developed in the

US and around the world.

By the 1990s as globalization of the world economy progressed, there was an added vigor given to the concept by Buddhists like Sulak in Thailand, and also the growing Buddhist movements in the West saw in Engaged Buddhism a philosophy that could be applied to address modern social ills. Sulak did not try to reinterpret Buddhism but discussed ways individuals could apply Buddha's teachings to address modern socio-economic and political challenges (Mikheeva, 2019). In his widely read book 'Seeds of Peace' he presents the idea of what is called "small b" Buddhism. He pointed out that according to Buddhism there are 3 poisons – greed, hatred and delusion – capitalism and consumerism are driven by these poisons. He observes that "Asian traditional values stress the spiritual side of a person as well as the group to which he or she belongs. Personal growth is always related to social well-being. A person is taught to respect other living beings, including animals and plants. Personal achievement at the expense of others is frowned upon". But, today's society, including its own Thailand, is riven with selfish consumerist values (see box on right).

The Religion of Consumerism

Western Consumerism is the dominant ethic in the world today. You cannot walk down the streets of Bangkok, for example, without being bombarded by billboards touting the benefits of various soft drinks. Streets here are jammed with expensive foreign cars that provide the owners with prestige and the city with pollution. Young people define their identities with perfumes, jeans and jewelry. The primary measure of someone's life is the amount of money in his or her checkbook. These are all liturgies in the religion of consumerism – Sulak Sivaraksa, 'Seeds of Peace' (1992, p 3)

Sulak interprets the 5 precepts (Panchasila) for contemporary Buddhists, extending it to the society at large as follows:

- *Precept 1* – it is not only the absence of killing, individual must also be aware of indirect action, which may support racial conflicts, wars, or killing animals for human consumption.

Precept 2 – the absence of stealing should include questioning the implication of capitalism and depletion of natural resources.

Precept 3 – abstaining from sexual misconduct should include stopping the global structures of male dominance and exploitation of women.

Precept 4 – vowing to abstain from false speech should bring into question how the mass media and mainstream education promote a prejudiced and biased view of the world.

Precept 5 – abstaining from taking intoxicants deals with nothing short of international peace and justice because Third World farmers are exploited to grow intoxicants like heroin, coca, coffee and tobacco, and deprive them of growing rice and vegetables.

(Mikheeva, 2019).

Sulak founded the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)¹² in 1989. Over the years the network has expanded to include members, both individuals and organizations, from more than 25 countries across Asia, Europe, North America and Australia. From this diversity, an understanding of socially

¹² <http://inebnetwork.org/>

engaged Buddhism has emerged which integrates the practice of Buddhism with social action for a healthy, just, and peaceful world. In the following country chapters, many Engaged Buddhism initiatives and projects will be discussed.

Mindful Communication – A Modern Buddhist Communication Pathway

Developing mindfulness is at the very heart of Buddhist teachings. Known as ‘Vipassana’, which means to see things as they really are, it is one of India's most ancient techniques of meditation. It was rediscovered by Gautama Buddha more than 2500 years ago and was taught by him as a universal remedy for universal ills (art of living). Vipassana (Mindfulness) is a way of self-transformation through self-observation.

Developing mindfulness has become a global movement today. This is a practice that could be cultivated to train our minds to practice Mindful Journalism in a secular setting. However, we need to be careful about the secularizing of mindfulness. As Venerable Phuwadol Piyasilo (Seneviratne, 2018, p26), a Thai forest monk and a graduate of mass communications from Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University warns:

Mindfulness practices in the West usually are found to be secular. They try to practice it without adding any religious value to it. This has become problematic because it could manifest itself with the wrong intentions. When you apply Buddhist teachings it is accompanied by panna - wisdom. Without this moral framework, the practice itself would not be enough to fast-track us into the right direction. We need to bundle up panna into the practice itself. In the path itself, you need to develop this by accompanying this to make it successful (Piyasilo, 2015).

Between 2016-2017 I was part of a team at Chulalongkorn University that developed a curriculum to train Asian journalists (we prefer to call them ‘communicators’) in mindful communications for sustainable development. It is the above principle that we have applied throughout the process of developing our curricula – how to bring the practice of gathering panna (wisdom) into the practice while we try to focus our minds through the learning of skills and techniques to be mindful of what we are doing.

The model of journalism that is being taught around the world is too adversarial and focuses on conflicts, which in turn often creates or encourages conflict. The curriculum we developed, incorporating Buddhist philosophical concepts, is one to help people to encourage cooperation and achieve social harmony. We call it human-centric journalism.

Mindfulness training for journalists should be seen in the context of training oneself to gather knowledge and wisdom to gain a deeper understanding of the issues you are reporting about and how to communicate with (rather than to) the society/community to improve their lives. One may argue that investigative journalism does that. Yes, but, can we offer a more philosophical and ethical guide for that practice?

Buddhism focuses on the mind, which it considers to be the source of all suffering, as well as the springboard to address the eradication of such suffering.

Western journalism could be said to be, focused on matter-generated issues - events reporting – while mindful journalism should focus on mind-generated issues – which is process reporting. Being mindful is being investigative.

The guru of mindful meditation, S. N Goenka (Hart, 2012, p19) once said: *“A life without wisdom is a life of illusion... being sensitive to the suffering of others does not mean you become sad yourself. Instead, you should remain calm and balanced so that you could act to alleviate their suffering”*.

Implicit in this quote, when applied to journalism, is an expectation that the news media could play a constructive social and political role in a society premised on the ground that the media mirrors the interests of the public. But, in rights across the globe, including in Asia, the media has become excessively commercial, even the public service media and news has become a commodity. The challenge for a mindful journalist is to apply the virtues of wisdom to produce a secular brand of journalism that is devoid of commercial contamination, inherently based on tanha (craving) and upadana (attachment).

Journalism involves observation, investigation, analysis and communication. The success of perfecting these skills depends on the practitioner’s ability to control and guide one’s emotions – a central theme of Buddhist teaching.

As HH Dalai Lama (1999, p 25-26) said: *“We first have to learn how negative emotions and behaviours are harmful to us and how positive emotions are helpful. And we must realize how these negative emotions are not only very bad and harmful to one personally, but harmful to society”*.

The wisdom path to journalism is the path of the Four Noble Truth in Buddhism – Dukka (Suffering), the reason for it, understanding it and the path to eradicate it. When you investigate the reasons for suffering the journalism that comes out of it is naturally people-centric. The news event is not an isolated happening but something that comes out of a process.

The search for Buddhist-oriented journalism should start with the Four Noble Truths, the foundation of Buddhist philosophy argues Shelton Gunaratne (2009). He discusses in detail how this four-fold path reflects in a new practice of Buddhism-inspired journalism that should lead to right speech that should result in a “timely, truthful, helpful and spoken with a mind of goodwill journalism”. The framework he has outlined along the Eight Fold Path could provide a journalist/communicator to judge their inputs and outputs to serve the community with wisdom. The western libertarian model of free media journalism says the journalist should be the watchdog on behalf of the citizen against abuse of power by the government. But, the adversarial reporting culture it has developed has driven conflicts rather than solving them.

As American Buddhist journalist Doug McGill (cited in Gunaratna, 2009, p 6) argues:

It is ordinary everyday suffering, aches and pains, mental moods and afflictions, sickness and death. On a social level, suffering in Buddhism is defined as any harshness, violence, and division of the community. A Buddhist journalism would therefore be aimed at helping individuals

overcome their personal sufferings, and helping society heal the wounds caused by injustice, hatred, ostracism, and physical violence. Such a defined professional purpose would give the Buddhist journalist a measuring stick for each word and story produced: does it help overcome individual and social suffering?

Bhutanese communications scholar Dorji Wangchuck believes that this new paradigm of news reporting could be called 'Middle Path Journalism' that could be defined as a human-centric model that takes into account the Values and Vision of a country in the practice of media and communication. The model can be applied to any society as long as people have a common understanding of the Vision and Values.

Middle Path journalism strives to avoid the extremes by finding the delicate balance (the middle-path) in the practice and use of all forms of media as well as in the consumption and analysis of media contents¹³. Middle Path Journalism is thus anchored in two concepts – Values and Vision. Values are a set of principles or standards of human behavior that determines one's judgment and belief of what is important in life within one's place in society. Vision, on the other hand, is the long-term stated goal of a nation that provides the strategic direction of what is to be achieved collectively – and as a nation. Earlier we saw that every society should redefine the role and the model of its media based on the social, cultural, religious, historical and political structure. The socio-cultural structure can be represented by the values that a society holds dear while the historical and political circumstances are distilled into a vision (Wangchuck in Seneviratne, 2018, p138).

Communicating Buddhism in Digital Age

Digital technology has provided both an opportunity and a threat to Buddhist communications. The spread of Buddhism in the West has been greatly assisted by social media tools. But, in the East, traditional modes of communication between the monastery and the people have been challenged, by new technology. It has also provided a dilemma – the community has traditionally supported the monastery/temple because it was the spiritual, counseling and communication center of the community. This traditional role of Buddhism is where monasteries have been keepers of religious doctrine, which is taught by a senior monk or master to younger students. The public traditionally relied on monastics for information about religious texts and teachings; they had no other means of seeking knowledge. This endowed monastics with unique authority.

If the spiritual knowledge and counseling could be obtained via the Internet with a monk not directly involved in the communication process, it could well challenge this traditional communication role and it is happening everywhere.

Many monasteries and monks have taken up the challenge across Asia and outside, using digital technology and popular culture to transmit Buddhist

¹³ Media is to be understood as any form of mediated communication in traditional media, social media and in the new technological platforms

wisdom to the masses, especially to youth.

In a study by Duo, Dwyer and Zhang (2012) on Buddhist communication in the social media age, they looked at how e-sangha or cybersangha transcends boundaries between the variety of Buddhist traditions, sects, and their distinctive cultural differences. But by having moderators in the forums they still practice a form of Buddhist orthodoxy based on Buddhist concepts of proper behavior. They have taken a number of case studies among them are the communication models practiced by His Holiness Dalai Lama and Master Cheng Yen founder of Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan.

In the case of the HH Dalai Lama, they pointed out that by using cyberspace to spread Buddhist teachings, though he is the head of a specific Gelugpa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, he has been able to reach out to people all over the world who might not be associated with a Buddhist temple or tradition. Though Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes face-to-face interaction, HH Dalai Lama has embraced the Internet and through websites, Facebook and Twitter accounts he has built a follower base of over 5 million by 2010. Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama has functioned as a monastery in cyberspace by coordinating the running of his cyber accounts. The frequent live webcasts of sermons by His Holiness can be viewed as an important exploration of cybersangha they argue.

Buddhism is a religion, which attaches great importance to the role of “teacher”. The wisdom passes down from a master to his or her students. So when a temple or monastery has an ambition to be influential, the first step is to promote its master’s thoughts, building an image of a spiritual leader and then attracts believers to follow.

In the new media age at present, this goal is much easier to be achieved by creating “Microblog celebrities”. This was the path taken by Tzu Chi Foundation (TCF) to promote its founder Master Chen Ye. TCF has its own media, from newspapers, magazines, radio and TV channels, website and social media. And, as their website says: “With new technologies, we have knitted a net to connect Tzu Chi volunteers all over the world together. As long as you are online, you are with us”. TCF is one of the world’s largest charities with a presence in over 100 countries. Their cybermedia and communications may not be that familiar outside the Chinese-speaking world, because of language barriers. Whereas, HH Dalai Lama’s communications have been largely in English.

In Singapore, the researchers found that many temples were trying to use their website as a virtual extension of their physical temple, but without a boundary. But, the authors argue that religion cannot exist entirely online. To survive, temples have to draw people out of cyberspace, into physical communion with the sacred space. In discussions about the country studies in the following chapters many other examples of attempts to link cyberspace with monastic traditions will be discussed, such as the use of We Chat by Bhutanese for blessings (see chapter 4).

At this point, however, it will be interesting to cite an example from Cambodia. The work of the Independent Monks Network for Social Justice (IMNSJ) where activist monks have taken to social media to campaign against environmental destruction and grabbing the land of the poor in name of development. The campaign has thrown an interesting challenge to the traditionally conservative

monastic hierarchy. While Cambodian monks have been involved in independence struggles against French colonialism, such as in the non-violent 1942 Umbrella Revolution, this time it is against their own government.

While Cambodian Buddhism has undergone a remarkable revival after the destruction of the Khmer Rouge rule in the 1970s, yet, the Cambodian government does not allow monks to play a social activist role. Socially active monks have been denounced, threatened and detained, and many monasteries experience surveillance. Yet, members of the IMNSJ, such as Monks Loun Sovath and Bun Saleth have significant social media followings, where they use videos shot by them on YouTube or blogs to communicate their Buddhist messages with a social justice focus. They have also been receptive to give interviews to foreign media and then post these on their social media platforms (Maza, 2017).

According to Ven Rath Sovann, a monk who works in environmental movements, social media allows religious leaders to reach out to audiences directly. "Cambodian monks who work in activism have always had a lot of problems, but they have a moral responsibility to explain to people their role in society," Ven Sovann says. "I am happy because we can explain to young people the importance of social engagement, and we use YouTube and Facebook" (Maza, 2017).

Bhikkuni Ani Choying Drolma is a Tibetan Buddhist nun from Nepal. She uses a different approach to spreading the dhamma, yet diverting from the traditional way of communicating from the monastery to the community. She is today a well-known Buddhist artist well embedded into the World Music networks singing often in international music festivals and concert halls. I first saw her performing at the iconic The Esplanade concert hall in Singapore in 2014. She sang for about one and half hours accompanied by an American percussionist and guitarist to a full house. I was able to interview her before the concert and when I asked her about getting into singing as a Buddhist nun, this was her response:

I never thought I could be a singer. My musical friend Steve Tibbet is the one who made me a singer I never got technical training to become a singer and never pursued to become a singer. When you pursue a career in becoming a singer your main ambition is that you want to become famous. Or you want to make a lot of money. But it has never been the case with me. What happened was this musician who came to the monastery and heard me singing some of the prayers, he asked me to record something. Later he took it back to America and mixed it with his music and sent it back with a proposal - would I be interested in making an album out of it? I went to see my teacher and asked what he thought. His answer was okay whoever hears these mantras or spiritual songs whether they are believers or nonbelievers, if they will all be benefited its okay. That was good enough for me to record. So I agreed to publish an album. It was published by a good record company in America. Soon it was worldwide distributed and people started to enjoy that album¹⁴.

¹⁴ Interview with author in Singapore, July 2014

The Singapore concert had a full house and most of them were not Buddhists nor Nepali or Tibetan. As she was singing in Nepali or in Tibetan languages, at the beginning of each song she explained the lyrics in English. Thus, at the end of the concert, she has given a Buddhist sermon with the audience perhaps not aware that they were been exposed to the Buddhist philosophy while enjoying the singing and the chants. She has performed many times in Singapore after that and her concerts are very popular with the Buddhists there. Her music clips are also widely distributed via YouTube¹⁵.



Bhikkuni Ani Choying Drolma on the World Music stage – screenshot from YouTube

There are also nuns in Korea who have taken to rapping to attract the attention of the young to Buddhist teachings and in the following chapters under various country studies, I would discuss several examples where Buddhist groups in various countries are trying to use music, teledrama and cartoons to appeal to the young presenting the Buddha's message in a medium they consume.

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¹⁵https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etVHHa4IpeM&list=RDetVHHa4IpeM&start_radio=1&t=988 (example of YouTube postings)

[https://www.academia.edu/3739090/Buddhist Communication in the Social Media Age copy](https://www.academia.edu/3739090/Buddhist_Communication_in_the_Social_Media_Age_copy)

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Chapter 3

Bangladesh: Protecting A Threatened Buddhist Community

We are microscopic community of 2 to 3 million Buddhists in Bangladesh. NGOs have been active in Chittagong Hill Tract areas to convert poor Buddhists to Christianity, exploiting their poverty. Without survival, religion cannot be maintained. Economic survival must be culturally addressed. In Bangladesh, you see a strong Buddhist heritage. Tourism department is talking about promoting Buddhist tourism - Sidhartha Barua, President Bangladesh Buddhist Foundation¹⁶



Lal Ching-Sada Ching Vihar, Ramu, Cox Bazaar

Bangladesh has a rich heritage of Buddhist culture, even though much of their cultural development is related to Bengali culture, which is also shared by the adjoining state of West Bengal in India. Today Buddhists in Bangladesh are a small minority in a nation of 164 million people. According to official statistics, 90.4 percent of the population are Muslims while Buddhists constitute just 0.6 percent¹⁷.

Brief History of Buddhism in Bangladesh

There are two opinions concerning the introduction of Buddhism to Bangladesh. One opinion says that the Buddha himself visited the region and the other says that Buddhism arrived in Bengal during Emperor Ashoka's period in 3rd Century BCE when he sent missionaries to various parts of the region. Under his Dharma Mission 2 prominent monks, Sona Thera and Uttara Thera have stayed in Bangladesh for some time before proceeding to Swarnabhumi (Burma and Thailand). In Samjukta Nikaya which is part of the Tripitaka, there is a clear reference to Buddha staying at a place named 'Shetak' in Bangaand there are many citings of Bangladesh in old scriptures like 'Millandapannaya' (1st Century BCE) and 'Mahabastu' (3rd century BCE) (Barua, 2005).

The travelogue accounts of famous Chinese pilgrim-travellers Fa-Hien (5th century), Hieun-Tsang (mid-7th century), H-Tsing (late 7th century) give a vivid and colourful pictures of Buddhism in what is Bangladesh today. The Chinese travelers have seen hundreds of vast monasteries and centers belonging to monks and followers of both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Royal

¹⁶ Interview with author in Chittagong, August 2019

¹⁷ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Bangladesh

patronage for more than seven centuries between the 6th to 12th centuries by Buddhist dynasties especially of the Pala period helped Buddhism to flourish (Barua, 2017).

Some of the well-known Bangladeshi Buddhists of this period are Santarakshit a professor at Nalanda University, Atish Dipankara Srijnana, a world-famous saint and professor and Pandit Silabhadra, the principle of Nalanda University. The Siddhacharyas (Saint Scholars) of ancient Bengal who were engaged in teaching at the great universities of the time like Nalanda and Pandit Vihara University used to compose a series of mystic lyrics and songs known as 'Charyapada' which marked the creation of the Bengali language and literature more than 1000 years ago (Barua, 2005).

After the fall of the Pala dynasty (750-1165 CE), the Varman and Sen dynasties that followed were strong followers and supporters of Brahmanism. During their rule, Buddhism and its followers were persecuted. When the Muslim rule in Bangladesh arrived in the 13th century CE Buddhism fell into its darkest age. Following the destruction of Nalanda University, this spread to Bangladesh Odantipura and Pandit Mahaviharara, which were completely destroyed. Buddhism reached its weakest period from 12th to 18th century CE where first Bhrahmistic and then Islamic repression compelled Buddhists to convert to Hinduism or Islam (Barua, 2017).

Dipankar Barua (2017) argues that the British period between the 18th and 19th centuries CE allowed Buddhists some breathing space. They recruited Buddhists to their army – to which Buddhists gladly obliged – and when the armies were disbanded they were absorbed into the police force, especially in the Chittagong area. "We find that in the British period the Buddhists of Chittagong and neighbouring areas regained their lost glory, at least to some extent. As the British government declared secularism in the country, the position of the Buddhists became more secure " (Barua, 2017, p 40).

After Burma (now Myanmar) annexed the Arakan region in 1795 waves of Arakanese refugees came across to Bangladesh (then part of British India) and settled around Chittagong. The Burmese army was oppressing them. They came and settled mainly in the southern Chittagong area now known as Cox Bazaar. More Arakanese refugees came in 1842 and the liberal religious policy of the British allowed Buddhists to reestablish themselves on a solid foundation in Bangladesh.

Today, the Bangladesh Buddhist community consists of many groups. The Baruas¹⁸ include several groups with most carrying the family name of Barua but also includes Chowdhury, Mutsuddi, Talukder, Sikder and Singha family names. They are followers of Theravada Buddhism and lives in the plains of Dhaka, Comilla Chittagong, and Noakhali. They are a fairly successful community that includes, professors, doctors, business people and even senior police officers. The largest community of Buddhists is the Chakmas, who reside in Chittagong hill tracts who claim to be descendants of the Sakya – from which

¹⁸ Barua is believed to be descendants of a powerful dynasty of Bengali Kings native to the region. Thus, they use the surname of Barua today. Yet, others say they same originally from the Bihar region in India.

Gautama Buddha came from. The Marma and Rakhine Buddhists who live around Cox Bazaar came from Arakan, Burma, some even having come during the time of Arakan kings.



Present day people of Buddhist community of Bangladesh must deserve the authenticity of the oldest recognition of Buddhism because they did not give up their faiths defying all sorts of hostile and repressive situations of history (Bimalendu Barua, 2005, p 9)

Descendants of Arakan Buddhists at a temple near Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh (left)

Buddhist Community Concerns Today

As part of this research project, I visited Bangladesh for a week in August 2019 visiting Dhaka, Chittagong and Cox Bazaar area. Government authorities rejected my request, for permission to visit Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) area. There are restrictions on foreigners visiting the area. However, I met a group of monks and Buddhists from the CHTs in Chittagong at their community temple.

Interactions with the Buddhist community indicated that, as mentioned earlier, the Barua community seems well established with good rapport with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Mrs Sheikh Hasina. Many spoke in positive terms about her support for the Buddhist community in Bangladesh. But, everything is not rosy and Buddhists in general face many problems particularly the poor CHT Buddhists who have been targeted by Christian evangelists for many years and the Buddhists of the Cox Bazaar area live in fear of possible repression by radical Muslim groups fuelled by the Rohingya crisis in neighbouring Myanmar and large refugee camps near Cox bazaar (see story below).

Cox Bazaar – Bangladesh: Buddhists Living In The Shadows Of Rohingya Fear

Lotus News Feature by Kalinga Seneviratne

Cox Bazaar: Most of Bangladesh's 1 million Buddhists live in Chittagong (now officially known as Chattogram), Chittagong Hill Tracts and here in Cox Bazaar areas. The latter is home to the teeming Rohingya refugee camps sheltering those who fled Myanmar's Rakhine state since the 2016 skirmishes with the Burmese military. Over an estimated 900,000 Rohingyas are sheltered here which is believed to be the world's largest refugee camp today.

The Buddhists of the Cox Bazaar area make up about half the Buddhist population of Bangladesh, whose state religion is Islam. With attacks on 29 Buddhist temples in 2012 that house numerous Buddha artifacts and statues still fresh in their minds, the Buddhists are living very much under the shadows of fear of Rohingya attacks.



Rebuilt Ramu Simar Vihar, Cox Bazaar

Most of the temples attacked in 2012 are in the Ramu area here, which are today protected by armed police guards at the entrances. In the 2012 attacks, the mobs have burned old wooden Burmese-style pagodas, old Arakan Buddhist texts and stolen gold Buddha statues. Buddhists

here widely believe that the attacks were instigated by Rohingya Muslims who infiltrated across the border from Myanmar,

“Because of Rohingya issue, there is pressure on the local Buddhist community,” Bangladeshi Buddhist leader Dr Bikiran Prasad Barua told Lotus News. “Sometimes Rohingyas come out of camps and try to create problems. But the government is alert and gives the Buddhist community protection” he added.

Buddhism was at one time practiced widely in what is called Bangladesh today. Buddhists here believe that Gauthama Buddha has visited the region during his lifetime. Professor Dipankar Srijnan Barua in his book ‘Buddhists and Buddhism in Bangladesh’ says that Buddhism flourished in Bangladesh until the 12th century and after that “Buddhism faced many calamities” yet the Buddhists of the Chittagong area, especially the Barua community has kept it alive.

Dr Dipankar says that out of the 3500 monks in Bangladesh, Barua community accounts for over 1500 of them, and out of the 3000 monasteries in the country, 1200 of these are in the Chittagong and Cox Bazaar area.

Baruas are descendants of Buddhists (and Hindus) who originally came from Magdhada (now known as Bihar state in India) and settled in the Chittagong area and married into Arakan Buddhist families from Burma (Myanmar). Today Baruas are a well-to-do Buddhist community in Bangladesh with many of them professionals such as doctors, engineers, teachers, etc.

“Chittagong used to be a kingdom of the Arakans. This is how Buddhism developed here” explains Dr Bikiran, who is a retired Physics professor. “(But) those links (with Myanmar) are not very strong now,” he adds.

The Arakan Burmese influence is very apparent in the temple architecture and rituals of the Buddhists here. This could also be a conduit for attacks on temples by Muslims who may resent the treatment of Rohingyas in Myanmar as reported by the media.

In a commentary written for Daily Star in 2017 at the height of such reporting, Buddhist barrister Jyotirmoy Barua argued that prominent international media such as BBC, Al Jazeera and Time have focused on a “reductive version of events simply focusing on religion” and such reporting have a negative impact on the Buddhist community in Bangladesh. He challenged the allegations by such media of Rohingyas being targeted simply because of their religion, by pointing out that there are larger communities of Muslims living in Myanmar, who do not get similar treatment by the rulers of Myanmar. He alleges that it is such reporting which instigated Muslims to attack temples in Ramu in 2012.

Recalling that faithful day in 2012, a senior monk at Ramu Simar Vihar told Lotus News: “They came at eleven at night. They set fire to wooden building. They took all the money in the donation box. They took 2 Buddha statues which were made in gold”. He also added that “five-hundred-year-old scriptures were destroyed and burned. It documented Arakan Buddhist heritage of the region”.



Bronze Buddha Statue

Another senior monk, Bhante Piyaratana added that when the attackers came they tried to pour kerosene and set fire to the bronze sleeping Buddha statue and damaged the marble statue by using hammers.

The senior monk also told Lotus News that before the attacks the local Muslims used to come to his temple to get blessings. “(So) we were very hurt from the attacks” he added expressing sadness.

After the attacks, Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina had visited this temple and others in the area and ordered the government to help rebuild the monasteries. Now they have new buildings, some reflecting Thai Buddhist architecture, but, Buddhists here resent that the old wooden architecture of the Arakans could not be replicated in the new monastery structures. Some of it is due to the difficulty of getting timber for such constructions.

"Ramu was a tragedy for us. Also it was a boon," argues Dr Bikiran. "Because Prime Minister Hasina came out in sympathy for us. Now whenever monks go to see her she gives dana (food) to them".

"Prior to Rohingya issue, most of the Muslim community treated us with respect" notes Lokapriya Barua, President of the Bangladesh Buddhist Welfare and Peace Society. "After Myanmar (army's) brutal clash in Rakhine the scenario is totally changed".

"We don't try to preach or even talk about Buddhism to (non-Buddhist) locals in the community now," says Bhante Piyaratana, noting that there are no legal restrictions. "(But), we are afraid that this could be a reason to attack us again".

"Bangladesh was born on Bengali language and cultural nationalism, not Islamic nationalism" points out Dr Bikiran, adding that he gets a small allowance from the government every month as a freedom fighter because he went to India, came back and fought for Bengali independence from then East Pakistan in the 1970s.

In a commentary published by Daily Star in August, Bangladeshi author Habibullah Karim tends to endorse this view. He argues that ethnic similarities of Bangladeshis of all religions are "hidden in plain sight by insurmountable walls of religious intolerance and bigotry", which has given way to "silenced identities".

In a discussion with young Buddhists from Cox Bazaar, they pointed out to Lotus News, "we join together in festivals. They (Muslims) come to our festivals like Vesak and Bengali New Year. We go to their's like Ramadhan".

But another chipped in noting that Bangladesh's Buddhists have no parliamentary representation. "There are some Buddhists in local councils but not representing Buddhist politics. Buddhists don't go into politics. They are afraid," she said.

While another, who is also a blogger expressed the fears of his community: "At the moment we have no problems with Rohingyas but in future, we might have. If they permanently live here .. maybe in 10 years we may have a problem with young Muslims". He was actually referring to the problem of gradual radicalization.

In a recent newspaper interview here, Dr Shamsul Bari, a former Director of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) also raise the same fears. "The statistics from the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh indicate that 52 percent of the refugee population are below the age of adulthood. Imagine the situation a few years hence when they grow older and find there is no hope for their future" he noted, warning, it will be an "extremely explosive situation"

Lokapriya notes that all what would take to light the fuse would be some fake news and video disseminated through Facebook that claims further atrocities against Muslim Rohingyas in Myanmar. He is worried that as a result "if the Rohingya refugees or plain Muslims can get an opportunity to take revenge they will do it. They may snatch property, land, household animals, even the life of Buddhist community of Cox's Bazar area".

* This article is the 35th in a series of joint productions of Lotus News Features and IDN-InDepthNews, flagship of the International Press Syndicate based in Berlin.



A hammer-attacked Buddha statue

Local Buddhist leader and former Vice-Chancellor of University of Science and Technology Chittagong, Prof Pravat Chandra Barua,¹⁹ is not that positive about the situation with Buddhists in Bangladesh. He argues that they are 2nd class citizens today after Bangladesh's secular independent constitution was changed

¹⁹ Interview with author in Chittagong, August 2019.

in 1988 and Islam was adopted as the state religion. “Education policies shifted to promote Islamic ideology. It created conflict within the education system. State mechanisms shape the cultural situation of people. (In terms of) cultural challenges of Bangladesh Buddhists, we have suffered a lot since independence,” he says. “Hardly anyone from the Buddhist community has been appointed to foreign service. We have no representation in parliament”.

Empowering CHT Communities

In a meeting with a group of CHT people visiting Chittagong and 2 of their monks residing at the CHT community temple in Chittagong, they complained about the lack of funds to educate and empower their community, leaving them vulnerable to Christian proselytism.

Monk Bhante Katana explained that some Hill Tribe Muslims harass the Buddhists on land issues. But, a lot of Buddhists have been converted to Christianity because of economic problems. “Missionaries give money to convert. About 40,000 to 50,000 Christians there now. No Buddhist organisation comes to help us nor give money” he said. Though a lot of harassment of Buddhists occurs in the CHT areas it is not reported by the media. “Sometimes the Muslims attack temples. They say Hill Tracts is our area” he added. “There are some Buddhist MPs but they are in the governing party. They don’t talk about these problems in parliament. No problem of ours has been discussed in parliament.”

When I spoke to a group of young Buddhists in Cox Bazaar they also complained about the lack of political representation for them (see article above). But, they said the Cox Bazaar Buddhists don’t face problems with Christian evangelists because they are financially better off than the CHT Buddhists. There are about 60 Buddhist temples in the Cox Bazaar area and because of the influx of Arakan Buddhists over many generations, much of the temples that escaped the attacks of 2012 are made in wood replicating the rich architecture of the Arakanese.



A Burmese Arakan style wooden temple – Lamar Para Monastery – in a village area of Cox Bazaar that escaped the burning of the temples.

University of Chittagong History Professor Ananda Bikash Barua²⁰ said that they appreciate the support of the Hasina government, who have given them the land in the centre of the Chittagong city to build a temple to serve about 30,000 CHT Buddhists living and working in the city. But, he added that the CHT Buddhist community needs help from overseas Buddhists.

²⁰ Interview with author in Chittagong, August 2019.

Need for Education

The Buddhist community in Chittagong has had to close the Pali school for lack of funds and need to set up educational facilities to teach the young people Buddhism. Buddhist children in state schools only get one lesson a week on Buddhism.

Lokapriya Barua, Joint Secretary General Prantik Welfare Trust also agrees that the need of the moment is for well-educated local Buddhist monks who have a good amount of devotees to help educate other Buddhists, especially in CHT communities. He pointed out that Buddhists from better-off communities are showing interest in taking steps to mitigate the influence of Christian missionaries. "Some renowned Hill Tribe monks are working individually to reduce the influence of Christian evangelical activity by establishing orphanage centres and giving free accommodation and education facilities to the poor villagers' children. But Christians have a lot of money to hand out to them" he lamented.

Lokpriya feels that there is a lot of scopes to expand Buddhism in Bangladesh if Buddhists are able to expand their socio-economic assistance to the lower middle class and poor communities, and in turn teach them meditation as a lifestyle choice to find happiness. However, he admits that Muslims with a "strong belief in Allah" might react badly to such attempts by Buddhists.

Dhammarajika Bouddha Maha Vihar in Dhaka established in 1960 is the largest monastery in the country. The vihar complex includes a large orphanage with 1500 poor boys, a residential high school, a trade school, a music academy, a kindergarden, a library with a rich collection of books, and an International prayer/meditation centre. The entire complex consists of four and a half acres of land gifted to the Bangladesh Kristi Prachar Sangha by the Government (Barua, 2005).

Anupam Barua²¹, head master of Dharmarajika High School said that they have about 700 students studying from grades 1 to 10 and only 400 of them are Buddhists, others are mainly Muslims. Because they follow government national curriculum, all students do their own religious studies with Buddhists having 1 lesson a week. Most of the students come from their orphanage. Monks are also trained here with special classes.

During a visit to a Barua Buddhist community in Aburkhil in the outskirts of Chittagong, Nantu Barua, director of the Cultural Park there lamented about a lack of interest of many of the monks in the numerous temples there to focus on education. He showed me the Dhuthank Temple an impressive temple not only with a big shrine but also buildings that could run a school and educational facilities. He said the chief monk there is a well-known meditation teacher, but the building is not even used for meditation retreats. "We are always fighting with him to use this as an education centre" he said.

"All people in these communities are Barua. Not poor and can survive. Problem is the mentality," he pointed out. "They are too ritualistic. Monks don't

²¹ Interview with author in Dhaka, August 2019.

encourage education. Some monks think if people get too much education it will create problems for them”.

Nantu set up and manage the Cultural Park in the community, which has a medical service with a doctor available. Meditation classes are held on weekends and cultural education is provided for children. They also have a mobile library service. There is, however, one school in the community at Mahamuni temple that is combined with an orphanage for 105 children both boys and girls. There are no Muslim students as it is a Buddhist school.

Nantu said that Buddhists face a dilemma because in Bangladesh Buddhist birth rate on the decline. Many of the young are also getting converted to Christianity and Islam. “Muslims put pressure on the youth to learn Islam (at school). Then Buddhist youth could be convinced easily by telling you can go to heaven by embracing Islam”.

Media Presence

Being a small minority Buddhists’ access to the media is limited. They have just one online TV channel and government allows Buddhists to broadcast special programs on Vesak Day in May, which is a government holiday. Sometimes discussion programs are allowed to be broadcast on other special days like Esala. Dr Bikiran²² said that in Chittagong there is a Hindu program manager who has sympathy for Buddhists and gives airtime sometimes. “Sometimes I talk on full moon days. On national radio every week they give us to broadcast a sermon by a monk, also on TV. It will be about 4 mins. Things like drama, songs, dance they will allow for about 20 minutes.” Private TV channels broadcast about Buddhist activity, especially on Vesak Day. “Now Bangladesh Muslims know that Buddhists are living here. Before they didn’t know,” Dr Bikiran said.

Lokapriya says that some Muslim groups have circulated fake news about massacres and repression against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and this has created a very bad image of Buddhists, which could erupt at any time with attacks on the community. Lack of access to the media deprives Buddhists of countering this fake news. He also says that because of the popularity of Bollywood movies in Bangladesh, Hindu culture is well known but Buddhists have no such media products to educate the Bangladeshis. Cartoons, drama, music and cinema from Buddhist countries, if shown in Bangladesh could give a more positive image of Buddhists. Thus, he advocates more collaboration with Buddhist country media to exchange programs.

There are 3 young Buddhist artists in Cox Bazaar - Chowdhury Turna Barua, Aditi Barua and Probir Barua, who sing Buddhist and traditional songs like Rabindra Sangeet. They sing at festivals like Bengali New Year. They sing on Cox Bazaar radio and also on TV in Chittagong channel. An upcoming national artist Nishita Barua’s haunting Bengali Buddhist songs have drawn the attention of Buddhists overseas, but because of her national ambitions, she has branched more into the mainstream Bengali music scene in Bangladesh. She has recently taken the initiative to produce an album of 100 original songs with 3 Muslim artists.

²² Interview with author in Chittagong in August 2019.

Shyamol Chowdhury is the editor Amitabha (Society, Literature and Culture) Magazine, Bangladesh's oldest Buddhist publications that is published quarterly



Cover of the Amitabha Magazine's special issue on the Ramu tragedy in 2012

in Bengali. It now also publishes some English articles in the English section. "We want to expose society to Buddhist teachings. Our publication has been running for 19 years. Buddhist philosophy has no end I want to spread Buddhism in my own country. There are no restrictions for doing it, but I can't expose communal issues," explained Shyamol²³.

However, they were able to run a special issue on "Ramu tragedy" in 2012. "Amitabha is a part of our (Buddhist) society," he added. "We are trying to expose our society, we are working through Buddhism, giving a supporting role to building a society".

Shyamol also pointed out that they do 4 shows on government TV channel (Bangladesh Television

Chattogram) every year. There are documentaries, talks, songs and teledrama, specially made for these broadcasts. "It is a matter of pride that in 2019, that a Buddhist teledrama was produced and it was the first-ever production on the occasion of a Buddhist festival in our country. The story and the screenplay were written by me," he said. "However,



Shyamol Chowdhury (far left) directing the teledrama production

to continue these productions, cooperation of the rich (Buddhists) is very important". For Eid of Islam, Durga Puja and Janmastami of Hinduism, there have been such teledrams produced. This is the first time that Buddhists have done one.

Thus being a small community, Bangladesh's Buddhists are facing challenges on many fronts as discussed in this chapter with the most serious being proselytism activates of Christian missionaries and the ramifications of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar on the Buddhist community here. Lack of access to the media is also a significant disadvantage for the community. They also need help from richer Buddhists in Asian countries to empower the Buddhists here, especially the CHT communities.

²³ Interview with author in Chittagong in August 2019.

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Dhammarajika Bouddha Maha Vihar in Dhaka

Chapter 4

Bhutan: Opening Up an Isolated Buddhist Kingdom

The Constitution of Bhutan refers to Buddhism as an important spiritual heritage and hence it becomes the duty of individuals and institutions to protect and promote it – Dorji Wangchuk²⁴, former Spokesperson for the King of Bhutan

Bhutan is a small Himalayan Kingdom bordered by India on the south and by Tibet on the north and northwest. It is one of the most scenic countries in the world spanning the Himalayan mountain range and has a population of 1.3 million. Until very recently, Bhutan was a very isolated country, television was introduced only in 1999 and it was opened for international tourism on a limited scale in 1974. Buddhists constitute 75 percent of the Bhutanese population and Hindus 22 percent. The literacy rate of the population is estimated at 60 percent.



Colourful Interior of a Bhutanese Temple

The Uniqueness of Bhutanese Buddhism

The lofty and rugged mountain ranges have rendered communication between one valley and the other rather arduous. Thus, over the centuries living in isolated communities sheltered by the great Himalayan peaks, the Bhutanese people have developed their own traditions, customs and folklore, which remained practically untouched over the centuries. Thus, Bhutan may be the only nation in the world that has remained a sovereign independent country throughout its recorded history, which goes back to the 7th century CE (Dorje, 1991), as discussed in chapter 1.

Upon arriving in Bhutan, Forbes magazine's Tom Mullen²⁵ observed:

The small and predominantly Buddhist nation of Bhutan, tucked between China and India, is lanced by deep ravines and coated with thick woods. The country has no traffic lights. Smoking as well as tobacco products, are illegal, as are hunting and fishing (except for catch and release). It is forbidden to climb high peaks (where spirits dwell), and employees must wear traditional clothing—a gho robe for men and kira dress for women—during work hours. Years ago, Gross National Happiness (GNH) was identified by the nation as being more important than Gross National Product (GNP). Monasteries—often massive and commanding—abound; monks, when not in prayer or

²⁴ Email interview with author, June 2019.

²⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tmullen/2018/02/27/why-bhutan-is-still-out-of-this-world/#2757cbc44be8>

meditation or chores are often found playing board games, sharing stories, laughing or all three. Archery is the national sport and green chili peppers together with 'cheesy sauce' is the national dish.

This is a western travel writer's point of view and this is an observation visitor to Bhutan – both Western and Asian - make upon their arrival. What makes Bhutan unique is its Buddhist culture and practice that is yet to be significantly corrupted by commercialism. The history of Bhutan is closely linked to the spread of Buddhism in the Himalayas. Today Bhutan is the only country in the world where both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism are practiced as State Religion, which in itself is unique. The presence of religion is evident in every facet of Bhutanese life and Buddhist values, which form the basis of Bhutanese society. These are inculcated in the younger generations from their formative years. The Je Khenpo (Sangharaja) in the Central Monastic Body, who is responsible for the nation's religious affairs, enjoys a prominent place in the social and cultural life of the people and is equal in status to the King. Je Khenpo is assisted by 4 deputies, known as Lopen-zhib, who are equal in rank to ministers in Government (Dorji, 1991).

Dawa Penjor²⁶ argues that in their daily practice Mahayana Buddhism prevails. "Tibetan Buddhist Schools of Kayjur and Nyingma are the dominant schools of thought. Therefore, in both school of thought, rituals are very much part of daily Bhutanese Buddhist practices" he points out. Further, he says that the perception and idea of Buddhism come from family members or the older generation. Thus the family practices play a crucial role in shaping the thoughts of young people and the future of Buddhist practices in Bhutan. "The Buddhist messages of the four noble truth and eightfold paths are so strongly embedded in the ways of life (of the people) and Buddha Dhamma is also taught in every school in the country," he adds.



Devotees perform prayer wheel meditation

To preserve the uniqueness of Bhutanese Buddhism it is important to preserve and nurture the order of monks. Traditionally, the supreme position, which the monks occupied in Bhutanese society both as temporal and spiritual rulers, and the privileges that they enjoy, as well as the deep religious habits of the people, all combined to attract to the priestly ranks enormous numbers of recruits, particularly between the 17th and 19th centuries CE (Dorji, 1991). Bhutanese families were traditionally bound to give one son to the monastery, but increasingly this tradition is dying down, as birth rates drop and families may have higher ambitions for their children with education and employment opportunities rising.

²⁶ Email communication with author, June 2019.

Many of the children who become monks nowadays come from economically disadvantaged homes, have a single or no living parent, or live with either their grandparents or other relatives. Therefore, the clergy is almost totally financed by the government. Thus, in 2014, Bhutan Youth and Development Fund started a 'sponsor a monk' project²⁷. The first monastery sponsored by this program was the ancient Dechen Phodrang Monastic School, which houses over 300 young Buddhist monks in Thimphu. To sponsor a monk for a month it costs USD 12 and by 2016 they have raised enough money from local and overseas devotees to sponsor 1200 monks in 8 monasteries across Bhutan.



Child monks at a monastery

Gross National Happiness – A Bhutanese Economics Lesson To the World

In 1972, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck announced that Gross National Happiness (GNH) is more important than Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and in subsequent years this pronouncement has become the primary public policy to balance the growing pressure of modern capitalism and modernization with Bhutan's treasured Buddhist traditions and culture. With the peoples' growing disillusionment with capitalism and globalization, GNH has also drawn the attention of the world. On 12th July 2012, the United Nations proclaimed March 20th as the International Day of Happiness adopting a resolution submitted by Bhutan²⁸. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has appointed Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) as the focal agency for SAARC's Development Goals, Research and Evaluation division.

The core principles of GNH is not exactly happiness like the way westerners understand, but contentment, argues Dorji Wangchuk (2018, p 140):

Happiness is very often taken as pleasure, delight, exhilaration, excitement, etc. Happiness is also subjective – differing from person to person. It is also transitory. One moment you are happy, next moment you may not be. Thus, the statement is more important than the 'gross national product' and has to be understood in totality, rather than selectively pulling out one word - happiness.... by contentment and happiness means that as long as people are generally satisfied these are the true measurement of a country's progress. Therefore, GNH as a development philosophy is more for state institutions to create enabling conditions for people to be content and happy.

When Bhutan adopted its first written Constitution it contained several provisions that linked GNH to Buddhism. Article 3, Section 1 declared that: "Buddhism is the spiritual heritage of Bhutan, which promotes the principles

²⁷ <http://www.bhutanyouth.org/sponsor-a-monk/>

²⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/events/happinessday/background.shtml>

and values of peace, non-violence, compassion and tolerance”. Article 2, Section 2 states that the King is required under the dual system of religion and politics (known as Chhoe-sid-nyi) to promote Mahayana Buddhism as the state religion. Article 9, Section 2 states, “The State shall strive to promote those conditions that would enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness”(Givel, 2019, p94-95).

GNH in Bhutan is implemented by government agencies is based on the Mahayana Buddhist idea that enlightenment can be obtained by everyone. Compassionate Mahayana public policies, based on GNH, can increase the likelihood of citizens becoming enlightened, blissful and happy (Givel, 2019).

The GNH Commission is the key national planning agency, that operationalizes and evaluates the adoption of GNH policies in government programs. It uses the Thimpu based Centre for Bhutan Studies GNH Index to measure the 4 pillars of GNH – economic growth (materialism), cultural preservation, ecological protection and good governance.

Threats from Christian Evangelism

While the Government tries to adopt GNH concepts based on the Buddhist philosophy to guide Bhutan’s development policies, there is a serious threat building up that could disrupt such planning and destabilize the society. For some years there has been a concerted attempt by Christian evangelical groups from overseas to infiltrate the closely-knit Bhutanese society.

“There is a huge threat to Buddhism from Christian Evangelical activities. The evangelist’s modus operandi is focused, systematic and willful, and always target vulnerable people and use the power of money to convert,” notes Panjor (2019). In Bhutan, proselytization is unlawful and anyone found guilty can be charged under the Civil and Criminal Procedure Code of Bhutan 2001. “However, many cases go unreported as the evangelists operate in a secret but effective manner”.

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in a submission to the UN Human Rights Council in October 2018²⁹ complained that Christians are “persecuted” in Bhutan and recommended that the Government of Bhutan should modify the 2008 Constitution’s paragraph 4 of Article 7 that proscribes proselytism by “compelling to belong to another faith by inducement”. Thus, they want the Government to abrogate articles in its penal code to comply with international human rights law, namely removing paragraphs on coercion, inducement and the promotion of civil unrest. WEA claims that there are about 30,000 Christians in Bhutan and numbers could be higher as “many do not practice openly”. But, nowhere in the report do they address the issue of whether it is unethical for them to exploit poverty in Bhutan to proselyte?

Panjor (2019) says that the monasteries have realized that this threat exists because of socio-economic situations. “To counterbalance the growth of evangelical Christians, the Buddhist community and Buddhist masters are changing their style of teaching and places of teaching. They now go from village to village and help communities when they are most needed. Buddhist schools,

²⁹ [http://WEA_UPR33_BTN_E_Main_Rev%20\(3\).pdf](http://WEA_UPR33_BTN_E_Main_Rev%20(3).pdf)

temples and stupas are being built in many places and community services are also being carried out by the state and Buddhist teachers, Gurus, Lamas and Rinpoches” he explains.

Historian Kesang Choden Tashi (2019) argues that certain changes need to take place to the way monks and monasteries operate to tackle the socio-economic problems facing Buddhist communities in the kingdom. “Monks can no longer, like in the past, live in the four corners of the Dzongs (monasteries), but will have to go out and do social work. We would like them to be doctors, be health workers, help the farmers, and help the poor people. I think, in this day and age, the Buddhist institutions have to reach out to the people”.

Tashi points out that in 2000, the Sangaraja (Je Khenpo) has set up the Tshokyi Lopen Foundation to provide welfare services to the community. But, many monasteries are not aware of it, because their traditional role has been to conduct rites and rituals to protect deities as a defense against external enemies. He argues that such external enemies are a “far-fetched idea” today and the new threats come from modernization which is “eroding the minds, hearts and values of our people”. Thus, he argues that the monastic establishment needs to think beyond merely “keeping Bhutan’s unique identity and legacy together”.

He points out examples of how in 2018 Zhung Dratshang (Central Monastic Body) trained 9 monks in Palliative Care. They have also organized a study tour to Thailand to learn about setting up social enterprises to provide such health services to the community. “The sole purpose of these monks is to provide the people with the support and guidance that can alleviate their emotional and psychological suffering,” notes Tashi (2019).

Media’s Role in Protecting Buddhism

Bhutan’s Buddhist spirituality and the mass media culture appear to be disparate, even diametrically opposed, the former being characterized by an introverted and deeply spiritual significance and the latter by an extroverted, superficial and material leaning. The former is ancient and sacred, while the latter is seen as modern, worldly and even diabolic. Religious institutions and persons even look down on media, such as TV and movies, as distractions inimical to spiritual study and practice (Karma Phuntsho, Center for Bhutan Studies, 2007, p20),

The conference in 2007 has debated how the media could incorporate Buddhist elements to protect Bhutan’s Buddhist heritage. What has happened in Bhutan is that the media exposure to most of the people has happened in a short space of time. The first newspaper was introduced 40 years ago and television only 20 years ago. Thus, how would it impact on the tradition-bound society like Bhutan?

“Mass media such as television, however, is a mixed blessing and cannot be seen one-sidedly as either good or bad” argues Phuntsho (Center for Bhutan Studies (2007, p29), pointing out as an example of the sudden impact, the case of grandmothers who postponed their evening prayers to watch the latest episode of an Indian soap opera on TV. “Such behavioural changes are however not the

most serious threat to Buddhist spirituality posed by mass media. They only indicate a deeper impact on people's psychology, which is more insidious and destructive than the felt effects on behaviour and lifestyle. Mass media is seen generally as materialistic and intended to flare people's desires and greed through endless advertisements, propaganda and other enticing programmes. It invigorates human vices such as craving, desire, and anger".

This is where the broadcast media in particular could come into conflict with the Government's GNH policies that sees contentment as essential to happiness. Former Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation (BBSC) journalist, Sonam Zangmo³⁰ says that the national television network understands its role to be the guardian and nurturer of preserving Bhutan's unique age-old traditions and Buddhist culture. "They do regular live telecasts of rare and sacred festivals so that people living in far-flung parts of the country, who cannot reach in person, can witness these. BBSC has a dedicated weekly Buddhist discussion program (that has) proven very popular and successful especially among senior citizens".

Penjor, who is a former Executive Director of Bhutan Media Foundation believes, that the broadcast media in particular need to connect more with young people in promoting Buddhist values and culture. "Media should change how messages are produced and communicated," he argues. "The traditional way of media messaging should change and instead focus on embedding the values through programs that young people could relate to. Right now, from what I understand, the mainstream media is disconnected from young people and the media's role in shaping the lives of young people is diminishing with the popularity and growth of social media".

Dorji Wangchuk, who is doing a Phd in Buddhist Communication, in a presentation at the 2018 Vajrayana Conference in Bhutan gave an encouraging account of how lamas in Bhutan and outside are using 'WeChat' to communicate with devotees in Bhutan. "We already have lots of lamas using WeChat to send mantras and teachings from other side of the globe and from different parts of Bhutan and India," he noted (Rinzin, 2018).

It is estimated that half of Bhutan's population use WeChat today and Wangchuk explained "there are people, who get Tara empowerment via WeChat from their Lama based in Sikkim, a WeChat group of about 200 members conduct a collective Jamyang Seldep prayer and report to the coordinator in the Wechat where they have recited over 13 million chants and there are Khenpos that bless people and recite mantras through the WeChat". He also pointed out that Bhutanese living abroad resort to WeChat while trying to appease the local deities like tsans and gyaps, who become wrathful if regular rituals are not performed. "WeChat helps us to come to terms with our spiritual and tradition demand besides keeping us connected with our family," he argues.

Karma Phuntsho (2018), who is a social-thinker and the President of the Loden Foundation, noted in an article in Kuensel how social media is impacting on Buddhist communication norms of the people. Pointing out slander, gossip and bad language used in social media communication, she argued that "reappropriating our timeless moral and ethical values regarding speech' need

³⁰ Email interview with author, June 2019.

to be considered. “As Buddhists, we are all very familiar with the concept of the ten negative actions and their counterparts, the ten positive actions. Many of us chant this in our daily prayers and strongly believe in achieving happiness by accumulating the positive actions and avoid suffering by eschewing the negative actions” she noted, but, the question is when you go on social media, do you practice it?

“Our spiritual tradition is still alive but strong cultural needs to be instituted in our people. If we want technology to keep reappearing in the use of our spiritual practices then these have to be supplemented with a strong cultural foundation,” argues Wangchuk (Rinzin, 2018) and he believes a Middle Path Journalism strategy is the need of the moment.

Wangchuk (2018, p138) defines Middle Path Journalism as anchored in values and vision. “Values are a set of principles or standards of human behaviour that determines one’s judgment and belief of what is important in life within one’s society. Vision, on the other hand, is the long-term stated goal of a nation that provides the strategic direction of what is to be achieved collectively – and as a nation”. He prescribes 4 dimensions of a Middle Path Journalism for Bhutan that is – Contentment (limiting greed and desire) , Community (working in the interest of the community), Compassion (avoiding extreme views and calling for justice) and Commitment (committed to the job and nation building).

Wangchuk³¹ says his middle path journalism idea has recently been included as required reading and a sub-topic in the university-level course offered by the Royal University of Bhutan. “It is a slow-cook approach that I am pursuing. I am not promoting it aggressively because it will take lots of efforts to bring any major paradigm shift”.

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³¹ Email interview with author, June 2019.

Chapter 5

India: Empowering Buddhist Communities In Its Homeland

Gautama Buddha spent almost his entire life in India preaching his dhamma to kings and paupers alike for 45 years. Yet, India's Buddhist population today is only 0.7 percent, numbering about 8.4 million Buddhists. Most of them are concentrated in Maharashtra and the Himalayan regions. The 2011 census indicated that 5.76 million (69 percent of Buddhists) belong to the scheduled caste – in other words, they are former low caste Hindus who have converted to Buddhism and are very poor.

Reflecting on the significance of the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh doing a 'boomi puja' (dedication of the soil) to proclaim the new city of Amravati on an ancient Buddhist site that was long forgotten by Indians, Jawahar Sircar (2015) noted:

So effectively had Buddhism been "forgotten" that very few people had even a proper idea of what had been its phenomenal contribution to art and architecture. Almost all the grandeur that existed in pre-Islamic India, like the mighty stupas at Sarnath and Sanchi or the ancient universities of Taxila and Nalanda had been lying covered under centuries of neglect or destruction, or both. The mighty stupas of yore had become ghostly ruins from which some would steal bricks for nearly a thousand years, between the reign of Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE to the death of Harsha Vardhana in 647 AD, Buddhism had ruled the minds of innumerable Indians. What happened during this dark interregnum of nearly twelve centuries, between Harsha Vardhana and Amaravati that Buddhism was forgotten, so vigorously?

After Nalanda was burned to the ground by marauding Turkish Muslim forces led by Bakhtiyar Khalji in the 12th century, and the Muslim armies marched across much of Northern India, for at least the next 800 years Buddhism went into decline in India. But, Head of the Department of Buddhist Studies at Delhi University, Professor K.T.S Sarao (2019, p229) argues that the writing was on the wall there much before and these are recorded in accounts of Chinese travelers Faxian (399-414 CE) and Xuanzang (629-645 CE) which indicates that Buddhism has become a spent force. "It seems to have fallen into a state of complete disarray and collapsed rather quickly and comprehensively towards the end of the twelfth century".



Ruins of Nalanda University

Hindu revivalist movements during this time were also influencing and absorbing whatever was left of Buddhism in India. Sarao (2019, p231-232) suggests that because Buddhism was "highly intellectual, elitist and urban", and

wary of those who lacked education and sophistication, Brahmanical-Hindu temples centered on agrarian settlements “grew into a dynamic and progressive force”. Thus, “the ascendancy of agrarian class and its alliance with Brahmins during the heydays of the Bhakti movement appeared to have tilted the scales against Buddhism”.

It was a British colonial administrator Alexander Cunningham, who became the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, who “discovered” many of the Buddhist sites of India today such as Sanchi, Bodhgaya, Nalanda and Ajanta, and he had to depend a lot on the testimony of Chinese pilgrims and their travel accounts of the Buddhist sacred places in India for the task of restoring the Buddhist heritage of India.

Because Buddhism survived and prospered outside India for centuries, India is today able to tap into their goodwill to rekindle the glory of Buddhism’s heydays in India, especially during and after the reign of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka.

In May 2017 giving the keynote address at the UN Day of Vesak in Colombo, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi praised Sri Lanka for preserving the purest teachings of Buddhism and its heritage. He acknowledged that after centuries it was a Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar, Anagarika Dharmapala, who revived the spirit of the Buddha in the land of its origin. “In some way, you took us back to our own roots. The world also owes a debt of gratitude to Sri Lanka for preserving some of the most important elements of Buddhist heritage,” he told the predominantly Buddhist audience in Colombo³².



Pilgrims at Bodhgaya

Every year millions of Buddhists from around the world visit India on pilgrimage to visit sacred places connected with the life of the Buddha such as Bodhgaya, Rajgir, Sarnath, Kushinagar and Sravasti. In recent years, the Indian government has started to aggressively promote Buddhist tourism to India to tap into the increasing number of Buddhist Asian travelers.

In 2018, during the Indian government-funded International Buddhist Tourism Conclave (which I attended), at a roundtable discussion chaired by the Union Minister for Tourism, a Buddhist delegate from Malaysia pointed out, that when you travel to Buddhist sites in Southeast Asia you will find a Buddhist community, a living Buddhist culture and festivals, India’s Buddhist pilgrim sites lack that attraction. He suggested that if India is to attract larger numbers of Buddhist tourists and pilgrims, the Buddhist sites need a living community of local Buddhists that adds value to one’s visit.

In this chapter, I will explore how Buddhists across India could be empowered

³² <http://www.ft.lk/top-story/magnanimous-modi/26-614700>

so that the land of the Buddha could have a living Buddhist culture in the form of thriving local Buddhist communities across India. During 2018 and 2019 I visited many Buddhist pilgrim sites such as Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Sanchi, Nalanda and Buddhist communities in Nagpur, Kolkata, Sikkim, Tripura and Manipur. I also spoke to Buddhist leaders from Chennai and Ladakh.

India's 'Soft Power' Potential

Despite the fact that it is host to a relatively small population of Buddhists in terms of proportion, India is in a position to claim legitimacy in its promotion of Buddhist diplomacy for a number of reasons. First, the Buddhist faith originated in India, therefore granting it singular historical legitimacy. Second, India has numerous sites of importance to the Buddhist faith, such as Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Nalanda. Third, India has nurtured an image of being a protector of the persecuted because of the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan parliament in exile in the city of Dharamshala following their 11 failed insurrections against China. In addition to ties with Tibetan Buddhism, historical links to Theravada Buddhism means that India is in a good position to further relations with other Buddhist countries and create a conversation between multiple streams of this faith (Shantanu Kishwar, 2018).

Though India is currently home to 7 of the 8 most significant Buddhist sites in the world, it receives less than 1 percent of global Buddhist tourism. Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand and Indonesia receive a lot more. India would have to use its soft power pitch with Buddhism to increase this traffic to India.



Buddhist Temple Caves of Ajantha

The present BJP government adopted the Panchamrit principles to guide its foreign policy, in actively promoting India's image as a rising global power. The fifth of these five principles is sanskriti evam sabhyata (cultural and civilisational links), which expresses the government's desire to leverage India's rich historical cultural links with other countries as a part of its non-coercive soft power

strategy. The promotion of Buddhist tourism reminiscent of the 'Incredible India' campaign is required to popularise India's association with the faith internationally (Kishwar, 2018).

Professor Daya Thussu, author of 'Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood' believes that India has a job on its hand to compete with China using Buddhism as a soft power path. In an interview with The Diplomat³³, he said: "China has the largest population of Buddhists in the world. You go to Shanghai

³³ <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/interview-indias-soft-power/>

or Beijing and look at their museums. How wonderfully they have kept all the amazing Buddhist art, paintings, etc. All this in a country where it was seriously undermined for many decades. Even today religion is not something they celebrate, but they've used Buddhism as part of their public diplomacy in Central, East and Southeast Asia. I have to say to Modi's credit that he did promote Buddhism. Wherever he went, in Japan or South Korea or China, he emphasized the Buddhist links that India has with these countries".

Bhikku Sanghasena, Founder President of Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre in Ladakh is optimistic that India and China will drive up the Buddhist communities across Asia in the 21st century. "Unfortunately Buddhism in many traditional Buddhist countries seem to be declining, but in these two countries Buddhism could grow," he said in an email interview³⁴ from Leh. He pointed out many recent initiatives he has been involved such as the Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre, Indian Buddhist Foundation, Himalayan Foundation and Mahakaruna Foundation that are working across borders to uplift Buddhist communities.

Bodhgaya: Do Foreign Funded Temples Constitute a Buddhist Community?

Bodhgaya to the Buddhists is like the Vatican to the Catholics and Mecca is to Muslims. According to Indian Government statistics³⁵ foreign tourists coming to Bodhgaya have increased from 30,161 in 2001 to 225,688 in 2014, while domestic tourists have increased from 175,980 in 2001 to 1,647,701 in 2014.



Mahabodhi Temple
at Bodhgaya

The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is the first temple built by Emperor Asoka in the 3rd century B.C., and the present temple dates from the 5th to 6th centuries. It is one of the earliest Buddhist temples built entirely in brick, still standing, from the late Gupta period and it is considered to have had significant influence in the development of brick architecture over the centuries. The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is the property of the State Government of Bihar. On the basis of the Bodh Gaya Temple Act of 1949, the State Government is responsible for the management and protection of the property through Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC) and Advisory Board³⁶.

On 26th June 2002, UNESCO declared Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya as a World Heritage Site³⁷. The revival of Buddhism in India is synonymous with the revival of the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya through the untiring effort of

Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka. When he visited Bodhgaya in 1891 he found an extremely neglected Mahabodhi Temple. He founded the Mahabodhi Society there with the purpose of making this a pilgrim center as well as the center to spread Buddhism in India.

³⁴ Email interview with author, December 2019.

³⁵ http://www.bihartourism.gov.in/data/Tourist_Data/2010%20&%202011&2012.pdf

³⁶ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1056/>

³⁷ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/156/>

A wandering Hindu ascetic, Mahant Gosain Giri, has taken control of the temple and its environments in 1590 CE, and thereafter the Buddhist shrine has passed into the hands of successive Mahants, who have used it for Hindu rituals. In 1906 the Mahant has filed a lawsuit to eject Buddhists from Mahabodhi Temple that lasted until the BTMC was created in 1949 (Sinha, 2016)

The BTMC set up under the Bodh Gaya Temple Act of 1949 has created controversy ever since, because it constitutes 4 Buddhist and 4 Hindu members and the governor of the state as its 9th member who is usually a Brahmin Hindu. In the last 2 decades, Buddhists have intensified their campaign for the amendment of the Act to include only Buddhists in the management committee.

“For so many years we have pointed out that there is no Hindu temple Buddhists are members of the management committee. No Church management that Muslims are members. Bodhgaya management committee why Hindus are a majority? We have asked PM Modi to abolish the BG management act and hand over Mahabodhi temple to Buddhists of the world” said Ms Sulekha Kumbhare³⁸, National Minorities Commission member representing Buddhists.

Meanwhile, Nagpur based Buddhist lawyer, Shailesh Narnawarere³⁹ has filed a public litigation case in Bihar courts as a minority rights issue to overturn the BTMC act and hand over the management to Buddhists. It was due for its first hearing in January 2020.

Kumbhare says that if the Act is going to be amended in favour of the Buddhists, it is only Modi that can do it. “Then Buddhists can say that Modi has done something for the Buddhists”.

I spent a week in Bodhgaya in January 2019 and found many issues that are worrying Buddhists. A local Buddhist lawyer complained that many of the monks who flock to the Mahabodhi shrine are “professional beggars”. Another local Buddhist complained that the small Dalit Buddhist community there does not get much help from the numerous Buddhist temples that surround the Mahabodhi complex. The question of whether these temples constitute a local Buddhist community is questionable if they are not closely knit to the local community and are there only to serve pilgrims from their home country (see article below). During my stay, a three-day annual Buddhist festival ‘Buddha Mahotsava’ took place, which was filled with mainly musical and cultural events organised in the style of an Indian ‘mela’. Several cultural groups from Buddhist countries in Asia performed there, and the festival ground was filled with locals each night, who came with their families. An important part I found missing, compared to such festivals in Sri Lanka or Southeast Asia was the local element – performances by local artists reflecting indigenous Buddhist cultural material. The simple fact is, there is no local Buddhist community there to do it.

Another disturbing aspect of Mahabodhi Temple’s environment was the loud call to prayer that goes out 5 times a day from a new mosque set up a few years ago at a stone’s throw from the Buddhist shrine. It disturbs the serenity and the Buddhist atmosphere of the Mahabodhi Temple. It will be interesting to find out

³⁸ Interview with author at her office in New Delhi, December 2019.

³⁹ Interview with author in Nagpur, December 2019.

how the Muslims got the approval to set up a mosque at such close quarters to Mahabodhi Temple and why they need to use loudspeakers to beam the call to prayer. Isn't it disrespect to a holy site of another religion? Did BTMC have any say in the approval process to build the mosque?

India's Attempt To Promote 'Buddhist Tourism' Handicapped By Lack Of Community

Lotus News Feature by Kalinga Seneviratne

Bodhgaya: In recent years the Indian government has been promoting the concept of a 'Buddhist Tourism Circuit' (BTC) with Bodhgaya – the site of the Buddha's enlightenment under a Bo-Tree – as the centerpiece of it. Yet, with less than 1 percent of India's population Buddhist today, the lack of Buddhist communities around the Buddhist sites being promoted hinders the promotional pitch, with Bodhgaya a good example.

Nangzey Dorjee, Secretary, Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC) disagrees with that view. "How can you say there are no Buddhists here?" he asked Lotus News when this question was posed to him. "There are so many Buddhist temples here. There are so many Buddhists staying or working with these temples. Taking all these as a whole, there is definitely a Buddhist community here" he argues.

Bodhgaya in fact has a vibrant Buddhist community with scores of grand and sometimes colourful Buddhist temples representing different Buddhist countries from across Asia, surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple which hosts the Bodhi tree. However, none of these represents what one would describe as 'Indian Buddhism'.

"Bodhgaya has so many monks, beautiful big temples that are well maintained, but the monks don't know Hindi (local language) nor sometimes English. So their effect on the local community is nil," complained Venerable Pragyadeep Mahathera, general secretary of the All India Bhikkhu Sangha in an interview with Lotus News. "Local community takes advantage of their charity, they see the monks (in foreign-owned temples) as only charity giving. They don't teach the dhamma (Buddhist philosophy)".

To create a vibrant Buddhist cultural life here, the Bihar state government organized a 3-day Buddhist cultural festival here at the end of January known as 'Bodh Mahotsav' in the style of an Indian mela (community festival). It was well attended by the local community, but most of the Buddhist cultural performances were done by artists brought over from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia, as well as from traditional Indian Buddhist communities in the Himalayas.

"In Bodhgaya you see there are monasteries from every part of the globe here. But I have seen working with TTV that even a Buddhist don't help a Buddhist here. They have got a very different kind of framework," laments Akil Sindhu founder of Tatagatha TV (TTV), who covered the festival. "If someone comes from an X country and wants to do a Buddhist ceremony, they will do so among themselves in India. They will not invite or entertain people from India. Because they think people from India are beggars. They are everywhere asking for money. (Unfortunately) this type of practice here has defined the native side of Buddhism here".



Monks and meditating devotees at Bodhgaya

A local Buddhist, Kali Prasad Boudh told Lotus News that there is a small community of about 15 Buddhists in Siddhartha Nagar, just about a kilometer from the Mahabodhi temple, but they don't get much help from the temples. "The temples here don't try to empower the local Buddhists (who are very poor coming from former Dalit – Hindu low caste – backgrounds)" he says. "They work closely with the BTMC, who in turn work closely with the Bihar (state) government".

Mahabodhi Temple, which was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2002, attracts about 4 million tourists (both domestic and international) annually. At least half of them would be Buddhist pilgrims that arrive with a charitable mindset. This has led to locals exploiting them and any visitor coming here during the Buddhist pilgrim seasons would find hundreds of Buddhist "monks" and NGO charities virtually begging for money in and outside the temple.

One local Buddhist told Lotus News that most of the monks you find with begging bowls and doing Buddhist chantings are fake monks. They will put yellow robes for Bodhgaya, and then change to white robes and go to Mahayana Buddhist pilgrim sites or festivals in other parts of India to beg. "They are professional beggars," he said, adding, "temple management has to do something to stop these people giving a bad image to this sacred place".

In November, it was reported in the local media that several fake child monks were apprehended inside the Mahabodhi temple by a regular monk and handed over to the police. Once inside the shrine, they were reported to have duped gullible Buddhist pilgrims from abroad to seek donations, and also stolen wallets and other valuables of the visitors.

Dorjee says that it is difficult to differentiate between a fake monk and a real one. "Mahabodhi temple is a public place, not a private place. Anybody can come here. As Buddhists we can't say only Buddhists can come here. (But) if one does a crime we can debar them" he says. He even argues that the fact Bodhgaya is attracting such a large number of poor people to earn a livelihood from begging shows that the temple is "influencing this whole area with Buddhist culture". He sees a solution to the begging problem as providing an education to the poor so that they don't continue to live in poverty.

When asked whether BTMC could initiate a foundation to channel large donations they receive from pilgrims into such activities, he said it is a good suggestion, but the temple also needs large funds to maintain the place. "Because of this temple so many are benefiting that is the charity part of it" he argues.

Venerable Seevali, general secretary of the Mahabodhi Society of India argues that if a thriving Indian Buddhist community is to be developed in Bodhgaya, the government needs to establish a scheme to improve the economy of the poor. "The government can (then) ask pilgrims to donate to these projects," he suggests. "There are no such schemes at present. The pilgrims come here, often using their life savings. It is not their duty to alleviate these peoples' poverty".



Foreign Pilgrims feeding the beggars

Mahabodhi Society runs a school here educating the local community. But Ven Pragyadeep Mahathera is critical of this school pointing out that most of its students are Hindus and Muslims from the local community. "Mahabodhi is not teaching Buddhism in the school," he says. "They need to teach Dhamma at a very low level to the local population to develop a Buddhist community here".

Ven Seevali agrees that the Mahabodhi school is not a Buddhist school. "Mahabodhi Society is not here to convert Hindus and Muslims (to Buddhism). We are not evangelists. We are helping to educate the community. (In Buddhism) practicing compassion and loving-kindness is not only towards the Buddhists," he told Lotus News.

The local NGO run Sujata School near Sujata Shrine here - where a young maiden gave a bowl of milk rice to Prince Siddhartha to break his spell of extreme asceticism and propelled him to find the 'middle path' - is an example of how Buddhist tourism is helping the local community. The school, which educates 220 poor students from villages in the area, 150 of them live on-site,

survives on donations they get from Buddhist visitors to the shrine close by. They have foot soldiers, who chat up tourists and lobby aggressively for donations. They have survived for 8 years so far, with some of the boarded students coming as far as 50 km away.

Helping the poor of any background without the hidden motive to proselytize may be a good Buddhist tradition. But, local Buddhist Kali Boudh argues that BTMC's control of all the Buddhist temples in Bodhgaya needs to be lifted if a local Buddhist community is to prosper. "(BTMC) does not allow these temples to go outside and promote Buddhism. That is why a Buddhist community is not developing here," he argues.

* This article was transmitted by IDN-INPS news agency on 3 March 2019⁴⁰

Nalanda: Rekindling Old Glory

According to the Buddha's sermon Kevatta Sutta, during his time Nalanda was already an influential and prosperous town, thickly populated. Later, it became a famous monastic center of learning when Buddhism was at its peak in India. The Nalanda Mahavihara is believed to be a forerunner to the university education system we know of today. It flourished as a university between 45 to 1100 CE – for over 10 centuries - when Nalanda enriched and disseminated Indian culture, and especially Buddhism across Asia.

From what we see in the ruins of Nalanda today are a series of 11 monasteries and 5 temples lined up on either side of a stone-paved pathway. It was originally built by Emperor Ashoka, but 7 times rebuilt since. The university of Nalanda had around 15,000 monks with around 1500 of them teachers, when in 1205 CE the marauding troops of the Moghul Muslim invaders put to the sword over 3000 monks and burned its buildings and libraries... a fire which is said to have burned for 6 long



Ruins of the library of the ancient Nalanda University

months. A large collection of precious manuscripts was lost forever. Today we are able to recollect the glory of Nalanda thanks mainly to the work of a great Chinese scholar-monk, Xuanzang, who spent 12 years at Nalanda – both as a student and a teacher - in the 7th century CE. He has written vivid memories of his time there. He returned to China with 657 volumes of sacred texts and spent his final years translating these and instructing fellow monks. As explained in chapter 1, it was his work that helped to spread Buddhism in East Asia. As former Vice-Chancellor of Nava Nalanda Mahavihara (University) Dr Ravindra Panth⁴¹ recalls:

We find from the records of Master Xuanzang about the grandeur of this wonderful university, a center of learning. As per his record 10,000

⁴⁰ <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/the-world/asia-pacific/2530-india-s-bid-to-promote-buddhist-tourism-encounters-hurdles>

⁴¹ Interview given to author in 2008 for the documentary 'Path of the Dhamma: Pilgrims in the Homeland' – see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BsJ6wTb4po&t=1339s>

monks were studying here. And the place was in such harmony the record says that actual site is almost 16 square kilometers, but what we have now is 1.6 square km...so you know a lot of Nalanda is yet to be found.....Xuanzang we can say he worked as an archeologist because you know he helped us in finding out the ancient Nalanda University. Because if the records weren't there, we would not have known the university as it is known today.

In 1951, the first President of the Republic of India Dr Rajendra Prasad declared that the ancient seat of Buddhist learning at Nalanda will be revived to regain the lost glory and the heritage of the Nalanda Mahavihare. Thus, Nava Nalanda Mahavihare (NNM) university was set up, funded by the Ministry of Culture. Since then it has slowly but gradually developed into a modern seat of learning, but reflecting the ancient Mahavihare principles. The library of the NNM store rare Buddhist manuscripts donated by Buddhist countries across Asia, including volumes of the Tripitaka in different languages. It educates many young monks, particularly from Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. There is a student population of over 1000 and it has 9 Departments and offers certificate, diploma and higher degree courses that include Pali, Philosophy, Ancient History Culture & Archaeology, Tibetan Studies and Buddhist Studies.



Nava Nalanda Mahavihare University

Since NNM is funded via the Ministry of Culture of the government of India, the then Vice-Chancellor Dr Pandt told me in 2013 that they are focusing on developing a strong arts and cultural studies program. “We are trying to explore the possibility of developing a Nalanda School of Art,” he said. “Since we are in the heart of Nalanda, we are focusing on archeological evidences, explorations and excavation to find many sights referred in Tripitaka. We have started a project to identify all those things based on Xuanzang travelogue.”

A ‘Bihar to Vihar’ project based on the Engaged Buddhism concept is hoping to tap into the increasing Buddhist tourism circuit, by developing a sense of ownership of one’s heritage, and serve it as a livelihood opportunity to local communities, as close to a million tourists visit Nalanda each year. During my visit to Nalanda in 2019, I was told that they are planning to introduce Buddhist studies and tourism diploma program in 2020.

Meanwhile, the new Nalanda University project that was initiated by Nobel laureate Dr Amartya Sen around 2008 has been dogged with controversy and confused the world about reviving the ancient seat of learning at Nalanda, since NNM already exists and there has been no attempt to merge this university with the new one. The East Asia Summit(EAS) adopted the idea of reviving the ancient Buddhist institution of Nalanda in October 2009 at their summit in Hua Hin, Thailand, as a symbol of an Asian renaissance. The Indian government has signed 17 MoUs with member states of the EAS.

Questions have been asked about the non-transparent way Dr Sen's hand-picked Mentor Group was operating, and the fact that the Asian Buddhist community was virtually kept out of the planning process. No established Buddhist universities across Asia were brought in as partners. Thus, after the Modi government came to power Dr Sen and his Mentor Group were moved out, a new administration under a new Vice-Chancellor Prof Sunaina Singh, a professor of comparative literature and culture, took over in May 2017.

Nalanda indeed was a pioneer of what is today called internationalization of education. "The mandate of Nalanda University is to promote regional peace and harmony," said Prof Singh in an interview with me at her temporary offices in Rajgir in January 2019. They were planning to move into a brand new campus in July. "We recently held a roundtable with China here at Nalanda and a lot of scholars and government officials from China were there. So Nalanda carries the responsibilities of its mandate very gracefully forward."

She acknowledges that it is still a work in progress. "When you are trying to set up a university with that kind of resonance and reputation, naturally matching the ancient glory of Nalanda will take time," she said, adding "We are not facing barriers but challenges, I would say."

With PM Modi's project to build bridges with countries to the East of India using India's Buddhist soft power potential, and since the new Nalanda University is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prof Singh said that the government has announced 30 scholarships for students from the seven-member states of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) that links India with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal and Bhutan. A special programme for 'Bay of Bengal Studies' will be established. "So there is a collaborative endeavour and it is already in the platform. We are moving forward," she added.

In the coming years, it will be interesting to see how NNM's focus on developing Buddhist arts-based local communities and also teaching the traditional Buddhist learning in Pali, Tibetan studies and philosophy could merge with the new university's focus on providing a secular education, based on adopting Buddhist philosophy, to the teaching of environmental sciences, community-based health and medicines, communications and even IT and artificial intelligence will work out.

Sarnath: Site Of Buddha's First Sermon

Sarnath is located about 12 km from the Hindu holy city of Benares on the banks of the Ganges river. This area was an important location in ancient times where holy men lived. After attaining enlightenment in Bodhgaya, Buddha visited Sarnath to meet his old fellow ascetics and explain to them

his newfound wisdom. He gave his first sermon here to five of his companion seekers of the truth.



Chanting of 'Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta' at Issipatana Temple

In 389 BCE, Emperor Ashoka has visited Sarnath where he built many stupas among them the Dhamekha stupa. At the adjoining ancient temple of Issipatha each night his first sermon 'Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta' is chanted by monks of the adjoining Mahabodhi temple, who also run a school here that has over 500 students, who are mainly Muslim and Hindu, because no local Buddhist community has been developed here.

Ashoka's Pillar and its famous lion capital was discovered here in 1904, is now housed in the museum. It is the emblem of the modern Republic of India. There are also many Buddhist monasteries and meditation centers run by foreign Buddhist establishments mainly catering to pilgrims and foreigners keen to learn Buddhism. There does not seem to be any attempt to develop a local Buddhist community.

About 2 km from the main pilgrim site is the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) which is a 'Deemed University'⁴² like the NNM at Nalanda. The University was established in 1967, on the joint initiative of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The objective was to take care of the cultural and educational needs of the youth among the Tibetan diaspora in India, and those of the Himalayan regions of India, who earlier had the opportunity of being educated in Tibet. This came to be discontinued in the wake of the Chinese occupation. But later, the university blossomed into a center of excellence in researches on Tibetology, restoration of texts, and imparting the knowledge of the four Sampradayas of Buddhism in Tibet along with ancient and indigenous Bon religion.

The university draws students from Tibetan communities in India, and especially the Himalayan regions, from the northwest to the northeast. The university is residential, and the students can have access to their teachers as and when they may be in need of it (CIHTS website)⁴³.

The university has 12 departments that include:

- Department of Mool Shastra – to preserve and promote Buddhist philosophy as propounded by the Buddhist scholars of Nalanda,
- Department of Bon Sampradaya Shastra - Bon is the ancient autochthonous pre-Buddhist religious tradition of Tibet, still practiced today by many Tibetans in Tibet and in India.

⁴² Deemed university, or deemed-to-be-university, is an accreditation awarded to higher educational institutions in India, conferring the status of a university. It is granted by the Department of Higher Education (Wikipedia)

⁴³ <http://www.cuts.ac.in/index.php?url=content/ab1vcd>

- Department of Sowa Riga - to preserve the Tibetan art of healing and promote/contribute better health care of the society
- Department of Bhot Jyostish Vidya - to preserve and promote the Tibetan tradition of Astrology, and conduct research in this field to enrich the science.

In an interview at his office in Sarnath, Venerable Professor Geshe Ngawang Samten, Vice-Chancellor of CIHTS acknowledged that communication is very important to teaching the ancient wisdom emanating from Buddhism (see box below). He argues that as people have different capabilities and in teaching of Buddhism certain values have to be followed or conveyed, communication plays a great role in both teaching and practice. He also expressed concern that Buddhist universities do not give much emphasis to teaching communication courses and expressed interest in introducing a mindful communication course.

What Should Concern Buddhist Educators
Interview with Ven Prof Geshe Ngawang Samten⁴⁴

Q: Are Buddhist communities not communicating well with each other?

A: Buddhism is making a very good contribution worldwide in different ways in science and other disciplines. Also in western philosophy, business and administration, it is making a very substantial contribution. But within Buddhism, we need to have a system of communication at different levels. To be a Buddhist there has to be knowledge of the teachings of the Buddha, everyone cannot be expected to have this knowledge at degree level. Very common people need to have a basic understanding of Buddha's teachings. They have to be inculcated with Buddhist values. For example, dana and sila, are fundamental values to live with the right attitude. As a Buddhist, you have to abide by those values according to the different capabilities of people. Communications should be based on Buddha's teachings and practice.

Q: Within Buddhist traditions in Asia, do you think that there is a lot of emphasis on rituals?

A: Buddhism is not at all a ritualistic religion. It is always on realization; it is always on transformation. Those rituals, some are part of the culture, which are at the peripheral level, not core elements. Our practice should not be looked at as a ritualistic religion. Buddha has never emphasized rituals. In course of time, there are certain things that ought to be done such as the ordination of Bhikkhus and Samaneras. Those are a process of receiving those vows, and ordinations cannot be said as a mere ritual. Many cultural developments turned into rituals, but these are supposed to be instrumental in bringing transformations and teachings. Disseminating genuine teachings of Buddhism and lead people to inculcate those values should be the issue. That is where communication comes in.

Q: Many people, especially in Theravada tradition, go to the temple and take 'panchasila' but, because it is in Pali, they do not know what it is. Should we change tradition?

A: Simply chanting is not sufficient, you must let others know about what these are. For example, when you take 'panchasila' you say 'athinadhana' without being given the meaning (in your language) that if something is taken away it is 'athinadana ...'. Through (Pali) chanting if we tell people don't steal, we need to make them understand what the consequences are - mental consequences, physical consequences, cultural consequences, environmental consequences. The youngsters are quite knowledgeable and smart they can pick it up... this is bad to take somebody's wealth without being given, spiritually it leads to a much deeper meaning of changing your personality, moral values, which makes sense.

Just to tell don't tell lies doesn't make sense, but why you should not do it and what are the impacts are important. Through realizing the very core element of the message once they accept

⁴⁴ Interview recorded with author in Sarnath in December 2019.

it we don't need to remind them. ... then they try to internalize, then transformation is much deeper and once transformation takes place and is done half of the work from our side is done.

Q: : Is the monastic system effective enough (as a communication medium) to take Buddhism to the next generation?

A: When we talk about monastic life, monastics have communication with outside people and also within the monastery, we have to bring up young generations. Outside monastery youngsters are more inquisitive than earlier generations. So they could pick up, if we can communicate with them skillfully, meaningfully with compassionate motivation, then there is no problem.

Q: There is a perception that people who are attracted to monastic life are not good caliber today?

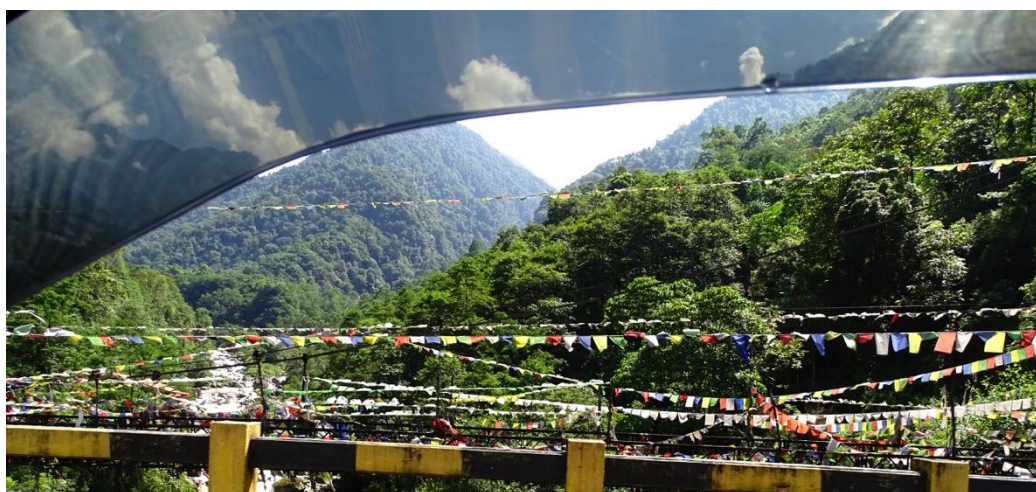
A: It may be true in some communities. But international level those who want to become monks, they have gone through different aspects of life and are finally choosing this life. They are very dedicated to bring transformation within themselves. Dedicated to practicing through understanding. In Buddhism, unless you study one can't practice, and lead the practice to higher levels. That is why steady contemplation and meditation are applicable to one's life.

Q: Tibetan community in India is very scattered. Do you have a communication network to keep them connected?

A: We are very much organized in that sense. Administratively every local community has a body that communicates with Dharmasala. Academically major monasteries are all linked together. They are not isolated (but) strongly tied up with each other

Sikkim: Living Buddhist Communities

Bayul Demojong, which is presently known as Sikkim, is the most Sacred Land in the Himalayas as per the belief of the Northern Buddhists. When you enter Sikkim (usually driving from North Bengal) you will immediately notice the presence of Buddhism there with colourful flags all over and street passes lined with white flags. You also often see colourful Buddhist monasteries perched on mountain slopes. Though Sikkim used to be an independent Buddhist Kingdom, now as an Indian State it is no more a Buddhist majority state (see news story below).



A car window view in Sikkim

The spiritual description of this land has been made in various religious texts such as 'Dejong Ney-yig' the volume of Text, which contains many secret notes about the places of worship, lakes, streams as well as the instructions to follow while making entry into this land. It is mentioned that Lord Avalokiteshvara, God Indra and Five Sublime Incarnates (hPhags-pa sPrul-pa Mi- Nga) showered their blessings to this Hidden Land in time immemorial in the past. Particularly, in the 8th century CE, Guru Padmasambhava paid a visit to this land during his quest for hidden land around Tibet and included it in the list of "Four Great Hidden Lands" which are significantly located in four cardinal directions of Tibet. He consecrated this land by means of concealing sacred objects in its caves, rocks and in the sacred lakes. At the same time, he subdued all the dreadful spirits of this land and appointed them as Guardian of the hidden treasures.⁴⁵*

The Buddhist Kingdom of Sikkim

Guru Padmasambhava (known as Guru Rinpoche), who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan before proceeding to Tibet where he spent over 50 years, is also credited with having introduced Buddhism to Sikkim around the same time as in Bhutan. Thus, some Sikkim Buddhist leaders pointed out to me that Buddhism in Sikkim pre-dates Tibetan Buddhism and it is not correct to say that Sikkim Buddhists follow Tibetan Buddhism. However, according to historians Buddhism was formally established in Sikkim in the 17th century CE.

"History and scholars claim 880 CE was when Buddhism came here. There had been many native Buddhist practices here before that. Buddhists used to meditate when they climb mountains. They were masters in controlling their mind," says Venerable Yapo Sonam Yongda⁴⁶, Head of the Pemayangtse monastery.

Guru Rinpoche, who historians claim brought Buddhism to Sikkim in the 8th century, was a teacher at the Nalanda University, and was well versed in Tantricism, an amalgam of Buddhism with ancient beliefs and nature worship, then current in India. The school of Buddhism that is prevalent in Sikkim is usually called Vajrayana – mainly of Nyingma and Kagyu order – that accepts and studies all aspects of Buddhism according to the traditions of great Buddhists universities like Nalanda.

The Guru Padmasambhava, whose fame as a teacher had spread across the Himalayas into Tibet, when he arrived at Samye around the year 747 CE, and through conversions, established the first community of the lamas. He also assisted King Thi-Strong De-Tsang in building the first monastery at Samye. Prior to the incursions of Buddhism, the original religion of the Lepchas and the Bhutias (indigenous people of the region) was a form of nature worship, variously referred to as *Pon* (also spelt as *Bon*) or Shamanism. It was a mixture

⁴⁵ Official website of the Government of Sikkim - <https://sikkim.gov.in/departments/ecclesiastical-affairs-department/history-of-buddhism-in-sikkim>

⁴⁶ Interview with author at Pemayangtse monastery in September 2019.

of witchcraft and sorcery with the worship of spirits and ghosts. Even though the Lepcha people converted to Buddhism in the 18th century, the indigenous Lepcha shamans manage to co-exist with Buddhist customs and beliefs. Both Buddhist lamas and Lepcha shamans preside at many important ceremonies in Lepcha life, each to perform their individual rituals (Raj, 2015).

Buddhism, which firmly established itself in Sikkim in the 17th century, initially absorbed the cult of ancestral gods and local deities which eventually became central to the performance of rituals that are currently held by both village lamas and shamans. At this time, Sikkim was indeed a kingdom where Buddhism became shamanic and shamanism became Buddhist. The kingdom was created in 1642 by three visionary Nyingma lamas who established both a new political structure, and, to some extent, a new religious order. Together, the three lamas founded the kingdom and the king rules in accordance with the dhamma, thus entrusting him with both temporal and spiritual powers (Kapur, 2016).

Venerable Yapo explained that the Bhutanese Buddhist kingdom began to crumble when the British wanted to build a road across Sikkim to Tibet and under advice from the Dalai Lama the King refused. The British jailed Sikkim leaders and using a landlord system that undermined the monasteries built the road. The 10th and 11th kings of Sikkim were born in prison, and later kings lived in house arrest within the palace. This continued until after Indian independence in 1949. Sikkim was an independent Buddhist kingdom again until India annexed the kingdom in 1973 initially as a protectorate and later as a State of India. Since then, while being part of the Indian Union, Sikkim has enjoyed certain privileges to protect Buddhism but the number of Buddhists has dropped dramatically and makes up only about 27 percent of the state's population now with the Chief Minister being a Hindu of Nepali origin (see story below).

After Kashmir Sikkim Buddhists Fear Losing Their Special Constitutional Rights

Lotus News Feature By Kalinga Seneviratne

GANGTOK: Since the special status accorded under section 370 in the Indian constitution to Jammu and Kashmir was abrogated by the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on August 5, 2019, there has been a sense of unease among the people of the northern Indian state of Sikkim – which also enjoys special status under Section 371F enshrined in the Indian constitution. This unease is felt mainly by the Buddhists, who feel that the special protections given to them could be taken away.

While the plight of Buddhism in Tibet under Chinese rule since 1956 has been widely reported, the steady decline of



Baby Lamas at a monastery in Sikkim

Buddhism in Sikkim since India annexed the former Buddhist Kingdom in 1975 is hardly known to outsiders. Both India and China have embarked on a soft power battle over the ownership of Buddhism in recent years, and what happens in Sikkim in the coming years would be crucial for India's attempt to project itself as the home of the Buddha.

Sikkim shares a long border with Tibet, and foreigners have to obtain a 'restricted area permit' from Sikkim Government tourism authorities at the state border posts to enter Sikkim. The state is scattered with Indian army bases and some areas near the border with Tibet in northern Sikkim are "no go" areas for foreigners. Due to its vicinity to Tibet, Mahayana Buddhism practiced here is heavily influenced by Tibetan culture. Yet, Sikkimese – especially its indigenous Bhutia people – feel that they have a unique form of Buddhism here, which they are determined to preserve.

When Buddhism traveled from the ancient Nalanda University to Tibet it went through the caravan convoys that passed through the mountains of Sikkim. Thus, Buddhism here predates that in Tibet. "Many are the sacred places of Sikkim that bear witness, to this day, to the sojourn of the blessed Padma Sambhava, messenger and carrier of the faith from its birthplace in India to the remotest fastnesses of Tibet," said King Palden Thondup Namgyal in an address at the stone-laying ceremony for the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) in 1957.

"Since 1604 we have had a 'spiritual democracy' headed by a Buddhist King, who was considered a reincarnation of a bodhisattva," Venerable Yapo Sonam Yongda, head of the Pemayangtse monastery explained to Lotus News.

Under article 371F, the Governor of Sikkim has special responsibility for providing "an equitable arrangement for ensuring the social and economic advancement of different sections of the population of Sikkim".

"In 1947 Maharaja Hari Singh signed the instrument of accession and Kashmir became part of new India. In Sikkim, our Dharmaraja (King) hasn't signed any instrument of accession (during annexation in 1975)," Tseten Tashi Bhutia, Buddhist community leader and Former Minister of Sikkim State Government told Lotus News, adding, "spirit of this exists in article 371F".

But, he lamented that "since 1975 there has been an influx of outsiders and 99 percent of them are not Buddhists". In addition, Christian evangelical groups have been targeting poor indigenous Buddhist communities. "The whole demography has been changed and it is threatening the existence of Buddhism in Sikkim," he maintained.

According to the 2011 census, Buddhists constitute only 27 percent of the state's population. Of the 32 seats in Sikkim's state legislature, 12 are reserved for indigenous Bhutias and Lepchas, most of whom are Buddhists. One 'sangha seat' is reserved for monks and only registered lamas are allowed to vote for this seat. "Nowhere in India is there a seat reserved in the state assembly in the name of community or religion," concedes Bhutia.

Tashi Densapa, Director, NIT, in an interview with Lotus News argued that section 371F has helped to preserve Sikkim's Buddhist identity like when it was a Buddhist kingdom "even though Buddhists are no more the majority" in Sikkim. His institute, which has an extensive library of ancient Tibetan Buddhist texts is only 1 of 3 such institutes in the world and it is financially supported by the government.

"This is the only Indian state that has a department of religious affairs. Also having a monk as a representative in the legislative assembly allows old practices of Sikkim Buddhism to prevail. If 371F is abrogated, then we are finished," he added.

The Buddhists are mainly made up of the indigenous communities, but the current Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang is a non-Buddhist Nepali. Though the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – since 2018, India's largest political party – is not represented in Sikkim parliament, the new state government elected in April 2019, supports the BJP government in Delhi. Thus, Tamang told the Buddhist community in August 2019 that he has submitted a request to the Union

government (in New Delhi) to help preserve section 371F and welcomed Union Home Minister Amit Shah's statement assuring it.

Through provisions in the 371F Act, Buddhists have received funding from the Union government to build new monasteries and maintain some of the old monasteries and institutions. Yet, Dr Jigme Wangchuck, a young Bhutia monk with a Phd from Visva Bharati University argues that the influx of non-Buddhists since the 1975 annexation has diluted the essence of Sikkim Buddhism.

"External appearance of monasteries is impressive, but the essence (of the practice) is lost because it is mixed with other religions" he laments. "Pemayangtse monastery was the royal monastery performing most of the ceremonies for the King. Now it has lost its influence".

On August 21, 2019, the Home Ministry in a bid to boost tourism announced that 137 Himalayan Mountain peaks will be opened for climbers as long as they got a permit from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF). The list includes the world's third tallest mountain 8,589 meters tall Mount Khangchendzonga in Sikkim. Buddhists here are enraged as they consider the mountain very sacred. Dr Jigme is organizing a signature campaign to send a protest to the Union government.

The Hindus have also expressed solidarity with the Buddhists with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's Sikkim unit claiming it is also sacred to Hindus and opening it for climbers is an insult to the religious sentiments of the people of Sikkim. IMF has said that they will not issue permits to climb Mount Khangchendzonga.

UNESCO in 2014 recognised a part of West Sikkim (where Pemayangtse monastery is located) as world heritage site under culture and nature category. "There is a Mahayana Buddhist culture here, our holy lakes, mountains, rocks, monasteries are protected under Indian government places of worship act," says Bhutia.

"UNESCO has recognized the connection between culture and nature. But, the government is constructing hydro projects and tunnels in these world heritage sites. Water is diverted from holy rivers. Our heritage is being attacked and politicians are silent."

Buddhists point out that though there are 12 seats reserved for them under 371F, the candidates are Buddhists, but they are not elected by the Buddhist constituents. "Buddhists are scattered all over the constituencies. Out of the 12 seats, 9 are dependent on general voters. We don't have the power anymore to elect our own representatives," says Ven Yato. "We are now developing a strategy for selecting genuine Buddhist representatives for these seats."

Meanwhile, the government is eager for Sikkim to join the Union government's Buddhist tourism promotion and the tourism authorities are funding monasteries to build homestay facilities. A multi-million dollar Buddha Park with a huge Buddha statue has recently been opened in South Sikkim.

"We have not only monuments and monasteries, but living Buddhist communities and cultures," an official with the Sikkim Tourism and Aviation Department told Lotus News. "They could experience a culture than just looking at monuments. Unfortunately (for us) Buddha has not visited Sikkim." Perhaps this is also what is keeping Sikkim out of the radar of the international media.

* The story was transmitted on IDN-INPS news agency feed on 04 September 2019



Paintings on monastery wall

Importance of the Monastery

Sikkim's has over 200 monasteries - 'Gompas' as it is called here - belonging to the Nyingma and Kagyu order. These reflect the rich cultural heritage and lifestyle of the people, as well as locations for colourful ancient rituals and festivals. In many Gompas, you can see small lamas dressed in maroon robes either studying or even playing football. Especially, if you visit in the mornings one could see both young and old lamas chant ancient mantras accompanied by drums and trumpets. The walls of monasteries are adorned by colourful drawings and frescoes of Buddhist legends, rare silk brocade Thangkas. While roofs and entrances have carved woodwork, inside you could also find ancient manuscripts.

There are six premier monasteries in Sikkim, namely Pemayangtse, Tashiding and Phensang for the Nyingmapa, and Rumtek (not to be confused with the Karmapa's Dharma Chakra Centre also located at Rumtek), Ralang and Phodong for the Kagyupa. The premier monastery is Pemayangtse as it was responsible for the royal duties, when Buddhism was being firmly established in Sikkim.



The author with Venerable Yapo Sonam Yongda at Pemayangtse monastery

During a visit to Pemayangtse monastery, its chief monk Venerable Yapo explained the traditions of the monastic system in Sikkim, which is very unique. They have 80 monks currently, though the monastery can accommodate 300. The monks can marry, but their families live outside. Monks can also work but need to choose work that won't harm others – work as carpenters, painters, construction, etc - they get paid like others.

“When there are big prayer ceremonies, families and even lay people can come and stay here for the duration. Sometimes, both husband and wife are practitioners. His wife is a nun but not a celebrant. Don't take celibacy vows. They bring children along to temple and introduce practices” explained Ven Yapo. “Before 1913 all monks were celebrant. Women were not allowed to stay in the temple. Our 9th ruler returned from Cambridge and saw outside people now were a majority. So allowed monks to marry. Arms begging was stopped. Family helps”.

The monastery provides many services to the community, among these is a school that educates about 180 Buddhist students from the area. The school has been functioning since 1980, but, Ven Yapo says maintaining the school is a struggle. “After becoming part of India, Buddhist education has been neglected. When Sikkim was a kingdom the King had a monastic department of government and supported schools. After annexation, the department continued but no budget, namesake only” he laments, explaining that the only 30 percent of the funds he gets from the Tribal Affairs Department of the Government. It is to cover salaries of teachers at Rs 4,000 a month, but to get good teachers he

pays minimum Rs 12.000 a month and the Maths teacher costs Rs 27,000 a month.

“We teach Buddhism in school, government schools don’t. We charge students Rs 4,000 a month but poor ones are given a scholarship by the panchayat (local council)” he explained, adding proudly, “three students from here are now professors at Indian universities and one student gone to Harvard to study foreign relations between China and India”.

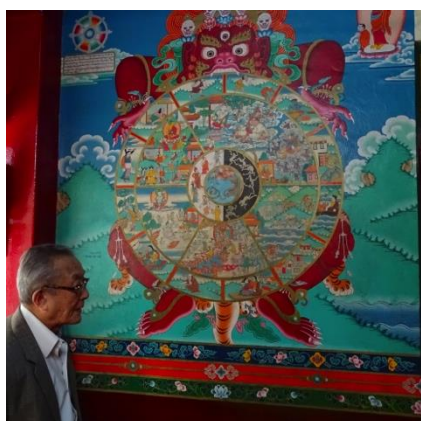
He also showed a room where they conduct a Buddhist Learning Centre for adults with money donated by European Buddhists. “There is a need to educate lay Buddhists here. They don’t have the facility to learn Buddhism in Sikkim. For namesake they are Buddhist” he pointed out. “I’m starting this for them. If interested, they can come. I provide the teacher”.

Namgyal Institute of Tibetology

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) in Gangtok owes its existence to a unique trinity – it was established by a Royal Charter granted by King Tashi Namgyal, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama laid the cornerstone for the institute and the Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru gave the initial funds for its construction. The NIT was inaugurated on 1 October 1958.

In an interview with me at the NIT, its Director, Tashi Densapa⁴⁷, explained the reasons for setting up the institute in Sikkim.

In 1956, all the leading Lamas including Dalai Lama was invited by Nehru for Buddha Jayanti to India. At that time we were a Himalayan (Buddhist) Kingdom. At that time the King spoke to Dalai Lama and said you should establish a library here in case the Chinese destroy all your literature, perhaps it will be safer here. Dalai Lama agreed. Also Nehru. This library was established in 1958 and this is a library where solid Tibetan Buddhist literature is stored.



Tashi Densapa beside the ‘Wheel of Life’ wall painting at NIT

Fortunately Chinese did not destroy Tibetan literature they destroyed only 10 percent but 90 percent of the documents have been preserved. The teachings of Buddha which were originally oral teachings and when his disciples started writing it that was all in Sanskrit and Pali. 108 volumes of Sanskrit and Pali were translated into Tibetan by scholars both Tibetan and Indian pandits. Indian pandits knew how to read and write Tibetan. Tibetan scholars were able to read and write Sanskrit and Pali... this volume of 108 is preserved in all the monasteries today. We have this also.

These volumes are accurate translations of Pali into Tibetan.

⁴⁷ Interview done at NIT in Gangtok on 21 August 2019.

Most of the Pali texts have been destroyed during Moghul raids. There's only 1 or 2 available. But Tibetan volume is absolutely authentic. So why Dalai Lama says we are the true Nalanda tradition is because the entire teachings of the Buddha have been preserved in Tibet. Then, there are 213 or 214 volumes of commentaries on the teachings of the Buddha written by high Indian pandits. These 200 plus volumes have been translated into Tibetan. We are now trying to translate it back into Pali.

NIT's official brochure points out that Sikkim has played a unique role in facilitating the carrying of the Buddhist faith from India to Tibet, and back to India from Tibet. It says that in the 8th century, "Guru Padmasambhava crossed Sikkim enroute to Tibet where he propagated the Buddhist faith. Centuries later, many precious Buddhist idols and religious texts found their way to the Namgyal Institute in Sikkim, carried on the backs of fleeing Tibetan over the same path where border trade has once flourished between India and Tibet".

NIT has recently started a Master's degree in Buddhism in collaboration with the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) in Sarnath, which is taught in English. They have also started a MMBS degree program in Tibetan medicine known as Sowa-Rigpa with 24 students already enrolled in 1st and 2nd years of a 5-year course.

Indian government has established in November 2014 the Ministry of AYUSH to focus attention on education and research on the application of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy. "Indian government has accepted Tibetan medicine as alternative medicine under Ayush," says Densapa. "Tibetan medicine has been declared as Sowa-Rigpa science of healing. This is part and parcel of Buddhism".

Threats to Buddhist Culture

Many Buddhists in Sikkim are concerned at the inroads Christian evangelical groups are making into Buddhist communities.

Venerable Jigme Wangchuk Bhutia⁴⁸, Assistant Professor at Department of History and Himalayan Studies at Nar Bahadur Bhandarai Degree College in Gangtok is not happy with the way Buddhism is developing in Sikkim, because he believes the essence of the religion has been lost since the Buddhist kingdom was dismantled. "While monasteries are being built – like the Buddha Park – but in essence, the influence of Buddhist monks has been lost. It is mixed with other religions," he argues.

"Young people don't get the necessary education on Buddhism at school level. In school, they have one subject called Bhutia language. Buddhism is not taught in schools," said Nim Pincho Bhutia⁴⁹, a young Sikkim Buddhist. "Majority of the people cannot learn Buddhism, therefore most of the people drift away from

⁴⁸ Interview with author in Gangtok in August 2019.

⁴⁹ Interview with author in Gangtok in August 2019.

their original Buddhist culture and convert (to other religions). Most of these people don't have much of an idea of our culture".

Buddhists are having problems with Christian evangelical activities in particular, because of vote bank politics argues Tseten Tashi Bhutia⁵⁰, a local Buddhist leader and a former Minister in Sikkim Government. He feels that the Indian Central Government needs to look at this issue of religious vote bank politics.

Tseten points out another interesting problem with regards to the threats to Buddhist culture in Sikkim. In 2014, UNESCO has recognised a portion of West Sikkim as World Heritage Site under the culture and nature category. "There is a Buddhist culture, Mahayana Buddhism (where) our holy lakes, mountains, rocks, monasteries are protected under Indian Government places of worship act. UNESCO has recognized the connection between culture and nature," he points out. "Although UNESCO recognized a World Heritage Site, construction of hydro projects and tunnels are taking place. Water is diverted from the holy river. Our heritage is attacked. There is no response from UNESCO – Buddhists have raised it with them. Government is involved (in the destruction) so are influential people and investors".

Attacks on Buddhism in Sikkim are coming from many quarters says Ven Jigme. "Now Hindus believe Lord Shiva blesses Sikkim. They claim monasteries – some 300, 400 year old - are their temples not Buddhist. But we see these as Buddhist temples with long histories. So there are controversies between Hindus and Buddhists," he points out, adding that even the Sikhs are laying claim to Sikkim's Buddhist heritage. "The big lake⁵¹ Sikhs created a history of Guru Nanak coming there but we (Buddhists) have older history".

Because of a lack of qualified people to teach the dhamma to young people, they are getting attracted to Christianity, says Ven Jigme. "Christians go door-knocking to teach Christianity. Buddhists don't go to homes like that preaching religion. Hindus – like RSS – invite people from other religions to functions and preach them Hinduism. Buddhists don't do it".

The only way to stop this drift away from Buddhism is to teach it at school. Buddhism is currently not taught in school laments Ven Jigme and he believes Buddhists need to prepare a curriculum to teach it in schools.

"Many young people are committing suicide, suffer from depression, etc. They don't understand basic Buddhist teachings that could help. We need to introduce traditional Buddhist practices like Samadhi meditation," notes Ven Jigme. "In Sikkim, monks do meditation in temples but don't engage enough with the community. So people convert to other religions".

Another reason for conversions is that Buddhist rituals are very expensive and people cannot afford them. So they convert to other religions. "Lot of Lepchas

⁵⁰ Interview with author in Gangtok in August 2019.

⁵¹ Gurudongmar Lake is one of the highest lakes in the world located at an altitude of 5,425 m. The lake is named after Guru Padmasambhava.

have converted into Christians because they find the rituals (of Christianity) very easy” notes Densapa. “You don't have to do anything. You just pray to Jesus Christ (to forgive your sins)”.

Traditionally a family has given a son to a monastery to be trained as a monk. But, Buddhists say that this tradition is dying and very few young people come forward to become monks. In addition, with no royal patronage like before, monasteries find it difficult to sustain themselves, and many rural monasteries only open for certain rituals.

Ven Jigme and a group of determined Buddhists in Gangtok are planning to set up a new monastery, which will have no full-time monks. They will engage common people to practice the Dhamma, and they would seek funds from the government to pay the teachers (who could be trained monks).

Sikkim In Buddhist Tourism Circuit

The location of Sikkim is both a disadvantage and a benefit. The latter is because it could be a transit route – like the Silk Routes of the past – for pilgrims from China and Myanmar in particular, who go onto visit Buddhist holy sites in Bihar and beyond. It could be a good de-tour for other Buddhist pilgrims/tourists who could fly into Kolkatta or Bagdogra and drive through the scenic tea-growing areas of West Bengal state to Sikkim and perhaps to Nepal from there, to visit Lumbini and back into India to visit other holy places of Buddhism. Since there are no train services in Sikkim, the road networks need improvements.

The Sikkim tourism authorities are trying to develop Buddhist circuit tourism and one scheme (as discussed in the article above) is to give funds to temples to build a guest house and then ask temples to develop programs for visitors to keep them at these sites for 2-4 days at least.

The Buddha Park in Rabong in South Sikkim is a new project that is designed to put Sikkim in the center of a Himalayan Buddhist circuit. Opened in 2006, the gigantic, seated Buddha surrounded by the scenic Himalayan ranges and a well-landscaped complex, that is surrounded by many budget range hotels.



The Buddha Park, Rabong, South Sikkim

The shrine room that is located right underneath the Buddha statue has a unique Cathedral effect to it. Inside on ground level are colourful Mahayana Tibetan style drawings in a circular inner circle with small gold Buddha statue in the middle with a dome at the top. Colourful Theravada temple-style wall paintings adorn the walls, which go in circular cylindrical style around the inner shrine room up to about 3 stories high. You can climb steps along the circular path with wall drawings depicting the life of the Buddha. In 2008, relics from several Buddhist countries have been donated to the temple.

Buddha Park is a unique modern addition to the monastic culture of Sikkim Buddhism and with local Buddhist communities in the vicinity such new sites could offer a living Buddhism experience to the visitor.

Kolkata: Attempt To Rekindle a Great Bengali Buddhist Heritage

Bengali Buddhism has an interesting history. It has flourished and survived long after the onslaught of the Moguls in northern India. Secondly, Bengal is said to be the home of what is called a “degenerate and corrupt” form of Buddhism known as Tantric Buddhism that developed during the Pala period (9th to 12th century). In much later times, Buddhism made a resurgence in the eastern part of Bengal, in what is now independent Bangladesh (as discussed in chapter 3). The history of Buddhism in Bengal is a long and complex story and I will not go into details. But there is a good account given in a paper by Niru Kumar Chakma (2011).

I will focus here on a 21st century Buddhist revival attempt by a group of Bengali artists who are also taking the Buddhist message to other parts of India through Bengali drama and musical presentations. The Kolkata-based group is called Attodeep Buddhist Cultural Group, led by an energetic former television presenter and now choreographer and dancer Madhusree Chowdhury.

Attodeep works in close association with three organizations that are linked with a Buddhist heritage of Bengal for more than 125 years - Bengal Theosophical Society, The Mahabodhi Society of India, and The Bengal Buddhist Association (Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha). It has also started working with the most prestigious organisation of Asian Studies like The Asiatic Society, Kolkata and also with Bangiya Sahitya Parisad, MAKAIS and Indian Council For Cultural Relations ICCR.

Attodeep also works on the awareness and development of the Buddhist heritage sites of India with a special focus on the newly developed archeological sites of West Bengal. Recently it has been the cultural associate of Bengal Buddhist Association in the First Buddhist Heritage Festival at Mogalmari, the recently developed Heritage site in West Bengal. It has also performed in the Global Buddhist Conference organized by Maha Bodhi Society at BodhGaya.

Attodeep sees a huge prospect of building a Buddhist culture in Bengal via the arts. In this direction, they have launched a series of cultural activities which include demonstrative performances, street theatres, audio drama, musical presentations based on Buddhist heritage and culture, musical presentations of spiritual songs and theatrical presentations based on Buddhist poems, songs, dramas from classical and folk to contemporary writers. They also work on

Tagore's thoughts on Buddhism with a vision to rediscover a Buddhist era through the language of literature, art and culture.

"I love to call myself a cultural activist and for the past 20 years I have been deeply involved with music, theatre, dance and other interdisciplinary art forms throughout the year," says Ms Madhushree Chowdhury⁵². "While directing any performance we do a lot of interactions reading and understanding the deep insight of a literary piece."

Attodeep is developing a cultural platform with a philosophy to develop a peaceful, happier, enriched and meaningful life in each individual and they work with youth and children to convey the Buddhist philosophy through artistic expressions. It is very much interested in working in those areas where religion and spirituality intersect with culture.

Ms Chowdhury, who is also a schoolteacher explains: "While Buddhism is spreading rapidly among the educated mainly urban and also young populations in the West, across Asia many young people of Buddhist families find Buddhism not appealing or attractive. They think the rituals and practices to be very boring and sometime superstitious. To address this problem Buddhism need to be repackaged for the youth of the present generation and to be brought into the popular culture. This popular culture can be through a lot of avenues like through seminars followed by cultural performances, artistic and theatrical productions, recitations with dances, chanting of sutras through music and meaningful body movements".



Madhusree Chowdhury

The cultural, linguistic and literary heritage of Bengal has its origin in Buddhism as the earliest poem songs of Bengal called Charyapada is composed by the Buddhist Siddhacharyas or monk poets, says Ms Chowdhury, pointing out the close association of traditional Bengali culture to Buddhism as follows:

A lot of dramatists have composed on the life and philosophy of Buddha which can be very appealing to the Buddhist youth and to mention a few Girish Ghosh's Buddhadeb Charit, Nabin Sen's Amitabha and Mohit Chattopadhyay's Tathagata, Bani Basu's Maitreya Jatak have strong philosophical insights with simple dialogues. They are very contemporary in approach and are both entertaining and enlightening which can appeal to the youth.

Haraprasad Shastri's Bauddha Dharma, Satish Chandra Vidyabhusan's Buddhadeb Satyendranath Tagore's Bauddha Dharma, Moni Bagchi's Gautam Buddha, Rathindra Nath Tagore's Buddha Charit, Abul Fazal's Manab Putra Buddha, Rajendralal Mitra's Living Buddhism in Bengal are treasure troves of intricate Buddhist philosophies which can also be

⁵² Email interview with author, December 2019.

great sources for future researches. Based on these authentic texts, seminars and demonstrative performances can be arranged.

Almost every well known and eminent poets of Bengal from both Bangladesh and West Bengal like Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul, Jibanananda, Sankha Ghosh, Samsur Rahman, Sufiya Kamal, Sunil Ganguly, Shakti Chattopadhyay, and many others have written remarkable poems on Buddha and Buddhism. Demonstrative and theatrical and dance performances based on these poems can be very effective in enlightening people with Buddhist philosophical thoughts. Attodeep has done several performances based on these poems titled Buddha Pranam.

The mystic singers of Bengal the Baul, Fakir, Darbesh are ignorant of the fact that the root of their songs belongs to the most sophisticated and alluring form of Buddhism that is Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism. So the Sufi or Darbeshi or Fakiri and the kawali songs of Bengal and most importantly the Kirtans, the Bauls songs with simple language and soulful music appeal to today's youth a lot. In that way also they can be spontaneously and effortlessly drawn closer to the Buddhist philosophy.

With significant excavation sites discovering a hidden history of Bengal that stretches to Bangladesh and all of it within a 400 km radius of Kolkata, the time may have come to revisit Bengali Buddhist heritage. "While completing the Buddhist circuit of West Bengal with some parts of Bangladesh we can very well trace out a *heritage path* in the soil of Bengal," argues Ms Chowdhury. "This is high time to look back and rediscover our heritage – this heritage does not only mean the heritage archaeological sites, the monuments, the monasteries or the ruins but a heritage which comes alive through a comparative study of texts, literature, sculptures, paintings, inscriptions and our indigenous culture⁵³".



Musical Drama Performance of Attodeep

⁵³ See 'Buddhist Mystic Songs of Bengal in the Light of Charyapada' presented by Madhushree Chowdhury - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daA4BwkdPNQ>

Tamil Nadu: Buddhist Revival Rekindling Ancient Bonds

According to the Sri Lankan chronicle Mahavamsa, after the successful completion of the third Buddhist council in Pataliputra in the 3rd century B.C.E, Emperor Ashoka had sent many monks along with his son Mahendra (Mahinda) to Sri Lanka to spread the dhamma. They must probably have visited Tamil Nadu on their route to Sri Lanka. Asoka's rock edicts II and XIII have given a fairly good account of his territory in the 3rd century B.C.E with Rock edict II mentioning the names of the dynasties that were prevalent then in the Tamil country and Sri Lanka (Gopalakrishnan, 2018).

There have been many accounts of the existence and flourishing of Buddhism in Tamil country in travelogues of Chinese pilgrims such as Chinese monk Yuan Chwang, who visited the Dravida (Tamil) country in 637 CE. He mentions the existence of a large monastery (samgharama) near Kanchipuram, which served as the rendezvous for the most eminent scholars and Acarya Dharmapala stayed there and wrote several commentaries on Pali texts. The Chinese visitor has also referred to the prevalence of a few monasteries in Malakuta in the Pandiya country accommodating very few monks. He also mentions the Avalokitesvara cult in the potaloka mountains (Gopalakrishnan, 2018).

Prof R. Gopalakrishnan (2018, p 33), who is the former Head of the Philosophy Department of the University of Madras argues, that, the evolution of Tamil Buddhism can be gleaned from the Tamil epic Manimekalai, "which incorporates the gamut of the philosophical truths of all the schools of Buddhism including the mantrayana and tantric trends... a large number of philosophical terms of Sanskrit has been converted to Tamil in the Buddhist works of literature. Though Manimekalai is a complete Buddhist epic depicting the doctrinal expositions as well as religious pursuits of this faith, this universal religion has influenced to a great extent the Thirukkural, Silappathikaram, Veerasoliyam, Kundalakesi, etc. the famous Tamil literary works".

Buddhism flourished in Tamil Nadu in two phases, firstly in the early years of the Pallava rule 400-650 CE, and secondly in the Chola period mid 9th to the early 14th century CE. Chinese monks who visited in the 7th century have written about the existence of over 100 Buddhist monasteries with over 1,000 Buddhist monks. They have also mentioned the presence of 300 monks from Sri Lanka in the monastery at the southern sector of Kanchipuram. The Manimekalai, mentions Tamil Buddhists on the island of Nagadipa off the coast of Jaffna. Since Tamil Nadu was largely Buddhist, one can easily conclude that the Tamil population in the north and east of Sri Lanka was also largely Buddhist. "The Tamil Buddhists who followed Theravada Buddhism shared common places of worship with the Sinhalese" (Chandrasahsan, 2013).

Though Buddhism continued to exist until about the 14th century, the situation in Tamil Nadu had begun to change after the 7th century with the rise of Vaishnavism and Saivism, there was a significant increase in Hindu Brahminical influence. The Buddhist and Jain institutions in Tamil Nadu came under attack and they began to lose popular support and the patronage of the rulers (Chandrasahsan, 2013).

"In the long run Buddhism lost admiration among the people in the Indian sub-

continent in general and the Southern peninsula in particular since it could not gain the royal patronage continuously,” argues Gopalakrishnan (2018, p 38). “The rulers retrieved the past glory of Hinduism and the common man embraced that faith vigorously”. He also argues that Buddhism had a weakness, “since Buddhism did not advocate a Supreme, Powerful, Benevolent and Merciful God, people who could not satisfy their devotional instinct developed contemptuous and disdainful outlook”. The anatmavada or the no-soul theory was too complicated for “men of little intelligence” to understand the significance of rebirth and karma theory.

The Buddhist revivalist movement instigated in India by Angarika Dharmapala has an impact in South India too. A branch of the Mahabodhi Society was set up in Madras in 1899 and later a small temple was built in Perambur. Initiated by Ayothidasar, a Tamil Buddhist revivalist. This temple was renovated and re-opened in January 2018 attended by monks from 40 countries⁵⁴.

A new phase of the Buddhist revivalist movement is gathering steam under the Tamil Buddhist Society led by Gauthama Prabhu. It is mainly a Dalit movement inspired by Dr D.R Ambedkar’s vision. During a conversation with me about 4 years ago at a Buddhist conference in Indonesia, Prabhu said that most Dalit Hindus in Tamil Nadu had been grafted into Hinduism during a Hindu revivalist movement in the 19th century and were declared Dalits. He is now saying to his people that their ancestors were Buddhists and many young people are receptive to the idea of coming back to the fold. Thus, there is a growing movement of especially young Tamils converting to Buddhism.

Prabhu⁵⁵ says that their community is a “neo-Buddhist community” that has renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. He says they have devised various strategies to explain and promote the practice of the dhamma among the new converts. This includes giving public talks, conducting 1, 3 and 7 day retreats, conducting full moon day programs, pilgrim visits, and using WhatsApp and YouTube applications. He added that a real need of the community is to have proper monks to teach the dhamma and at the moment they don’t have such monks. Thus, he has sent 2 members of the community, who are well educated for training to Sri Lanka. The first one has already completed 1 year of training and after another year he would become the first Tamil monk with ‘Upasampada’ (higher ordination) in centuries. “We are also encouraging others from the community to come forward and participate in the bhikku training program,” he said. They are currently trained by Sinhalese monks, at a well-known ‘Pirivena’ (Buddhist Education Centre) in southern Sri Lanka.

Prabhu said that their growing Buddhist community needs help from international Buddhists. They are into Engaged Buddhism, as the community needs much socio-economic empowerment as well. Late British monk, Ven Sangharakshita’s followers in the UK have been helping out in this aspect, as he is involved with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists. They also need to translate some Buddhist books into Tamil to help people learn the

⁵⁴ <https://medium.com/@dalithistorynow/celebrating-dalit-history-the-southern-india-buddhist-vihar-a-community-revival-d2dacaafe211>

⁵⁵ Email discussion with the author from Chennai, September 2019.

dhamma. They are also looking for funds to set up a video and radio production studio for Dhammadutta work. "We are interested in developing an Android and iPhone application so that via a National Buddhist Council (which they hope to establish) network all Buddhists in India could be connected.

Manipur: A Forgotten Buddhist Minority

Manipur shares a long border with Myanmar, and Mandalay is closer than Bodhgaya for the people of the state. Strong Buddhist bonds across the border is yet to be established. The people of Manipur also look and dress like their counterparts in Myanmar (Burma).

According to 2011 Census⁵⁶, Hindus make up the biggest religious community in Manipur with 41 percent while the Christians follow a close second with 41 percent. Buddhists are only 0.25 percent – about 10,000 people.

Hinduism flourished in Manipur during the reign of king Garibaniwaaj (1709-1748 CE), who adopted it as the state religion. It reached the climax of ritual dance in the theme of Raadha and Krishna and later became the well-known Manipuri Raas. But the elements of Buddhism are found far and wide in the hills and valley of Manipur long before the advent of Hinduism. It has also been considered that Buddhism spread to Myanmar passing through Manipur by successive waves of Buddhists from mainland India. However, curiously Buddhism did not flourish in Manipur; perhaps Hinduism of the later period had absorbed it, as the political climate was not favorable (Ningombam, 2005).

Most of the tribal people in Manipur are Christians and they have been converted by waves of Christian missionaries who began to come to the region since 1921. Once a church was established and the tribal chief was converted, the whole village and even neighbouring villages became Christian⁵⁷.

In January 2020, I visited Manipur and met with members of the All Manipur Buddhist Association (AMBA) in Imphal. There is no temple in Imphal and thus they have very few members. AMBA secretary Memyo Ningombi said they have got land, but no funds to build on it. The National Minority Commission's (NMC) Buddhist representative Ms Sulekha Kumbhare has visited Imphal and later recommended to the State Government to provide the funds to build the temple but nothing has come through as yet.

They said that NMC has given them some funds, like Rs 20,000 an event to organize awareness programs, but it is not for propagating Buddhism, more in form of inter-faith dialogue.

Ningombi says that Christian missionaries provide a lot of facilities for the Christians and because Buddhists are small in number they are not disturbed in a big way. However, there are a lot of youngsters who are interested in

⁵⁶ <https://www.census2011.co.in/data/religion/state/14-manipur.html>

⁵⁷ Encyclopaedia Of Manipur (3 Vol.) - <https://books.google.com.au>

Buddhism and if they have a facility they can take advantage of this fact, to introduce the dhamma to them. Now, Ningombi's father Venerable Panthaw Pa conducts meditation sessions and talks at their house.

Retired Archeologist and President of AMBA pointed out that recently 2 sites were found in Manipur with Buddhist relics, going back many centuries. "There are these 2 sites that indicate Buddhism existed here many centuries ago. The main gate at Kangla ancient capital (still to be seen) in Imphal is Buddhist architecture".

Though Buddhism is not new to Manipur, it is in a transitional stage they say. With their proximity to Myanmar and Thailand, AMBA believes they can



develop transit facilities for Buddhists to travel via Manipur and Imphal to Buddhist holy places in Bodhgaya and beyond. But, they have no monastery to host them.

"It is very important for us to get the government money to build the temple" Ningombi said, adding, "if we have a temple or community centre Buddhists will increase here rapidly".

Entrance Gate to Kangla
Ancient Palace, Imphal

Tripura: Buddhists Under Attack

Tripura is a small formerly princely state in northeast India, bordering Bangladesh and Myanmar. It became a Union Territory (State) of India in 1972. There are 19 tribal communities across the state and a large chunk of Bengalis whose Hindu culture dominates the state. Yet, Christians have been increasing rapidly in the past 2 decades, especially among the tribal communities. They even had a terror group National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) with an estimated membership of about 600, and they wanted to secede from India and form a separate Christian state described as the 'Kingdom of God' (Wikipidea).

In August 2019, NLFT, which was banned as a terrorist group in India, signed a truce with the central government to lay down arms and respect the constitution of India. In return, their cadres will be rehabilitated with government financial aid⁵⁸.

According to the Census of 2011 Tripura's population is 3.6 million, with 83.4 percent Hindu, 8.6 percent Muslim, 4.3 percent Christian and only 3.4 percent

⁵⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/national-liberation-front-of-tripura-signs-peace-pact-to-join-mainstream/articleshow/70621676.cms>

Buddhist numbering about 125,000⁵⁹.

Though it is not clear who was the first Buddhist king who ruled Tripura, it is evident from Archeological findings of Pilak and Boxnagar (Buddhist sites) that the earliest rulers of Tripura were Buddhists dated back to the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. According to "Rajmala" the historical record of the royal lineage of Tripura, the Mog (Burmese origin) were the powerful Buddhist kings of Tripura. Buddhism flourished in Tripura from 2nd to 9th century CE. Both Theravada and Mahayana forms of Buddhism were practiced, though Theravada Buddhism seemed to have had a stronghold in many parts of Tripura for many centuries. The Mog Buddhists have a close affinity with Burmese Buddhism in all socio-cultural and religious aspects (Bhikku Khemachara, 2010)⁶⁰

Buddhists in Tripura faced the same fate as in other parts of India when Buddhist kings were defeated first by Hindu kings and later by Muslim invaders. They had to flee to Myanmar and by 11th century CE Buddhism was completely eliminated from Tripura. However, a revival took place in the 17th century when Mog (Burmese) Buddhists re-entered Tripura and were followed by Chakmas and Baruas from Bangladesh. However, beginning from the 19th century, Buddhists, especially those of tribal background have faced the brunt of aggressive Christian evangelists.

In January 2020, I visited the Buddhist communities of South Tripura about 100 km from Agartala. And met Venerable Dr. Dhammapiya, the founder and chairman of the Bahujana Hitaya Educational Trust and Dhamma Dipa Foundation in Sabroom. He pointed out that there were no churches in the area 5 years ago but now, a number of them have come up and they are trying to convert anyone they could get hold of by exploiting the poverty in the area.



Market in Sabroom, Tripura

“Buddhists are getting affected, definitely this is a threat in the sense of unfair means of conversion”argues Ven Dhammapiya. “If someone is to convert after understanding the religion it’s fine, but it is not done that way. People who don’t have proper means of livelihood or those who need some support like finance logistics or legal support, they offer this support to them. Intellectual level I don’t see people converting. (They convert) mostly for financial and educational reasons. Some of the areas they set up good schools and they have a rule that if you are a Christian, your fees are waived this much, priority will be given to Christian children”.

⁵⁹ <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/tripura.html>

⁶⁰ A pre-Phd research paper submitted to Acharya Nagarjuna University, Andra Pradesh, India.

“Buddhists themselves are poor. If you are to help others you have to first help yourself,” laments Ven Dhammapiya. “In Tripura, we have been trying to protect our Buddhist community by establishing schools, where we try to give Buddha’s teachings and also values, to the children. We have a universal open approach and not all students are Buddhists. The main idea is to give them proper learning, where they will develop a questioning kind of mind”.

In 2002, he set up the Dhamma Dipa School⁶¹ with 50 students. It was at a time when there were extremist groups on one side and missionaries on the other, forcing people to go to missionary schools, where kids were told that worshipping the Buddha and giving food to monks give nothing to them. Today there are over 700 students and 160 of them are novice monks undergoing training at the affiliated Dhamma Dipa Buddhist Academy set up in 2007. Dr Dhammapiya is also planning to set up India’s first private Buddhist University here in Tripura that would also focus on

Buddhist communication studies. He is canvassing funds from Buddhists in Asia.



Kindergarten students leaving school after sessions with parents

A few kilometers away, Ven Dr Khemachara has started Dong Mog Memorial Dhamma Dipa School with a kindergarten class of about 100 students. Most children come from the nearby Mog Buddhist community.

“This is the first Buddhist community school here. Now in Tripura there are 3 or 4 Buddhist schools,” said Ven Khemachara. “We try to provide same uniform and bag. Have to package it to Christian

missionary style to brand the school”. However, he added that sometimes the parents are unable to pay the Rs 300 monthly fee, and he uses his own money to pay the teachers. The Government has given a one-time grant to build the facility and buy computers.

We protect the Buddhist community here. Most villages have temples and they preserve the religion by doing regular chantings, listening to Dhamma sermons. Because they are Mog Buddhists they go regularly to temple, 4 times a month at least” explained Ven Khemachara.

At nearby Suknachari, Bhikkhu Nyana Rakkhilo has set up the Mahabodhi School in 2014, where 5 monks, 30 novices and 180 children study. Students pay Rs 350-400 a month as fees.

⁶¹ Dhamma Dipa School website - <https://www.ddstripura.org/index.php>

“Christians are very aggressive in their campaign trying to convert Buddhists” Ven Rakkhilo said, pointing out that they have set up a school 15 km away. “There are ‘messengers of God’ going from house to house. They target weaker people by offering them funds. They survey what people need and then target them with money. They say to Buddhists my God comes with money and your Buddha doesn't provide help”.

The well-equipped school is an attempt to prove them wrong. They have got funding from the Mahabodhi Society in Bangalore and it is modeled on the Sri Lankan ‘Pirivena’ system of education where both secular and dhamma education is given.

Because most Mog Buddhists are poor, it is not easy to maintain good standard schools without financial assistance from outside. It is to the deep dedication of the monks that they are able to maintain a school to the same standards as those operated by Christian churches that get money from outside.

“Christian schools get money from overseas and they can also raise loans from Christian institutions. They have funding agencies in Delhi, Guwahati and Chennai. Buddhists don't have access to such funding,” laments Ven Dhammapiya.



Author (right) with Ven Dhammapiya (2nd from left) and Ven Akshayananda (3rd from left) opposite the incomplete monastery

At a nearby community surrounded by rubber plantations, Venerable Akshayananda, Chief Monk of Venuvan Vihar, Agartala, has set up camp – living in a hut with the Mog Buddhist villagers to build a new monastery here. Showing me the incomplete monastery he said: “I started building this 4 years ago, not finished yet. When we get the money we start again”. He said he needs another Rs 500,000 to complete the construction.

“Before I came here Buddhists were under tremendous pressure to convert to Christianity. There are now only 50 Buddhist families left. Lot converted to Christianity. I’m building residences for monks here and 2 rooms added to set up English medium school” he explained. “People here are very poor. Chakma Buddhists donate to me. Agartala Buddhists also help. But no support from foreign Buddhists. They say Indians are beggars, so I don’t ask for money”.

Venerable Akshayananda finds it very ironic that at a time when Europeans, after learning about Buddhism rejects Christianity and become Buddhists, Mog Buddhists are going the other way. Buddhists here are being easily converted because of their poverty. “If we don’t have monasteries to educate these people about the dhamma, bring them together regularly for discussions and festivals, they will forget their traditions. They will get money from Christians and convert because they are illiterate and poor” he explained. Ven Dhammapiya added: “When they become Christians they rarely come back”.

Ven Dhammapiya, who is also the Secretary-General of the Delhi-based International Buddhist Confederation argues, that there is a general weakness in the mindset of the Buddhist communities across Asia, that allows Christian proselytism to succeed.

If you ask a Buddhist to give money for a social cause most are not interested to donate. But if you ask them for money for building a temple, a pagoda, a Buddha statue or a meditation centre, there are people who come forward to donate. Buddhist people need to understand, these days, that it is not only building temples and pagodas, but they also have to build a human resource to protect Buddha Sasana. Buildings are fine, but along with that, we have to educate and support the community, and empower them educationally, spiritually and morally (Ven Dhammapiya, 2020).

Nagpur – The Nerve Center of Indian Buddhism?

On 14th October 1956, which is believed to be the date on which Emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism, Dr B.R Ambedkar – the architect of India’s Republican Constitution and former Union Law Minister – with 500,000 of his so-called ‘Untouchable’ (Dalits) followers chanted ‘*Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Dhammam Saranam Gacchaami, Sangham Sranam Gacchaami*’ and embraced Buddhism. This set in motion a great process that has led to a Buddhist revival in India and to an empowerment movement among the Dalits across India.



Deekshabhoomi Stupa, Nagpur

Dr Ambedkar has argued that Buddha’s Dhamma is not something that declared one allegiance to a higher power and religion is personal and one should keep it to oneself. He has clearly stated his social philosophy in 3 words, “liberty, equality and fraternity”. He was born into an ‘untouchable’ community in 1891 and was one of the first Dalits to get a college degree. Through a remarkable life, he rose to become Law Minister in the first Government of independent India. Thus, he understood very well the extreme structural violence under which Dalits live, and he realized that the Buddha’s social philosophy was the path to liberate them from it.

Dr Ambedkar died 6 weeks after his historic conversion to Buddhism leaving the new Buddhist movement leaderless. But, in Nagpur, where the historic conversion took place, Deekshabhoomi Stupa that was built to commemorate the event has become the inspiration, and a strong Buddhist community has built up here, whose empowerment through liberation, education and political action is amply demonstrated in the large middle-class Buddhist community they have built up. They have also inspired Dalit Buddhist movements in other parts of India and it could be said that this is what is driving the revival of

Buddhism in its homeland. Yet, it should also be pointed out, that what is called the 'neo-Buddhists' or 'Ambedkarite' Buddhist movement because of its strong opposition to the Hindu caste system and political action to dismantle centuries of discrimination based on it, sometimes alienate the traditional Buddhists, whose practice is closely ingrained with the worship of Hindu deities.

"What the Buddha found was a religion based on equality. Now Hindus are promoting that Hinduism and Buddhism are the same. This is a threat to Buddhists in India," a local Buddhist leader who does not want to be named told me⁶². "Ambedkar Buddhists don't practice that kind of Buddhism. We practice Buddhism that is distinctly different from Hinduism (especially caste teachings). Our marriage ceremonies are different for example. It has brought a cultural change to our communities. Emotionally we are attached to the idea of being Buddhist. We practice Buddhism because we don't adopt Hindu culture".

He said that India needs well-trained monks to drive the Buddhist revival. Apart from Arunachal Pradesh, he believes India does not have good monasteries that are run by Indian Buddhists themselves. The Nagpur Buddhists have helped to set up a center to house 80 to 100 monks and given it to the All India Bhikkhu Sangha. "We need good Buddhist monasteries in India where Vinaya is followed strictly. We are trying to establish a Pirivena here. We have had several discussions with Sri Lankan, Thai, Myanmar monks about setting up a bhikkhu training center". He said the help they need from overseas Buddhists is not money, but, resources – good teachers (trainers), syllabus and exchanges - where Indian monks could go overseas and spend some time in good monasteries to learn about how to run a monastery and the Vinaya rules and behavior.

The Buddhist community in Nagpur has initiated many social service and welfare programs, as well as educational institutions, to help themselves to overcome the terrible social discrimination imposed by the Hindu society using the principles of the Buddha Dhamma, as espoused by Dr Ambedkar. They have set up community centers, kindergartens, adult literacy classes, tuition classes, dhamma classes, health programs and hostels to house poor children.

Nagaloka Initiative

Nagarjuna Training Institute (Nagaloka)⁶³ has been set up in Nagpur to train what they say is an estimated 40 million new Buddhists in India who are starving for knowledge of Buddha Dhamma. Nagaloka is the only training institute in India that trains people in Buddhist-based social transformation. It has a 15-acre campus dominated by a huge standing Buddha statue, along with lecture theatres, a meditation hall, students hostel, a café, a



Nagaloka Complex, Nagpur

⁶² Interview with author in Nagpur, December 2019.

⁶³ <https://www.nagaloka.org/nti/>

shop and a modern guesthouse.

They have four main components:

- 1 – train young people from across India based on Ambedkar's ideas on social transformation. They also learn meditation.
- 2 – 3 year BA Buddhist Studies program that is taught in both English and Hindi, and teaches Ambedkar's ideas and Pali as well.
- 3 – Organise nationally and internationally to bring Buddhists of various sects to learn about Ambedkar's work and to inspire them.
- 4 – local dhamma activity such as Sunday dhamma school, talks, meditation and dhamma practice classes.

They also have a 1-year residential course called 'Dhamma Sekiya' on Buddhism and Social Action for young men and women from all over India... Which teaches Buddhist ethics, Ambedkar's thoughts on how to run social service and NGOs - such as keeping accounts. How to respond to needs. They have a nationwide alumni network to help them in career development and further studies. Five of their alumnis have gone to Thailand and 19 to China for further studies.

"We have a worldwide movement - Triratna Buddhist community⁶⁴ - and we are part of it in doing social work. We are putting Buddhist principles into action. Training makes people be socially active. We want to develop Buddhist activities," explained Tej Dharshan⁶⁵, Manager of Nagaloka, before taking me on a tour of the facility. He explained that they have affiliated companies that were set up to expand the application of their teachings into the community. Golden Light Foundation runs a few businesses "based on right livelihood and some run by our students" he said. They have an event management company, as well as a tourism company, Nagaloka bookshops and a catering service. "Thorough these we generate some income, we can't ask for donations always".

"Now we have over 150 students on campus. We want to go into business to provide employment to our students. By developing a Buddhist business community, you can upgrade whole society," argues Dharshan.

Renaissance College

Renaissance College is an initiative of a local Buddhist to provide education to Buddhist youth in computer science and advanced technology. Though it is also open for other disadvantaged community youth, about 90 percent of the students are Buddhists. "This is a dedicated institute for educating Buddhist youth with university-level degrees offered" explained Shasshikant Jambhuinar⁶⁶, Director Renaissance College. "Most students are Buddhists. Institute is government subsidized. OBC (Other Backward Caste) gets free education. Buddhists are not include in this category, but Buddhist students also get free admission". They also have a primary school from nursery to grade 3.

⁶⁴ British Buddhist monk Venerable Sangharakshita founded the Triratna Bauddha Maha Sangha in the UK in 1967. It is an international fellowship of Buddhists who try to apply the Buddha's teaching to the modern world.

⁶⁵ Discussion in Nagpur, December 2019

⁶⁶ Interview with author in Nagpur, December 2019

Religious education is not allowed to be taught in government subsidized schools. But, Jambhuinar explained that indirectly they could teach Buddhism in lessons on meditation and communicating with people, and in moral education. Teaching meditation is okay in government-funded schools, but they do not conduct prayer lessons because that is considered a religion.

Activism

In addition to educational activities, there are many local Buddhist cultural groups, Buddhist publications and two television channels Awaaz TV (discussed later in the chapter) and Lord Buddha TV.

Local Buddhist artist and writer Prem Kumar⁶⁷ has been involved in drama for over 15 years. “I do this for the Buddhist community” he said. “I use song and drama to depict Buddhist themes”. They perform in community festivals, “during writer week we perform, and Bhante provide chanting, sermon, etc. We got a good audience. We had shows (that added up) for 22 hours”.

As pointed out earlier, Nagpur Buddhists have a strong activist side to their Buddhist activities. They have not been afraid to mount legal challenges to get their rights recognized.

“We are struggling to get Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya under Buddhists,” said Prof Bhad Lokmande⁶⁸, Head of Pali and Buddhism, University of Nagpur. “Anagarika Dharmapala is our inspiration”. A book is going to be published soon by a local organization, a Marathi translation of Anagarika’s case against Mahanta of Bodhgaya, and the judgment given by Judge McPherson. “He said that this temple belongs to Buddhists only and no scope for any Hindu worship”.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, local lawyer Shailesh Narnaware⁶⁹ has filed a case in Bihar district court about the need for Buddhists to have management of Bodhgaya Mahabodhi temple.

Another issue he has taken on, despite indifference from the local Buddhist leaders, is to address the neglect of the iconic Deekshabhoomi temple in Nagpur. He says it has been neglected since the 1950s. Thus, he filed a public litigation case to provide all facilities there to promote pilgrimage and tourism. On 20th March 2019, the Nagpur bench of Bombay High Court gave the Maharashtra Government 6 weeks to explain its position with regards to releasing Rs 281 crore allocated for the Deekshabhoomi temple⁷⁰.

The plea filed in courts by Narnaware was for the Government to fund the redevelopment of the site on the same grounds as popular Hindu pilgrim centers, and he had pointed out Hindu sites like Koradi and Paradsingha, that the Government helped to develop, and have now become leading tourist

⁶⁷ Interview with author in Nagpur, December 2019.

⁶⁸ Interview with author in Nagpur, December 2019.

⁶⁹ Interview with author in Nagpur, December 2019.

⁷⁰ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/hc-seeks-govt-reply-on-funds-for-deekshabhoomi-development/articleshow/68504941.cms>

centres and holy pilgrim sites. He wanted the Government to fund building basic amenities like drinking water, bathrooms, rest houses, and skywalks as well as developing proper facilities at nearby railways station and bus stops.

Narnaware said, that, 3 weeks before I interviewed him, the courts issued notice to Government to provide such facilities and the State Government has now started releasing the money in phases. "All this happened on my initiative. Even Dekkshabhumi Trust wasn't interested. People are angry that the Trust is not transparent," he pointed out. Thus, the money from the Government is not given to the Trust.

He also filed a public litigation case to make the use of the word 'Dalit' unconstitutional. The Nagpur High Court gave judgment in his favour in 2018. The Government of India has issued a notification to all government departments and even the media not to use the word 'Dalit'. Maharashtra state government has also recently issued an order in this direction. "We don't want to be categorized as lower caste. This is a turning point for our people" he said.

Narnaware is not only battling the government. He has taken on the Buddhist hierarchy as well. "Our monks are not good caliber to guide the people. Quality of monks is deteriorating day by day," he argues. "They are not practicing dhamma and enlightening the common man".

Narnaware is also working on a Buddhist Act. "What I'm working on is designed to tackle these issues of organizing the monks and regulating them under an Act. Discipline will also be there," he explained, pointing out, that, there is a Hindu Act, Muslim Act, Christian Act but no Buddhist Act. "Legally we are still governed by the Hindu laws, there are no Buddhist laws. My request is either to introduce a Buddhist Act or abolish all religious Acts. Let all religions be governed by one law. I'm working on this Act because we need to have our identity as Buddhists in India".

When asked, who funds his work, Narnaware replied: "This is a one-man army. I don't need anyone. Investment is my mind".

Nerve Center of Indian Buddhism

In the village of Chicholi about 20 km from Nagpur city a brand new Buddhist Centre is in the making, that could well become the nerve center of Indian Buddhism. It is being built in the same place where a dilapidated small building housed the Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Museum built in 1985.

Old Ambedkar Museum (right)



Though the new complex will be called the 'Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Museum' it is going to be much more than that. Some impressive buildings are coming up, built at a cost of about Rs 41 crore (USD 5.76 million) in a sprawling 11.5-acre complex, it would have in addition to the museum, Vipassana meditation center,

Anapanasathi center, training center with teachers and students' quarters, dining hall, cafeteria, and public toilets. The museum would have 988 articles of personal use of Dr Ambedkar.

The building of the center has been bogged down for years because the Congress chief minister has refused to change the land allocation for a stone quarry. But the BJP Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, within 6 days of taking office lifted the reservation for the project the Buddhist project to go ahead⁷¹.

Center is expected to be officially opened in mid-2020 and a local Buddhist leader said that both local and foreign dignitaries would be invited for the event.



New Complex Coming Up (as of December 2019) in Chicholi

Ladakh: Would Statehood Help The Buddhists?

According to popular belief, Ashoka's missionaries are believed to have penetrated Ladakh and propagated Buddhism in 3rd century BCE. Buddhism is said to have been firmly rooted in the area from 1st century CE when Kanishka sent 500 Buddhist missionaries to Tibet and Ladakh. Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien has also written about flourishing Hinayana Buddhist communities in Ladakh in 400 CE (Dorje, 2019).

After Tibet was divided into 3 princely brothers in 1020 CE, one of them had moved to Ladakh and founded the first royal dynasty there. Ladakh also fell into the grip of the Turkic Islamic armies beginning in the 16th century and became tied to the history of the Muslim history of Jammu and Kashmir. But, Ladakh did not forfeit its Buddhist history and today despite the presence of Muslim and Christian communities, the presence of Buddhism is prevalent, especially in areas in and around Leh.

Ladakh has preserved its glorious Buddhist heritage, concealed among different forgotten monasteries, which are located in rugged mountainous valleys. These monasteries served as the epicenter of Buddhist society where students used to

⁷¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/ambedkars-museum-in-chicholi-to-be-ready-by-dec/articleshow/67763140.cms>

get education and religious enlightenment (Dorje, 2019).

During a visit to Leh in 2016, I found that most monasteries – known as Gompa – were now of Mahayana Tibetan Buddhist traditions and were indeed located in rugged mountain valleys that take quite a lot of effort to get up there from Leh city. It offers a unique scenic tourist experience, but I wondered how they could educate today's youth who may not be willing to climb up those mountains daily? In contrast Muslims and Christians have built new mosques and churches in the valley. When I raised this issue with a Buddhist leader who lives in the valley he said: "The Muslims have just built a brand new mosque and the Christians are going house to house and interact with the people, especially the young. Buddhist monks are up in their small monasteries meditating. That is how we are losing our Buddhist population".



Lamayuru Monastery, Ladakh

In August 2019, when the Indian government declared Ladakh a State within the Indian Union, there was much hype created in the media that India would have its first Buddhist majority state. But, Venerable Sanghasena⁷², Founder President of Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre in Leh says that is not the case.

"Buddhism is not in majority in Ladakh. It consists of 2 districts (Muslim majority) Kargil and Leh. Both together Buddhists are a minority," he noted adding, "but there was a time the Buddhists were the majority. Now Buddhists are less than 50 percent and Muslims are the majority".

However, Ven Sanghasena believes that granting statehood will certainly help to preserve and to develop the Buddhist culture and traditions of Ladakh. Because, earlier when the Buddhist community of Ladakh was part of Jammu and Kashmir "we had all sorts of discrimination there and there were true threats for our existence – to preserve our Buddhist identity and survive" he added. Now he is confident that the Government of India will give good support and encouragement to preserve the Buddhist culture here. Yet he is worried that the Buddhist population in Ladakh is decreasing while the Muslims are increasing.

The Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre is situated in the valley and works with the Buddhist people of Leh. They have organized several international Buddhist and environmental conferences here, where there is a well-equipped guesthouse. They also run a home for old feeble people, a school and orphanage. A dedicated team under the energetic monk has been able to mobilize social workers, teachers, doctors, monks, nuns and community leaders to help the elderly, needy and the sick in the valley. Through spiritual teachings they are also developing a sustainable ecological development model for the Himalayan region. This also includes regional and international collaborations.

⁷² Email interview from Leh, January 2020.

“We wish to build a strong connection with Buddhists particular in Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and other Asian countries,” said Ven Sanghasena.

Buddhist Media in India

With Buddhists scattered across India and also segregated to various sects, schools and political ideologies, there don't seem to be any national Buddhist media network to bring Buddhists together. However there are pockets of growing Buddhist media, and as well a lack of knowledge about using community radio for propagating Buddhism.

Ven Sanghasena and Ven Dhammapiya have considered setting up a community radio station in Ladakh and Tripura respectively but given up on the idea, because of worries about sustainability.

Said Ven Sanghasena: “We tried to start community radio but there were many conditions put out by the Government. We almost got permission but last minute we stopped it because we will find it difficult to survive. Community Radio is not allowed to collect advertisements, so we thought it will be difficult to sustain. We haven't yet started. We would very much like to start a radio That would have been great to broadcast our Buddhist programs, teachings dhamma, etc”.

Tathagat TV

There are a few Buddhist TV channels that transmit mainly via Internet. One of them is Lucknow based Tathagat TV⁷³. Akil Sindhu⁷⁴ is the founder and Director of Tathagat TV(TTV). “We cover more social issues rather than covering traditional Buddhist activities (like chanting and sermons)” he said, adding that his TV is a medium for new Buddhists – who are followers of Dr Ambedkar. “There's a large community of Ambedkar people in India, but no representation of them in the mainstream media in India. TTV represents those people in the media. How they live, how they work, practices they should do. How come they not get their upliftment in society? So it is a representation of them, the Buddhist people - it is their broadcast showcase”.

Sindhu believes that there are no Buddhist media in India. “If somebody showed an ordination it is not Buddhist media,” he argues. “For Buddhist media, you have to work on the field and if people see you this is TTV they approach you. They want to give interviews they want to share their tradition, problems. We have a large audience and because we are not very rigid and we are not extremists. It's a middle path media and certainly a representation of Buddhists on social issues. I'm not talking about economic problems, but social problems. There are a lot of social problems in India with the Buddhists”.

They use Facebook, YouTube and other social media outlets to transmit the channel or disseminate the information. When asked about going into community radio, Sindhu related his experience thus: “In India, community

⁷³ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCu359yTUzcA2b5RN_hA2sfw/featured

⁷⁴ Interview with author in Bodhgaya, in January 2019.

radio is known as CRS (community radio station). Ministry of Information and Broadcasting gives license. It's 14 lakhs project and 7 lakhs you have to fund. The Government of India gives the other half. It's one-time investment. They have guidelines on what program to broadcast and what not to. There should be no advertisements, there should be no broadcast of film songs, you can only broadcast folk music, and third is there should be no religious opinion about any community. I cannot broadcast about Ambedkar. It is only available for a 25 km radius (transmitter power) not nationally. In 25 km radius how many people I will get? Will be very few people who will listen to us? No advertisements and I will not be able to promote the religious thoughts of Buddha or Ambedkar. So even if you get a license for Buddhist radio you cannot promote Buddhism because parliament has passed a law that you cannot broadcast religious content, religious harmony should be maintained".

AWAAZ TV

AWAAZ TV (ATV) is a Nagpur-based Buddhist TV network set up in 2013. "Idea of this channel is to bring all Buddhist countries together in one platform. To give them a platform to promote values of Buddhism - morality, equality, fraternity" explained Aman Kamble⁷⁵, Director of ATV.

He also added that they are not only targeting Buddhists to promote Buddhist values, but also the Hindu community. "We want people to see Buddhism as a way of life that everyone can accept. That is why we started this channel," he added.

In addition, Aman said, the marginalized younger generations of Buddhists need media to propagate their ideas. "They have fewer resources. So we have started this channel to propagate their ideas, their thoughts to promote the ideas of Ambedkar and others, who have done a lot of development for the community".

As for their program and broadcasting strategy, Aman explained: "We have given segments to monks and we ask questions to clarify. We have interviews, debates and question sessions. We go to Buddhist temples and ask questions on different topics related to Buddha Dhamma. All the kids and adults come to the vihara, they get together, its a good program. We have documentary features, our own production unit make. We do documentaries on people who have devoted their lives to Buddhism. They have given so much of their time to serve our people. We have some Buddhist musical programs, meditation programs, current affairs, issues affecting Buddhism and Buddhist values. We are awakening people that way".

Aman said that when they started the channel, it opened avenues to showcase the tremendous musical talents their Buddhist community had. Many people have created songs on the life of the Buddha and modern Buddhism. When they bring these to the channel, they broadcast.

When asked about funding for the channel he said: "This is a crucial issue, there was a time when there were very few Buddhists and no one were supporting us (financially). But we have willpower. We have been for 6 years. Our people are

⁷⁵ Interview with author in Nagpur, December 2019.

middle class and upper middle class, they support with whatever they have. Our staff is very cooperative; they feel that whatever we do is a mission not a commercial venture. We broadcast very few commercials”.

Thus, in this chapter, I have tried to give a diverse idea as possible about the situation with Buddhism in India. Time constraints did not allow me to visit two important Buddhist communities – Dharmasala and Arunachal Pradesh. But, I hope I have been able to give you a diverse perspective on Buddhism and the communication needs of Buddhist communities across India.

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Chapter 6

Nepal: Buddhism At Crossroads In Buddha's Birthplace

Though India may claim that it is the home of the Buddha and Buddhism, it is at Lumbini in modern-day Nepal that Prince Siddhartha was born. It is just 30 km away from the closest Indian border crossing at Sunauli and about a 2-hour drive from the major Indian rail junction of Gorakhpur. Every year, tens of thousands of Buddhist pilgrims from across Asia visit Lumbini to pay homage to the Buddha – most come across the border from India after visiting other holy sites of Buddhism such as Bodhgaya, Rajgir, Sravasti, Sarnath and Kushinara - while others may fly in via Kathmandu.



Mayadevi temple, marking the spot where Queen Maya Devi gave birth to Prince Siddhartha

The complex of structures within the archaeological conservation area includes the Shakya Tank; the remains within the Maya Devi Temple consisting of brick structures in a cross-wall system dating from the 3rd century BCE to the present century and the sandstone Ashoka pillar with its Pali inscription in Brahmi script. Additionally, there are the excavated remains of Buddhist viharas (monasteries) from the 3rd century BCE to the 5th century CE and the remains of Buddhist stupas (memorial shrines) from the 3rd century BC to the 15th century CE. The site is now being developed as a Buddhist pilgrimage center, where the archaeological remains associated with the birth of the Lord Buddha form a central feature (UNESCO)⁷⁶.

Lumbini was inscribed on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in 1997 as the place where Gautama Buddha was born in 623 BCE.

The Hindu Kingdom and Buddhism

Many historians have claimed that the Buddha did visit Nepal after his enlightenment in Bodhgaya. Since the remains of Kapilavastu - what is believed to be the palace and the environment in which Prince Siddhartha grew up – are only about 30 km from Lumbini, taking a cue from the Buddha's life story, it is possible that he visited this area. However, Nepal was the world's only Hindu Kingdom until 2008, but today it is a secular republic.

⁷⁶ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/666/>

The 2011 census showed that in a population of 26.5 million, Hindus make up 81.3 percent, while Buddhists constitute 9 percent and Christians 1.4 percent. The latter has seen a substantial increase in the number of its followers in the last ten years, although the number is still small compared to other religions⁷⁷. In the past decade, the number of Christians is believed to have increased three-fold, due to aggressive proselytism, especially following the 2015 earthquake. This led to the Nepali government introducing an anti-conversion law in 2018, mainly to protect its Hindu population, and also as a national security issue⁷⁸.

The number of Buddhists in Nepal could be much higher than what the statistics indicate. Though most people in Nepal are Hindu, Buddhist influences are pervasive in most aspects of Nepali culture. Tibetan Buddhism is the most widely followed and the Newar Buddhists practice a particular Newar variant of Vajrayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism.

The history of Buddhism in Nepal, especially in the Himalayan mountain areas and in the Kathmandu Valley is interesting. There is definite evidence, such as the Ashoka pillar at Mahadevi temple, that Emperor Ashoka had visited Lumbini and Kapilavastu. But, if he went all the way to the Kathmandu valley is still being debated. Guru Padmasambhava – who introduced Buddhism to Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet – is believed to have visited Nepal when he was 26 years old and stayed for 4 years between 743-747 CE. He has disseminated the Vajrayana doctrine widely in the Kathmandu valley. Buddhism found in the Kathmandu Valley may very well represent the oldest continuous forms of Buddhism in the world, argues Sakya (1995).

Nepal was declared a Hindu Kingdom in 1768 when King Prithvi Narayan Shah united all the small kingdoms. It lasted for 240 years until a new constitution adopted by a communist-dominated government in 2008 declared Nepal a secular republic. During this period, Nepal was formally under the rule of the Shah dynasty, which exercised varying degrees of power during the kingdom's existence.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the government of Nepal even banished a few Buddhist monks from Nepal aiming to suppress the resurgence of Theravada Buddhism in the country. In 1926 and again in 1944, several monks were deported from Kathmandu. Those exiled in 1926 were the first group of monks to have been seen in Nepal since the 14th century. They had been trying to revive Theravada Buddhism, which had disappeared from Nepal over five hundred years before (Marianne, 2015) In 1928, Ven. Mahaprajna a Theravada monk from Kushinagar and Ven. Amritananda preached the dhamma extensively in Nepal and were imprisoned under a non-conversion policy of Rana rulers, Ven. Amritananda later left for Burma to further his study and then to Sri Lanka. In 1944, when monks who returned after studies overseas started dhamma propagation activities, these were interrupted and the monks were expelled. Living in Sarnath, Ven. Amritananda formed Dharmodaya Sabha.

⁷⁷ <https://cbs.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Population-Monograph-of-Nepal-2014-Volume-I-FinalPrintReady1.pdf>

⁷⁸ <https://orientalreview.org/2018/08/27/nepals-anti-conversion-law-is-more-about-national-security-than-christianity/>

In 1956, Dhannodaya Sabha organized its 4th General Conference of W.F.B. under the patronage of late King Mahendra. Since then, Buddhist monks of Theravada tradition established monasteries such as Anandakuti, Sumangala Vihara, Sakya Simha Vihara, Ganamaha Vihara, Vishwa Santi Vihara, Nagarmandap Vihar and in various districts of Nepal (Sakya, 1995).

In 1946, a Sri Lankan goodwill mission that visited Kathmandu was able to convince the King that the Buddha was born in Nepal, so his followers should be free to practice their faith in the country where he was born. Eventually, the ban was lifted and the monks returned, renewing their efforts to spread the faith. Shortly after in 1951, the Rana regime was ousted by a revolution, democracy was established and the overt persecution of Buddhists ended (Marianne, 2015).

In August 2018, when a new Civic Code was introduced by the communist-led government stipulating that anyone involved in proselytizing will face a five-year jail term and Rs 50,000 fine, there were fears that Hindu nationalism may be creeping back. In an interview with the BBC, KB Rokaya⁷⁹, a pioneer Christian and former member of the National Human Rights Commission made an interesting comment:

Nepalis accepted secularism without really understanding what it meant. Even we Christians took to the streets demanding a secular nation. But after the election of the second Constituent Assembly and before the new constitution was drafted, I realised it was a mistake. We had blindly supported it without understanding the implications. Secularism must be abolished from the constitution because the state cannot be indifferent to religion. In the context of Nepal, it means going back to the Hindu Kingdom. Secularism makes society immoral and corrupt. The government has restricted religious activities. Religious communities do not have a voice. Religious leaders are not allowed to speak. The actions or laws of the government cannot be challenged based on religion or religious texts.

Dr Kabindra Bajracharya,⁸⁰ former President, Nepal Traditional Buddhist Association believes that there are more Buddhists in Nepal than the official statistics indicate. "Buddhist religion is not so much talked about in politics. Between Hindus and Buddhists they have a mixed culture and a lot of tolerance. There is no problem, argument nor conflict," he says, pointing out that tertiary institutions such as Lumbini International Buddhist University and Kathmandu University teach and discuss Buddhism freely, including holding international conferences.

Marketing Lumbini For Pilgrimage and Tourism

The plan to develop Lumbini, as a Buddhist pilgrim center, was first proposed by Japanese professor Kezo Tange in 1972. Today, a 3 square km area around

⁷⁹ <https://www.nepalitimes.com/from-the-nepali-press/back-to/>

⁸⁰ Interview with author at International Lay Buddhist Conference in Ayuthaya, Thailand in December 2018.

the Mayadevi temple – that marks the spot of Prince Siddhartha’s birth under a sal tree – has been cleared up by local residents. A Japanese-style Canal has been built leading to the site and acres of land on either side have been reserved for Buddhist monasteries from both Theravada and Mahayana traditions. Already 30 monasteries have been built out of a planned 46, almost all funded by foreign governments that have been given land under a 99-year lease. An international Buddhist university has also been established. But, the problem Lumbini has is that there are hardly any Buddhists living in the area. About 60 percent of the population here are Muslims and the rest are mainly Hindu.



New developments in the Mahayana sector in Lumbini

Lumbini Development Trust was formed by the Government of Nepal as provisioned by Lumbini Development Trust Act 2042 (1985) in 1985 to implement Lumbini Master Plan, explore, excavate and conserve archaeological sites scattered in Kapilavastu, Rupandehi and Nawalparasi districts. The LDT was constituted in order to present before the people of the world and commitment of the Government of Nepal to project goal and ideal of development of Lumbini⁸¹.

Ven Metteyya Sakyaputta⁸², Vice Chairman of LDT admits that developing Lumbini as a Buddhist pilgrim center where the majority local community is Muslim creates a complex problem. “(LDT) believes that Lumbini belongs to all Buddhists from across the world,” he said in an interview and argues that Lumbini could also become a symbol of a compassionate cultural awakening that could encompass all religions. He added that the local Hindu and Muslim communities are ready to showcase their rich traditions of costumes, cuisine, street dance and drumming to interpret religion “in a peaceful theme showing compassion to others”.

“We have removed 7 villages, 6 Hindu temples and 4 mosques to establish the Lumbini development area. It's a large project, and people did not protest when it was said that for Buddhists we should do this,” pointed out Ven Sakyaputtra.

Though Nepal was the world’s only Hindu kingdom until recently, Venerable Sakyaputta argues that the history of this area is immersed with Buddhism (see box interview below). Recently, archeologists have identified the ancient city of Kapilavastu and the palace where Prince Sidharta grew up just 30 km from

⁸¹ <https://lumbinidevtrust.gov.np/en/home/content/13>

⁸² Interview with author in Lumbini, September 2019.

Lumbini. There are plans to build an international nunnery at this site – that will go well with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In 2013, an international team of archeologists discovered a wooden structure beneath the Mayadevi temple, which they claim is the earliest example of a Buddhist monastery⁸³.

Developing A Buddhist Culture In A Non-Buddhist Community
Interview with Ven Metteyya Sakyaputta⁸⁴, Vice Chairman of LDT

Most of the Hindus living around Lumbini have been living there for generations. Most people living in Lumbini, Kapilavastu have a connection with rituals from those sites. Only meaning was forgotten. So there is harmony.

Everyone wants Lumbini developed. We have started many schools in the area. These are Buddhist schools but not to convert people to Buddhism. We have Muslim students, about 60 percent of people living in the Lumbini area are Muslims. We welcome them to our schools. In one community school, we have roughly about 1600 students. What we do is while we teach the secular subjects, we teach them 1 subject that has a history of Lumbini, Kapilavastu, Ramadeva, about Prince Siddhartha, about his father, mother and his kingdom, as well as basic teachings of the Buddha. This way we connect them with their history. Buddha is part of our history, our heritage, so we need to learn about that. The great challenge is how to connect these people to their great great grand parents who would have been part of the story of Buddhism. Might have been Buddhists themselves - this is a real communication challenge.

World Buddhist Conference was held in Lumbini 1998 and there was a follow up in 2000. All Buddhist delegates gathered here realised that Lumbini needs to become a center for learning. Centre for Buddhist teachings. The government has started that process but not become a reality yet. University is a very complex word. For a country like this, basic education of Buddhism is not there. We should start with small Buddhist colleges and then transit into university level. But we started from top first with Phd programs. How can you teach at Phd level to a community that does not know the ABCDs of Buddhism? Then they started Masters (degree), but they are having difficulty there. They don't have any Buddhist students. We don't even have a 'pirivena' education system here.

I have advised the university chancellor and others that we have to think out of the box here. Instead of Phds and Masters in Buddhist studies, why don't we have basic level Buddhism? I encourage them to create a 'pirivena' type of high school. When they graduate from high school, if they are interested they can go and receive Bachelor, Master's at the university. Because it's a university, they cannot offer courses lower than the Bachelor's level. So we are in a bit of a dilemma..... problem is without government support a pirivena type program on a larger scale cannot function. Because people living here don't know the Buddhist culture, it needs intervention funding from the government or a larger source.

The idea is for Lumbini to be an open museum... all these unique (Buddhist) practices from around the world should be available in Lumbini. When a devotee comes on pilgrimage to Lumbini, they can spend a day or two learning about different Buddhist traditions. From different monasteries. They can see how Buddhist monks live and practice. We have challenges here .. one of them is language. For example, the Chinese monastery has 15 monks at a time hardly any of them know English. So how do you communicate with others? Another problem is some of those monasteries are run by governments, and monks are sent for a year or two. So they change monks frequently. No chance to learn the language and to know local people.

We are starting a 'Visit Nepal 2020' program that includes temple stays. We want to encourage especially young people who want to learn Buddhism to come and stay at the temples overnight. Learning meditation, customs and rituals. We have asked monks from Korea, Mongolia, Japanese and Chinese to offer such programs in Lumbini. We Buddhists are very familiar with Sinhalese, Thai or Burmese traditions but we don't know how Japanese monks practice. There are Tibetan

⁸³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/12/buddha-birthplace-discovered-nepal-20131210104114734178.html>

⁸⁴ Interview with author in Lumbini, September 2019.

monks, they don't know how Korean monks practice. So we are encouraging them to go and stay in the Korean temple for 2 or 3 days. Korean monks can explain why they do this, why this is happening. So we hope to introduce these things from next year. It will be open to any visitors to Lumbini .. they can stay in monasteries.

Since they are not Buddhists, to keep the local community happy they need to see tangible economic benefits coming out of this project. LDT and Lumbini Buddhist University are now discussing with the Chinese, Tibetan, Thai, Japanese, and Koreans who have built grand monasteries here to design programs collaboratively, such as workshops and retreats so that pilgrims and tourists visiting here could stay on for a few days and bring revenue to the local community.

The community school Venerable Sakyaputta mentioned (see box above) is Buddha Metta School. Phra Sittichai⁸⁵ of the Thai temple in Lumbini said that most temples in Lumbini have minimal interaction with the local community. Thus, with funds from Thai Buddhists, they launched the school to educate the local community who are poor. Nepali monks trained in Thailand, manage this school.



Thai Temple, Lumbini

“Nepal government persuaded the Thai government to build the temple here. The land was leased to the Thai government - all monasteries lease land for 99 years here” he explained. “We built the school in terms of giving not for spreading Buddhism. Buddhists lack manpower here to do that. There are no restrictions, however, to preach Buddhism here. If we have manpower we can do it”. He pointed out that a Nepali monk trained in Thailand came back, got funds from the Thais to spread Buddhism here. Now he got 30 Nepali novices.

Nepali government’s desire to develop Lumbini as a major Buddhist pilgrim and tourist attraction also had its drawbacks. In 2016, according to LDT, Lumbini attracted 270,522 tourists, which is minuscule compared to Vatican’s 3.95 million in the same period. One of the problems Lumbini faces is its remoteness. It is about 10 hours treacherous road trip from Kathmandu or about a two-hour journey from Gorakhpur rail station in India, with at least 1-2 hours to cross the border into Nepal due often to traffic congestion at the border. A new international airport called ‘Gautama Buddha International Airport’ has just been opened near Lumbini with a local airline “Buddha Air’ offering budget fares.

Almost a decade ago, a Chinese company mooted a much-publicized USD 3 billion plan to develop Lumbini. When asked about it, Hari D Rai⁸⁶, Information and PR Chief of LDT said, after some initial hesitation, that the investors were Chinese MNC’s (multinational corporations) many from the US, Indonesia and China. “The idea was to develop Lumbini as an international tourist center with

⁸⁵ Interview with author in Lumbini, September 2019.

⁸⁶ Formal discussion at LDT in September 2019.

monorail etc – a type of Buddhist Disneyland. They would develop it over 5 to 6 years then get returns over 20 years (before handing the project to Nepal)”. The plan included “world-class experts” to come to Lumbini to conduct training programs in conflict resolution. “When the Nepali government understood and found that they would not gain much, they did not accept it,” he added.

Lumbini International Buddhist University

Though the Lumbini International Buddhist University (LIBU) was set up following a resolution adopted by the World Buddhist Conference in Lumbini in 1998, because the Nepali Government funds it, it is secular by definition. Thus, they also need to open the university for students from the area who are predominantly non-Buddhist. Almost all the students at the university are non-Buddhists and predominantly Muslim. They also have only one Buddhist among the academic staff. The university’s mission statement says: “Academic Excellence and Research for promoting Buddhist Concepts for Peace, Compassion, Virtuous and Sustainable Development”.

They offer a Phd program in Buddhist Studies, MAs in different Buddhist schools and Buddhism and Peace Studies. Their BA programs include a course in Travel and Tourism Management where the development of Buddhist tourism in Lumbini is included.

Dr Manik Ratna Sakya⁸⁷ pointed out that LIBU is the only Buddhist University in Nepal and most students who come here are not Buddhists but interested in Buddhism. “Before coming here they didn't know about Buddhism and gradually they learned about Buddhism,” he added. He also pointed out that LIBU has 8 affiliated colleges across Nepal where there are Buddhist students.

A senior academic in an informal discussion said that what they do is add Buddhist elements to most of the curriculum taught at the university. The most challenging task for them is to convince the local community that they are not a Buddhist university, that teaches only Buddhism. When they introduced a rural development program, some community members have come to discuss with them whether that was a course in Buddhism. “Whatever Buddhism we teach is academic,” he said.

This conflict between secularism and religious teachings in government universities raises the question of whether LIBU went the wrong way in introducing a Buddhist educational institution in Lumbini. As Ven Sakyaputta argued (see box above) it would have been better to introduce a ‘pirivena’ type educational institution in Lumbini than a state university. But, the question here is who is going to fund it?

Newari Buddhism In Kathmandu Valley

Kathmandu valley, especially the historic Patan area, is dotted with Buddhist temples and small stupas on every street corner. Locals say that some of the ancient temples here go back to the time of the Ashoka Empire.

⁸⁷ Interview with author in Lumbini, September 2019.



Buddhist stupas in Kathmandu Valley

Most of the Buddhists in Kathmandu valley come from the Newari community – who are also related to the Sakya clan from which Prince Siddhartha came. Thus, they carry the Sakya name and have a unique practice of Buddhism that is non-monastic and the monks are part-timers and non-celibate. Their temples and rituals seem a synthesis of Hinduism and Buddhism. As one devotee told me at a

Buddhist temple in Patan: “Many Hindus come here to worship and they think they are practicing Hinduism. In fact they practice our Buddhism”. That is why many Buddhists in Kathmandu claim that about 50 percent of residents there are Buddhists.

“Among hundreds of communities, the Newars have an unbroken history of over two millennia in Nepal. They have turned their Kathmandu Valley and some areas beyond the valley ridges into the stage of beauty and civilization that none of the other communities have nurtured here” argues Razen Manandhar (2018), a journalist with Bodhi TV. He points out that all Newars are not Buddhists - some are Hindus.

Between the 8th to 12th centuries when Mahayana Buddhism moved from India to Tibet it went through Kathmandu Valley and left its imprint here. But when it was traced back, it was different, “either you call it syncretism of Hinduism and Buddhism or just Hindu encroachment into Buddhist philosophy, the result is, what people now broadly term as Newar Buddhism,” notes Manandhar (2018),

A unique feature of Newari Buddhism is that the temples are built as courtyards surrounded by a two-story building usually hosting a shrine room. The courtyard would have many shrines, bells, etc that resemble more a Hindu temple. There are about 400 such historic temples in Kathmandu valley. The monasteries do not have resident monks, which makes them different from both Mahayana and Theravada monasteries.

The monasteries do not have any celibate monks these days. It is said that King Jayasthiti Malla (1374–1395 CE) introduced the caste system among Newars and forcefully disrobed the celibate monks. These days the boys from Bajracharya and Shakya families go through the rituals of ordination (chudakarma) and instead remain a monk for only four days. After that, they all live normal lives as social beings. However, some Bajracharyas may prefer to spend life as Buddhist priests, supporting other laymen to practice rituals of Vajrayana Buddhism. They connect the rituals of Mayahana or Vajrayana with the daily lives of Buddhists of the valley (Manandhar, 2018).

A devotee at the famous Golden Temple in Patan told me that there are about 500 members (of Sakyas) who are members of the temple, and 1 family is responsible for a month to run the temple. They provide 1 child to become a monk for that period. Monks wear white robes and they perform rituals that are similar to Theravada ceremonies.

“What we do for ritual has a reason and comes from Buddhist philosophy” explained the devotee. “This temple represents three schools of Buddhism – Theravada, Mahayana and Vjrayana. We believe there’s divine protection here. Need to do ritual practices each day to get deities’ help. This temple mixes Hindu and Buddhist rituals. But, statues are original Sakyamuni Buddha”.

“Their rituals have survived (for centuries),” argues Bodhi TV producer Bimala⁸⁸. “Family members provide a monk for 4 days (in a year) and that is a special (unique) ritual. Boys between 5-12 become a monk for 4 days. Only Sakyas and Bajnacharya communities do it. Sakya is born as Vajrayana Buddhists but may not necessarily identify as such. Sakyas were earlier monks staying in monasteries. When Buddhism collapsed they became lay people”.

Newari Buddhists also have a strong musical tradition where temples have musical groups and they sing songs that are very similar in rhythm and presentation to Hindu bhajans. Instead of the ‘paritta’ (Pali chanting of sutras) you normally hear at Theravada temples, the Newari temples were more akin to a Sikh temple, where singers accompanied by a traditional orchestra sing Buddhist songs for an hour or more before puja times (perhaps as part of the puja). It has an entertaining element to it. One member of a musical group said that through their songs – which are sung in Nepali or Newari language – they sing about the “teachings of Sakyamuni or the good things you can do”.



Child monk (left) and Temple Musical group (top)

Mukund Bista, President of the Golden temple said that most of the Newari of Kathmandu valley are middle class and fairly well to do. Thus, Buddhism thrives in the valley. But, hill tribe Taman Buddhists are poor and many have been converting to Christianity. “Christians are offering them better healthcare, education They don't know what Christianity is but are attracted by their lucrative offers and convert to Christianity,” he added. “Only way Buddhist community could counter it is to educate the people about dhamma. We don’t have good dhamma teachers in villages”.

The Guthis – Buddhist Institution Under Threat

In September 2019, when I visited the communities, there was a dispute between the Newari Buddhist community and the government. Guthis are Newari land-holding trusts that support Mahaviharas (temples) through their

⁸⁸ Interview with author in Kathmandu, September 2019.

landholdings. They also receive tax-free income from them. Shakya and Drechsler (2019) note: “The defining aspect of the Newar society of Kathmandu valley is their traditional form of community governance – the Guthi. The Guthi is a specifically Buddhist institution of community governance based on the notion of societal resilience and philanthropism”.



Swayambhunath Stupa, Kathmandu Valley

A Newari Buddhist journalist explained to me that Newaris have set up trusts for 1500 years. All Newaris belong to one or other trusts. Members help each other. They never thought temples are owned by anybody but take care of them. Trusts were set up not to own but to take care of. Now the government wants to own trusts. The government is interested because there is the land in the trusts. All monasteries have large land some for agriculture where their rice harvest funds temples. Some Newars have sold some land illegally. Now rice harvest is not enough to fund temples.

A university communications professor told me when asked about the issue that what the government is trying to do is to bring the Guthi land under common law. “Guthis operated by trustees passed from generation to generation. Nobody can buy the land of the Guthis. Government doesn't want to take over the Guthis. Outside Kathmandu Valley, 1000s of acres of land are acquired by Guthis. There is a limit to Guthi's ownership of land and if they have more than that the government will take over. The government did not discuss the bill with stakeholders .. so they think the government is trying to take over our Guthis”.

The journalist said that they protest in the streets. But the communists have a 2/3rd majority in parliament. “Newars are a minority in all sectors including media. Hindus who are also Newars control media. But they do not support the Buddhist Newar campaign. Most media don't support any claims of Newars because they (managers) are high caste Hindus”. A senior newspaper editor, who is a high caste Hindu, confirmed this point to me.

Bodhi Television

Bodhi Television⁸⁹ (BTV) is a Kathmandu-based Buddhist television network that was set up in 2016. They broadcast sermons by monks, news features, discussion programs, and even a 1-hour of chanting from Mayadevi Temple in Lumbini each morning. The broadcasts are mainly in the Nepali language, but English programs are also broadcast sometimes.

“I'm born Buddhist, but had no knowledge of Buddhism. When I came to know beautiful things about Buddhism, I wanted it broadcast to the world. Nepal has tremendous contents on Buddhism” said Sanjeeb Tuladhar⁹⁰, Chairman of Bodhi TV. He also added, that when they started, they did programs targeting foreign audiences (via their YouTube feed), but soon found out that Nepalis need this

⁸⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjowTZLq2bmdBwlfHujShWQ/featured>

⁹⁰ Interview with author in Kathmandu, September 2019.

information more. "Many Nepalis have no knowledge of Buddhism, even Buddhists, though Buddha was born in Nepal," he laments. "We focus on Nepali people now and almost all programs are done in the Nepali language".

"BTV is trying to distinguish Buddhism from Hinduism. Hindus go to Buddhist temples and think, they are blessed by Hindu gods. So we are trying to educate people on Buddhist teachings and Buddhist monuments. Where people think it's Hindu," he explained.

Talking to BTV producers they gave a good account of the diversity of programs they do on Buddhism in Nepal. These are programs that could be very useful for other countries to watch as well. It reflects the diversity, resilience and struggles of Buddhists across Asia. They are planning to shift operations to Kapilavastu near Lumbini in the near future and establish networking with other Buddhist channels in the region.

Producer Manandhar expressed a note of caution when they have to cover sensitive issues like the Guthi dispute. "It is very difficult for Bodhi TV," he said. "We cannot alienate them (Hindu community). We can't be vocal in critical issues. When Brahmins do it, it is a national issue. When we do it it's communal. Bodhi TV therefore does programs on Buddhist culture, philosophy etc, not political issues".

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Chapter 7

Sri Lanka: Great Buddhist Heritage At Stake

Though Buddhism originated in India, it was in Sri Lanka that it flourished beginning with the introduction of the religion to the island in the 3rd century BCE by Bhikku Mahinda the son of the great Indian emperor Ashoka.

The Sri Lankan scholar-monk late Walpola Rahula (1956, p1) argues:

When the Indian missionaries brought Buddhism to this island, they carried here with them not only the teachings of the Buddha but also the culture and civilization of Buddhist India. Almost all the Buddhist rites, ceremonies, festivals and observances of Ceylon were, with slight local changes and modifications, the continuation of Indian practices which the early Buddhist missionaries introduced to this country.

The story of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka is legendary. Venerable Mahinda is believed to have arrived in Sri Lanka in the BE 236 with 4 other monks and they met the then King of the island Devanampiyatissa while he was on a hilltop near Anuradhapura on a regular hunting expedition. After meeting the monks, and since he has heard about Buddhism from his friend Emperor Ashoka, he has invited them to his palace in Anuradhapura and treated them with utmost respect and kindness. The next day Ven Mahinda and his companions were offered residence at the royal pavilion and they stayed there for 26 days preaching the dhamma to the royal household and officials.



Temple at Mihintale built to commemorate the spot (rock in the background) where Venerable Mahinda preached Buddhism to King Devanampiyatissa for the first time

With the conversion of Devanampiyatissa and his royal household to Buddhism, the religion soon spread in the kingdom and through royal patronage many Buddhist temples and monasteries were built. Ven Mahinda brought along 4 *upasampatha*⁹¹ monks so the Buddha Sasana could be established in Sri Lanka. But, once when Devanampiyatissa asked the venerable monk if Buddha Sasana has been established in the kingdom, he answered that it will be thus established when a son born in the kingdom to local parents studies the *vinaya*⁹² in the island and recites it there, then the roots of the Sasana will grow.

King Devanampiyatissa dispatched to the court of Emperor Ashoka a request to bring his daughter Bhikkuni Sangamitta to Sri Lanka along with a branch of the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, to help establish the order of nuns. This request was granted and the Bo Tree thus planted in Anuradhapura is being worshipped and venerated

⁹¹ *Upasampatha* monks have undergone a higher ordination ceremony to graduate from a novice to a fully ordained monk.

⁹² *Vinaya* is the disciplinary code for self-training laid down by the Buddha for monks and nuns to observe. Vinaya plays a pivotal role in their monastic way of life.

ever since. Devanampiyatissa was also able to receive from India the right collar bone of the Buddha which is enshrined in the Thuparama stupa in Anuradhapura.

The planting of the Bodhi tree was symbolic of the establishment of Buddhism and Buddhist culture on the island. The relic of the Buddha was regarded as representing the Buddha himself, and their enshrinement was as good as Buddha's residence in Lanka (Rahula, 1956, p 58)

During the 40-year reign of Devanampiyatissa, an unbroken link was established between the Buddha Sasana and the government of the country. It was the responsibility and custom of the rulers of the country to patronize, protect and nurture the Buddha Sasana. A requirement that is enshrined in the present constitution of Sri Lanka adopted in 1972 when the country was declared a Republic.

This chapter is a summary of the 177-page book 'The Scourge of Poverty and Proselytism' I published with funding from World Buddhist University in Bangkok (see Seneviratne, 2017) plus the addition of some interviews and literature surveys done since that.

Sri Lanka's Buddhist Heritage

The Sinhalese have built a rich Buddhist civilization over the past 25 centuries on the small island. Some of the major components of it are as follows:

- **Mahavihara Tradition**



Ruins of Abayagiri Vihara in Anuradhapura, closely associated with the Mahavihara tradition

The Mahavihara is the oldest and foremost centre of Buddhist learning in Sri Lanka with its origin going back to the introduction of Buddhism to the island by Arahant Mahinda Thera. Mahavihara tradition has developed gradually in the country from that time. Pemaloka (2008) argues that the Buddhism brought to Sri Lanka by Arahant Mahinda is the purest form of the dhamma that was recited and confirmed by the 3rd Sangayana (monks council).

Walpola Rahula (1956, p 85) notes:

The Mahavihara was the original and first center of Buddhism, hallowed by Mahinda himself; its monks were proud of the great traditions, and jealously guarded the honour and authority of their vihara. They had enjoyed the undivided regard and respect, loyalty and support of the state and the public, and did not like new elements entering the field to share their privileges and dividing attention.

The preservation of the Mahavihara tradition in Anuradhapura has been a long and hard struggle with many attempts between the 3rd century BCE and 5th century CE to undermine its importance in the Anuradhapura monastic tradition. It is mentioned in

the travelogue of the Chinese bhikkhu Fa-Hien (4th century CE) that, 3,000 venerable bhikkhus were dwelling in the Mahaviharas then. The two main Buddhist temples of Sri Lanka today, Malwatta and Asgiriya viharas in Kandy are very much ingrained in the Mahavihara tradition.

- **Writing of Tipitaka**

An important landmark in Sri Lankan Buddhist history, in the latter parts of the 1st century BCE, is that for the first time Dhamma teachings were transformed into written text. A Brahmin named Tissa has declared war on the Sinhalese King Vattagamani and 7 Tamil Generals from South India have landed in the north and marched towards Anuradhapura with their forces. After that, for 14 years five Tamils ruled in succession from Anuradhapura. King Vattagamani lay in hiding in remote parts of the country. In addition, the whole country was ravaged by famine.

Senior Buddhist monks and Sinhalese leaders saw that Buddhism was under threat in Sri Lanka. The oral tradition of the 3 Pitakas, which has so far been handed down from teacher to pupil, appeared no longer possible under the prevailing conditions. The primary concern of the sangha during this tragic period was to preserve the teachings of the Buddha (Rahula, 1956).

Thus, in the 1st century BCE, on the advice of the sangha, King Vattagamani (Valagamba) assembled over a hundred Buddhist monks at the Aluvihare Temple in Matale (in Central Sri Lanka) to put all the Buddhist teachings to text. This was the first Buddhist Council to be held outside India. The Theravada Pali Buddhist canon 'Tipitaka' was compiled here. Until then Buddha's teachings were orally transmitted. This Pali cannon has been preserved in its purest form up till today and has been instrumental in the spread of Buddhism across Southeast Asia and other faraway lands.

The writing down of the Tipitaka in the 1st century BC in Sri Lanka is one of the greatest events in the history of Buddhism. That's because dhamma appeared in text form after that. Before that it was oral. It's important because by that time, 1st century BC, the Vedas had not been committed to writing it down. So the Sri Lankan Buddhists took a bold step for the first time in the history of religion to write the text in ola leaf – Emeritus Professor Oliver Abeynayake, Buddhist and Pali University in 'Path of the Dhamma' (AMIC/ISEAS 2009)

Hema Goonatilake (2010) notes that from the beginning of the founding of Burma, Sinhala Bhikkhus have taught the Tipitaka and the Pali language, incidentally through the Sinhala script. She argues that from the 11th century to the 15th century CE, Sinhalese religious and cultural influence impacted heavily on Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. From there, it spread to southern Vietnam and the Yunnan province of China.

- **Sri Mahabodhi**

The sacred Bo Tree – Sri Mahabodhi – in Anuradhapura is reckoned as the oldest surviving historic tree in the world⁹³. It is believed to be the southern branch of the original tree in Bodhgaya under which Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment.

⁹³ It is believed that the current Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya is an offshoot of the original tree.

When the Anuradhapura civilization began to disintegrate around the middle of the 11th century CE as a consequence of a series of South Indian Chola invasions, sacred places in the city were encroached by the jungle. Yet, people in the small villages that survived, looked after the sacred places, especially the Sri Mahabodhi to the best of their ability.

Today, Sri Mahabodhi is a venerated shrine to Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage and its links with India. Dignitaries – both local and foreign – come here to pay their respects. In March 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a historic visit to the Sri Mahabodhi where he offered prayers and was blessed by Buddhist monks in a special traditional Buddhist ceremony.



Sri Mahabodhi, Anuradhapura

- **Dalada Maligawa**



Elephants carrying casket of relics at
Kandy Esala Perahera

The Dalada Maligawa or the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy – the seat of the last Sinhalese King – could be described as the Pinnacle of Sinhalese Buddhism. Each year around the full moon day of Esala (July-August) a world-renowned festival *Kandy Esala Perahera*⁹⁴ is held over 10 days to pay homage to the Tooth Relic.

The relic is enshrined in a small gold casket covered by 6 outer gold caskets some of them studded with gems. The gold caskets are taken out for public

viewing only on very special occasions. The traditions and rituals associated with the Tooth Relic are central to the nurturing of all Buddhist values of the Sinhalese. Traditionally, whoever held the custodianship of the Tooth Relic, was given the power of government.

The Tooth Relic of the Buddha enshrined in Kandy is believed to have been plucked from the funeral pyre by a close disciple. When it was brought to Sri Lanka in the 4th century CE, it remained at the then capital of Anuradhapura. The sacred Relic has remained with royalty ever since, and, because Kandy was the last capital of the Sinhalese kings, before British colonization in 1815, the Temple of the Tooth remains in Kandy today. Since the 11th century, the temple known as the Dalada Maligawa has been both the pinnacle of the Buddhist faith and the symbol of the sovereignty of the Sinhalese nation.

Many rituals take place throughout the day to pay homage to the Tooth Relic starting with the early morning ceremonial opening of the doors to the shrine to the evening drumming rituals. The drummers performing at the temple and in the Kandy Esala

⁹⁴ See 'Pinnacle of Sinhala Buddhism on Lotus Comm Net site - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olen_kQd9VY

Perahera are the custodians of the rich musical tradition of the hill country Sinhalese. They have inherited these artistic talents through generations. During the time of the Sinhalese kings, in return for performing these voluntary duties for the temple, they were given land by the King.

The present rituals and ceremonies of the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy are a continuation of the great and unbroken Buddhist worship not found anywhere else in the world. Its known history goes back to a period of more than fifteen centuries (Seneviratne, 1990, p 90)

- **Buddhist Architecture**

Despite political upheavals in the early stages, the Polonnaruwa period of the 12th to 13th century CE is characterized by significant technological and cultural achievements. Guruge (1993) argues that it has manifested in impressive monuments, irrigation systems, city planning, and health systems. The development of architecture based on Buddhist influences has been a notable achievement of this period, which has attracted the attention of Thailand's leaders. Architects from Polonnaruwa were very influential in the designing and building of the new capital of Siam - Sukhothai - in the 13th century CE.



Stupa at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka(top) and in Sukhothai in Thailand (right)

The spread of the Sinhalese stupa architecture to other parts of Southeast Asia began in the period following Parakramabahu I (1153-1186 CE). It was also a time when Sri Lanka's maritime prowess was at its peak. The Kiri Vehera temple in Polonnaruwa inspired both Cambodia and Nakon Si Thammarat in the Malay Peninsula in Thailand. Si Satha, a prince monk from Sukhothai spent 10 years in Sri Lanka learning the Dhamma and visiting the major Buddhist sites and returned around 1345 CE along with several craftsmen from Sri Lanka. He got the Sinhalese craftsmen settled in five villages in Sukhothai, and through them added Sinhala style stucco motifs of makaras, to the Mahathat stupa, the centerpiece of Sukhothai. These motifs were based on Sri Lanka's Lankatilaka temple, which had been built in 1342 CE during Si Satha's stay in Sri Lanka. The bell-shaped stupas, which began to be built in large numbers in the middle of the 14th century CE in Sukhothai, and Lankatilaka and Gadadeniya temples, two sites visited by Si Satha, also inspired the standing elephants emerging from niches found in Sukhothai. The architecture of Sukhothai was thus transformed with "overwhelming adoption of Sinhalese styles (and) a multitude of Sinhalese-style stupas" (Goonatilake, 2008).

The ruins of the ancient cities of Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, and Sukhothai and Ayutthaya in Thailand provide ample proof today of these Buddhist architectural collaborations.

Historic Threats to Buddhism

Chola King Elara ruled from Anuradhapura for 44 years before a young Sinhalese Prince from the south Dutthagamani organized an army, which fought an epic battle in Anuradhapura and finally killed King Elara to regain the Sinhalese control of the Anuradhapura kingdom. This battle has been immortalized in Sinhalese history as the first war to regain Sinhalese sovereignty of Sri Lanka and hence save its Buddhist civilization. Earlier it was mentioned how Buddhism was threatened at the time Tripitaka was written.

Between the 5th and the 11th centuries CE, climate was not good for Buddhism in Sri Lanka. This period was marked with continuous warfare between reigning kings and their rival claimants to the throne or with South Indian invaders. These skirmishes with South Indian rulers over many centuries have left a strong Hindu impact on Sinhalese Buddhism. They were not religious wars, and some of the Hindu invaders even considered themselves Buddhist Kings to rule the people they conquered, but, Buddhism did not have the type of royal patronage as before. As a result of this fusion of Hindu and Buddhist civilizations, most Buddhist temples have Hindu shrines today, and Buddhists worship Hindu deities as their protectors, such as Vishnu, Ganesh, Murugan (Kataragama).

In 1070 CE when Vijayabahu I was able to defeat the Cholas and became the king of Sri Lanka, he moved the capital to Polonnaruwa. He restored many of the *pirivenas* and monasteries that were in utter destruction and even build new ones. But, his greatest task was to restore the ordination of monks. Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka has deteriorated to such an extent that it was impossible to find 5 ordained Bhikkhus to perform the *upasampada*⁹⁵ ceremony under the *vinaya* rules. Thus, the then King Vijayabahu had to send a request to Myanmar's King Anuruddha in 1071 CE soliciting help to restore the Buddha Sasana. He sent twenty senior Bhikkhus who arrived from Ramannadesa (Lower Burma), and higher ordination was re-established in Sri Lanka (Goonatilake, 2010).

King Parakramabahu I ascended to the throne in 1153 CE and the greatest task he performed during his 33-year reign was to purify the Sasana and unifying the sangha who were divided into many sects. This period also saw Sri Lanka becoming a maritime power, and its architecture and the arts flourishing to such an extent, that other Asian countries began to look up to Sri Lanka for inspiration.

From the late 7th century CE Arab Muslim traders have sailed to Sri Lanka from Siraf, Oman, Yemen and Persia. All these interactions have been peaceful trading relations, and not the violent Turkic Mughal invasions India experienced.

European invasions started in 1505 CE when the Portuguese landed and as Goonatileka (2010, p2) noted: "The ensuing clash of civilizations resulted in the use of considerable cruelty by the Portuguese amidst significant and deep cultural

⁹⁵ *Upasampada* is a Theravada Buddhist tradition where a novice monk receives the full ordination as a Buddhist monk.

confrontations”. Historians – though it was restricted to a strip of land mainly in the western coastal areas – regard the period of Portuguese rule in Sri Lanka as the darkest period in the country’s history. After the Sinhalese were able to drive the Portuguese away with the help of the Dutch, finding that the Portuguese had killed most of the senior monks, the Sinhalese King sent an emissary to Siam to obtain ordained monks to restore the sangha order in Sri Lanka. King Boromkot of Thailand sends a team of senior monks led by venerable Upali and Venerable Ariyamuni to Sri Lanka to help re-establish the order of the sangha in the 18th century, which is known today in Sri Lanka as the ‘Siam Nikaya’. In the first decade of the 19th century, due to restrictions placed by ‘Siam Nikaya’ on the ordination of monks based on caste, a group of monks sailed to Myanmar, where King Bodawpaya welcome them, and they spent 2 years studying under the Sangaraja. When the monks returned to Sri Lanka they set up the ‘Amarapura Nikaya’ that is named after the city from where King Bodawpaya ruled. For the first time a monastic lineage was set up not through royal patronage, but the collective action of a dedicated group of Buddhist laymen. Earlier in 1693 CE, Sri Lanka has also sought help from Myanmar (Arakan King) to maintain the sangha under fierce Portuguese repression (read the discussion in chapter 12).

The British colonial period started in 1815 when a treaty was signed between the British and the Kandyan kingdom in which the conquerors pledged to safeguard Buddhism, its rites, and ceremonies. Known as The Kandyan Convention, Article 5 said (BCOI, 1956):

The religion of the Buddhoo professed by the chiefs and inhabitants of these provinces is declared inviolable and its rites and ministers and places of worship are to be maintained and protected.

What these words meant has been a subject of much discussion in the country ever since. During the British period, the colonizers systematically went about undermining Buddhist institutions and the ‘pirivena’ education system.

Mohottiwatte Gunananda Thera, Colonel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala

It is at this time around 1860 that a young dynamic novice monk Mohottiwatte Gunananda appeared on the scene and challenged the Christian missionaries to take him on in an open debate that is celebrated in Sri Lanka as the ‘Panadura Vadya (Debate)’.

This monk has had his early education in a Christian school and was thus knowledgeable in Christianity as well as well versed in the Buddhist teachings. He went from village to village making public speeches and holding public forums in Christian communities openly challenging Christian missionaries to debate. He earned a reputation for eloquence and was attracting thousands of followers.

This famous debate with Christian missionaries at Panadura lasted for a week, and Gunananda Thera was judged to have won the debate and it attracted wide media coverage in the country and overseas. Festivities were held in every Buddhist temple, and effigies of Gunananda Thera were carried in processions in Buddhist villages. It culminated in a great Buddhist reawakening in the country (Perera, 1988).

Following this, British Buddhist Colonel Henry Olcott came to Sri Lanka in 1880 and joined forces with Mohottiwatte Gunananda Thera and all prominent Bhikkhu

leaders to help accelerate the activities of the Buddhist revival movement that has gained extraordinary momentum at the time. After he came to the island with the support of Buddhist leaders he formed the Buddhist Theosophical Society where he worked tirelessly for the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. As a dynamic leader of this movement, he was able to deal effectively with the colonial rulers. The Buddhist Theosophical Society was instrumental in opening schools to provide Buddhism-based education to the younger generation. Buddhist Sunday schools were started in 1881 in several places within Colombo.

A young boy of 16 with the name Don David from a wealthy Buddhist family in Colombo met Colonel Olcott and soon began to take an interest in the work of the Theosophical Society. In 1886, he changed his name to Dharmapala and joined Colonel Olcott in going from village to village to collect money for the Buddhist Education Fund. In the process, though passing the Clerical Service Examination with distinction, Dharmapala resigned from the public service job he held and devoted full time to the service of Buddhism in his country. This was the beginning of a remarkable journey that helped to reawaken the Buddhist consciousness not only in Sri Lanka but also in its homeland in India (as discussed in chapter 4).

Buddhist Communication – Dhamma Schools

Sri Lanka's Sunday Dhamma Schools system has been hailed by many Buddhist communities in Asia as a good example of communicating the dhamma to young people. These were established during the Buddhist revival of the 1880s to mainly educate Buddhist children who were not getting a religious education of their choice in schools set up by European missionary organisations.

Held on Sunday mornings mainly in Buddhist temples, children are taught basic Buddhist teachings and traditions by both monks and lay teachers who are devout Buddhists. The Theosophical Society in Colombo, established by Colonel Olcott, originally set up these schools, but, when the demand for such education grew, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) took responsibility to conduct these classes for almost 50 years. Now, most Buddhist temples across Sri Lanka conduct these classes.

There are over 9500 registered Dhamma Schools throughout the island and 122,084 volunteer dhamma teachers and almost 2 million Buddhist children attend these. The figures help to understand the magnitude of the system of Dhamma Schools and the commitment of Buddhist monks and laity to operate them effectively. Ms Chandini⁹⁶, a Dhamma Schools coordinator at YMBA said that since 2007, Religious Affairs Ministry has taken over the coordination work, and every year over 200,000 students sit for exams that are conducted under 7 age groups. YMBA has helped to establish English language Dhamma schools in 6 countries that include Singapore, Qatar, Malaysia and Australia.

The Dhamma Schools play a vital role in the transmission of Buddhist cultural values and rituals from generation to generation. They effectively integrate the children into the mainstream of the Buddhist way of life and strengthen the solidarity of Buddhist communities. National television channels have also broadcast quiz programs involving Dhamma school children.

⁹⁶ Interview with author in Colombo, January 2020.

Scourge of Poverty and Proselytism

In June 2002, a Presidential Commission report was submitted to the government on the threats faced by the Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka. It was a comprehensive report with facts and grassroots viewpoints on the issue. More than half a century after the end of colonial rule the report pointed out that there was a lack of proper government support for the Buddha Sasana, a decline in the moral and ethical standards in the community, and increasing threats from Christian evangelical activity that is going unchecked by the government. It pointed out the biggest threat facing Buddha Sasana is aggressive evangelization activities of both Christian and Muslim groups. Many Christian evangelical organisations come to Sri Lanka and set up Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) on the pretext of doing social services but their main motivation is proselytism (Seneviratne 2017, p 51-56).

In 2009, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC), set up a Commission to inquire into the conspiracies to convert Buddhists into other religions. This Commission recorded evidence from 348 witnesses at 23 centers across the country and a Sinhala language report was submitted to the ACBC on 9th January 2009. Many of the evidence gathered during the Commission investigations reflected very much the same concerns expressed in the Presidential Commission Report of 2002 discussed above. This report was compiled at a time when the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was intensifying and reaching its final decisive stages, while in the background, there were increasing concerns about rapidly expanding Christian evangelical activities in the country that was exploiting the political and economical instability in the country, which was creating social upheavals (Seneviratne 2017, p 56-61).

Buddhists were reduced to living a life of psychological insecurity. These undue pressures justifiably sparked off feelings of helplessness among Buddhists. What especially caused this was the fact that the Maha Sangha⁹⁷ and Buddhist organisations, which should take action on behalf of the Buddhists continue to remain silent. Although a few Buddhist monks and a few Buddhist organisations tried to give leadership to the Buddhist agitations, they failed to whip up strong collective force. These non-Buddhist organisations made a scapegoat of the ethnic issue prevailing in the land, to reap maximum benefit and were sufficiently vicious as to brand the Buddhist leadership that was bold enough to speak up on behalf of the rights of Buddhism, as racists and religionists (section 54, p 33)

The report's 20 chapters make a comprehensive survey of many threats facing the Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka. This includes moves by Christian evangelical organisations in particular with international backing to challenge the Buddhist identity of Sri Lanka and the dubious and unethical strategies used by NGOs masquerading as social welfare agencies to convert Buddhists, mainly to the Christian religion.

If we are to protect Buddhism, we must have laws to control movements that are trying to destroy Buddhism. There are no such laws. They (government) think giving some money to temples and some goods and food to monks are protecting Buddhism. That's a wrong concept. If the

⁹⁷ The Great Community of Buddhist Monks

government is to protect Buddhism, they have to take steps to stop other religions trying to convert Buddhists to their religions – Ven. Omalphe Sobitha Mahathera (Seneviratne 2017, p 74).

In the 21st century, several Buddhist nationalist movements have cropped up such as the Jatika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). The international media has often labeled them as “extremists” or purveyors of “hate speech” without trying to understand the socio-economic situations that have given rise to them. In September 2004, at the beginning of the Sri Lankan Presidential election campaign, I interviewed the parliamentary leader of JHU as his party has declared their support for the presidential bid of the Sinhala nationalist leader Mahinda Rajapakse. The international media has labeled JHU as a “Buddhist Nationalist” party. When I asked him if they are indeed so, this is what he told me:

We have used language and religion to mobilize our people against the injustices of globalization that are impacting our grassroots (rural) communities. It is wrong to call this Buddhist nationalism.

After the interview, I thought that 2 decades earlier, they would have done this under the hammer and sickle and the red flags. Then the media was clear in treating these conflicts as socio-economic.

Foreign Media and Bias Against Buddhists

Most Buddhists in Sri Lanka believe that the international (ie Western) media has an inbuilt bias against Buddhists when it comes to coverage of Sri Lanka.

It is reports and headlines such as these below that attracts the ire of Buddhist activists and raise questions of media’s impartiality which the above quote reflects:

- Why are Buddhist monks attacking Muslims? – BBC, 2 May 2013
- Fear shock among Sri Lankan Muslims in aftermath of Buddhist mob violence – CNN, 24 June 2014
- Meet the violent Buddhists starting riots in Sri Lanka – Vice News.com, 30 June 2014
- How an extremist Buddhist network is sowing hatred across Asia – Time, 8 August 2014
- Buddhist monk to fight ‘jihad threat’ – Al Jazeera, 28 September 2014
- Radical Myanmar monk join hands with Sri Lanka’s Buddhists – Reuters, 29 September 2014
- Buddhist militancy triggers international concern – Financial Times, 28 December 2014
- Sri Lanka’s not-so-tranquil Buddhists – Catholic Herald, 2 January 2015
- Sri Lanka’s violent Buddhists – New York Times, 2 January 2015
- The darker side of Buddhism – BBS, 30 May 2015
- The dangerous rise of Buddhist chauvinism – Japan Times, 31 July 2015

(Seneviratne 2017, p 110-111)

This is what CNN said in their report (24 June 2014) after a riot at Aluthgama:

The rally, organized by the far-right Buddhist group Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force), was called in response to an alleged altercation in the area between a group of young Muslims and a Buddhist monk and his driver on an important Buddhist religious holiday days earlier.

Addressing the crowd of thousands Sunday, the BBS's leader, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, gave an inflammatory speech. Video footage from the event shows the orange-robed monk using derogatory terms for Muslims and, to approving roars from the crowd, vowing that if any Muslim laid a hand on a member of the Sinhalese majority -- let alone a monk - - that would "be the end" of them.

After the rally, Buddhist mobs marched through Muslim neighborhoods, torching and destroying dozens of homes and shops, witnesses told CNN.
(Seneviratne 2017, p 110-111)

In May 2009, Sri Lanka became the first country in the age of ‘war on terror’ to defeat a ruthless terror group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’ (LTTE). The 30-year civil war for a separate Tamil state ended with a bloody battle that killed thousands of people – many of them ‘human shields’ held by the LTTE and shot by them when they were fleeing into ‘safe zones’ created by the army. The entire military leadership of the LTTE was killed in the battle. During the 30-year war, western media often referred to “Hindu Tamils” and “Buddhist Sinhalese” fighting an ethnic war. But, the conflict was never about religion and most of the LTTE leaders both in Sri Lanka and among the Tamil diaspora in the West were Christians – a fact western media ignored.

A consortium of international human rights organizations has hounded Sri Lanka, ever since the 2009 victory against LTTE. UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Western Governments and the western media alleging war crimes claiming 40,000 Tamils were killed in the final onslaught. Those who are making the allegation haven’t even provided 40 names – leave aside 40,000 – to prove their allegations. Fingers are always – directly or indirectly – pointed at Buddhists. Some actions by so-called Buddhist groups like BBS, Mahasohon Balakaya or Sinhala Le, in attacking Muslims or mosques or their shops play into their hands. Many Buddhist leaders in Sri Lanka have argued, that they are mainly thugs likely to be funded by overseas groups or politicians with a vested interest, to tarnish the image of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

In January 2015, the anti-Buddhist western consortium succeeded in a typical ‘velvet revolution’ using western funded human rights and pro-democracy NGOs to influence the youth vote. The new government that came in under the banner of ‘yahapalanaya’ (good governance) – a word borrowed from Buddhist terminology – was subservient to western demands even co-sponsoring a resolution alleging Sri Lanka of war crimes at the UNHRC in September 2015!

One of the major agenda items of the new government was to amend the constitution adopting ideas of multiculturalism and reconciliation promoted by westerners that would include taking out the clause in the Sri Lankan constitution that gives state protection for Buddhism. When challenges to that move came up from Buddhist groups, suddenly a “religious conflict” flares up where one of those fringe ‘Buddhist’ groups would mount an attack on some

Muslims. The western media and Al Jazeera would jump in and report about “extremist Buddhists attacking Muslims” in Sri Lanka. The sinister motives behind these attacks, that is often asked in Sri Lanka media reporting are never given any coverage (see boxed article below).

The Timing of 'Communal' Violence in Sri Lanka Raises Questions

By Kalinga Seneviratne

The damage has already been done. Buddhists are accused of Islamophobic communal attacks in Sri Lanka and tourists are canceling their trips to the country as the international media follow a common formula denigrating the Buddhist majority, while ignoring questions that are being raised in the country on the timing of these latest “communal” attacks.

The violence against Muslim businesses and homes in Central Sri Lanka and in the East came a day before a no-confidence motion against prime minister Ranil Wickremasinghe was to be tabled in parliament by the opposition.

It was expected to be supported by a number of MPs of his own government. The opposition was forced to withhold the motion when the riots broke out and the PM as the Minister for Law and Order immediately imposed a state of emergency across the country.

The flare-up between Muslims and Buddhists came as a result of drunken behaviour by a group of youth from both communities. Ironically both Islam and Buddhism strongly reject the consumption of alcohol of any form.

In the eastern city of Ampare a group of drunken Sinhalese youth filmed a video clip of a staff member of a Muslim-owned café admitting to glazing food served to Buddhist customers with a substance that is claimed to be an infertility drug. This video soon gathered traction on social media. Meanwhile, near the central hill country city of Kandy, a group of drunken Muslim youth allegedly assaulted a truck driver who refused to allow them to overtake the vehicle. He later died in hospital due to the injuries sustained.

According to Sri Lankan media reports, the spiraling violence against Muslim property especially near Kandy has been instigated by outside groups who rushed to the area within minutes of these incidents that indicates an organized attempt to create a communal conflict in Sri Lanka.

These extremist Buddhist groups are largely resented by the mainstream Buddhists in Sri Lanka because they create a bad image of Buddhism in the country. When one such group Bodu Bala Sena formed a political party and contested the August 2015 general elections, it had a rude shock, because it could muster only 19,000 votes nationwide. Over 11 million Buddhist voters did not vote for them; and this fact was ignored by the international media, who often labeled them as “Buddhist nationalists”.

On February 10 this year, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa who lead a new political party Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (Sri Lanka Common Man Party) or SLPP, won a sweeping victory in island-wide local government (LG) elections, which triggered calls for the government led by Wickremasinghe to resign.

SLPP is mainly supported by the Sinhala Buddhist masses, especially in rural areas, but, they were also able to make inroads into Muslim areas in the east and south of the island, even winning the southern coastal Beruwala council that consists mainly of Muslim voters – there was a major Buddhist-Muslim fare-up here in 2014 during Rajapaksa’s presidency.

SLPP focused their national campaign on corruption, an issue that ousted Rajapaksa from power in January 2015. The new government grabbed power campaigning on an anti-corruption platform promising to bring “good governance” known as “yahapalana”, a slogan coined together and promoted by Western-funded NGOs in the country.

But, since coming to power they have been embroiled in corruption scandals one of which is what is now known as the “Central Bank Bond Scam”, the biggest financial fraud in Sri Lanka’s history. The new Central Bank Governor, Arjuna Mahendran, a close friend of Wickremasinghe, is the chief instigator of this scam that benefitted his son-in-law. An Interpol warrant is out for his arrest at the moment. The PM is seen as protecting his friend and thus implicated in the scandal.

The SLPP campaign for the LG elections was mainly focused on this scandal that has plunged the country into an economic crisis and disgusted a large segment of the Sri Lankan population, who are now willing to forgive the Rajapaksa regime for its alleged corruption because they see it as more efficient in bringing development and economic growth in close alliance with Chinese assistance.

In a media briefing on March 9, an opposition member of parliament Udaya Gamanpila, who was the main organizer of the no-confidence motion against Wickremasinghe lamented the fact that the communal violence in the last few days seriously dented the opposition campaign to oust the prime minister. After winning the votes of the Sinhalese, he said, they were now in the process of winning the votes of minorities, especially the Muslims (who strongly backed the Rajapaksa regime during the war against Tamil Tiger terrorism).

"Since February 10 the main issue in this country was to get rid of the prime minister (PM). Before that the issue was that those who were involved in the bond scam were not brought to justice and the PM was not making any attempt to get Mahendran back to the country to face justice," he pointed out, adding, "but, after these (incidents of) violence, the concerns within his own party and the government about the PM's conduct have subsided."

Meanwhile, in a media briefing on March 8, Health Minister Ranjitha Senarathne – a staunch Rajapaksa foe – hinted that the government may place the blame, especially for the Kandy violence, on the SLPP (they won these areas convincingly in the LG elections). The Minister said that there were seven persons involved in the conspiracy so far; two recently appointed local government councilors, two Members of Parliament, a monk affiliated to their political party, a secretary of one of the MPs and one of their party organisers.

As part of the state of emergency, the government has introduced draconian measures such as shutting up social media sites across the board and threatening to arrest and jail for 20 years anyone campaigning against reconciliation.

The latter will have serious implications for freedom of speech especially at a time when there is widespread opposition among Sinhalese Buddhist voters to a new proposed constitution that the government is trying to impose on the country at the dictates of western powers exercised via the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council, who are due to meet this month to discuss Sri Lanka's "accountability" measures.

"In a dramatic turn of events replete with irony, the yahapalana government has had to adopt some stringent, if not draconian, measures which some of its leaders condemned vehemently while they were in the Opposition," noted 'The Island' newspaper in an editorial, arguing that what is needed is for the president to set up an independent task forces to study the reasons for such violence from time to time taking into account views of all communities.

"It seems that certain sections that are greedy for power are planning various ploys and acts of sabotage and the disruption of normalcy. Their only trump card in arousing racism," argued Wickremasinghe making a statement to parliament on the violence, adding, "their only objective is to obtain power by creating violence in the country. It is clearly seen that false and misleading information creating hatred among communities is being spread using social media in an organized manner."

This is the same argument he used during the LG election campaign against the SLPP, which badly misfired. Rajapaksa was quick to respond. In a media statement, he warned that some sinister forces were at work.

"The local and foreign forces seeking to destabilize this country are trying to engineer another 1983 (when Tamils were attacked island-wide) style conflagration to drum up support for their constitutional reforms which seek to divide this country into several semi-independent states," he argues. "I call on citizens belonging to all communities to reflect intelligently on what has been happening and to refrain from all acts of violence."

Such statements about constitutional reforms could be construed as campaigning against the western-prescribed idea of reconciliation via unpopular constitutional changes.

Thus, misgivings of Sinhala Buddhists against this could be suppressed by the new censorship measures driving them towards the small extremist groups within the community. The western funded NGOs such as the National Peace Council have been silent on these measures. But, the

Bar Association of Sri Lanka has warned the government to ensure that only those who were really involved in the acts of violence were arrested under the emergency regulations.

Former diplomat and political analyst Dr Dayan Jayatileka, in a commentary in The Island newspaper, is warning the Sinhalese Buddhist community not to force young Muslims to run into the arms of the Islamic terror groups that could open up a new front in Sri Lanka. He also notes that the timing of the latest communal violence is “amazing” and raises crucial questions.

“Mahinda Rajapaksa has just beaten both (Wickremasinghe’s) UNP and (Sirisena’s) SLFP and pretty much swept the board at the local elections. He has won back some Muslim votes and his supporters have even won Beruwela, which has a Muslim majority. He certainly does not benefit from attacks on Muslims,” says Dr Jayatileka.

On the other hand, he notes, “Ranil Wickremesinghe is on the ropes with an imminent ‘No Confidence’ motion. And ‘Hey presto!’ the violent Islamophobic attacks act as a giant eraser, switching the discourse, and making the political threat go away at least for the moment.”

He warns: “I would not be surprised if there are attacks on Catholics too, given that the Sinhala Catholics swung back to Mahinda in the recent election.”

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After Easter Sunday attacks on Christian churches in April 2019 by a home-grown Islamic terrorist group, the international media initially reported the attacks with sympathy (as it has hit Christians – not Buddhists), but, later when some of those fringe ‘Buddhist’ groups attacked Muslim shops the reporting turned into Buddhist bashing. Even the Buddhist media outlets overseas reproduced reports from international media accusing Buddhists for violence against Muslims. The New York-based Buddhist Review ‘Tricycle’ flashed a headline ‘A Violent Buddhist Mob’ and started their report dated 18 May 2019 with the following paragraph⁹⁸:

Violent anti-Muslim riots broke out in northern Sri Lanka this week, leaving one man dead, and authorities said Buddhist extremists were most likely responsible, Al Jazeera reports. On Sunday and Monday night, mobs burned Muslim-owned shops and raided mosques and homes in an apparent act of retaliation for the Easter Sunday church bombings that killed more than 250 people, mostly from the country’s Christian minority. But government officials said on Wednesday that Christians seem to have turned the other cheek and that hardline Sinhalese Buddhists were behind the attacks, according to Al Jazeera. Authorities arrested three heads of extremist Buddhist groups who allegedly organized the riots: Mahasohon Balakaya leader Amith Weerasinghe, Anti-Corruption Force Operations Director Namal Kumara, and the Nawa Sinhale National Organization’s Suresh Priyasad. Authorities also arrested dozens of other rioters, instituted a curfew, and blocked access to social media.

As a Buddhist media ‘Tricycle’ should have tried to contact reliable and respectable Buddhist groups to find out what is happening, not reproduce anti-Buddhist prejudices of Al Jazeera and Western media. In Sri Lanka, even Catholic Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, and many Buddhist leaders have questioned whether there was a sinister reason for the Easter Sunday attacks because it came at a crucial time when the US Government was pressuring Sri Lanka to sign a controversial agreement

⁹⁸ <https://tricycle.org/trikedaily/buddha-buzz-weekly-buddhist-mob/>

called SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) which would allow US military personnel and forces to be stationed in Sri Lanka for “peacekeeping” operations.

During the Presidential election campaign in November 2019, National Freedom Front leader Wimal Weerawansa repeatedly pointed out to voters at campaign rallies that the US needed a huge massacre or attacks on Muslims in Sri Lanka to justify stationing US marines in the island for peacekeeping. “The US did not get their wish because our Buddhist civilization is built on the belief that hatred is never appeased by hatred” he reminded the voters. Well, Tricycle should have explored that point of view rather than giving credence to isolated incidents and questionable motives.

Local Media Bias Against Buddhists

Many local Buddhist leaders have complained for a long time that the English language media in Sri Lanka in particular – which is very influential in setting the political agenda in Sri Lanka and presenting Sri Lanka to the outside world – is generally anti-Buddhist and dominated by Christians. The latter may be true because most Buddhist media people are educated in the Sinhalese language.

Almost 50 years ago, the Press Commission Report of 1964 said (Waduge, 2013):

If these English language newspapers were sufficiently patriotic they could have made a very useful contribution to bringing about unity among the various communities after the country achieved its independence. They should have advised the minority groups to adapt themselves to the changing circumstances and exhorted the majority to be generous towards the former. They failed to do that. What they consistently did was to poison the minds of the minority groups and encourage them to fight to retain the unjust privileges they had received during the era of foreign domination.

“If you look at the coverage in the Daily Mirror, Daily News, Island, you will see Buddhists are at the receiving end. They willingly slam the Sinhala Buddhists” says Buddhist lawyer and activist Senaka Weeraratne⁹⁹ naming a number of such columnists. “Lots of these columnists are non Buddhist and anti Buddhist. If you have a Buddhist writer, that person questions Buddhists. There is no right of reply for Buddhists” he complains. Added Shenali Waduge¹⁰⁰, a Buddhist and a prolific writer: “I send articles to everybody and don't take money. I don't know what their problem is for not publishing. Minorities control English media”.

Weeraratne argues that Buddhists should have the right to express some of their concerns without been labeled as “extremists” or “communalists” and be banned from media outlets. Both he and Waduge said they have been banned from Facebook for raising these concerns for a while. Some of the issue Weeraratne feels need to be discussed in the mainstream English media are the big population growth within Muslim groups and its implications for social harmony; building of mosques everywhere with Wahabbi money from overseas;

⁹⁹ Interview with author in Colombo, January 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with author in Colombo, January 2020.

the need to strengthen animal welfare laws and issues dealing with unethical conversion activities of Christian evangelical groups.

“Gota (President Gotabaya Rajapakse) realized the power of the united Buddhist vote. He calculated that 70 percent of the vote is Buddhist and they targeted this electorate,” noted Weeraratane, referring to the November 2019 presidential election. “Now he has the mandate to protect the Buddhists”

In January 2020, when I visited Sri Lanka, the Buddhist Rights Commission (BRC) was holding public hearings in Colombo. “Human Rights are used to attack Buddhists. But we have a broad perspective on human rights, which includes protecting nature. We need to protect our heritage and communicate it to the world” said BRC coordinator, Ishan Edirisooriya¹⁰¹. He explained that they have started the latest investigations in June 2018 and already collected evidence from over 300 people. They hope to submit the report to the government in 6 months.

“We have covered all districts. There are underground conspiracies to destabilize the country. We want to get all religions under one Religious Affairs Ministry. Now other religions get more money than Buddhists (from the Government). We are looking at how to get proper people into politics to protect our country,” he added.

Retired Political Science Professor Jayadeva Uyangoda argues that Sri Lankan Buddhists have got bad media because fringe groups have come to occupy the center of Buddhist politics. “They are like the Christian rightwing groups in the US or Hindu rightwing groups in India. Their politics is a mirror image of those groups... they are very intolerant, don't seem to respect what the world knows about Buddhism as a religion of compassion tolerance, loving-kindness. These fringe groups are denying that entitlement of Buddhists. That is the issue that needs to be contested to restore respect and dignity of Theravada Buddhism”

Buddhist Media

Sri Lanka does have a variety of Buddhist media outfits, almost all of it in the Sinhalese language in the social media sector, which makes them vulnerable to accusations of “fake news” or “hate speech media”.

High Rating Buddhist FM Radio

Media academic Dammika Bandara Herath¹⁰² deputy director of the Media and Communication Unit at Kelaniya University had an interesting discussion about how mainstream media, especially commercial radio, has made Buddhism a high-rating broadcast medium. All these stations are broadcast in the Sinhala language.

“Earlier 7 to 9 in the morning was prime time for radio, now it is 4 to 6 in the morning,” he said. “Net FM says they changed prime time to morning 4 to 6 because they have a large audience listening to their pirith. When NET FM

¹⁰¹ Interview with author in Colombo, January 2020.

¹⁰² Discussion with author in Colombo, January 2020

increased ratings by doing Buddhist broadcasts other radio stations started to do the same”.

The concept of such Buddhist broadcasting is an interesting development. Earlier, temples may have all night ‘pirith’ (chanting of Pali sutras) or even some homes would invite monks to chant pirith all night for special occasions, like death anniversaries or feeding the child for the first time. But, today the radio broadcast this chanting usually from 11.00 pm to 4.00 am. People have the radio on the whole night while they go to sleep. Some even keep a glass of water in front of the radio and get the children to have “pirith pan’ (blessed water) before setting off for school. During the 4-6 am slot, certain chantings are broadcast that people believe will protect the child in school during the day. So, while the child gets ready to go to school the radio is on in the home.

Buddhist commercial radio station Rangiri Radio with its headquarters in the rural township of Dambulla could be heard on a national frequency. It is run from the premises of the Rangiri Dambulla Viharaya (temple) premises and rates very high due to its religious contents, especially pirith broadcasting.

“When Nielson comes and ask the people they say they listen to Rangiri or another Buddhist channel which then rates high in the rating charts. So these stations can go out and ask for sponsorships,” Herath points out. “Rangiri Radio is better equipped than the government-funded Sri Lanka Broadcasting Service”.

Listeners may feel they are getting blessings, but are they getting a better knowledge of the dhamma by listening to such radio?

The commercial radio stations have even made the drive-time radio (3-6 pm) very lucrative by broadcasting certain types of sutra chanting (pirith) which is supposed to give protection to the drivers while they navigate the chaotic evening peak-hour traffic in Colombo. A program on a commercial radio station called ‘Pinbara Hendava’ (Meritorious Evening) has good sponsorship. “Inside this program are Buddhist contents,” says Herath. “They can also have musical breaks and commercials. It is done in between two Buddhist segments”.

On Poya (full moon) day, the whole day all channels air Buddhist programs as this day is a monthly holiday for religious purposes. But all stations are registered as secular channels. Perhaps, Sri Lanka is providing a model for Buddhist countries on how to mainstream Buddhist culture.

Mahamevunawa Media

The Mahamevnawa Buddhist Monastery founded by Venerable Kiribathgoda Gnanananda Thero, who was born to a Catholic family, has 40 branch temples across Sri Lanka today, and several overseas temples including one in Bodhgaya. Their temples have over 700 monks and about 100 nuns. Mahavevnawa gives emphasis to Sadha (devotion) to encourage the spiritual development of the human being, they argue. They have also attracted some criticism from conservative segments of the Buddhist establishment for downplaying certain Buddhist traditional activities.

A key point that Mahamevnawa highlights is that dhamma not only says that life is suffering but also shows a proven path to the cessation of that suffering. To widen its Dhamma Service, Mahamevnawa monastery started a Buddhist television channel named Shraddha TV in 2012 and later a radio channel named Lakviru Radio. Both have recently got an official license for terrestrial broadcasting.

During a discussion¹⁰³ with their media executives at its broadcasting headquarters in the Colombo suburb of Kaduwela, they explained the vision and aims of their operation.

On Shraddha TV they do not broadcast pirith at night because “people do not watch pirith all night, only listen to it” according to one executive. They broadcast a lot of sermons by Mahavevunawa monks, as well as they broadcast a lot of discussion programs addressing youth concerns. The audience can send questions by calling and monks respond to these on-air as long as these are not personal problems (which they answer privately).

In collaboration with the Buddhist TV network DMC in Thailand, they broadcast a series of children’s programs. Thai DMC cartoons on Budha’s life, they dub to Sinhala for broadcast. They also distribute these Sinhalese cartoons to Dhamma Schools free of charge for use in their lessons. They have recently introduced a weekly news program.

Lakviru Radio has much more diversity of programming. They do broadcast pirith from 11 pm to 4 am but say they mix Pali chanting and Sinhala chanting. In the morning programs, they make a point to explain the sutras in Sinhala.

They have sponsored programs discussing dhamma in relation to current issues like kidney disease, which is affecting rural farmers, and on topics like organic farming, health programs on Sinhalese traditional medicine.

Between 4-5 pm they do programs with children introducing Buddhist values. One such program is ‘adaraniya amma’ (loving mother) about love to mothers. “We choose successful people and talk to them about their upbringing and how the mother helped them to be where they are today” explained the producer. On radio, they also broadcast Buddhist songs from Sri Lanka.

“We have programs on how traditions can be adapted to modern society” pointed out one producer giving as an example, Valentine’s Day, which has been commercialized in Sri Lanka in recent years with the advent of globalization. “We talk about Buddhist perspectives on dating and marriage. What values you need to develop for a successful marriage, raise good children”. An event on the topic that they organized at the BMICH convention center on Valentine’s Day attracted about 5,000 students.

¹⁰³ The discussion was held in Kaduwela in January 2020.

The Buddhist TV

'The Buddhist TV'¹⁰⁴, is a multi-media Buddhist setup, with a TV network transmitted via cable, satellite, and on line, online radio and a monthly magazine in Sinhala titled 'Sambodhi'. Headquartered at Sambodhi Vihara in the heart of Colombo, it was founded by the late Venerable Daranagama Kusaladhamma Thero in 2007. When it was launched The Buddhist TV was Sri Lanka's first Buddhist television channel.

The network's Director-General, Prof Rohan Garuthara¹⁰⁵ explained that they broadcast 9 sermons a day – each time a new one, 1 hour each. Since they have a 24-hour broadcast cycle, some sermons are repeated. "We survive on sponsors" he said, noting that they are not a profit-making media. "If you want a sermon broadcast you pay Rs 40,000 (USD 220) for 1 hour. They don't choose the monk, we choose. We have a list of monks, as we need certain standards. We have over 100 monks in the list". The Sambodhi Vihara also subsidises the TV network.

In addition to sermons that also have a program called 'Maha Sinhale Baudha Ethihase' (Sinhalese Buddhist History). Recently they have broadcast an event where Buddhists freed milk-giving cows taken for slaughter. The event was sponsored by a devotee. The channel avoids doing any political programs. But, they have a daily 15 minutes news program, where people can film events and send them for broadcast. They pay a small fee for it. These are usually community Buddhist activities, even things like helping the poor.

"Our mission is 'sema sitha suwa pinisa' (calm every mind)" says Prof Garuthara.

Threats From Within

Buddhism is not only facing threats from the outside, even from within its ranks. There are many "new age" monks, new sects that do not belong to any of the traditional Buddhist orders, and many fake monks who abuse the liberal laws that control the registration of monks to involve in black magic and other rituals that are not in tune with traditional Buddhist teachings and practices. There is no official body like a Sangha Council to help regulate and control the order of monks.

Venerable Medagoda Dhammananda of Asgiriya temple sees it as a "threat to the very core of Buddhism". Some of these he lists as follows (Seneviratne, 2017, p 144-145):

- Preachers who are either monks or lay people that do various meditation programs claiming they have become 'rahat' or 'sovan'¹⁰⁶. People who are mentally disturbed/depressed or don't have a good knowledge of Buddhism are attracted to this and believe what they say.
- A popular monk and preacher is spreading a view that the Buddha was born in Sri Lanka and he identifies various places associated with the Buddha's life

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.thebuddhist.tv/>

¹⁰⁵ Interview with author in Colombo, January 2020

¹⁰⁶ These terms are used to describe, usually monks, who have far advanced in the path of enlightenment (nirvana) but haven't yet reached Buddhahood.

- Another monk living near Colombo has become a creation of the media, which gives publicity to his claim of being an ‘arahant’ and making him into a money-making venture (for both the media and the monk).
- Astrology monks reading people’s astrological charts have also become very popular (sometimes promoted by the media).
- One of the latest threats to Buddhism is the relic worship culture that is developing. It has become highly commercialized with TV channels getting involved to promote the exposition of relics with a commercial motive, often to promote their channels.

The best way to address threats facing the Buddhist community is for Buddhists to help the poor people of their communities argues Prof Uyangoda, who is critical of Buddhists building grand temples and stupas, when their own people need socio-economic empowerment. “Buddhist traditions in Sri Lanka have not been able to see poverty as an issue they should address”.

He feels that Buddhists need to self-criticize themselves so that socio-economic issues could be tackled. “I can’t criticize Buddhist monks, and when I do that I get attacked. Buddhists need to look at themselves critically and build engaged Buddhist structures. We need to change the way Buddhist monks communicate - not just directly from the Tripitaka scriptures”.

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Chapter 8

Cambodia: Revival of Buddhism After Pol Pot

Hinduism has been in Cambodia longer than Buddhism. We regarded Hinduism as the religion of Cambodia for a long time... Because both Hinduism and Buddhism came from Asia, people believe in both and think it will bring them and the country happiness and prosperity - Venerable Tep Vong, Great Supreme Patriarch of Cambodia¹⁰⁷

When Buddhism arrived in Cambodia in the 11th century, the Khmers have already built a great civilization heavily influenced by Hinduism. Buddhism gradually made inroads into Khmer civilization with 'Tripitaka' making an important contribution. Yet, a hallmark of Khmer Buddhism is the close interaction between Hindu and Buddhist traditions. While the monarchy is regarded as the protector of Buddhism, the Royal Palace also has Brahmin priests and a Baku music orchestra, who perform in ceremonies reflecting Cambodia's Hindu past complete with Vedic chantings. Thus, in many Royal ceremonies, both Brahmin priests and Buddhist monks participate.



Inside Royal Palace, Phnom Penh

Brief History of Khmer Buddhism

Since the first century CE, several schools of Buddhism have found their way into Cambodia. During the Funan period three Hinayana schools of Buddhism that use Sanskrit – Sarvastivada, Sammittiya and Mulasarvastivada – have found their way to Cambodia. During the time of King Jayavarman VII in the 12th and 13th centuries, Mahayana Buddhism has entered the kingdom. Towards the latter 13th century, Theravada Buddhism proper has come to Cambodia – both from Burma and Sri Lanka – which has been accepted by the Cambodian masses and the rulers, and it has remained the religion of the people until today (Sovanratana, 2019).



Legacy of Khmer Rouge period - Bullet Holes in Angkor Wat

Between 1975 and 1978 at the end of the Vietnam War, Buddhism suffered almost a fatal blow at the hands of the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime. Buddhist practices were banned, monks killed or forced to disrobe, temples and Buddhist places were plundered or

¹⁰⁷ From TV documentary 'Path of the Dhamma Part 4 – Dhamma Consolidates in Swarnabhoomi', AMIC/ISEAS, 2008 – watch via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lx-28dN19iY>

destroyed. It is believed that over 21,000 monks were killed during the KR regime (Sovanratana, 2019).

Since the fall of the KR regime, since 1979, Buddhism has undergone a remarkable revival¹⁰⁸. In the initial stages of the revival, it was difficult to find the quorum of ordained monks to establish the sangha across the country. In September 1979, 7 “carefully chosen” (by Vietnam-backed Government) former monks who have been in the sangha for over 20 years, were re-ordained at Wat Unnalom. Even though the state did not provide funds for rebuilding Wats (temples) local communities found the money and sympathetic government officials helped to source inexpensive building material (Harris, 2005).

This revived Buddhism largely followed the structure that existed before 1975. Cambodian sangha came under the sole leadership of the Supreme Patriarch (Sangaraja), assisted by his Secretary and assistants of senior monks called ‘Rajagana’ (senior monks with Royal titles). In 2006, a royal decree was issued to establish the ‘Supreme Sangha Council of Cambodia’ to run the Buddhist affairs of the country (Sovanratana, 2019).

When Cambodia finally got a new Constitution in 1993 Buddhism was declared as the “State Religion”. Today out of a total population of 14 million, 95 percent are Buddhists. Most Cambodians also have a strong identity as Buddhists. There are, according to 2018 figures, 4,985 monasteries and 70,853 monks and novices of both orders – Mahanikaya and Dhammayut – that function under Theravada tradition (Sovanratana, 2019).

Restoring Buddhist Education

Formal Pali Schools were re-established in 1989 with the re-opening of a Buddhist school and many more followed. Currently, there are 772 Buddhist primary schools attended by 16,760 monks, and 35 Buddhist secondary schools attended by 4,815 monks and some lay students. In 1993, Buddhist secondary education began with the re-establishment of Suramrith Buddhist High School in the premises of the former Preah Sihanoukraj Buddhist University (Sovanratana, 2019).

In 2006, Preh Sihanmoniraja Buddhist University was established on the premises of Svay Pope monastery. Two other Buddhist



Young monks at Angkor Wat

¹⁰⁸ See ‘Revival of Cambodian Buddhism After PoPot “Genocide” by Lotus Talks - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWeMVk_OJyo - In this panel discussion, some of the actors in this great revival of Buddhism talks about those dark days and how Buddhism was revived in the country and the challenges they face now. Taking part in the discussion are: Ven Oeun Sam Art, Vice Dean, Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University, Ven Kou Sopheap, Lecturer at Pannasastra University of Cambodia, Pou Sovachana, Lecturer Ethic and Political Science, Pannasastra University of Cambodia, Prof Roath Kim Soeum, Retired Political Scientist and Ven. Nhab Tat, Personal Aid Protocol of Sangharaja of Cambodia.

universities were set up after that. The Buddhist monastic education system is divided into 4 levels of study – primary, secondary, upper secondary, and higher education. In addition, there is another system of monastic education called the ‘study of dhamma-vinaya’ or doctrine and discipline. This education could be completed in 3 years with the passing of an exam organized by the Ministry of Cults and Religion and the Supreme Sangha Council of Cambodia (Sovanratana, 2019).

“In the early 1990s, Buddhism took a big leap. Monastic education for young monks took a huge turn with the re-opening of Suramrith Buddhist College in 1993. During this period, the number of temples and monks jumped almost ten-fold” notes Ven Sovanratana, (2019, p131).

Sangha Activism and Politics

As discussed in chapter 2, the Cambodian government cracks down heavily on Buddhist monks, who go into political activism such as expressing concerns for the plight of the poor who are ejected from homes to pave the path for developers or demanding action to stop environmental destruction. Unfortunately, the Supreme Sangha Council of Cambodia tends to take a dim view of such activism as well.

As Osborne (2014) observes the Cambodian monks have been politically active in nationalist movements during French colonial rule. When the French tried to introduce romanticized written forms of the Khmer language, it was the monks who protested seeing it as an attempt to change a fundamental element of the country’s culture. But, before KR rule (after independence), the sangha has played no overt political role like in Burma for example.

Hoeurn Somnieng is a former monk and is now a civil servant. He entered the monkhood at the age of 16 because he was a war orphan and could not get an education. During 19 years in yellow robes, he not only completed his sangha education in Cambodia but got two degrees from the US, one of it an MBA from Harvard University. As a monk, he saw himself as an activist, but someone who would work from within the system. He set up the Hope and Life Association (HLA) at his temple Wat Damnak in Siem Reap, which is the largest pagoda in the area. Under his NGO he set up a vocational training center to train the poor mainly street kids to get a job or be self-employed.

“Monks are working in isolation from other temples and other networks. I have gone through all of that for the last 15 years” Somnieng¹⁰⁹ told me, when I met him at his government office in Phnom Penh. “That is part of the journey and I cannot change (but) that’s not the reason I left monkhood”.

Looking back at his time as a monk and running a vocational training center at the temple, he argued that once you understand the Buddhist teachings, you need to take the right action to get the right results.

¹⁰⁹ Discussion in Phnom Penh with author, June 2019

The way I communicate the teachings is that we are not only learning but try to take action. By doing actions we bring better results .. in peace, happiness, and prosperity. We have to take action to share with others. When we communicate what do we want? We want peace, we want our rights, but what about the others in the community? If we do not understand others and we want to understand only ourselves, sometimes we are very selfish, we (need to develop) communication to understand the needs and feelings of other people in the same situation as us. By developing communication within ourselves, within a temple, and outside in the community, this can be done (Somnieng, 2019).

Somnieng argues that the mainstream media is too traditional when it comes to covering Buddhism. They focus on broadcasting chanting, reporting on ceremonies and giving long sermons. "The way they broadcast Buddhism is not too attractive, it looks more like they are broadcasting to attract donation rather than conveying the real teachings. This creates a sense of dislike from the community".

He used to have a weekly radio spot for HLA where they talked about morality, how to understand others and how to help each other and what you can do in your community, in your temple, your environment. "That message I related was very strong both for Buddhists in my community and outside .. even temple started doing their own things (after listening to the radio program). They listen and they say oh we can do this, we can do that". Through such non-confrontative communication, he believes you can bring socio-economic change.

Now as a layperson, and civil servant with expertise in business and commerce, he is taking on another component of society. "Now I'm working with business people," he explained. "Many of them if they don't understand Buddhism they will not have good insights."

He is working with good friends in the real estate property development field. They offer Buddhism over 15 lessons for their staff - from basics like four noble truths to eight-fold-path and five precepts (panchasilas). "We want working people to understand that. Start from their company their staff. Within 1 year they have to understand that, then they have to do meditation at least twice every month".

"Our team, we organize events in conference halls, universities, city hall to bring business people, university students, government officials to understand about Buddhism. Being Buddhist means how much you understand Buddhism and how much you can live according to Buddhist principles," argues Somnieng. "It does not mean you have to come to the temple every day or every month. Your own temple comes from the right understanding of Buddhist principles (and applying it to your business) ... this is the new way of communicating with people. It is a new way of spreading out Buddhism. It started with 3 people and now we have a big group of people and we work closely with monks".

The Facebook Monk – Another Way To Communicate

Venerable Kou Sopheap is a Professor of Management and Leadership Dynamics, Character Building and Personal Growth and Development at Pannansastra University of Cambodia. He is well known for his short messages derived from Buddhism on life lessons and motivation. He holds a Master degree in education from PUC university and Troy University, USA. He authored several books related to mental health using the Buddhist approach.

When I met Venerable Kou Sopheap at his sprawling temple, an amalgamation of the old and new on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, he told me that the traditional way of spreading Buddhism is only for old people and the young need to be engaged using new tools of communication. “We need a new communication strategy to reach young people. I’m working with young people from primary to university. I’m aware of how they think,” explained Ven. Sopheap¹¹⁰ adding, that they need to be assisted to learn “how to cope with jealousy, anger, dealing with difficult people”.



Facebook Page of Ven Kou Sopheap

He uses Facebook (FB) extensively and some call him the ‘Facebook Monk’. When he chooses a topic to feature on his FB page, he tries if possible to give the message through a short video of about 3 to 4 minutes. “Some topics based on my own experience. Some I get ideas from young people” he said. “When I make a video I go straight into addressing issues and taking meaningful solutions”.

He does not want to show poverty in Cambodia – though a lot of it is seen everywhere. He prefers to address issues like how you could sleep well and how to overcome lack of sleep. “I speak on video about solutions. People watching my video is between 18 to 45 years” he noted. “Traditionally only older people go to temple to listen to dhamma. Now young people are looking at how to cope with problems. So I reach them with a video. I’m building up communication methods to address their problems via video and Facebook, and YouTube. Cambodian young people are hooked onto Facebook. We need to bring teachings to Facebook. It’s a free platform”.

He uses an integrated form of Buddhist media synergizing the new and old. The temple has a small radio studio and a radio frequency available 24 hours. On radio, he uses traditional communication methods such as broadcasting chantings from midnight to morning, giving dhamma talks taking different parts of the Tripitaka and explaining. Different monks are given time slots to broadcast.

They also do live discussions, panel discussions and talkback radio. These programs are also live-streamed on FB and nuns do some programs from the temple. The radio has been operating for 4 years without any interference from

¹¹⁰ Discussion recorded in Phnom Penh in June 2019.

the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs. “They don’t check us. They have guidelines saying don’t do this or that, but they don’t control what we talk on air” he said.

While many of the radio listeners are older people, who are used to the medium, younger people who listen to their programs and watch his video clips on FB, have now begun to come to the temple when they have special events. “We have plenty of seminars now in high schools, universities where we also invite monks to participate. That’s a good sign,” says Ven. Sopheap with a smile.

Before young people used to come to the temple only at the New Year in April and the Lent Festival in September, but now the young come more often (see box right).

When I put stuff on Facebook, I don't say it's dhamma. If they think it's dhamma they think that is for old people. They become resistant. I address on Facebook their problems and once I engage them and they like it, I say it's dhamma. Then they like it. I'm not doing that much ritualistic stuff. When I organise seminars very little chanting is done. I go straight into the dhamma discussion (Ven Sopheap, 2019).

Ven Sopheap’s team has also produced Buddhist songs to address young people’s concerns. Some of his short video clips have attracted between 3 to 5 million views and he feels cartoons are very important media as well. So he has started doing it, though it is expensive to produce.

He acknowledges that to maintain the Buddhist identity of Cambodians the rituals are important, but, there needs to be a balance. If the young are not able to understand the dhamma and see how it will assist them to cope with modern-day life, they will drift away from the religion.

When State Religion Is Buddhist, How Buddhist Is The Media?



Cambodia’s iconic Angkor Wat Temple

With the Constitution clearly stating that Cambodia’s State Religion is Buddhism, the mainstream media does feature a lot of Buddhism, but in what way? I consulted a number of current and former state media practitioners to find out, along with some senior monks as well.

The national broadcaster TVK reports on major events concerning Buddhists. Sometimes events presided over by Sangaraja and eminent monks.

Dhamma talks and any programming that contains dhamma contents have to be provided or approved by Dhammakara (Ministry of Buddhist Affairs). But, private media does not have this requirement. CTN (Cambodia TV Network) for example does programs on Buddhist legacy and Engaged Buddhism.

Buddhist monks have also turned to social media especially FB as discussed earlier. “There are many Buddhist Facebook pages with podcasts. Not only by the sangha but also some lay Buddhists have their programs. We give dhamma talks live on YouTube and FB. We use quite extensively social media for dhamma

propagation” said Venerable Professor Khy Sovanratana¹¹¹, Rector of Preah Sihanoukraj Buddhist University.

He also added that from time to time there are scandals on FB, because not every monk follows the vinaya properly. The public then criticizes monks. One particular monk, Ven. Bun Salouth in the north of Cambodia who used social media extensively to campaign on forest environment issues was suspected by the Government of working for the opposition party. “But now the Government has realized he is not and they have given him the forest to preserve” noted Prof Sovanratana.

Sing Chantvy¹¹², Presenter of Buddhism programs on CTV said that they are different to other TV because they go to village to capture social activity and show positive side of Buddhism, how to practice in positive ways. Talking about their legacy programs, he said they have 2 types – one is to create a show on how Buddhist culture interacts with the community via drama and documentary. Another is, producers going to India to study Buddhist pilgrim places and do interviews with monks. They have also gone to Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Sri Lanka as well.

They also do programs on Engaged Buddhism where they invite monks to appear on talk shows. “We go outside and film with monks to show how they are involved with the community. Not only in Cambodia, but we do similar programs from Thailand, Laos and Myanmar” he explained. “In talk show programs we invite the public to suggest topics to discuss about Buddhism. Sometimes we go to villages to talk about the best way to engage Buddhism with the public”.

A senior producer¹¹³ at Cambodian National Radio (CNR) said that they have 1-hour program every day morning and evening on Buddhism. The Dhammakara provides the contents. Ministry buys airtime but gets CNR to produce the program. They have 2 options in the production process – go directly to the pagoda or go to specific Buddhist monks. Sometimes they get memory stick to broadcast. The ministry has recorded it. Any material they broadcast has to be checked by the ministry and approved that it is ok for society.

They also have children’s programs that are not specific to religion, but to educate them on morality, good attitude, how to be good to society, how to respect elders and teachers, which are Buddhist values. Also to let them know the history, especially of Buddhism in Cambodia and the role of the pagoda in Cambodian society.

Many pagodas now have community radio frequencies, but CNR is not allowed to broadcast their programs. The Ministry of Information gives licenses for these radios. There are at least 8 Buddhist community radio stations in Phnom Penh. Radio Pouletrayroth (102.7 FM), Voice of Dharma Buddhist Radio (102.9 FM), Radio Ponlen Thom Preaphut (104.7), Vithyu Vat Morun (105.5 FM) and Radio Voice of Buddhism Cambodia (105.3FM).

¹¹¹ Interview with author in Phnom Penh, June 2019

¹¹² Interview with author in Phnom Penh, June 2019

¹¹³ Interview with author in Phnom Penh, June 2019

Ke Socheat¹¹⁴, Director Program Production Division, TVK said that 3 days a week between 5.30-6.30 am Dhammakara gives them programs on Tripitaka on disc to broadcast. On Vesak day and at other national Buddhist events they do live broadcasts. “Cambodians believe in Buddhism and every national holiday goes to the pagoda, and we broadcast these events. But we don't have any Buddhist coverage reporters” she explained. When asked if they produce any teledrama with Buddhist contents, she said, that “Cambodian drama is not really Buddhist. People are not interested in Buddhist contents in teledrama”.

Pen Sopheak¹¹⁵, a former TVK producer, who now owns his own production house, said the young generation is not interested in Buddhism (or anything traditional). “Digital communication came to Cambodia and changed the society a lot. The young generation wants to go enjoy, love traveling, gamble, party, and Karaoke (KTV), to bar and get drunk, 50 to 60 percent of youth today want to enjoy life. Don't care,” he says. “They don't think about the right way in Buddhism. They just want to make money, and are into alcohol and drugs”.

In these circumstances, he is very appreciative of the way Ven Sopheak has engaged the youth. “Many community people support him, he is famous and a successful monk,” notes Pen Sopheak.

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Group of young Cambodian monks at Angkor Wat – eareger to practice their English with tourists

¹¹⁴ Interview with author in Phnom Penh, June 2019

¹¹⁵ Interview with author in Phnom Penh, June 2019

Chapter 9

Indonesia: Srivijaya Legacy and Buddhist Survival



Borobudur Temple on Vesak Day at night

The Indonesian archipelago consists of over 17,500 islands that make it one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. There is a combined population of over 250 million people with 1349 ethnic groups with more than 2500 native languages. About 85 percent of the Indonesian population is Muslim, making it the world's biggest Islamic nation (in terms of numbers), yet Islam is not the official religion of the nation. The Buddhist population is only 0.72 percent - less than 2 million.

Andreas Harsono¹¹⁶, Researcher for Human Rights Watch Indonesia argues, that after the fall of President Suharto in 1998 there has been a push by conservative Islamic forces with pressure from Middle Eastern sources to water down the liberal attitude of Indonesian Muslims towards other religions.

"After Suharto fell the idea was to introduce sharia law via local laws rather than through national constitutional amendments," he notes. "There is the pressure at school to wear hijab¹¹⁷. Now there is pressure to introduce hijab where the shape of the body is not shown. There is a rise in wearing such hijabs".

Harsono pointed out that blasphemy laws have been in the books for 40 years but used only 4 times until 2004. Since the beginning of President Yudhoyono's two terms in office, 125 individuals were jailed under these laws. Now, the

¹¹⁶ Comments made at a seminar 'How Tolerant is Indonesian Democracy?' at ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore on 24th September 2019.

¹¹⁷ Hijab is a common headdress of Muslim women in Indonesia that covers the hair and the neck, but it is not widely worn there. The pressure is building to adopt the Arab dress of niqab or chador, which covers the whole body and most of the face.

comparatively liberal President Jokowi (Widodo) is unable to undo it. “Blasphemy laws used against minorities. A new criminal code is under consideration that will extend blasphemy laws. It s becoming a political tool” he says, adding, “you can argue against ideology but cannot argue against Koran”.

Thus, religious freedom that is enshrined in the Indonesian constitution could be under threat by new blasphemy laws. “If you defame Hindus, Buddhists or Christians you cannot be charged. 2006 religious harmony legislation replaced the principle of religious freedom. The majority has veto power over minority religions” claims Harsono. He cites the Religious Harmony Councils set up in every province where membership is based on religious ratios. Since all provinces have Muslim majorities, “this legislation would allow Indonesian authorities to close churches (and temples)”.

Indonesian Panchasila Ideology

Indonesia is guided by an ideology of ‘pancasila’ (which is different from Buddhist panchasila) first framed in 1945 and officially adopted in 1985 (see box below right – source: Wikipedia).

The problem that confronted Buddhists in the early years of Indonesian independence was how to accommodate the Pancasila in their religion. They had to do this both to prove the bona fides of Buddhism as a religion and also to show their political respectability (Brown, 1987).

Being a religion that does not accept the idea of an all-mighty God, this was a real challenge to Buddhists. In 1965, a follower of Bhikkhu Ashin Jinarakkhita Dhammaviriya published a small book entitled ‘Ke Tuhanan dalam Agama Buddha’ (God In Buddhism). In it, he described the One Supreme God as ‘Adi Buddha’, with Prophets as Buddha Gotama and the Bodhisattvas. The Holy Books are: Tipitaka, Dhammapada and Sang Hyang Kamahayanikan. In this way he put Buddhism precisely into the Islamic/Christian context, fulfilling the main requirements the Government set for a belief system to be formally recognized as a religion (Brown, 1987).

Indonesia’s Panchasila

1. Belief in the Almighty God
2. Just and civilized humanity
3. The Unity of Indonesia
4. Democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations among representatives
5. Social justice for the whole of the people of Indonesia

Theravadians were not happy with the ‘Adi Buddha’ concept of Bhikku Ashin. They arrived at a different definition – they interpret it as referring to the Absolute or Unconditioned (Asankhata Dhamma). However, ‘Adi Buddha’ concept was acceptable to the Indonesian government and in 1983 Vesak Day was declared a national holiday to mark Buddhism’s symbolic equality with the other 3 major religions (Brown, 1987).

When I asked about this definition from the chief of the Theravada Buddhism in Indonesia, Venerable Sri Pannyavaro Sanghapamokkha Thera¹¹⁸ he expressed this viewpoint:

¹¹⁸ Interview with author in Borobodur in May 2019.

The government says we are pancasila country. Not a Muslim country. This pancasila is different from Buddhist panchasila. Tuhan is the Indonesian word for God. In Pancasila God is referred to as 'KeTuhanan' an adjective. For Buddhists, the law of cosmic is our tuan. According to other religions, God is powerful. But our God is the law of cosmic. God's final destination in Buddhism is nirvana. This is acceptable to Government because they cannot change religious scriptures.

Legacy of Srivijaya Civilization

As discussed in chapter 1, the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra were on the trade routes between the Arab world, India, and China even before the 1st century CE. Thus, there were many interactions between the civilizations of these 3 regions that led to the rise and fall of the Hindu-Buddhist civilization of Srivijaya and the Islamisation of modern-day Indonesia.

The Indian religions, Vaishnava Hinduism, Shivaism, and Buddhism arrived in Southeast Asia from 200 CE onwards. The oldest references are in the (Chinese) biography of the Kashmiri prince and monk Gunavarman (367-431 CE) who is said to have preached in Sumatra. The Chinese traveler and Buddhist monk I-ching (Yijing) was in Palembang, Sumatra, in 687-9 CE and praised the place and the kingdom of Sriwijaya as a center of Buddhist learning. He translated some works from Sanskrit into Chinese while staying in Palembang and suggested that pilgrims traveling to Nalanda through the sea route should visit the kingdom (Steenbrink, 2013).

Buddhism thrived across much of Java and Sumatra between the 6th to the 14th centuries, when Srivijaya and Majapahit empires ruled the islands. These islands were major centres of Buddhist scholarship and learning, where pilgrims travelling between China and India spend months and years learning about Buddhism. In several places of Sumatra remnants of Buddhist places of worship are still preserved. It was during the Buddhist kingdom of Sailendra (about 750-850 CE) that the grandiose Borobudur temple was built.

Around 1200 CE Islam had already arrived in the archipelago, first in the northern harbour towns of Sumatra, and around 1400 CE more and more Muslim traders arrived on the northern coast of the major island of Java, making converts until influences of Hinduism and Buddhism slowly disappeared. Venerable Sri Pannyavaro explained that Buddhism lost favour with the people when it had become a Shiva cult (see box story below).

It is believed that the great Buddhist civilization that built Borobudur started to decline with the fall of the Majapahit kingdom in the 15th century CE when it was overcome by Hindu Tantric practices and corruption of the monkhood that indulged in black magic. "In the Majapahit era (1293-1478 CE), syncretism reached the highest culmination. Siva Siddhanta, Waisnawa, and Sogatha (Buddhism) lived together in harmony. These 3 are considered as the different forms of the same truth" (Indaviriyo, 2019, p 313).

Steenbrink (2013) noted that there may be some truth in the rather general idea that Hindu and Buddhist practices and doctrines spread from top to bottom, from the palace and the officials at the royal shrines to the common people (if

they reached the common people at all.) On the other hand Islam may have been spread more from the bottom to the top. Such as from the individual traders in the small coastal towns, to the elite in these harbour towns; and then inland to the political centers of the great empires, especially Majapahit. When it reached the top, there may have been another reason for rulers to embrace Islam. To enjoy the profit of this network (of Arab traders up to the Muslim Mediterranean), local rulers wanted to become more intimate with these new trade opportunities.

Islam was thus spread across the Srivijaya empire and the Indonesian archipelago in a peaceful manner, not through the sheer violence unleashed by Islamic armies in India. This is why even up to today, Buddhist shrines known as 'Candi' can be seen across Java and Sumatra including the world-famous Borobodur shrine.

Significance of Candi Borobodur

Historians consider that the amazing Borobodur temple took 50 years to complete between 780-830 CE during the reign of King Samaratungga of the Sailendra dynasty. It is believed, that in 750 CE, Candi Borobodur was buried from lava, sprouted by the eruption of a volcano in Merapi Mountain close by. It was not until 1814 CE that British explorer Stamford Raffles rediscovered the temple.



Borobodur Stupas seen in 3 levels

The temple has been constructed from andesite stone with its 47,000 cubic meter area arranged without adhesive with the surface of the stone coated with 'Vajralepa'¹¹⁹. Interestingly the temple, which has been constructed in layers on a small hill, has no shrine rooms for prayer as it has been constructed as a showcase of pilgrimage and dhamma teaching. The small

stupas of what has become to be

known as 'Borobodur' stupa style is made with rocks with a rock-carved Buddha image inside.

Borobodur is a symbol of the 3 stages of human life. The foot of the temple is about lust and desire, while the second level was called as the realm form where the human bounded by worldly life is trying to control desire and lust. The roof level of the temple consists of three stages called the formless world. In this stage, the human is released from desire and lust (Indaviriyo, 2019). The 3 levels at the top consist of the rock stupas that have diamond-shaped holes to see the Buddha statue inside with 32, 24 and 16 stupas respectively.

¹¹⁹ Vajralepa is a type of indestructible plaster of yellow colour used especially to keep the reliefs from corrosion in building structure.

The Indonesian government and UNESCO undertook a big restoration project between 1975 and 1982. Over one million stones were dismantled and removed during the restoration and set aside like pieces of a massive jigsaw puzzle to be individually identified, catalogued, cleaned, and treated for preservation. The restoration involved the dismantling of the five square platforms and the improvement of drainage by embedding water channels into the monument.

This project cost over USD 6.9 million with 5 countries contributing to it. After the renovation was finished, UNESCO listed Borobudur as a World Heritage Site in 1991. A disturbing fact however is, that there are too many 'beheaded' Buddha statues to be found at the site, where the Buddha's head is missing. This is not a good reflection on the liberal nature of Indonesian Islam.

Borobodur is officially a historic monument – not a Buddhist shrine. But, on Vesak Day Buddhists are allowed to use it as a religious shrine and thousands of Buddhists assemble from across Indonesia and Asia to take part in a procession from nearby Mendut Monastery to Candi Borobodur with Buddhist chantings and other cultural activity. In recent years, Buddhist monks and devotees have begun to do chantings all night at the shrine.

President Widodo has recently told the Buddhists that they could use Candi Borobodur as a Buddhist shrine anytime during the year, as long as they get permission from the government. The Indonesian Government has indicated to Buddhists that they would like Borobodur to become a major Buddhist pilgrim site that would attract pilgrims and tourists from abroad (see boxed story below).



Vesak Day procession in Borobodur

Borobodur Poised To Become Buddhist Pilgrim Centre

By Kalinga Seneviratne

For over 30 years Buddhists from across Indonesia and neighbouring countries have come to Borobodur on Vesak day to pay homage to the Buddha. Built in the 8th to 9th centuries during the reign of the Syailendra Dynasty, the temple at Borobodur is regarded as the greatest Buddhist temple ever built. Many argue that it should be the eighth wonder of the world.

Since it was restored with UNESCO assistance in the 1970s, the Indonesian government has declared it a national monument – not a Buddhist shrine – and Buddhists are allowed to use it as a religious shrine only on Vesak day, which is a national holiday in Indonesia.

To mark the Vesak holiday, thousands of Buddhists from across the archipelago gathered at Mendut monastery on May 18th and went on a 4 km processions from there to the temple complex... In a specially constructed altar at the shrine, they offered flowers, farm-produce, lamps and prayers to the Buddha, and there were also Buddhist songs and dances performed by Indonesian artists. They also had all-night chanting representing various Buddhist traditions.



Javanese farmers bringing produce to offer to the shrine

The theme of this year's Vesak festival was 'how to understand the heart'. "How to develop Buddha-nature is important to Buddhists and it is inside you. It is peace and compassion" explained Venerable Tadisū Paramita Mahasthavira, who gave the sermon at the ceremony.

After President Widodo (Jokowi) came to power in 2014, the government has changed its policy and in 2015, Governor of Central Java Rizal Ramli has said that

Borobudur could become a pilgrim site for Buddhists comparable to Mecca for Muslims.

"Anytime the Buddhist community want to use Borobudur temple (President) Jokowi's policy is to give us permission. With Jokowi the Buddhist community has felt easier to develop activities here," says Venerable Sri Pannyavaro, Head of the Theravada Sangha of Indonesia.

The temple complex is a large landscaped park protected by tall steel fences and armed guards. It was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1993. According to official statistics Borobudur recorded 3.7 million tourist arrivals in 2017 and it is expected to exceed 4.5 million this year.



Vesak procession arriving at Borobudur temple

In recent years, local residents – who are almost exclusively Muslim – have added homestay rooms to their houses and many small hotels have been constructed to offer accommodation to growing international tourists many of whom are Buddhists from Asia. Several new Buddhist temples have also been built.

Buddhism thrived across much of Java and Sumatra between the 6th to the 14th centuries when the islands were ruled by Srivijaya and Majapahit empires. These islands were major centers of Buddhist scholarship and learning, where pilgrims traveling between China and India spend

months and years learning about Buddhism. It was at this time that the Borobudur temple was built.

After the Islamization of the islands and possibly following a volcanic eruption close by, Borobudur was lost to the world until a European governor discovered it in the 19th century. It is believed that the great Buddhist civilization that built Borobudur started to decline with the Majapahit kingdom when it was overcome by Hindu Tantric practices and corruption of the monkhood that indulged in black magic.

In an interview with me at his Mendut monastery in Borobudur, Venerable Pannyavaro said that Buddhism got mixed up with a Hindu Shiva cult at the time. "Buddhist sangha behaved like Brahmin priests and people resented such attitude," he noted, adding, "(at the time) when Muslim traders arrived and they said in Islam in front of God everyone is equal, it attracted the ordinary people to Islam".

Only about 1 percent of Indonesia's 240 million population – numbering about 1.7 million – are Buddhists today.

Responding to the new government policy, Indonesian Buddhists are now expanding the range of spiritual activities that could be offered in Borobudur. Venerable Pannyavaro invites Singaporean Buddhists to visit there for a grand Esala Full Moon (marking Buddha's first sermon) festival on July 14th. "We expect to have about 20,000 pilgrims and we will chant from the Tripitaka," he said.

* Published in 'For You' Buddhist magazine, Singapore – June 2019

Community Harmony and Engaged Buddhists

Indonesia's Leading Buddhist group WALUBI held a two-day health camp for the local population in the courtyard of the Borobudur Temple during Vesak. The people treated were almost exclusively Muslims from the local community. 185 medical doctors and 294 paramedics supported Walubi's health and social service activity. They provided services such as general poly (headache, itching, sore aches, etc.), dental poly (pulling, patching, tartar), ophthalmic including cataract surgery, minor surgical operations (lumps), ENT specialists, obstetricians, pediatricians and cleft lip surgery. They treated about 8,000 people over the 2 days.

Walubi sees this service as a demonstration of "Engaged Buddhism" where compassion, loving-kindness, and social harmony are put into practice.

"These activities, we do all over Indonesia every 2 months. We don't claim it is only for Buddhists and we don't say we are Buddhist when we provide the services. It's not important to claim your identity. Let the people get a good image of you," explained Dr Rusli,¹²⁰ coordinator of Buddhist Publications at Walubi. "We send transport to communities to pick up poor people and bring them for medical services. When they come we first give them to eat then give medicines".

Dr Rusli, pointing out that Walubi has donated USD 1 million to construct a hospital for Rohingya refugees said: "We gave the money to the Indonesian government. We want to give Indonesians a good life, not flaunt our wealth".

¹²⁰ Interview with author in Borobudur, May 2019.

Indonesia is a country where many natural calamities take place regularly, pointed out Venerable Pannyavaro, adding that Buddhists have been very active in such relief work. In addition to Walubi, he said there is another Buddhist foundation that is doing a lot of good work in Indonesia. That is Tzu Chi Foundation from Taiwan, which has a huge headquarters building in Jakarta. They have been building housing, hospitals and schools for the poor.

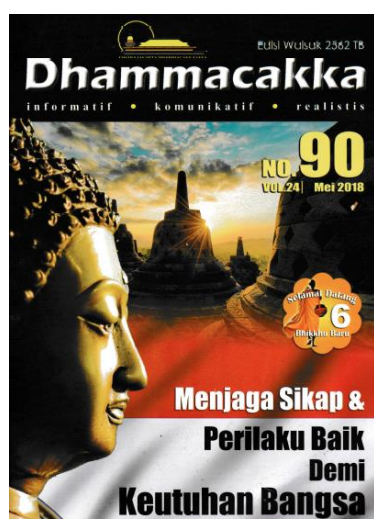
On 2 February 2019, Tzu Chi Foundation and the Regional Government of Palu signed a cooperation agreement on permanent housing development of 1000 units for victims of the earthquake, liquefaction, and tsunami that happened on 28th September 2018 in Palu City. On 18th February 2019, a groundbreaking ceremony was held to begin the building of a school by Tzu Chi Foundation in Singkawang in West Kalimantan. To be built on 10,000 square meters of land, it would have 54 classrooms, a playground, and cater up to high school. Speaking at the ceremony, Tzu Chi Indonesia's Pui Sudarto said, that at Tzu Chi School "we prioritize humanistic value" and try to teach students "to have a good heart".

Pointing out the work done in the community by Buddhist organisations such as Walubi and Tzu Chi, Venerable Pannyavaro said: "The Government sees us as Buddhists helping out, not proselytizing."

Buddhism and Indonesian Media

When a community is less than 1 percent of a country's population, you cannot expect to get much of a voice in the national media. But, if your community is wealthy, in today's social media and digital technology era, it is possible to set up your own media networks. Thus, because the Indonesian Buddhist community is a fairly wealthy one - mainly involved in business - they are able to create their own Buddhist media networks. However, getting their voices into the mainstream of society is not an easy task.

"When we get some voice in the media, it would be only on a Buddhist topic. (But) Indonesia is very secular. So we don't talk about religion unless its election time" said Yusuf Sumartha¹²¹, from Handaka Viijananda Ehipassiko



Foundation. "Buddhists are business people, so we have a voice on business affairs. But not to talk about Buddhism".

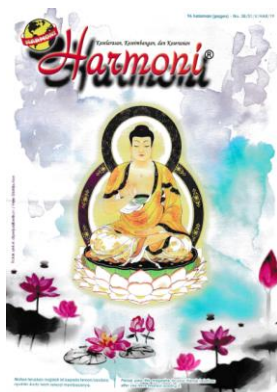
Setiawan Liu,¹²² former Editor in Chief of Dhammacakka Buddhist Magazine agrees. He says that usually, they get some coverage for Vesak in Borobodur, other than that Buddhists don't exist in the media. There is also occasional coverage like when in 2014 an Islamic extremist group threatened to attack Candi Borobodur, and in 2016 when 11 Buddhist temples were attacked near Medan over a dispute about loudspeaker noise from a mosque.

¹²¹ Interview with author in Jakarta, May 2019.

¹²² Interview with author in Jakarta, May 2019.

Liu said that Dhammacakka and another Buddhist publication Dhammaratna have ceased publication and are now looking into going for online media. He believes Buddhist media need to link to popular culture to attract the young.

Another Buddhist magazine that is still in print and has produced over 40 issues is Harmony Magazine that represents the Mahayana School of Buddhism in Indonesia. It is published in Bhasa Indonesian with some Mandarin content.



“People donate to support the magazine and the main purpose of printing this is for the benefit of the Buddhist community,” said Venerable Samantha Kusala¹²³, a member of the editorial team. “We try to give the Indonesian government the right understanding of Buddhism too. We try to influence government officials who read this so their activities will be done better,” he added.

Ven Tadisū Paramita Mahasthavira¹²⁴, who was involved in the founding of the magazine, said that while they use the magazine to encourage followers of Mahayana Buddhism to follow “high quality practice” of the dhamma, it is distributed for free for anyone to read, “we are not trying to convert the Muslim community”.

In addition to the magazines mentioned above, many monasteries have their own newsletters or magazines printed in Bhasa Indonesian. With most young Indonesians hooked onto online media, especially those from the wealthy Buddhist community, Buddhist magazines are shifting from printed versions to online websites. One popular Buddhist media site is Buddhazine¹²⁵, which is a slick professionally done site in the Indonesian language, which has news, columns, dhamma information and even videos on Buddhist topics and events, that links to their YouTube site¹²⁶.



Buddhazine website

Buddhazine does articles about how millennials learn Buddhism. Get millennials interested in doing social work,” pointed out Fian Yong¹²⁷ a Millennium Buddhist. “Almost every campus has Buddhist associations and Buddhazine sponsors them for events. You can find Buddhazine on YouTube. They package Buddhism for millennials”.

¹²³ Interview with author in Borobodur, May 2019.

¹²⁴ Interview with author in Borobodur, May 2019.

¹²⁵ <http://buddhazine.com/>

¹²⁶ Buddhazine YouTube site -

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_zLcWdHMwCxJaQ3V8McDAw/featured

¹²⁷ Interview recorded in Borobodur in May 2019.

A Buddhist businessman, Irvyan Wongso has set up a Buddhist music channel on YouTube¹²⁸ that is very popular. "He knows how to use music to trigger millennials' interest in Buddhism," says Fian. "He is very popular in the Indonesian Buddhist community. He thinks music is not the core of the Buddha Dhamma but it could be an opening to dhamma".

Another popular Buddhist music duo is Linawati Suwito and Santo Shi, who sing together under the stage name of Lyna and Santo. They sing Buddhist songs using Indonesian rhythms such as using Bali and Sunda music, as well as the popular Dangdut music. Lyna has been performing since 16 years and she's done 16 albums of dhamma music.

Lyna¹²⁹ says: "Most lyrics come from application of Buddhism to everyday life. Through the medium of song, it makes it easier for devotees to understand the dhamma than reading books. We go to small temples and sing to teach dhamma". Adds her composer Ambeng: "Young generation is getting more interested in Buddhist music. I need to create music to make the song more energetic. I prioritize music over lyrics. Music is more important to young people".

Lyna is involved in a weekly Buddhist program on the national network TVRI every Tuesday from 9.30 to 10.00 am. She interviews people on Buddhist topics on the program and also play music in between talk clips.

Dai TV from Taiwan's Tzu Chi Foundation has also got a broadcast facility in Jakarta from where they broadcast programs for Indonesian viewers. But, those are mainly in the Mandarin language with Indonesian subtitles. Also not all programs are purely on Buddhism. They touch on political, economic and social issues from Asia.

Dr Rusli says that they haven't tried to establish a national Buddhist media in Indonesia "because we don't want to upset the majority Muslim population here". But, they want to improve the quality of life to all Indonesians that is why they have set up a social work training program for Buddhists at Mendut temple in Borobodur in association with Tzu Chi Foundation. "Buddhists in Indonesia don't want to proselytize we want to improve the overall Indonesian society."

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¹²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/user/IrvynWongso/feed>

¹²⁹ Interview with author in Jakarta in May 2019.

Chapter 10

Laos: Unique Accommodation Between Marxism and Buddhism

Buddhism come from India and enriched our land. French wanted to destroy the Lao language but Buddhism protected it. Monks protected Buddhism in Laos. During that time the poor could not go to school. During that time they teach French, and the Lao language was taught by monks ... Lao people learn all the culture from the temple. After the French, Americans came in, monks helped the government in the fight (against imperialism). They fought in mobilizing people mentally. So monks played an important part in helping the government - some say Lao monks go to war – it is not true. Monks helped to motivate the people by guiding their minds. They talked to people, helped them to cope with the suffering of war, and motivate them to fight the enemy. Monks in Laos don't use weapons, but the mind to fight wars - Ven Athipatay Maytryjit – Member of Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation¹³⁰



Child monks receiving food from devotees

Laos, a landlocked Southeast Asian nation of just over 7 million people is a predominantly Buddhist country with 67 percent Buddhist and another 31 percent following animist religions that may have elements of Buddhism in it.

Buddhism and animism are so inter-woven that they are usually seen as one by both Lao and foreign visitors and called Buddhism. Animistic beliefs are beliefs that ascribe, what might be described as 'Spirit' to inanimate objects. 'Spirits' are called 'phi' in Lao. Much of Lao life is at least heavily influenced in belief in 'phi'. Community elders usually do ceremonies making offerings to 'phi' or getting their blessings. But, sometimes Buddhist monks take part in these though they are prohibited in propagating 'phi' worship per se (Ahir, 2001).

Buddhism is thus deeply rooted in the country, which has had a theoretically Marxist government since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Yet, almost all Government members are Buddhists and they openly take part in Buddhist ceremonies. The government in turn deploys Buddhist temples, to deliver their development programs, especially in rural areas, as we will explore later in this chapter.

Brief History of Buddhism in Laos

Buddhism has arrived in the area that is called Laos today in the 6th and 7th centuries CE from India via Burma and Thailand. However, the history of Laos starts in the 14th century when a banished son of a king, Phi Fa went with his son Fa Nagum and settled in Angkor under the Khmer rule. Fa Nagum studied under a Theravada monk, and eventually married one of the Khmer king's daughters, who provided him with an army around 1350 CE to get back his father's lost inheritance. He set up an independent kingdom with ties to Angkor and Luang Phrabang as its capital in 1353 CE marking the beginning of the Laos

¹³⁰ Video interview with author, recorded in Vientiane, October 2015.

state. From the beginning, being a small state Laos had problems protecting its independent identity and had to get into subservient alliances with Burma and Thailand. These, however, reinforced Theravada Buddhism, which became the country's primary symbol of continuity and identity in the face of its shifting political fortunes (Buddhanet)¹³¹.



Pha That Luang pagoda in Vientiane believed to have been built in the 3rd century CE and enshrined with a hair relic of the Buddha

Fa Nagum declared Buddhism as the state religion after accepting the Pha Bang Buddha image from his father-in-law and in 1356 CE he built a pagoda to house it in Luang Phrabang. King Sethathirath who ruled Laos between 1547-1571 CE tried to make Laos a regional Buddhist studies center. But, it was not until the 17th century that Buddhism began to be taught in schools. Since that time Theravada Buddhism and Laos have been intertwined (Ahir, 2001).

Traditional Role of the Temple in the Community

Most Lao people like to donate food and other useful items to the Buddhist monks to gain merit and improve their karma. The Buddhist temples in Laos are likely to be the educational institutions for novice monks as well as for the general public. Lao novice monks are highly respected and revered in Lao communities. Traditional methods of communication based on Theravada Buddhist teachings imparted by the temples can be considered as norms or traditions that should be followed by Lao people to ensure that Lao culture remains alive and our national identity is maintained (Phensisanavong, 2018, p 192)



Typically Lao-style temple in Vientiane

Phensisanavong (2018) believes that this tradition of the Lao people helps in community development and the creation of a harmonious society. A National University of Laos, communication lecturer, she has done a case study of a village near her university to illustrate this point.

“The temple effectively functions as a center of the community with traditional Buddhist festivals held there the whole year,” notes Phensisanavong (2018, p 195). “The novice monks are regularly invited to chant in private houses, government offices as well as in some private companies during important traditional events like moving into new houses or company premises or someone passed away. While the monks support the needs of any traditional community Buddhist activity, the community also supports the temple actively”.

¹³¹ <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/laos-txt.htm>

Monks at these temples give dhamma lessons to high school children under the curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education and Sports. Their role through these lessons is to guide children in proper behavior, at school with friends and teachers, and at home with parents and relatives, as well as generally communicating with people in the community in such a way that there is social harmony.

Boualin Bouaphalaphone¹³² is the Village Headman at one of the villages that participated in Phensisanavong's case study. "Wat plays a central role in facilitating the traditions of the village people. Temple is at the center and the community relies on the temple," he said, listing some of the activities that take place here. Such as, that the temple is a place for people to gather for traditional and family activity like funerals, births, blessings, etc; it



Village temple in Laos

receives and accommodate outsiders, and the temple is used as a venue for Government activity such as officials holding meetings to communicate with the community. "Temple is a spiritual refuge – when people have problems they come to temple to get a Buddhist sermon and feel happier. They come for blessings to make them feel calmer," he added.

Boualin is worried about the teenagers in his village, which is very close to the university. "They may be doing it (coming to temple) because parents want to. Globalization, technology, social media, internet are threats to safeguard Buddhism," he argues. Although every village has a temple, he believes that they play too passive a role. Just teaching Buddhist values in the temple is not enough. "We need to seek help from Government to having Buddhist activity. Monks need to go to schools and interact more with teenagers in classroom activity" he added.

The beating of drums, announcements by loudspeakers, and handing out leaflets door to door are the communication methods still applied by village temples to summon people for meetings. "Buddhism provides a common identity, something public service broadcasters set out to do in the post-colonial era," argues Phensisanavong (2018, p206).

Accommodation with Marxism

In the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War in the mid-1970s, with the success of the anti-American Communist forces, there were worries among the international Buddhist community that Marxism could wipe out Buddhism and Buddhist culture from Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. But, as this study reflects the opposite has happened. There has been a revival of Buddhism with a strong social action agenda. Laos is a good example of how

¹³² Interview with author at village temple in Vientiane, October 2019.

Buddhism and Marxism have worked out a unique formula of cooperation rather than confrontation.

“Laos suffered a lot from war and after 1975 (when Communists won) the laws of Lao changed and the country embarked on development. Lao Buddhists decided to integrate (temple activity) with Government policy. It's the uniqueness of the Lao Government and monks cooperating – (temple) helping people to cooperate with Government is unique. Lao Government has a central committee for monks for implementation of development policy in the provinces. Monks go to the provinces to teach people (and) is a partner in development, and (the committee) integrate (cooperate) with monks (in the provinces) to contribute to society,” explained Ven. Athipatay.

In the last decade of the 20th century, the Lao Government decided to open up the socialist system to market forces in a limited way. It would have resulted in the onslaught of western and commercial values in the country.



Lao People's Revolutionary Party emblem

Lao society was faced with the question of the preservation not only of its culture but also of its very national identity. As Morev (2002, p 395) observed, “Buddhism and its teachings provided one of the most important means available, with the values of patriotism and independence, to help the Lao nation withstand the influence of foreign ideologies and mass culture. Buddhism was enlisted in the defense of national culture, life and identity as a matter of course. In 1991 a Buddhist stupa replaced the red star and the

hammer and sickle on the insignia of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and the word 'socialism' was removed from the motto of the state, symbolizing this shift in spiritual values”.

Rural Development – A Buddhist Path

The ever-increasing globalization, trade, market, capitalism, and the spread of rampant consumerism have created many social problems such as poverty, drug, human trafficking, environmental depletion, etc. The phenomenon is a threat to peace and the security of Lao society. The Buddhist Community (Sangha) leaders feel that Lao society is facing these new challenges and they can play a meaningful role if members are well trained in understanding their own spiritual and cultural roots, as well as the complication of globalization and the social, cultural and environmental issues related to it – Buddhism for Development Project¹³³

The Buddhism for Development Project (BDP) was launched in 2003 with the approval of the Lao Front for National Construction. “Project promotes monks as community leaders in development work. To let people understand



¹³³ Taken from the promotional leaflet of the Buddhism for Development project.

clearly why Buddhism is part of community development. We communicate Buddhist principles and teachings and link it to people's daily life," explained Khamsing Vongsavang¹³⁴, of Lao Buddhist Fellowship Association, which is affiliated with BDP. "There is a specific Sangha constitution to guide our work" he added.

There are 2 parts of BDP's development work. First is the constitution, which is a guide to how the sangha community or Buddhist organisations collaborate with government agencies. One such agency is the Ministry of Home Affairs, which has a religious department there. The second part is the Lao National Front for Construction, which is also a government agency. If a Buddhist organisation/community has a plan they need to inform and collaborate with them. Buddhist Fellowship Organisation (BFO) is at both provincial and central levels. If you want, for example, a forest preservation project, the plan goes through sangha organisation first, then collaborate with government agencies at provincial and district level. " (You need to) makes sure it agreed with the constitution and rules of the sangha. The constitution is drafted and adopted by the BFO in collaboration with the Government. Sangha constitution has gone through national parliament (not as a bill)" explained Khamsing.

When asked if they have run into any conflicts with the government, he responded that there are no such cases as in Cambodia (discussed in chapter 2). "When a forest area is identified for a development project, community, village, district, provincial authorities have to mutually agree to cut a forest. Many years before the constitution was adopted there was a case in northern Laos. Now sangha constitution guides development projects. This sangha constitution guides all development activity in Laos," he concluded.

Village Buddhist Monks in Laos Initiate Environmentally-Aware Development

Lotus News Feature By Toung Eh Synuanchanh

BEUNGSANTHUENG, Laos: A quiet revolution is taking shape in rural Laos, where environmentally-conscious village Buddhist monks are teaching people morality and meditation to spearhead a movement mobilizing the people to economically develop their communities for



Monks and nuns taking a Buddhist Volunteer Spirit for Communication training course at the BDP's Training Center at Wat Nakhoun Noi

living in harmony with nature rather than destroying it in the name of development.

At the Ban Beungsanthueng community, in Nongbok District in Khammouane Province of Laos, about 400 km south of the capital Vientiane, monks educate the villagers in *Sila* (Buddhist morality) and the way to live a good life (Right Livelihood), while protecting the environment. In this nominally communist country, the monks explain the linkage between humans and nature to villagers, and its importance to their livelihoods and well-being.

"Inviting the villager to practice meditation and observe five or eight precepts is the process of

preparing their mind before initiating any activities ... awakens them to realising the impact of their activities or practice on the environment and also the impacts on their daily lives and well-being," explains Phra Phithak Somphong of the local village temple here.

Phra Phithak is one of the monks who had been trained by the Buddhism for Development Project (BDP) of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation (BFO) for the purpose of engaging in grassroots development work. The monk started the work soon after completing his training in

¹³⁴ Interview with author in Vientiane, October 2019

Vientiane in 2013 and began by inviting villagers to observe Buddhist precepts and practice *vipassana* (mindful) meditation every full moon (holy) day. He inculcates Buddhist morality in the villagers, including children and youth. The monk points out that this practice follows the Buddha style of teaching or training.

Meanwhile, he has formed a villagers' Buddhist Volunteer Spirit for Community group with children, youth and adults included in the group. Activities include cleaning the village access road, road reparations, production of compost or non-chemical fertiliser for agriculture, pilot organic gardening, reforestation, conservation and ecological protection.

Over the centuries, Buddhism has been linked with development in Laos. Buddhism was introduced to the country and promoted in the era of King Fangum Maharaja in the 14th century when the Lao Lanxang Kingdom (Kingdom of the Million Elephants) was united. Since then, Buddhist temples have played a vital role as education centers (temple schools or *hong hien wat*) and Buddhist monks have continued to play an educational role up to today.

Furthermore, Buddhist monks in Laos significantly supported the process of gaining and declaring the independence of Laos from France and also the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). They helped to impart spirituality and arouse people to join the process of fighting for Lao independence.

After the founding of Lao PDR on 2 December 1975, at the end of the Indo-China war, the role of Buddhist monks in development appeared to diminish. But, Buddhist values remained embedded in the Lao people's lifestyle, tradition and culture, and monks continued to play their educator's role.

Monks have understood their role to stay at their temples to learn and practice dhamma (Buddhist teachings) and disciplines, accept the invitation of lay people for religious activities (rituals) to relieve spiritual sufferings and accept offerings to meet their basic needs, such as clothing, food, accommodation and medicines.

This community role makes a psychological impact on people's minds and encourages people to pursue and cultivate Buddhist practices like loving-kindness, compassion and mindfulness which promote social harmony and peace.

Nevertheless, this alone cannot respond to the rapid changes and social context that affects people's mind and their well-being. Therefore, the sangha (Buddhist order of monks) in Laos had to rethink their roles. They realised that it was their duty to become involved in the development process to help Lao people obviate their sufferings. From a Buddhist point of view, social issues that affect people's well-being are considered as sufferings.

Degradation of the environment is one reason for this suffering, and monks and villagers have agreed that they will use the sacred forest, the great ancestor's spirit dwelling villagers call "Don Hor", as an area for protection and conservation.

Because people in the village believe in Buddhism along with their ancestor spirit, monks and villagers began by negotiating their needs and intentions with the ancestor spirit or "Pu Ta Yaphaw" through the persons who act as mediums known as "Jum Ban" and "Nang Thiem" (the Shaman). These people play a vital spiritual role in the village in communicating with the Pu Ta.

"The monks and villagers came to me and asked me to communicate with the Pu Ta¹³⁵ to ask for his permission to take his area - Don Hor - for reforestation activities and as a protected and conservation area," explains the village Jum Ban. "The Pu Ta permitted them and allowed them to plant trees whenever they want. On the day of demarcation, the Pu Ta borrowed and possessed my body and he then pointed to where the monks and villagers could put posts to demarcate the area."

This is how tradition and modern environmentalism merge. Soon after obtaining permission from the Pu Ta, they began demarcation and held an ordination ritual to ordain the area according to Buddhist rituals to protect the forest in the area.

"The reason why we have to protect the land and forest (is) because people are greedy. They do not care about collective or community property; they will seize it if they see their benefits. This initiative will help to prevent the protected area, trees and animals in the area from

¹³⁵ The 'phi puta' is the spirit of the land in Lao culture.

encroachment, cutting and hunting,” argues Phra Phithak. “Nature is linked to people’s well-being. If we achieve this, it will become a source of food that can be collected all year round, and producing oxygen or fresh air for us to breathe,” he adds.

This follows the Buddhist worldview that all creatures on earth are linked: the human being is also a part of nature, earns a living with nature, and survives because of nature.

** Transmitted by IDN-InDepthNews – 07 December 2017*

Khamsing also expressed concerns about some Christian evangelical groups who do development work in Buddhist villages with a hidden agenda. The government’s Religious Affairs Department monitors them as religions are allowed to be propagated but not to attack other religions. “There are some problems with Christians in Laos. There are certain sects of Christians where the government and we are worried about (he was referring to Pentecostal Christians). Christians don’t use violence but we are worried about evangelical Christians. Government closely monitor activities of them,” he said.

Christian Targeting of Hill Tribes

In many parts of Southeast Asia, Christian missionaries have been targeting hill tribe people for proselytism, mainly because the government in the delivery of development projects has neglected them. Many are also illiterate in the national languages of the countries, and Buddhist temples have also neglected them in dhamma propagation. Laos has several Hill Tribes that usually do not communicate in the national Lao language.

The Christians have been trying to spread the gospel in Laos since the 17th century CE, especially the Catholic Church, but failed to do so initially. In the late 19th century, after France, they able to set up some churches, and by the beginning of the 21st century, colonized Laos it had parishes in virtually every province. Yet, according to statistics, only 2 percent of Laotians are Christians, and that is mainly concentrated between the Khmu and Hmong tribal communities.

Morev (2002) says that according to French Catholic missionaries and American Protestant pastors he has spoken to them which they have said that Lao Buddhists are staunch adherents of their faith and minority groups because of their spirit-worship, are more open to conversion. Direct preaching according to them, has been unproductive. So what the missionaries do is pick on a few individuals and work with them to drill the Christian faith into their minds, and once they are convinced, to use them to proselytizing their own people.

Morev (2002, p 401-402) has documented the following observations during his research in Laos in last few years of the 20th century:

To recruit people, they will offer gifts and money, promise material benefits or, conversely, hold up the threat of hell.

After their establishment, these new religious groups, or at least their leaders, are maintained by donor humanitarian organisations until they can provide for themselves. Members of a neoprotestant group in Phongkheng village (Vientiane municipality), for instance, said in court that they received salaries and expenses from the American

humanitarian organisation 'Partners in Progress', in return for which they 'sought out people for Bible study classes in various provinces and rendered other services.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the scope for illegitimate religious activity by so-called humanitarian organisations was growing steadily. New unregistered religious groups with their preachers, places of worship and other property were appearing all over the country. In this situation the Lao authorities felt obliged to take measures to regulate the arbitrary activity of these neo-protestant organisations and to put a potentially precarious course of events under control.

Afterwards events followed a classical pattern: the side, which had provoked the conflict took it as a 'casus belli'¹³⁶ and unleashed an international campaign for the protection of religious rights in Laos; this gained momentum with every passing year. Western mass media, in the first place the US-sponsored 'Free Asia' radio stationed in neighbouring Thailand, some international organisations such as Amnesty International and Lao refugee organisations in America and Europe constantly accuse the Lao authorities of infringement of freedom of religion in Laos, of discrimination, persecution and harassment of Christians, of closing their churches and imprisonment of Christian clergy and laymen.

The targeting of minority groups by Christian missionaries is a common situation that afflicts most Buddhist communities across Asia, as pointed out in most of the country chapters of this book.

Khamsing said, that the LBFA has begun a communication strategy to reach tribal communities. "Some communities who are not Buddhist - like ethnic communities – they (LBFA members) will collaborate with village authorities, to help to communicate as they don't speak the Lao language. Many boys from ethnic communities now ordain as novice monks," he added.

Religious Freedoms – One Dimensional Thinking

At this stage, it will be appropriate to look at how the Americans see the issue of religious freedom in Laos. During my research, a Lao government official told me that it is not only Americans that come in for "illegal" missionary work on tourist visas, many South Korean Christian missionaries slip into the country as well on tourist visas. "We don't want to stop issuing visas for Korean tourists because we want them," the official said, adding, "We certainly don't need Korean missionaries".

Be it Korean or American, this one-dimensional perspective on the role of Christian missionary work, is important for Buddhists to understand, if we are to challenge it. The source of this information is the 'US Commission On International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) – Annual Report 2019'¹³⁷.

¹³⁶ An act or event that provokes or is used to justify war.

¹³⁷ https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_LAOS_2019.pdf

The report says, that throughout 2018, USCIRF continued to receive reports of harassment and persecution of Christians in Savannakhet “a province known for its religious intolerance”. Furthermore, the Lao government maintained its policy of promoting Buddhism through various state institutions, including public school curricula, and at times incorporated Buddhist rituals or ceremonies in official state functions.

Some Christians find the government-prescribed religious labels too narrow or at odds with their own personal doctrine or beliefs. As a result, some choose not to join a recognized religious institution (there are 3 recognised Christian organisations/churches) and instead attend services at unofficial house churches. While technically illegal, house churches are fairly common throughout much of the country, and in some areas, they are more or less tolerated by local authorities. In other— predominantly rural—areas, Christians worshipping in unregistered house churches face social exclusion from their community, harassment, and occasional detention by local authorities. Because village elders sometimes disapprove of Christian religious activities, local authorities often feel justified in committing these abuses under the misguided notion of preserving communal peace and stability.

Throughout 2018, the Lao government continued to promote Buddhism through various state institutions, and at times incorporated Buddhist rituals or ceremonies in official state functions. Authorities usually framed these efforts as an attempt to instill pride in Lao customs and reinforce national identity by regarding Buddhism not solely as a religion, but also as an integral component of the country’s cultural heritage. The Lao government also reportedly urged highly influential Buddhist leaders to include progovernment messaging in their religious sermons. The Lao government continued to promote Buddhist practices throughout the public school system (USCIRF Annual Report 2019)

What the above comments constitute is one-dimensional liberal western ideology. Secularism means that no country has a right to protect its religious identity and the religion itself from outside infiltrators who are creating social disharmony in society. I will discuss this issue further in chapter 16.

Media and Buddhism

From conversations with Buddhists, they said that there is very little Buddhism in the mainstream media in Laos. Usually when government officials attend a Buddhist event it is broadcast on national television. But when monks have their own activity, very rarely it is broadcast on TV.

Ms Thepphavon Vongmany¹³⁸, a Senior Producer, Lao TV explained that they have 2 national TV channels and in one of the channels on Sundays they have a 30 minute program which includes a 8-10 minute talk by a monk, while they also include reports on traditional Buddhist events, and in the third segment, a

¹³⁸ Interview with author in Vientiane, October 2019.

monk will explain a specific aspect of Lao Buddhist culture and traditions to teenagers.

She also explained that they broadcast programs, which focus on positive aspects of Buddhism, but do not do any programs on other religions. Sometimes they would have discussion programs where someone like an academic would put the question on the dhamma to a monk. They also have children's programs where they show Buddhist festivals, what is its meaning and how children prepare for them. Sometimes they send a camera crew with a Buddhist monks' delegation visiting overseas and they may do some programs on that country's Buddhist culture. However, Lao TV does not have money to purchase overseas programs.

Ms Phonesavanh Thikeo¹³⁹, Deputy Editor In Chief at Vientiane Times said that since 1994 they have been covering on a weekly basis Buddhist festivals – both public and private – to promote Lao Buddhist culture.

She also added that they carry opinion pieces on why women have to wear appropriately when they go to the temple. Also, men do not wear short pants. "We promote dress code a lot, especially for women. Need to respect our culture. We also promote among young people respecting teachers at school and elders at home. How to greet people with head bow down" she added. "The focus is on giving an opinion on culture and most of the opinions are written by monks".

Since Vientiane Times is a government-funded publication, Phonesavanh says that its main function is to promote Lao culture and safeguard it. However, they do cover other religions from time to time, as well as carry foreign news items. The government has not given any guidelines on covering religion.



School children in Laos, wear traditional uniform to school

Village Headman, Boualin Bouaphalaphone is concerned that monks are not able to reach out to teenagers in a big way. "We use social media to communicate Buddhist events. I use Facebook but represent the village. Every temple event I communicate via Facebook" he explained. "We need to have a more coordinated plan among Buddhist organisations to propagate Buddhism by reaching to the teenagers via social media. Buddhist organisations need to

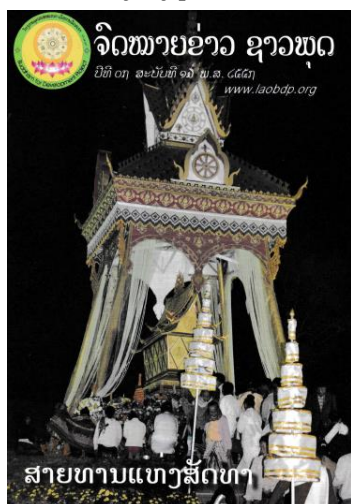
discuss and plan on how to reach teenagers".

Some famous monks have their own Facebook notes Prof Phensisanavong. She points out that most of these famous monks who have a good understanding of Buddhism have gone to India for their education. However, she thinks that to reach teenagers, the best way is through schools.

¹³⁹ Interview with author in Vientiane, October 2019.

“To safeguard Buddhism, monks and community should ensure that they provide Buddhist classes in schools. Only Sangha Schools teach Buddhism, but not in Government schools. They only invite monks to come and do chanting, and tell students how to behave once a year”.

Khamsing Vongsavang, of LBFA explained that to communicate Buddhism, they have many types of channels at local and central levels. In some communities



Magazine produced by LBFA

that have community radio, monks produce radio programs on dhamma. “We want to get funds to develop community media at the grassroots,” he says. “We produce a Buddhist fellowship newsletter (printed like a magazine in colour) it includes news of all activities at grassroots level”.

The magazine used to be produced quarterly but now due to lack of funds, is only produced about twice a year. ‘SCM Kalang’ an organization run by Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand funded it. “We don’t want to stop the publication. After their funds stop we are trying to raise funds locally to continue it. Most funds go for printing. We can do e-mag but will not reach our target audience –

rural communities can’t get access to the Internet” he points out. So we need a print issue. When monks go to the community they distribute it to the community for free. We need help for funding books and publications because this type of communication helps the community”.

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Chapter 11

Malaysia: Keeping Buddhism Alive In An Islamic Nation

Buddhism was introduced to the Malays and also to the people of the Malay Archipelago as early as 200 BCE. Chinese written sources indicated that some 30 small Indianised states rose and fell in the Malay Peninsula. This was a time when Indian traders and priests began traveling the maritime routes and brought with them Indian concepts of religion, government, and the arts. However, Hindu influence was not spread by the sword but by Indian trade. Over many centuries the peoples of the region, especially the royal courts, synthesized Indian and indigenous ideas - including Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism - that shaped their political and cultural patterns¹⁴⁰.

Between the 7th and 13th centuries many of these small, often prosperous peninsular maritime trading states came under the loose control of the great Sumatra-based empire Srivijaya. As discussed in chapters 1 and 9, this was the golden era of Buddhism in the region. Recent archaeological finds in Kedah state indicates that Buddhist temple and stupas existed there possibly dating back to 110 CE. That would make them the earliest archeological evidence of Buddhist presence in maritime Southeast Asia. Between the 7th to 11th centuries Kedah was a vassal of the Srivijaya Empire¹⁴¹.

There was even a military expedition by the Cholas of South India some time at the beginning of the 11th century CE when Rajendra Chola attacked parts of the peninsula and Sumatra. This led the king of Kedah, Phra Ong Mahawangsa to denounce the traditional Indian religion. He was the first of the Malay rulers to do so and he converted to Islam. In the 15th century CE, during the golden age of the Malacca Sultanate, the majority of Malays converted to Islam (Wikipediaa).

These early Indianised states left a living legacy, traces of which can still be found in the political ideas, social structures, rituals, language, arts, and cultural practices of the Malays¹⁴².

Malaysia Today

Though, the identity of a Malay is today associated with followers of Islam, yet, there are strong pockets of Malaysian Buddhists, who are mainly among the ethnic Chinese (migrants from China over many centuries) and Thai, Burmese and Sri Lankan migrants in the latter part of the 20th century.

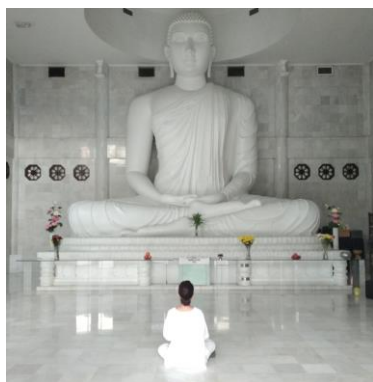
On 29 September 2001, the then Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir declared that the country was an Islamic state (*Negara Islam*). The opposition leader at the time, Lim Kit Siang called Mahathir's move unconstitutional by repeatedly clarifying that Malaysia is a secular state with Islam as its official religion as enshrined in the Constitution (Wikipedia).

¹⁴⁰ A History of Malay Peninsula - <http://www.sabrizain.org/malaya/early.htm>

¹⁴¹ 'Buddhism in Malaysia', leaflet printed by Nalanda Institute Malaysia.

¹⁴² Source as in 138 above

Malaysian population was 28.3 million at the time of the last census in 2010 with Malays constituting 63.1 percent of it. In terms of religion, all Malays are considered Muslims and under Malaysian law, if you are born Malay you are not allowed to convert to another religion¹⁴³. Buddhist component of the population is 19.8 percent (approximately 5.6 million) while Christians are 9.2 percent and Hindu 6.3 percent (Department of Statistics Malaysia). Since much of the Malaysian Chinese population has successfully ventured into business, the Buddhists, in general, are well to do.



Buddhists in Malaysia mainly follow Mahayana Buddhism, but there is a significant component who are also Theravada Buddhists (or is a mixture of both) working closely with Thais, Sri Lankans and Burmese.

Lim Kooi Fong¹⁴⁴, founder of the Buddhist Channel says that as a minority in Malaysia, Buddhists don't want to rock the boat. "They (Islamic Government) give us Vesak holiday, allow us to build temples. We are grateful for that. We have a lot of temples in Malaysia. These are very active in teaching Buddhism. As a minority group, we are grateful to the Government to give us that freedom. But we are not allowed to preach or teach Buddhism to Muslims".

Any book on Buddhism published in Malaysia for free distribution needs to carry a statement on the cover "For non-Muslims only".

Chinese are very self-dependent and emphasize a lot on education and have smaller families, points out Lim. "We are involved in the corporate world doing business. Buddhism is a big part of the Chinese community. They invest savings in education and building temples. Community funds most of the Chinese schools. The government only pays the salaries of teachers. Temples are very elaborate. We have been very successful in both. Tibetans come here to raise funding, to build temples in India and Nepal".

Venerable Dhammananda Legacy

Though Malaysia is not a Buddhist country, Ven Dhammananda's untiring work (see box below), not only in writing books but also initiating many social service projects from its temple in Brickfields in Kuala Lumpur, put Malaysia on the map of the Buddhist world. When he passed away in September 2006, even Malaysia's 'The Star' newspaper carried a long feature under the heading of "Loving Monk" (Chiew, 2006). His funeral was attended by over 500 monks coming from 11 countries along with thousands of his Malaysian devotees.

¹⁴³ The rationale for this is that Islam is considered intrinsic to Malay ethnic identity, which culturally and historically is ruled by a Sultan who is a Muslim (Wikipedia)

¹⁴⁴ Interview with author in Kuala Lumpur, May 2019

Ven. Dr K. Sri Dhammanada Nayake Thera is one of a rare quality of Asian Buddhist monks these days who attracted a large following not only in Malaysia but also overseas. It had a lot to do with his many Dhamma books and audio and videotapes that explained Buddhism simply and without too much intellectual jargon. Malaysia is blessed with many visionary pioneer Buddhist leaders from both Theravada and Mahayana traditions. The most well-known Theravada visionary monk in Malaysia was venerable Dr Kirinde Dhammananda Nayaka Thera. The Venerable came from Sri Lanka to Malaysia in 1952 and began his tireless efforts to propagate Dhamma. He gave numerous talks throughout the country and authored more than 50 publications on Buddhism. His hard work paid off handsomely as it transformed how Buddhism was perceived and practiced in Malaysia - from a backward, antiquated, traditional belief, to a contemporary, proactive religion suited to modern needs and lifestyles. – Nalanda Institute Malaysia.

Lim believes that one of the greatest services Ven Dhammanada did for the cause of Buddhism in Malaysia is the development of the Sunday Dhamma Schools from his temple in Brickfields: “Sinhalese monks have played a big role in teaching Buddhism here. They created a big impact on Buddhist education in this country. They used British missionary school methodology. Dhamma school tradition in Malaysia started from the Bricksfield temple. Most temples now have Sunday Dhamma Schools and follow Bricksfield model”. The Buddhist Institute Sunday Dhamma School¹⁴⁵, which started in Brickfields in 1926 with 12 Sinhalese children, is now coordinating the Sunday schools with a common curriculum designed by Bricksfield temple.

Another Sinhalese monk who is making a great contribution to Malaysian Buddhism is Venerable B. Saranankara Mahathera, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur from Sri Lanka in 1984. With a passion for social welfare service, the Venerable founded the Siri Jayanti Welfare Organization in 1991 which started a Free Clinic, Free Tuition Classes, and the Metta Home. In 1996, he renovated the Sri Lanka Buddhist



Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple in Sentul

Temple in Sentul in Kuala Lumpur, and from that base, he organises a lot of social service work, which extends to the poor Malay Muslim community. Among the major programs he organises is the yearly Educare program with the Siri Jayanti Sunday Dhamma School which provides essential school items to needy Malaysian students. He has also initiated the ‘Buddhist Novitiate Program’ at the Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple for teenagers to experience as a novice monk and started the Maha Karuna Buddhist Society in 2001 to extend his spiritual and welfare programs to a larger section of the Malaysian community (see below).

Malaysia: Buddhist Monk Empowers Education of Muslim Children

Lotus News Feature by Kalinga Seneviratne

Kuala Lumpur: A grand Chinese temple on the hills of central Kuala Lumpur overlooking the Malaysian capital was the site of a unique event today where a Sri Lankan born Buddhist monk’s

¹⁴⁵ <https://bisds.org/>

vision to empower the education of poor Malaysian children, most of them Muslims, was taking place without the glare of any television cameras or the national media.

Venerable Sri Saranankara is a Sri Lankan-born Buddhist monk who had made Malaysia his home since 1984 and has set up the Maha Karuna (Great Compassion) Foundation to help the needy in his adopted country irrespective of their religious affiliations. Thus, out of some 2,000 schoolchildren and their parents who flocked to the Thean Hou Temple on a rainy Sunday to receive their education bursaries, most were Malay Muslims or Indian Hindus and Christians.

“We do this in 21 places in Malaysia (and) this year we will be assisting over 16,000 children,” Venerable Saranankara told Lotus News, adding, “they are chosen by the principal on the recommendation of the teachers, who will tell us that these are the students who are finding it financially difficult and sometimes it affects their classroom performances also”

This scheme is known as ‘Educare’ and was first organized in 2001 to mark the 12th anniversary of the Sri Jayanthi Sunday Dhamma (teaching) School at the Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple at Sentul in central Kuala Lumpur, whose chief monk is Venerable Saranankara.

An annual charitable project of the Maha Karuna Foundation (MKF) it donates school items to needy students irrespective of their religious or ethnic backgrounds. This would include school uniforms, bags, shoes, stationery, and exercise books given to students from government schools and orphanages. The ceremony on Sunday was for students from the Kuala Lumpur area.

“This program was started when I was in Sri Lanka in 1999 and the chief (Ven, Saranankara) was with me” explained Jacob Chan, President of MKF. “We went to his temple first and on the way, we saw a lot of poor students in Sri Lanka. He asked why don't we help them with some shoes, bags, books?”

Thus the idea germinated among the Malaysian Buddhists to help needy school children in Sri Lanka – who were mainly Buddhist – and they started in 2000 helping students in some poor villages. Chan told Lotus News that today they still help about 15,000 Sri Lankan students and additionally 18,000 Malaysian students will get the same assistance in 2016.

Funds for the project are donated mainly by devotees of the Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple in Sentul, and the project is coordinated by thousands of volunteers from the temple membership. Almost all the donors and volunteers are Malaysian Chinese. However, Chan says “we don't look at childrens’ race, we support anyone - Malays, Indian, Chinese ...it's for everybody”.

The temple volunteers who join the Educare committee are all dedicated to practicing Buddhist compassion and loving-kindness to all without any discrimination. Throughout the year the program goes through many stages, which culminated with Sunday's ceremony attended by over 3,000 people.

Registration forms for assistance is distributed to schools in Malaysia in July and teachers in the school choose the deserving students and completed forms are forwarded to MKF between August and October. These students have to visit the temple in Sentul during this period for volunteers to take measurements for their shoes and uniforms. Volunteers are also involved in sourcing the best suppliers for shoes, uniforms, bags and stationeries. In addition, they have to liaise with partner organisations in other states to organize the same.

Educare will not only lessen the financial burden of parents to purchase essential school items for their children for the coming new school term but is also designed to empower the children and families for them to succeed in their education. The concept of compassion practiced is devised not to give the recipients a feeling of dependency and shame because of their financial situation.

“Many of the families we help are finding it difficult at the beginning of school year paying fees, buying books, uniforms, especially families that have 5 or 6 children” explained Ven Saranankara. “We first gave money to families individually, but later we realized that it is not good for their mentality, especially children, to think that because they are poor we give them handouts”.

Thus the chief monk said that rather than going to the houses, show them sympathy and kindness and hand over the goods or money, they decided to organize the event in a carnival atmosphere.

"We organize the event like a carnival, give them food and other gifts including school bags. We give them like a coupon and they go to different stalls and get their food items such as fishballs, ice cream and also bags and books ... when you are in a group and receive these you don't feel that because you are poor they sympathize and give you things free" noted Ven. Saranankara.

Financial support comes not only from Buddhist temple devotees but a cross-section of Malaysian society - individuals, companies, and foundations. "For what is good there are people who will always support it. We know this is not a fly-by-night operation. This has been going on for 17 years and it is not easy to sustain such a program," argues Lawrence Lim of Magnum Corporation, a major sponsor of the Educare project.

"Once you find a program like this, it is worthy of support" he added, "as you can see this is multi-ethnic, multi-religious and a spread of what Malaysia is... so we have no hesitation in giving our support".

The very words 'Maha Karuna' implies two great virtues of the 2500-year-old Buddha's teachings - Wisdom and Compassion. Wisdom teaches one the ability to see things as they really are, cultivated through spiritual practice, and Compassion is cultivated by serving the needy through welfare activities that are also believed to bring one good karma.

When asked if MKF has become a wealthy foundation perhaps due to the karma generated by helping such a vast array of needy students in Malaysia and Sri Lanka, the humble Sri Lankan monk with his permanent smile replied: "Maha Karuna don't have money... people donate to it and we coordinate the project ... 95 percent of people involved (in delivering the project) are Buddhists (and) this year about 80 percent of the recipients are Muslims while only 5 percent are Buddhists".

** Transmitted on IDN In-Depth News on 28 November 2016*

Buddhist Voice, Media and Community

There is no analysis of Buddhism in Malaysian media. Whether it is growing or not. Philosophy is never covered. Newspapers have no religious reporting pages for any religion. There is a lot of negative news of Sri Lanka and Myanmar Buddhists carried by the media in Malaysia sourced from western media. When (former Prime Minister) Najib and Dr Mahathir criticized Myanmar there was no Buddhist response to it reported in the Malaysian media.

Buddhists are very low in ranking, unlike Christians who speak up on issues of religion. Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus and Sikhs don't do that. Though there are social media, Buddhists are not politicized.

Retired senior Malaysian journalist Kuah Guan Oo made the above comments¹⁴⁶. Lim Kooi Fong also agrees that Buddhists are not political, even when Myanmar or Aung Sang Suu Kyi is criticized by Malaysian leaders on the Rohingya issue, though Buddhists may not agree with their views, they prefer to keep quiet. This is happening at a time when Malay youth are getting influenced by Wahabi extremism from the Middle East and getting politicized.

Lim, who started the Buddhist Channel in 2004 with virtually no funds, wanted it to be a platform for sharing news among Buddhists across Asia and the world.

¹⁴⁶ Discussion with author in Kuala Lumpur, May 2019.

Without funds, it was difficult to commission stories. Rather than providing him with stories, Lim says Buddhists wanted to use his platform as a bulletin board to promote their activities. “They want me to interview the organiser and write about it. They want to use that material for promoting the event next year. This is not educating the community,” he argues.

Lim has recently rebranded the Buddhist Channel to become an influencer rather than a news provider. “I consider the Buddhist channel a failure because it just became a bulletin board” he acknowledged. “I want to change the Buddhist Channel into an influencer channel. You can produce articles/analyses to influence people. You create followers to read your ideas. It very much lacking in Buddhist communities”.

Former Malaysian diplomat Ananda Kumaraseri¹⁴⁷ believes that the Malaysian Buddhist society is growing – but not necessarily drawing from the Malay community. He noted there are small pockets of Buddhists that are expanding, who have Tibetan monks and develop a personalized common identity with the Lama. These are Vjrayana groups. They appeal to the Chinese. “They get involved in the occult, practices like interventions from devas. If you feel monks can cure you of sickness they go there. These groups are growing,” he says. There are also fellowship groups that do things together. They are interested in chanting as blessings. “They like chanting because the Chinese think it gives you instant benefit. Ritualistic Buddhism you may call. . you can say this is Vajrayana Buddhism too. Impressive growth in last decade” says Kumaraseri. As for Theravadians, he thinks they are closer to monks, they give them dana etc. They also go to websites to learn Buddhism without having to go to temples.

Pioneers in Buddhist Music

We have discussed so far in various chapters how Christian evangelical groups are targeting and converting Buddhists exploiting their poverty. In Malaysia, poverty among Buddhists is very low as the community is fairly wealthy and well educated. Yet, the urbanized Malaysian youth are attracted to evangelical Christianity by the “cool’ modernist approach they use, Gospel Music is a big part of this packaging. Thus, Buddhists in Malaysia have taken a leaf out of it and have gone to music and musical productions to promote Buddhism, particularly to the young. A number of young Malaysian Buddhists have gone into this area.

Dr Victor Wee¹⁴⁸ is a pioneer in using music to promote Buddhism in Malaysia:

Among the Malaysian Buddhist community we have composers, musicians and dancers. Malaysia staged the production based on the story of Xuan Xuan 3 years ago at the National Arts Center. It is world-class standard. Imee Ooi is a Malaysian Buddhist artiste who comes up with new songs, with contemporary themes. I.Gem songs are in their 3rd album very contemporary and very popular with young people. We haven’t given our albums to RTM (Malaysian national broadcaster) or radio stations. We need to make them available. In the past in Melaka we used to go to radio on Vesak day to sing. Buddhists in Malaysia

¹⁴⁷ Discussion with author in Pataling Jaya in June 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with author in Kuala Lumpur, May 2019.

comes up with very good stage productions. Bodhi group has done 25 years of Buddhist songs and albums. IGem is more English, and their albums have gone to Singapore and Indonesia (Wee, 2019).



Dr Victor Wee pioneer of English language Buddhist Music

Imee Ooi¹⁴⁹, a professional Buddhist musician is now beginning to make waves among the young Buddhists in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. “Christians have been very successful since a long time ago, in terms of using gospel music to attract the attention of youth to Christianity. To me, music has always been a most effective form of media, or a vehicle to

deliver, even transcend messages and text to the listeners” she argues. Imee believes that, If it works for Christians, it should also work for Buddhism, but, the real question is how much will the Buddhist religious authorities help to promote this spreading and how they position music in their list of priorities.

Dr Wee¹⁵⁰, in an article given to me, argues that the Buddhist scriptures mention that music was heard on auspicious events linked to the Buddha's life. But, Theravada Buddhists in particular have reservations about using music, because the tradition of taking the eight precepts is strong in some Buddhist cultures, and one of these precepts prohibits attending musical performances, also novices are not allowed to indulge in musical entertainment (see below).

Buddhist Devotional Music

by Victor Wee

Music permeates through all societies and cultures. Good music has excellent powers to express the message of the heart and transform the thoughts of the listener. To the anxious, it can bring calmness, to the fearful courage, and to the grieving consolation.

Music in Buddha's Life

The Buddhist scriptures mention that music was heard on auspicious events linked to the Buddha's life, such as when he was born and when he preached certain suttas. Heavenly music resounded through the higher realms as the devas and Brahmas rejoiced during such occasions. When the Buddha was practicing self-mortification during his six years of search, he realized the importance of the Middle Way by taking a lesson from a lute string that was correctly tuned, which is strung neither too loose nor too tight.

He used this analogy to teach Sona who was a former musician on the need to balance his practice because the young monk worked too hard on walking meditation that his feet started to bleed. On one occasion when Lord Sakka, the king of the devas, wanted to ask the Buddha some questions, he sent Pancasikha, a heavenly musician, to sing to the Blessed One as a prelude to the questions. After the performance, the Buddha praised Pancasikha for the beautiful songs on the Triple Gem and loving-kindness.

¹⁴⁹ Email interview with author, June 2019

¹⁵⁰ Listen to Dr Wee's You-Tune explanation of how it all started - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKzewgS_juU

Buddhism and Music for Devotional Purposes

All religions have used music for devotional purposes and as an aid to piety. Secular music existed in the early days of Buddhism. Among the rules for novices and Eight Preceptors is the prohibition from attending musical performances, some of which might have been somewhat crude and disturbing for a person practicing religious abstinence. Therefore, in some Buddhist countries, religious authorities look upon music with some suspicion as being profane and sensuous - a thing to be shunned.

At the time when Buddhism was flourishing in India, sacred Buddhist music was often performed. A translation of the *Dharmapitaka* mentions that Ashvaghosha (80 – 150 CE), the great Buddhist philosopher and poet, had composed hymns that were used in public worship in Pataliputra. The melody and lyrics of his songs were so soothing and touching that they brought an awakening among five hundred royal princes who renounced to adopt a monastic life.

Music must have been a pastime or perhaps even as means of private edification among the Buddhist monks of ancient India during the early years of the Common Era. The wall paintings on the caves of Ajanta and Dunhuang show monks with lutes and other musical instruments. The thought that there could be anything wrong in music seems to be altogether missing.

Local musical expressions developed in every corner of the world where the Buddha's words are honoured and practiced. In the Far East devotional verses are sung to the solemn accompaniment of gongs, bells, drums, and wooden fish. Through the centuries, the Japanese had composed hymns called *saimon* and semi-religious dance music such as *goeika*, *nembutsu odori* and *bon odori*.

In Tibet, music is used to show deep confidence in the dhamma, and every Tibetan child knows the story of Milarepa, the thirteenth-century Tibetan saint, who would burst out into spontaneous poems and songs when inspired by dhamma. Among the Theravada devotees, the role of devotional music tends to be comparatively subdued although *gathas* continue to be sung on beautiful Pali verses.

Pioneers of Buddhist Hymns in Malaysia

In Malaysia, English Buddhist hymns are a relatively new phenomenon, being introduced by an American monk, Venerable Sumangalo in Buddhist Sunday Schools and youth circles, which he helped to establish in Malaysia and Singapore in the late 1950s and early 1960s. American and Hawaiian Buddhists have composed these hymns for the American Buddhist congregations. The repertoire of Buddhist hymns is, however, limited in number, and after a while, there remains little life force to sustain interest when the same songs were sung over and over again during puja.

I learned my first Buddhist hymns as a student at Seck Kia Een Dhamma School (SKEDS) under the guidance of Venerable Ananda Mangala, who was trained as a Franciscan priest during his younger days. With encouragement from the venerable, my musical aptitude blossomed. To inject a new life into Buddhist music, I started composing Buddhist hymns beginning in 1976 and tested them with the members of the University Malaya Buddhist Society. The response was nothing short of overwhelming, which inspired me to write more hymns. Venerable Piyasilo had also supported me, and at his suggestion, I composed the music for "Anthem of Unity" on the lyrics that he wrote.

Another religious personality who had influenced the development of English Buddhist music in Malaysia was Venerable K Sri Dhammananda who recognised the potential of using hymns as a tool for propagation among youths. He gave his blessings and support to the new hymns that I composed, which were sung during Buddha pujas and gatherings at Brickfields Buddhist Vihara in Kuala Lumpur.

** This is an edited version of the original article. Some of the information provided in the article is used below in mapping Malaysia's Buddhist music movement.*

In 1977, Dr Wee had recorded some Buddhist songs with the Buddhist Missionary Society (BMS) Youth Singers and Venerable Sri Dhammananda's

office helped to sell these cassettes. The success of the project encouraged him to record an album of Buddhist hymns at a proper studio. Thus, in 1979, he formed the 'Wayfarers' and released the first album titled *Moments of Inspiration* in 1982 consisting of songs that he and a Dhamma friend Tan Huat Chye have composed¹⁵¹.



Wayfarers Group (source: Facebook)

Besides writing songs in English, Huat Chye had also composed Buddhist songs in Chinese. He produced his first album, *Yi Zhan Deng* in 1988 with the Xiang Ya Ta, comprising university and college

students. This album was a runaway success and reached the Chinese-speaking Buddhists internationally. More importantly, it drew the attention of the Chinese-speaking Buddhists on a novel way of promoting Dhamma and set in motion the growth of Buddhist songs in Chinese.

This album attracted nationwide attention. Later, the Wayfarers recorded four other albums: *The Sunrise Comes* (1983), *Nirvana Sweet Release* (1989), *A Light in the Darkness* (1993) and *Sasanarakkha* (2002). Concurrent to this effort, the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia (YBAM) held a national English hymns composition competition, and some of the songs submitted were recorded in an album entitled *The Dawn of Dhamma* by the Awakening group in Penang.

Almost a generation later, three musical groups emerged in Klang Valley at the start of the new millennia.

- **i.gemz** started as a loose grouping of musically inclined friends that presented their songs during the Musical Puja held at Buddhist Gem Fellowship (BGF). Later some of the singers and composers came together as members of i.gemz to release their first album, *Cradled in Buddha's Arms* (2002). The i.gemz released two more albums. It is led by Daniel Kwok, who along with Khoo Nee Wern, Khoo Nee Sern, Toh Anson and Susan Goh composed songs for the group.
- **Messengers of Dharma (MOD)** are childhood friends from Seck Kia Een Dhamma School with the same passion for music and who have moved to Kuala Lumpur to work. MOD is active in giving stage performances as a way of sharing the Dhamma through songs. Cedric Tan is the leader of the group, which has released four albums and six sing-along CDs to provide the musical backing for Buddhist songs.
- **Big Chip** is a choir that performs Buddhist songs as well as popular songs in the choral as well as acapella style. Aaron Lee leads this group, which has given many stage performances.

¹⁵¹ Listen here to one of the songs from Wayfarers' album - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOI6CJLERBY>

The Chinese-speaking Buddhists are particularly active in promoting Dhamma through hymns. One of the notable groups is Bodhi Buddhist Fellowship Malaysia (BBFM), which was formed by the final year students from various universities. They have sustained attendance and interest in hymns presentation and dharma discussion held during the weekly Friday gathering, “A Date With Bodhi” for the last 30 years.

Imee Ooi is internationally known for her recordings of sutras, mantras and free composition with her unique musical arrangements that transcend religious barriers, cultures and age groups. She has a phenomenal musical output of 55 albums and six full-length musicals that have won critical acclaim. Her first album, *The Chant of Metta*, released in 1999 has taken the world by storm and remained well-loved internationally. She has also composed a soundtrack for a Chinese movie and written many individual theme songs and orchestrated works with Dhamma content. She is a music producer, composer, arranger and vocalist, all rolled into one.

Says Imee: “Musical productions can be presented in various forms of stage art, and the creative ideas can be abundant and infinite going along with the depth of the Dhamma. Ideas, or better said as inspirations will always arise and derive from understanding the purpose of the work and the eventual merits and good it will bring upon people”.

Another talented composer of Buddhist-themed music is Yang Wei Han who staged *Xuan Zang The Journey to the West Musical* in 2014, which received rave reviews and high critical acclaim. He has also produced the *Di Zang The Musical* (2017). He has many talents. He performed the lead male role in the musicals produced by Lin Huay. In the *Xuan Zang Musical*, he wrote the music and libretto, undertook the stage design, and produced the musical where he acted the role of Tripitaka Master Xuan Zang.

Dr Wee believes that Buddhist music has an important role to play in dhamma propagation if the composer's dhamma inspiration could be transformed into meaningful lyrics and memorable music. Music could also attract people who may initially be less attracted to the intellectual, devotional or spiritual aspects of the dhamma but are musically inclined, Buddhist songs can capture their attention and provide them with the conditions to mingle with Buddhists and listen to dhamma.

Imee argues that there is no need to debate about if music is appropriate to spread the Dhamma, especially to young people. “Buddhist have been talking, discussing and having conferences on this for decades. I did not just try but have done it for almost 20 years, and yes it works and works wonders”.

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Chapter 12

Myanmar: Fighting To Protect a Great Buddhist Civilization

Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) has a population of 53.6 million as of 2018 according to official statistics. Out of this population, 89.8 percent are Buddhists while Christians constitute 6.3 percent and only 2.3 percent are Muslims with others mainly of various tribal religious groups (Myanmar Statistical Information Service).

Myanmar, which has common borders with India, Bangladesh, Laos, Thailand, and China is the Union Republic, meaning it is a union of many territories with different ethnic or tribal groups. Burma refers to the main ethnic group the Bamar. In 1989 when the Government changed the official name of the country to Myanmar it was supposed to encompass all ethnic groups living in the republic.

Myanmar is a stronghold of Theravada Buddhism in Asia along with Sri Lanka. Thus, the development of Buddhism and Buddhist institutions in Myanmar closely resembles that in Sri Lanka and the two countries have had a close relationship for centuries, and it was broken with the advent of European colonial rule. Today both countries are facing a concerted attack by foreign forces on their right to protect their Buddhist heritage and culture.



Buddhist worshippers at
Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon

Buddhism in Myanmar: Historic Background

Two merchants named Tapussa and Bhallika have traveled to India from Myanmar in the 6th century BCE, and are believed to have met the Buddha about 7 weeks after his enlightenment and received pieces of hair from him. Upon their return to Ukkalapa (modern-day Yangon) the hair relics were enshrined in a pagoda that was built – today it is Myanmar's major Buddhist shrine known as Shwedagon Pagoda. Thus, the beginning of Buddhism in Myanmar could be traced back to this period. Myanmar Buddhists also believe that the Buddha visited the area at least 3 times – in modern-day Magwe there is a place of pilgrimage to pay homage to where the Buddha has left a footprint (Hieu, 2019).

The present form of Theravada Buddhism in Myanmar owes its existence to the Mahavihara tradition of Sri Lanka (Hieu, 2019), which came to Sri Lanka from India in about the 3rd century BCE. Archeological evidence show that Buddhism existed in lower Myanmar at least in the 5th and 6th centuries CE. Pegu (Bago) and Thaton in lower Myanmar were well-known centers of Buddhism by the 5th century. During a visit to Pegu, I found temple paintings in one of the pagoda's where it shows Myanmar monks bringing Tripitaka from Sri Lanka.

During the reign of King Anawrahta (1044-77 CE) in Bagan, Buddhism received

royal patronage and there were attempts to make Buddhism the national belief. The King gave official sanction to the Mahavihara tradition and it became known as Theravada. Monks from Sri Lanka were welcomed to teach there and later when he annexed Ramanna, he made sure that the belief system of Myanmar and Sri Lanka were the same ((Hieu, 2019). Today Bagan is known as the land of pagodas and visitors find a fascinating variety of pagodas of different architecture belonging to different periods. There are hundreds of big and small stupas of the 'Lanka style' with some small stupas build by expatriate Burmese as a merit-making activity.



Pagodas of Bagan

Myanmar has become such an important Buddhist civilization that in 1872 CE the 5th Buddhist Council was conveyed in Mandalay during the reign of King Mindon. And in 1954, the 6th Buddhist Council was held at the Mahapassana cave in Kaba near Yangon (Hieu, 2019). Thus, there is no doubt that Myanmar is seen in the Buddhist world as a bastion of Buddhism today.

Communicating Buddhism - Role of Education



Ancient temple school in Bagan

With the advent of the Mahavihara tradition from its inception, Buddhism in Myanmar has taken a strong institutionalized educational path. Monastic as well as education for the laity have a strong base. In many ancient monasteries, even today, you could see monks imparting education to children. There are 66,664 monasteries across the country and in the Yangon area alone, there are 97 meditation centers (Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture).

Three notable features of Buddhism in Myanmar today are meditation teaching centres, universities where Buddhism is taught as an academic subject, and the Tripitaka exams. One may also add Adhidhamma education to this list.

Some well-known universities include Sitagu International Buddhist Academy (Sagaing), International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University (Yangon), Yangon Buddhist University, Shan State Buddhist University (Taungyi), Mettananda Sasana College (Yangon) and Dhammaduta Chekinda University (Hmawbin). Every year in December for 33 days, the Tipitakadhara and Tripitakakovida exams are held where candidates have to recite by memory 8026 texts from Tripitaka and also pass a written examination. These examinations have been held since 1948 and until today only 14 Venerable Myanmar monks have received this degree (Hieu, 2019).

Lack of knowledge of the dhamma among the young and the need to promote good behavior among the teenagers, in particular, have prompted Myanmar to

introduced Sunday Dhamma Schools in recent years. "Two to three years ago Dhamma Schools were set up here. We got the idea from Sri Lanka," explained Arthur Myint, Registrar, and Abhidhamma Propagation Association. "Before British (colonialism), education was totally in the hands of Buddhist monks. Rich people. Kings and queens were pupils of monks. Monks were very influential. When British introduced school education the influence of monks was diluted".

Burmese Gift to the World - Goenka and Vipassana Revolution

The ancient land of India gave a message of peace and harmony to the world, to all humanity, but it did more: it gave a method, a technique, for achieving peace and harmony. To me, it seems that if we want peace in human society, we cannot ignore individuals. If there is no peace in the mind of the individual, I do not understand how there can be real peace in the world. If I have an agitated mind, always full of anger, hatred, ill will and animosity, how can I give peace to the world? I cannot because I have no peace myself. Enlightened persons have therefore said, "First find peace within yourself." One has to examine whether there is really peace within oneself – S. N Goenka¹⁵².



S. N Goenka

The above comments were made by Myanmar-born Buddhist meditation master Satya Narayan Goenka (commonly known as S.N Goenka), when he participated in the Millennium World Peace Summit, a gathering of 1000 of the world's religious and spiritual leaders, held at the United Nations under the auspices of Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2000.

S N Goenka was born in 1924 to a Burmese-Indian business family. In 1955 unable to control his severe migraines, he went to famous Vipassana teacher Sayagyi U Ba Khin for relief. Goenka trained under him for 14 years, and was given permission to train others by his teacher. Thus, he left the business to his family and moved to India in 1969. In 1976, he started his first Vipassana Meditation Centre in Dhamma Giri near Nashik and went on to become a leading lay teacher of Vipassana meditation. He has initiated the 'Mindfulness Revolution' that is sweeping the world today.

He has trained more than 800 assistant teachers and each year more than 100,000 people attended Goenka-led Vipassana courses. Goenka emphasizes that: "The Buddha never taught a sectarian religion; he taught dhamma - the way to liberation - which is universal" and presents his teachings as non-sectarian and open to people of all faiths or no faith. "Liberation" in this context means freedom from impurities of mind and suffering. Goenka calls Vipassana meditation an experiential scientific practice, through which one can observe the constantly changing nature of the mind and body at the deepest level, a profound understanding that leads to a truly happy and peaceful life.

¹⁵² S.N Goenka's speech on YouTube - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xy9PugTy15M>

In an interview with 'Lion's Roar' (Fisher, 2009) Goenka explained how a successful Hindu businessman from Myanmar became a Buddhist meditation teacher. It is a fascinating story of how he met Sayagyi U Ba Khin and he initially hesitated to introduce Buddhism to him. But, once he agreed to learn sila, samadhi and panna from the Buddhist teachers, and explained that it will not conflict with his Hindu background, he invited Goenka to attend one of his 10-day retreats. The rest is history now. Hundreds of thousands of people around the world – from illiterate farmers in India to IT executives in Silicom Valley to Catholic priests – have benefitted by taking up Goenka's renowned 10-day Vipassana Retreats.

Goenka Ji has also been conferred the Padma Bhushan, the third highest civilian honour in India for social work on the occasion of India's 63rd Republic Day in 2012. Goenka's Vipassana meditations are taught free of charge in thousands of Centers around the world. He passed away in September 2013 at the age of 89.

Reviving The Arakan Buddhist Kingdom

Arakan became one of the earliest Indianised kingdoms in Southeast Asia and Buddhist missionaries of Emperor Ashoka are said to have traveled through Arakan to other parts of Southeast Asia. It is important to understand the history of Buddhism in Arakan to understand the Rohingya crisis today.



Arakan style temple near Cox Bazaar in Bangladesh

When I went to Chittagong and Cox Bazaar areas of Bangladesh, Tripura and Manipur states in India, people in those countries refer to the Arakan Buddhists as traditional Buddhists of the region. Many of the Buddhists living there trace their Buddhist (and sometimes ethnic) roots to Arakan Buddhists. Their temples have also been designed to Arakan Buddhist architecture. After the fall of the Arakan kingdom, many Buddhists have fled to the Cox Bazaar area of today's Bangladesh and settled there in the 18th century (Leider, 2008).

The Arakanese kingdom grew from the fifteenth century CE from a small agrarian state with its nucleus in the heart of the Kaladan valley to a significant local power by the early seventeenth century. Arakan asserted its influence across the northern shores of the Bay of Bengal. In the first decades of the 17th century, the Arakanese kings of Mrauk U received tribute from local rulers between Dhaka and Pegu, cities more than a thousand miles apart. The Mughal rulers of Bengal were even forced to build a string of forts to defend the areas around Dhaka and Hugli against Arakanese incursions. From the middle of the 17th century, the Arakanese state was gripped by a seemingly sudden decline that would culminate in civil war at the end of the 17th century.

The huge Mahamuni statue (now in Mandalay) is considered by Buddhist Arakanese to be their national image and is alleged to predate the Burmese

kingdom centered at Bagan (1044–1287 CE) by a millennium. Eventually the Moguls, and later the Portuguese invaded Arakan. In 1785 CE Burmese forces conquered the Arakanese kingdom and carried the Mahamuni statue off to Mandalay. The Arakan region was ceded to the British in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandabo. When Myanmar became independent from British rule in 1948, the province in which the Arakanese are dominant was named Arakan (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

After taking control of the country, the Burmese uprooted the political, military, and religious elite of Arakan. The tax and revenue system that the Burmese introduced followed the standards of the contemporary Burmese district administration. Burmese people were appointed as chief officers but they also had to rely on local men to pass on their orders at the village level. Just as in other districts of Burma, census and revenue inquests were made. The Arakanese king and his inner court were sent into exile to Amarapura, the Burmese capital. The country also lost its ritualists and masters of ceremonies because the Arakanese court Brahmins, the so-called punṇa who were men of Bengali origin, had to follow in their footsteps (Leider, 2008, p415-416).

Leider (2008) points out that in the 17th century there were very close Buddhist contacts between Sri Lanka and Arakan kingdom. After the devastation brought to Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka by the Portuguese, King Vimaladramasuriya II has sent a mission to Arakan in 1693 to obtain ‘upasampatha’ monks to re-establish Buddhist Sangha ordination in the island. King Marumpiya of Arakan has sent 33 fully ordained monks to Sri Lanka and Malwatta Vihara in Kandy hosted them.

In the early seventeenth century, Arakan was a powerful kingdom in the Bay of Bengal and it is therefore not so surprising that the Sinhalese turned to its king for such a request. During the reign of King Min Raja-gri, Arakan reached the peak of its territorial expansion toward the north and the south. In southeastern Bengal, the port of Chittagong was fully under its control, and trade revenues filled the royal treasury. Min Raja-gri took his troops to Lower Burma and profited from his share in the booty when Pegu, Burma’s capital, fell after a protracted siege in 1599. For three decades Arakan was a regional power broker and controlled the slave trade in the northern Bay of Bengal. It is not difficult to understand that the news about this powerful Buddhist kingdom spread to Sri Lanka and that King Vimaladharmasuriya I viewed Arakan as an attractive place from which Buddhist missionary monks could be requested (Leider, 2008, p 448)

Today, with international attention focused on the Rohingya crisis, the Buddhist history of the Arakan region is been overshadowed by Muslim claims to the land and its history.

There have been many debates on the origins of the Rohingya and the Arakan State. The two conflicting theories are that (i) Rohingyas are illegal immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh and (ii) Rohingyas are native to Arakan, and are descendants of the original Muslim converts on Ramree Island (in the 18th century). In 1982, a new citizenship law has effectively made most of the Rohingyas stateless. The term “Rohingya” is derived from the Arabic word Rahm,

which means mercy. It has its origins with the arrival of Arab traders on the shores of Ramree Island in the 18th century (Mohajan, 2018).

The earliest Muslim settlers were those Bengali followers who were allowed to settle during the Mrauk-U Dynasty (1430–1785 CE) or those who fled to Arakan during the Mogul invasion of Bengal in 1575 CE. The fall of the Mrauk-U Arakan Dynasty encompassed parts of modern-day Bangladesh and the Rakhine (Arakan) State and continues to be one of the roots of contemporary Arakan nationalism. From 1575 until 1666, for nearly a century, Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts were under almost uninterrupted Arakanese rule. It is estimated that at least 60,000 Bengalis were brought to live in northern Arakan by the end of the 17th century (Mohajan, 2018).

In the middle of the 17th century, the Muslim community grew because of the assignment of Bengali slaves in a variety of workforces in the country. The Portuguese and Arakanese raids of Bengal for captives and loot became a conventional practice of the kingdom since the early 16th century. The Mogul historian Shiahabbuddin Talish noted that only the Portuguese pirates sold their captives and that the Arakanese employed all of their prisoners in agriculture and other kinds of services. A considerable portion of the Arakanese population was deported by Burmese conquerors to Central Burma. When the British occupied Arakan, the country was a scarcely populated area (Chan, 2005).

During the Burmese occupation, there was a breakdown of the indigenous labour force both in size and structure. In the 1830s the wages in Arakan compared with those of Bengal were very high. Therefore many hundreds, indeed thousands of coolies came from the Chittagong District by land and by sea, to seek labour and high wages (Phayre cited in Chan, 2005). The flow of Chittagonian labour provided the main impetus to the economic development in Arakan.

As Chan (2005, p 406) notes:

For all the bloody communal violence experienced by the Arakanese Buddhists in the Western frontier, I feel strongly that it is reasonable to blame the British colonial administration for arming the Chittagonians in the Mayu Frontier as the Volunteer Force. The V Force, as it is called by the British Army, was formed in 1942 soon after the Japanese operations threatened the British position in India. Its principal role was to undertake guerrilla operations against the Japanese, to collect information about the enemy's movements, and to act as interpreters...The volunteers, instead of fighting the Japanese, destroyed Buddhist monasteries and Pagodas and burnt down the houses in the Arakanese villages.

A record of the Secretary of the British governor of Burma dated 4 February 1943 reads: "I have been told harrowing tales of cruelty and suffering inflicted on the Arakanese villages in the Ratheedaung area. Most of the villages on the West bank of the Mayu River have been burnt and destroyed by the Chittagonian V forces...."(cited in Chan, 2005, p 407)

After Burmese independence in 1948, most of the Muslims have felt an overwhelming sense of collective identity based on Islam as their religion, while

Arakanese Buddhists at the same time became more and more concerned with their racial security and ethnic survival because of the increasingly predominant Muslim population in their frontier/neighbourhood. In March 1946 the Muslim Liberation Organization (MLO) was formed with Zaffar Kawal, a native of Chittagong District, as the leader. Some Chittagonian Bengalis from nearby villages brought the weapons they had collected during the wartime to the mosques in Fakir Bazaar Village and Shahbi Bazaar Village (Department of Defense Service Archives, cited in Chan, 2005). On 15 and 16 June 1951 All Arakan Muslim Conference was held in Alethangyaw Village, and “The Charter of the Constitutional Demands of the Arakan Muslims” was published. The demand of the charter reads: “North Arakan should be immediately formed a free Muslim State as equal constituent Member of the Union of Burma”

Burma’s successive military regimes have persisted in denying Burmese citizenship to most Bengalis, especially in the frontier area. They stubbornly grasped the 1982 Citizenship Law that allowed only the ethnic groups who had lived in Burma before the First Anglo-Burmese War began in 1824 as the citizens of the country.

Chan (2005) argues that the term “Rohingya” came into use in the 1950s by the educated Bengali residents from the Mayu Frontier Area and it cannot be found in any historical source in any language before then. The creators of that term might have been from the second or third generations of Bengali immigrants from the Chittagong District in modern Bangladesh.

Rohingya historians have written many treatises in which they claim for themselves an indigenous status that is traceable within Arakan State for more than a thousand years. Although it is not accepted as a fact in academia, a few volumes purporting to be history but mainly composed of fictitious stories, myths and legends have been published formerly in Burma and later in the United States, Japan and Bangladesh. These, in turn, have filtered into the international media through international organizations, including reports to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Chan, 2005, p 396).

The current displacement of the Rohingya began after the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked 30 security outposts along the border with Bangladesh on August 25, 2017, killing over a dozen Burmese police officers, and at least one Tatmadaw soldier. In response, ARSA was officially declared a terrorist organization, the first time Myanmar used such a declaration for an insurgent group.

In 1990 the Burmese government renamed Arakan as Rakhine State, a name commonly used now, especially in relation to the Rohingya issue. In the State, it is estimated that 59.7 percent of the 3.8 million people are Buddhist, 35.6 percent are Muslim. Islam has come to the region in the 8th century with Arab traders.

While the Rohingya issue has been attracting global media attention, throughout 2019 Arakan Army (a Buddhist Arakan nationalist group) has been involved in pitched battles with the Myanmar army, especially in the iconic Mrauk-U area, a city the Myanmar Government wants UNESCO to declare as a World Heritage Site.

In March 2019, Myanmar's Frontier news service's Ye Mon interviewed Arakan Army's (AA) deputy chief Nyo Tun Aung in his hideout near the China border. He denied any links with the Muslim ARSA and even said the AA is open to cooperate with the Myanmar Army to crack down on ARSA. He said there is an Arakan (Rakhine) nationalist agenda with an "Arakan Dream 2020" slogan geared to achieve self-determination for the Arakan people by the end of 2020. He has added that the rallying cry among his fighters is to evoke memories of the once-powerful Arakan kingdom defeated by the Barmars in 1784. They want an Arakan state within Myanmar with a high degree of autonomy (Mon, 2019).

The fighting in the ancient town has angered residents and raised concern among archaeologists, who say there is a need to protect what are some of the country's most important Buddhist monuments. In a statement on March 18, the Myanmar Archaeology Association expressed extreme concern that the fighting could hinder progress towards the World Heritage listing of Mrauk-U. "(Both armed groups) should declare Mrauk-U a demilitarized zone," said the statement, which noted that Myanmar had in 1956 signed the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (Mon, 2019).

The international media has all but ignored this conflict, which is believed to be taking the lives of hundreds of people every month as the skirmishes continue.

Foreign Media and News Bias

"(International media) did not pay much attention to reports on the situation of innocent (Rakhine) ethnic villagers who lost their lives in the ongoing violence. They only focus on the other side of the (Muslim Rohingya) community that fled to the Bangladesh border. The media should not take sides. Their biased news reporting worsens the current situation. It is sad to see some of their reports sound even like supporting the terrorist group," U Tha Aung Nyun, the Burmese Ambassador to Australia, told SBS Radio's Burmese program¹⁵³.

This is a common complaint I heard from Buddhists in Myanmar when I spent 10 days in Yangon researching for this book. I stayed in a hotel just 2 blocks from the iconic Sule Buddhist Pagoda, but the street was predominantly Muslim. During the next 10 days, I noted that the Buddhists and Muslims were living peacefully side by side there. Just across the road from Sule Pagoda was the Bengali Sunni Central Mosque, there were also many other mosques in the area, along with Buddhist temples, Christian Cathedral and Hindu temples. There was not a hint of any tension there.

As Arthur Myint¹⁵⁴, Registrar, Abhidhamma Propagation Association, whose office is located inside Sule pagoda, pointed out to me, the western media reports on Myanmar without giving the context to the story. " (Rohingyas) may not be all armed but have lethal weapons such as machetes. The army came in, used force, but no one can confirm the actual (number of) killings. Western media took everything (given by Rohingyas) for granted and reported. Some

¹⁵³ <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/biased-media-coverage-has-worsened-rakhine-s-conflict-myanmar-s-ambassador>

¹⁵⁴ Interview with author at his office in Sule Pagoda in Yangon, December 2019

stories were fake,” he complained. He also wanted me to note that most problems are in border areas. “Most Rakhine (Arakan) people see this as an invasion. If there’s 2 million more Muslims in 2 years how that happened?” he asked, indicating that border controls may be corrupted. “They are 90 percent, economic migrants. This is the feeling of Buddhists,” he added (see Lotus news commentary below).



Sule Pagoda and Bengali Sunni Central Mosque located side by side in Central Yangon

Myanmar Buddhists Say International Media Is 'Unfair'

Lotus News Viewpoint by Kalinga Seneviratne

YANGON: When I checked into a hotel at 10.00 pm in Central Yangon near the iconic Sule Pagoda, seeing a lot of South Asian Muslims around the place, I asked the hotel reception if it was safe to walk up the road to get some dinner. The receptionist laughed and said: "It is very safe here, sir."

For the next eight days in December, I lived in the heart of a Muslim Bengali/Indian community. I walked around the place late at night and early mornings and found that it is a very peaceful community where the Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians interact well.

The Sule Pagoda is just two streets away, and right next to it the Bengali Sunni Central Mosque. There are four Christian cathedrals (of course built by the British), two Hindu temples and numerous small Buddhist temples.

The Buddhist nuns chanted Pali sutras for about two hours every Saturday night and these were broadcast through a loudspeaker right into the Muslim community – without any problems whatsoever; perhaps both Muslims and Buddhists consider it a blessing.

Mosques broadcast their call to prayer on the loudspeakers (no problem for Buddhists either); Hindus ring their temple bells and play the drums for morning prayer; Christians have decorated the streets for Christmas and are having a huge fair and a Christian concert on a stage erected in a park next to a church and right in front of the Sule Pagoda.

No one had a problem with the Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims joining in the Christmas festivities. The only problem I noted was a group of Christians led by a White missionary distributing leaflets in Burmese about Jesus right opposite the Sule Pagoda. He told me, "We want the Burmese to know about the peaceful message of Jesus". But I asked myself, "Are they trying to create conflict on such a festive occasion?"

During the eight days of my stay, I met Buddhists working in the media, scholars at the university and some working directly with the government to find out the media needs of the Buddhist community in Myanmar.

The overwhelming message I got was that the international (meaning western) media was "unfair" to Myanmar. They feel the Buddhists are misrepresented overseas. They may have a point, as people overseas hardly hear about such scenes I just described.

When I did a Google search as part of my research before the trip, all I got were pages and pages of articles on Rohingyas and 'hate speech' by monks of Ma Ba Tha, an organization banned by the government. Many Buddhists I spoke to said that it is suspected to be a front for the military.

However, Buddhists strongly believe that there are foreign forces that are trying to destabilize Myanmar to exploit its strategic location by manipulating its delicate ethnic mix.

"In big cities, we don't have problems. Most problems are in border areas," explains Arthur Myint, Registrar, Abhidhamma Propagation Association. He adds that most Rakhine people see Rohingyas as invaders, with corrupt border controls having contributed to the problem.

"The real issue is very much socio-economic," argues Toe Zaw Latt, Operations Manager of Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). "Some minority communities are very rich. Muslim shop owners and their communities are rich. It is easy to report it as a religious issue rather than analyze it as a socio-economic issue."

During the military regime, DVB was set up with Norwegian funding and operated from overseas. But, today it is registered as a local media company broadcasting via satellite and through social media platforms.

Toe Zaw says that since 2013 there is a lot of media freedom in the country and along with it nationalism has come to the surface. "More freedom means nationalist issues get more exposure," he adds.

After Ma Ba Tha was banned in 2017, it was reincarnated via the Buddha Dhamma Parahita National Foundation vowing to protect Buddhism in the country – which they see as a citizen's right under the 2008 Constitution. I meet its chairman, a soft-spoken senior monk Ashin Tilokabhivamsa at Ywana Payiyarti Monastery on the outskirts of Yangon.

He argues that what Myanmar has is an immigration problem and that Islamisation is creeping into the country via the Rakhine state. "NGOs are creating this problem, and the media and the UN are under the control of international NGO money," he claims.

When asked about the "extremist" label given to Ma Ba Tha monks, he replies: "Ours is true speech and historic facts. We never lie, we speak the truth. This hate speech is like if you show a bottle of honey and keep on saying this is poison, people will ultimately believe it and not touch it," he says, adding: "That is the western media".

Retired Myanmar diplomat Sein Wen Aung believes that monks have risen up with nationalist sentiments because of interference in the country's internal affairs by foreigners.

"There are 330 INGOs (international non-governmental organisations) operating here and contributing to conflict," he notes, explaining how the West uses such agencies to destabilize countries, which don't toe their line.

"They use these NGOs to distribute false information to change governments (from within). It is very dangerous," he argues. "The minister (of information) recently asked independent media supported from outside to be ethical."

Contrary to foreign media reports, it is the Buddhists who are disadvantaged in Myanmar, argues Sein Wen. "Islamic people are supported by OIC (Organisation of Islamic Countries) and also many NGOs here are Christian getting support from overseas. Buddhists don't have such support," he laments.

With the opening up of Myanmar's media, there has been an influx of foreign trainers. But, many Buddhist media practitioners believe their methods of free media practices are not adequate to report the complex socio-economic issues in the country. Because the media was suppressed for so long such analytical reporting is yet to be developed.

"Lot of journalism trainers are coming here. They are dominated by INGOs. They brainwash our young people," says one local media manager who does not want to be named. He says because of such indoctrination, most journalists believe that they have to keep away from nationalist interests. He argues that young journalists need to be taught ethics to report in such a manner that their work protects national interests, which is not necessarily supporting the government or military.

Giving the 43rd Singapore Lecture in August 2018, Aung San Suu Kyi argued passionately about the need to bring development to the poor border states to establish long-term peace and

prosperity in her country. She said addressing the terrorist problem in the Rakhine state was fundamental to it. She noted that people living outside pick and choose what to report. And they see the Rakhine issue differently from those living inside.

With the current skirmishes between Arakan Army and the military in Rakhine state, this may provide local journalists in particular, the opportunity to focus on the socio-economics of the conflicts. The Arakan Army is predominantly Buddhist, but they are not fighting a religious war. This also challenges the western media narrative of the Myanmar army as a “Buddhist Army”.

Tow Zaw warns the media against focusing on religion to report on socio-economic conflicts. “Our transitional community is very fragile,” he argues. “It is not good to use religion to report (socio-economic) political action,” he cautions.

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In September 2017, when Aung San Suu Kyi spoke for the first time regarding the Rohingya crisis she claimed that there is an “iceberg of misinformation” about her country peddled by the international media. Just before she spoke, she has spoken to Turkish President Erdogan to complain about fake pictures his Deputy Prime Minister was spreading on Twitter about alleged genocide in Myanmar using pictures taken in Rwanda in 1994¹⁵⁵. He has deleted the messages and the Turkish government later apologised to Myanmar about it.

On 7 December 2016, UK’s Daily Mail published an article with the headline ‘heartbreaking images show Rohingya toddler tortured by laughing Burmese soldier’. The article featured horrifying images of a toddler being attacked by a man with an electric pod, and it was soon revealed by Cambodian sources that this video was shot in Cambodia. Singapore’s Channel News Asia reported that a Dutchman has been charged over this video in Cambodian courts. Daily Mail ultimately took down the article without an apology to outraged Myanmar people¹⁵⁶.

It is a huge task for the Myanmar government to monitor such reporting. Even Sri Lanka has been a victim of such propaganda and fake news in the international media. It is also accompanied by accusations that Buddhists are doing this.

A day before, Suu Kyi’s speech, the London-based Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) launched a report in Bangkok¹⁵⁷ bashing Myanmar’s Buddhist majority. In launching their report at a media conference in Bangkok, they claimed that there is a “systematic persecution of Burma’s Muslim minority” with ID cards denied to them, constant monitoring of their mosques and young people across the country, the spread of “Muslim Free” villages and of course military attacks on Rohingyas in Rakhine state leading to the exodus of thousands of refugees across the borders mainly to Bangladesh.

The so-called “discrimination” against Muslims listed in the report was almost identical to what Muslim minorities are having to cope with in western countries, but, the report constantly referred to “Buddhists” as perpetrators

¹⁵⁵ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/turkish-deputy-pm-denounced-misleading-twitter-pictures-rakhine-conflict.html>

¹⁵⁶ <https://coconuts.co/yangon/news/daily-mail-removes-article-falsely-claiming-tortured-cambodian-toddler-rohingya/>

¹⁵⁷ The author was present at the launch in Bangkok’s Foreign Correspondents Club.

whereas when such discrimination is reported in the West it will be addressed as a national security issue rather than “Christians” as perpetrators.

What the Myanmar government is complaining about is this double standard. That they are facing a terrorist threat from IS(Islamic State)-linked ARSA. But, Human Rights Watch (HRW) Deputy Director for Asia, Phil Robertson argued during the media conference that they have monitored the “carnage” via satellite images from Bangkok and showed such images where the red dots shown he claimed were Rohingya houses burned by the army. When pointed out by a journalist that the Myanmar government claims that Rohingyas themselves are setting fire to houses, all he could say is “oh, this is Burmese government propaganda”. Perhaps, it would make sense for Rohingyas to burn their huts if HRW’s researchers use such dubious research methodology to discredit the Myanmar Government.

Kyaw Phyto Tha, News Editor of the English edition of The Irrawaddy made a good analysis of the international (ie. Western) media’s reporting of Suu Kyi’s presentation to the International Court of Justice (ICC) in December 2019, defending the country against accusations of genocide over the Rohingya issues. Unfortunately such perspective never get into the western media.

Reading the news coverage of the hearings - from my random picks of the Financial Times, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Economist, The Guardian and The Associated Press - left me with an uneasy feeling. It's disappointing to see that nearly all of their coverage poorly reflected the intention of her testimony. It's worrisome because this negative portrayal in globally renowned media could fuel international misconceptions, further damaging Myanmar's already tarnished reputation (Tha, 2019).

Hate Speech and Buddhism

Writing in Australian academic website ‘The Conversation’, Paul Fuller¹⁵⁸, Lecturer in Buddhist Studies at Cardiff University observed:

There is now a form of militant Buddhism, which often promotes the supremacy of Buddhism, and can be Islamophobic, ethnocentric and chauvinistic in its preaching. This is a Buddhism alien to the romantic, pacifistic, meditative and compassionate Buddhism of popular imagination, and – one would hope – much of Buddhist history. It is a Buddhism in which the Buddhist faith should be protected against the supposed threat of other religions (primarily Islam) overrunning Buddhist Myanmar.

Led by the Mandalay-based monk Ashin Wirathu, it is a religion that campaigns to punish those who offend Buddhism. In its organised form in Myanmar - these nationalistic Buddhist ideas coalesce around a group popularly known as MaBaTha – the organisation for the protection of race and religion.

¹⁵⁸ <http://theconversation.com/myanmar-and-buddhist-extremism-86125>

Is this a romanticized version of Buddhism in the West? Who do not understand the heritage protection, identity and nationalist dimensions of Buddhism in Asia? Is it “un-Buddhist” or “hate speech” to talk about threats to its existence and practice? When others attack Buddhists or Buddhist temples or try to destabilize Buddhist communities, are Buddhists expected to go to the jungles and meditate on loving-kindness? Also as a Buddhist, one may ask, if groups like MaBaTha are using wrong speech to address a right issue?

MaBaTha – the full name of which is the ‘Association for the Protection of Race and Religion’ – started as an empowerment movement for poor Buddhists threatened by outside forces. Sri Lanka’s Bodu Bala Sena also started the same way. But, when they try to speak about the threats facing the community they get labeled as “Buddhist Extremists”. In July 2013, Time Magazine ran an infamous cover story branding Bhikku Wiranti as ‘The Face of Buddhist Terror’.

Brussels based International Crisis Group (ICG) in a report titled ‘Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar’ published in September 2017¹⁵⁹ had this description about MaBaTha:

The nature of MaBaTha and the extent of its popularity are widely misunderstood, including by the government. Far from being an organisation narrowly focused on political or anti-Muslim goals, it sees itself – and is viewed by many of its supporters – as a broad-based social and religious movement dedicated above all else to the protection and promotion of Buddhism at a time of unparalleled change and uncertainty in a country and society where historically Buddhism and the state have been inseparable.

While State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy party command enormous respect and support in the political realm, there is a widespread nationalist perception that they have a generally western liberal outlook that privileges minority rights and diversity (including religious diversity) over protection of the Buddhist faith – notwithstanding the fact that many minorities feel that the government is not taking account of their concerns. Efforts by the government to crack down on MaBaTha have only amplified the perception that they are weak protectors of the faith. If the government makes good on its threat to declare MaBaTha an unlawful association, there will be severe, likely violent, reverberations across the country.

MaBaTha is led by widely-revered and charismatic monks who have far greater legitimacy on religious issues in the eyes of many Myanmar Buddhists than the government or state religious authorities. MaBaTha also appeals to a broad range of people, including those who oppose its forays into party politics or hate speech, through its engagement in a wide range of “good causes” at the community level – from Buddhist Sunday schools, social service and secular education provision to legal

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar>

aid and disaster relief. Nowhere is this clearer than in the strong support for MaBaTha among nuns and numerous laywomen's organisations – despite MaBaTha's support for what many see as misogynistic objectives such as laws that restrict women's right to marry whom they choose. For many – male and female – MaBaTha provides not only a powerful, well-funded channel for participation in community-support activities but also a sense of belonging and direction in a context of rapid societal change and few jobs or other opportunities for youth.

Throughout this book, there are numerous instances where I have pointed out that Buddhist communities, their culture and heritage are under attack by other religious forces out to proselyte because they are poor. So when the media – both international and domestic – ignore socio-economic issues and concentrate their attention on a few monks who may speak without caution – but express simmering issues for the community – the “hate speech” narrative they create may well confuse the real issue of how to empower the community, so that they will not feel insecure. During my visit, many learned monks complained that the media does not come to them for comment. They prefer to go to Bhikkhu Wirantu because they get the sensational comments they want.

Communicating Buddhist Viewpoint

There is no doubt that Myanmar's Buddhists are vulnerable, especially because of economic problems the country faces, where a majority of the poor – especially in rural areas – are Buddhists.

In delivering the ‘Singapore Lecture’ in 2018, Suu Kyi spoke for 45 minutes on this issue of empowering the poor Buddhists along with the other poor ethnic groups, including Muslims. She appealed to Singapore businesses to come and invest in the country to provide the poor economic means for empowerment. The human rights she argued is economic empowerment through socially just development policies assisted by foreign investments.

How could the Buddhist nationalist forces in the country convey this message to the world? As ICG pointed out MaBaTha is basically doing what Suu Kyi argued, on the ground (providing economic empowerment).

Venerable Kondanna¹⁶⁰ of the State Pariyatti Sasana University said that monks discuss socio-economic issues a lot and work within communities to address these. The monks use social media to reach young people to address socio-economic issues and that is not hate speech he explained. He says the international media, in particular, has labeled Buddhists as “extremist” and when CEO of Twitter came to Myanmar to learn meditation and he tweeted praising Myanmar Buddhists, media in the US accused him of supporting genocide.

Venerable Ashin Tilokabhivamsa¹⁶¹ of the Buddha Dhamma Parahita National Foundation successor to now banned MaBaTha argues that it is the media that is

¹⁶⁰ Interview with author in Yangon, December 2019.

¹⁶¹ Interview with author in Yangon, December 2019.

extremist for not giving them space to explain their viewpoints. “We would like to say to the world media that they have to be fair and balanced. They are not. They are extremists. Media can be a medicine but media can also be a mine (bomb)” he points out. Taking a critical look at the Myanmar mainstream media, he said: “Today media is not loyal to the nation. In Myanmar many media don’t stand with the Buddhist community. They stand with money”.

At a time when the Rohingya voice is everywhere and the Myanmar Government is not effectively countering it, Ven. Tilokabhivamsa said that a couple of years ago they wanted to set up a radio station for the Buddhists of Myanmar with money from a Thai Buddhist organization. But, the Government refused to give them a license. “If we had the radio we would have told to the world that we are not fighting, we are defending the Buddhists” he added, pointing out that the Buddhist media the Government has given licenses for – such as Magabodhi and Buddha channel – they just broadcast sermons and “don’t discuss about the Buddhist community”.

A senior reporter of Myanmar Times, Myo Lwin¹⁶² pointed out another critical issue in Myanmar which the local media is not reporting. “In border areas, Christian missionaries are very active. They go give food, help and get the trust of the people. Then they gradually become Christians. When Buddhist monks come they start collecting food. Monk takes from the poor not give. Christians give food Buddhist monks collect food. Media don’t see this as an issue worth reporting,” he added.

Perhaps this is an issue media need to discuss about reforming the Buddhist practices to address the socio-economic challenges facing the Buddhists in Myanmar. But, many media practitioners I consulted said that Buddhism in the media in Myanmar is about broadcasting ‘sutra’ chanting on radio between 5.00 to 6.00 am and broadcasting of sermons by senior monks on TV early morning or late evenings.

“Buddhism is a sensitive issue. There are growing Buddhist sentiments. It’s a difficult issue to report,” says Toe Zaw Latt¹⁶³, Operations Manager of private TV channel DVB. “We have to be careful of creating conflicts. There is a lot of hate speech, fake news”.

He argues that the Rohingya issue is politically coloured by religion. “Some of MaBaTha speeches are racist. We do broadcast them if there’s issues. But we don’t rebroadcast or promote it. We handle as news” explained Latt. “Real issue is very much socio-economic. Some minority communities are very rich. Muslim shop owners and their communities are rich. Rakhine state some Muslims are rich. It’s easy to report it as a religious issue rather than analyze it as a socio-economic issue”.

“Wirantu has different views (to me) but media ask him not me. They never come to me but always goes to him” said Dr Vimala¹⁶⁴, Lecturer, International

¹⁶² Interview with author in Yangon, December 2019.

¹⁶³ Interview with author in Yangon, December 2019.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with author in Yangon, December 2019.

Theravada Buddhist Missionary University, when asked about how to change the negative image of Buddhists in Myanmar especially overseas. “I want peace and want other people to have peace. Media should ask us. Some media have values and some don’t. They just want bad news”.

Many of the media practitioners and members of the Myanmar Press Council argued that the Myanmar media is in a transitional phase as press freedom only came in 2013. Along with it mobile and social media have expanded making drafting laws to control or guide the media very difficult.

Former Myanmar diplomat Sein Wen Aung had a word of caution. He believes most young journalists coming into the profession do not understand Buddhism well, even though they may claim to be Buddhist. In addition, too many international NGOs (non governmental organisations) are coming in and interfering in the media. He cautions that especially those coming from the West have the habit of transmitting information to destabilize governments if they are not subservient to western interests.

“The minister (of information) asked independent media supported from outside to be ethical” noted Aung. “Islamic people are supported by OIC (Organisation of Islamic Countries) and also many NGOs here are Christian get support from overseas. Buddhists don't have such support”.

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Chapter 13

Singapore: Buddhism Recreating Relevance Amidst Modernity

Singapore is a small strategic island at the tip of the Malay peninsula with a natural harbour that led to the founding of modern Singapore in the early 19th century with the arrival of the British East India Company and Stamford Raffles. Singapore however was not uninhabited and it has had centuries of settlement. When Stamford arrived in the island it was under the governorship of a Malay Muslim Sultan. A treaty was signed with the Sultan in 1819 CE with the British agreeing to recognise the Sultan, but for an annual fee, they would be given to use the port as a trading post. Perhaps it is due to this treaty that Singapore's national anthem is sung in Malay to this date, while the majority of the people of Singapore are Chinese.

As a trading center, Singapore (known as 'Singapura' – Lion City) attracted traders of Arabs, Bugis (Indonesians), Indians and Chinese. Trade and commerce would transform Singapore dramatically and turn the island into the center of commercial activity in the region and the East in general. It also made the island a truly multicultural society with hardly any historical religious heritage to protect. Singapore came under the British empire and was ruled along with Malaysia. However, after Malaysian independence and acrimonious relations between the island's Chinese majority and Malaysia's Malay majority, Singapore separated and became an independent nation in 1965.

Today Singapore is a multi-religious nation with Buddhism and Taoism (traditional religion of the Chinese) together accounting for 43.2 percent of the population in 2015 with Christianity 18.3 percent, Islam 14 percent and Hindu 5 percent. Taoism and Buddhism tend to be lumped together in statistics because there is a big overlap between the two religious practices on the island. Singapore's population as of 2017 was 5.6 million with only 3.5 million of them Singapore citizens (Department of Statistics Singapore).

Singapore has one of the world's highest per capita income in the world (over USD 60,000) and hence it is a highly advanced modern society. Yet under the facade of a "westernized" modern society is a lot of Asian traditional religious practices mainly from Buddhist, Taoist and Hindu communities that make Singapore a prototype of a modern Asian (not western) society. It is a staunchly secular country.

According to western liberal ideology, secularism means no religious affiliation, but in Singapore, it is each religion co-existing and practicing its rituals, ceremonies and festivals, without offending anyone. Discussing religion in the media is a taboo subject, and there are strong controls on religious preachers from overseas giving public talks in the country.

In October 2019, Singapore's parliament updated the religious harmony act to extend these controls to the Internet and social media to deal with hate speech. Key changes include higher maximum punishments and immediate restraining orders to prevent offensive statements from spreading on social media, instead of the current 14-day notice period. It also makes it mandatory to disclose

foreign donations over SGD 10,000 and for Singaporean religious organization to have locals in key decision-making positions.

Rounding up the debate, Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam said the law does not have powers to ask local religious groups to dissociate themselves from foreign affiliates, and this would be too intrusive and excessive. "We have no home-grown religion of our own, and we are an open society. The approach is to ensure that our local religious organisations are sensitized to a multi-religious context." The Government also does not wish to constrain debate on social issues, even when done on religious grounds, he said. "But if a religious group says you can only work for people who are of the same religion as you, that is not acceptable, and it crosses the line." Mr Shanmugam said that while the law sets out broad parameters of behaviour, it cannot be the sole driving force to change behavior (Ho, 2019).

Three Schools In Harmony



Bathing Buddha on Vesak Day

Being a trading post many Buddhists from different parts of Asia have come and settled in the island and brought with them their own traditions. Thus, Mahayana, Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism exist side-by-side, but not necessarily in association with each other. There are many Buddhist temples scattered across the island belonging to different traditions.

Since the bulk of the Chinese immigrants came from the southern Chinese coastal provinces of Fujian and Guangdong during the 19th century, their temples make up a large portion of Buddhist temples in Singapore and these are very colourful – sometimes one could be confused between a Taoist and a Buddhist temple.

The first Buddhist temple to be constructed was the Thian Hock Temple in Telok Ayer Road in 1842 to give thanks to Ma Zu – the Goddess of the Seas for their safe voyages from China to Singapore. Although predominantly a Taoist temple, the Temple also contains aspects of Buddhism, Confucianism and Ancestral Worship. In addition to Mazu, the main deity, there are also shrines dedicated to other deities such as the Guan Yin Bodhisattva, Baosheng Dadi (God of Medicine and Health), Cheng Huang Ye (City God) and Confucius. It is very common for Singapore Buddhists to perform Taoist practices and rituals, given the syncretic nature in which both Buddhism and Taoism co-exist in China. But, the oldest fully Buddhist monastery is Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery (Twin Grove of the Lotus Mountain Temple) founded 120 years ago. This national monument remains today one of the finest Buddhist structures in Singapore in terms of architecture and conservation (Bodhi Travel)¹⁶⁵.

¹⁶⁵ <https://bodhi.travel/destinations/singapore>

One of the newest temples is the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum in Chinatown believed to be built at an estimated cost of SGD 60 million. The building, which looks more like an ancient Chinese Imperial Palace, is 6 storey high building with a tooth relic of the Buddha received from Myanmar, enshrined inside a golden



Singapore Tooth Relic Temple

casket on the fifth floor. Located within the main hall on the first level is the imposing and majestic statue of the Maitreya Bodhisattva. The third floor is the museum, which has many valuable Buddhist sculptures and arts from across Asia on display. The temple was opened by the President of Singapore in May 2007 and attracts Buddhists of both Mahayana and Theravada traditions from Singapore and abroad. Two other important temples are Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery built in 1921 and the Buddhist Lodge built in 1935. The former runs the Buddhist College that trains Buddhist nuns and monks from across Asia.

The earliest Theravada Buddhists to settle in Singapore came from Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar. Wat Ananda Mettarama Temple was the first Thai Buddhist temple to be set up in Singapore in 1925. The famous Aw brothers who came from Burma financed the Sakya Muni Buddha Gaya Temple along Race Course Road. This was probably the reason why the Temple, built in 1931, had a Burmese architectural style (Bodhi Travel). The Sri Lankaramaya Buddhist Temple is the primary Sinhalese Buddhist temple in Singapore and was constructed in 1949. It has a huge reclining Buddha statue in the shrine room and a 'Bo Maluwa' where regular Bodhi Pujas are performed. In the latter half of the 20th century, well-educated Sri Lankan monks were instrumental in setting up many education-oriented Buddhist institutions in Singapore such as the Maha Mangala Vihare – which offers degree programs from the Pali and Buddhist University of Sri Lanka – and the Singapore Buddhist Library (see box on right).

Singapore Buddhist Library – Better Than Having Ten Temples

Venerable Bellanwila Dhammaratana, or affectionately addressed as 'Bhante', founded the Buddhist Research Society in 1981 along with the first dedicated Buddhist book service in Singapore – which later led to the establishment of the Singapore Buddhist Library. He had told his devotees at the time: "To start a Buddhist library in Singapore is better than to start ten temples"

In an interview, he explained the rationale and value of a library for the Singapore Buddhist community.

The library is non-sectarian. For the start, I did not want to promote this place as a Theravada Dhamma center. When you look at Buddha Dhamma it is what the Buddha preached. Theravada is the rituals followed by different sects. In Mahayana, the Buddha Dhamma may vary a little bit from the pure teachings of Buddha. There are no hassles when we promote the Buddha Dhamma here.

There is an interest between the followers to learn about the other. For example, those who are leaning towards Theravada are interested to learn about Mahayana. So they read about Mahayana and take part in religious activities in the temple. Mahayana people have a big interest in reading about Theravada scripts especially Tripitaka. They don't see it as Theravada script but Pali script. They think through that they can get a good knowledge of Buddhism. I don't see a division here between Theravada and Mahayana.

* Interview was recorded with the author in Singapore in October 2019

Compared to the Chinese Mahayana, and Theravada traditions, the Vajrayana practitioners were relative latecomers to Singapore. They have expanded their presence since the 1980s, and Vajrayana Buddhist practice is firmly entrenched in Singapore today. Major schools in Vajrayana Buddhism are represented in Singapore now - the Amitabha Buddhist Centre (Gelupa tradition), the Karma Kagyud Buddhist Centre (Kagyulpa tradition), the Singapore Buddha Sasana Society (Sakyapa tradition) and Palyul Buddhist Centre (Nyingmapa tradition)(Bodhi Travels). Foreign Rinpoches regularly visit Singapore and hold hugely popular blessings and teaching programs – some of which have been held in Singapore’s convention centers.

Reformist Buddhism and Socially Engaged Buddhists

As the peoples’ standard of living rose and Singapore began to enter the realm of the ‘First World’, Buddhism had to face a new challenge. With rising education and educational standards, the people began to question tradition as modernization gripped the nation. Buddhism traditionally has been a very ritualistic religion across Asia as discussed at various stages in this book. Singapore Buddhism was no exception and Chinese Buddhism, in particular, was very ritualistic, though colourful. Thus, by the 1980s, as the 20th century was drawing to a close, several progressive Buddhist monks began, what one may call a ‘Reformist Buddhism’ movement.

In Traditional Buddhism, it is the ritual that takes the center stage in the religious beliefs and practices; in Reformist Buddhism, it is the " Buddhist ideology " that is the key emphasis of the Reformist Buddhists. Therefore, Reformist Buddhism adopts "various scriptural tenets from the different Buddhist traditions to answer contemporary needs" (Eng, 2009, p217).

She points out that the activities of the Reformist Buddhists can be categorized into the religious and the main secular spheres. Within the religious domain, there are six main types of activities, namely: "propagating Buddhist scriptural knowledge to the public, encouraging general participation, nurturing a group of committed Reformist Buddhists, performing missionary work and engaging in subtle proselytization, putting faith into real-life practice and action, and legitimizing Vesak Day as a public holiday" (Eng, 2009, p233).

As Chia (2016) observes, Singapore’s Buddhist activism has not been directed at political reforms, but working within the strict controls on public assembly and agitation, to defend Buddhism against misrepresentation and involve in social welfare activities. Singapore Buddhist Federation (SBF) which was founded in 1949 has played a lobbying role such as persuading the government to declare Vesak as a public holiday and regularly making representations to Film Censor Board and other authorities to ban media products such as films that they think misrepresent Buddhism.

There have been many monks, since the 1980s that have become actively involved in social welfare services. Among them, someone who stands out is Venerable Yen Pei. He was a student of the renowned Buddhist reformer Taixu, who actively promoted “Human-life Buddhism” during the Republican period in China. He moved to Singapore in 1963 and became the abbot of Leng Foong Prajna Auditorium. After settling in Singapore, Yen Pei became an active dharma teacher and promoter of ‘Humanistic Buddhism’ (Chia, 2016).

He emphasized the need for Buddhists to be socially engaged and to give back to society. Ven Pei's social welfare activities covered 3 major areas: elder care, organ donation and kidney dialysis, and drug prevention and rehabilitation. He played an active role in promoting food distribution and public assistance to poor elderly living under the poverty line. Subsequently, he founded the Grace Lodge Home for the Aged in 1985 to provide shelter for homeless female elderly, regardless of race or religion. Ven Pei was an active champion of organ donation. He believed that organ donation is in line with the Buddhist teachings of compassion and loving-kindness. The third concern of his was the problem of drug abuse in Singapore. While emphasizing that drug abuse is "harmful to one's health," "ruins a person's future," and "upsets the peace and prosperity of the society." He also stressed that the Buddhist 5th precept calls upon oneself to refrain from intoxication. He set up 'Green Haven' that provides 6 to 12 month residential rehabilitation and treatment program for former drug addicts. It assists former drug addicts in seeking both accommodation and employment during their rehabilitation program. Ven Pei died suddenly in 1996, and more than 60,000 people attended his funeral.

Singapore Buddhist Free Clinic (SBFC) is another major social welfare project of Singapore's Buddhists. Two nuns – Venerable Master Hong Choon and Venerable Master Chang Kai - founded it in 1969, at a time when the general population drew meager salaries and could not afford medication. Today it has 8 branch clinics across the island and offers mainly traditional Chinese medical treatment. Starting with 3 physicians, today they have 40 physicians and treat 315,000 patients annually – out of which 75 percent of the patients are eligible for free treatment and medicines.

In a speech at SBFC's 50th anniversary celebrations in November 2019, Cabinet Minister Masagos Zulkifli said: "We need the tripartite collaborative efforts of the public, private and public sectors to help these less fortunate Singaporeans, to show them that we care, we support, and also help them to rebuild their lives". In his welcome speech, SBFC chairman Venerable Sik Kwang Ping expressed his gratitude to the Housing Development Board for providing the locations, Town Councils for its cooperation and the support of Resident Committees and members of the public for financially supporting them (For You, Jan 2020, p 53).

Kampung Senang Charity and Education Foundation – known as Kampung Senang – was set up in 1999 by Joyce Lye, a Buddhist who left her career in the financial sector, invested a lot of her savings in the project and ensured her children got a local university education rather than going abroad for it. For the past 20 years, they have adopted what they call a "holistic environmentally friendly approach, filled with compassion and loving-kindness" to care for over 18,000 needy people. They have serviced their wheelchairs, provided care for children, students, and the elderly, and educational programs for helping the public. Their work is geared towards developing a mind-body spiritual balance to "inspire people to act with gratitude, respect and unconditional love towards life and nature" (For You, Aug 2019).

There are many other Buddhist monasteries such as the Singapore Buddhist Lodge that provide daily free meals for the poor (while most of the population is well-to-do, there are still pockets of the poor in a country that does not provide

government welfare like unemployment benefits or aged pensions). A few years ago while researching for a story on abused foreign domestic helpers (maids) I came across a shelter for them run by a local NGO which said they received a donation of SGD 350,000 from a Buddhist monastery to run the shelter. Most of the women who were given shelter while their cases in the courts finished were Catholics from the Philippines and Muslims from Indonesia.

Venerable Shi You Wei is another monk who has started a weekly food distribution program with an outreach of about 80-at-risk and vulnerable seniors, and a bursary for some 50 needy students, since 2012. He also attends to the sick in hospitals and counsels those needing a listening year, as well as visits prisons to bring comfort and hope to those behind bars.

“Buddha Dhamma doesn’t change but how we approach it has to evolve to make it relevant, meaningful and beneficial in the modern context, addressing the ever-changing societal needs and environmental situations” he argues (For You, Aug 2019, p 55). He also adds that these challenges have to be coupled with the need to ensure that it continues to be aligned to the Buddha’s teachings, to inspire dhamma practice, by sustaining the commitment of devotees for volunteering endeavors.

Reflection upon the Engaged Buddhism activities of Singaporean Buddhists, Chia (2016) makes a very interesting observation:

Since the strict laws in Singapore prohibit religious and civil society groups from organizing street protests and demonstrations, Buddhist activists were careful not to get on the wrong side of the law and antagonize the state authorities. Instead, they lobbied and petitioned the state agencies to protect their religious interests and often, in their own words, “to preserve the dignity and reputation of Buddhism”. Thus, it appears that Buddhist activists co-opted the state to do its bidding, rather than vice versa.

Threats From Pentecostal Christianity

An independent Pentecostal movement has been growing rapidly in Southeast Asia in recent decades. To a large extent, the Pentecostal movement is driven by upwardly mobile, middle-class ethnic Chinese. The movement’s appeal to the middle class suggests that this growth is not going to taper off in the face of increasing economic development and mass consumerism in the region.... In countries where the ethnic Chinese are in the minority, Pentecostal churches and cell groups are crucial spaces for social networking, business contacts and identity-making. In Singapore, where the ethnic Chinese are in the majority, the Pentecostal community was as well-educated and well off as the broader Protestant community, if not more so. The Pentecostal megachurch’s so-called ‘prosperity gospels’ either justify wealth and well-being as divine favour or offer them as a reward for faithfulness to God, thus making it popular with the middle-class (Chong, 2015).

In earlier chapters, it was pointed out that these Pentecostal churches are infiltrating poor Buddhist communities offering them money, food and education in proselytizing. But, in Singapore, it is a different situation. They are appealing to young middle and upper middle-class Singaporeans, especially from the Chinese community, with a message of modernity and “cool”. They are also into subtle social engineering and big business, exploiting loopholes in the

law where religious charities are not taxed.

In March 2009, a watershed event took place in Singapore where religion came to the forefront and the media shed its taboo on religious reporting to cover widely what came to be known as the 'AWARE Saga' in Singapore. AWARE stands for the 'Association of Women for Action and Research', an NGO that has fought for equal treatment for women, such as in the workplace, for over 40 years. On this faithful day, the usually quiet AGM of AWARE that normally attracts about 30 members had over 100 many of whom have joined the group only recently. At the end of the meeting, they have succeeded in appointing 6 of them into the executive committee including its president and secretary. Later they were all found out to belong to the same evangelical (Pentecostal) church and they have taken over the association to stop it running workshops on sex education in schools, which this Christian group alleged was promoting homosexuality.

"The saga was a milestone in contemporary political history. It alerted Singapore to the whistling of a kettle that had been boiling for many years; that continues to bubble into the present day" noted Singapore's alternative news site 'Rice News' in a commentary marking the event's 10th anniversary¹⁶⁶. "Clearly, this was no benign coincidence. It was an unwelcome takeover, designed to steer this prominent advocacy group down a more culturally conservative path".

The 'old guard', which was furious summoned an EGM (Extraordinary General Meeting) in May 2009, which was attended by over 1000 members of AWARE. The 7-hour EGM saw arguments, shouting, jeering, and heckling and at the end, a vote of no confidence resulted in the new guard's defeat, and they resigned, ending the AWARE saga.

In recent years, the business model of megachurches and corruption were exposed when a SGD 50 million fraud case involving City Harvest Church went to court resulting in the jailing of 3 of its leaders, including the Pastor – all Singapore Chinese¹⁶⁷. In November 2019 it was revealed that another Pentecostal church 'New Creation Church' has bought the Star Vista mall and convention center for SGD 296 million¹⁶⁸. The media reported it as a business deal and questioned whether they are going to raise a loan for its purchase. Nowhere was it asked, if what the church is doing is unethical because they are using loopholes in the law to get into big business without having to pay taxes like other businesses? This needs exploration by the media and civil society.

It is such business deals that help these churches to expand and have a huge kitty to proselytize by branding themselves as modern and successful.

¹⁶⁶ <https://www.ricemedia.co/current-affairs-commentary-aware-saga-ten-years-later-whats-changed/>

¹⁶⁷ City Harvest Church: A timeline of Singapore's biggest case in misuse of charitable funds - <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/city-harvest-church-kong-hee-a-timeline-of-the-largest-case-11830638>

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/no-plans-by-new-creation-church-to-raise-funds-to-buy-300-million-shopping-mall>

When asked what makes these churches attractive to young Singaporeans, Dr Terrence Chong¹⁶⁹, deputy director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore said: “Christianity is attractive to young Singaporeans because they provide good social networks. Many like-minded or people they aspire to be, are part of the church. Church members are professionally successful very dynamic, they are doing well in their careers. There is sometimes a desire to emulate some of them. So church would be a very natural place to go. The Pentecostal megachurches are able to package messages in a very relevant way to young Singaporeans. Christian morality and Christian messages are made very much relevant to their day to day life”.

Dr Chong also added: “Buddhism is often associated with folk religion, with superstition, with rituals, many associate Christianity with West because the language used is also English in churches. It is the language of education and the language of professionals. So they see Christianity as modernity”.

When I was teaching at Ngee Ann Polytechnic a few years ago, this was the message I got from the teenagers I was teaching. When we come to the question of religion in classroom discussions, many Chinese students said they were “free thinkers”. I found they usually come from Buddhist and Taoist families. When I told them that Buddhists are also free thinkers and explain to them the liberalism of Buddhism and the Kalama Sutra, they say that is not the Buddhism their parents taught them. They went to temples offered flowers and joss sticks and prayed, and also chanted for hours in a language they could not understand. When they ask the parents why they do it, they say just do it to get good merit. For youngsters that is superstition.

Ven Dhammaratana¹⁷⁰ of the Singapore Buddhist Library agrees that the practice of Buddhism in Singapore is too ritualistic. “They (Buddhists) don't realize that because of this the youth are drifting away from Buddhism and their Buddhist identity. We can't have Buddhism by completely eliminating rituals. There needs to be some devotion. We need to protect these, but there needs to be limits to it” he argues. “We need to understand that the dhamma and rituals are 2 things. The monks need to understand that first”.



A poster for a puja with Chinese Buddhists

The Bhante pointed out that when religion used to be taught in schools, Buddhism was the most popular with even students going to Catholic schools opting to take Buddhism as a subject in school. “Government did a moral education program in secondary schools. Under that Buddhism was taught at OL (junior secondary) stage. It was very successful from the Buddhist's side. Most

¹⁶⁹ Interview with author in Singapore, October 2019.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with author in Singapore, October 2019.

students opted to learn Buddhism. It went for about 12 years, but then Government stopped - until today Government hasn't given a reason for it".

Ven Dhammaratana added that in those days there were a large number of Buddhist children who understood the dhamma well and were not into too many rituals. "Without schools offering Buddhism as a subject, it is difficult to attract older children to dhamma school nowadays" says Bhante.

Dot Connection - Communicating Dhamma Via Counselling

It is not only young people, but Christian churches also – especially the so-called Pentecostal "New Churches" - have been attracting a lot of women facing a mid-life crisis such as marriage breakdowns. Because Buddhist temples usually don't have professional counseling services, they go to churches that are ever willing to offer such assistance. In such circumstances, it is not only the woman but, her usually teenage children who ultimately become church members.

Venerable Ding Rong, a young ethnic Chinese monk who was ordained in Sydney in 1994, set up Dot Connections Growth Centre in Singapore in 2014 to provide professional counseling services to the Buddhist community. He holds a BSc in Psychological Studies from UK, a master's degree in Professional Counseling from Australia, and a postgraduate degree in Buddhist Studies from Taiwan.

"We are not like traditional temples with a lot of rituals and ceremonies. We focus more on training than rituals. We train Sunday school teachers and Buddhist counselors", explained Ven Ding Rong¹⁷¹. "In Singapore, it is fairly new to have a counseling service by a Buddhist organization. A few years ago I found the demand is very great. When I started a lot of people started to make inquiries. I was the only person who provided the service and sometimes I could not handle so many cases at the same time".

He said there is only one other temple that offers counseling service but theirs is a secular service done by people who are trained professionally as counselors. But, he wants to add the Buddhist element to it. Thus, he launched in 2017 the inaugural Diploma in Buddhist Psychotherapy and Counseling course that provides training in the area focusing on Buddhist principles and values. To do this course, applicants have to first complete a master's in Professional Counseling. The Dot Connection Diploma is 7 months, but they also have a basic course of 10 sessions.

"For basic one, we start with basic concepts of dhamma and also impart some counseling skills to them. We also let them practice counseling, integrating them in role plays" explained Ven Ding Rong. "For professional counselors, you need to have minimum a master degree in counseling, and at least 600 counseling hours with supervision".

"We have started forming a counseling team. Currently, we have about 10... they either have masters in counseling or has attended our diploma" said Dr Gouk

¹⁷¹ Interview with author in Singapore, December 2019.

Sok Siam¹⁷², Counsellor Coordinator, Dot Connections, “We are now planning how to publicize our service to Buddhist communities”.

“There are many areas for counseling” she added. “Lot of people who contact temples for counseling have a marriage problem, relationship issues. Many parents have issues dealing with children ... youth suicide also is a problem”.

Both Ven Ding and Dr Gouk believe that there is an urgent need to train good dhamma teachers and provide Dhamma Schools on Sundays for children. Thus, they have started a program to train dhamma teachers.

“There is a need for a concerted effort to train Dhamma teachers. So that they do just impart knowledge to youngsters ... venerable’s idea is to try to use innovative ways to reach out to young people” added Dr Gouk. Ven Ding believes that they need to cross a language barrier as well because most Buddhists in Singapore are Mandarin speakers. “Chinese Buddhists are more focused on rituals than education” he notes. So he argues, “methods we use are very important. You have to be very encouraging and engaging”.

Dot Connections and the bi-lingual Singaporean Buddhist monthly ‘For You’ have linked up to take dhamma messages and Buddhist viewpoints to the community. They have both a print version and an online presence. Magazine’s English editor, Juansa Cheng Sze Yam¹⁷³ explained: “We have involved Dot Connections in discussing contemporary issues in Singapore ... We have discussed how to celebrate Mother’s Day not just in a commercial manner but to reflect on our gratitude to mother. We discuss psychology and mental health in society”.

Taking Dhamma To Youth

In making young people interested in the dhamma in a modernist society like Singapore, it takes a lot of thinking and imaginations to package the message as modern (cool) and Buddhists could take some ideas from the Pentecostal Christians in communications. A weakness of Buddhism is that, as discussed already in this chapter, the youngsters lack knowledge of the dhamma, and it cannot be introduced to them via rituals – many of this is seen as superstitions by the young if they cannot see it relevant to their contemporary lifestyle. The older generations, who know the dhamma, need to think of how to use modern communication methodologies and tools to convey the message.

But, as Shulin¹⁷⁴, a Buddhist practitioner in her late 40s note, “old people need community for spiritual networking and company. They are not interested in taking Dhamma to the young”. She was also critical of foreign monks who come to Singapore to teach Buddhism. Even though they are well educated, she says “once they come to know the devotees and get a following, they tend to go out and set their own temple. That becomes their way of getting a visa to stay on”. Another issue is that the main segment of Buddhism in the island is the Chinese – “they function in the Chinese language and do not reach to outsiders unless

¹⁷² Interview with author in Singapore, December 2019

¹⁷³ Interview with author in Singapore, June 2019.

¹⁷⁴ Based on an informal chat in Singapore, June 2019.

you know Chinese” – the problem is that most educated young people in Singapore today are English speakers and “they are being brainwashed to think of English and Christianity, as ‘cool’ and something they should adopt”.

“To make Buddhism attractive to youngsters we also make video clips, short movies and animations,” says Juansa. Puay Kim Teo¹⁷⁵, of Dhamma in Action, agrees that Buddhists need to do more to counter the trend of youngsters drifting away from Buddhism. “Messaging has to focus on Buddhism being suitable and relevant to the young,” he argues. He feels that the cautious nature of Buddhists and restrictive nature of the Harmony Act in Singapore draws Buddhists more towards community charitable work and cultural activity, instead of trying to spread the philosophy.

In recent years, the Government has hinted that it may be willing to scrap the British colonial-era law that makes gay sex between men a criminal act. The growing LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) movement in the region has been putting pressure on the Government. Christians and Muslims have come out strongly opposing such a move, but Buddhists have been muted. This would have been an ideal opportunity for Buddhists to express their liberal and tolerant nature to youngsters in particular. Buddhists should not be opposed to such a change to the laws, as Buddhist teachings – such as the 3rd precept of panchasila – says not to misuse your senses and that would apply to both gay and heterosexual activity. There is no scriptural material, as far as I know, that objects to gay relationships. But, when I asked the Singapore Buddhist Federation (SBF) why they don’t make a statement saying they are not opposed to scrapping the law, a senior executive told me that it is difficult to get consensus among the membership to make such a statement.

Teo believes that Buddhists can use the 3rd precept to argue a liberal and tolerant attitude to the issue. “Of course we can bring the 3rd precept about sexual misconduct, but it is more about being faithful, not sexual orientation. Different from some religion (on this issue)” he noted when I put the question to him. But he added that many devotees take directions from the sangha, and “if the sangha is not willing to debate it, we don’t feel we are in right place to say something. So our religious leader needs to give a firm stand for us to take a stand on it”.

Wilson Ang¹⁷⁶, former President of the Buddhist Fellowship of Singapore argues that if Buddhists want to get involved in debating social issues like gay sex they need to think for what benefit? You need to judge issues based on whether it is bringing temporary relief or long-term happiness in your mind. “To make others happy is to make them develop happiness in themselves,” he says.

Packaging Buddhism Through Music

Music is one area that triggers many emotions and could bring happiness to oneself. Can such a medium be used to spread dhamma messages to youth? It seems the Christians have used Gospel Music to good effort in this direction and

¹⁷⁵ Interview with author in Singapore, June 2019.

¹⁷⁶ Interview with author in Singapore, June 2019

it has caught the attention of Singapore's Buddhists. Some of them have been collaborating with fellow Buddhist musicians in Malaysia.

"If you want to get the young in their 20s or 30s interested in dhamma, music is one of the ways. Singapore Buddhist Music Hub (SBMH) does it... their fundamental problem is funding. They get Buddhists who are musically talented to come together and create a new genre of songs," Ang pointed out.

"Buddhism needs to be more audience-centric, tailoring content delivery to be most digestible by an audience of various types" argues SBMH's Marcelly Suhali¹⁷⁷. "This has always been overlooked and overdue when it comes to the Buddhist community outreach efforts. Not just in music but in all types of reach-out mechanisms". Suhali believes that music is the medium, but, lyrics are the message and that is the key. She said that they get invited by various Buddhist organizations, be it an anniversary dinner of a Buddhist organization, a youth camp, an opening item at a dhamma talk, a Sunday service at a temple, or a Buddhist concert. The response has been very positive with many audiences very appreciative.

Suhali gave this account of responses to their music: "One mother with young kids was very grateful that we taught their Children's Sunday class to sing Buddhist songs. On many occasions, nominal young Buddhists who were originally interested in learning the dhamma, were attracted to casual Buddhist events that involved music and after getting introduced to the dhamma in this friendly manner, later on, deepen their knowledge via another medium like dhamma talks and books". But, they have also faced barriers from different schools of Buddhism, for using music to spread the dhamma.

Another Singaporean Buddhist musician is Kang Kee¹⁷⁸, who formed 'Happy Productions' in 2016 to create Buddhist music "to bring happiness". He argues that happiness comes with understanding. "When you have understood you come to gratitude, which ultimately brings happiness. We want to create musical docs to promote a culture of understanding," he said adding that the music he produces is not labeled as Buddhist. "Sounds cheerful songs, take messages from Buddhist teachings like gratitude, self-understanding, compassion. We take them to schools. We don't highlight these as religion".

Kang further said that in their songs, they encourage reflection and anger management. "We promote the community to be harmonious. Songs have a pop flavor to appeal to young people". He explained that when he grew up in Malaysia, Buddhist temples did not allow music to be played. It was a time when Dr Victor Wee along with Tan Huat Chye started a Buddhist musical movement (as discussed in chapter 11). After he came back from studies in the US in 2000, he has quit engineering and got into music.

"At the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia, we went to about 70 locations in one and half years to sing Buddhist songs. In between Buddhist talks, we sang songs. We use music to bring the young to gather to listen to dhamma talks.

¹⁷⁷ Email interview with author, November 2019.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with author in Singapore, September 2019.

When we sing the young feel this is a good place to join. Old people do chanting and listen to talks, young not interested” says Kang.

In Singapore, in 2008 he has produced an album of environmental songs. It is difficult to survive on singing Buddhist music, so he does commercial productions like Chinese commercial jingles. “That way we get in touch with the industry. We need to be professional in our music” he argues. Explaining how they are using music to expand the circle of Buddhists among the young in Singapore: “We identify young people and pull them in with the music. When we gather them we are not pushy. We get them excited with music they love. Later get involved in religious-related projects. Our main objective is to bring Buddhist teachings to the young via music. We need the younger generation to look at Buddhism differently”.

This is what Ang did when he teamed up with Buddhist musicians in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore to organize a Vesak concert titled ‘Sadhu for Music’ at Singapore’s Esplanade concert hall in May 2016. Malaysia’s Imee Ooi was instrumental for Ang to get this concert together (see article below). “When I did ‘Sadhu for Music’ agenda was quite clear - it was not done for a particular organization or person... it was for everybody. The reason was to bring in Buddhist talent across different groups and give exposure to people. It was a world-class concert as Esplanade has strict requirements in terms of talent - that is why we brought in Imee”.

“Today there is a lot of music with Buddhist flavor locally and in the region,” says Ang. “The challenge is to bring them to a better exposure. We need an organization behind it and we need sponsors (to fund it)”.

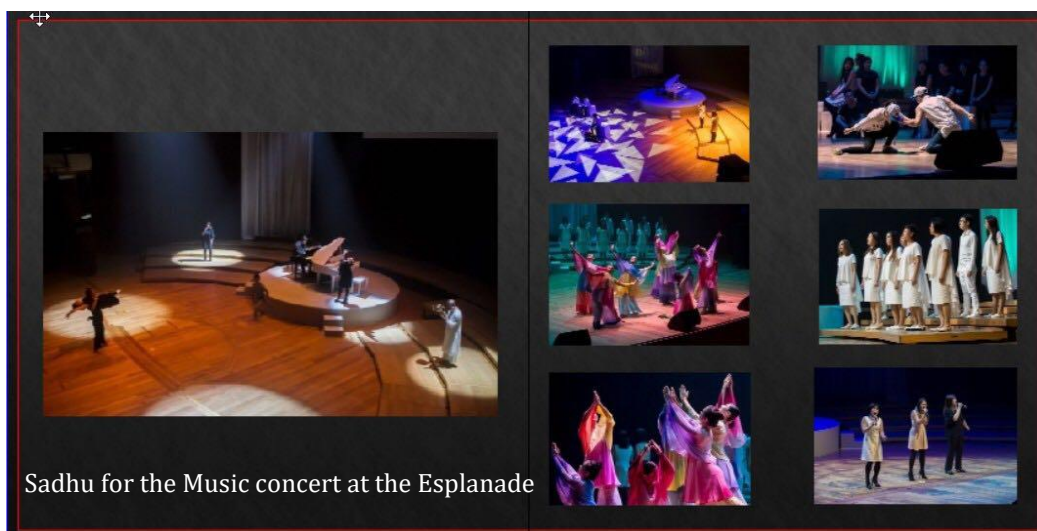
Singapore: Buddhists Take The “Gospel” Music Path To Attract Youth

Lotus News Feature By Kalinga Seneviratne

Singapore: Buddhist ideas and wisdom are being increasingly adopted by the West as part of a 21st century modern lifestyle, but in the East, youth are increasingly distancing themselves from their Buddhist heritage becoming “free thinkers” or even embracing Christianity from the West.

A group of young Buddhist musicians from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have now come together to reverse this trend by using music to attract youth. They staged a Buddhist musical show at the prestigious Esplanade arts center here called “Sadhu for the Music” to mark the Vesak festival this month. The two shows on 4 and 5 May were a sell-out filling up all four levels of the large concert hall’s galleries.

The traditional method of getting the youth to come to the temple and listen to the Dhamma (Buddha’s teachings) is not working anymore argues Wilson Ang, President of the Buddhist Fellowship of Singapore (BFS), which organized the concert in collaboration with the Buddhist Gem Fellowship of Malaysia (BGFM) and Buddhist Fellowship Indonesia. The internationally acclaimed Malaysian Buddhist singer and musician Imee Ooi, who has recorded over 1000 songs and 50 albums, directed the show.



Sadhu for the Music concert at the Esplanade

Ang told Lotus News, that, at a recent conference here an academic has provided statistics, which showed declining interest in Buddhism in Singapore among the youth. "That caught my attention and I wanted to see how we can capture the interest of this younger generation as well as nominal Buddhists," he explained. "Every youth today carry a mobile phone and they listen to music on it. Or watch movies. Probably we can use music as a starter to reach via the media they are closely associated with".

Prof Victor Wee, President of BGFM agrees. " Before we can start telling people about Dhamma, our first challenge is to persuade them to come and listen," he argues. "And good music certainly has the power of attraction".

Buddhists in Asia are well aware of the power of Gospel Music that has helped to attract youth in the region to Christianity in large numbers. The production 'Sadhu for the Music' had a heavy influence of this genre of music in its presentation style but the lyrics were well crafted with Buddhist ideas and even chants from the sutras (Buddha's sermons). Songs were sung in English, Mandarin and Bhasa Indonesian by youthful singers. Some of the accompanying dances had an interesting blend of East and West, with the ballet and breakdance styles reflective of gospel music dancers blended at times with kung fu and tai chi movements. None of the dancers or singers wore any batiks, lungis or cheongsams.

Director Imee Ooi admits that she's been heavily influenced by Christian gospel music because her family in Malaysia was very musical and at the time of her childhood, there was no Buddhist music for her to listen to. "I think gospel music has gone a long way ... because of the nature of religion. Buddhists are more inwards and Westerners and Christians are more expressive in their religious activity... they are well ahead of us" she told Lotus News.

Buddhists in Asia are renowned for their conservatism and many older monks still shun the use of music in propagating the religion, fearing that it will dilute the traditional monastic chanting culture mainly based on Pali language of the Buddha's time, which no one speaks today.

Prof Wee who was one of the first to pen Buddhist songs in the 1970s recalled in a message written for the concert program that when they started singing Buddhist songs at the Buddhist Mahavihare in Brickfield, Kuala Lumpur some temple elders have gone to the high priest and complained about them singing in the pagoda.

"They were roundly scolded by the late Chief (Venerable K Sri Dhammananda) who said that if they were not open to new ideas, the temple would soon be bereft of young people," recalls Prof Wee.

Imee notes that because the world has changed, youth are very much connected with the world and they are exposed to very good standard of music. "Their taste is different and if you want them to come and relate to religion you have to do it their way" she argues. "My mission was given by the BFS to create a platform for youth to come and enjoy the music".

In putting the program together Imee has “polish up some of the gems lying around,” some of these Buddhist compositions were written in the 1980s. “The productions were not very professional as they did not have good facilities at the time and they were basically home made” she notes. “I was given over hundred CDs to pick up good pieces and also lyrics to put up the show”.

Ang says that not all monks are opposed to using music to propagate Buddhism. “We approach older venerables for advice and many of them gave us examples of how in older days music was part of the promotion of Buddhism. They were supportive, only a few were not receptive” he said, adding “Buddha used different vehicles to get the message across to different individual... there is no one vehicle”.

The show was put together in six chapters, each included about 4 songs and reflected a theme based on Buddha’s teaching, with the last chapter representing compassion with a wish “may you all be well and happy”.

“This is a very good platform for Buddhists of different countries to come together and experience Buddhism in a way that we don’t usually do,” said Kan Rong Hui, one of the Singaporean youth performers. “I also found out that Imee was involved and her standards are good. So I wanted to be part of it’.

“It’s not that we are so backward compared to gospel music it is that we never saw music as a platform to spread the message,” argues Imee, who plans to transform the ancient sutras into songs. She says that there is a growing Buddhist musical movement across Asia and they need to start networking among themselves. “They are all disconnected” she adds, “someone looks at me and says oh Buddhist music has gone international”.

One of the biggest drawbacks Buddhist musicians face is that Asian Buddhists are not yet used to fund such cultural activities on a grand scale. They are more willing to fund building grand temples or huge Buddha statues.

“If it’s something physical you get money easily,” notes Ang. “When it’s something soft like Dhamma through music (building) relationships is very important. That is why BFS team had to go to temples to establish relationships with abbots and businessmen. “We have to convince them that it’s important to reach out to the youth in a very contemporary manner ... to give them a taste of the Dhamma and from there you can make progress” he adds.

“Gospel music is effective but we need to use (the idea) wisely” Ang argues. “In propagating (the religion) we are pretty strong in meditation, eventually that is where we want people to get into learning the Dhamma and practicing meditation”.

Addressing those who have reservations about using music to propagate Buddhism, Prof Wee says that in his four decades of producing Buddhist songs and music “many of my friends who sang with me have remained Buddhist practitioners, some going on to become serious meditation practitioners, Dhamma teachers and Buddhist leaders”.

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Chapter 14

Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom Facing Many Threats

For centuries, Buddhism has been firmly established in Thailand and it is the only country in the world where the King is constitutionally stipulated to be a Buddhist. All Thai citizens are taught that "chat, satsana, phra mahakasart" (nation, religion and monarchy) are the three pillars of Thailand's intrinsic national values. Thus, the Thai identity is synonymous with Buddhism. Any visitor to Thailand will immediately note the saffron-clad monks and Buddhist temples everywhere. Thus, Buddhism is deeply ingrained in Thai society and culture. The Thai calendar is still based on the Buddhist era, not the Christian one – for example year 2020 CE will correspond to BE 2563.



'Pinnapath' – common early morning merit making seen in streets of Bangkok

Out of a population of 70 million, close to 95 percent of them are estimated to be Buddhist, with about 4 percent Muslim and 1 percent Christian. Thailand is one of the few countries in the world that Christmas (December 25th) is a normal working day. Yet, Thai authorities tolerate the action of the British-owned supermarket chain Lotus Tesco to get their cashiers to wear Santa Clause caps and play Christmas hymns during the Christmas season.

On the surface, Thailand seems to have strong national values. Foreigners visiting this country are impressed with what they see and encounter personally. But that can be an illusion because when it comes down to identifying national values and interests, the Thai people are completely at a loss. They really do not know what these values and interests are, or how to form a consensus around such values (Kavi Chongkittavorn, 2011)¹⁷⁹.

Thus, what well-known journalist Chongkittavorn points out probably led to the Constitutional Drafting Committee (CDC) refusing to recognize Buddhism as Thailand's official religion in 2016. Since 1997, the Thai constitutions have mentioned the State's duty to protect and promote Buddhism, while giving freedom of worship to other religions. CDC decision led to a debate among intellectuals in the kingdom on what criteria that decision is based on. The Thai monarch is also seen by the population at large as the protector of Buddhism in the kingdom, while the military protects the King.

"For many Thais, the recognition of Buddhism as Thailand's official religion would be a crucial element of making a good constitution. Buddhist morals would help the country out of the ongoing political turmoil, which they have

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.nationthailand.com/opinion/30166126>

simplified into a crisis caused by a lack of ethical politicians” argues Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, a Thai constitutional law scholar¹⁸⁰.

Buddhist scholar Suraphot Thaweesak warned that declaring Buddhism as the official religion would increase the militancy among Thailand’s Muslims (who are mainly living in the south bordering Malaysia) as they would be unhappy about it¹⁸¹. Yet, he ignored the fact that across the border in Malaysia with Muslims constituting only 55 percent of the population, Islam is its official religion.

Meanwhile, in the 2019 elections, many fringe political parties emerged with a Buddhist nationalist platform. They allege that Buddhism is under threat in Thailand with rising Muslim militancy in the region as well as infiltration of Christian evangelical movements. There has also been a disturbing rise of extremism among the clergy, such as, Phra Apichart Punnaajanto, a 30-year-old head preacher at Bangkok’s popular Marble Temple, calling on his social media followers to burn one mosque for every Buddhist monk killed in the south, that made headlines in Thailand and overseas (this issue will be discussed later in this chapter).

Khemthong believes that there are 2 perceived threats from outside that bugs Buddhists. “The insurgency in Thailand’s Deep South has seen monks slain by Muslim fighters. Thailand’s accommodation of Islam, possibly in response to the Southern unrest is seen by Buddhist extremists as dangerous tolerance. The growing popularity of Christianity among the population is another possible danger”.

Brief History of Buddhism

It is believed that Buddhism first arrived in Thailand (Suvarnabhumi) during the reign of Emperor Ashoka taken by two of his missionaries Sona and Uttara in the 3rd century BCE. Mahayana missionaries have come via Northern India and Srivijaya in the 5th century CE. The Srivajaya Empire that rose to power in 757 CE included most of the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian archipelago and south of Thailand. Thus, Mahayana Buddhism may have flourished in Thailand alongside Theravada Buddhism for about 5 centuries (Thakur, 2001).

The capital of Suvarnabhumi where Buddhism was first introduced is believed to be Nakhon Pathom. From 1002 to 1182 CE kings belonging to the Suryavarman dynasty that ruled Cambodia have extended their empire to the whole of present-day Thailand. Much of the Brahmanic culture, which survives to the present day in Thai Buddhism, could be traced as its origin to this period in Cambodia (Kusalasaya, 2019).

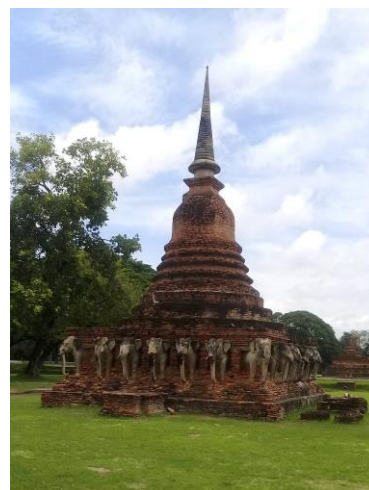
In the second half of the 11th century CE, Buddhism has come across from Pagan (Bagan) in Myanmar into the northern and north-western parts of Thailand. King Aniruddha of Pagan who came to power in 1057 CE has taken a keen interest in spreading Mahayana Buddhism in the region (Thakur, 2001).

¹⁸⁰ <https://www.newmandala.org/buddhist-politics-and-thailands-dangerous-path/>

¹⁸¹ <https://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=8,13248,0,0,1,0>

Sri Lankan (Lankavamsa) Buddhism forms an important part of the history of Buddhism in Thailand, for it was that form of Buddhism, which remains dominant in the kingdom today. This form of Buddhism was introduced to Sukhodaya (Sukhothai) kingdom by King Ram Kamhaeng in the 13th century.

The Sinhalese sangha was established in Sukhothai during the reign of King Lothai (1317-1347 CE), son of Rama Khamheng. During this time, a Sinhala Mahathera, Udumbara Mahasami who belonged to the Arannavasi fraternity had arrived in Pegu (Lower Burma). A monk from Sukhothai named Sumana went to Pegu with Anomadassi, another monk from Sukhothai, studied religious texts under Udumbara Mahasami, and received Upasampada. The king, on hearing of the arrival of the Udumbara Mahasami in Pegu, sent an envoy, requesting him to send a monk who would perform Upasampada and other ecclesiastical functions of the sangha in Sukhothai. Udumbara Mahasami sent Sumana to Sukhothai for whom the king constructed a monastery called Wat Pa Mamuang. Gradually the Sinhala Sangha was well spread in northern Thailand with centers flourishing in Sukhothai, Nibbisapura (Chiang Mai), Sajjanalaya (present-day Suwankhalok) and Haripunjaya (present-day Lamphun). Architects from Sri Lanka have also been instrumental in introducing Makara and elephant motifs to temples in Sukhothai and also the stupa architecture. The large bell-shaped stupas that began to be built in large numbers in the middle of the fourteenth century have been directly traced to Sinhalese prototypes. The bell-shaped stupas and the standing elephants emerging from niches found in Sukhothai have been inspired by the Gampola Lankatilake temple and Gadaladeniya temple in Sri Lanka (Goonatileka, 2014)¹⁸².



Sri Lankan stupa
architecture in Sukhothai

The Ayuthaya period has inherited the Lankavamsa Theravada school from Sukhodaya. During the reign of King Boromatrailokanatha (1448-1488 CE) Buddhism has reached its pinnacle of glory (Thakur, 2001).

In the 18th century, Thailand was able to repay the debts somewhat, when King Kithsiri of Sri Lanka asked for help after a decline of Buddhism aided by the massacre of Buddhist monks and sacking of temples by the Portuguese had reduced the number of 'upasampada' monks in the island to zero. King Boromkot of Thailand sent a team of senior monks led by venerable Upali and Venerable Ariyamuni to Sri Lanka to help re-establish the order of the Sangha, which is known today in Sri Lanka as the 'Siam Nikaya'.

All the Thai kings in the recorded history of present-day Thailand have been Buddhist and the institution of the monarchy has been preserved because Thailand was never colonized by the Europeans. As pointed out already the

¹⁸² <http://www.lotuscomm.org/lotus-academy/buddhist-history/1009-cultural-exchanges-between-thailand-and-sri-lanka>

constitution stipulates that the King has to be a Buddhist and the upholder of Buddhism in the country.

Monarchy and Thai Buddhism



Buddhist Temples of the
Royal Palace in Bangkok

The origin of Thailand's monarchy is considered to go back to the founding of the Sukhothai Kingdom in 1238 CE. After a brief period of inactivity in the 18th century, from the death of King Ekkathai and his successor King Thaksin, the institution has continued uninterrupted with the current Chakri Dynasty created in 1782 CE. The first Chakri king moved the Palace from Thonburi to Bangkok. In 1932 after a bloodless revolution, the institution was transformed to a constitutional monarchy – ending 150

years of absolute Chakri rule - with the King holding a largely ceremonial position. The late King Adulyadei Bhumipol was the world's longest reigning king until his death in October 2016 at the age of 88. He was much loved by the people for his dedicated community development work implemented via several Royal Foundations.

For over 70 years of his reign, His Majesty King Bhumibol kept a promise - the promise that he would reign with righteousness for the benefit and happiness of the Siamese people. As of 1998, there were 2,159 royal development projects initiated by His Majesty and implemented throughout the country. Most of the projects are aimed at improving the living conditions of his subjects, particularly those in remote rural areas. Among the private projects initiated by Their Majesties, the King and Queen, are crop substitution and the preservation of watershed areas in the northern region. The objectives of the crop substitution project are to stop opium cultivation, deforestation, and the slash and burn cultivation methods used by the hill tribes, which comprise the communities of the Akha, Lahu, Karen, Hmong/Miao, Mien/Yao and Lisu. Advice and assistance given to the hill tribes by His Majesty include planting cool climate fruits and flowers, which yield a better income (Lim Kooi Fong, Buddhist Channel, 2016)¹⁸³.

Education is also an important area that reigning monarchs paid attention to. One of the major foundations in this area is the Mahamakut Ragawithayalai Foundation¹⁸⁴, which was officially formed in 1893 by King Chulalongkorn. Since education in those days was only limited to the privileged few, the King had established this foundation in the name of his Royal Father, King Mahamakut intending to give free education to all young Thai people, and also

¹⁸³ <http://www.lotuscomm.org/news-features/lotus-features/1284-righteous-king-who-ruled-for-the-benefit-and-happiness-of-the-siamese-people>

¹⁸⁴ <https://mahamakut.org.au/>

to give support to any monastery that runs the school for the young monks and young novices. In Thailand, the Foundation consists of one Buddhist University, with four regional campuses, over 3000 temples and monasteries with more than 30,000 monks. Under the patronage of Mahamakut University, about a hundred monks have been trained for Buddhist Missionary work overseas every year. There are 71 temples Mahamakut foundation has set up in North America, Europe and Australasia.

The regulation (or some may call control) of the sangha is another area where the monarchy plays a major role until today. There are 2 sets of Nikayas of the Sangha order in Thailand today. These are the Mahanikaya and Dhammayuttika Nikayas. The latter was founded by King Mahamakut to enable monks to lead a more disciplined and scholarly life according to the Dhamma. There isn't much of a difference between the 2 nikayas.

According to the Bhikku Sangha Act of 1943, the organisation of the sangha is similar to that of the state. The King appoints – in consultation with the Government of the day - the Sangharaja (Supreme Patriarch), from among the most senior and qualified members of the sangha. The Sangharaja appoints a Council of Ecclesiastical Ministers headed by a Sangha Nayaka (whose position is analogous to that of a Prime Minister). Under the Sangha Nayaka comes 4 ecclesiastical boards that deal with administration, education, propagation and public works. Each of the Boards has a Sangha Mantri (equivalent to a Minister in secular governments) and with his assistants, the 4 Boards are expected to look after the affairs of the entire sangha in Thailand. There is also a Department of Religious Affairs which acts as the liaison between the Government and sangha working in cooperation with the Council of Ecclesiastical Ministers.

An amendment to the Sangha Act in 1992 took away the King's power to appoint the Sangharaja, but, in January 2017 Thailand's parliament – controlled by the military – passed a bill restoring the new Monarch's right to appoint the Supreme Patriarch. This bill was passed at a time of controversy over the appointment of a Sangharaja, a position left vacant since the death of the 100-year-old former Sangharaja in October 2013.

In February 2017, Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn appointed Venerable Somdet Phra Maha Muneewonga as the new supreme patriarch. In 1957, he graduated with a bachelor's degree in religious studies from Mahamakut Buddhist University, then studied for a master's degree in history and archaeology at Banaras Hindu University in India.

The selection process for the new supreme patriarch was marked by rivalries, controversy, and disputes between the major monastic orders and within the government. In February 2016, monks and army personnel clashed during a protest rally attended by thousands of monks against perceived interference in the appointment of the supreme patriarch and in a show of support for the then frontrunner for the position, Ven. Somdet Phra Maha Ratcha Mangkhla. However, vocal critics expressed doubts about his suitability for the role. He was accused of violating monastic rules and of having close ties with the abbot

of Wat Dhammakaya, which is reportedly backed by the family of ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra (Buddhistdoor)¹⁸⁵.

Since this dispute, in 2018, there has been a purge of some senior monks whose royal titles were taken back, and some even disrobed. They have been accused of fraud and embezzlement of temple funds. Some have welcomed the action of the Government as a long overdue clean up of corruption within the monastic system in Thailand, while others have criticized it as a purge of pro-Thaksin senior monks by the military-backed Government with probable support from the Palace¹⁸⁶. Former Prime Minister Thaksin is widely seen in Thailand as a person trying to undermine the monarchy, but not necessarily Buddhism in Thailand. Tough less-majeste laws¹⁸⁷ have restricted criticism of the Palace.

Brahmanic Buddhism

Thailand's Buddhist practices have been greatly influenced by Brahmanic influences that came via Cambodia centuries ago, as discussed earlier. Ganesh, Indra and many other Hindu deities are widely worshipped across Thailand, but not in the confines of a Hindu temple. These shrines stand on their own very often, in city squares, outside shopping malls, on pavement corners, or in the premises of Buddhist temples. The Erawan Shrine in Bangkok's City center is one of the most popular pilgrim sites in Thailand.



Worshippers at Erawan Shrine

It was built in 1956 after Hindu Brahman priests suggested its creation to ward off bad luck. This Brahman shrine is said to bring good luck to those who visit it. Devotees – most of whom are Buddhists – come in their thousands every day offering everything from lighted incense to colorful marigold garlands and even pay Thai classical dancers to perform puja for the deity. It is believed that Brahma likes dancing and pretty girls and this is done to thank him for a

wish already granted (Warren, 2005). The shrine houses a statue of Phra Phrom, the Thai representation of the Hindu god of creation, Brahma; this is why the shrine is also known as the San Pha Phrom. The god has four faces, and each one is said to represent some type of good fortune. Thus, outside the shrine, lottery sellers do brisk business.

As seen even today in the ruins of Angkor Wat, Hindu influences were particularly strong during the Khmer empire. After overthrowing the Khmer, the Sukhothai kingdom adopted many of these Hindu beliefs, and Brahmanism

¹⁸⁵ <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/thailand-appoints-new-supreme-patriarch-to-head-monastic-sangha>

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.newmandala.org/ncpos-purge-thai-sangha/>

¹⁸⁷ Thailand's lese-majeste law, which forbids the insult of the monarchy, is among the strictest in the world. It has been increasingly enforced ever since the Thai military took power in 2014 in a coup, and many people have been punished with harsh jail sentences

played an important role in the life of the Sukhothai people. Such influences even became stronger during the 4 centuries of the Ayuthaya period. Kings were seen as deities by their subjects, and Brahmin priests figured prominently at court functions (Warren, 2005).

In May each year, a Royal Ploughing Ceremony takes place at Sanam Luang outside the Royal Palace in Bangkok. The day is a national holiday in the kingdom. It is a ceremony where both Buddhist and Hindu traditions are performed. First, the Phra 'Ratchaphiti Pheutcha Mongkhon' is a Buddhist ceremony to bless the plants. It is followed by 'Charot Phra Nangkhan Kan' a brahmin ceremony to bless the plants. The ceremonies are carried out each year to bring good fortune to all plants and to boost the morale of the farmers and a member of the royal family takes part in it.

Because of the Hindu caste system, Brahmic influences may have only permeated the upper rung of society, judging by the fact that it has not integrated too much into the Buddhist practices of the rural people of Thailand.

Mediums, Monks and Amulets – Thai 'Popular' Buddhism

In a fascinating book titled 'Mediums, Monks and Amulets', Thai scholar Pattana Kitiarsa (2012) discusses what he calls "popular Buddhism" that encompasses monasteries, marketplace, media and private home altar.

Popular Buddhism in Thailand is a large-scale, cross-social spectrum of beliefs and practices – incorporating the supernatural powers of spirit, deity, and magic – that have emerged out of the interplay between animism, supernaturalism, folk Brahmanism, the worship of Chinese deities, and state-sponsored Theravada Buddhism. Yet, its existence and continuation depend very much on distinguishing it from mainstream religious traditions. Popular Buddhism is different from its scriptural or canonical counterpart due to its loosely organized and pragmatic nature. Its principle beliefs, iconographies, and rituals derive from the fertile grounds of the dominant religious tradition of Buddhism, alongside folk religious beliefs and practices, and fashionable foreign imported religious cults. It is oriented towards this-worldly or mundane concerns, and not towards scripture-based teachings and principles for spiritual attainment (Kitiarsa, 2012, p 2).



Popular Buddhism in Thailand – early morning merit-making at a beach resort

Driven by television and other forms of media, entertainment and commercialism, such manifestations of Buddhism is an in-built threat to the religion. Deity, media and money are the main elements in the creation of Thai popular Buddhism. Sangha Council has tried to reign in such practices and defrocked many monks, and authorities have even charged and jailed some for fraud against the public.

As Kitiarsa (2012) describes, the process of creating popular

Buddhism starts with the identification of a diety – it could be a prominent figure from the national narrative - such as kings, queens, princes and nobles, lay monks or spirits of city founders or guardian spirits, famous monks or lay people (read the interview in box below). There could be elaborate rituals, but others could be simply performed at temple, shrine or personal altar. Local communication networks or mass media is needed to create an aura of sacredness around the legend of that particular diety.



Buddha amulet market in Bangkok

Brahmanical beliefs associated with the royal court, have had a considerable influence on the spirit cults. The most popular Hindu deities worshipped in urban spirit-medium cults are Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu, Indra, Ganesha, Lakshmi and Kali. These deities originally came via Indian traders, religious teachers and migrants. Meanwhile, Chinese migrants have brought spirit-cult deities like Guanyin (known as Kuan Im in Thai), Mazu, and Bentougong. King Chulalongkorn, in the 1990s – 80 years after his death – has become one of the most popular spirits (diety) in Thai urban-based cults.

This popular Buddhism has become a commoditized, packaged, marketed and consumed product, or a hybridized popular religion that has gone out of monasteries into television, shopping malls and markets with Thais spending millions of Bhat every year in buying such products.

Thailand's Synthesized Buddhism Interview with Dr Jirayudh Sinthuphan

Q: Thailand's popular Buddhism seems to have a lot of fusion especially with Brahminism, such as in the Spirit Houses. Can you explain that?

Ans: For most Thai people, Thai Buddhism is a mixture of different religions. We have the belief that spirits take care of our house so that's a function of this spirit house... they also think it is a place where one can perform dana or giving arms to other forms of life.

Q: Erawan Shrine in Bangkok is very popular. Is it Buddhism really?

Ans: In the early 80s Hong Kong Buddhists came to visit this shrine. They asked for children... a son and they got it. It became a popular shrine. They ask for favour... it's a combination of Chinese religions popularized by Hong Kong Buddhists.

Q: Many Thais pay homage to the statue of King Rama, who is treated as a deity?

Ans: Chinese business community come there ... a lot of Chinese came to this country during King Rama 6 period and became successful here economically. So, he has become part of Chinese community deities... it is not part of Buddhism ... but because of the success of Chinese businessmen, they started to worship King Rama.

Q: There seems to be a lot of Brahministic influence on Thai Buddhism?

In popular practice there is no distinction between Hindu gods and Buddhist or Chinese deities... even Christian saints... they don't make a distinction in that ... only recently there have been attempts to purify Buddhism.

** This is part of an interview recorded by the author in Bangkok, in June 2019*

"Thai popular media has shaped public belief and practices in the direction of a more prosperity-oriented religion," argues Kitiarsa (2012, p33). Mass circulated daily newspapers and popular television shows have produced content such as commercial biographies of popular magic monks, astrologers or spirit mediums, and famous amulets, or tips for winning lottery numbers. "This media coverage performs the dual function of encouraging the hybridization of beliefs and serving as a virtual site of religious hybridity where public attention and desire for luck, wealth, good health, and a happy life are juxtaposed with people's common religious experience and imagination" notes Kitiarsa (2012, p 33).

A senior Thai television executive¹⁸⁸ said that online platforms have been active in promoting this kind of Buddhism and commercial television channels don't do that openly, but every fortnight there would be major stories by broadcasters about these monks. "They would present them as 'enlightened' monks, who could give some lottery numbers and that type of thing," which he believes promotes misguided belief because, "people think this is Buddhism. That is not the case. They are just using the robes".



Thai Spirit House

Engaged Buddhism – Thai Struggle To Make Dhamma People-centric

The term 'Engaged Buddhism' originated in the 1960s in Vietnam during the war and in the 1990s Thai social critics, Sulak Sivaraksa gave it a new momentum (as discussed in chapter 2). He argued that Buddhists need to practice the Dhamma in a manner that is relevant to today's socio-political context.

"This country is supposed to be a Buddhist kingdom but most people worship capitalism and consumerism, including monks. We promote small 'b' Buddhism. They put nationalism over Buddhism," Sulak¹⁸⁹ argues. "People in this country don't take Buddhism seriously, unlike in Sri Lanka or Myanmar. ... most sangha don't follow Buddhist principles though Thailand is the only Buddhist kingdom".

Sulak founded the Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation (SNF) in 1969. It is one of the first social organisations set up in Thailand - with a broad mission of supporting struggling artists and writers, and facilitating educational, cultural

¹⁸⁸ Interview with author in Bangkok, June 2019.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with author in Bangkok, June 2019

and spiritual activities that encourage detachment from consumerism. What distinguishes SNF and its sister organisations from other social organisations is a deep commitment to social change through combining spirituality with social action. Many sister organisations have grown from SNF in Thailand and abroad. One of these is the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)¹⁹⁰ he set up in 1989. It functions through a number of organizations across Asia and in the West.

“I started INEB to apply Buddhism seriously in everyday life” explained Sulak. “Our aim was to apply Buddhism to overcome dukkha. Our interpretation of dukkha is not only personal, but also social, environmental, and economic. We started an educational movement, which has been going on for 20 years. We operate it in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka”.

One of its offshoots is the INEB Institute for Transformative Learning that functions mainly from Wongsanit Ashram in Nakon Nayok, about 2 hours from Bangkok. They have 3 main programs - School of English for Engaged Social Service (SENS), Awakening Leadership Training (ALT), and MA in Socially Engaged Buddhism. SENS is a 12 weeks program of intense English learning with a week of holidays in mid-term. It is designed for rapid, enjoyable, and successful mastery of English language skills while fostering personal growth and social engagement in a rich, cooperative, and relaxed learning environment. ALT is a program spread over 5 months for people who are in a transitional stage in your life and looking for ways to contribute to the global regenerative movement in response to the social and ecological crises we are facing across our world. The MA program is being developed and it will be offered in Thailand, Taiwan and India. All the courses are on a fee-paying basis with scholarships available for the real needy.

Development As If People Mattered

In Buddhism, development can be attained in stages as negative desires are overcome. The goals of development are perceived differently. From the usual standpoint, when desire are increased and satisfied, development can proceed. From the Buddhist standpoint, when there are fewer desires there can be greater development. It is reduction of desires that constitute development.

Sulak Sivaraksa, ‘Seeds of Peace’ 1992, p44

Another important Thai Buddhist personality who challenged the conservative Buddhist establishment was venerable Buddhadasa Bhikku, who passed away at the age of 87 in July 1993. He coined what came to be known as ‘Dharmic Socialism’ in the 1960s at a time when a huge battle was brewing across Southeast Asia between western-style capitalism and Communism, triggered by the Vietnam War. Santikara, Ven Buddhadasa’s primary English translator and assistant describes his master’s ‘Dharmic Socialism’ as:

The primary historical forms of socialism have been violent, and clearly, Buddhist socialism would be non-violent. Ajahn Buddhādāsa critiqued communism and Marxism, with their terminology of class war, as primarily motivated by revenge. He contrasted “blood-thirsty capitalism” with “vengeful Marxism,” and endeavored to

¹⁹⁰ <http://inebnetwork.org/>

create an alternative, middle-way understanding. Thus, he described socialism that is primarily a moral system based on spirituality. This sort of socialism can only work if we curb egoism; it won't work with the usual incentives — such as greed and fear — employed by non-Dhammic systems¹⁹¹.

In 1932, Ven Buddhadasa founded Suan Mokkh, a forest monastery along the coast of Southern Thailand, about 600 km from Bangkok. It grew to become one of the most innovative and progressive Buddhist teaching centers in Thailand. Although Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu has passed away, much of his work continues, mainly through many virtual Suan Mokkhs.

Puntarigvivat (2019) argues that 'Dharmic Socialism' is based on the philosophy that people should not take more than they need and should share surpluses with the needy.

'Dharmic Socialism' theory begins with the concept that nature is a state of balance for the existence of humankind, creatures, plants and the world ecology. In the natural state, all living beings produce at their capacity and consume only what they need, without collecting "surplus" for themselves. Buddhadasa calls this natural state of balance "socialism". However, once human beings began to secure surplus resources in a way that forced others into scarcity, troubles began. According to Buddhadasa, human beings should return to the state of balance of natural socialism, producing some surplus, but distributing it thoroughly for the benefit of all (Puntarigvivat, 2019, p 59)

At the height of Thailand's economic meltdown in 1997, King Bhumibol Adulyadej came up with the idea of a "Sufficiency Economy". It embraces the three pillars of Buddhism – dana (giving), sila (morality) and bhavana (meditation) – and is based on the Buddhist principle of the 'Middle Path', that is avoidance of extremes (of greed).

The United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) 'Thailand Human Development Report 2007: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development'¹⁹², gave a strong endorsement to the King's idea.

UNDP describes 'Sufficiency Economics' as a set of tools and principles that help communities, corporations and governments to manage globalization – maximizing its benefits and minimising its costs – by making wise decisions that promote sustainable development, equity, and resilience against shocks. Thus, the report says that the 'Sufficiency Economy' is a much-needed "survival strategy" in a world of economic uncertainty and environmental threats.

UNDP believes that Sufficiency Economics is a natural ally of human development, but it also offers two additional elements – placing greater emphasis on mental and spiritual development and offers guidance on how to

¹⁹¹ <https://www.suanmokkh.org/articles/10>

¹⁹² <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/thailand-human-development-report-2007>

make decisions that will achieve sustainability, well-being, and happiness. But, it has received lukewarm treatment by successive governments.

Communicating The Dhamma: Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke Models

As discussed in this chapter, Thailand has come up with many innovative ways to practicing or expressing Buddhism. Mainstream Buddhist institutions and hierarchy may not welcome some, merely because it challenges the norm. Wat Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke Buddhist movements are two such well-known examples from two extremes of Thai Buddhism. They have both their supporters and critics in good number.

Venerable Luangpor Dhammajayo established Wat Dhammakaya in 1970 in a 78-acre property of rice paddies, with an initial fund of 3,200 baht (about USD 100). Today it is one of the wealthiest temples in Thailand, with many branch temples across the country and overseas. When their new “flying saucer” type stupa was inaugurated in 2002, I filmed it for a TV documentary. It was a grand event with about 400,000 white-clad devotees and 100,000 saffron-robed monks. The 180-meter diameter stupa is dotted with thousands of small gold-plated Budha statues, each of which has been sponsored by a devotee with a donation of 10,000 baht (USD 320). According to one devotee who took me to his home, where a replica of the stupa is in his lounge room, he said that when he sponsored a statue he was given the replica to remind him every day about the good merits he has generated by the donation. Such attitude to merit making supposedly encouraged by Dhammakaya has attracted critics for commodifying merit and Buddhism. The fact, that the temple attracts some of Thailand’s wealthy people has helped to boost this image.

“Dhammakaya has been labeled as a deviant but strangely enough a lot of people have been attracted, especially young people” noted Thepchai Young¹⁹³, former head of Thai PBS. He recalled how about 20 years back when he was working for ITV, they exposed what went on there. “They used tactics to convince people to donate millions of baht, to the point of going bankrupt in order to look good Buddhists by making huge donations”.

Not so argues Phra Sanitwongse Wutthiwangso¹⁹⁴, Director Communications of Wat Dhammakaya. “We don’t commercialize Buddhism. We make it easier for people to get access to Buddhism, even going to the extent of using social media excessively – that is not commercializing Buddhism, it can benefit people” he said. “We don’t focus on criticism by people. We focus on doing things that are based on Buddhist teachings. When we build temples we use Buddhist principles. Some see it as commercialization of Buddhism”.

The huge modern complex today includes a “meditation stadium” around the stupa that could accommodate up to 600,000 people. An air-conditioned meditation hall that can take 2,000 meditators, Dhammakaya Assembly Hall with 300,000 capacity for worshippers, multi-story staff residences and the headquarters building that looks like a large spaceship, could give a visitor the

¹⁹³ Interview with author in Bangkok, June 2019.

¹⁹⁴ Interview with author in Bangkok, November 2019.

impression that this is a business enterprise. Except for one traditional-style vihara, most of the complex looks very modern and well kept.



Wat Dhammakaya stupa and meditation complex

Phra Sanitwongse was at pains to explain to me that they are promoting traditional Theravada Buddhist practices with a modernist outlook. Even he guided me through a 20-minute meditation session to introduce their special meditation techniques, which he said was very popular with Thai Buddhists, especially young people. Meditation is an important element of Dhammakaya's outreach to the community. "Many years ago we started meditation every Sunday because people don't come weekdays. We now broadcast meditation through Internet using Facebook and YouTube. And on Internet TV channels. When there is a new technology we use it" he explained.

Dhammakaya pays close attention to the young and they have specially tailored meditation sessions for them as well as present Buddhist teachings in simple language relating it to science and logic. During school holidays they organize camps for children. They have a novice camp for girls.

The temple has an Internet based TV network DMC which broadcast a lot of material geared for children such as cartoons of Jataka stories and life of the Buddha, and songs specially produced to understand the Buddhist message easily. While DMC programs are originally produced in Thai, they also dub them to Mandarin and English for program exchange with other countries.

"When they go back home we provide them activity in their local area like volunteering in the community. We encourage that," explained Phra Sanitwongse, adding, "every year we bring children to come to the temple for virtue retreat, we make children good persons and apply Buddhism in their daily life – for example not bullying or fighting".

Santi Asoke is completely a different type of organization even though they also promote community-based Buddhism. The group consists of followers of Bodhiraksa, who was ordained as a monk more than 30 years ago. He was a famous TV entertainer in the 1970s, became vegetarian and started to preach first as a layman, but was later ordained into the royalist Thammayut Nikai sect in the state-controlled Buddhist sangha (monastic order). They have a very staunchly anti-capitalist a more 'Dharmic Socialism' approach to Buddhism.

Santi Asoke is a politically and socially engaged Buddhist group, which seeks to find a remedy to the moral and social ills of global capitalism within the capitalist framework by establishing economically autonomous village communities. The Asoke group addresses economic and social justice from a radical Buddhist perspective by promoting an alternative economic system to global capitalism. It aims to teach the people to follow the moral Buddhist path,

which would ultimately transform the capitalist society into a *bunniyom* society (Heikkila-Horn, 2010).

“We don’t worship Buddha the way others do. Buddha statues remind us of his teachings. It’s not true that we don’t respect Buddha,” explained community leader Samdin Lersbusway¹⁹⁵. “Buddha statues means 3 things to us – about worldly things, being the knower of the world, having compassion”. Rather than focusing on worship and praying, they practice a grassroots Engaged Buddhist form of Buddhism (see article below).

Buddhism From The Grassroots In Outskirts of Bangkok

Lotus News Feature by Kalinga Seneviratne

Bangkok: On a Saturday morning a couple drives into the Santi Asoke community in the north-eastern outskirts of Bangkok, and walks into a large warehouse stacked with clothes, shoes, books, electrical goods, mobile phones, washing machines, furniture and other household items. They inspect a stack of clothes scattered on a mat, picks some up and put it in a basket. It is then taken to a volunteer cashier, who weighs it and quotes a price.

This is a type of ‘Buddhist’ supermarket where almost all goods for sale are second-hand donated by the devotees and sold here to raise money for Santi Asoke TV station. They make about Bhat 800,000 to 600,000 (USD 26,000-19,000) a month.

“People donate whatever they don’t need. We have no set price. They will come and collect the pieces they want to buy, like in wholesale, and we quote a price,” explained community leader Samdin Lersbusway, while taking Lotus News on a tour of their community.

“The shop sells everything from clothes to air conditioners. Things that cannot be sold directly, we repair and sell. We also recycle paper, plastics and sell them to recyclers,” he added. “Anyone can donate stuff to us. Sometimes we get new goods from the rich”.

Taking a lift to the 3rd storey of a multi-storey block we visit the modest facilities of Santi Asoke TV station where only their Liaison Officer Thongkaeo and her cameraman – a student - was present. They don’t have a station manager nor a program manager, but they broadcast 24-hours a day on satellite and when the need arises live on Facebook and Line. Its operations are coordinated by the Liaison Officer, and a recorded feature was being broadcast when I visited them.

“We have run the TV station for 10 years. We work as a family,” says Thongkaeo, adding, “I plan schedules, do interviews, arrange visitors to be interviewed, and during school term students help us”. She invites me to take part in a discussion with her about Lotus Communication Network with the help of an English interpreter. But, before we start the interview she points out, “we may be the only TV station in the world where no staff is paid. All staff has to be multitalented”.

Samdin adds further that they work on the basis everybody works for free and the money they earn from their labour goes to a central fund which is managed by the Santi Asoke community. They have 7 communities across Thailand, with the largest one - and their headquarters - in Ubon Ratchathani in the north-east of Thailand near the Laos border.

Santi Asoke was founded by Bodhiraksa, a famous television entertainer in the 1970s, who became a monk in the early 1980s. He was not happy with the behavior of many monks who were non-vegetarian and involved with black magic rituals. Thus, he left the temple with a group of followers and set up a third sect of monks outside the control of the State. Thus, they became an outlawed sect in the tightly controlled Thai clergy.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with author in Bangkok, December 2019.

But, when Santi Asoke member Major-General Chamlong Srimuang was elected as the Governor of Bangkok in 1985 and later showed interest in joining national politics there was a systematic campaign to demonize the group. “Chamlong was extremely popular as a Governor, regarded as a ‘Mr Clean’, who lived modestly according to the Asoke teachings, ate one vegetarian meal a day, rejected tobacco and alcohol, and did not gamble or visit night-clubs” noted Mahidol University’s Professor Marja-Leena Heikkila-Horn in a study of Santi Asoke.

Chamlong had the potential to clean up the corrupt political establishment of the kingdom with a Buddhist moral movement that could appeal to the population, where 95 percent claim to be Buddhist.

“To prevent Chamlong from taking to the national stage in politics, his Buddhist affiliations needed to be declared illegal” argues Prof Heikkila-Horn. “Bodhiraksa was detained in June 1989 and all the Asoke monks and nuns were detained for one night in August 1989. A court case was commenced against them that year lasting until 1996”.

In the economic crisis of 1997, where excessive greed and borrowing were identified as the root cause of the problem, stocks of Santi Asoke began to rise because they have always been critical of greedy capitalism and promoted the concept of Buddhist economics known as *bunniyom* (meritism).

“Purpose of having a business here is not to make money. We make contacts in doing business to practice the dhamma (virtues)” argues Samdin. “Business here is viable because people want food. Take little profit so that they can continue to take a little wage”. He was explaining this principle to Lotus News while walking through their weekend market where the farmers (who don’t use chemical inputs in their farms) sell their vegetables and fruits at a modest profit. There were also a number of vegetarian restaurants that were ‘selling’ meals virtually for free.

An Indian vegetarian restaurant run by a Thai chef was giving food free of charge to monks, nuns and residents of the lay community here who have to come before 10.30 am to eat. “Other people pay. They may also leave a donation to give one a free meal” chef Glang Din explained, pointing to keys on a noticeboard he said, “key is on a board to show how many free meals are available. If you want to get one, take a key and give it to me for a free meal. Anyone can do it”. He also added that if you donate 4,000 baht (USD 130) “I will give free meals for the day to everyone who wants a meal here”.

At the height of the economic crisis in 1998, the late Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej famously advised Thais to follow a “sufficiency economics’ model of contented economic self-reliance. This was what Santi Asoke has been practicing since its inception.

When business tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra came to power in 2001, Santi Asoke got the opportunity to preach their economic ideal to the rural masses. He delegated to Santi Asoke the government-financed training of tens of thousands of indebted farmers in Asoke centers. Farmers came in groups of about 100 and stayed for five days. They learned about organic farming, recycling and reusing, and were obliged to listen to sermons on the virtues of vegetarianism and *bunniyom*.

Each Santi Asoke community, like the center here, whose leafy 7-acre property is surrounded by creeping high rise buildings of developers, has in addition to the warehouse, the market space and restaurants, two multi-storey apartment buildings housing lay followers, *kutis*(cottages) for monks and nuns, a school building, a health center, a departmental store selling mainly organic and herbal products, and a 4-storey unfinished temple in concrete with artificial waterfall behind a Buddha statue. They have been constructing the building in stages for 30 years, “when we have money to do it” says Samdin.

Interestingly, they don’t have the large Buddha statues and lavish shrine rooms Thai temples normally have. “Our community has 3 sections – temple, school and community. All 3 are integrated,” says Prouputt Kaodura, English interpreter for the community. “We don’t worship Buddha the way others do. Buddha statues remind us of his teachings. It’s not true that we don’t respect Buddha,” she adds. Chipping in Samdin says, “Buddha statues means 3 things to us – about wordly lthings, being the knower of the world, having compassion”.

Thus, the rooms and floors that surround the Buddha statue are areas for retreats, classes, conference rooms, meeting rooms and a library. “It is a place for people to work, a very practical path,” says Prouputt.

“The Santi Ashoke communities are self-sustained Buddhist communities. Monks and people live according to the teachings of Buddha and they have developed a system of sustainable living,” says Thai television producer Pipope Panitchpakdi who has reported on the community many times.

“It is something good for today’s world facing climate change and political divisions, etc” he argues, pointing out that because Santi Asoke believes that capitalism is against humanity, the commercialized mainstream media shuns them.

** This article was transmitted by IDN In-depth News on 9 December 2019.*

Threats To Buddhism

Thailand seems to be in a mood of self-denial in respect to any threats to Buddhism in the kingdom. The public narrative in the mainstream media tends to favour the notion that Buddhism is well protected and thriving in Thailand, as long as the institution of the monarchy is strong and the army is loyal to it. Yet there are still fringe but growing nationalist Buddhist groups that have raised the issue of threats (not necessarily through violence) to Thai Buddhism from rising Islamist groups, and that political corruption is opening the door for them to destabilize the Buddhist institutions and the country as a whole. There is very little discussion on religious issues in the mainstream media other than regular reports about misbehaving or corrupt monks. If you are to judge any Christian threat to Thailand based on mainstream media reporting, one could conclude that such a threat may be in the imaginations of a few.

“Thai mainstream media just follow western media on Buddhist issues. They are quite unaware, and there is a lack of basic information regarding true problems of the issue (of the threats to Buddhism)” argues Dr Tavivat Puntarigvivat¹⁹⁶, a lecturer in ASEAN Studies at Mahidol University. “They just look at the problem from the surface, and they are influenced by western media. They blame the vast majority of Buddhist people when we talk about any conflict with other non-Buddhist religions”.

“Media feels comfortable as long as Buddhism remains in the comfort zones - ritualistic Buddhism or well-demarcated type of Buddhism. When Buddhism crossover to everyday life and everyday practice, many times people regard them as alternative groups, who resist the mainstream of consumerism. This kind of thinking makes them feel that these folks are strange and shouldn’t be reported as normal people,” notes Pipope Panitchpakdi,¹⁹⁷ a well-known television producer and deputy director of ThaiPBS.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with author in Bangkok, February 2019

¹⁹⁷ Interview with author in Bangkok, June 2019.

Invisible Threats To Buddhism in Thailand

Discussion with Dr Charon Wonnakasinanont

Muslims have penetrated political infrastructure. They have a plan implemented from 20 years ago to take over Thailand in the next 10 years Muslims will consolidate. They are working on a plan to take over many ministries. They have sent Muslims to take over senior positions. They sent Muslims to learn in state universities for free. Muslims are 1 to 2 percent in Thailand but they have power over our government. They have a strategy to take over Thailand. Any Muslim has the right to join any ministry in Thailand. They will gradually take over Thailand (administration) this way. Thai Buddhist architecture was a tourist attraction now they are changing it. They have incorporated the Moghul style into Thai spirit houses. Many Thais think its Thai modern style.

As a Buddhist political party, I need to bring these concerns to parliament. We need to control infiltration by Muslims. The Muslims control Halal labeling and make a lot of money from Thais. About 6 billion Baht (USD 19.2 million) from Thai people. I gave information to the government, but they did nothing. If the government doesn't do it we have to pressure manufacturers not to pay. The government pays the Muslim community to promote halal labeling – more than 10 billion Baht (USD 32 million) to support halal activity.

I have also sued the minister and Muslim community reps for setting up mosques everywhere - 10 years ago Muslims started setting up mosques everywhere. If any province has 3 mosques they can have a Muslim as an advisor to the governor. I have sued in the constitutional court. This attitude is destroying Thailand. Even if a province has 10,000 temples Buddhists have no right to have an advisor to any governor. By Thai law Buddhists don't involve in politics, especially monks. But they accept Imams, say they are not religious persons.

That's why I need to set up the Mahabodhi Party to get involved in government. Buddhism is the heritage of the Thai people. We will protect Buddhism everywhere. We have about 200 cases suing the government.

Thus, when Buddhist nationalist parties contested the 2019 elections they had struggled hard to get mainstream media attention. If they get, they were presented as “radical” or “extremist”. Panu Wongcha-um reporting for Reuters as the election campaign kicked off, started his report about the Buddhist parties, thus: “Their politics marks a new trend in traditionally tolerant Thailand, where Buddhist nationalist movements have never taken root in the same way as in countries such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Buddhism is one of the traditional pillars of Thai society and underpins many aspects of Thai life, but monks have little influence over the state compared to the monarchy and military. The emergence of the Pandin Dharma Party to contest the March 24 election points to the rise of a fringe of Thai society that is at odds with the royalist-military establishment over religion and expresses growing antipathy to Islam.”¹⁹⁸ The whole article projected the party as a threat to Thailand’s political and social stability and did not try to look into the Muslim threat they were referring to.

Sociologist Dr Charon Wonnakasinanont¹⁹⁹ has recently formed another Buddhist political organization – the Mahabodhi Party. In a discussion with me in Bangkok, he explained that the objective of forming the party is to use temples to unite Buddhists in Thailand. “Current parties don't represent Buddhists” he argues and alleged that almost 50 percent of members of parliament are Muslims. “They initiate laws and Buddhists don't do anything.

¹⁹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-election-buddhism-idUSKCN1Q00E1>

¹⁹⁹ Interview with author in Bangkok, June 2019.

Communication methodology has to change". He does not trust Thailand's mainstream media and argues that you cannot depend on them to communicate the message to Thai Buddhists. "We work through community grassroots to make people aware through a mindful communication strategy. Most important to Thai people is to know how the government is facilitating laws to establish Muslim systems" (see box on top left).

In the discussion, Dr Charon raised the Halal labeling issue, which has become a global problem in predominantly non-Muslim countries. It has even been raised by nationalist politicians in Australia and European countries. Millions of dollars are being siphoned into Muslim organisations and non-Muslim consumers pay a price for it because halal-labeled products cost more to compensate for the fee paid for the label. In Thailand's case, the government may justify allowing the scheme because of the millions of Muslim tourists who visit Thailand every year, and possible markets in Arab countries that could be opened up for Thai Halal products. Though many non-Muslims resent this system, no government has come up with a strategy to tax the Muslim organisations that benefit from this scheme.

Dr Tavivat says that Dr Charon has done extensive research on the issues he talks about. But, when he presents these to the media nobody listens to him. "Most media take for granted that Dr Charon gives unreliable information because they have not done the research (into it). This is the weakness of (our) media. Buddhists like Dr Charon have no other choice we have to tell the truth, again and again, and again, even though they don't listen. We hope eventually they will gather the information and understand. They need to be aware and understand the real issue".

Nitinant Wisaweisuan²⁰⁰, Dean Pridi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University argues that, though the Thai identity is based on nation, religion and monarchy, the term religion is broadly defined and does not include only Buddhism. It includes all the minority religions existing in the kingdom as well. "What we do is focus on having all religions living together. Buddhists also attend other religious functions. Others can also attend Buddhist functions," she notes.

There are many Thais who may disagree with this definition. Dr Jirayudh Sinthuphan²⁰¹ of Chulalongkorn University points out that after the absolute monarchy was abolished and Siam was changed to Thailand there were question marks about what constitutes Thai identity. "Buddhism has been brought as a type of definition of what Thai culture really mean". He also points out that Buddhism itself has two distinct paths in the kingdom – one is the popular form of Buddhism and the other is the monastic path. "The media tends to stick to popular forms of Buddhism," he notes.

"To build the modern state of Thailand, King Rama V centralised Buddhism in the kingdom in 1902. There was only one official version of Buddhism, which, together with the nation and the King, founded the Thai identity. Other strains of Buddhism, mostly regional, were heavily suppressed," notes Khemthong

²⁰⁰ Interview with author in Bangkok, June 2019

²⁰¹ Interview with author in Bangkok, June 2019

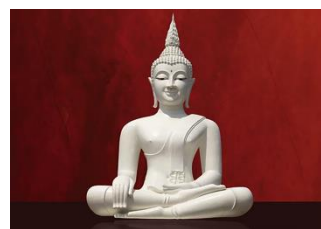
Tonsakulrungruang (2016), a Thai constitutional lawyer.

Referring to the rise of Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke, and the former in particular, he argues:

Withering government attention to the Sangha Council, as well as a series of high-profile scandals concerning famous monks, opened up the field for non-mainstream Buddhist groups to increase their prominence. Some groups became anti-materialistic and anti-globalization, such as Santi Asoka, which dreamed of returning to a pure form of Buddhism. At the other end of the spectrum was the Dhammakaya group, which chose to capitalize on the wave of capitalism. Dhammakaya succeeded for two reasons. First, its teaching was simple and easy to understand. “Bun” (merit) could be quantified in monetary terms. The more donations one makes, the more merit one shall gain. Second, its use of new visual technology, including light and sound effects, helped lure people in. It wasn’t long before Dhammakaya began to grow. Its followers numbered in the tens of thousands, encompassing business people, academics, and politicians.

Knowing Buddha – Respecting The Image

For a long time, the Buddha image has become a commodity and a popular souvenir for a visitor to take home. The selling of Buddha statues has become a multi-million dollar trade for decades since Thailand became a popular tourist destination. But today, as a visitor drive from Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi airport they are greeted by a couple of huge billboards – even one in German – asking visitors to respect the Buddha statue. When you come to the immigration counter at Bangkok and some of the international airports, you may also see a sticker on the counter saying the same.



Knowing Buddha Foundation billboards greetings visitors to Bangkok in English (above) and German (right)



The campaign has been spearheaded by an organization called ‘Knowing Buddha Foundation’ (KBF) founded in 2012 by

Vipassana Master Acharavadee Wongsakon. Their members are mainly young people who have undergone Vipassana meditation training. They are determined to reverse the lack of respect for the Buddha image both in Thailand and overseas.

Uamdao Noikorn²⁰², Deputy Editor of KBF's 5000s magazine explained that their campaign is multi-dimensional. "It was totally new calling for respect of the Buddha statue" she pointed out. "Master came out and spoke (early 2018) about monks' misconduct. They promote commercial Buddhism, sell good luck images, Master came out and criticized that. That was when we got publicity".

Master Acharavadee, was also attacked by some people, for criticizing monks, "because she was a woman and not a monk," said Uamdao. "Fortunately we got a lot of support from senior monks. She was not asking people not to go to temples, but not to support commercial Buddhism. Some reporters were suspicious of her motives".

KBF has a website²⁰³ that is available in 8 languages, and they also have a Facebook page. While asking people to respect the Buddha image, their communication strategy is to lead people to learn more about the dhamma, especially foreigners from Europe visiting Thailand. Thus, the website is designed to simply explain the main elements of Buddhism. Twice a year they also hold a Buddhist exhibition at Wat Arun on the banks of the Chayo Prayo River, which is a popular tourist site.

"Each time we do that we get very positive feedback from foreigners," said Uamdao. "Billboards, posters create interest to learn Buddhism. Exhibition becomes useful for people to grasp Buddhism".

Young Urban Thais And "Cool" Christianity

While the threat from Islam may be a more visible issue, the challenge from evangelical Christianity could be a more serious one. From what I gathered during my teaching assignment of 15 months in 2016-2017 in Bangkok is that Christian influence is creeping into the young minds not as a threat but as an opportunity to be "cool" and even develop cross-cultural networking. It throws a direct challenge to Buddhism, which is largely ritualistic. Unlike in other Asian Buddhist communities, where new Christian evangelical church's exploit the poverty of Buddhist communities (as discussed in previous chapters), in Thailand, they are targeting upwardly mobile urban youth who have a desire to master the English language and look positively towards Western culture – which for many of them is a Christian culture.

At a prestigious university in Thailand, when I wanted to teach how to use 'panchasilas' concepts to investigate and report on corruption, I was alarmed to find that students in a class of 35 where most claim to be Buddhist, seem clueless. When I recited the precepts in Pali, they knew what it is but not its meaning. One student told me that they recite it to make merit. I had to explain

²⁰² Interview with author in Bangkok, February 2019.

²⁰³ <https://www.knowingbuddha.org/home-en>

to them what panchasila is and how to practice it to get merit. It is youngsters with such shallow knowledge of the dhamma, who could be easy prey for Christian evangelists. They could easily point out to the youngsters that such “merit-making” rituals are superstitions.

Dr Tavivat feels that the problem with young Thai Buddhists is that they don't know their religion. “They think they know. They think Buddhists have a biased attitude towards other religious people. This is the biggest problem facing the understanding of the Buddhist people themselves. Buddhists don't understand themselves and blame their Buddhist people (for seeing other religions as a threat),” he laments.

Thepchai Yong, who is also the former head of Nation Media Group says that the older generations always complain about how young Thais are not aware of the values of the country. “Religion is one of the basic pillars of Thailand,” he argues. “Because of fast-changing world and invasion of western cultures, I have to admit that Buddhist values, the culture of the country, have been very much overshadowed by this”. But he thinks, that a lot of young Thais are also aware of all these and try to understand what Buddhism is all about. “I think there is a need for the media to draw the attention of the people to issues of Buddhism, to remind younger generation that Buddhism is a pillar of the nation and that need to be promoted. And be appreciated”.

ThaiPBS's Pipope Panitchpakdi believes that to attract the attention of young people to Buddhism media needs to present Buddhism not as rituals and sermons but as a contemporary living religion. He referred to a 13 part series ThaiPBS broadcast during Buddhist lent on the Tripitaka, which looked at how Buddhism is alive and well in the world and linked to nature and small people. “We have been established for 10 years and we have never done this before... to give a message to the public that we have something that is precious and it is not limited to monks ... the whole population has to be responsible to make the religion practical and relevant,” he says.

Thai Media, Buddhism and Participatory Communication

“Thai media is very much interested in scandals. Bad news is good news. They cover too much on the negative aspects of Buddhism. They need to cover more positive things about Buddhism,” noted Uamdao Noikorn of KBF. This is a common complaint I hear from devout Buddhists who would love to see Thai society have better Buddhist values rather than worshipping consumerism blindly.

Uamdao, who was a Catholic before, said: “When I try to look upon Buddhist practices, information, it is hard to find. Media revolves around relating to superstitious practices rather than to the teachings of Buddhism... There are monks,



A typical Thai mainstream media report

very popular preachers, and they are trying to modernize the message. They (media) have failed to capture the essence of the teachings. Media revolves around some old style of preaching. They need to modernize”.

We look at Buddhism as a mainstream belief first. Some would describe it as knowing Buddhism by birth, something automatic. How much they understand Buddhism is a question,” notes mass communications scholar Dr Palphol Rodluytuk²⁰⁴, Dean of Social Science at Shinawatra University. “We are faced with a lot of paradox here,” he continues. “Buddhism remains at large something aloof, otherworldly, and something difficult to be understood by people. So they just scratch the surface when they talk about it. Pali recitation and all that ... most Thai people understand those (rituals). But not very many people understand the real meaning of the teaching. It’s difficult for the media to fight for Buddhism when they have to fight for their own survival”.

Thepchai is of the view that the mainstream media tend to shy away from reporting on religious issues because they don’t want to fuel conflicts. “Mainstream media has been very careful not to highlight what some people see as a threat, invasion of foreign elements to different regions. We know what this will result if we focus on it too much” he argues. “Lot of people are trying to highlight this issue of (threat of) Islam to sow divisions among Thais. Mainstream media has been careful not to fall into that trap and remind the people that some use religion for violent acts in the south. It doesn’t represent a majority of people of that religion. We have been trying at TPBS to show that people of different faiths in southern Thailand can co-exist”.

Should that concern stop the media from reporting a threat to Buddhism when it exists, such as unethical activities of Christian evangelical groups involved in disaster relief? Panitchpakdi explained such an issue after the 2004 Asian Tsunami when many Buddhist communities in the south of Thailand were badly affected.

After the 2004 tsunami, he was involved in doing a report for the Nation media group that was aimed at the Ministry of Religion to do something about the unethical activities of evangelical Christians, such as setting up churches in Buddhist communities. The report pointed out that a certain sect of Christians from the US based in northeast Thailand have mobilized to go to tsunami affected areas for proselytism, especially among the sea gypsies, which is quite a fragile population in that area. “Once we reported it a lot of people got angry at us (and asked) why we bring religion to this tsunami which is already a tragedy? Thai media is expected to report on the unity of our religions,” he noted.

The report focused on how Christian churches came in and tried to change their religion, at a time when they were traumatized. The Nation was the only media that covered the story. Panitchpakdi believes that the expose stopped other churches from jumping in the bandwagon. “When it comes to a threat media need to identify whether this is a threat, not only to the religion itself, but also people in that area” he argues.

²⁰⁴ Interview with author in Bangkok, October 2019.

Dr Palphol, whose Phd thesis was on the participatory communication model between the monastery and the people in rural settings, believe that such participatory communication models could be adopted at national level with the participation of temples, media, social media technology, monks and the community to get Buddhist voices from the grassroots and Buddhist values into the mainstream. He sees some silver linings on the horizon.

It comes back to the basic model of teaching Buddhism through chantings, rituals, festivals. I documented this widely in my thesis 15 years ago. That still applies (when you look at) Buddhist participatory communications. The traditional model of communication is more effective still. Especially, in the grassroots, because they are closely connected with the idea of the temple community and school. We see it coexisting very peacefully in many areas of Thailand. This continues to be inherited from generation to generation. However, in the past few decades, we continue to see many progressive movements - including Dhammakaya - who use the media in very special ways. Some would say they use marketing techniques to attract people. They have been able to evolve their own models of Buddhist media. I have seen some local cable TV channels, much lesser known, broadcast late at night, with some reruns at daytime. These channels manage to teach some basic principles (of Buddhism) and they invite intellectuals on the programs to talk about the benefits of Buddhism in life. But they attract such a small audience. They are partly subsidized by some kind of small-scale business of selling (recordings of) chantings or amulates or whatever... stable funding models are crucial (for the success of such ventures).

Panitchpakdi who believes in developing such national participatory communication models involving Buddhist communities explained the problem they have doing it in the mainstream media.

If a monk does something wrong it is quite easy to report because it has news value. Challenge is when you try to report on the concept. In the northeast Ubon Ratchathani province, we have (Santi)Asoke community where monks and people live according to the teachings of Buddha, and they have developed a system of sustainable living. It is something good for today's world facing climate change and political divisions etc.

We (TPBS) have a program called 'Thailand Live', which is a live program where you go to an interesting community and do live broadcasting, fronted by a well-known anchor. Usually, he goes there and starts discussion and show activity in the area. We have gone to hill tribe and Mekong river communities. There was no problem at all. But when I asked the team to go to the Buddhist community there were a lot of questions from the producer about whether it is appropriate. Of course, there was an issue because the Abbot (the head of the community) was one time denounced by mainstream Buddhists... by Sangha Council.

But that's how communities evolve, and it has proven that the Ubon Ratchathani Buddhist community has done a lot of good deeds, totally vegetarian, plant their own rice, they have a system of self-reliance. It's

a good thing. 10 years after the debate it's irrelevant whether the Sangha Council has denounced the head of the movement or not. But, questions come up whether we as the media should involve religious elements.

If monks do something bad it is ok. Like in Thailand monks were selling illegal wildlife that's newsworthy, everyone writes about the temple and the monk. There are no questions asked about it if we bring a religious element to the news. When it comes to a good story, many times the question has been asked. In a country where 95 percent are Buddhists, we have to be bold enough to say well there are options for the future world (Panitchpakdi. Interview with author, 2019).

Thammasatt University's Prof Nitinant Wisawesuan does not believe that a particular Buddhist media should be established to cover Buddhist communities. "I don't think a particular channel would work because finally if you don't want to look at that channel you just switch it off and turn to others. Only having one channel doesn't work. Understanding of philosophy must be embedded in everything... even the media reporting political news. If they apply true Buddhist teachings they can convey a message without bias to create understanding in society. Otherwise, there will be conflicts, misunderstandings, and delusions, which is not Buddhist practices".

Development Communication practitioner, Dr. Kamolrat Intaratat²⁰⁵ of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University believes that Buddhist communicators need to look more seriously at using ICTs (Information Communication Technology) to create participatory Buddhist communication networks. "We have to accept that the new generation is born with digitized DNA. Even little monks use mobile phones, many people think they are poor and cannot access but everyone in Thailand seems to have access to smartphones. We need to create ICT-based media to let the small monks learn Buddhism. We need to give real Buddhism to them," she argues.

Dr Kamolrat is involved with several Buddhist organisations and the university in setting up a MOCC (Massive Open Communication Courses) to give Buddhist contents via Buddhist languages Pali and Sanskrit. "It has created interest in the new generation because they can learn from MOCC, anytime, anywhere by smartphone" she points out. "MOCC is a new communication channel that can strengthen the communication of Buddhism among the Thais". Through this system, they are giving Buddhist lessons to little monks across the kingdom and also train them to make good use of ICTs using their mobile smartphones. "Many little monks are happy that they can self-learn Buddhism now. They can then collaborate hardcopy textbook with smartphones," she added.

The project is trying to get the help of the royal princess to promote the project. "That will encourage people to use this... in the coming year our target is to reach 50,000 monks. We have to educate the monks first because they are the communicators of Buddhism," argues Dr Kamolrat.

²⁰⁵ Interview with author in Bangkok, October 2019.

Dr Kamolrat also explained that as the new phase of the ICT project they are planning to create a virtual Sunday Dhamma School system via smartphones. She says that the people have the perception of temple dhamma schools as only for monks. So normal children don't go. Like old days, the schools do not teach Buddhism today. "Smartphone is everyone's hands so we will try to create the schools there," she said confidently.

Another area Buddhists are looking at is to use music and communication tools like YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and iTunes to create Buddhist entertainment channels for young people like what the Christian gospel music industry does.

Mass Communication graduate and community tourism consultant, Pattama Vilailert²⁰⁶ feels that using music to promote Buddhism could come up with objections. "It will be difficult to bring Buddhism through music, you will get opposed by the conservative Buddhists. It will be difficult to do that. They prefer to stick to Pali rituals not to the contents of Buddhism," she noted, adding, "there are some Buddhist bands - they are not monks - just Thai singers (but) not very popular".

Thapchai says that there have been attempts by a lot of Buddhist groups to introduce entertainment type of activity to woo new generations interested in Buddhism. But the mainstream media has not played a role in this; it's the music industry doing it. Even Nation Group (which he founded) hasn't come to that point, but he believes that the Thai society has been very open and tolerant to that idea.

Wat Dhammakaya's Phra Sanitwongse Wutthiwangso said that they have presented the Mangala sutra not by chanting it in Pali, but through a sing-song process. "We also present a drama on social issues like divorce, violence in family, alcoholism. We put them on YouTube. Gambling is also addressed. It's a problem in the lower class," he explained. "When we present dhamma views on drama in social media platform sometimes we get in access of 1 million hits. Dhamma talk get less than 1000".

Buddhist Crystal Bowl Artist and Healer, Bee Bee Navapan²⁰⁷ has developed a music genre for inner peace and relaxation. She performs at Buddhist concerts, grand opening ceremonies to welcome guests and also for meditation. She claims that it has a healing effect in the latter application. "Bowl music incorporates Buddhist teachings using meditation. It helps to separate hormones in the body. Music clears negative emotions from the body," she says.

Thapchai feels that some of the mainstream TV channels, and online platforms have been successful to some extent in attracting young people to Buddhism. He gave a very good example of how the mainstream media could brand Buddhism to look modern and cool for the young generation. On New Year Eve media would normally talk about where people go to celebrate such as clubs, outdoor entertainment places and such venues (where they could get drunk and

²⁰⁶ Interview with author in Bangkok, June 2019

²⁰⁷ Interview with author in Bangkok, November 2019.

celebrate). In recent years, some channels have started to broadcast vast chanting ceremonies at midnight in major temples.

“It is becoming popular among young people, and they join sermons and chantings to welcome the New Year (at temples)” he pointed out. “I didn’t see that in my generation. New Year Eve will be the occasion for major TV stations to go live to music festivals, like in Central World (Bangkok shopping mall) and now they have live coverage of New Year chanting (from a temple).



Young people on New Years Eve at a Buddhist temple in Bangkok

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Chapter 15

Vietnam: Buddhism Thrives Under Communism

When you think of Vietnam what may come to your mind is the Vietnam War and the triumph of communism over imperialism. The Vietnam flag with a red background and a yellow star may conjure an image of a staunchly atheist communist state that discourages any religions. It is far from that, Buddhism thrives in Vietnam today, and the Government supports it. Ancient temples and some grand new monasteries across the country attract pilgrims and tourists alike. Some Buddhists, who fled the country after the victory of the Vietcong in 1975 fearing a clampdown on religion, are now coming back and even helping to build new monasteries and Buddhist institutions.



Buddhist monk at One Pillar Pagoda in Hanoi

Vietnam is officially an atheist state as it is governed by a one-party communist regime. Despite this most of the people in a population of 95.5 million are very religious with Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism holding sway. They are grouped in the religious statistics as one religion known as 'tam gian' and are estimated to make up 70-90 percent of the population.



Woman praying at a Hanoi temple

Most temples consist of shrines that mix images from all three. But, according to the statistics of the Buddhist Church of Vietnam, 45 million people are taking refuge in the three jewels and about 12 million are just Buddhist making it about 57 million Buddhists (Wikipedia). In Vietnam, both Mahayana, and Theravada Buddhism

co-exist. There is also a Catholic population that makes up about 8 percent of the population and is concentrated in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and the environments.

According to Vietnam Buddhist Sangha as of March 2018, there are 54,941 monks and nuns in the whole country. Out of that 39,229 belong to Mahayana School and 10,328 are of the Theravada School. There are 18,466 monasteries and temples and 15,846 of these are Mahayana (Tu, 2018).

“Vietcong discouraged religion earlier, but now they encourage Buddhism. Communists now are Buddhists – its Buddhist socialism,” Professor Le Manh²⁰⁸, Rector of Vietnam Buddhist University told me with a broad grin when I met him in HCMC.

Brief History of Spread of Buddhism

Buddhism is believed to have been introduced to Vietnam in the 1st century CE by Buddhist monks from India who were sailing with Indian traders to China. Two notable Indian monks who have come to Vietnam at the end of the 2nd century CE are Marajivaka and K’sudara, who later sailed to China. These two monks are considered to be two of the most important figures in the early period of Buddhist penetration to Vietnam (Xuan, 2012).

Ahir (2001) says that during this time Vietnam was under direct administration from the Great Chinese Empire and Buddhism had to take a low profile as Buddhists faced dreadful persecution in China. However, in 939 CE, after almost 1000 years, Ngo-quyen was able to chase out the last Chinese governor. Ngo regime did not last long before Dinh-Bo-Linh came to power, who gave protection to Buddhism. Buddhism was able to establish a strong presence in Vietnam by the 5th century and during this period many Chinese Buddhist missionaries also visited Vietnam. Between the 6th to 10th centuries more Chinese influence came to Vietnam and helped to consolidate the Buddhist intellectual traditions. Many pagodas were also built across the country and the religion became popular with the people (Xuan, 2012).



Tran Quoc Pagoda, Hanoi

Xuan (2012, p16) says, “despite social and political restrictions suffered under foreign domination, the first 10 centuries following the introduction of

²⁰⁸ Interview with author in Ho Chi Minh City in October 2019.

Buddhism to Vietnam, represents a period of vigorous growth of a distinctively local Buddhist tradition, and that during this time, Vietnamese Buddhism exerted a great influence and made many key contributions to the distinct nature of Buddhism as a religious practice”.

The predominant form of Buddhism in Vietnam is a combination of Pure Land and Zen. Zen practice with its emphasis on meditation is mostly pursued among the monks and nuns, while the lay people prefer Pure Land philosophy and practice. In the south, there is a sizeable minority of Theravada Buddhists, mainly among the ethnic Khmer people (Khmer Krom), but also among the Vietnamese. There is also a uniquely Vietnamese form of Buddhism, which evolved in the southern provinces, and is a successful combination of Theravada and Mahayana. While much of the philosophy is Mahayana, the sangha follows the Vinaya rules (code of ethics) quite strictly and go on the traditional alms round every day. During colonial times, many hybrid Buddhist sects evolved, and most are still active today, especially among overseas Vietnamese communities. These include Hoa Hoa, a lay-based, militant, form of Buddhist Protestantism, and Cao Dai, a Vietnamese attempt to combine the world’s great religions (Budhanet)²⁰⁹.

There is great equality between monks and nuns, as there is between men and women throughout Vietnamese society. Monks are addressed as "Thay" (Teacher), Nuns as "Su Co" (Sister). All Sangha take the name "Thich", to signify that they have left their worldly family, and have joined the family of the Buddha (Budhanet).

Spread of Catholicism



Catholic Cathedral Hanoi

In the early decades of the 16th century, European Christian missionaries entered Vietnam. Even earlier, in the 17th century, Portuguese Catholic Jesuit priests have come from Macau and built a church in Dang Trong.

The Nguyen Dynasty (1802-1945 CE) had objected to Catholicism not only for political reasons but also for the strangeness of Catholic worship. “Before Catholicism was

introduced Vietnamese worshipped their ancestors and followed the three traditional religions, including Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. The psychology, lifestyles, practices, customs and ethical standards of these religions were strikingly different from the values and beliefs of Catholicism”(Xuan, 2012, p105). For these reasons, there were suspicions in the country that Vietnam could be overcome by a foreign culture.

²⁰⁹ <http://www.budhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/vietnam-txt.htm>

Efforts to restrict Catholicism came to a halt when the French colonialists forced Vietnam to hand over 6 provinces in South Vietnam under the Nham Tuat Peace Treaty in 1862 and Giap Tuat Peace Treaty in 1874. By 1880 there were 500,000 parishioners and 227 priests in Vietnam. The Catholics also set about establishing their printing presses and newspapers to spread the religion and consolidate power. By the dawn of the 20th century, Catholic missionaries published 20 out of 40 newspapers.

During this period Vietnamese Buddhists felt the pressure to create more socially engaged Buddhist movements, and many Buddhists who were ardent patriots looked to other East Asian Buddhist countries for inspiration. Learned clergy and laity well exposed to Western culture, set up many new Buddhist organization, during the 1930s (Tu, 2018).

‘Buddhist Crisis’ of 1963

In 1949, King Bao Dai assumed the role of head of State, and in 1951 he signed a Decree No. 10 that followed the French policy of relegating all religions to the status of “public associations”, with the exception of Catholic and Protestant Christian missions. After a referendum in 1955, Ngo Dinh Diem, a Vietnamese Roman Catholic and passionate anti-Communist assumed leadership in Saigon. On assuming power, Diem retained Decree No.10 and 2 years later eliminated the Buddha’s birthday from the list of official holidays (Tu, 2018).

Diem relied deeply on the loyalty and support of his co-religionists. He not only began to fill almost all important civilian and military positions with Catholics but also implemented many biased policies toward Catholics in the professions, business, education and more. However, in a country where Buddhists made up more than 70 percent of its population, Diem’s religious favoritism and discrimination caused increasingly deep resentment.

“Diem’s policy towards Buddhism led to many Buddhist resistance movements during the 1960s, especially the death of the monk Thich Quang Duc by self-immolation on June 11, 1963, which ultimately resulted in the overthrow of the Diem government” noted Venerable Thich Nhat Tu (Tu 2018, p 737).

In April 1963, the government ordered provincial officials to enforce a ban on displaying religious flags. The order arrived just before the Vesak festival. Its application caused waves of indignation among Buddhists, as a week earlier Papal flags had been displayed in a government-sponsored celebration of Ngo Dinh Thuc, the Archbishop of Hue. On May 8 (Vesak Day), the Buddhists flew their flags despite of the order and even held up a demonstration protesting against the ban. Realizing the demonstration as a challenge to a government authority, local officials attempted to dismiss the crowd. When initial efforts produced little results, the police were ordered to fire on the protesters. Nine persons were killed and fourteen were wounded. However, Diem’s government refused to acknowledge responsibility and even made up a story that the victims had been hit by a grenade blast thrown by a Viet Cong infiltrator.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Above information was extracted from - <https://thevietnamwar.info/vietnam-war-leaders/>

This came to be known as the ‘Buddhist crisis’ during a period of political and religious tension in South Vietnam between May and November 1963, which was characterized by a series of repressive acts by the South Vietnamese government and a campaign of civil resistance, led mainly by Buddhist monks. President Diem declared martial law and his forces raided the pagodas of the Buddhist group behind the protests. He once told a high-ranking officer, forgetting that he was a Buddhist, "Put your Catholic officers in sensitive places. They can be trusted." Many officers in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam converted to Catholicism in the belief that their career prospects depended on it, and many were refused promotion if they did not do so. The crisis ended with a coup in November 1963 by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and the arrest and assassination of President Diem on November 2, 1963 (Wikipedia).

However, Catholicism has failed to spread among the Vietnamese as much as they would have liked. When the Vietnamese resistance against the French (and later the Americans) began, thousands of Vietnamese Catholic youth have joined the army to fight against foreign enemy troops. "Many of them later became revolutionary heroes and martyrs, and Catholic villages and communes became historic places" (Xuan, 2012, p 135).

Vietnamese ‘Father Of Mindfulness’

Buddhists of Vietnam not only survived the above crisis, but they have also overcome the perceived hostility of communists to religion. This is a reason why tens of thousands of Buddhists fled South Vietnam and took refuge in western countries at the end of the Vietnam War. One of the most famous of such refuge-seeking Vietnamese was Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh who made his home in France.

Mindfulness helps you go home to the present. And every time you go there and recognize a condition of happiness that you have, happiness comes – Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh

It is a measure of the religious freedom (under state control) Buddhists enjoy in Vietnam today that its most celebrated Buddhist monk returned to his homeland on 28 October 2018, at the age of 92, and now lives in the 19th century Tu Hieu Pagoda in the historic city of Hue awaiting to transit to the next life in the cycle of samsara. He, in fact, returned to his homeland in 2005 and 2007 giving well-attended sermons that infuriated some of his Vietnamese exiled followers, who still think the government is repressing Buddhism.

In the West, Ven Thich Nhat Hanh is famously known as the ‘father of mindfulness’ for helping to trigger the mindfulness revolution in Europe in particular. He has authored over 70 books. His influence has spread globally. Christiana Figueres, the former executive secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, said in 2016 that she could not have pulled off the Paris Agreement “if I had not been accompanied by the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh”(Fitzpatrick, 2019).

Ven Hanh has always had an independent mindset and even returned to Vietnam to become an anti-war activist after teaching at Columbia and Princetown universities between 1961-63. In 1966 as the war escalated he left

Vietnam for a tour of 19 countries to appeal for peace. The Vietnamese government banned him from returning, and he did not come back until 2005. He eventually based himself in southwest France, where he turned the Plum Village Buddhist monastery into Europe's largest and established eight others outside France including the US and Thailand.

Ven Hanh taught that you don't have to spend years on a mountaintop to benefit from Buddhist wisdom. Instead, he says, just become aware of your breath, and through that come into the present moment, where everyday activities can take on a joyful, miraculous quality. If you are mindful, or fully present in the here and now, anxiety disappears and a sense of timelessness takes hold, allowing your highest qualities, such as kindness and compassion, to emerge. This was highly appealing to Westerners seeking spirituality without the trappings of religion²¹¹ (Fitzpatrick, 2019).

Contemporary "Buddhist Socialism"

Xuan (2012) argues that the experience between 1954-1975 shows, that whenever Buddhism has a strong attachment to the nation and national tradition, it has power. However, when it diverges from the traditions of patriotism-cum-self-perfection, it becomes neglected, and it inevitably declines. Thus, after the Vietcong victory of 1975, all Buddhist sects and denominations were united under one organization. In 1981, a congress organized to unify all Buddhists established the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation (VBC) and approves a Charter and action program under the motto "Dharma – Nation – Socialism".

While critics of the Vietnamese government overseas may see this move as an attempt for the Government to control Buddhism in the country and repress voices of dissent from within Buddhist ranks, Xuan (2012, p96) sees it as "a very important event in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism (that) meets the desires and passions of monks, nuns and Buddhist followers in Vietnam (to) create good conditions for (them) to develop their traditional attachment to the nation, promote the propagation of Buddhist doctrine (and) serve the nation".

Over the past 3 decades, the VBC has ordained over 1500 monks and nuns. The VBC functions at different levels – from central to provincial and district to grassroots. At the central level, there is a Sangha Council that consists of very senior monks at least 70 years old with 50 years in the monkhood. The central Executive Committee of the Sangha Council, which has a maximum of 147 members, defines the annual action plan for the VBC.

"From Ho Chi Minh down, all the communists came from Buddhist families. Ho Chi Minh's father died a Buddhist," pointed out Prof Le Manh, Rector of Vietnam Buddhist University (VBU). "There were problems with the French and Catholics. So Buddhists supported Vietcong. Now every member of the

²¹¹ Thich Nhat Hanh Quotes on Mindfulness, Peace, Love, and Happiness - <https://medium.com/@thenishant/thich-nhat-hanh-quotes-on-mindfulness-peace-love-and-happiness-11b1cca4b502>

communist government comes from devout Buddhist families. Currently, the government is supporting the expansion of Buddhism. Government members declare themselves as communists but help to build Buddhist temples. The Vietnamese Government sponsored the UN Day of Vesak twice. The first event was in 2008, and we said that it is government-supported”.

The VBU stands on 50 acres of land and has a student population of 3,000 all monks and nuns. They offer Bachelor’s, Masters and PhD programs in Buddhist studies. Its first president was Venerable Thich Ming Chau who was educated in Sri Lanka on Pali, and then spent many years at Nave Nalanda Mahavihara University in India where he obtained a PhD. In 1964, he came back to Vietnam and set up the university. Which was Vietnam’s first private university.



Vietnam Buddhist University in Ho Chi Minh City

When Vietcong came to power the university had 10,000 students and 5 faculties. They took all the faculty members and made them government servants. Took over the university as well. But, in 1984 it was given back and allowed to function as a private university.

“Catholics are not strong now. Government treats all as equal, follows separation between church and state principle. That’s a public stance but the government support Buddhism,” Prof Le Manh said.

However, Venerable Dr Thich Giac Hoang²¹², Chief Administrator of VBU complained that graduates from his university are not allowed to teach in government schools “because some government officials think they don’t have good minds”. He added, that “monks and nuns here are good people very bright. They go back to the monastery and teach the young”.

Communicating Dhamma to Young Vietnamese

Vietnam also faces the same problem most Asian Buddhist countries face – how to get young people to learn the Dhamma and see it as relevant to their day-to-day modern lives?

Bhikkhu Vren Dong is a 20 something Vietnamese youth who has a Buddhist father and a Catholic mother. During his childhood, his mother took him to the Catholic Church, but in his teenage years, he became interested in Buddhism. He is now a novice monk studying at VBU.

²¹² Interview with author in HCM city in October 2019.

“My mother took me to church I did not go to the temple. I learned dhamma from the internet and books,” recalled Bhikkhu Dong²¹³. “I started going to temple when I was 20 years old. After learning Buddhism better I decided to become a Buddhist monk”.

He is now devoted to introducing Buddhist teaching to young people, that could apply to their lives. “I teach the dhamma to young people by attracting them to do charity work. They do charity with Buddhist monks, come together with them and they can then teach the dhamma to young people” explained the young novice Bhikkhu. He also added that he is now writing stories to introduce Buddhism to the young through cartoons. With his master Venerable Thich Nhat Tu, he is now getting into Buddhist music. “My master writes songs for young people to take part in (Buddhist) sing-song. When they sing, they learn the dhamma too” he says. He wants to follow the path of his master by becoming a teacher at the university after he graduates while interacting with the young to spread Buddhism in Vietnam.

“Buddhism is very strong in Vietnam,” Bhikkhu Dong says confidently. “Five precepts are basic in life. If you follow you make yourself happy and everybody happy. People are scared of evil things they like the good things. So they believe in cause and effect .. karma”.

His master, Ven. Thich Nhat Tu is a Buddhist reformer, an author, a poet, a psychological consultant, and an active social activist in Vietnam. Though I met him briefly at the VBU and chatted with him about the musical and cultural activities he does to attract young Vietnamese to Buddhist, I could not do a formal interview with him as he was preparing for an overseas trip the next day. However, I researched a bit after the conversation with him to find out more about the use of music in Buddhist propagation.

Ven. Nhat Tu has authored more than seventy books in Vietnamese and English on Buddhist philosophy and applied Buddhism. He is the Editor-in-Chief and publisher of the Buddhism Today Books Series (more than 200 volumes on different subjects have been published in Vietnamese to meet the needs of researchers and practitioners). He is also an author and editor of the Buddhism Today Dharma Talks Series (More than 2000 VCDs and Audio CDs on Buddhamdharma as taught by Ven. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu have been produced by the Buddhism Today Association for the general public). He is the Editor and publisher of Buddhism Today Dharma Music Series (more than 100 CD albums have been published). He is also Editor and publisher of the Vietnamese Tripitaka in MP3 format (Wikipedia).

Since 2002, Ven. Nhat Tu has set up a Buddhist Music Club in Ho Chi Minh city, with the participation of many famous songwriters, singers, and actors to propagate the Buddhist philosophy and practice for the general public. He is the editor and publisher of more than 150 CDs, VCD, DVD of Buddhist music since 2002. Being a Secretary-General of Cultural Department, HCM city’s Buddhist Sangha (2002-2007) and Chairman of its Cultural Department since 2012, every year he organises many Buddhist cultural performances at Lan Anh Theatre and

²¹³ Interview with author in HCM city in October 2019.

Hoa Binh Theatre. On top of that, many Buddhist exhibitions, calligraphy, and arts have been organised by him too (Wikipedia).

“Some people question if Buddhism is the religion of death – we prey when people die or have memorial services. The young need to see Buddhism beyond that” argues Prof Le Manh. “Vision of this university is to train young people to have skills in both Buddhism and in other areas like science and communications to develop Vietnam society”.

Vietnamese Buddhists use the Internet exclusively to propagate Buddhism as well as build up Buddhist communities across the country. One such Buddhist communication website is ‘Phat Su’²¹⁴. It is a Buddhist news website that keeps the community updated with news related to the Buddhist community in Vietnam. It is a professionally produced website with both text and video news updates. It is a goldmine of information on Buddhism and Buddhist activities in Vietnam, with archives of both text and video material.

There are many video clips of Vietnamese Buddhist music clips on YouTube - ‘Real Happy Buddhist Channel’²¹⁵ is one of these. One particular clip that caught my attention was a song by Vietnamese singer Saka Truong Tuyen²¹⁶ which was very professionally produced, and the message seems to be clear even though you may not understand Vietnamese.

The Buddhist Family



Monk praying at a Pagoda in Hanoi

Ven Giac Hoang, explained that in monasteries they have formed what is called ‘Buddhist Family’ (BF) that organize Dhamma classes in monasteries, Earlier they used to run a TV channel, but since it is costly to maintain, they now use the Internet and YouTube for it.

“We have 13 sectors of the sangha, and dhamma communication is one of them. There we have Buddhist activity online. Each group takes news and spreads it. Whatever they feel is of value. They use Facebook in Vietnamese only. It is done mainly by young people,” he explained.

Explaining the BF concept further, he said that they organize children to gather on

Sundays from 1-2 pm or 4-5 pm. First they have singing of traditional songs and games for children. Buddhist lectures to children come after that. Sometimes, they may have 3 to 4 classes in the same temple. Some monasteries have BF

²¹⁴ <https://www.phatsuonline.com/>

²¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCit20bfcq9N9vORnQ3qZaAw/featured>

²¹⁶ Watch the clip here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwTdZP5Mbe4>

leaders, who act as counselors – lay people having knowledge of Buddhist philosophy. They conduct classes for members. They also help to bring people to the temple for activity with Sangha. BF system has started in Central Vietnam and then spread to the south, now it is spreading to the north.

Theravada-Mahayana Fusion

Vietnam is unique in that both Mahayana and Theravada traditions exist side by side (as mentioned earlier in the chapter). This fusion is called ‘Khat Si’ in Vietnamese. It is a tradition of Vietnamese Buddhism that attempts to recreate the original tradition of the Buddhist sangha by walking barefoot and begging for alms. It was started in 1944 where monks take Mahayana ordination but adopt the Theravada robes and the begging bowl tradition.

Ven Giac Hoang who follows the ‘Khat Si’ tradition said that from 1946 until now their Sangha combine both Theravada and Mahayana traditions /doctrine. “Main elements of Mahayana are adopted in philosophical aspects. But does not accept the rituals. Our master says it develops according to nation (culture). But accept Theravada universal practice. That is how Theravada and Mahayana communicate” he explained. “We have over 550 monasteries in Vietnam and nearly 100 monasteries overseas. We have 3500 nuns in Vietnam”.

“Buddha Sangha in Vietnam has 3 traditions – Theravada. Mahayana and ours. We accept the application of philosophy to society. Our Vinaya is mainly Mahayana and follows it strictly. In Vietnam, monks eat at night because we work all day and need to eat. Since we work all day, we have dinner. We adopt to society - ‘continue Sakyamuni teachings’ is our traditional slogan,” he added.



Shrine room at Wat Chandaransi

In HCMC, I visited Wat Chandaransi, which is a Khmer Theravada Buddhist temple amid a Mahayana Buddhist community. They follow the Cambodian Theravada tradition, but the monks are Vietnamese. The secretary of the temple is the deputy director of the local government in the area. Its community director is Chau Huai²¹⁷, who described to me the role of the temple in the community and how they communicate with the people. He also manages the website of the government-controlled Buddha Sangha group for the area. He says “it is a group of monks sponsored by the government and they encourage people to do charity work with monks”.

Every month on full moon day and the last day of the month, people come to the temple and chant sutra and listen to dhamma talks. Every day early morning and night monks chant the sutras in Pali. “When they come the first time, they don’t know the chantings in Pali, the monks help. Every week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday there are dhamma talks for anyone of any age. Usually,

²¹⁷ Meeting with author in HCM city in October 2019.

about 20 people come for it. The temple has also set up an online program for people to learn the Tripitaka along with Abidhamma via mobile phones or computers.

The community here is mostly people who have come from rural areas to find work in the city. They were farmers and their educational level is low. So don't know dhamma that much. Most follow the family tradition. If parents are Buddhist, the children come along to temple to follow the parent's tradition. They come to the temple in groups. Each group has a leader they call 'father'. The leader used to be a monk. But now back to lay life. Groups come once a month and the leader teaches the dhamma to the group. But most don't understand. When monks give sermons dhamma has to be presented simply. Complicated dhamma they cannot understand (Chau, 2019).

Prof Le Manh says Vietnam Buddhism is facing a serious problem with regards to the continuation of the monastic system. "Now people want only 2 children and don't want to give one to become a monk. We are heading towards secularization of Buddhism," he predicts. He feels that though they train monks and nuns at VBU, who are not married, there is no compulsion for them to remain in the monkhood (or nunhood) after graduation. Prof Le Manh himself does not wear the monks' robes, though he is ordained. "People we train can disrobe, but (we like them to) become secular Buddhist teachers. Vinaya allows disrobing. The main thing is to give knowledge (to the Buddhist community) and also you need to practice," he says.

Indo-China Buddhist Awakening

The 3 neighbouring Buddhist countries of Indo-China – Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia - initiated a dialogue in November 2018 to jointly strengthen Buddhism in the region.

At a conference organized by the Lao Front for National Development and the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation, in Vientiane, they agreed that Buddhism plays an important role in educating monks and laypeople, and in developing a society based on love and sharing. Thus, the Buddhist leaders of the 3 countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to further their cooperation to further strengthen Buddhism in the region. In this endeavor, they would organize study tours to each other's countries, and pool experiences in using Buddhism in development activities.

Vietnam estimates that around 100,000 Vietnamese live, work, and study in Laos. Laos itself is home to 14 pagodas serving the Vietnamese lineages of Buddhism, with the Lao capital hosting three Vietnamese pagodas and one monastery. The Mekong River that snakes through Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam is not



Rice barges on the Mekong River

only important lifeblood for the 3 countries, it also helped in the spread of Buddhism in ancient times. The ancient pagodas that dot its banks are living

proof. Thus, this latest attempt to revive such cooperation for the common good of Buddhism in the region should be welcomed. As Buddhistdoor²¹⁸ observed in a commentary on the important event, 13 November 2018 event could be a watershed in addressing important issues for the strengthening of Buddhism in the 21st century in Asia:

The recent events in Vientiane imply that there is a strengthening consensus among Buddhist authorities in the wider region that better coordination and cooperation are needed. The era of “silo-ed” Buddhism—where Buddhist communities did their own thing, engaged in few ecumenical activities, and had little exposure to each other aside from the occasional conference — is not just unfeasible, but a hindrance to the interests of Buddhist institutions across Asia.

Furthermore, there is the question of communicating the relevance of the dhamma to the younger demographics of Southeast Asia—how can Buddhist teachings teach the younger generation to reorient their mental habits and change their lives for the better? How can young people re-engage with their Buddhist heritage at a cultural and spiritual level? What can Buddhism mean for a generation increasingly exposed to causes concerning economic, social, and ecological justice like climate change and conservation?

This informal renaissance of cross-border dialogue needs to occur at two levels to be successful: in both elite and grassroots circles; on the institutional and popular stages alike. Buddhism must involve academics, the youth, and civil diplomacy (diplomacy that is ostensibly not through government channels) that are acutely sensitive to the balancing act of the three countries’ relations: as well as those with Thailand, Myanmar, and China.

The coming tasks will be Herculean. However, 13 November’s conclave was a solid start.

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Chapter 16

Communication Strategy To Empower Buddhists

This book is the result of an 18-month long research project that included literature reviews and location research. In adopting an ethnographic research methodology, I visited as many Buddhist communities as possible across South and Southeast Asia through 2018 and 2019 to gather research data. While many Buddhists welcomed me warmly and arranged meetings, yet in a few countries, I had to overcome language barriers, which is an important issue to consider when we develop cross-cultural communication projects as discussed later in this chapter. I should point out that Buddhism in Asia faces formidable challenges both from within and outside, as documented in previous chapters. But new communication technologies and regional infrastructure developments for trade and tourism flows offer Buddhists the necessary tools to improve communications among Buddhists in the region. This should be done in the same spirit as those missionaries of Emperor Ashoka and others that followed, who used the ancient Silk Routes for this purpose. To do this we will have to think out of the box and even challenge some of the entrenched Buddhist traditions that may be too inward-looking.

In summarizing the research I have done on various countries, it could be argued that the Buddhist monastic system needs reforms. Traditionally, it is the monastery that was both the education and communication center for the community. As discussed in many of the chapters, there is a serious problem in attracting suitable people to the monkhood, mainly due to the aspirational needs of communities, where becoming a monk is no more an attractive proposition. In many countries, monastic education itself needs better investments, planning and modernization; so that the monks get the respect they traditionally got from the community as educators and counselors. There are also serious problems of corruption and misbehavior within the Buddhist clergy that erodes the respect they traditionally received. In addition, a very important issue that was reflected in the research I did in most countries is that Buddhism has become too ritualistic and it fails to explain the dhamma properly to the followers and especially to young people. This is exploited by Evangelical Christians, in particular, to offer Christianity in a modernist and socially engaged framework.

In many Buddhist countries across Asia, grassroots Buddhist communities are very poor and the monastery is not seen as empowering them socio-economically. I was often told by Buddhists that Christian missionaries tell the poor Buddhists “you only give to the monastery, we give to you” – when Christians offer them goods, money and educational facilities. ***If Buddhism is to survive as a major force across Asia, Buddhist temples and charities have to re-focus their priorities.*** Rather than building grand temples and Buddha statues (and encourage devotees to donate generously to maintain these), they need to turn the monasteries into development centers that offer education, vocational training, help create livelihood projects and also counseling services to help solve peoples’ emotional problems, using the Buddhist philosophy to guide them. To do that, international networking needs to be developed among Buddhists. A complaint made by many socially engaged Buddhist monks was

that they do not have the type of foreign assistance (funds) the Christians and Muslims can come up with. ***There is a need for a well-structured network of international Buddhist charities that focus on poor Buddhist communities across Asia*** – rather than show off their Buddhist compassion to non-Buddhists by funding programs in non-Buddhist communities. In Indonesia for example, I found that the Taiwanese Buddhist charity Tzu Chi Foundation has a huge headquarters building in Jakarta, and they spend millions of dollars in Indonesia helping poor Muslim communities across the archipelago building schools, health centers, etc. Buddhist communities in places like Tripura, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Laos are crying out for such funds and assistance.

Common Issues

Most Buddhist communities I visited expressed concerns about the following issues that impact them.

- ***Proselytism***

Proselytism is a major problem for most Buddhist communities and often the governments and the Buddhist leaders are in self-denial. There is a concerted attempt especially by Evangelical (Pentecostal) Christian and Wahabi Islamist forces, to undermine, destabilize, and destroy Buddhism in Asia. These are highly organized and sinister movements well funded from overseas, and exploits poverty and corruption in many Buddhist countries.

One Australian Buddhist monk who spent many years in Sri Lanka and Thailand told me in an email communication recently:

Sri Lanka and other Buddhist countries are up against an incredibly well-financed, carefully designed, and extremely determined scheme to destroy Buddhism and replace it with Christianity. I am deeply saddened that the Sangha is nowhere motivated, educated, or organized enough to counter this menace other than to demand that “the government should do.....” Lack of motivation, out-of-date education, Nikaya divisions, concern for personal betterment, are just some of the issues that make the Sangha completely unprepared to face the Christian challenge. I have to tell you that I am not very optimistic about the future.

From what I have gathered from my research, I think he has a very good and relevant point. ***In countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Bangladesh, and in Indian states of Tripura and Sikkim it is poverty among Buddhists that is exploited by Christian missionaries, who come with money to buy off Buddhists. They also target hill tribe communities in Thailand, Nepal, Laos and India, where richer Buddhists have ignored or neglected them. In wealthier countries like Singapore and Thailand, they are targeting the urban youth with a message of modernity often using ‘gospel music’ and various counseling services. This exposes the weakness of ritualistic Buddhism that the young find superstitious.*** Muslims are also exploiting poverty in Buddhist communities - they are flushed with petrodollars from the Middle East to buy off Buddhists.

Buddhists need to rise up to face the challenge with some new thinking, protecting Asia's Buddhist heritage requires such an attitude, if not, by the dawn of the 22nd century Buddhism in Asia would be just historic monuments like Borobodur in Indonesia, that attracts tourists, not pilgrims.

- ***Socio-Economic Situations***

As pointed out earlier, even in many Buddhist majority countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia, Buddhists constitute most of the people living under poverty. Both Christian and Muslim evangelical forces exploit these socio-economic situations by providing economic incentives to coerce Buddhists to convert. Merely asking governments to enact anti-conversion bills will not help this situation. It could play right into the hands of those evangelical forces, who will use its international networks (including the international media) to accuse Buddhist countries of "religious persecution" as discussed in the chapter on Laos.

What is needed is to lobby governments to change economic policies to help these communities economically. Buddhist groups could also mobilize international Buddhist foundations to help these communities. For a start, Buddhist aid agencies like Tzu Chi Foundation and Buddhist Global Relief in the USA should be lobbied to spend more of their aid money on Buddhist communities in Asia. ***There is an urgent need to set up a global Buddhist aid agency to target the socio-economic development of grassroots Asian Buddhist communities.*** I know of many diaspora Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, that sometimes collect money to help poor Buddhist communities back home. While this is welcomed, there needs to be an Asia-based Buddhist Aid agency similar to World Vision of the Catholics, to tap into development aid funding from wealthy countries and the UN agencies. International Buddhist Confederation (IBC), World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) and other mainstream national Buddhist organisations need to look into this with urgency.

- ***Youth Drifting Away***

It was pointed out to me many times in almost every Buddhist country or community, that the young are not interested in Buddhism anymore. But, is it the fault of the young people? Many young people see Buddhism as old fashion and even superstitious because of the ritualistic nature of Buddhism in Asia. It is ironic that they see Buddhism in such a frame at a time educated western youth find Buddhism a "cool" new-age lifestyle. ***We need to rethink the way the dhamma is communicated to the young in Asia.*** I will discuss this later in this chapter. Some innovative ideas were discussed in previous chapters such as from Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore and Cambodia.

- ***Maintaining Monastic System***

The Buddhist tradition – both in Theravada and Mahayana – has been built around the monastic system. Maintaining this needs a constant supply of well-educated monks and nuns. There are famous Mahaviharas, Pirivenas, Gompas and Universities that have functioned for centuries to provide this education and training. But, it has been pointed out in this publication, that in many countries it is now difficult to get, young boys, in particular, to enter monkhood, because parents don't want to give one of their sons to the monastery anymore.

While preserving the traditional monastic system is of utmost importance to Buddhist practices even in the 21st century, time may have come for us to consider a two-tier system of ‘monkhood’ where one may not have to remain in robes, follow the Vinaya and practice celibacy to preach the dhamma to the community from a monastery. Buddhism that is developing in the West already has a strong second-tier of Buddhist teachers, especially meditation gurus or masters, who live as laypeople. In the Nepal chapter, I discussed how the Sakya Newari Buddhist temples, operate without full-time monks resident in the temple.

As the rector of the Vietnam Buddhist University, Prof Le Manh explained in the chapter on Vietnam, that they train the monks and nuns to give a good knowledge of the Buddhist teachings, but they do not mind them joining the lay community after graduation. What they expect from them is to use their knowledge to improve society. Perhaps, monasteries could develop a two-tier teaching system, where former monks and nuns could be employed as dhamma teachers. These could be in the form of fee-paying educational programs.

I haven’t looked too much into the role of nuns in South and Southeast Asia because there is still controversy regarding their role as monastics. But, lessons could be drawn from the East Asian Mahayana tradition where nuns play crucial roles in Buddhist communities – for example, the founder of Tzu Chi Foundation is a Taiwanese nun. One Sri Lankan monk told me that he would like to set up a training center for Buddhist nuns to become pre-school teachers and community health workers there. Such innovative ideas should be included in regional Buddhist discourses in the region. Nuns like Bhikkuni Dhamananda in Thailand could provide some useful ideas and initiatives in this area.

- ***Distortion of Buddhism***

Distortion of Buddhism by Buddhist monks or temples is a serious issue in some Buddhist communities. This was discussed especially in the chapters on Sri Lanka and Thailand. Rather than these Buddhist monks and temples being isolated, mainstream Buddhist organization may need to draft them into their discussions and conferences to debate these issues openly and arrive at acceptable middle paths or if there are clear distortions to get them to agree to remedy these. Some of these monks and temples are drawing a large pool of devotees that Buddhism cannot afford to lose.

As discussed in the Thailand chapter, Wat Dhammakaya, which is accused of distorting Buddhism by many mainstream Buddhist groups in the kingdom, is also doing some good work in using new communication tools to disseminate Buddhist ideas to youth. On the other hand, those monks who are into black magic and such distortions, and TV networks that promote those, need to be censured and effective laws introduced to get these programs or networks out of the mainstream.

- ***Media Bias***

Media bias against Buddhists, not only in the western media and among international broadcasters like Al Jazeera, but also within Asian countries is a cause for concern. Sri Lanka and Myanmar have suffered from it, and so is Thailand. This needs to be countered with a well-planned communication strategy.

Communication Strategies To Counter Threats

In addition to the above threats, there are also other threats to Buddhist communities and countries we need to look at seriously. I have listed some of them below, along with communication strategies to counter these threats.

- ***International Blasphemy Treaty***

In 1999, the UN, at the prompting of the 47- member Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), passed a non-binding resolution asserting that speech deemed offensive to another faith is a violation of international law. While the resolution is relatively toothless, it provides cover for domestic blasphemy laws used to restrict proselytism and religious speech around the world. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Indonesia have been at the forefront of efforts to get the UN to adopt an 'International Treaty on Blasphemy'. Their main aim is to stop people from questioning the teachings in the Koran.

In early 2019, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres launched a Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech as part of an effort to counter attacks on religious minorities. But, such efforts to combat 'hate speech' could also backfire on 'free speech'. Freedom allows the seeker to compare religious claims, choose among them, and then order his or her life around them. Unfortunately, the concept of hate speech is all too often wielded to silence comparisons between ideas that are essential to truth-seekers. It is the tone of this speech that should be questioned rather than its contents.

The OIC continues to actively advance blasphemy laws at the U.N under the misleading moniker "defamation of religions." In Pakistan, a Catholic mother of five, spent years on death row simply because a co-worker with a personal grievance accused her of insulting the prophet Muhammed. In Indonesia, the Christian governor of Jakarta was jailed for some public comments he said were deemed insulting to Islam. ***Then what about Christian and Muslim missionaries telling Buddhists that Buddhism is a religion of idol worship?*** Is it not defamation of religion?

Rather than pacifying the hostility, blasphemy laws fomented social intolerance and violence by legitimizing the idea that offensive words cause injury and should be punished—the same notion that defines hate speech.

Buddhist organisation like the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) and the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) should be aware of such moves, because it could have a drastic impact on preaching the dhamma, especially in nominally Muslim countries in the region such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Bangladesh. Buddhists need to develop a sound argument based on the charter of free inquiry espoused by the Kalama Sutra, to be articulated internationally. Governments of Buddhist countries need to be made aware that when such resolutions come up at the UN to question its motives and vote against them if necessary, or move amendments that could empower Buddhists to protect their communities from proselytism.

- **Human Rights Agenda Justifying Proselytism**

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief”.

This provision has been used by Christian missionaries to justify their proselytism activities in Buddhist communities. Even some western governments, particularly the US, have accused Buddhist countries of “religious persecution” when they move to restrict the activities of these missionaries.

Buddhists need to develop a common argument, that, it is a human right to protect Buddhist communities from evangelical groups, who disturb their harmony and create conflicts in the community, as well as within families. Also, it should be a human right to protect one’s religious (ie. Buddhist) heritage and culture from threats from outside forces. Buddhist organisation like IBC and WFB need to articulate this point. When they take part in inter-faith dialogue this issue needs to be emphasized.

- * **Regional Buddhist Research Centre**

To counter the threats mentioned above, there is an urgent need to establish a regional research center, well funded by Buddhist foundations or governments. I would like to call it the ‘International Research Centre On Safeguarding Tripitaka Civilizations (IRCOSTC)’ and propose that it be set up at Aluvihare in Sri Lanka. As the Tripitaka was written there, it will be a symbolic location to set up such a research center to “save the Tripitaka civilizations’ and their heritage.

The research should not be on the Tripitaka scriptures because there are enough universities and Buddhist institutions around the world that do this research. The research should be on socio-economic and cultural issues facing Buddhist communities in Asia and how it is creating threats to the existence of Buddhism in those societies that have been driven by the Tripitaka scriptures. The research should develop strategies to counter these threats by empowering the communities economically, culturally and socially. These strategies should include Buddhist principles (from Tripitaka) and their application to modern socio-economic and cultural development.

When I did the research and wrote the book ‘The Scourge of Poverty and Proselytism’ on Sri Lanka in 2016-17, the plan was to follow it up with similar studies and reports on Myanmar, Cambodia and Thailand. The project was funded by the Bangkok-based World Buddhist University (affiliated to WFB) and its research director at the time, Dr Tavivat Puntarigvivat, named the project ‘Socio-Economic and Cultural Challenges Facing Buddhist Communities in Asia: A Case Study of Sri Lanka’. He hoped that WBU would add further publications on other Buddhist countries as the years went on to create a database for Buddhists to argue the case for development assistance to these communities and look at ways of empowering them. Unfortunately, changes to the WBU leadership precipitated by the WFB secretariat derailed this project.

Thus, ***a regional research program conducted by Asian Buddhists themselves is urgently needed to create a database on socio-economic and***

cultural threats facing Buddhist communities in Asia. Otherwise, when these issues are raised by the Buddhists, the international media (and even some local media in Buddhist countries) would accuse the Buddhists of indulging in “hate speech”. To avoid that accusation, the Buddhist argument needs to be backed by real data obtained by professional research methodologies.

This database could be used to lobby governments and international aid agencies for development assistance to these communities as well. Also, it could be used to develop the argument for Buddhist heritage and cultural protection as a human right.

*** Buddhist Media**

For the socio-economic and cultural empowerment of Buddhist communities across Asia, developing Buddhist media networks with a regional and international reach is crucial. These networks should reflect the voices of grassroots Buddhists, Buddhist scholars and leaders. It is needed to counter biased news against Buddhists in the international and regional media.

One of the first objectives should be to de-colonize the minds of local media practitioners who transmit western media contents, without looking at it critically and identifying bias against Buddhism. As pointed out in the chapter on Thailand for example, local Buddhist media practitioners are not well versed about the ground realities of Buddhist communities and they feel that reporting on them is bringing religion into reporting. They need to be trained, on how to bring Buddhist concepts into reporting socio-economic, cultural, social and environmental issues in communities. They also need to be better trained on how to report so-called “religious conflicts” as socio-economic issues.

In developing pan-Asian news networking among Buddhist communicators, a major issue is a language, because almost every Buddhist community in Asia speaks a different language. Thus, we need to look at the use of the English language for cross-border disseminations with provisions for translations, dubbing, and subtitling at each end.

I have found that most Buddhist media in Asia use a formula of broadcasting long sermons (usually about an hour) and chanting. Though this provides an important spiritual service to the Buddhist community, yet, to spread Buddhism to modern youth a different communication strategy is needed. In various chapters in this book, ideas and projects implemented in different countries were discussed. These ideas need to be brought into a regional framework with close collaborations among Buddhist communicators to produce material that could be shared.

We also need to rethink the methods of communication between the monastery and the community. While keeping the general principle of these communications intact, we need to explore ways of using new communication technologies to improve this communication flow and also link the youth into it.

I would like to propose that launching a Buddhist Media Development Fund be explored possibly under the auspices of IBC or WFB.

* Media Networks and Training Centres

During my visits to Buddhist communities, I did not find any country where a Buddhist University was offering a course in Buddhist communications. There is a real need to train Buddhist communicators – which should involve monks and nuns - to use new communication tools to disseminate the dhamma. ***We need to realize what the monks and nuns are doing – and have been doing so for over 25 centuries– is communicating. We need to bring in new communication tools and methods of dissemination to the process.***

Through the Lotus Communication Network (LCN), I have been trying to develop collaborative Buddhist communication networks. But, it has been a very frustrating process due to lack of funding and a lack of motivation among Buddhist organizations to reach out beyond their comfort zones (ie. your own community). There have been a few successes like this very report, which LCN was commissioned to do with funding from Buddhists. LCN has also set up the 'Lotus News Features' project in 2016 as a joint-venture with Berlin-based IDN InDepth News the flagship of the International Press Syndicate where news features are transmitted to thousands of subscribers online, including UN agencies in New York and Geneva. Newspapers and news portals in Sri Lanka, Philippines, Bangladesh and Thailand have printed some Lotus stories. So far over 35 features have been produced and this has been done without any funding – thus I have done most of the stories. The stories reflect Buddhist values in news writing and the stories are normally not about Buddhist events and festivals. Some of the Lotus features have been included in various chapters in this book.

Asia-Pacific



Photo: Collage of pictures of Prime Minister Rajapaksa and cattle. Source: Sri Lanka NewsNet.

Sri Lanka Bans Cow Slaughter, But Has Yet to Pass Animal Welfare Bill

By Kalingsa Seneviratne

This article is the 44th in a series of joint productions of Lotus News Features and IDN InDepthNews, flagship agency of the Non-profit International Press Syndicate. Click here for previous reports.

SINGAPORE (IDN) - The Sri Lankan government will be amending the Animal Act after the Cabinet approved a proposal by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa to ban the slaughter of cows in this predominantly Buddhist country. However, animal rights activists point out that there are no animal welfare laws in the country, and a bill to enact an Animal Welfare Act has been blocked in parliament since 2006.

After the Cabinet approved the proposal on September 28th the government released a statement presenting it as a rural economic self-reliance measure.

Lotus News feature on IDN InDepth News site – link for other reports:
<https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/archive-search?searchword=Lotus%20News%20Features&searchphrase=all>

LCN is working closely with IBC in initiating regional Buddhist media networking, communication training and arts activities. It was an LCN proposal to organize the 1st Asian Buddhist Media Conclave that the Ministry of Culture in India funded and held in Delhi in August 2018. A second media conclave was due to be held in Bangkok in association with ThaiPBS in April 2020. But, that was called off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. LCN is also working on an English language IPTV Buddhist Television project, and also developing a mindful communication training network in Asia (see below). As a pilot scheme for the former, LCN jointly produced a one-hour special program with Atoodeep in Kolkata for Vesak as part of IBC's International Vesak Day webcast in May 2020. Also on 1st January 2021 LCN and Atoodeep produced a special one-hour Buddhist musical webcast with contributions from Buddhist artists from across Asia in association with IBC.

Recently, I discussed with Venerable Dr Dhammapiya, secretary-general of IBC about setting up a Buddhist Communication Department in the new Buddhist

University he is planning to set up in Tripura. If it can be done this would be a first of its kind in Asia.

Malaysia-based Buddhist Channel has also tried for over a decade to create a Buddhist news syndicate and as discussed in chapter 11 it has not worked out the way it was originally planned. Now its founder Lim Kooi Fong is looking at remodeling it to be an influencer channel. Hong Kong-based 'Buddhistdoor' has also been functioning for about a decade and since it has got funding from Ho Foundation in Hong Kong, they have been able to commission reports and operate the news service on a daily footing. While they have done some good stories from Buddhist communities across Asia, they have not tried to develop a network of Asian Buddhist journalists who could contribute regularly. Sometimes, the Asian Buddhist perspective is lacking from their reporting.

Rather than competing, one would hope that Buddhistdoor, LCN, and Buddhist Channel could collaborate to build a strong Buddhist news network in the Asian region. We should look more closely at utilizing ICTs in developing such networks as Thai communication professor Dr Kamolrat argues in chapter 14.

Pipope Panitchpakdi²¹⁹, deputy director of ThaiPBS argues reflecting on media's attitude towards reporting from a Buddhist perspective in Thailand:

They will broadcast the ceremony, chanting, even the story of Buddha from India. When it is a living religion and political issues are involved, they shy away. If you want clean air it's politics, (so are issues like) people surviving producing organic fertilizer (and) in order for him to have material for fertilizer he has to enter politics. Or else soil will be contaminated. Politics for me is not the Prime Minister or Parliament, but how people conduct themselves in the public sphere. When Buddhism becomes an active religion at this level, the media has a lot of question marks. Whether religion should be kept inside the temples. Which is contrary (to Buddhism). Buddhism needs to be practiced not only by monks but also by the people.

*** Buddhist IPTV Network**

At the 1st Asian Buddhist Media Conclave in Delhi in 2018, three resolutions were adopted:

- 1 – To develop a 'mindful communication for sustainable development' regional Buddhist development communication training program.
- 2 – Set up a Buddhist regional television network to assist in cross-cultural communications between Asian Buddhist communities.
- 3 – Organise an annual Nalanda Arts Festival (at Nalanda in India) to bring together and mobile Buddhist artists from across Asia and the world.

I will now discuss its progress since then.

LCN has been looking at the possibility of setting up an English language IPTV-based network as a consortium of Buddhist TV networks in the region. Buddhist TV channels from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, India and Thailand

²¹⁹ Interview with author in Bangkok in June 2019.

have expressed interest, but the sticking point is funding. ***While it is possible to set it up as content sharing network, yet, to produce specially commissioned news and cultural programs a funding base is needed.*** The idea of the network is to focus on news using mindful communication methodologies; produce MTV-style Buddhist musical clips; broadcast short Buddhist discussions and 'Lotus Talks' (not more than 6 minutes), and feature Buddhist travel sites across Asia. Material not originally produced in English would be dubbed or subtitled.

*** Mindful Communication Training Programs**

In chapter 2, the mindful communication initiative at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok with assistance from UNESCO was discussed. Since the Buddhist Media Conclave in Delhi in August 2018, there has been momentum on creating a network of educational institutions in Buddhist countries to introduce short programs in 'Mindful Communication for Sustainable Development'.

Nalanda University, Central Tibetan University and Visva Bharati in India, Kelaniya University, Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy and Colombo University in Sri Lanka, Lumbini International Buddhist University in Nepal, Vietnam Buddhist University and some private Buddhist educational institutions in Cambodia, Myanmar, Bhutan and Thailand have expressed interest. These programs would include curriculum material on sufficiency economics and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness index.

The momentum was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and in 2021 a series of webinars are planned as a joint venture of LCN, Institute of Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University and IBC to revive the momentum.

*** Nalanda Arts Festival**

After the media conclave of 2018, IBC set up an informal committee to look into organizing the first Nalanda Arts Festival in Nalanda in mid-December 2020. Ms Madhushree Chowdhury from Atoodeep Kolkata coordinates the committee; and an international organizing committee is expected to be formulated soon. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has put these plans on hold.

Nalanda Arts festival is expected to be both a showcase of Buddhist arts from Asia that would include song, dance, musical drama, films and other audiovisuals, drawings, and other artistic expressions from Buddhist cultures. New art forms with a Buddhist flavor would also be welcomed. All such expressions should have some relationship to the Nalanda intellectual and cultural tradition.

Foreign Buddhist organisations will be invited to set up stalls to introduce their arts to Indians; national groups (possibly government-funded) will be invited to have their cultural pavilions. Spiritual masters from various regions of Asia may also come to present workshops on Buddhist arts and culture.

The core funding for the festival is expected to come from Bihar State Government and the Indian Central Government. This needs to be topped up by overseas Buddhist foundations and other sponsors. It is expected to develop this festival into an annual event under the auspices of IBC. The main aim of it

would be to draw Buddhist youth into cultural activity and regional collaborations.

As a flow-on from the Nalanda Arts Festival a traveling exhibition of Buddhist arts may be developed, perhaps under the auspices of Nalanda University to take Buddhist culture across the region in years to come.

*** Community Radio and Podcasting**

Important areas for Buddhist communicators to explore are community radio and podcasting. There is much scope for low-cost community radio to keep Buddhist communities together. Since the licensing regimes in India and other countries are for low-powered transmitting usually covering a radius of 25-50 km, this radio has to be very localized, which creates problems of economic viability. One way of overcoming this would be for Buddhist communities to set up programming collectives, where Buddhists are trained to make radio content and negotiate for windows on existing community radio stations in their community. Paying for such airtime could be a more economically viable model of Buddhist community radio.

Another area that is becoming very popular now a day, as alternative (and even mainstream) broadcasting is podcasting. It is known as “listen at your convenience radio” – where radio programs could be posted on a website. LCN did a project about 5 years ago, where a series of 10 podcasts were produced and posted on the LCN website under “Lotus Radio”. These were 25-minute magazine-style programs. There are many monks, especially in the West, who are doing Buddhist podcasts. In August 2020, LCN launched its podcast station called ‘Lotus Radio’ with an appeal for subscribers from Buddhist communities in Asia. The idea is to set up collectives of Buddhist content producers across Asia who will feed content to the ‘Lotus Radio’ site. Progress so far has been disappointing.

I would like to propose that one of the Buddhist universities in India – perhaps Nava Nalanda Mahavihara – consider introducing a community radio/podcasting training program for Buddhist community members from India. This could later be extended to other countries.

*** Reaching The Youth**

It was pointed out over and over again throughout this book that young people from Buddhist families in Asia are drifting away from Buddhism. Thus, it is of paramount importance that we review the way we communicate Buddhism to them. ***We need to fine-tune strategies, to use the communication tools they use to engage them with Buddhism.*** Some good practices from Cambodia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Thailand were discussed in earlier chapters.

We need to look at ways of how to detach Buddhist youth from the consumerism of Valentine’s Day, Mothers Day and Fathers Day. Buddhist communities across Asia could set aside a day of the year where concepts taken from Buddhist philosophy could be adopted in expressing love, respect, and honesty in relationships. In the Sri Lankan culture, the New Year that dawns on April 14th is a day when youth pay homage to their parents and grand parents in the traditional fashion of giving a betel leaf and bowing in front of them. I think it is also there in Thai, Cambodian, Laotian and Burmese cultures on the same

day. This needs to be re-emphasized with some modernist packaging. In chapter 14, Thepchai Yong pointed out how mainstream Thai TV channels have branded a Buddhist welcoming of the New Year with chanting and sermons at temples, which attracts youth in large numbers – instead of them going to clubs and other secular sites and get intoxicated to usher in the new year. Thus, ***we need to re-package Buddhist traditions, festivals and ceremonies to make it appealing to the youth and mainstream media need to be drafted into this process.*** But, social media will be crucial as well.

One of the focuses of the IPTV project should be to set up a Buddhist MTV segment, where songs from different musical cultures will be featured reflecting dhamma ideas. Using English or via sub-titles, dhamma would be introduced to youth via songs²²⁰. This type of strategy was discussed in length on the chapter on Malaysia. Applications like Tik Tok may be explored to introduce the Dhammapada to youth.

*** Buddhist Community Tourism Training**

Lately, there has been a lot of talk about creating Buddhist tourism circuits across Asia. But, as mentioned earlier in this book, Buddhist tourism would not succeed if there are no living Buddhist communities for tourists to experience their unique cultures. ***Just looking at monuments of a glorious past is not Buddhist tourism; it needs a living culture and a unique cultural experience.***

As discussed in chapter 5, India's Sikkim state government is investing money in helping monasteries to build guesthouses and encouraging them to introduce cultural immersion programs to induce tourists to spend a few days there. Lumbini Development Trust is also trying to introduce a similar setup with monasteries there. ***Governments and tourism authorities would need to look closely at how to develop tourism packages where foreign visitors could experience a unique Buddhist culture and in the process learn something about Buddhism as well.***

It would be a good idea to organize an Asian Buddhist Tourism Summit to discuss strategies. But, at the same time, Buddhists need to be a bit wary of international tourism agencies and “experts” (who are non-Buddhists) who would try to jump on the bandwagon.

IBC or WFB could coordinate with universities in areas where Buddhist tourism could be developed, to introduce a certificate program in ‘Buddhist Community Tourism Development’ where concepts like sufficiency economics and happiness index should also be part of the curriculum along with Buddhist cultural studies. ***There is a need for training programs for local guides too in Buddhist heritage, history, philosophy and culture so that they will not misrepresent Buddhism to foreign tourists.*** Guides may need certification through these courses to take tourists to Buddhist heritage sites.

I understand that Nava Nalanda Mahavihara is already planning a diploma course in this direction. Lumbini International Buddhist University has also expressed interest in such a program. Universities in Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar need to look into this seriously.

²²⁰ Watch LCN production - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZC1sgo1Z7E>

Another possible project would be a “reality show” where a group of Buddhists would visit another Buddhist country accompanied by a camera crew. At the end of the trip, the TV channel in their home country would have a good series of programs to broadcast on the cultural immersion experience of the group. This could be arranged as exchange programs between national TV channels of Buddhist countries – where one country hosts the TV crew of another as part of a Buddhist pilgrimage and tourism promotion.

*** Reaching The Youth Through Community Tourism**

Sadly there seems to be a lack of solidarity among young Buddhists across Asia. The youth need to be motivated to learn, understand and appreciate the cultures of the region. Developing specific Buddhist cultural tourism programs to appeal to youth tastes would be one way to go. This could involve not just a spiritual pilgrimage, but also some ‘fun activity’ such as attending festivals, interaction with Buddhist communities, tasting their cuisine, attending meditation retreats in scenic settings, etc. There are many scenic settings across Asia where great Buddhist temples and monasteries are located. Youth could be given a spiritual experience there with a well-tailored program designed to give them a good insight into the Buddhist culture and traditional practices of the community.

LCN is currently looking into establishing a ‘Buddhist Youth Tourism Promotion Portal’ with a Singapore-based IT company to create content to offer online (or face-to-face) short programs to youth to introduce Buddhist culture, heritage, festivals, vegetarian cuisine, spiritual practices, etc in different Buddhist communities. It is hoped that this will encourage youth to visit each other’s community and develop collaborative spiritual and cultural activities.

*** India’s Ganga Initiative and China’s BRI**

In November 2001, India launched the Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC) grouping with 5 countries that border the Mekong River - Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. Through its ‘Look East’ policy, India is trying to reinvigorate the cultural and religious linkages between India and the other MGC members, using Buddhism as its lynchpin. But, one country that is missing from the link is Sri Lanka, as well as China (its Yunan province also borders the Mekong). Perhaps India could expand this project to encompass the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) that links countries that surrounds the Bay of Bengal and most of them are Buddhist or had a Buddhist civilization in the past.

During their meeting, especially the one in Xian in China, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has suggested to his Chinese counterpart President Xi Jinping to bring culture to the trade routes developed through the new Silk Routes - the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. If these two projects could be synergized with cultural flows, there is tremendous scope for a Buddhist reawakening in the region.

Hope this book will be a useful guide to develop communication structures and processes among and within Buddhist communities across South and Southeast Asia. It was beyond the funding scope of this study to include East Asia.



Dr Kalinga Seneviratne, was born and educated in Sri Lanka and has spent over 20 years in Australia and another 20 years in Singapore. He is a journalist, a radio broadcaster, a television documentary maker, and an international communications analyst and lecturer. He was the Head of Research at the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) from 2005-2012. He holds a PhD in International Communications from Macquarie University

(Australia) and an MA in Social Science from the University of Technology Sydney (Australia). He has been a prolific feature writer for news agencies and publications, especially in Asia, for the past 30 years. During this time, he has reported from over 30 countries across the globe. He has also taught at the tertiary level in Australia, Singapore, Thailand, India, and Kyrgyzstan. He has also been a consultant to UNESCO in journalism curriculum development and community radio. He has been the author and editor of many publications on communication issues. His latest book titled 'Myth of Free Media and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era' was published by SAGE in 2020. He has won a United Nations Media Peace Award in 1987 for a radio documentary series he did for Australian community radio on the relationship between rich and poor countries.

This book is very comprehensive and it surveys all development trends and problems, paradoxes facing Buddhism in the region. The mindful communication and Buddhist communication models discussed in chapter 2 are an excellent discussion about Buddhist communication. The chapters on Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand are eye-opening. I will use part of this book in my PhD class on world wisdom and traditions for communication -

Dr. Palphol Rodloytuk, Assistant to the President and former Dean, School of Liberal Arts, Shinawatra University, Thailand.



Lotus Communication Network