
Book Review

DEEGALLE, Maheenda, ed. 2006. *Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*. London: Routledge. xv + 277 pp. ISBN 0-415-35920-1 (hbk). £75.00.

The civil war in Sri Lanka has attracted the attention of the world for many years now. It is one of the most traumatic conflicts of contemporary times, comparable to the crises in Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine and now Iraq. This collection of essays is a very useful contribution to the manifold analyses of this very complex issue and elucidates especially the religious dimension of the Sri Lankan question.

This conflict can be construed in many ways—as inter-ethnic, or inter-religious, as between social classes and as between differing political ideologies. Richard Gombrich in his very lucid and well-thought-out article concludes that Buddhism has nothing to do with the genesis of this war. He identifies demographic reasons as a very big factor—the apprehension of the Sinhalese of the very large Tamil population in nearby India, and similarly of the Sri Lankan Tamil minority of the preponderance of the Sinhalese population in the island nation. He also points out that during the riots of 1983 it was actually the poor and the deprived who attacked the wealthy residential areas of Colombo and destroyed and looted property belonging to the wealthy, irrespective of religious or ethnic affiliation. Gombrich's assessment makes sense. But there are other contributors who beg to differ from him.

One thing is certain: it was the discriminatory actions of Bandaranaike, born as a Catholic but converted to Buddhism—one would suspect for political expediency—that initiated this disastrous conflagration. Language is a vital element of national life. Language is critical in employment prospects, national identity and survival. This is perhaps the reason why neighbouring India has made all the major Indian languages official languages of the nation. But Bandaranaike and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party were determined to promote Sinhalese as the national and only official language. This was a grievous error and a setback to all who wanted national unity, ethnic cohesion and harmony, let alone the observance of democratic principles in nation building.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has played a very adverse role in exacerbating and perpetuating this conflict. It has stifled and even tried to annihilate the moderate and democratic voices within the Tamil community and engaged in acts of horrendous violence, not only against the Sri Lankan Army but even among the Tamils. The Indian intervention, originally at the behest of the Tamil population of India and its politicians, was a debacle, did very little good and had even complicated the issues. It finally had to fight the very people it was trying to rescue and damaged the reputation of Sri Lanka's great and powerful neighbour. The then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi unnecessarily sacrificed his life as well as those of some senior Indian officials on this account. India earned the hostility of both protagonists in the conflict, and though named as a peacekeeping force did nothing to keep the peace and had to fight a very intensive campaign leading to the loss of several Indian as well as Sri Lankan lives.

The article of Alvappillai Veluppillai, which seeks to provide a rationale for Tamil secessionist demands, and that of Ananda Vikramaratne, which argues for Sinhala perspectives,

seems to indicate that there is justification of a sort for the actions of both protagonists of this civil war. That presages an almost irremediable polarization of the two sides. As time goes on and the body count rises, the situation will become more and more intractable. It requires a radical rethinking on both sides and the rise of a great national leader of the stature of, say, Mahatma Gandhi, to bring about a Sinhala-Tamil detente. Mrs Kumaratunge could have been such a figure but the actions of the LTTE in attempting her assassination extinguished such hopes. Velupillai Prabhakaran from his actions of sabotaging the peace seems to desire a perpetual conflict. I think sensible Tamils in India no longer support his actions. An alternative would be the partition of the nation on the lines of the Indian partition of 1947. But that would meet with stiff opposition from the Sinhalas, and for such a small geographical territory may lead to future political and economic problems, as the history of India-Pakistan relations seems to presage. Bengal, for instance, suffered a lot from the division, the raw materials being left in Bangladesh and the industrial base in West Bengal. A similar situation could arise in Sri Lanka if such a division comes about. Also there can be perennial tensions between the two fledgling nations.

The concern of this volume is the role of Buddhism in this conflict and all the articles touch upon it. The article by the editor of the volume, Maheenda Deegalle, is very enlightening and discusses in detail the theological ramifications as well as the course of events which led to the participation of Buddhist monks in this conflagration. Buddhist monks in political matters are an anomaly, as those who are the only people eligible for attaining nibbana should be far from such aspirations. Their concerns should be world-renouncing and abjuring of material passions and ambitions. But the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP—People's Liberation Front) seems to be a creation totally opposed to the principles of Theravada monasticism. At the most they could be advocates of peace and non-violence. Being embroiled in political matters directly as Members of Parliament it is difficult to see how successfully they could enact the role of mediators, let alone be world-renouncing personages working towards nibbana. I do not agree with Deegalle's concluding view that the formation of Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU—National Sri Lankan Heritage) is justified for the preservation and safeguarding of Buddhism in the Island. The perceived threat to the survival of Buddhism as a result of Tamil demands and separatism is simply religious paranoia.

On the whole the book leads to a balanced view of the conflict and the editor has taken care to include voices that represent all shades of opinion on this complex issue. The ultimate aim should be to seek justice for all citizens, Tamil or Sinhala, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist or Muslim, and that would be the only way forward for keeping unity and peace in this nation.

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