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Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism & Modernity in Sri Lanka

Anne M. Blackburn

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010. xxii + 237 p.

Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism & Modernity in Sri Lanka explores the life of Hikkaḍuvē Sumaṅgala, a 19th century, Sri Lankan, Buddhist monk. Through the investigation of this one individual, Anne Blackburn effectively sheds light on the complexities of the politics of religion within the colonial experience.

Locations of Buddhism starts off with three introductory sections: a preface; acknowledgements; and notes on translations, sources, dating, and language. These thirteen pages provide useful insight into the methodological and stylistic choices made by the author. It concludes with an extensive bibliography and a serviceable index. The intervening six chapters build upon one another, progressively unfolding the story of one monk of exceptional scholarly talents, and his growing role in the internal debates and power struggles of colonial-era Sri Lanka.

Unlike many academic texts on the market today, this book progresses in a style more reminiscent of fiction than non-fiction. The story and thesis are revealed in steps, culminating in the conclusion, rather than being stated up front and proven through the body. This approach sometimes leaves the reader at a loss as to the significance of a given piece of information, but it does allow the reader to become increasingly engrossed in this text as it progresses. Readability is further bolstered by the use of footnotes as opposed to endnotes.

Largely chronological, each chapter focuses upon a different facet of Hikkaḍuvē's life. Chapter 1, "Hikkaḍuvē Sumaṅgala at Adam's Peak," tells of how Hikkaḍuvē gained notoriety through his editorial contributions to a new edition of Buddhist monastic law and achieved institutional power as a result thereof. This section also provides the reader with a basic understanding of the individuals, institutions, and issues at play within Sri Lanka during the latter half of the 19th century. In chapter 2, "Hikkaḍuvē Sumaṅgala at Vidyodaya Pirivena," we continue to follow Hikkaḍuvē's professional career as he becomes an increasingly important member of the monastic community at Colombo, learning still more about the complex systems of power that influenced Sri Lankan religious institutions, particularly in terms of education, during the colonial era. Chapter 3, "Learning and Difference," explores the power dynamic that existed between local and colonial groups. Blackburn discusses how certain monastic groups used colonial funds, available as a result of orientalist academic fervor, to forward their own scholastic goals, emphasizing the simultaneous dependence and independence of local monastic institutions. Chapter 4, "Engaging the Adventurers," examines the changing power dynamic between monastic and non-monastic Buddhists, including the advent of new power-creation strategies and the growing influence of western Buddhist figures. Chapter 5, "Śāsana and Empire," reviews the Sri Lankan attempt to draw upon Buddhist groups, both monastic and sovereign, from other parts of Asia to manipulate the local situation. Finally, Chapter 6, "Horizons Not Washed

Away," deals with larger methodological questions regarding how the preceding study fits with existing and potential avenues of investigation and interpretation.

Through the reading of this monograph, one gains a strong understanding of the life of one monk, but one is also impressed with a larger sense of the complex and often treacherous social landscape of local religious institutions within the colonial system. As various groups and individuals strive for power within the interrelated structures of monastic, local, and colonial influence, allegiances are tested and identities shift as forces enter and exit the field.

Blackburn positions her monograph as a single step in a larger initiative of research and analysis. She argues that the proliferation of such individual case studies will collectively best contribute to our understanding of the complex social relations of colonialism and, it could well be argued, the human experience in general. As such, this text is both a building block and an end in and of itself. I think it is safe to say that Blackburn has succeeded in her primary goal of elucidating her topic, Hikkaḍuvē Sumaṅgala. It is currently difficult to judge whether this book will encourage other scholars to pursue similar projects. That being said, this book does effectively demonstrate the efficacy of such an approach, and the format itself is certainly appealing, as it provides a clearly focused structure for any proposed research initiative, while simultaneously allowing for the inclusion of more expansive analysis. Similarly, this approach is in line with current academic methodological trends as we attempt to blend the voices of the individual and the subaltern into the larger networks of understanding.

One critique that may be leveled against this work is that it lacks a clear audience. At times (e.g. when un-translated - although transliterated - versions of original texts are provided, when foundational knowledge is assumed, or when great emphasis is placed on methodological issues), this text appears aimed at specialists in the field of South and Southeast Asian studies. At other times, conversely, the text appears geared towards non-specialists. We see this, for example, when basic terms such as *pandit* are defined in non-specialist terminology (16), and in Blackburn's apparent anxiety to dispel any preconceptions the wider readership may hold regarding the otherworldly nature of religious (or Buddhist) organizations. The level of emphasis given to the existence or centrality of the practical side of religious institutions may appear belaboured for a specialist audience. I fear that specialists may be put off by the periodic patronization, while non-specialists may find the more esoteric sections daunting. Still, this is a relatively minor issue, and one that can be categorized as an unavoidable by-product of the author's underlying goal. Given the parallel objectives of this book, to both dissect the specific and elucidate the general, Blackburn must incorporate both the particular and the wide-ranging, in terms of material but also of prospective readership. To make her case study significant on the larger scale and encourage the production of other similar works, *Locations of Buddhism* must be taken seriously as a scholarly work within its specific field of academia, but it must also be accessible and engaging for readers with minimal knowledge thereof. I would argue that this ostensible flaw is one of this text's strengths as Blackburn manages to appeal to

a broad and diverse audience. The success of this text will lie largely in the extent to which both the specialist and non-specialist reader is able to overlook the concessions made to the other.

Locations of Buddhism is overall an engaging read that fills an important niche in the academic study of both Southeast Asia and the broader colonial experience. Not only does it provide the reader with unique insight into the political struggles which ruled the Buddhist institutions of Sri Lanka from the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, but it also provides significant, insightful discussion of the methodological approaches available to such studies.

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