

# The Buddhist Revival and Social Change in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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**ABSTRACT:** Sri Lankan history presents that the Buddhism has undergone various reformations at various historical periods. Religious reformations have addressed various issues and changes that Buddhism has undergone throughout the history. The significant aspect of Sinhala Buddhism is then reformations cannot be confined to a particular historical epoch and a particular movement since Buddhist revival is a continuous process, and multiple reformation movements exists simultaneously. The Mahamevnawa Asapuwa as a recent radical and innovative Buddhist movement presents a contemporary form of the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka. This paper argues that the Buddhist reformations of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa cannot be understood as isolated religious phenomenon in contemporary Sri Lanka since it connects within larger historical, social, economic, political, religious and educational contexts of Sri Lanka. The Buddhist reformations of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa presents that the Sinhala Buddhist identity has been changed due to social change and the impact of globalization and neo-liberalization on Sinhalese and Buddhism. Therefore, a larger social, educational, economic, political and religious reformations are aimed to generate strong Sinhala Buddhists followers irrespective of their class and caste backgrounds.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddhist revival, Mahamevnawa Asapuwa, Globalization, Neo-liberalization, Social change

## **Introduction**

In his study of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sinhala Buddhist revival, George Bond states:

Whenever the context changes, and especially when it changes radically, as in the case of modernization, a new cost structure, or cultural and cosmological bias, replaces the old one and requires a reinterpretation of traditional beliefs and values. (Bond 1992, p. 4)

This thesis on modernization has been prominent in a great deal of academic discussion on Sinhala Buddhism, and more broadly on religion, since modernization has

transformed Buddhism into various revival forms. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) link it to what they call ‘urban anomie’ and ‘urbanization’ in *Buddhism Transformed*; a work where they explore this in detail. Obeyesekere’s original thesis was inspired Max Weber’s argument about the link between Protestant Christianity and capitalism<sup>2</sup>. Obeyesekere thus coined the term ‘Protestant Buddhism’; a term that has gained considerable traction in Sinhala Buddhist studies (Johnson 2004) and more broadly Buddhist studies<sup>3</sup>. Critical to that discussion was the concept of the laity – the body of worshippers who rejected the rigid separation of the Church from its communities in western European countries where Protestantism took hold. Along these lines, the growing popularity of lay meditation movements can be found in Sri Lanka (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988; Bond 2003). It can be further found in new monastic movements like the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa and other clerical organisations that challenge the established orders of Buddhist monkhood (Seneviratne 1999; Abeysekara 2002; Deegalle 2006). What becomes clear is that the process of Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka is not reducible to a singular moment or a religious movement. However, it has been a tendency following from Obeyesekere and his excellent work on the figures of the Anagarika Dharmapala and the members of the Buddhist Theosophical society. However, instead of describing a singular movement – the Buddhist revival – I will discuss in this article that it is a process that consists of multiple movements, many of which coexist and affect each other, while also be in tension with each other due to their disagreement with the established Buddhist *nikāyas*, as well as their broader political orientation. To capture this sense of process, I will employ the term Buddhist revitalisation and argue how the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa is just one strand of a larger sense of Buddhist renewal and reform, and it is a re-defining the Sinhala Buddhist identity in the face of impact of globalization and neo-liberalization on social transformation and contemporary Sinhala Buddhism.

This paper is based on an ethnographic research which was conducted in three rural, peri-urban and urban branch monasteries of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa in Malabe, Polgahalawela and Balangoda in Sri Lanka from October, 2017 to October, 2018. In addition, I explored three temples of the Siyam *nikāya* (fraternity) in Horana, Malabe and Polgahawela in Sri Lanka and one temple of the Amrapura *nikāya* in Horana to better compare the difference between the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa and other contemporary Buddhist movements during my field work. I employed informal interview method and participant observation method to collect data over a 12-months period.

### **The British Colonization and Protestant Buddhism**

Sri Lankan feudal society began experiencing various social transformations, especially due to the presence of British colonization. According to Bond (1992), the British

colonization has brought modernity and drastic social, economic, educational, political and religious changes to the Sri Lankan society. The British colonizers captured the entire Sri Lanka by 1815, and moved the central power from Kandyan highlands to the low-country. Later, the British introduced parliamentary democracy. As a result of colonization, social structural changes were introduced, such as the emergence of new Anglicized urban elites and the spread of Victorian values. Political structures had also been changed, with the demolishing of the monarchy system and establishment of parliamentary democracy. The British also abolished compulsory obligation and land tenure of the feudal system, and introduced plantation economy. Religious changes such as the establishment of protestant missionary churches and schools, decreased role and authority of the monks and Buddhist temple education, etc., were inevitable results of the British colonization (Bond 1992). Hence, Sri Lankan society has undergone various and drastic social transformations during the British colonial period.

One of the significant aspects of the British colonization period is the emergence of identity issues among the middle and upper class of Sinhala Buddhists. Especially the middle and upper class of Sinhala Buddhists embraced the new culture of the British colonizers. Leach (1973) mentions that ‘...the whole of the Ceylonese middle and upper classes had been very thoroughly Anglicized’ (Leach 1973, cited from Bond 1992, p. 18) and they adopted the western lifestyle and fashion, while detaching themselves from their village relatives and their local languages (Bond 1992, p. 18). However, while these new elites imitated the British colonial life style, they did not receive full membership into the British colonial regime. In addition, due to the fact that they had been socialized to the British colonial life styles, values and norms, they did not belong to their traditional village communities. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) argue that in this context, the urban middle class was largely in urban anomie due to the fact that they did not belong to either the British colonial regime or the peasant society. In this scenario, as the new elites were attempting to reconstruct their lost identity, they found that the traditional Theravada Buddhist cosmology did not match their modern social context. Hence, they attempted to reinterpret Buddhism with an eye to re-establish their lost identity.

Bond (1992) argues that Buddhist revival is an attempt of ‘... the newly arisen lay Buddhists to reinterpret their heritage, to find adaptive strategies that would enable them to respond to modernity without becoming Western in their values’ (Bond 1992, p. 300). Seneviratne (1999) opines that this modernization process was aimed to revive true Buddhism and the Sinhala Buddhist culture. The economically capable class conceived that Buddhism had been corrupted due to outside influences, and the rituals of the peasant society. Seneviratne (1999, p. 25) labels this modernization process of Buddhism as ‘Buddhist modernism’ or ‘Neo-Buddhism’. Bond (1992, p. 3) states that the Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism is significant since it symbolises ‘... a case study

in the history of religions of how a people who had almost lost their tradition along with their identity under colonialism rediscovered and reinterpreted both<sup>47</sup>. Similar attempts to redefine Buddhism can be seen in Thai Buddhism too. As Taylor (1993, p. 68) states, '[t]he new urban reformist movements are an attempt at reformulating the cultural gestalt through a reinterpretation of traditional symbols and meaning systems' in Thai Buddhism<sup>5</sup>. The impact of intellectuals in altering Buddhism can be seen in Chinese Buddhism too. Chunhua (2013) argues that Chinese intellectuals have altered Buddhism to adjust to the modern social context while maintaining a deep-rooted relationship with Buddhism<sup>6</sup>. The attempt of reforming Buddhism is then not limited to the British colonial period and only Sri Lankan social context. The contemporary form of the reformation spirit of Buddhism can be seen through the Mahamevna Asapuwa and its' radical and innovative Buddhism. This movement attempts to reform Buddhism since this movement wants to purify the contemporary corrupted Buddhism. Therefore, the explicit fact is that religious reformations are not limited to a particular historical juncture or a geographical location. Religions are open for transformations and reformations time to time and place to place.

The division between 'the great tradition' and 'the little tradition' is important in understanding of the different influential levels of Buddhist revival. According to Robert Redfield (1956), there is the great and little tradition in any civilization, and the great community and little community are social dimensions of these two traditions. The great tradition is the culture of the community that consists of priests, theologians and literary men, while the little tradition is the culture of general masses (Redfield 1956, cited from Obeyesekere 1963, p. 139). In the Sri Lankan social context, as Obeyesekere (1963, p. 141-142) states, the great religious tradition is the Theravada Buddhism, with a great community of monks, scholars, and intellectuals with their Pali texts and places of worships, while Sinhalese Buddhism is the little tradition, where is the religion of the little community that is the masses<sup>7</sup>. Buddhist revival emerged especially in the great tradition and among the greater community.

The Buddhist revival was then a religious reform movement that was very strong in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Sri Lanka, and Theravada Buddhism was reformed by the especially urban middle class. One area of the Buddhist revival that has been extensively studied is Protestant Buddhism. Protestant Buddhism is a term introduced by Obeyesekere (1972, p. 46-47) that consists of two main aspects: (1) absorbing many of the organizational forms and norms of Protestant Christianity and (2) protesting against Christianity and its Western political domination before the independence of Sri Lanka. Protestant Buddhism was a significant consequence of Anagarika Dharmapala's engagement in the Buddhist revival (Gokhale 1999; Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988; Kemper 2011; Obeyesekere 1972; Yoshiko 2015). Many followers

of what has been called ‘Protestant Buddhism’ have been from the emerging middle classes (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988). In this scenario, Protestant Buddhism has provided a value system to the urban Sinhalese middle class, who was is an urban anomie. According to Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988, p. 11), this value system has caused to constitute the modern bourgeoisie, and provided a value system for an emerging middle class that played a vital role in the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka. According to Swearer (1970, p. 259-260), ‘...the most important changes in Buddhism have undoubtedly come through the inspiration and direction of urban, educated Buddhist laity’. Hence, Buddhist revival through Protestant Buddhism is, on the one hand, a result of urban anomie, and on the other hand, a response to British colonization and Christianity by the middle class Sinhalese. However, De Silva (2006, p. 168-169) questions the categorical analysis of the practices of Buddhism, such as “Protestant Buddhism’, ‘Post Protestant Buddhism’, ‘village Buddhism’ or ‘urban Buddhism’. De Silva suggests that Sinhala Buddhist practices should be categorized as ‘popular religion’ due to the long history of Sinhala Buddhist practices, and the expression of Buddhist revitalization sentiments through this label (2006, p. 168-169). In addition, unlike the middle class of the British colonial period that had an identity issue and experienced urban anomie, the contemporary Sinhala Buddhists experience a dominant and privilege religious and ethnic status in Sri Lanka since the post-colonial period. Hence, their effort to Buddhist reformation addresses the issue of establishing and spreading a ‘pure form of Buddhism’ instead of addressing urban anomie that is not relevant to them. The contemporary Sinhala Buddhists followers of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa then adhere to the purifying process of dominant Buddhist religion to spread an ideal type of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and foreign countries. Claiming and forming ideal type of religious and ethnic identity within their dominant ethnic and religious domain is then significant in the Buddhist reformation attempts of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa.

The reformation of Sri Lankan Buddhism has been a continual process that lasted throughout different historical periods in Sri Lanka. ‘Rediscovering and reinterpreting their tradition, the Theravadins of Sri Lanka have generated a revival of Buddhism that began in the late nineteenth century and has intensified since the independence of that country’ (Bond 1992, p. 3). Bond outlines various Buddhist reformations from the colonial period to the post-colonial period as following:

From the beginning of the revival in the nineteenth century up to the present day, Theravada lay persons have re-presented their tradition in diverse ways. Within this diversity, or spectrum, four major crystallizations or patterns of interpretation and response can be identified. The four patterns of the reinterpretation and response are:

1. Protestant Buddhism: the response of the early reformers who began the revival by both reacting against and imitating Christianity.
2. The return to traditionalism

or neotraditionalism during the Buddha Jayanti period. 3. The Insight Meditation (*vipassanā bhāvanā*) Movement: the reinterpretation and resurgence of meditation among the laity<sup>8</sup>. 4. The social ethical interpretation of Buddhism: the reinterpretation that regards social development and social equality as the fulfilment of the Buddhist ideal. (Bond 1992, p. 5-6)

Buddhist revival is then not limited into a particular social context and historical movement. Furthermore, there are multiple Buddhist revivals that emerged from different socioeconomic, political and historical contexts. Buddhist reformation is then continuous process. Moreover, various social contexts have caused to alter Buddhism especially through the involvement of urban middle class, elites and intellectuals. The question I want to raise here is why Buddhist revitalisation continues to occur in contemporary post-war Sri Lanka, even though Sinhalese and Buddhism have been a politically and socially dominant ethnic group and religion since post-independence to the contemporary society. There are various Buddhist revitalisation movements in contemporary Sri Lanka. The Mahamevnawa Asapuwa presents one of Buddhist revitalisation groups, and continuation of some features of colonial and post-colonial Buddhist revival movements in contemporary Sri Lanka. This means that Buddhist revitalisation of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa is not a totally new revitalisation movement. It has some connections with previous Buddhist revivals, especially through the ideological stand of those movements. Hence, the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa not only absorbs the feature of earlier Buddhist reformations but also present their own innovative reformations.

Unlike Protestant Buddhism that needed to address the impact of Christianity and the British colonization on Buddhism and Sinhalese, as well as the vital role lay Buddhists played during that era, contemporary Buddhist monks led revival movements like the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa have different concerns and characters. That said, some of its concerns are shared with the older movement, principally, a sense of historical corruption and the need for purification. It addresses the larger social transformations of Sinhala Buddhist community through many changes. Instead of addressing one particular force, religion, or ethnic community as a threat to the Sinhalese and Buddhism, this movement addresses multiple forces. It gives especial attention to impacts of globalization and neo-liberalization on the contemporary Sinhalese and Buddhism, along with historical, social, and political forces. There are various threats to the Sinhalese and Buddhism, such as other religious groups (Hindus, Christians and Muslims), and cultural diffusion through globalization, neo-liberalization, and westernization. New technologies such modern internet, social media and communication mediums are also viewed as a threat. Hence, though Sinhala Buddhism has been re-established as the state religion, and is a prominent religion in post-independent Sri Lanka, Buddhist reformations still



occur as it is still subjected to various new external and internal influential forces that attempt to alter Sinhalese and Buddhism in contemporary Sri Lanka.

Rev. Gnanananda thinks that neglecting the Buddhist path, following Hindu religious practices and westernization have also been a part of the contemporary Buddhist identity. Therefore, the contemporary Buddhist identity is seen as not a 'real' Buddhist identity by this movement. Furthermore, this identity is a result of long-term historical influences and social transformations. Hence, Rev. Gnanananda believes Buddhism has been corrupted throughout various historical period and forces. Foreign invasions and royal marriage alliances with non-Buddhist royal families have opened access to Hindu religious practices, which combined with the 'pure Buddhism' from the ancient kingdom of Anuradhapura. Non-Buddhist rituals such as worshiping gods and shamanic practices, superstitious concepts such as performing vows, black magic, astrology and horoscopes, and following alternative auspicious times and celebrating Sinhala and Tamil New Year, have entered into Buddhism in Sri Lanka through those forces. Further, the prominence of the Buddhist temples' role in education had declined due to the imposition of the colonial missionary educational system that favoured Christianity. Due to the British colonization and domination of Christianity, some Sinhala Buddhists have converted to Christianity and absorbed the western lifestyle through missionary schools and churches in order to gain advantages of the British colonization.

Social changes in Sri Lanka have intensified after the end of the British colonial regime and the introduction of open economy since 1977. For instance, according to Rev. Gnanananda, the monks, the sermons and the publications of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa, the modern educational system primarily aims to create a knowledgeable person without a strong religious root. The students are trained to be qualified for the job market without religious guidance or a moral life foundation based on Buddhism. International private schools spread western lifestyles and non-Buddhist practices. Hence, there is a detachment between religious life and social life in contemporary Buddhists. Moreover, contemporary Sinhala Buddhist politicians do not follow the path shown by the Buddha, and do not think about the existence of Buddhism, monkhood and the Sinhalese people. Furthermore, due to the globalization, international migration, urbanization, and the flow of modern communication media such as newspapers, TV, radio, mobile phones and internet, have further kept contemporary Buddhists away from 'pure Buddhism', monkhood, and their Buddhist identity through cultural diffusion. When the monks of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa preach, it is very common to hear statements like *'now some Sinhala Buddhists don't know even five precepts. They don't believe in good and bad, karma, heaven and hell. They are Sinhala Buddhists since they have just born in Sinhala Buddhist families'*. These statements present that some of the

contemporary Sinhala Buddhists have weak ethnic and religious identity. They detach from their ethnicity and Buddhist religion. According to Rev. Gnanananda, Sri Lanka has undergone various social, economic, educational and political transformations that caused the destruction of the path to *nirvāṇa*. This has created a religious and moral obligation to purify Buddhism and to protect Sinhalese, Buddhism and Sri Lanka, and these are the reasons for Buddhist reformation by the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa.

The monks of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa believe that during this larger social transformation, they have an unavoidable responsibility to protect Buddhism and guide the Sinhalese Buddhists towards the Buddhist way of life in this complex contemporary world. However, as this movement thinks, majority of the non-Mahamevnawa monks and temples do not play a vital role in protecting Buddhism and the Sinhalese identity. According to this movement, the functions of most of Buddhist temples and monks are limited to the reproduction of a few conventional Buddhist practices, such as preaching, conducting full moon day observations and mortuary rituals, and engaging in politics. Furthermore, most of non-Mahamevnawa monks engage in occupations or manage properties to earn money. They have forgotten their real Buddhist goal of achieving *nirvāṇaya* for themselves, while also guiding others in that direction. As the monks of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa argue, full moon day observing precepts programmes in most of temples also do not provide enough religious guidance to attend the ultimate goal of Buddhism. Most of monks in these temples do not preach in person during the full moon day observing precept programme. They use radio or television channels' to broadcast sermons, and the ordinary lay people can also conduct preaching and meditations at the temples. Most of Mahamevnawa Asapuwa monks said that the Pali *Tripitakaya* had been kept in cabinets in most of non-Mahamevnawa temples and monasteries as a sacred item, until the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa published a Sinhala translation of the *Tripitakaya*. Therefore, most of lay followers did not have access to read them until this publication was released. Hence, as the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa considers, most of Buddhist temples and monks do not play an active role in reviving and purifying Buddhism, or protect Sinhalese Buddhists in contemporary Sri Lanka. Due to the nature of other Buddhist monks and temples, lay Buddhist followers of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa movement also believe that most of non-Mahamevnawa monks and temples are not enough to guide their religious, social, educational, economic and political lives in contemporary society.

I have talked with monks and lay followers of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa about their reasons for joining this movement. The most explicit reason was that there was the insufficient religious guidance from the village temples. People are not happy with the role played by the village temples in guiding their religious path. Most of people and monks I spoke to said that they found that the village temples just maintains ordinary religious



activities, such as offering flowers to the Buddha, full moon day observing perceptions programmes, alms-giving and religious funeral functions. People did not find any advance religious, social-welfare and meritorious functions in these village temples. Most of people whom I have discussed with said that full moon observing precepts programme of the village temples is very ineffective. The village temple monk comes to only give perceptions for people to observe in the morning. After that, the whole day programme is conducted by a village layman or radio religious programmes. The village monks do not come and deliver long sermons. Sometime, a monk comes for sermons in the evening. Therefore, there is no proper guidance or supervision. People do whatever they want. Some people talk each other while others sleep. However, the full moon observing precepts programme at the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa was admired by everyone as it is well organized, and it is only conducted by monks. There is no any place for lay people to deliver sermons. They said that the monks only leave for lunch breaks. Otherwise, one monk will preach for one and half to two hours. When one monk leaves, another monk comes. They preach sermons and practice meditation for the whole day. Therefore, the full moon day is full of religious activities that are only delivered by monks. There is no lay man delivering sermons or sermons playing on the radio. The monks hold the authority of delivering the *dhamma*. A school teacher who is 48 years old and comes regularly to the Malabe Mahamevnawa branch monastery said to me the following:

If I have learnt anything about Buddhism, that is due to the Mahamevnawa. Though I went to the village temple, I didn't understand any point of the sermons. Monks from the village temple just come, tell a jathaka story (life stories of the Buddha) and then say the religious advice or point of that story. Otherwise, they advise us to manage our daily life matters. They don't teach the Buddha's real teaching in the Thripitakaya, instead they talk about politics or gossip. Since I am a teacher, our village temple monk asks me to conduct the full moon day observing precept programme. I was asked to preach to lay people and conduct meditations. How can I preach and conduct meditation if I don't have a good knowledge about Buddhism? This happens at most of the village temples. Lay people preach and conduct meditation to others. So, people who come to village temple can't receive good, religious knowledge. But here, monks explain complex religious points of the Thripitakaya. They preach only about the dhamma. Monks give us the reference to their sermons and ask us to read more about The Buddha's teaching and these sermons. There is no time for political or gossip. Therefore, there are a lot of new Buddha's teachings I have never learnt from the village temple. Village people who come to temples also don't intend to learn dhamma. They observe precepts on full moon day as their custom. They come to temple, eat, talk with each other and sleep. But, people who come to the Mahamevnawa don't talk gossip or politics or sleep there. There is a good time table for religious functions for the whole day. The day is full with various sermons, meditation and the worshipping the Buddha.

This shows that some of lay followers in contemporary Sri Lanka are not satisfied with the village temple monks and the religious role they play in the present society. People expect more religious engagement from monks. They are not happy with the village temples and their monks since they expect more enlightenment from religious institutions and monks. The Mahamevnawa Asapuwa movement fulfils the need of the middle class to seek serious engagements with Buddhism in contemporary Sri Lanka. The middle class people can learn Buddhism and practice meditation under the guidance of monks. There are no lay experts in this movement, since only monks have the authority to preaching and conducting meditation and religious programme. Moreover, giving references to the sermons is an interesting aspect of this movement, since it guides the lay followers to explore more about the Buddha's teaching.

### **Class, Caste and Buddhist Revival**

Buddhist revival has a strong connection with class and caste in the Sri Lanka. According to Bond (1992), Buddhist revival was an attempt of the educated, urban Buddhist laymen. Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) connect urban anomie with Buddhist revivals and the urban middle class, and shows that Protestant Buddhism connects directly to the urban middle class.

In addition to class, the Buddhist revival during the British colonial period has a connection to the caste system in Sri Lanka. Three of the low-country coastal castes, the *karava*, *salagama* and *durava*, have been the driving force behind the Buddhist revival movement (Ivan 2009, p. 57). Seneviratne (1984) and Nissan (1988) have shown a connection between the orientation of the low-country coastal castes and up-country higher caste, and the Buddhist site-based revival. According to Seneviratne (1984) and Nissan (1988), due to the universal election system and the low-country revivalist merchant classes, the Kandyan aristocrats were under the risk of losing their power, which was based on privilege, landownership and other ascribed statuses. Meanwhile, the low-country revivalist merchant classes, which belonged to *karava*, *salagama* and *durava* castes, achieved upward social mobility under the British colonization. These up-country and low-country caste groups have supported different religious sites in Sri Lanka. Kandyan aristocrats have traditionally supported the Temple of the Tooth Relic of the Buddha in Kandy and its *Asala* Pageant, since it was a means to maintain and continue their privilege and power, whereas low-country revivalist merchant classes supported the Anuradhapura Buddhist site as there was no caste based ritual practices (Nissan 1988; Seneviratne 1984).

Wickremeratne (1969) outlines the economic motives of low-country castes, especially *Karava* and *Salagama* castes, in the Buddhist revival. He argues that the Buddhist revival was not purely a religious movement, since it was used by lower

castes for their economic agenda because they were unsatisfied with their economic subordination, and the economic policies of the British colonial regime. Hence, these caste groups have attempted to enhance their businesses by supporting the Buddhist revival (Wickremeratne 1969). Malalgoda (1973, 1976) has also explored the dual characteristics of influential laymen in the Buddhist reformation movements during the colonial period in the maritime provinces. The influential laymen aimed to preserve their influence in these provinces by maintaining their connection with Buddhist monks, while also maintaining their official status and at the same time, receive favours from the colonial regime and missionaries (Malalgoda 1973, 1976).

Malalgoda (1976) has further demonstrated the influence of caste, especially on the origin of three main Buddhist *nikāyas* (fraternities) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Sri Lanka. As Malalgoda (1976) observes, though higher ordination was aimed to preserve and purify Buddhism at the beginning, later higher ordination turned to create caste boundaries among Buddhist monks that caused to originate different *nikāyas* in Sri Lanka. Though the Siyam *nikāya* was formed in 1753 to re-establish the higher ordination in Sri Lanka with the patronage of Kandyan monarchy, the Siyam *nikāya* restricted their higher ordination to only *goyigama* caste monks. In this milieu, monks of lower castes such as *karava*, *salagama* and *durava* challenged the monopolies of the high caste Siyam *nikāya* and its restriction of higher ordination to the only *goyigama* monks with the help of economically upward mobilized wealthy and influential laymen of *karava*, *salagama* and *durava* castes. Hence, monks of the *karava*, *salagama* and *durava* formed the Amarapura *nikāya* in 1803, and opened their higher ordination for both high caste and low caste monks. In this scenario, some up-country and low-country *goyigama* caste monks of the Siyam *nikāya* left, and obtained ordination from the Amarapura *nikāya*. This was due to some controversies regarding monks and monastic practices, and their dissatisfaction with the higher ordination and monks of the Siyam *nikāya*. Later, some of the low-country *goyigama* caste Amarapura *nikāya* monks wanted to form an entirely new *nikāya* with a view to pursuing ‘the higher ideals of monkhood’ (Malalgoda 1976, p. 162). These low-country *goyigama* monks formed the Ramanña *nikāya* in 1864 in Sri Lanka. In addition, as Malalgoda describes, Buddhist monks have formed few other *nikāyas*, such as the Śrī Kalyāni Sāmagrīdharma Samgha Sabhā which is known as the Kalyāni *nikāya*, the Dhammarakkhita Amarapura *nikāya* (The Dhammarakkhita lineage of the Amarapura *nikāya*), the Kalyānivamsa *nikāya* and the Mūlaavamsa *nikāya* due their caste, personal orientations, some controversies among monks, and the transformation of Buddhism (1976, p. 128-161). Furthermore, Kemper (1980) and Rāghavan (2016) suggest that national political loyalties, personal loyalties, regional considerations, custom, lineage and temple traditions have been important components of establishing

Buddhist fraternities in Sri Lanka. The Mahamevnawa Asapuwa stands out of the Kandyan feudal system-based caste order and presents more socially mobilized Buddhist order that is open for anyone from any caste and class background to become a monk and follower of this movement.

The question I want to raise here is how categories, such as class and caste, play a role in Buddhist reformation in a Buddhist movement which has spread throughout Sri Lanka and to a few foreign countries in contemporary time. There are two main points that I want to underline. One is the difficulty of narrowing down the connection between a caste and class categories of a widely spread religious movement. Since the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa has more than 70 branches throughout Sri Lanka and in a few foreign countries, the social composition of each branch depends on the socio, economic and demographic factors of the area. For instance, the majority of lay followers of the Balangoda Mahamevnawa branch monastery are lower middle caste people such as people of *wahumpura* caste, and less *govigama* caste people. Hence, it is unlike the Buddhist revival of the British colonial period, where *karava*, *salagama*, *durawa*, played a vital role in Buddhist revival it is also very obvious that lower middle caste group, such as *wahumpura* also play a role in this movement. Here what I observe is that class holds more prominence than caste, since this movement has spread throughout Sri Lanka and as a radical and innovative religious institution it is a caste free religious institution especially at its' institutional level. Caste free religious institution means here that unlike other Buddhist fraternities which specially connect with particular caste groups, the Mahamevnawa as a religious movement does not give any recognition and a value to caste practices within their institutional level and among monks. Further, this movement does not turn towards to a particular caste group. Since the branch monasteries of this movement have spread throughout Sri Lanka, its' lay followers from various caste backgrounds connect with this movement through those various branch monasteries. However, most of local and foreign lay followers belong to the upper and middle class, while low class takes a small portion of its social composition. Therefore, unlike Buddhist revival during the British colonial period where there was a clear connection to caste and class, Buddhist revival in contemporary society shows that its connection to the caste categorization is not very clear, while its connection to class, especially upper and middle class, is much clearer.

### **Anagarika Dharmapala and Buddhist Revival**

Though Buddhist revitalisation via the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa is a contemporary phenomenon, it does not totally separate or depart from previous British colonial or post-independent Buddhist revivals. There is especially a connection between the ideological stand of this movement and Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933). Though

Dharmapala actively engaged in Buddhist revival around one hundred years ago, he is still very influential in the Buddhist revitalisation movements. According to Bond (1992, p, 60), 'Anagārika Dharmapāla was undoubtedly the most influential individual in the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka'. His teachings enabled Buddhists to rediscover their identity and their heritage that had been obscured during the colonial period' (Bond 1992, p, 60). Similarly, ideology of Dharmapala is reproduced in present society as it urges the Sinhalese Buddhists to adhere to Buddhist principles, be personally responsible for the protection of Sinhalese and Buddhism, have a Buddhist way of life in the face of drastic social transformation and work for the betterment of Sinhalese religion and ethnicity.

Dharmapala was important during the religious reformation period since he was able to absorb apparatus of the British colonizers, Christianity, and social reforms, while at the same time rejecting them. According to Seneviratne (1999, p. 11), Dharmapala provides an example for religious reformation that is on the one hand based on western ideas and social reforms on the other hand rejecting the west. 'This creative synthesis, meeting the western challenge by learning from the west and fighting it with its own weapons, is a characteristic feature of all situations of rational indigenous response to colonialism' (Seneviratne 1999, p. 11). Kemper (2011, p. 248) states that Dharmapala learnt about the Protestant institutional forms such as 'Sunday schools, fundraising, tracts, catechisms, periodicals and the missionary role' from Olcott.

Kemper (2015, p. 26) has noted that '[w]here Olcott wanted unity among different kinds of Buddhists, Dharmapala wanted only neutrality at Bodh Gaya<sup>10</sup>...Recovering Bodh Gaya, he thought, would provide a unifying focus for Buddhist communities across Asia...' In addition to recovering the Bodh Gaya in India, the contribution of Dharmapala can be seen in many other revival activities, such as establishment of the Maha Bodhi Society, Sinhala Buddhist schools and hospitals, publishing a newspaper called Sinhala Baudhaya (the Sinhala Buddhist). He also provided a 'role model' for a this-worldly asceticism for Buddhism, rejected the worshiping of gods, and condemned meat eating and alcohol consumption. He promoted engagement in Buddhist religious activities such as worshiping the Buddha every day and practicing meditation. At the same time, he criticized the westernization of Sinhalese upper class, and introducing 200 rules for the laity (Gokhale 1999; Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988; Ivan 2009; Kemper 2011, 2015; Nissan 1988; Obeyesekere 1972, 1991; Yoshiko 2015). Obeyesekere (1972, p. 56) argues that most of these rules are for the literate Sinhalese intellectuals rather than peasants. In addition, most of these rules have been influenced by the Protestant and Western norms<sup>11</sup>. According to Gokhale (1999, p. 30), Dharmapala embodied grander themes of the Buddhist revival process: Sinhalese patriotism and modernization, the condition of Buddhist pilgrimage in India, and the spreading of Buddhism in the West

and Asian countries. Seneviratne (1999, 2001) divides Dharmapala's influence on the Buddhist monastic order into two broad aspects: economic or pragmatic aspects, and cultural, political or ideological aspects. In addition, Obeyesekere (1972, p. 55-58) categorizes the contribution of Dharmapala to Buddhist revival under three categories: this-worldly asceticism, code of lay ethics, and missionary activities.

Dharmapala had given special attention to the identity crisis that originated with colonization, westernization and the introduction of Christianity<sup>12</sup> (Bond 1992, p, 55). Bond draws parallel between the Indian independent fighter and reformer Gandhi with Dharmapala, since Dharmapala also urged people to give up their foreign identity, and reclaim their true identity as 'Sinhala Buddhist'. He persuaded Buddhists that traditional identity of Buddhists was more noble than the British. Dharmapala thought that the best solution to the 'problems of the modern context' was for the Sinhalese to recuperate their true Buddhist identity (Bond 1992, p, 55-56). Bond further argues that Dharmapala propagated a rational world view and reformed Buddhism. Christian and Protestant Buddhist schools taught rational world views. The main characteristics of this Buddhist movement are: 'a lay orientation, a this-worldly asceticism, an activist and moralistic focus, and a strong social consciousness' (Bond 1992, p, 60).

Gokhale (1999) compares Dharmapala with Indian social reformer Ambedkar. As Gokhale (1999) states, according to the Buddhist scriptures the Theravada Buddhism is to be a 'religion of world-renunciation', its pragmatic aspects of Buddhism demonstrate that Buddhism has political and social engagements in the modernization process. Dharmapala's engagement with Buddhism shows Buddhism as the foundation for the Sinhalese cultural affirmation and nationalism, while Ambedkar's adherence with Buddhism depicts Buddhism as a means for social liberation and cultural transcendence for low castes, especially for the untouchables. Gokhale (1999) suggests that Dharmapala had given his concern for these factors of Buddhist revival process: 1). Sinhalese patriotism and modernization, 2). the condition of Buddhist pilgrimage in India, 3). the spread of Buddhism in the West and Asian countries (1999, p. 39). Dharmapala's role has made Buddhism self-confident, and created the means of reaffirming Sinhalese cultural identity for elites and masses with the emergence of Protestant Buddhism (Gokhale 1999, p. 39). Buddhism, thus, was not just another religion, but an opportune way of modernizing and energizing a hitherto submerged and suppressed mass (Gokhale 1999, p. 44).

Dharmapala is not a just historical personality. His ideas are reborn and his ideologies are repeatedly reproduced in Sinhala Buddhist religious and nationalist movements. Schonthal and Walton (2016) argue that:

Dharmapala set the agenda for the Buddhist political activism for the next 100 years, during which time a number of monastic, lay and monastic-lay Buddhist organizations



arose. His influence is more than ambient or indirect: the Bodu Bala Sēnā regularly point out that they take their inspiration directly from Dharmapala. (Schonthal and Walton 2016, p. 99)

This is very true since the ideological influence of Dharmapala can be seen in various Sinhala Buddhist patriotic movements. This includes not only politically active and violence oriented Buddhist movements, but also politically less active and non-violent movements like the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa movement. The Mahamevnawa Asapuwa uses Dharmapala as a role model for their Buddhist revitalisation. Since Dharmapala had sacrificed his whole life for betterment and protection of Buddhism, Sinhalese and Sri Lanka, this movement also urges its followers to follow in Dharmapala's path in contemporary society. The chief administrator monk of Mahamevnawa Buddhist School said me the following at an informal interview:

We want to generate many Dharmapalas for today and in the future. Unfortunately we don't have lay followers who strongly adhere to Buddhism, Sinhalese and the country. If we also have lay followers who think like Dharmapala, Sinhalese Buddhists would then be totally different. Now some Sinhala Buddhists condemn Buddhism and Sinhalese. They admire western cultures. Some behave as if they are foreigners and follow whatever western social trends have come through television and social media. When we look at youths, their behaviour, dressing, etc., we can't locate which culture they belong to. We see various drug associated Facebook parties and various Tiktok associated nude dances. Our youths just follow whatever the foreigners do. So, people have forgotten their noble Sinhala Buddhist origin. This is because people don't know what their real Sinhala Buddhist background is. We teach our school students to understand these kinds of contemporary threats to Buddhism and Sinhalese, and face them with their strong Buddhist principles and live like Dharmapala.

This shows that monks of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa think that Sinhala Buddhists are detached from their real Sinhala Buddhist identity. Culturally diffusion and westernization have twisted their character. Real Sinhala Buddhist identity does not change in the face of societal changes due to globalization, westernization or modernization. The solution for the contemporary identity issue is the role model Dharmapala. It presents that present and future Sinhala Buddhists should strongly follow Buddhist principles in their lives and shape their lives to protect Buddhism and the Sinhalese.

The Mahamevnawa Asapuwa uses various ways to spread ideologies of Dharmapala. They use Facebook posts, preaching, their newspaper articles and their publications to spread ideologies of Dharmapala. It is very common to see this movement's Facebook posts on Dharmapala's various statements about Buddhism, Sinhalese and Sri Lanka. This is an attempt to reach and bring messages of Dharmapala to a larger audience.

Since most of people use social media nowadays, it is easy to spread his ideas to a larger crowd not only in Sri Lanka but also in foreign countries.

### A Facebook Post about Dharmapala



(Source: Thawatinsayatra 2019)

The post has mentioned the following:

Standing courageously

Sinhalese buy all the foods, drinks and various fashionable cloths imported by foreign businessmen. It increases our humility. Though most of these imported foods and drinks can be produced here, it is neglected.

Is it right for a great human nation like Sinhalese to spend money and time on foreign customs without learning to get wisdom? Does it protect our generations and nation? Shouldn't we think that the noble Sinhalese nation would be totally destroyed if this continues? Therefore, it is the right time for patriotic elites to come forward to take immediate actions.

Hence, the expenditure that was spent on useless fashions should be donated to teach various skills to the younger generations and increase scholars. We should take immediate actions to open main shops and cultivating lands to earn wealth without waiting for foreign businessmen who look forward to grab our money. These will help to eliminate the factors that will help to cause a decline in our great and powerful Sinhalese nation.

It is very common to see these kinds of social media posts on the Facebook account of this movement. These posts spread the ideologies of Dharmapala and the Mahamevnawa's stand with that ideology. This movement states that contemporary Sinhala Buddhists are also similar to Sinhala Buddhists whom Dharmapala has addressed in the past. The most of Sinhala Buddhists are open to various foreign influences. A monk of the Malabe Mahamevnawa branch monastery said to me at an informal interview that if the Sinhala Buddhists do not use the resources of Sri Lanka, other ethnic groups and foreign countries would use them, and then sell these products back to the Sinhala Buddhists. Furthermore, the Sinhalese do not know how to use these resources and do business, since people have lost their traditional knowledge. The minds of most Sinhalese Buddhists are full of negative thoughts of their ethnicity, their knowledge and the country. Hence, the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa uses the ideological orientation of Dharmapala to support the formation process of the Sinhala Buddhist identity in the contemporary Sri Lanka. Bond (1992) states that Dharmapala's writings and speeches addressed Sinhalese to rediscover their identity as Buddhists. He considered that it was the best way to respond to the new challenges facing them. 'It was Dharmapāla who did the most to conjoin in the contemporary Sinhalese mentality, Buddhism and Sinhalese nationalism' (Bond 1992, p. 300-301). This is still applicable to contemporary Buddhist revitalization movements like the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa movement.

## Conclusion

This article attempted to examine the nature of Buddhist revival of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa in contemporary Sri Lanka. Buddhist revivals have emerged at various historical periods due to various factors. Urban middle class and *govigama*, *karava*, *durawa* and *salagama* castes had played a vital role in the Buddhist revival, especially during the British colonial period because of their urban anomie and identity issues. The Mahamevnawa Asapuwa also presents the continuation of Buddhist revitalization in contemporary Sri Lanka. However, the Buddhist revitalization of this movement does not address urban anomie or identity issues of a particular class or caste group. It addresses and evaluates various larger impacts of globalization and neo-liberalization on Buddhism, the Sinhalese and Sri Lanka. In response to impact of those forces, this movement attempts to reform contemporary popular Sinhalese Buddhism and redefine Sinhala Buddhist identity. The significance of the Buddhist revitalization of the Mahamevnawa Asapuwa is that it does not totally depart from the Buddhist revival of the British colonial period. This movement has a special connection with Anagarika Dharmapala and his Buddhist revival interventions, as this movement follows the ideologies and the goals set by Dharmapala. The influence of Dharmapala on Buddhist revival movements is still then strong, since this movement uses Dharmapala as a

role model for constructing identity of the present and future Sinhalese Buddhists generations. Hence, the Buddhist revitalization of the Mahamevna monastic movement is a response to various impacts of globalization and neo-liberalization on contemporary Buddhism and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.

### *Notes*

1. Dharmapala's Protestant Buddhism was spread among the colonial government officers such as headmen, coroners, registrars of births and deaths, and village schoolmasters, as well as Ayurveda physicians and entrepreneurs. These groups of people did not belong to either the colonial power regime or peasant society (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, p. 211-212). Therefore, these groups have been without clear established social values and norms, which is an anomie social situation. As a result, when they founded Protestant Buddhism, they have adhered with the values of Protestant Buddhism in order to build their own religious and social identity.
2. Weber's study 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' (1930) demonstrates how Protestant ethics influenced entrepreneurs to accumulate wealth for future investments, and thereby promote a special form of capitalism—rational bourgeois capitalism—that became tied to expanded industrial production and its associated labour disciplines.
3. Though the term 'Protestant Buddhism' is widely accepted in the Buddhist studies, there is a certain amount of criticism from Buddhist studies scholars. See further Holt (1991) and Johnson (2004).
4. Bond (1992, p. 21) '...the English-educated laity, fitted with a Western world view and trained to participate in the new economy, eventually discovered that the British would never allow them to become full partners in their society. The gulf that separated them from the British and Europeans they found to be as vast as that now separating them from the traditional Sinhalese villagers'. Many of these people converted to Christianity, at least nominally. The Buddha Sāsana Commission Report referred to these English-educated laymen as "a class of so-called Buddhists who did not go to the temple, did not know Buddhism, did not know the *bhikkhus*, and considered Buddhist customs and practices as something to be looked down upon (Bond 1992, p. 18-19).
5. As Taylor (1993) observes, social changes such as rapid urbanization, enhancement of new middle class aspirations, spreading mass media into the country side, increasing interaction between peasantry and urban centres, and the emergence of a rural based middle class have been driving forces of social, political and religious reformation in Thailand. Due to these forces, the Thai Buddhist order has changed. According to Taylor, declining number of rural and urban monks and novices, the holding of temple ownership by less senior monks, monks' attraction to modern conveniences and educational opportunities, and monks' involvement with sexual intercourse, organizing pornography, gambling, murder and political activities have been a result of the social structural changes of the Thai society (1993, p. 66-69).

6. According to Chunhua (2013), the modern intellectuals who have studied, travelled and lived abroad have played an active role in forming new types of Buddhist sectors through building a relationship between contemporary Buddhist studies and Western knowledge. This intellectual effort has transformed Buddhist studies to demonstrate the fundamental ideological and cultural transformations in Buddhist philosophy and Chinese society. Further, this new modern Buddhism has a few significance characteristics such as engaging with the world to save humankind, preserving the national destiny, educating the people and taking the nation away from extinction (Chunhua 2013, p. 29). Chunhua states that '[t]he modern intellectual elite generally did not regard Buddhism as a world of supernatural spirits nor as an absolute power of life and death that transcended real life' (2013, p. 32). Instead, the intellectuals defined Buddhism as a permanent lifestyle and a way to learn the meaning of life (Chunhua 2013, p. 32).
7. Obeyesekere (1963, p. 142) argues that 'Sinhalese Buddhism is a single religious tradition, having important structural links and in constant interaction with the great tradition'. This connection is based on the karmic theory of the great tradition. Hence, astrology, demonology, and karma go together. Obeyesekere mentions that '...Sinhalese Buddhism cannot be equated with Theravada. Instead it should be seen historically as a fusion and synthesis of beliefs derived from Theravada with other non-Theravada beliefs to form one integrated tradition' (1963, p. 148). Further, salvation in Sinhalese Buddhism has derived from the great tradition and aims for other-worldly goals whereas, the little tradition assists to meet this worldly- goals. Hence, '...Sinhalese people from all parts of the country can meet and feel a sense of "belongingness" as result of sharing in the same salvation tradition' (Obeyesekere 1963, p. 152). In addition, the great tradition and the little tradition are not closed entities. People can move in-between these two traditions. For instance, if a person from the little tradition wants to achieve the salvation, person can enter the great tradition through being either an *upasaka*, a novice or a monk (Obeyesekere 1963, p. 152).
8. With regard to meditation practices in Myanmar, Long (2013, p. 91) states that the introduction of *vipassana* meditation (insight meditation) has reduced the involvement of Buddhist monks in ritual merit earning practice while enhancing the legitimacy of laities' moral ground.
9. According to Bond (1992, p. 61-62), '[d]uring the period when Dharmapāla was active, there seem to have been at least three groups of Buddhists interested in reasserting the religion: the Kandyan elite who sought to regain their traditional position; the militant reformists who followed Dharmapāla completely in his attempt to revive both Buddhism and nationalism; and a more moderate group that might be called neotraditionalists who, while admiring Dharmapāla's high ideals, sought more political and less radical ways of restoring Buddhism in the modern context'.
10. The site in which Siddhartha Gautama gained enlightenment, which was under control of Hindu priests at the time
11. According to Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1998, p. 214), Dharmapala's rules for the live have addressed the various aspects of the life such as the manner of eating food, chewing



betel, wearing clean cloths, how to use the lavatory, how to behave while walking on the road, how to behave in public gatherings, how females should conduct themselves, how children should conduct themselves, how the lay person should conduct themselves before the Sangha, how to behave in buses and trains, what village protection societies should do, how to go to see sick persons, funerals, the carter's code, Sinhala cloths, Sinhala names, what teachers should do, how servants should behave, how festivities should be conducted, how lay devotees (male and female) should conduct themselves in the temple, how children should treat their parents, domestic ceremonies.

12. 'Influenced by the money grabbing, whiskey-drinking, beef-eating, pork-loving European, the anglicized Sinhalese does not want to know whether his ancestor was an Aryan from India, or a hybrid foreigner from Portugal...or Holland' (Guruge 1965, cited from Bond 1992, p, 55).

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