

An Introduction to the Role of the Buddhist Monks in Sri Lanka under British Colonial Policies, 1796 – 1848

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Abstract

This study analyzed the role of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka under the British colonial authority from 1796 to 1848, highlighting their strategies of cooperation, opposition, and adaptability. During this period, British colonial policies produced considerable social, political, and cultural transformations in the country. Buddhist monks significantly influenced the socio-political situation by preserving cultural and religious identity during foreign domination. This study reflected the intricate relationships

between the Buddhist monks and the colonial authorities through the historical analysis of primary and secondary sources, highlighting the monks' influence on the political landscape of colonial Sri Lanka. This research aimed at clarifying the complex reaction to British authority, providing insights into the underlying dynamics of colonial government and the maintenance of local traditions. The study discussed the monks' significant role in cooperation, resistance, and adaptation to colonial policies, protecting the existence of Buddhism and its societal significance.

Keywords: Adaptation, Buddhist monks, Cooperation, Resistance, Sri Lanka

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Received: 9 September 2024, Accepted revised version: 6 Dec. 2024.

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Introduction

The British colonial period in Sri Lanka lasted from 1796 to 1848 and was marked by considerable social, cultural, and political changes. During these years, Buddhist monks emerged as significant political participants, actively interacting with colonial policy in many ways to safeguard their religious and cultural inheritance. During this period, Buddhist monks actively participated in many types of cooperation, resistance, and adaptation while dealing with the complexities of colonial administration. Their political engagement significantly influenced the survival of Buddhism, the cultivation of cultural identity, and the establishment of the groundwork for subsequent opposition to colonial domination. Their actions during this period provided insight into the wider workings of colonial governance and the reactions of indigenous populations.

In 1796, the British East India Company established authority over the coastal areas of Sri Lanka. By 1815, they expanded their authority to include the entire island, including the previously independent kingdom of Kandy. The transfer in power brought forward new systems of government and ideologies that conflicted with the established religious and cultural framework of Sri Lankan society, which was mostly maintained by the Buddhist monks. Buddhism, as the main religion in Sri Lanka, has always exceeded simple spiritual devotion; it is forever linked with the cultural and national identity of the Sri Lankan society. Bhikkhus, also referred to as Buddhist monks, have performed crucial

roles within the religious and cultural framework, working as spiritual leaders, educators, and promoters of communal mobilization.

The British colonial authority adopted several types of policies that had significant impacts on Sri Lankan culture, economics, and religion. The policies may be roughly classified as economic reforms, administrative modifications, and social interventions. Understanding these regulations is essential for evaluating their impact on Buddhism and the Buddhist monastic community.

Research question

How did the Sri Lankan Buddhist monks influence the social fabric by cooperating, resisting, and adapting to the colonial authority from 1796 to 1948?

Aims/Objectives

This research aims to analyze the impact of Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka on the social framework by studying their collaboration, resistance, and adaptation to British colonial authority between 1796 and 1948. The objectives are to analyze the influence of British colonial policies on Buddhist monasteries and institutions, examine the many different responses of Sri Lankan Buddhist monks to British colonial authority, to evaluate their outstanding contributions to nationalist movements and their attempts for sovereignty. The study attempts to get an in-depth understanding of the impact of Buddhism and Buddhist monks on the development of the Buddhist history of Sri Lanka under the time of British colonial rule.

Methodology

The study uses historical analysis which is a qualitative research approach, focusing on primary sources, including colonial administrative documents, edicts, correspondences, and official reports, to provide insight into the legislative and policy framework of British control regarding Buddhism. Secondary sources, such as historical records, scholarly publications, journal articles, and theses, provide contextual information and interpretations of original material. It is expected to examine current periodicals, pamphlets, and written by Buddhist monks and colonial officials to assess public conversation and the viewpoints of the monks. The research is conducted at national and regional archives in Sri Lanka to collect unpublished papers, letters, and diaries that might provide valuable information on the activities of the monks and their interactions throughout the colonial period.

Importance of the Research

The study of Buddhism and the role of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka during the period of British colonial policies (1796-1848) have significance for several reasons. This study focuses on the unexplored area of cooperation and adaptability among monks under British authority, offering a deeper understanding of monastic approaches that go beyond mere opposition. This work explores the complex socio-political interactions between colonial rulers and Buddhist institutions, highlighting how monks effectively operated and maintained influence on colonial policy. This study

provides a comprehensive historical framework for understanding the development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, highlighting the complex relationship between religion and colonial authority. Obtaining knowledge about these associations enhances the understanding of deeper research on colonialism, religious adaptation, and resistance, providing comparative insights into different colonial contexts. This study enriches the history of colonial Sri Lanka and provides important insights into the adaptive resilience of religious organizations during colonial authority.

Results and Discussion

Both Sri Lankan academics and researchers from foreign nations have carefully studied the study of Buddhism and the role of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka during both the pre-colonial period and modern Sri Lankan history. This field includes theological, historical, social, and anthropological aspects. The post-independence era has a significant engagement with the examination of Buddhist history. Early research in Sri Lanka included a range of significant topics including the pre-colonial history of Buddhism (Adhikaram 1953; Rahula 1956), as well as shedding light on the history of Buddhism and cultural history (Liyanagamage & Gunawardhana 1965). Adhikaram (1953) examines the first chronicles of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and examines the fundamental characteristics of the early Buddhist clergy on the island. Rahula (1956) provides a philosophical basis for this research by examining the dynamics and transformations of the Bhiksu Society from its establishment.

Gunawardene (1979), an expert in the early medieval period of the Sri Lankan Sangha Society, has examined its organization and revealed its socio-cultural and politico-economic progress within the wider framework of Sri Lankan Society. Yet, these specialists provide valuable information from an intellectual perspective. Their writings are especially relevant for understanding the historical aspect of Buddhism and the Sri Lankan Bhiksu Society during the Pre-colonial period. However, this study specifically examines the era of British rule in modern Sri Lankan history.

The era from 1796 to 1848 in Sri Lanka, under British colonial authority, offers a compelling opportunity to examine the effects of colonial policy on indigenous religious organizations. Recent studies have explored the many complex roles that Buddhist monks have undertaken throughout this period, emphasizing their strategies of resistance, adaptation, and preservation of culture. The scholars examine recent research to provide a detailed understanding of the complex interaction between British colonialism and Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Wimalananda (1970) has studied the connection between the state and religion. Richard Gombrich conducted sociological research in 1971 to understand the behavior of Sri Lankan Buddhists by examining the teachings of the Pali canon. Recent studies have provided insight into the changes in monastic education that were implemented in response to colonial pressures. Kithsiri Malalgoda's (1976) research focuses on the social dynamics

and modifications of the Sri Lanka Bhiksu Society throughout the period from 1975 to 1900 A.D. The author emphasizes the monks' efforts to revise their educational programs by including disciplines such as English, Mathematics, and science. These changes were crucial in providing monks and ordinary people Buddhists with the necessary information and abilities to properly navigate the colonial environment.

Martin Southwold's 1983 study provides an anthropological perspective on Buddhism. It provides an anthropological examination of the religion. In addition, Obeyesekere (1988) explores in "Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka" how these educational changes facilitated the emergence of a new group of knowledgeable monks who were capable of intellectually engaging with colonial authorities and missionary challenges. This not only preserved Buddhist traditions but also ensured their growth in a rapidly changing socio-political environment.

In addition, Bartholomeusz (1994) examines the use of print media by monks in "Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation, and Response" in response to missionary propaganda and promotion of Buddhist doctrines. The establishment of Buddhist presses and the distribution of pamphlets and newspapers had a crucial part in the revival of culture and religion.

S.J. Tambiah's study in 1992 analyzed a century-long timeframe, namely spanning from 1880 to 1980. He argues

that Buddhism, as a religious belief practiced by the community and in public, actively engaged in political affairs at this particular time. In addition, Tambiah (1992) examines the enduring consequences of these interactions in his book “Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka.” He proposes that the colonial era laid the foundation for the intricate connection between religion and politics in present-day Sri Lanka. The monks played a crucial role in resisting colonial control and safeguarding Buddhist customs, which contributed significantly to the formation of a collective national awareness that endured even after the end of colonialism.

In his work, S.L. Senaviratne (1999) provides an in-depth study of the practice of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. He has explained in detail the methodology of social psychology and attempted to analyze the Bhiksu Society in Sri Lanka throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Senaviratne (1999) examines the efforts of monks in Sri Lanka to revive and safeguard Buddhist traditions and cultural legacy in his book “The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka.” This included the process of restoring temples, reprinting Buddhist scriptures, and reviving Buddhist celebrations. These initiatives played a key part in preserving an effective Buddhist identity in the face of colonial aggression.

A recent study examined the different strategies of resistance and adaptation utilized by Buddhist monks. In “Buddhist Preaching and Lay Practice,” Deegalle (2006) examines the role of monks such

as Ven. Wariyapola Sumangala and Ven. Migettuwatte Gunananda in leading resistance organizations. These monks not only organized rallies against colonial invasion but also participated in public discussions to defend Buddhism against Christian critiques.

In his book “Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo,” Gombrich (2006) emphasizes the adaptive strategies used by monks to modernize monastic education. Monks safeguarded the continued relevance and competitiveness of Buddhist education by including secular subjects, to oppose the influence of missionary schools. This educational reform had a crucial role in maintaining the impact of Buddhism in Sri Lankan society during the time of colonial administration.

Contemporary academics have highlighted the methodical approach used by the British colonial authorities in changing the religious background of Sri Lanka. The British adopted a dual strategy as they attempted to undermine Buddhism while simultaneously promoting Christianity using missionary activities. Blackburn's (2010) study, “Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka,” explains how British actions, such as the removal of Buddhist institutions and the support of Christian missionaries, were intended to undermine both the social and economic foundations of Buddhism. The temple land restrictions and the limitation on monk movement had a profound impact on the established framework of Buddhist monastic life (Blackburn, 2010).

In "The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics," Holt (2011) explores the role of Buddhist monks in shaping a national identity that was closely connected to Buddhism, focusing on their resistance and revivalist activities. This emerging sense of nationalism played a key part in the ultimate struggle for independence.

Despite extensive study, there remain significant gaps and disagreements in the literature. A substantial amount of the literary works tends to focus on well-known monastic centers and prominent monks, commonly ignoring regional variations and the contributions of lesser-known monks. The extent of women's involvement in the Buddhist revival and resistance activities has not been thoroughly studied. The majority of studies focus mainly on male monks, ignoring the contributions provided by nuns and laywomen. Further research is necessary to examine the enduring socio-political effects of the monks' resistance and adaptation methods, specifically their influence on post-independence Sri Lanka. Although there is much evidence of external opposition, there is a lack of research on the internal disagreements within the Buddhist monastic community over how to address colonial governance. Examining these conflicts might provide a more detailed understanding of the era.

Although significant research has been done on the resistance provided by Sri Lankan Buddhist monks against British colonial rule, there has been a noticeable lack of attention given to their political activities and cooperation as well as adaptation with British authorities. This

overlook fails to consider the adaptive methods and alliances established by monks to negotiate the colonial environment, revealing a notable deficiency in the comprehension of the intricate connections between Buddhist monastic groups and colonial authorities throughout this era.

The British occupation of Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) occurred within the context of the wider geopolitical conflict of the late 18th century, namely the Napoleonic Wars. During this time, the British attempted to obstruct French expansion and acquire vital regions for reasons of commercial and military advantage.

In 1796, the British East India Company took over the coastal regions of Sri Lanka from the Dutch, marking the beginning of British colonial governance. By 1815, the British extended authority over the entire island, including the Kandyan Kingdom, by the Kandyan Convention. The treaty not only established British control but also included provisions to protect Buddhism, recognizing its significance in Sri Lankan culture.

Before British colonization, Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka had a significant impact on religious, educational, and socio-economic aspects. Monasteries were centers for spiritual guidance, education, and cultural preservation, with monks holding significant influence over the populations around them. These monastic organizations were self-sufficient, relying on land endowments and donations from lay followers for maintenance. Monks served as both

religious leaders and advisors to rulers and local authorities, incorporating Buddhist ideas into administration and everyday life. This pre-colonial system laid the foundation for the intricate interactions with British colonial policies that ensued.

The British colonial authority implemented a variety of policies that had a significant impact on Sri Lankan culture, economics, and religion. The policies are classified as economic reforms, administrative modifications, and social interventions. A comprehensive understanding of these policies is essential for evaluating their impact on Buddhism and the Buddhist monastic community.

The main objective of British colonial rule was to organize and take advantage of economic resources. The British implemented land reforms that modified traditional land ownership patterns and developed an economy focused on cash transactions. The changes caused a disturbance in the agrarian community, as temples had an important role as owners of land and recipients of agricultural surplus. The Temple Properties Registration Ordinance of 1818 was a significant legislation aimed at regulating temple properties, which had a direct influence on the economic foundation of monastic organizations.

The British colonial administration established governance and introduced new administrative frameworks. The establishment of a new administration and judicial system replaced traditional governing processes, therefore reducing

the influence on politics of Buddhist monks who had traditionally served as advisors to local kings. In addition, the British actively promoted secular education by establishing government schools that directly competed with traditional monastic education institutions.

Although officially maintaining religious neutrality, the British authorities actively supported and enabled Christian missionary endeavors. Missionaries founded educational institutions, medical facilities, and places of worship with the objective of evangelizing the indigenous populace to embrace Christianity. This caused tension with Buddhist institutions since the monks saw these endeavors as threatening their religious and cultural heritage.

Buddhist monks, in their roles as leaders of religion and culture, played an important role in implementing many changes. The interaction between the Buddhist clergy and the British government was influenced by their strategies of collaboration, resistance, and adaptation.

At first, the British legally implemented a policy of religion, assuring the protection of Buddhist traditions and customs, particularly in the Kandyan regions after the 1815 Kandyan Convention. The monks collaborated with British authority by offering their knowledge of local traditions and religious practices, helping the British comprehend the socio-religious context.

Monks fulfilled the role of advisors to both local leaders and British authorities,

guiding on issues that impacted the Buddhist community. Their guidance was crucial to developing policies that had a significant influence on Buddhism.

Monks served as intermediaries in disputes between the colonial authorities and the local population, facilitating negotiations and reducing tensions. A group of monks collaborated with colonial authorities to establish schools and promote education. Although these schools often attempted to modernize education, the monks made certain that Buddhist teachings were included in the curriculum.

Monks organized public protests and presented formal written requests against colonial policies that were a threat to Buddhist rituals and institutions. Their pressure encouraged the mobilization of the lay people and promoted their joint resistance. Monks solidified their position as protectors of the people's rights and cultural identity by leading activities to resist colonial threats. The Uva Rebellion was a notable struggle against British governance, supported by Buddhist clergy. Prominent individuals like Venerable Wariyapola Sumangala Thero played significant roles in mobilizing the opposition, presenting the rebellion as a protection of Buddhism. The Matale Rebellion (1848) saw the active participation of monks who provided their support to the rebellion against the restricting tax policies and economic difficulties imposed by the British.

In response to the impact of missionary education, monks built Buddhist schools

known as Pirivenas. These institutions were created to offer traditional education and uphold the teachings of Buddhism. The monks had a crucial role in reviving and spreading Buddhist literature, protecting the preservation and transfer of religious knowledge while also resisting the cultural dominance of colonial powers. A group of monks directly interacted with British officials, engaging in negotiations to secure the preservation of Buddhist traditions and institutions. This pragmatic approach often included making adjustments, but its objective was to ensure the protection of religious privileges.

Monks exerted influence on policies by operating within the colonial framework, aiming to reduce their impact on Buddhist institutions and secure an appropriate amount of autonomy for religious rituals.

In response to the need to adapt to changing circumstances, certain monks incorporated elements of Western education and administrative procedures into their religious institutions. The objective of this modernization was to enhance the impact and durability of the Sangha.

The monks implemented curriculum reforms in Buddhist schools to include disciplines outside traditional religious teachings, therefore elevating the intellectual levels and attractiveness of monastic education.

Monks adapted to changes in land regulations by actively participating in legal and administrative procedures to protect temple lands and resources. This adaptation guaranteed the financial

viability of Buddhist establishments in the face of evolving colonial rules.

The monks' efforts in education, literature, and temple administration played a crucial role in protecting Buddhism and its cultural heritage at times of colonial changes, assuring cultural continuity. Despite facing difficulties, monks successfully obtained specific protections for Buddhist rituals, assuring the religion's survival and ongoing impact.

The monks' involvement in politics cultivated a feeling of political consciousness and mobilization among the general public. Their active participation in actions and resistance activities showed their position as protectors of the community. The strategies and structures established during this era established the basis for later nationalist movements and the broader struggle for independence. Monks exerted influence on colonial policies by serving as advisors and engaging in discussions, therefore ensuring that the administrative structure took into account the concerns and interests of the Buddhist community. The monks' cultural and educational endeavors served as a means of opposing the dominance of colonial culture, supporting the Sri Lankan identity, and preserving traditional customs.

Conclusion and Recommendation

During the British colonial period in Sri Lanka (1796-1848), Buddhist monks played a significant role characterized by a dynamic interaction of collaboration, resistance, and adaptation. Buddhist monks engaged with colonial authorities

in various ways to protect their religious and cultural heritage while dealing with the intricate dynamics of colonial rule. Their efforts had an enduring influence on the socio-political environment of Sri Lanka, supporting the strength and durability of Buddhist customs and establishing the groundwork for forthcoming nationalist movements. This era highlights the ongoing impact of religious authority in shaping socio-political dynamics when faced with foreign dominance.

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