

BOOK REVIEWS

Ethnic Conflict in Buddhist Societies: Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma.
Edited by K.M. de Silva et al. Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1988. 220 pp.

This volume represents the output of a workshop on “Minorities in Buddhist Polities”. Five of the chapters deal with Sri Lanka, three with Thailand and two with Burma while three chapters on “theoretical issues” are not country-specific, dealing mainly with the nature of Buddhism.

It is clear from the introduction by K.M. de Silva that the rationale for the workshop and for the book was the puzzlement why ethnic conflict should be so rife in societies dominated by that most tolerant and non-violent of all religio-cultures, Buddhism. As P.D. Premasiri states in his chapter on Buddhist doctrine, “Within a polity governed by Buddhist principles, the problem of minority rights should not exist at all”. The problem in the book, and for the readers, is that the contributors are undecided whether this is, in fact, a sensible focal question, and they repeatedly veer away from it or ignore it. Thus, the unevenness and disjointedness of the contributions arise not just from the significant variations in quality but also from the failure to confront the theoretical issue as to the validity of the primordialist argument — namely, that ethnic conflict arises from the incompatibility of the values of cultural majorities and minorities.

Some of the chapters are excellent, and give us various clues to the causes of ethnic conflict. In a chapter on the attitudes and values of Sri Lankan monks, Nathan Katz finds the Buddhist *sangha* perfectly willing to assert the universalistic values of Buddhism, the legitimacy of other religions, and the revulsion of violence, while, at the same time, defending

the Sinhalese-Buddhist identity of the state and denying the legitimacy of Tamil grievances. Clearly, there seems to be no connection, at the level of consciousness, between religious values and ethnic relations.

This issue of the relationship between ethnic conflict and religious values is tackled most clearly in the excellent exposition by Surin Pitsuwan on the Pattani Muslims of Southern Thailand, and by Ronald Renard on the minorities in Burma. Pitsuwan documents the clash between the Buddhist values of the assimilationist state and the Muslim values of the Pattani Malays, showing, for example, that Muslims can only sing the Thai royal anthem without committing blasphemy as long as they fail to understand the words sung, or are willing to take the words as having symbolic rather than literal meanings. Pitsuwan's suggestion is not just that the ethnic tension has focused on such religious issues, but that it is indeed "the differences in the cosmological structures of their two different religions" which is the primary cause of ethnic conflict. But there are two problems with this argument. Firstly, it side-steps the fact that the clash of religious values only arises as part of attempts by the state at domination — economic, political, cultural as well as religious — of the minority community. The non-Malay Muslims of Thailand have not faced the same problems of integration. Secondly, ethnic conflict frequently cross-cuts religious cleavages, so that while Buddhists sometimes fight non-Buddhists, they also frequently fight fellow Buddhists. In Sri Lanka, Muslims and Buddhists have been perfectly capable of allying politically with each other since the 1940s (see the chapter on Sri Lanka's Muslim minority by K.M. de Silva); and in Burma, as Renard shows, some of the separatist ethnic minorities are indeed Karen Christians or Arakanese Muslims, but most of the rebels, like the Shans and the Mons, are co-religionists of the majority Burmans.

Renard's historical study shows clearly that it is neither religious differences between the Buddhists and non-Buddhists which cause the tension; nor is it racial or ethno-linguistic distinctions. Rather, the key to ethnic conflict lies in the way in which those with access to power, and especially state power, choose to identify themselves, and relegate others as inferior, excluding minorities. The implication is that the focus should be not so much on Buddhism as a majority religion and culture but rather on the role of Buddhism as a resource in state ideology. This is recognized most clearly by K.M. de Silva in his chapter on nationalism and the state in Sri Lanka, but, unfortunately, he fails to develop the theme in his editor's introduction.

The book, thus, does contain material of interest to students of Buddhism, and of ethnic politics in the three countries. It does not itself offer a clear analysis of the relationship between Buddhism and ethnic

conflict, but it does offer a starter. The Buddhist religion itself probably neither causes nor inhibits ethnic violence; but we can perhaps begin to understand how and why Buddhism is employed as a resource by ethnic communities and the state.

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***Political Economy of Non-alignment: Indonesia and Malaysia.* By Kalyani Bandyopadhyaya. New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1990. 318 pp.**

This book deals with the history of Malaysian and Indonesian foreign policy. The term “political economy” appears in the title. It is a term which might convey various meanings these days. In the present case, it appears that Bandyopadhyaya blends a consideration of international economic links with the traditional approach of diplomatic history.

The main theme of the book is that for Malaysia and Indonesia non-alignment has been more an item of rhetoric than an accurate guide to foreign policy behaviour. The author argues that the fragile nature of the developmental achievements of these countries and their extensive economic links to Western economies have prevented them from achieving genuine non-alignment. To the author, this is a failing. Malaysia and Indonesia should, she believes, be striving for economic development, but not at the price of dependence on the West. While this may be a sentiment we can readily embrace, how realistic is it, especially when considering the early decades of industrialization? From where is the capital to enable large-scale investment and thus growth to come from if it is not available in sufficient quantities locally? Is it possible to pursue a genuinely independent and non-aligned foreign policy when one’s economy is highly vulnerable to external pressures? This is a sharp dilemma confronting most developing countries. In an increasingly independent global economy it is not just the South which is finding its freedom of foreign policy movement restricted but the countries of the North are also wrestling with the same problem.

More broadly, I was frustrated by the author’s apparent acceptance of non-alignment as an uncontested term. What does non-alignment really mean today? Is it still a useful concept? Even before Mikhail Gorbachev turned the strategic world upside down, the meaning of terms such as