Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Mindful of power: Politics and nationalism in Buddhist-majority societies

Description: While non-violence and detachment may be central to Buddhist teachings, there are growing accounts of human rights abuses – often along ethnic lines – in Buddhist-majority countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka, often carried out in the name of Buddhism. So how does Buddhism intersect with political power? And how has Buddhism itself been changed by the demands and constraints of the modern nation-state? Southeast Asia historian Assoc Prof Patrick Jory and Asia cultural and environmental historian Dr Ruth Gamble join host Jane Hutcheon to examine the junction of Buddhism, social life and politics in majority Theravada Buddhist countries. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Voiceover:

The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Jane Hutcheon:

Hello, I'm Jane Hutcheon. This is Ear to Asia.

Patrick Jory:

In Thailand, the current monarch is unlike his father, King Bumibhol, who passed away in 2016 -- he cultivated the image of a bodhisattva king, you know, a morally pure being. A large part of the population really did see him as a very virtuous king in a Buddhist sense. His son is not in the image of the traditional Buddhist ruler and there are Buddhists on both sides of the fence who are, I think, sort of dissatisfied.

Ruth Gamble:

That idea of territorial exclusion and coming up with Buddhist exceptionalism, and saying, "We have to get rid of all these people, push them all out of Burma".

So you're getting this Buddhist-Muslim tensions all along that border region, these awful tensions for the people on the ground who used to live in a much more mixed way.

Jane Hutcheon:

In this episode, mindful of power, politics, and nationalism in Buddhist majority societies.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

Nonviolence and detachment are central to Buddhist teachings and the reputation of Buddhism, particularly in the West is generally that of a peaceful religion. Yet in the last decade, there have been growing accounts of human rights abuses often along ethnic lines in Buddhist majority countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Carried out in the name of Buddhism and not infrequently instigated or abetted by Buddhist monks.

In this episode of Ear to Asia, we examine how Buddhist traditions and contemporary perspectives impact political life across those countries in south and Southeast Asia, in which most people are adherence of Theravada Buddhism. So how does Buddhism intersect with power? How might appealing to Buddhist beliefs or cultural norms be used or abused to promote political ends? How much room is there for diversity of beliefs including non-Buddhist ones.

And how has Theravada Buddhism itself been changed by the demands and constraints of the modern nation state? Joining me to examine the junction of Buddhism, social life, and politics in majority Theravada Buddhist countries are Southeast Asia historian Associate Professor Patrick Jory from the University of Queensland and cultural and environmental historian of Asia, Dr. Ruth Gamble from La Trobe University. Welcome to Ear to Asia, Patrick, and welcome back, Ruth.

Patrick Jory:

Thanks. It's great to be here.

Ruth Gamble:

Thank you.

Jane Hutcheon:

I want to start off with a broad brush. A lot of Westerners tend to think of Buddhism as a peaceful religion and fold Buddhist terms and practises into... We talk about mindfulness, there are principles of non-violence and detachment that are central to Buddhist teachings. Patrick, perhaps you could start for us. What are the key tenets of Buddhism?

Patrick Jory:

Well, Buddhism has influenced a huge geographical region. The Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, East Asia, including China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and most of Southeast Asia. And as Buddhism moved into these regions, it's been influenced by their societies and cultural traditions. So it's actually very diverse. But to boil it down to its essence, perhaps we could say that the central tenent of Buddhism can be summed up by the doctrine of the four noble truths, which are traditionally believed to have been explained by the Buddha in his first sermon.

And what he said was that the four noble truths are firstly suffering – that life is full of suffering. Secondly, that suffering has a cause. Thirdly, that there is an end to suffering. And fourthly, that there is a path that can lead people to the end of suffering. And the Buddha taught that part. I think Buddhist everywhere, no matter what school they belong, to, what particular perspective they have, they will all believe in those four noble truths.

Jane Hutcheon:

Ruth, I wonder in your view, what are the key differences between the different types of Buddhism? How does Theravada Buddhism differ?

Ruth Gamble:

So there's three main schools of Buddhism that we have in Asia and also have spread to the rest of the world. They kind of developed from different trajectories from India. The Theravada tradition, which is in Southeast Asia and in Sri Lanka, which has a big focus on the monastic community and bases their traditions on the Pali scriptures, which are some of the oldest scriptures. And then you have these two other traditions, the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions.

So the Mahayana tradition is different from the Theravada tradition in that they say all humans or all beings, including animals and spirits and gods and so on have the capacity to become a Buddha. And so they make a commitment to not just leave a cyclic existence and become an arhat but commit to attain awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings. So this is the form of Buddhism that's practised in China and in Japan and in Vietnam, large areas of Vietnam. And this is the one that has a lot more celestial bodhisattvas in it. So Guanyin, and Avalokiteśvara, and Mañjuśrī, these kind of

celestial bodhisattvas people tend to do prayers to as opposed to just meditating on the image of the Buddha.

And then there's another form of Buddhism, Vajrayana, which comes out of the Mahayana tradition that has more of a focus on transformative yogic meditation practises. And this is the form of Buddhism that you find in the Himalaya, and Tibet, and Mongolia and up even into Siberia. But those broad strokes don't give you the full picture because there's a lot more overlap than you'd at first think. So there are practitioners of the Mahayana and Vajrayana in what are nominally, Theravada countries and the Mahayana and Vajrayana contain a lot of the practises associated with the Theravada, which they see as being foundational to their religion.

Jane Hutcheon:

Patrick, I wonder why is Theravada dominant in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, and to minorities in India, Bangladesh, China, Nepal, Vietnam? I mean, how did that happen that those countries specifically became majority Theravadans.

Patrick Jory:

It's an interesting question. And the answer is a little bit mysterious because these countries, mainly Southeast Asia, Mahayana Buddhism was actually formerly dominant, particularly in Cambodia during the Angkor Wat period together with Hinduism, particularly the Vaishnav Hinduism that they were, the Theravada tradition and that the party scriptures in particular, which is the sort of central element of Theravada, that they were known going back to the fifth century of the common era. But it's 13th century where Theravada just sort takes over mainland Southeast Asia. Sri Lanka plays a major role. Also in that, the Thais, they sort of import some Buddhist monks and scholars from Sri Lanka to kind of help them solidify the tradition.

It's a tumultuous period for mainland Southeast Asia, that the Mongols have invaded from the north. The Mongols are going crazy all over Asia and there are huge political changes taking place. The Thais is just starting to break free from the Angkor empire. And it seems that Theravada Buddhism offered a new religious practise that fitted into these big political and social changes that were taking place at that time.

Jane Hutcheon:

So how did the, I suppose the more militant elements of Theravada Buddhism, how were those born?

Patrick Jory:

I would put it back to, and I don't want to blame everything on the colonials. I think it's a little bit simplistic, but what happened during the colonial period, a very important thing happened. And in this includes Sri Lanka. That was the overthrow of the Buddhist monarch. Now within the Theravada tradition, I think perhaps this is fair to say more so than other traditions. The monarch is the defender and the patron of the Theravada Buddhist religion.

Of course, in the case of Siam or Thailand as it's known today, the monarchy continued up until 1932 when there was a movement, a political movement led by Western educated civilian bureaucrats and mid ranking military officers, which overthrew the absolute monarchy. Thailand was one of the last absolute monarchies in the world.

They actually retained as a constitutional monarchy, but the monarchs sort lost its symbolic position as sort of head of the Buddhist monkhood. And with the rise of communism also during the Cold War, this also was seen as a threat to the Buddhist community. So from about this time, from about the colonial period, the 19th century, and it kind of increases over the course of the 20th century,

there's a real strong sense within the Theravada Buddhist community in mainland Southeast Asia at least, that Buddhism is under threat. And that becomes increasingly more intense.

In fact, in the Buddhist tradition, like a lot of religious traditions, there is sort of Millenarian thinking that the end of the world is nigh and we need to make amends for our sins and so on. So you have that in Buddhism already. And so the political events of the 19th and 20th century accentuate that already existing sort of Millenarian feelings. 1957 is a really important turning point because that's the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the Buddhist religion.

There's all this activity in Southeast Asia, and I think Sri Lanka as well to kind of draw attention to the state of Buddhism, not just Theravada but the Theravada ones of course were focused on their tradition. And what to do to protect and defend the religion. And this is when we see the sort of roots of this Buddhist nationalism that arise, particularly with the founding of the nation states, because Buddhism actually doesn't really have a major role to play in the independence movements.

It was basically nationalism and communism that fueled those independence movements that eventually ended with the end of colonial rule and the establishment of new nation states. But once you had a nation state, that raised a question of the whole status of religion in this new nation state, and this is when we start to see Buddhism connected with a conception of national identity. And this is the roots of the Buddhist nationalism that we see, particularly in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, to lesser extent I think in Thailand. The monkhood is more controlled and the whole Buddhism is more controlled there for interesting reasons. And the same, I think could be said for Cambodia and Laos where you have authoritarian regimes, one communist in Laos and one under the strong man Hun Sen.

So they've got a pretty tight control over the Buddhist establishment. But what we're seeing, I think the rise of this kind of Buddhist nationalism which is fueled not really so much by doctrinal issues, but this sense that Buddhism is under threat and Buddhist need to defend their tradition.

Ruth Gamble:

Can I just jump in there as well? Because I was thinking it's a little bit different in Sri Lanka because the Buddhists were involved with the movement to get rid of the British. They'd been colonised by first the Portuguese, then the Dutch and then the British. And they had this reformist movement from the 1880s. And you had people from the theosophical society, Henry Steel Olcott and someone coming to Sri Lanka. They started promoting Buddhism and they promoted this form of Buddhism they called Protestant Buddhism based on texts.

Jane Hutcheon:

Yes. He's a fascinating character. Just tell us a little bit about this American. He was deeply passionate, but he was also not a Buddhist.

Ruth Gamble:

Henry Steel Olcott didn't start off as a Buddhist. He travelled to Sri Lanka with Madame Blavatsky. He started off as a theosophist but then they tended to have murky borders between what was a theosophist and what wasn't. But there was a sense at this point that because the British were promoting Protestantism, Christian form of Protestantism, and they were denigrating the Catholic ritualistic traditions at the same time that maybe Theravada and that particularly the form practised in Sri Lanka had similarities with Protestantism like Christian Protestantism.

I mean, he started off as theosophist, but he was definitely promoting Buddhism at the end. And a particular form of scriptural, logical and rational form of Buddhism. And this is kind of a colonialist presentation of Buddhism in the West as a philosophy, as a meditation practise that was a lot of the time stripped of the rituals and the social elements.

I wouldn't say it's nationalistic at this point, but the royal aspects... There's a better word for that, but I can't remember it. The royal aspects of Buddhism and its connection to the dharma kings and so on. They were kind of stripped by this Protestant Buddhism perspective that was then exported to the West.

And the other thing I was going to add, I really liked what Patrick was saying about this combination of the Buddhist traditions with the nationalism. And there was another element to this, I think too though, was that the nation state when it started being formed after the British empire dissolved, and it was mainly the British in this area at that time, it was much more focused on territory than the earlier forms.

So beforehand, when you had everybody, all these different subjects under British rule, because the British were ruling everywhere, it didn't matter if you had smaller groups overlapping each other. So it's the same with partition in India. What you had happening was these hard borders or in Sri Lanka's case, it was the entire island was seen as a Buddhist island where beforehand you'd had Hindus and Muslim enclaves and Catholic enclaves in this space. After that there was like this mapping of nation state onto national territory and therefore there was a move towards uniformity across that space, which hadn't been there before. And this created a lot of tension between the majority Buddhist and the minorities within the community.

It's interesting because most of the tensions today seem to be between Buddhist proposing that Islam is a threat to their tradition, but in Sri Lanka for a while, you also had them proposing that the Hindu Tamils were a threat to their tradition. But it's two different others that have been presented during this entire period.

Jane Hutcheon:

Let's talk a bit about the role of the monarch in Theravada Buddhist societies. The monarch is pivotal, isn't he? Patrick?

Patrick Jory:

Yes, absolutely. And I think this helps us understand this whole question of the relationship between church and state, religion and state which is a big question, of course, in every religious tradition. In the case of Christian Europe, we see this separation develop over time. In the case of the kingdoms of Southeast Asia, mainly the Theravada kings of Southeast Asia. The two are fused really in the person of the king. As I said the king is the defender and protector and patron of the Buddhist religion.

Up until the colonial period, there was a kind of a Theravada theory of monarchy which understood the kings to bodhisattvas. Now, everyone has probably heard of the Buddha, but they may be less familiar with the term, the bodhisattva. And a bodhisattva is a being, a human, just a person who has made a pledge a long time ago to become a Buddha to become enlightened as a Buddha in the future incarnation.

But in order to do that, he has to perfect himself. And there's a theory of the 10 perfections. There's the perfection of giving, the perfection of wisdom, the perfection of patience, of equanimity, so and so on. So over hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of lifetimes, you perfect yourself to such a degree that you can one day become enlightened as a Buddha.

This theory of the bodhisattva was taken on by the kings. They presented themselves as these... It's kind of like a Theravada version of the divine theory of monarchy. They added their own dynastic lineage onto the lineage of the bodhisattva as represented in the Theravada Buddhist scripture. So it's as though they're kind of part of the same lineage of the Buddha and all of the Buddhist before him, they often take on the name of the famous emperor, Ashoka. This is the third century Indian

emperor who converted to Buddhism and played a major role in spreading Buddhism throughout the subcontinent to almost to every part of the subcontinent.

And his son also took Buddhism to Sri Lanka. So Ashoka, the emperor Ashoka is a key figure for the Theravada monarchs. And as part of this whole kind of theory, they are bound by what is known as the 10 Royal virtues. Again, this comes out of Theravada Buddhist scripture. You don't have a constitution of course. It's kind like an absolute monarchy.

But you are bound in theory at least by these 10 Buddhist virtues. So all of this stuff is bound up with the person of the king. So when in the case of Sri Lanka and Burma, the British decided to get rid of the monarchy. It's a huge crisis, but this same crisis takes place really in different ways, a little bit less extreme, less suddenly in the cases of Thailand, and Cambodia, and Laos.

As I said, the 20th century, I think is particularly in the case of the mainland Southeast Asian Theravada states, they're all trying to solve this question of how do we replace the role of the monarch in defending and patronising the Buddhist religion.

In the case of Thailand, you don't have to replace it because the king is... Particularly, the guy they've got now is very much in charge, but for the other ones the new governments have had to take over the role of the Monarch in protecting and defending Buddhism.

Jane Hutcheon:

So in Thailand, we have this... Well, it's an insurgency in Southern Thailand in, I think, it's three of the provinces in particular. Again, that is something we hear very little about at the moment. What is the state of play in Southern Thailand?

Patrick Jory:

Sure. This conflict has been going on for at least 400 years and it comes down again to a very important aspect of the history of the south. From about the 16th century, a very powerful and prosperous sultanate developed in what is now Southern Thailand. It was called the Pattani Sultanate. Very famous. Became very, very rich. It was a trading state and also became an Islamic centre. It's a really significant state, and becomes a really important centre for Islamic scholarship that's known throughout Southeast Asia.

So the Javanese, the Malays, they all know Pattani. Pattani is very famous. Now, Pattani was never sort of powerful enough to escape the sort of gravity of the Thai state in the north. Sometimes they'd try pull themselves free and the Thais would send down an army and they'd sort of basically make up and pay tribute and sort of carry on more or less independent.

That all changed at the end of the 18th century where the Thai thought enough is enough. They went down and they just destroyed the city of Pattani. They depopulated the whole region. That was basically the end of the Pattani sultanate. And they're ethnic Malay in this region. But they're ethnic Malays who speak a dialect, a Pattani Malay dialect, and their whole kind of worldview is bound up with this old Pattani Sultanate. Because there are Muslims all over Thailand, right? But this is something which concerns the Malays who are descendants of this old Pattani Sultanate.

Now, over the course of the 20th century as we've been talking about with the rise of the nation state, Thailand wasn't colonised. So they were a little bit ahead of the game. They're trying to create a nation state, make everyone feel that they're Thai and Buddhism becomes a part of Thai national identity.

This creates a big problem for the Pattani people who still remain down there for whom you Islam and their Malay identity is central. So things go from bad to worse. And by the 1960s what I would call a secular-oriented national liberation, a bit like the PLO in the Palestinian territories back then in the 1960s, right? So it's a militant movement. There's bombings. By the way, the Thai military is also extremely brutal in the way that it goes about suppressing this insurgency.

So that continues off and on. It's a little bit more complex than that. But in the 1980s, something very interesting happens. That is kind of an Islamist ideology starts to influence as it does most other parts of the Muslim world, these radicals. Whereas before they were kind of secular, national liberation guys, now they become sort of Islamists and they start talking about Islamic state, so on and so on. For complicated reasons, basically internal reasons, it was not so orchestrated by Al Qaeda or any other terrorist group operating in the Middle East. Not at all. It's all internally driven. It starts up again in the early 2000s. And once again, it's crushed very brutally. I think seven or 8,000 people have been killed.

At one stage, it was the bloodiest insurgency in Southeast Asia. It's quiet now, but it's sort of still on the boil. There are still sort of incidents every now and again. It's one of those intractable ethnonationalist disputes. To me, one way of thinking about it is Northern Ireland.

I think that there's kind of a sort of parallel with the dispute of that nature which goes back centuries. You've got religion in there, but you've got a national identity as well. You've got a legacy of Imperial dominance, et cetera, et cetera. You have this down in Southern Thailand.

Only very recently, so started to take on aspects of religious conflicts. I think that's for the most part agent provocateurs. They want to turn it to a bigger conflict. On both sides, I should say. But deep down what it really is, it's an ethnonationalist dispute. What the militants are really fighting for is autonomy in the region of the former Pattani sultanate.

Jane Hutcheon:

Ruth, I liked Patrick's coupling, I suppose, of that situation in Thailand with Northern Ireland.

Ruth Gamble:

Yeah. That's not fair, because I was about to do that [laughter]. About both Sri Lanka and... Well, yeah, definitely Sri Lanka. So I'd say it's a similar thing in Sri Lanka, the north of Sri Lanka and the borderlands between Burma and Bangladesh or Myanmar and Bangladesh, which is where we're having all the trouble at the moment with Rakhine state and the Muslim-Buddhist interactions.

Maybe I can claim Northern Ireland more. It's a bit different to Thailand because the British were involved and practise the divide and rural strategy in those areas where they did a lot through the colonial infrastructure to separate and create different identities based on religion, both in Sri Lanka and in the borderlands between Bangladesh and Burma. Because you remember the British rule Burma, what is now Bangladesh and India as a combined state.

I mean, they had specific regional areas. But there was a lot of flow between the two, the delineation between the borders wasn't that clear. So in the case of Sri Lanka, you ended up with the same thing. You had a, an island with a significant minority on it that sees itself being aligned with another community on a mainland, just across the water, the Tamils, but they're losing their identity to the majority on the island, which was the Sinhalese.

But what you had happened there is, and that's what we're getting at today is that the Sinhalese the majority in Sri Lanka, they not only saw themselves as a religious identity, a cultural identity, some of the early battles that were fought in Sri Lanka in the civil war were actually about language as opposed to religion because they brought in a law that there was only one language supposed to be the national language of Sri Lanka after it got independence.

But also along with that came this idea that the language it was infused with Buddhist blessings because it was an Indian language. And also even at that point, there was some really bit disturbing stuff because it was the '30s and '40s that said that the Sinhalese were Aryan, had connections through North India and therefore were superior to the less developed, even less fair Tamils in the north.

So you have this combination of basically racism and the idea of religious and linguistic purity. And then there was also this idea of protecting Sri Lanka as a pure land for Buddhism. So to take on what Patrick was saying about the kings, the rulers, the new rulers were supposed to step up and perform the role of the king in protecting Buddhism.

So rather than do it through their armies or through ritual, they started doing it through religious protection acts and setting up special laws that protected Buddhism doing it legally as opposed through imperial statements and rituals. But there was one more thing that I was going to add that's a bit weird about Sri Lanka that people maybe don't know as much is that Sri Lanka is also said to be special because the people there are said to be the protectors of one of the most important relics of the Buddha which is the Buddha's tooth, which is housed in a temple in Kandy in the middle of Sri Lanka.

And there is this idea that they've got a special role to protect that relic and that temple. The tooth relic temple has played an important role in Sri Lankan history as a symbol of Buddhist identity for the Buddhists of the Sri Lankan island.

Jane Hutcheon:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its society's politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

I'm Jane Hutcheon and I'm joined by cultural historian of South Asia, Dr. Ruth Gamble and Southeast Asia historian Associate Professor Patrick Jory. We are looking at how religion and ethnicity interface with politics in Buddhist majority countries. I'd be interested to hear from you both how Buddhism and Buddhist culture in a sense has intersected in these country's society and politics. Patrick you first perhaps.

Patrick Jory:

Yeah. What I would say is that if we think of the secularisation process that occurs in the West. We're most familiar of course, with the politics as its practise in the West, in Europe, and the US and here in Australia. And that's predicated to a certain extent on secular societies. And those secular societies were produced through centuries of secularisation really arguably dating back to the reformation with the Protestants split off in the Catholic church, et cetera, et cetera.

That process of secularisation is much more recent and much less developed in the Theravada countries of Southeast Asia. And it was really interrupted, stimulated perhaps is a better word by the coming of the colonial powers to Southeast Asia, most extreme form, the abolition of the monarchy in Myanmar. These societies that are drawn into a global economy, there are all kinds of social changes that are taking place that also drive internal political changes in the most clearest case is the 1932 overthrow of the Thai absolute monarchy.

That takes place not by colonial powers. This is driven by Thais. So once religion becomes disconnected from the monarch, I think that this is a really important moment in a country's history. This moment is very recent for the Theravada Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia. A little bit older in Sri Lanka, but just early 19th century where the British also got rid of the monarchy there.

So I would argue that the secularisation process in the mainland Southeast Asian countries is less advanced. And for that reason, these societies – they're very religious. I think there was a... It might have been a Pew Centre poll saying, I think, that Thailand was the most religious country in the world, which surprised me, but they're religious places, if you talk to people there, even on the face

of it, sometimes you can't see it because maybe we're not looking for the right things. But these societies, I think are quite religious.

And the politics, I think perhaps arguably that maybe a certain obstacle to a greater democratisation of politics in Southeast Asia. There are other factors involved, but particularly I think in the case of, well, Thailand, maybe in the case of Myanmar too, with the military, Buddhism is so bound up with those two governing bodies that I think democratisation sometimes has a hard time in kind of establishing itself.

Jane Hutcheon:

Ruth, what kind of an imprint have you seen?

Ruth Gamble:

I definitely agree with everything that Patrick was saying and there's a couple other things I was thinking when you were speaking, I'm always struck by how much the Chinese state seeks to control monastic institutions because it understands, I think correctly that as long as you have large monastic institutions, you have an alternate source of power that can undermine your will. Right?

And I think that we've seen that repeatedly. We definitely saw it in Burma with the Saffron Revolution and the uprisings in those cases. I think there's always a tension when you have very religious countries, as Patrick was saying with these large organisations of monastic institutions. You're always going to have attention between the government and those institutions. If it's working properly, the monks are supposed to check that the government is doing the right thing and the government is supposed to check – or the king.

In the olden days he2's supposed to check that the monks are doing the right thing. And that idea that they're supposed to check up on each other as opposed to being completely separate is a different model. And the other thing I would say is that there's also a tension in that the monk's primary role is to beg to get alms from the populace and the populace's primary role in this is to make offerings to the monks. So that economic dynamic is a very different sheen on top of the politics of the place than you would have in other countries.

Jane Hutcheon:

Ruth, you spoke briefly about the Rohingya. Talk a bit more about what has happened with Myanmar being predominantly Buddhist, what is the military regime there doing, if anything, which doesn't appear to be much at all, douse the flames of Buddhist nationalism?

Ruth Gamble:

I don't think they're doing much at all. I think they're playing on it. And I do think it's very much a Buddhist issue. It's also a border issue because there's intense tensions there. But it's basically that idea of making the entire land of Burma, that idea of territorial exclusion, and coming up with the Buddhist exceptionalism and saying, "We have to get rid of all of these people, push them all out of Burma. So then you're getting push back from the Muslims of the region who like Bangladesh is a majority Muslim state just next door, but it also has a significant minority of Buddhists, mainly from the Chakma minority.

And they're getting – tend to get pushed out of Bangladesh – and 2sidelined in Bangladesh. So you're getting this Buddhist-Muslim tensions all along that border region. And it's all about that idea of majorities, trying to have their national identity, a singular national identity in a singular sovereign space that's causing this awful tensions for the people on the ground who used to live in a much more mixed way. And the other thing is that it spreads.

You're getting Buddhist-Muslim tensions and the tensions there spread to Sri Lanka and spread through South Asia. And you had some terrorist attacks at the place where the Buddha is said to achieve enlightenment in Bodh Gaya. There was an extremist attack on the temple of Bodh Gaya, and that fed into more tensions because tensions keep blowing up on either side.

Jane Hutcheon:

Patrick, you said a little earlier that you felt that Buddhism in Thailand was perhaps more regulated. What about this issue of tensions crossing borders? Have you seen that in Thailand?

Patrick Jory:

Not really. My view is these tensions tend to be internally driven. Thailand has a very long experience of dealing with very successfully, actually the Muslim community. I mean, there's lots of different groups. The Persians came, the Arab traders, the Javanese so on and so on. Even today, Muslims, large areas in Bangkok, there's no problem. There's no kind of real religious divide between people who have friends. They go to the same schools, universities, et cetera. The real tension in Thailand is that southern border region I just talked about.

Having said that, I think that there's another huge political conflict in Thailand which I think plays into maybe an increasing interest in Buddhism at the political level. And that is the tension surrounding the monarchy and the monarchies involvement in politics. And this goes back to a coup against the democratically elected Thaksin government in 2006.

There's another coup in 2014, which is more kind of hardcore. They thought they'd get rid of him the first time he came back, so they thought they'd do a better job. He's still around. Actually, his party would probably ruin the next election. But this coup was backed by the monarchy and the military. The monarchy and the military are very closely related because they felt that Thaksin and a democratically elected parliament was usurping the role of the Monarch.

So Thailand kind of... They can't leave behind this idea of the absolute monarchy, at least the royalists, the hardcore royalists – the monarchy has got to be in charge. So right now there's just this big tension about the role of the monarchy in politics. And the current monarch is unlike his father, King Bhumibol who passed away in 2016. He cultivated the image of a bodhisattva king, a morally pure being, a large part population really did see him as a very virtuous king in the Buddhist sense.

His son doesn't have that whatsoever. Famously, he does hit headlines. He has got a very bizarre personal life. So he's not in the image of the traditional Buddhist ruler. And there are sort of Buddhist on both sides of the fence who are, I think, sort of dissatisfied with the behaviour of the monarch. And as this is happening, we're seeing now I think a politicisation of Buddhism because the monarchy is no longer the moral anchor.

It might sound a bit bizarre because we don't live in a kind of an absolute monarchy. It's kind like a moral anchor that no longer exists with the new king. So I think that there's increasing interest in Buddhism and you are getting some Buddhist groups are calling for Buddhism to be declared de facto the state religion of Thailand, it is not de jure currently the state religion, it is probably is de facto, but there are groups who want Buddhism to have more state support.

And there are others who are on the more kind of progressive democratic side who are calling for Buddhism and the state to be clearly separated. And they clearly are not at the moment. That whole debate is going on right now quite apart from the problems with the insurgency in the south.

Jane Hutcheon:

It's a fascinating situation. And of course the situations in the different countries are, are very, very different. Ruth, I wonder if you can talk a bit about the key personalities. I know Myanmar and Sri

Lanka have got very outspoken, if you like spokespeople, leaders of these nationalistic movements. To what extent are the movements being really driven by these personalities?

Ruth Gamble:

I think in some ways they're not being driven by the personalities as much as it has been reported. I think there's definitely extremists within most communities. I mean, if you're going to look at Sri Lanka now it's being driven by economy collapsing. That's the biggest driver for change and what's happening there at the moment. They got rid of the government that had been there for decades recently because there was an economic collapse, and people started getting on boats again because it was so desperate.

And also just recently in India and there was Sri Lankan monks wandering around all over the place looking for alms. I saw several times big groups of them because there's no money left in Sri Lanka. So they've come across to India to beg. But there are some key personalities. So I wasn't saying that these people aren't drivers of tension and aren't playing on nationalism.

So in Sri Lanka, you have a figure like Gnanasara Thero who has been put in jail for inciting violence against Muslims. His group, the Bodu Bala Sena, BBS or Buddhist Power Force. Sena actually means army, but they changed it to force in English to sound less scary.

Jane Hutcheon:

He was released wasn't he?

Ruth Gamble:

Yeah, he was put in jail and then he was released. But he was put in jail for issuing personal threats., but that kind of militant element of the Buddhist sanga, the monks. And I note that it's monks and there's no nuns involved in this, right? It's very kind of macho monks thing. They kept pushing the government to not give into the Tamil insurgency during the civil war, with the Hindu Tamils in the north. And now that war is over thanks to some horrendous human rights violations, they've now moved on to saying that it's the Muslims that are the problem.

So I do think that you are getting some wind up here because there's also a reconfiguration that I do think in South Asia brings the Modi government in India into play because this is spilling over into Northeast India as well where the Modi government considers Buddhist to be Hindus. So they're allowed to migrate into India and then they're chucking Muslims out in the northeast and actually can't become Indian citizens. So you're getting this whole realignment and this whole movement happening through that area.

Chakma Buddhist up into Northeast India, the Rohingyas, some of them resettling in Bangladesh and then the kind of Sri Lankan realignment with Indian nationalism presenting their Muslims as a kind of generic enemy. And not everyone buys into that, right? There's an amazing amount of peace movements. And the government is main Sri Lanka. The new government is nominally secular. They're not buying into this. But when it's a nationalist cause they have to answer to this.

It makes it harder for them to back down against perceived threats. We're used to that, right? We see it in other parts around the world as well. If you have people agitating for nationalism, it's hard for the government. It tends to draw centrist governments to the right. So I think you'd have a similar thing going on in Sri Lanka.

Patrick Jory:

If I could just make one point, if we go back to Myanmar, it's under a military dictatorship, hardcore military dictatorship for 60 years. And in 2011, they start to open up. They kind of do a deal with the US and the Europeans and they start to democratise, open the country up. And it's just then that this

Buddhist militancy starts up. So ironically, it's kind of related to Myanmar's democratisation which of course was killed dead last year with the coup.

But before then, there is a correlation between Myanmar's democratisation and the politicisation of Buddhism and including militancy. Politicisation doesn't necessarily have to be militant, but I think it's connected to the democratisation. And I think in the case of Thailand, maybe less so Cambodia and Laos for political reasons. But in Thailand, there's a really now strong movement, a pro-democratic movement which is kind of lining itself up against to be straightforward about it, against the monarchy in the military.

And that's where we see Buddhism again being politicised. So I think there's some interesting relations or connections between democratisation and politicisation. If I could make just one final point, sorry to go on, but I think this is really important one.

Jane Hutcheon:

Please do.

Patrick Jory:

When we're talking about Buddhism politics, Myanmar, Thailand, and I think also Bhutan do not allow Buddhist monks or nuns, or novices to vote or to run for political office. They're forbidden from doing that constitutionally. And so the question is isn't this the kind of anti-democratic infringement of human rights? Well, from a Buddhist point of view, at least the people who've made these laws know because the Buddhist monk within the Theravada tradition at least is understood to be what's called a field of merit.

So the monks have to do their duties. They've got to follow the Vinaya, the discipline, the monastic discipline laid down in scriptures to be virtuous monks and almost every day, the laity will make merits. That's kind of very, very basic everyday kind of Buddhist practise that most Buddhist would do. It's not meditation. It's not all this other stuff. It's making merit, that is giving food to the monks, presenting them with robes. You're looking after the temples, maybe restoring the temple. All of this kind of stuff.

So there's a view within that Theravada tradition that if Buddhists become too politicised, they're starting to be become interested in power, in money, and greed grasping, which leads to suffering in that Buddhist sense. So they've forsaking their duty as a field of merit. They've forsaken their duty to the laity. In all of these countries, you do have Buddhists become involved in politics one time or another.

On the other side, I think this is fair to say, even amongst them all sort of democratically progressively minded Buddhist, that it's just seemed to be a bit unseemly for Buddhist monks to become overly politicised because they're forsaking their duty as Buddhist monks, providing a field of merit for the laity to make merit, to improve their lifetimes and to be born in a better incarnation in your future life.

So that is one thing which may prevent a further politicisation of Buddhism. A lot of people think these guys are going a little bit too far. They may sympathise with them and that they certainly want to protect the Buddhist religion if they feel that it's being in danger by whether it's Muslims or whatever it might be. They're a little bit reticent to see Buddhist monks actually taking political action.

Jane Hutcheon:

Well, that has been an absolutely fascinating discussion. Patrick Jory and Ruth Gamble, thank you so much for joining us on Ear to Asia.

Ruth Gamble:

Thank you.

Patrick Jory:

It's a pleasure.

Jane Hutcheon:

Our guests have been associate professor Patrick Jory from the University of Queensland and Dr. Ruth Gamble from La Trobe University. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia, by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts. Please rate and review us. It helps new listeners find the show. And do put in a good word for us on social media. This episode was recorded on the 28th of June 2022.

Jane Hutcheon:

Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bemmel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons copyright 2022, the University of Melbourne. I'm Jane Hutcheon. Thanks for your company.