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Politics of Higher Ordination, Buddhist Monastic Identity, and Leadership in Sri Lanka*

Since July 20, 1985, a new higher ordination (*upasampadā*)¹ movement has emerged at the Dambulla Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka. The architect of this movement, a Sinhala Buddhist monk named Inamaluwe Sumangala, challenges the contemporary Buddhist monastic practice of ordaining monks on the basis of their castes, a practice that became “institutionalized” in the eighteenth century.

Sumangala’s new ordination movement should not be approached as a transparent self-evident social phenomenon awaiting straightforward causal explanations. On the face of it, the movement seems to involve a debate about the irrelevance of caste to higher ordination between Sumangala and the monks of the Asgiriya temple, one of several chapters of the Siyam Nikāya (fraternity) that ordains only high-caste Buddhist males. However, the challenge constituted by the new ordination can be seen as part of a broader attempt on Sumangala’s part to redefine monastic identity at the Dambulla temple. This redefinition

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1. There are two ordinations: lower ordination (*pabbajjā*) and higher ordination. For a discussion of the two ordinations, which were synonymous at the beginning but were separated later, see R. GOMBRICH: “Temporary Ordination in Sri Lanka,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7.2 (1984): 42.

process is central to Sumangala's claim to his legitimate leadership of the wealthy, royal Dambulla temple where the new ordination is held annually. Sumangala's challenge can be understood within a context of constructing a reconceptualized space (a new image) of the Dambulla temple.² In this new image of the Dambulla temple we find an interplay of debates among Sumangala, other monks, and political figures such as President Ranasinghe Premadasa not only about what it means to be a monk but also about the antiquity of the Dambulla past. The discourses that are produced to construct this particular image of the temple and its "past" are communicated to monks and lay people in the context of a landmark political debate in 1992. It is in such political conditions of portraying this new image of the Dambulla temple that the casteless ordination is located. In general, the contemporary controversies surrounding the Dambulla temple and the new ordination show ways in which questions and debates about what it means to be a Buddhist monk – that is, whether or not caste is "Buddhist" or "unBuddhist" ("political") and hence irrelevant to monastic ordination, who can and cannot challenge the "tradition" (*sampradaya*) of a "central" monastic fraternity and ordain monks irrespective of caste distinctions, what is and is not the "proper" "Buddhist" relation between monks and politicians, and so on – are made possible by complex political contexts in Sri Lanka.

2. The term reconceptualized space is not meant to be an abstract theoretical concept but is a name for complex political conditions that enabled the construction of a new image or representation of the Dambulla temple. Thus, throughout the paper terms such as image, representation and reconceptualized space will be used interchangeably to refer to those political conditions.

*“INSTITUTIONALIZATION” OF CASTE AS A PREREQUISITE TO
MONASTIC ORDINATION*

There is documentary evidence that “caste” was present among monks as early as the medieval period of Sri Lanka, and it is well discussed in the literature.³ However, caste as an issue in the *sangha* became pronounced when the two renowned temples of the Siyam Nikāya, Malwatta and Asgiriya (both based in Kandy), employed a new policy of conferring the higher ordination only on those who belonged to the highest caste (*goyigama*). One Buddhist monk told me an oral version of it, which differs slightly from that which is found in the Sinhala text, *Mandāram-purapuwata*. According to the oral account I heard, the policy to ordain monks based on caste came into existence when Kīrthi Sri Rājasimha (1747-1782) had a perplexing experience as he was riding his royal elephant into Kandy. As the king was approaching the city, a Buddhist novice who was supposedly from a low caste stood up from his seat and bowed to the king. Since a monk never bows his head to any lay person, the king was troubled by the experience and requested the chief monks

3. We come across references to caste considerations in the monastic order before the eighteenth century, if we think of terms such as “birth and family name” (*jāti-gōtra*) in terms of what we mean by “caste” today. For example, *Dambadeni Katikāvata*, an eleventh century text, quotes a passage from the fifth century Pāli commentator, Buddhaghosa’s work, *Samantapāsādikā*. The passage says that those who are ordained should be “cleansed” or “examined” (*sōdetvā*). However, the above *Katikāvata* text takes (reinterprets) the word “examine” to mean that candidates’ “birth and family” should be examined (*jātigōtra vicārā*) before they are ordained; cited in A.V. SURAWEEERA: *Sinhala Katikāvata hā Bhikshu Samājaya*, Colombo: Gunasena 1971: 110. Buddhaghosa certainly did not mean what the *Dambadeni Katikāvata* attributes to him; what he meant was that an examination should be conducted to find out if the candidate has been a debtor, slave, or soldier, which bars him from gaining admission into the *sangha*. On the “prevalence” of certain notions of caste in the medieval *sangha*, see Y. DHAMMAVISUDDHI: *Polonnaru Hā Dambadeni Katikāvat*, Colombo: Karunaratna Saha Putrayo 1995: 77-83; A. LIYANAGAMAGE: “The Influence of Caste on the Buddhist Sangha,” *Kalyāni* 2.1-2 (1982); M. ILANGASINHA: *Buddhism in Medieval Sri Lanka*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications 1992: 83-90. PANABOKKE, who maintains that caste discriminations in the *sangha* “gained ground from the Polonnaruwa period onwards,” gives a largely complementary account. See *History of the Buddhist Sangha in India and Sri Lanka*, Kelaniya: Post-Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies 1993: 186-188.

of the Malwatta temple not to ordain low-caste people henceforth.⁴ There is another version of the story found in a Sinhalese text called *Nīthiratanāwaliya* which is worth mentioning also because of its similar plot structure. In this version, a group of monks complained to King Kīrthi Śrī Rājasimha that monks from low castes had received higher ordination and requested that he issue a royal decree prohibiting the ordination of low-caste males into the monastic order.⁵ The king then informed Vālivita Saranankara, the progenitor of the eighteenth-century “Buddhist revival,” about the situation, but Saranankara refused even to consider it because caste differences have no place in Buddhism. However, the king later ignored Saranankara’s advice and, in order to appease the high-caste monks who had threatened to leave the order, issued a decree that only “those of good birth” should be given higher ordination.⁶ We see in both stories how the monks strategically used the authority of the king to construct and institutionalize a new tradition of caste-based ordination. However, what is striking about the latter story is that the author of the text wants to relieve monk Saranankara of the burden of responsibility for even thinking that the idea of caste can ever be part of the monastic order, and instead places the burden on some unidentified monks and the king.

Though caste became the central qualification for (higher) ordination in the Kandyan monastic community, the monks of the Asgiriya and Malwatta temples clashed over how and where the ordinations should be performed, which led them to hold separate higher ordinations every year.⁷ In this context of competing forces for power and legitimacy we see the emergence of two new monastic fraternities, Amarapura and

4. This story is in a text called *Mandārampura Puwata*, which is believed to be an appendix to the eighteenth century *Kīrthi Śrī Rājasimha Katikāvata*; cited in SURAWEERA: *Sinhala Katikāvata*. This version of the story is slightly different from the one that monks told R. GOMBRICH: *Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Kandy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971: 312.

5. *Nīthiratanāwaliya*; cited in A. H. MIRANDO: *Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the 17th and the 18th Centuries*, Dehiwala: Tisara Prakashakayo 1985: 136, 142. This incident is mentioned in K. MALALGODA: *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1976: 91; R. GOMBRICH: *Precept and Practice*, p. 308. However, neither GOMBRICH nor MALALGODA refers to the above text.

6. Cited in A. H. MIRANDO: *Buddhism in Sri Lanka*, p. 142.

7. MALALGODA: *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 125.

Rāmañña.⁸ These new fraternities broke away from the community of high-caste monks claiming to “reform” the caste-ridden monastic world. They were not immune to making caste distinctions since today they too ordain monks on the basis of caste.⁹ In the last hundred years or so many other sub-fraternities or “chapters” (*pārshava*) have come into existence in Sri Lanka, and presently there are approximately forty-three “chapters” holding separate higher ordinations.¹⁰

*SUMANGALA’S NEW ORDINATION: CHALLENGING THE
“CENTER”*

Sumangala explained that he started the new ordination movement because certain Sinhala monks, particularly those of the Asgiriya center to which he belonged, have allegedly misunderstood and misinterpreted the whole idea of higher ordination. As part of his polemical argument, he pointed out and elaborated two striking “misconceptions.” In the course of his interview with me, the first misconception and misrepresentation Sumangala named was the commercialization of the ceremony of the higher ordination that masks the understanding of the higher ordination’s “original” purpose. The second misconception he named was the “fallacy” of dividing monastic communities into *nikāyas* or fraternities. He holds that there are no *nikāyas* as such in Sri Lanka, each differing in some substantive way from the others, and that there certainly should not be *nikāyas* based on caste differences in any Buddhist monastic community. In fact, for Sumangala, *nikāya* and caste are all interrelated features of one issue.

8. For an excellent discussion of the emergence of these two fraternities, see MALALGODA: *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, pp. 144-177.

9. The widespread assumption among both monks and lay people is that Rāmañña Nikāya is the only fraternity that does not discriminate on the basis of caste. This is a myth because I found, as GOMBRICH did over twenty years ago, that certain Rāmañña temples ordain only high-caste, *goyigama* candidates (GOMBRICH: *Precept and Practice*, pp. 361-63).

10. These statistics are according to the *Lankāve Nikāyan Pilibanda Toraturu*, Colombo: Baudhakatayutu Departamentuwa 1984. The number is probably higher today as it does not list Sumangala’s fraternity and the most recent “chapter” that broke away from Malwatta, “Ruhunu Pārshavaya,” which was spearheaded by Kamburupitiye Vanaratana. A report about this is found in P. HEMASIRI: *Ruhunu Sangha Sanvidānaya: Māta Yugaya*, Matara: Bodhiarakhsha Sabhava 1990.

Higher ordination is something like what Bourdieu calls a “rite of institution” (in the sense of being instituted) that a novice (*sāmanēra*) who has reached the age of at least twenty goes through in order to attain full membership in the *sangha*.¹¹ In other words, it is after a novice receives higher ordination that he gains the identity of a *bhikkhu*, a full-fledged member of the community of monks, the *mahāsangha*. The process of qualifying for full membership culminates in an elaborate ceremony in which the candidate/novice, who arrives (on some occasions on an elephant) stripped of his robes, dons a dazzling royal costume, symbolic of his last journey in the mundane world on an equal footing with its highest authority, the king. He then presents himself in front of an assembly of monks gathered within a duly consecrated boundary (*simā*)¹² and undergoes an oral examination that tests his ability to memorize over two hundred Pāli verses and other passages.¹³ He takes on a different monastic identity by putting on new robes. Before the ceremony the candidate’s teachers will meet with the monks who are to conduct the examination and present them with various gifts (*pudasatkāra*) which range from basic food items (such as rice, co-

11. I have deliberately avoided the Van Gennepian notion of “rite of passage” and chosen BOURDIEU’s substitute mainly because of the active sense it embodies. BOURDIEU argues that “[to] speak of rites of institution is to suggest that all rites tend to consecrate or legitimate an *arbitrary boundary*, by fostering a misrecognition of the arbitrary nature of the limit and encouraging a recognition of it as legitimate.” In other words, it is like “teaching a fish to swim,” or saying that “this man is a man, ... a real man, which is not always obvious.” P. BOURDIEU: *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1991: 118-119.
12. It is within a marked boundary that higher ordinations and other monastic acts (*sangha kamma*) such as *upōsatha*, a mutual fortnight confession ceremony, are held. On the centrality of a *simā* to higher ordination, see MALALGODA: *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, pp. 154-155. On the general significance of *simā* to the monastic community as found in the *vinaya* literature and the Sri Lankan chronicles, see K. ARIYASENA, *Simāvan Hā Ehi Aitihāsika Samvardhanaya Pilibanda Tulanātmaka Vimansanayak*, Unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, University of Ceylon 1967; P. KIEFFER-PÜLZ: “Ceremonial Boundaries in the Buddhist Monastic Tradition in Sri Lanka,” unpublished paper delivered at the Wilhelm Geiger conference held in Sri Lanka in 1995.
13. For an account of a Kandyan *upasampadā* ceremony as witnessed by an Englishman in 1872, see J.F. DICKSON: *Ordination in Theravada Buddhism: An Early Account*, Piyadassi Thera ed., Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society 1963. It gives a brief description of the assembly hall and the kinds of questions asked of the candidates.

conuts, etc.) to money. Some monks maintain that the more gifts the novice gives the easier the exam will be.

Sumangala recalled for me his own higher ordination examination to which he had gone well-prepared, accompanied by his teacher and a large retinue of lay Buddhists from Dambulla. Sumangala says that during the examination the monks did not test his skills of memorization by asking him to recite even one verse. He says that it was a shameful and embarrassing experience, because people thought that he had gotten off too easily and that his teacher had showered the examiners with too many gifts. The disappointment he felt led him to write to the newspapers from time to time suggesting that the monks should eliminate the “commercialization” of the ceremony and restore what he termed “authentic ordination” (*niyama upasampadāva*).¹⁴

Sumangala says that the other factor that compelled him to start the new ordination was the monastic fraternities’ ordination of monastic candidates on the basis of caste. He maintains that caste in the monastic community is against the Buddha’s teaching. In supporting his view, he cites the *Pahārāda Sutta* in the Buddhist canon where the Buddha compares his doctrine to the ocean and states with regard to the Indian caste system: “Just as...the great rivers, the Ganges, the Yamunā, the Aciravatī, the Sarabhū and the Mahī, upon reaching the great ocean, abandon their former names and gotras” and come to be known as the great ocean, so do the four classes, viz. Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaiśyas and Sūdras, upon joining the Buddhist monastic order, abandon their former names and clans and become followers of the Buddha.¹⁵

Sumangala argues further that on the basis of caste some monks have confined higher ordination to certain central locations such as Kandy. He maintains that such centralization obstructs one of the purposes of the higher ordination intended by the Buddha: dispersion. He points out that

14. There is an instance where the Buddha himself is said to have carried out an *upasampadā*. It is found in the story of the little boy, Sōpāka, whom the Buddha ordained despite his low-caste status. The Buddha is reported to have given him full membership after asking a series of questions (*kumārappaññā*); cited in H. SMITH, ed.: *Kuddhakapātha together with its Commentary, the Paramatthajōtikā*. vol. I., London: Pāli Text Society, Luzac and Company 1959: 75-78.

15. See *Anguttara Nikāya* IV. 197; cited in G. P. MALALASEKERA: *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, London: Pāli Text Society [1938] 1960: 175. The very structure of this *sutta* is similar to that of the *Upōsatha Sutta* in P. MASEFIELD trans., *The Udāna*, Oxford: Pāli Text Society 1994: 98.

this idea of dispersion is clearly embedded within the very notion of Buddhist monastics who are “dispersed” in different directions to carry the message of the Buddha “for the benefit and the happiness of the many,” avoiding settlement within a centralized establishment. Sumangala explains that centralization hampers that dispersion. He says:

The Buddha pointed out that any five monks – monks who are of ten years standing from their *upasampadā* – could perform the ceremony within a given marked boundary either on water (*udakukkhepakasīmā*) or on land (*baddhasīmā*), that would allow dispersion. It should not be confined to one particular geographical locality chosen by a group of individuals for some presumed notion of sacredness. By not confining the performance of the *upasampadā* ceremony to a particular place, the Buddha allowed monks the freedom to conduct an important ceremony independent of the authority of any particular center or group of individuals belonging to a center. There is no mention in the Buddha’s doctrine that it should be done in association with a central establishment.¹⁶

Sumangala’s assertion that the ordination could be performed at any geographical location independent of a “center” blatantly contests the claim and practice of the Asgiriya monastic chapter. Moreover, Sumangala’s point that the ordination could be held within any given “marked boundary” (*sīmā*) allows for a *sīmā* to be created anywhere without reference to any central establishment.

Based on this reasoning Sumangala formed a monastic committee (*sangha sabhā*) that consisted of one hundred and seventy monks from various temples in Dambulla and neighboring areas. To this committee he proposed the idea of holding a casteless ordination. The committee reached a collective consensus on the proposal and decided in 1985 to hold an *upasampadā* that would confer higher ordination on all qualified candidates irrespective of their castes.

Sumangala recalled that the Asgiriya chief monks became enraged by the news of the new ordination and voiced opposition to it on at least two grounds: they argued that Sumangala could not begin a new casteless ordination at Dambulla because Dambulla is considered “one of Asgiriya’s temples,” an issue to which I return shortly. Since it was an individual monk who was challenging the caste-based ordination, the Asgiriya monks also questioned whether Sumangala had the authority to begin a new casteless ordination just because he thought that “caste” was contrary to Buddhism.

16. From the interview conducted with Sumangala in July 1995.

The monks of Asgiriya whom I interviewed maintain that the majority of monks recognize and respect the “age-old tradition” (*purāṇa sampradāya*) of caste-based ordination and that these kinds of new movements against tradition will not last long.¹⁷ Here is what Sumangala thinks of “age-old tradition”:

[People] may have practiced tradition (*sampradāya*) for a hundred or two hundred or a thousand years. The number of years that a tradition has been practiced is not important; what is important is that we should examine whether that tradition is correct or not. Any tradition could be maintained and continued without examination. If we should accept it on that basis, we could say that the Buddha himself might have done something wrong because he spoke against caste that had been and is an age-old tradition in Indian society. Again, in those days, there was male sovereignty in India, which enjoyed all kinds of rights and privileges to the exclusion of women. The Buddha ordained women, and it was a revolution. Did he do something wrong? That is not how it is. We should have the right to get rid of any tradition that is not proper; everybody has the power to get rid of tradition if it is wrong, improper, dangerous to any society, and particularly if it is a hindrance to the development of any organization. We should not just continue doing things because “tradition” says so.¹⁸

However, the Asgiriya’s opposition to the new ordination became more visible over the issue of *registering* the Buddhist monks who had received the first casteless ordination.¹⁹ Sumangala says that Chandānanda, chief monk of the Asgiriya temple had instructed the Buddhist commissioner not to register the monks from the Dambulla chapter because it was “not a legitimate Buddhist organization.”²⁰ Sumangala filed a petition with the public court, and after a prolonged period of litigation Su-

17. Interviews conducted with Asgiriya monks in Sept. 1996. The head monk, Chandānanda, refused to grant me an interview, but I spoke to the second in charge and four other monks.

18. From my interview conducted with Sumangala in July 1995.

19. C.A. No: 1267/90- Application for a Writ of Mandamus. Copy of the Court Order issued on Nov. 30, 1991 in the hand of Sumangala.

20. According to section 42 of the Ordinance of the Buddhist Temporalities all monks – whether novices or full-fledged monks – should be registered at the Buddhist commission. See *Vihāra Dēvālagam āgñā Panata*, Colombo: Bauddha Katayutu Pilibanda Departumentuwa 1931, and *Bauddha Vihāra Dēvālagam āgñā Panata Yatate Upanīti*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Rajaye Departumentuwe Mudranalaya 1956. On the colonial context in which this practice came into being, see S. KEMPER: “The Buddhist Monkhood, the Law, and the State in Colonial Sri Lanka,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26.3 (1984): 416.

mangala persuaded the judge to order the Buddhist commissioner to register the “Dambulla monks” as legitimate, full-fledged *bhikkhus*.

Recounting the origin of this movement gives some glimpse of the ways in which the Sinhala monastic ideas of “authenticity” and “legitimacy” of a cultural practice such as caste-based ordination came to be contested for the first time by a group of monks. Sumangala says that the committee of one hundred and seventy monks who gathered to discuss establishing a casteless ordination questioned whether they possessed the “qualifications” (*sudusukam*) to do so. Sumangala reports that he assured the monks that gaining “qualifications” was as easy as memorizing a few Pāli passages from the “book of discipline” (*vinaya-pota*) and having five senior monks recite them in any consecrated place. Apparent in this case is his blunt contention that legitimacy or “qualifications” to hold a “separate ordination” are not derived from the authority of a group of monks but from the mere application of the “word of the Buddha.” It is with this conviction he says that his committee of monks held the first casteless *upasampadā* at the Dambulla temple and conferred higher ordination on five novice-monks, “the exact number of monks the Buddha himself had ordained when he first started the monastic order.”

In providing this account of Sumangala’s departure from the central establishment of Asgiriya and the inauguration of what he calls an “authentic ordination,” I do not wish to be understood as suggesting that Sumangala is attempting to recover a “lost,” “historical reality” of the *sangha*. There is more to it than meets the eye. For example, one should not take literally Sumangala’s assertion that anyone can gain the “qualifications” to hold a new ordination just by chanting a few passages from the Buddhist *vinaya* texts. Surely, that assertion was a rhetorical flourish. It will become evident later that these “qualifications” are constructed within the new image of the Dambulla temple.

I must point out that Sumangala himself demonstrates an ambiguous attitude towards caste and *nikāya*. This became evident in his discussion with me about the Buddhist *nikāyas* (fraternities) in Sri Lanka. Recall that there are three major fraternities in Sri Lanka. Sumangala maintains that he and his colleagues do not recognize the legitimacy of designating these three fraternities as *nikāyas*. For a *nikāya* to exist there should be “clear differences.” While Sumangala accepts that monks of the three fraternities have varying internal monastic customs such as shaving eye-

brows, he insists that these differences are not substantive and therefore do not constitute a *nikāya*. He explains:

What distinguishes one "sect" from another is not just trivial matters like the caste of its members but the interpretations and perception of the ultimate reality of the teaching, to which a "given sect" collectively adheres. If we take, for example, the interpretation of Sinhalese Buddhism and that of the Korean or Japanese, we could see clear differences; while the Korean and the Japanese Buddhist monks recognize the Buddha more as a deity or a messenger of a deity than as a human being, the Sinhala monks of all three *nikāyas* accept indisputably that the Buddha was but human. The very same principle applies to other key concepts of the Buddha's doctrine such as "suffering," "impermanence," and "*nibbāna*," which all three *nikāya* monks accept as fundamental and preach to the laity without any difference whatsoever.

Even as he explained how he does not recognize the existence of separate fraternities among monks, I noticed that Sumangala himself had shaved his eyebrows, and I asked him why he had done so. He quickly responded: "Yes, I shaved the eyebrows because I am in the Siyam Nikāya" (*mama siyam nikāyene*). Why would Sumangala who maintained the "fallacy" of the Buddhist fraternities say that he is "in the Siyam Nikāya"? It certainly cannot be a slip of the tongue because he had not only accepted very clearly that he was "in the Siyam Nikāya," but he had also shaved his eyebrows, a practice that is unique to high-caste monks of the Siyam fraternity. What is worth noting about this paradox is that, even though he himself considers that the "external practices" do not constitute a fraternity, he is well aware that the majority of monks have adopted them as marks of distinction. Sumangala's seemingly ambiguous attitude toward caste signals that he operates within Sinhala Buddhist monastic relations that define his identity as a "high-caste monk" who is attempting to eliminate caste from the monkhood. If Sumangala does not shave his eyebrows he would surely be identified as a "low-caste monk," an identity he apparently does not want to acquire. Were Sumangala to be categorized as a low-caste monk, his program for eliminating caste would seem to be motivated by self-interest. By maintaining the status of a high-caste monk, he more effectively removes the appearance of self-interest, but only at the expense of assuming the very identity he seeks to eliminate.²¹

21. However, Sumangala says that monks who receive higher ordination at the Dambulla temple may or may not shave their eyebrows.

Sumangala is one of the best known monastic figures among both monks and lay people in Sri Lanka. In fact, most university monks, who first told me about Sumangala during the times I was researching the contemporary politics of monastic identity in Sri Lanka,²² regarded Sumangala as a “real monk” (*niyama hānuduru kenek*). It is this idea of the “real monk” that Sumangala constructs and debates within the new representation of the Dambulla temple where the new ordination is held annually. I want now to describe what the Dambulla temple is and the political conditions within which Sumangala and his supporters construct a particular image of the temple. It is in this new image of the Dambulla temple that the new ordination came into being and is debated among both monks and lay people.

*CONSTRUCTION OF A RECONCEPTUALIZED SPACE
OF THE DAMBULLA TEMPLE: THE LOCATION
OF THE NEW ORDINATION*

The Dambulla temple, or the “Golden Rock Temple” (*Rangiri Dambulu Vihāraya*), as it is well-known among the Sinhalese, is one of Sri Lanka’s most impressive places of Buddhist pilgrimage. It sits on an enormous rock, which rises up to a height of over six hundred feet, and overlooks a small town. The temple, with more than seventy-three gold-painted images of the Buddha in many of its ninety some caves, is famous for the myths associated with the “mysterious” drops of water that seep incessantly from the ceiling of rock over the image house.²³ Dambulla is also one of the wealthiest Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka, owning more than 15,000 acres of land donated by kings.²⁴ It is at this

22. The interviews that I conducted with more than ninety university monks in Sri Lanka in 1994, 1995, and 1996 are part of a larger project that explores the contemporary politics of monastic identity in Sri Lanka.

23. *Pūjāvaliya*, which gives this account of King Nissankamalla’s patronage of the temple, first uses the term “Sawarna Giri Guhā” or the “Golden Rock Cave;” cited in M. ILANGASINHA: *Rangiri Dambulu Vihāraya*, Dehiwala: Sri Devi Printers 1994: 22. However, there is some debate about who really built the seventy-three Buddha images. See A. SENEVIRATNA: *The Golden Rock Temple of Dambulla*, Colombo: Ministry of Cultural Affairs 1983: 31-39.

24. On the Sinhalese royal politics of periodic land donations to Buddhist temples, see S. KEMPER: “Wealth and Reformation in Sinhalese Buddhist Monasticism,” in D. Swearer and S. Sizemore eds.: *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 1990: 152-158. ILANGASINHA says that the popular belief is that Vattagāmini Abhaya (89-77 BCE) donated 18,000 acres of

temple, of which Sumangala is the current incumbent, that the new higher ordination is held annually.

The “early” history of the Dambulla temple is a debated issue. This is because one of the most celebrated texts of Sinhala Buddhist history, *Mahāvamsa* (lit. Great Chronicle fifth century AD), does not have any mention of the temple until about the tenth century.²⁵ However, Sumangala, with a well-respected historian on his side, challenges the *Mahāvamsa* and claims that the Dambulla temple not only existed “long before” the *Mahāvamsa* account of Sinhala Buddhist history began but was also an important center of Theravāda Buddhism. On the basis of some inscriptions that excavation works unearthed in 1988, they argue that the area of Dambulla was “... among the earliest Aryan settlements in the Island”²⁶ and trace the origin of the temple to King Dēvānampiyatissa himself (3rd century BCE), under whose leadership Buddhism is said to have been introduced to Sri Lanka.²⁷ Implicit in this claim is that Dambulla temple is as “ancient” as both Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the “āryan” Sinhalese race itself. It is within the context of this debate about the “earliest” existence of the Dambulla temple that a new image of the temple begins to emerge.

The debate about the antiquity of the Dambulla temple – with the embellishments of the “ancient past” associated with it today – has been in progress since the late 1970s. The debate came about in the wake of at least two important interventions by the UNP government authorities in the affairs of the Dambulla temple.²⁸ The first instance of intervention occurred in 1979 when the UNP government of Sri Lanka designated the city of Dambulla as a “sacred area” (*pūjā bhūmiyak*). The previous

land to the temple. However, today the temple owns an area of over 15,000 acres. See M. ILANGASINHA: “Notes on the History of Sigiriya-Dambulla Region in the 18th and the 19th Centuries,” in S. Bandaranayake et. al., eds.: *Settlement Archaeology of the Sigiriya Dambulla Region*, Kelaniya: University of Kelaniya 1990: 156.

25. Cited in M. ILANGASINHA: *Rangiri Dambulu Vihāraya*, pp. 69-70.

26. M. ILANGASINHA: “Dambulla Rock Temple: Its Name and History,” in H. T. BASNAYAKE ed.: *Dambulla Project: First Archaeological and Excavation Project*, Colombo: Ministry of Kelaniya 1988: 59-70.

27. ILANGASINHA claims that it was king Devanampiyatissa’s brother, Sūratissa, who donated the temple to its “early Buddhist monks.” See M. ILANGASINHA: “Dambulla Rock Temple,” p. 61.

28. It is probable that there were other state interventions. These two interventions are the most visible to me from my interviews and archival research in Sri Lanka.

SLFP government had proposed to undertake this project in the early 1970s, but abandoned it because of a “lack of funding.”²⁹ However, when the newly elected UNP government financed the project, it did not single out Dambulla; rather, as Steven Kemper observes, Dambulla was one of many Buddhist areas that the government had undertaken to develop and designate as “sacred” at the expense of over 1,000 million rupees (1991:179).³⁰ Moreover, Dambulla is located at the center of the triangle constituted by three “ancient,” “sacred” capitals, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandy.

The second state intervention began when the UNP government sponsored an archaeological excavation project called the “Dambulla project.” The purpose of the project, as its director put it, was to “excavate and expose, as far as possible, the ‘ancient’ monuments belonging to Dambulla...” and “develop and elevate Dambulla as a center of pilgrimage and visitor interest.”³¹ In the ambitious words of W. Lokubandara, the then minister of cultural affairs, the project was to “reveal the hitherto unknown past” of the Dambulla temple.³² This was part of a larger project that the government’s Cultural Triangle program had undertaken to excavate and develop six other “sacred places.”³³ In 1985, R. Premadasa, then Prime Minister of Sri Lanka,³⁴ who was also the chairman of these projects, inaugurated the “Dambulla project.” Equally significant about his involvement in this project is his published estimate of it. In the foreword to the “Project Report” in 1988, Premadasa endorsed its findings as “scientific and authoritative.”³⁵ My point here is obvious: These state interventions into the Dambulla temple and the high opinions of them represented by Prime Minister Premadasa contributed significantly to the conditions that made possible the construction of this particular ancient, sacred image of the Dambulla temple. The new ordination is located in this image of the Dambulla temple.

29. *Divayina*, June 20, 1982.

30. See S. KEMPER: *The Presence of The Past: Chronicles, Politics and Culture in Sinhala Life*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1991: 179.

31. BASNAYAKE’s introduction to *Dambulla Project*.

32. LOKUBANDARA’s “Preface” to *Dambulla project*.

33. Roland SILVA’s “Note on the Project” in *Dambulla Project*.

34. Prime Minister Premadasa became President of Sri Lanka in 1989.

35. Premadasa’s “Foreword” to the *Dambulla Project*.

Already during the early phase of these state interventions, certain discourses about the antiquity of the Dambulla temple began to surface. For example, an article that was published in a leading Sinhala newspaper in 1982 had a captivating title, “Dambulla, the Golden Rock: the Oasis of the Sinhala Heroes.”³⁶ The article races through the “ancient history,” the *very beginning* of the Dambulla temple, highlighting abruptly the seventeenth-century Sri Lankan political situation. It refers to the “past Dambulla monks” in the context of a peasant revolution that took place against the British in 1848. In doing so, the article turns the “Dambulla monks” into “heroic monks” by stating that the resident monks of the Dambulla temple had “counseled and helped Sinhala leaders such as Virapurana Appu launch the last Sinhala freedom struggle even at the expense of risking their own lives.”³⁷ In a similar way, today Sumangala refers to Mahātissa, a monk from a different period (29 BCE) who occupies a controversial place in the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Mahātissa, as Rahula points out, belonged to one of the early schools of Buddhism, Mahāvihāra. But he was later expelled from the Mahāvihāra because he had accepted the rival monastery Abhayagiri from King Vattagāmini to whom he is said to have given shelter at his monastery during the king’s fourteen-year period of exile.³⁸ There is no evidence to suggest that Mahātissa had ever lived at the temple and had given King Vattagāmini shelter there, but Sumangala argues otherwise. He says that “heroic monks” (*vīra hāmuduruwaru*) like Mahātissa had lived at the Dambulla temple and had “counseled Kings who saved the Sinhalese nation.” Sumangala claims that the *Mahāvamsa* chronicle did not mention the Dambulla temple because its writers, who were the monks of the majority tradition of the Mahāvihāra school, considered Mahātissa an “unorthodox” monk who did “unorthodox” things.³⁹ These discourses about the “past heroic monks” are communicated in relation

36. “Sinhala Vīrayangē Kshēma Bhūmiyak Vū Rangiri Dambulla,” *Divayana*, June 20, 1982.

37. *Ibid.*

38. W. RAHULA: *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, 3rd ed., Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Center 1994: 83.

39. In his interview with me in 1996. The *Mahāvamsa* mentions this episode between Mahātissa and Vattagāmini, but it says that Mahātissa was from Accagala; cited in A. SENEVIRATNA: *Dambulla Rock Temple*, pp. 14–15. However, ILANGASINHA holds strongly that Accagala was Dambulla. See M. ILANGASINHA: “Dambulla Rock Temple,” p. 65.

to a hallmark socio-political debate that took place in 1992, to which I will return shortly.

The early phases of representing the Dambulla temple as an “oasis,” in which “heroic monks lived in the ancient past,” were accompanied by another very important shift within the Dambulla temple. The shift took place in the administrative leadership of the temple. Some time in the early 1980s, Udugama Buddharakkhita, the previous incumbent (*vihāra-dipati*) of the temple, who was Sumangala’s teacher, became ill, and, according to convention, his office passed to Sumangala. This convention was the “tradition of the pupillary succession” in which the eldest pupil assumes the leadership of the temple following the death of the teacher/incumbent or some illness. The convention has become the law now.⁴⁰

As early as 1984, Sumangala’s emerging leadership of the Dambulla temple had generated some unease among the Asgiriya monks because he did not seem to conform to the then-existing relationship between the Asgiriya chapter and the Dambulla temple.⁴¹ Dambulla is considered one of seven temples that are under the jurisdiction of the Asgiriya.⁴² This is because, as Ilangasinha points out, *Potuhāra Tudapata*, an eighteenth century “letter patent,” records that King Kīrthi Śrī Rājasimha, who had renovated the temple, had entrusted the Asgiriya monks with the administration of the Dambulla temple on the grounds that its resident Lēnāvala monks had not executed the “rituals of the temple satisfactorily.”⁴³ (This is the same king who is said to have issued the royal decree that only high-caste males should be admitted into the monastic order.) Over time, as Ilangasinha further shows, the Asgiriya monks also

40. Regarding pupillary succession, see U. PHADNIS: *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka*, New Delhi: Manohar 1976: 99. For a discussion of the process by which this “tradition” became legal in 1924, see S. KEMPER: “The Buddhist Monkhood,” pp. 416-421.

41. “Sāmpradāya Rāka Gānīma Api Agē Karamu” (“We Must Proudly Safeguard Tradition”), *Lankādīpa*, Oct. 9, 1984. The author of this article, who is an Asgiriya monk, states implicitly the Asgiriya’s concern over Sumangala’s emerging leadership of the temple.

42. The author of the above article identifies Dambulla clearly as a property of the Asgiriya temple. MALALGODA also says it is one of seven temples which fall under the Asgiriya jurisdiction. See MALALGODA: *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society*, p. 68.

43. M. ILANGASINHA: “Notes On the History,” p. 157; idem, *Rangiri Dambulu Vihāraya*, p. 71.

undertook the task of appointing the head of the Dambulla temple, who was usually a monk selected from the Asgiriya temple itself.⁴⁴ There is evidence that as late as 1835 the Asgiriya monks had appointed one of their own monks as the head of the Dambulla temple and had justified doing so because, they claimed, the “priests resident at Dambulla were ignorant of Pali” and therefore, were unqualified for the office.⁴⁵ It is important to note that the head monk that the Asgiriya temple appointed did not reside at the Dambulla temple. He played mainly a symbolic role in administering the temple as he paid perfunctory annual visits to Dambulla (ILANGASINHA 1994: 76). However, it is in the context of the head monk’s annual visits to Dambulla that the Asgiriya monks make visible the authority of their claim to the ownership of the Dambulla temple. During the head monk’s visits to Dambulla, the resident monks would pay respect to him by handing over keys not only to the Dambulla temple but also to five other temples that belong to Dambulla. Ilangasinha points out the unique aspect of this practice: Once the Asgiriya head monk received the keys he could refuse to return them to the Dambulla monks or could even hand them over to some other monks.⁴⁶ Thus the ritual gesture of “handing over the keys” clearly enforced the Asgiriya’s authoritative claim that Dambulla is “one of its temples” and that the monks who maintain it are temporary custodians. In fact, Ilangasinha points out, this practice of “handing over the keys” had given rise to sporadic conflicts between the Asgiriya’s head and the resident monks of the Dambulla temple. This created eventually what Ilangasinha calls a “dual control system” in which there were two heads of the Dambulla temple at the same time, one at Dambulla and the other at Asgiriya.⁴⁷

With Sumangala’s emerging leadership of the temple in the mid-1980s, supported by more than one hundred and seventy Buddhist

44. M. ILANGASINHA: “*Notes on the History*,” p. 157. Elsewhere, he points out that there were two heads at the Dambulla temple because the “*Lēnāvala*” monks who continued to live at the temple claimed that they too were heir to it. See M. ILANGASINHA: *Rangiri Dambulu Vihāraya*, p. 72.

45. This is found in A. C. LAWRIE: “A Gazetteer of the Central Province of Ceylon,” in S. Bandaranayake et. al., eds.: *Settlement Archaeology*, pp. 169-193.

46. M. ILANGASINHA: *Rangiri Dambulu Vihāraya*, pp. 76-77. ILANGASINHA does not mention when this practice originated or ended.

47. M. ILANGASINHA: “Notes On the History,” p. 157; idem, *Rangiri Dambulu Vihāraya*, p. 72.

monks from Dambulla and its neighboring areas, the Dambulla temple entered a new phase of administration. It was during this time (a year before Sumangala started the new ordination) that the secretary monk of the Asgiriya temple wrote to a Sinhala newspaper an open letter entitled, “We must protect proudly the long-standing (*cirāgata*) tradition.” The content of the article indicated clearly that by “long-standing tradition” the Asgiriya monk meant that the Dambulla monks should recognize Asgiriya’s long line of monastic leadership of the Dambulla temple.⁴⁸ The reference to the Dambulla temple as “an oasis,” an “independent temple” with its “ancient” lineage of “heroic monks” implicitly contested the authority of the Asgiriya’s claim. Moreover, Sumangala’s institution of a new ordination explicitly contested the Asgiriya’s caste-based ordination, which had worked to link the two temples for many years and to authorize the Asgiriya monks’ claim to the “long-standing” leadership of the Dambulla temple. It was through the Asgiriya’s caste-based ordination, which they received every year, that the Dambulla monks had defined themselves as *bhikkhus*, “full-fledged monks.” By obviating the Dambulla monks’ long-maintained necessity of receiving ordination from the Asgiriya temple, the new ordination created a gulf between the two temples in such a way that the Asgiriya monks could no longer be part of the Dambulla temple since they do not now participate in the same tradition of the higher ordination. Before I discuss ways in which some of the discourses are communicated, I want to examine a few contemporary practices that render those discourses about the antiquity of the Dambulla temple more visible to its visitors.

Today, the Dambulla temple presents itself as an “ancient, sacred, independent” Buddhist temple in every sense of these terms. The practices that communicate these adjectives as meaningful are made strikingly visible to visitors. One such practice is the dress code (“dressing properly”) to which all visitors – both local and foreign – should conform when entering the “sacred” grounds of the temple on the rock. Until very recently, as far as my research indicates, there was no formal injunction against wearing “short frocks” or “short-trousers” within the “sacred” premises at Dambulla.⁴⁹

48. *Divayina*, June 20, 1984.

49. “Footwear, headgear, cameras taboo at Dambulla Viharaya,” *Daily News*, Feb. 8, 1994.

It is, of course, customary that when Buddhists enter the “image house” (*budu gē*) at any Buddhist temple they do so dressed in an attire that covers almost completely both the upper and lower parts of the body as a mark of reverence for the Buddha. However, there is no “guard” at the entrance to most temples to bar those “dressed improperly” from entering the temple. The only religious establishment where there are “guards” at the entrance making sure that visitors are “dressed properly” is the Temple of the Tooth (*daladā māligāwa*),⁵⁰ a center of worship frequented by thousands of daily visitors – both local and foreign. Those who are not “dressed properly” can rent sarongs at the main entrance before entering the temple.

Sumangala has imposed the very same practice at the Dambulla temple. No visitor dressed improperly can enter the image house. A dozen guards are stationed at the entrance to the temple on the rock to enforce this practice. Those who need to rent a sarong (as did I, dressed in shorts), may do so from little flower shops at the base of the rock.

Among other injunctions against head-gear and foot-wear, which are observed at all Buddhist temples, the most conspicuous is the ban on cameras in the temple. This ban is rendered visible by the “confiscated” film rolls displayed hanging on the wall behind the security desk near the entrance to the temple. The injunction was introduced after a much publicized scandal of a foreigner being photographed seated on the lap of a statue of the Buddha.⁵¹ An article in a Sri Lankan English newspaper, *Daily News*, in 1994 alluded to the episode and characterized taking pictures at Dambulla as “taboo.” The episode received wide publicity because it was the first time a “desecrated” statue of the Buddha, as the article pointed out, was “washed with fragrant water and ... re-painted” so as to “reconsecrate” it.⁵² The ideas of antiquity of the Dambulla temple played right into this process of “repainting” the statue of the Buddha. The painter whom Sumangala hired for this assignment, the article pointed out, was a “descendent of a guild of people who had come from India during ancient times.”⁵³ This claim implies that a “modern [ordinary]” painter could not paint an “ancient” statue of the

50. The temple is so named because it is believed to house one of the Buddha’s tooth relics.

51. *Daily News*, Feb. 8, 1994.

52. *Daily News*, Feb. 8, 1994.

53. *Daily News*, Feb. 8, 1994.

Buddha situated in an “ancient Buddhist temple” and restore it to its “original purity.”

These practices or “rules,” which are new inventions, are strategic attempts at making visible those discourses about the antiquity of the temple. In other words, these practices attempt to communicate the new image of the Dambulla temple as an oasis, an ancient temple with an “ancient history” that is independent of all other Buddhist temples, including the Asgiriya temple, which claims to hold authority over Dambulla.

It is in these discourses, which represent the Dambulla temple as an “ancient oasis of heroic monks,” that we can locate the new ordination. The existence of Dambulla from the “very beginning” of Buddhism in Sri Lanka that Sumangala and others claim for this temple is as old as those discourses.⁵⁴ In other words, the antiquity of the Dambulla temple that these discourses construct is as old as the new ordination.⁵⁵

The representation of this new image of the Dambulla temple gain greater visibility in the context of a hallmark socio-political debate that took place in Dambulla in 1992. It is in relation to this debate that the issues of the antiquity of the Dambulla temple and what it means to be a Buddhist monk in its space are hotly debated by Sumangala, other monks and lay Buddhists. Since this debate involves the issue of building of a tourist hotel in Kandalama, an area of Dambulla, I will call it the “Kandalama debate.” This is a seminal debate because it was following Sumangala’s controversial involvement in it in 1992 that the

54. Here I am aided by a similar argument that Jeganathan has made recently with regard to Anurādhapura, one of the “ancient” capitals of Sri Lanka. Jeganathan questions its antiquity and argues that Anurādhapura is as old as the nineteenth century because the forms of authoritative knowledge about its antiquity came to be produced in that nineteenth-century colonial rupture. He writes that “...the ‘very beginning,’ or point of origin of contemporary authoritative forms of knowledge about Anuradhapura is recent. The ‘very beginning’ was only ‘the day before yesterday’” See P. JEGANATHAN: “Authorizing History, Ordering Land: The Conquest of Anuradhapura,” in P. Jeganathan and Q. Ismail eds.: *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association 1995: 107. It must be pointed out, however, that the antiquity of Anurādhapura may be constructed anew in other political conditions.

55. For a very different account of the temple’s history from mine, see D. G. A. PERERA: “King Valagamba’s Role in the Uncharted History of the Dambulla Temple,” *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities* 22 (1-2) (1996): 83-142.

casteless ordination at the Dambulla temple gained publicity and Sumangala himself became popular among Sinhala monks and lay Buddhists.

THE KANDALAMA DEBATE

The Kandalama debate revolved around a private corporation's plan to build a massive four-story luxury hotel in Kandalama, a village near the Dambulla temple. The government of President Premadasa endorsed this plan to boost tourism in the country.⁵⁶ However, Sumangala and the Dambulla people requested the government to revoke the plan because, as Bond observes, they argued that "... a large hotel would adversely affect the cultural and moral environment of the community, disrupt the ecological balance of the semi-wilderness area, pollute the water supply and infringe on the sanctity of the ancient, sacred [Dambulla] Buddhist shrine."⁵⁷ As the government ignored the request and continued with its plan, Sumangala staged a massive, "peaceful demonstration" (*satyagraha*) at the Dambulla temple, in which more than fifty thousand people – monks and lay people – participated, to oppose the government's decision.⁵⁸ Among those joined in this opposition effort were prominent lay Buddhist leaders such as A.T. Ariyaratna.⁵⁹ According to Piyasena, the government confronted Sumangala's challenge head-on by mobilizing over three thousand official and undercover police officers who marched into the houses of the Dambulla people and warned them not to attend the demonstration at the temple.⁶⁰ The government also attempted to impose a curfew and designate Dambulla a "restricted area" on the day of the demonstration at the temple. It then staged its pro-government, counter-demonstration, which was poorly attended. The

56. It is curious that J. VAN DER HOST's *Who is he? What is he Doing?: Religious Rhetoric and Performances in Sri Lanka During R. Premadasa's Presidency* (Amsterdam: UV University Press 1996) makes no mention of this episode between Sumangala and Premadasa.

57. This movement in relation to Ariyaratne's participation in this event has been examined by G. BOND: "Conflicts of Identity and Interpretation in Buddhism," in T. Bartholomeusz and C. R. De Silva, eds.: *Buddhist Fundamentalism and Minority Identities*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1998, pp. 36-52.

58. See L. PIYASENA: *Vāvē Bānda Hōtalaya*, Sarvodaya Vishvaleka: Ratmalana 1994: 69.

59. BOND: "Conflicts of Identity," p. 47.

60. L. PIYASENA: *Vāvē Bānda Hōtalaya*, p. 68.

government did, however, have the support of some high ranking monks (*mahānayaka*) who argued that the hotel would advance the development scheme that President Premadasa had launched to usher the country into a new era of prosperity.⁶¹ As these monks began to voice views supporting the government, a number of debates took place focusing on issues of the leadership of the Dambulla temple, monastic identity, and the new ordination.

The Kandalama debate served as a political platform for making more visible the reconceptualized space of the Dambulla temple. This was facilitated at the most fundamental level by the argument that the construction of the hotel would “infringe upon the sanctity of the ancient, sacred [Dambulla temple].” That argument made Sumangala a leading player in the Kandalama debate since he was now the head of that “ancient temple” on which the hotel would infringe.

During this period, the non-government newspapers carried a flood of articles that dramatized the debate. Some of the articles had large, provocative captions such as, “The Dambulla rock is waging a cold war,” and “The Dambulla temple has been set on fire by villains,”⁶² One newspaper ran a story of how Sumangala had received death threats from unidentified people demanding that he withdraw the *satyagraha*.⁶³ While these newspaper articles explained how the Dambulla temple was involved in the debate, they introduced (and popularized) Sumangala not only as the head of the Dambulla temple but also as the architect of a new ordination that is held at that “ancient temple.” One such newspaper article ostensibly discussing the debate devoted much of its content to the new ordination.⁶⁴

61. *Daily News*, July 23, 1992; cited in G. BOND: “Conflicts of Identity,” p. 52. It must be evident that we are not interested in who won this debate though it must be noted that the hotel was built later.

62. “Dambulu Gale Sītala Satana” (“The Cold War of the Dambulla Rock”), *Lankādīpa*, May 17, 1992; “Dambulu Mahāvīhārayata Māravarayō Gini Tabati” (“The Dambulla Royal Temple has been Set on Fire by Villains”), *Ātta*, April 30, 1992; “Dambulu Rajamahāvīhārayē Potgulata Gini Tabati” (“The Dambulla Temple’s Library is Set on Fire”), *Divayina*, April 29, 1992. Many of these statements were polemical. PIYASENA says that only the temple library – not the whole temple – had been set on fire. L. PIYASENA: *Vāvē Bānda Hōtalaya*, p. 45.

63. “Ināmaluwe Nāhimiyanta Marana Tarjana” (“Death Threats to Inamaluwe Sumangala”), *Lankādīpa*, May 8, 1992.

64. *Lankādīpa*, May 17, 1992.

The meteoric rise of Sumangala and the new ordination in the public consciousness during this period precipitated a climate in which the issues of the leadership of the Dambulla temple and what it means to be a monk came to be debated more visibly. In the wake of Sumangala's popularity, one chief (Asgiriya) monk, Aruvala Somaratana, appeared live on state-owned television and accused Sumangala of misleading the public by pretending to be the head of the Dambulla temple. He said that Sumangala had been presenting himself as the head of the Dambulla temple when the real head of the Dambulla temple was in fact at Asgiriya. Implicit in this accusation was the question of the validity of the new ordination since it is held annually under Sumangala's leadership.⁶⁵ In responding to this accusation, Sumangala went on to criticize monks such as Somaratana as "state monastic tools" that the government was using to distract the public from the Kandalama debate.⁶⁶ Leading Sinhalese newspapers carried reports of Sumangala's speaking to professional lay and monastic audiences at major Sri Lankan universities and accusing such pro-government chief monks of having become "pliable as rubber (*rabar patipanna velā*) when the Buddha had said that they should be firm and upright (*ujupatipanna*)."⁶⁷ Other newspapers reported his addressing large audiences at respectable Buddhist temples in Colombo and stating that "Some monks have thrown to the winds the dignity of the sangha because of greed for high office and other [political] material benefits."⁶⁸ Sumangala also made it clear in my interview with him that some monks have "lost their autonomy and power (*balaya*) and become like puppets because they seek political benefits." Sumangala often made these criticisms even at meetings where chief monks who had supported the construction of the Kandalama hotel were present.⁶⁹ From Sumangala's perspective, the "real monk" is the "firm monk" who is apolitical and does not seek political benefits. He claims to represent this image of the "real monk" at the Dambulla temple, which, as he stated in the interview, is a place "where heroic monks lived in the past and worked to help the nation without seeking political benefits."

65. Cited in PIYASENA: *Vāvē Bānda Hōtalaya*, pp. 63-66.

66. *Lankādīpa*, July 10, 1992.

67. *Lankādīpa*, August 12, 1992.

68. *Divayina*, Oct. 12, 1993.

69. *Island*, Oct. 18, 1993.

The discourses about what it means to be this “real monk,” within these representations of the Dambulla temple gained greater visibility in relation to a different aspect of the Kandalama debate. Sumangala met with his *sangha* committee, consisting of one hundred and seventy monks, and they decided that they would boycott every political meeting taking place in the area and that no politician would be invited to a Buddhist event until the government had withdrawn its plan to build the hotel.⁷⁰ After the newspapers carried the report of this decision, as Piyasena informs us, President Premadasa called Sumangala at five o’clock in the morning one day and warned him to persuade the other monks in the Dambulla area to reverse their decision.⁷¹ Sumangala refused to do so stating that the decision was a collective one by the members of the Dambulla monks.⁷²

Today some Sinhalese writers refer to this episode and portray Sumangala as that “firm, real” monk who did not accede to the President’s “threat” to gain “political benefits” but moved ahead with his decision even at the risk of his own life to further the cause.⁷³ Others viewing this episode in retrospect write to newspapers about Dambulla monks’ “path of independence” and assert in hyperbolic phrases that “those cardboard political leaders who had threatened the Dambulla monks on the phone crumbled to pieces.”⁷⁴ A famous Buddhist Sinhala monk, Maduluwawe Sobhita,⁷⁵ congratulating Sumangala on his leadership in the Kandalama debate, writes that “[a] Buddhist priest exercises an unlimited sovereignty of free thought, expression, and writing... No one possess[es] this privilege other than a Buddhist monk. Ven.

70. *Lankādīpa*, May 8, 1992.

71. PIYASENA: *Vāvē Bānda Hōtalay*, p. 42-43.

72. PIYASENA records the entire content of the conversation. PIYASENA: *Vāvē Bānda Hōtalaya*, pp. 42-43.

73. PIYASENA: *Vāvē Bānda Hōtalaya*, p. 43.

74. See “Dambulu Vihārayē Swādīna Gaman Maga” (“Independent Path of the Dambulla Temple”), *Divayina*, July 30, 1995.

75. It was Sobhita’s picture that appeared on the front page of S. J. TAMBIAH’s *Buddhism Betrayed: Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1992), a text that generated a polemical debate about the politics of representing Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka. On some aspects of this controversy in relation to questions of Buddhist identity, see Ananda ABEYSEKARA: “The Ritual of Yaktovil and Being Buddhist,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, forthcoming.

Sumangala is fully conscious of [this] role of the [monk].”⁷⁶ These discourses about the monastic identity of the Dambulla temple have their reality within that reconceptualized space of the Dambulla temple in which “heroic monks” lived in the “ancient past.” It is in this reconceptualized space that Sumangala, other monks and lay people continue to debate the new ordination.

It is important to reiterate that I have not given, as some might say, an account of “what this ordination is all about” and, therefore, have not treated it as a self-evident social phenomenon. The new ordination is not just about caste: it revolves around the issues of the legitimacy of Sumangala’s leadership of the Dambulla temple and also around the process of redefining what it means to be a Buddhist monk in the reconceptualized space of the Dambulla temple within a specific political contexts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The construction of a new image of the Dambulla temple was facilitated by several factors. Significant among them were the government’s designation of the Dambulla temple as a “sacred area,” followed by its archaeological excavation works, which, as endorsed by then Prime Minister Premadasa himself, “unearthed” the artifacts of antiquity, which proved the existence of the Dambulla and its temple from “the very beginning of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.” Equally important was the new phase of leadership at the Dambulla temple under its new incumbent, Ināmaluwe Sumangala. Having capitalized on the state-designated sacrality of the Dambulla temple, Sumangala implemented the casteless ordination, “challenging” the caste-based ordination of the Asgiriya monks. The Asgiriya monks had claimed for centuries that they had the legitimate authority over the leadership of the temple because King Kīrthi Srī Rājasimha conceded the administration of the Dambulla temple to the Asgiriya monks on the grounds that the Dambulla monks had not performed their duties “properly.” However, the new ordination gave Sumangala ammunition to contest the authority of the Asgiriya monks’ claim by implying that Asgiriya monks had not done their duties “properly” by ordaining monks on the basis of caste. In fact, Sumangala argued in his interview with me that the Asgiriya monks have “followed the ‘doctrine of the king’ (*raja bana*) and not the ‘doctrine of the

76. See D. Ananda ed.: *Abhivandana: Felicitations* (No Publisher).

Buddha' (*budu bana*) by ordaining monks on the basis of caste" because caste, he claims, was institutionalized by a king. Therefore, from Sumangala's point of view, caste and politics are two sides of the same coin; to abandon caste in the monkhood is to abandon political authority.

The Kandalama debate, which was the crowning movement in the establishment of Dambulla as a sacred area, enabled Sumangala to make these discourses more public. By portraying the image of a monk who rejects both caste and thereby political authority Sumangala castigated the monks who supported the government for taking political sides and losing their autonomy and power. In doing so, Sumangala contested the authority of the very state that helped to construct that new image of the Dambulla temple in which the new ordination originated and is debated among monks and lay people in Sri Lanka.

The new ordination, the administration of the Dambulla temple under Sumangala's leadership, and the Premadasa government's attempt to build a hotel on the Dambulla "sacred" grounds complex are not just "local" debates. These debates point to complex ways in which questions about what it means to be a Buddhist monk – that is to say, whether or not Buddhism or Buddhist monastic identity is casteless or what should and should not be the appropriate "Buddhist" relationship between monks/temples and politicians/politics – are rendered possible by political conditions at the "national" level.