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*Locations of Buddhism:  
Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka*

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# A Review of *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka*

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*Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka*. By Anne M. Blackburn. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010, xxii + 237 pages, ISBN-13 978-0-226-05 507-7 (cloth); ISBN-10 0-226-05 507-8 (cloth), \$45.00.

In her first book, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture*, Anne Blackburn explored the rise of the Siyam Nikāya in eighteenth-century Lanka in order to problematize an all-too-common dichotomy in recent scholarship between “traditional” Theravāda Buddhism and “Buddhist modernism.” In her latest book, *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and Modernity in Sri Lanka*, Blackburn brings her expertise in colonial-era Lankan Buddhism and the Siyam Nikāya, her philological prowess in Pāli and Sinhala, and her considerable talent as an academic writer to bear on the study of a single figure within nineteenth-century Lankan Buddhism: Hikkaḍuvē Sumaṅgala.

Hikkaḍuvē was a prominent figure within the Siyam Nikāya, as well as a contemporary of, and sometime interlocutor with, Henry Steele Olcott and Anagārika Dharmapāla, but who has attracted less attention from recent scholars than the latter two due to his more “traditional” (a category Blackburn finds problematic) doctrinal positions. Blackburn

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directs her focus to such a narrow subject because, she argues, “it may be fruitful to direct at least some of our histories of colonial-period Buddhists and Buddhisms to the scale of an individual, his or her central projects, and his or her social networks” (202). She takes this approach in order to advance the thesis, consistent with her earlier work, that neither subaltern studies of colonial South Asia that arose in response to the work of Foucault and Said, nor the concepts of “Buddhist modernism” or “Protestant Buddhism” as applied monolithically to colonial Lanka, are “adequate to the evidence we have from colonial period Laṅkā.” Rather, she argues, “we see that new imported discourses and forms of social identification did not always displace those which had existed previously” (xii).

Insofar as she seeks to advance this thesis, Blackburn begins her narration of the life of Hikkaḍuvē quite cleverly by recounting the reason that he became a monk to begin with—not as a “rational,” free-thinking Protestantized individual, but as a child, placed in the *saṅgha* by his parents in response to a troubling horoscope after his birth. Not only was this decision made on a basis at odds with what the narrative of “Protestant Buddhism” would lead us to expect; it was made *in lieu of* his father’s original plan to send him for an English education. This proved to be a propitious decision, for Hikkaḍuvē, quickly recognized as an able speaker and translator, rose within the ranks of the Siyam Nikāya until, at age thirty-nine, he was selected to serve as Śrī Pāda Nāyaka (the administrator of the Adam’s Peak shrine)—a position that allowed him to become one of the most influential figures of his day.

Blackburn’s book is divided into six chapters. The first five of these chapters are almost entirely biographical, each focusing on a particular episode or aspect of Hikkaḍuvē’s long and illustrious career. Blackburn saves her substantive theoretical reflections on these episodes in pursuit of her thesis until the sixth and final chapter. I will therefore give a brief synopsis of each of the five biographical chapters, followed by my own reflections on the theoretical framework Blackburn provides for this biography in the preface and chapter six.

In chapter one, Blackburn describes the early part of Hikkaḍuvē's career, beginning with his birth in 1827 to a wealthy high-caste Goyigama family and continuing to his appointment as Śrī Pāda Nāyaka in 1866 and the dispute that followed that appointment. As already mentioned, Hikkaḍuvē was ordained as a child and was quickly recognized as possessing a keen intellect; due to this recognition, he was sent to study under Valānē Siddhartha, one of the leading monastic educators in Lanka. By 1850, Hikkaḍuvē was sufficiently confident in his intellectual abilities that he sided against his teacher in a series of intra-sectarian disputes between a monk named Bentara Atthadassi (whom Valānē supported) and the central Kandyan Siyam Nikāya administration. His success in doing so, Blackburn argues, increased his intellectual prestige and ingratiated him to the central authorities, leading ultimately to his appointment as Śrī Pāda Nāyaka in 1866. This appointment did not proceed without problems, however; colonial government approval was required for such appointments, and after it was granted, the previous holder of the position, Galagamē Atthadassi, sued to get his job back, on the grounds that the monks who made the appointment (thus deposing him) did not have standing to do so. Blackburn notes that, in successfully fending off Galagamē's lawsuit, Hikkaḍuvē articulated his eligibility for the position on the basis of appeals to non-colonial forms of authority, including his own particular monastic lineages and a letter of praise he had received from a Buddhist king, King Rāma IV of Siam, when the latter was still *saṅgharāja* of the Siamese *saṅgha*.

In chapter two, Blackburn explores Hikkaḍuvē's involvement in the establishment of Vidyodaya Piriveṇa, a school for traditional Sinhala *śāstric* learning. The project began in 1871 when thirteen lay patrons signed a legal document setting up the Vidyādhāra Sabhāva, an organization committed to the goal of creating such a school. Hikkaḍuvē was then instrumental in obtaining funding for the project through his professional contacts and by directly contributing Śrī Pāda funds. Instruction at the Vidyodaya began in 1873, and its continued operation was made possible in part by an annual government stipend offered by

the colonial governor, William Henry Gregory. Gregory's interest in the project was born out of an Orientalist nostalgia for "classical" Sinhala learning, which in his mind was confined primarily to literature—mathematics and science having been superseded by their modern Western counterparts. Hikkaḍuvē and the leadership of the Vidyodaya, however, were motivated by a desire to restore what they saw as the cosmopolitan intellectual climate of medieval Lanka, and therefore saw no distinction between worthy forms of "classical" knowledge and antiquated "pre-modern sciences." They therefore stuck closely to a traditional *śāstric* curriculum, consistently disappointing government requests for them to include modern Western mathematics and science.

In chapter three, Blackburn explores a number of intellectual projects and debates Hikkaḍuvē participated in that she believes illustrate his greater commitment to pre-colonial discourses than colonial ones. The first of these is a project Hikkaḍuvē was involved in to produce a Sinhala script edition of chapters thirty-seven to one hundred and one of the *Mahāvamsa*, as well as a Sinhala translation of the same text. Each of the resulting manuscripts was dedicated to William Gregory, but as Blackburn notes, they were framed quite differently. The Pāli edition was framed in terms acceptable to Western Orientalist scholarship, as a positive contribution to the *historical* understanding of Lanka. The Sinhala translation, however, contained a preface that situated the text in the context of traditional categories of *Buddha-śāsana* and royal lineage—thus implicitly criticizing the current government for not being Buddhist—as well as openly criticizing the historicist theories of Kern and Oldenberg. On the basis of this evidence, Blackburn argues that Hikkaḍuvē and his collaborators "seem to have assumed the opacity of the Sinhala translation to British and European readers. Sinhala was the language for frank speaking, in which a critical commentary on the learned attainments and civility of 'Europeans' was safely possible" (77).

In this same chapter, Blackburn also discusses two inter-sectarian disputes Hikkaḍuvē participated in. The first was over whether low-caste Karavas were in fact *ḷḷatriyas* and therefore of higher caste than the

high-caste Goyigamas, who were *vaiśyas*. Blackburn argues that certain anonymous writings defending the Goyigama position (that they were higher than the Karavas) were in fact written by Hikkaḍuvē, who was himself a Goyigama. The second dispute involved the proper manner of wearing the monastic robes: Beginning in the early 1880s, Hikkaḍuvē publicly took the position that members of the Siyam Nikāya should cover both shoulders when outside the temple. Both of these disputes, for Blackburn, represent levels of discourse unrelated to, and largely below the radar of, colonial discourse.

In chapter four, Blackburn turns to Hikkaḍuvē's relationship with the two great protagonists of the standard "Protestant Buddhism" narrative: Henry Steele Olcott and Anagārika Dharmapāla. As the three preceding chapters already make clear, Hikkaḍuvē had a vision of Buddhism fundamentally at odds with the Protestantizing vision of Olcott; nevertheless, the two figures were at times allies, and Hikkaḍuvē even supported Olcott's activities as a member of the Theosophical Society. Hikkaḍuvē also had a relationship with Dharmapāla; although he kept his distance from the latter's rather quixotic attempt to return the Mahābodhi temple to Buddhist control, he was closely involved with the activities of the Mahābodhi Society in Lanka. Hikkaḍuvē's relationship with Olcott, however, soured over time, as Olcott began introducing what Hikkaḍuvē saw as increasingly outlandish and unorthodox statements into his English-language Buddhist "catechism." Dharmapāla used this opportunity to ingratiate himself further to Hikkaḍuvē, and eventually the rift between Olcott and Hikkaḍuvē became irreparable when in 1905 the former publicly ridiculed the Tooth Relic as inauthentic. This rift illustrated in a very stark way the difference between the Buddhism Hikkaḍuvē subscribed to and the "Protestant Buddhism" of Olcott.

Finally, in chapter five, Blackburn discusses Hikkaḍuvē's continuing desire to restore the Lankan *saṅgha* to the protection and oversight of a proper Buddhist monarch. He did so by fostering ties with

all of the royal families in Theravāda Southeast Asia, including those of Burma and Cambodia, but it was particularly in the King of Siam, the one Theravāda Buddhist monarch still free from the yoke of colonial rule, that Hikkaḍuvē placed his hopes. Unfortunately for Hikkaḍuvē, these hopes were dashed in 1897 when King Chulalongkorn visited Lanka, but was incredibly offended when he was not allowed to hold the Tooth Relic in his own hands. Although this particular aspect of Hikkaḍuvē's advocacy on behalf of the Lankan *saṅgha* ended in diplomatic disaster, Blackburn argues that it demonstrates a logic on the part of Hikkaḍuvē that derives from pre-colonial conceptions of the symbiotic relationship between *Buddha-śāsana* and righteous kingship and flies in the face of any emerging Sinhala nationalism. In addition, it was allowed to continue, in spite of its politically fraught undertones, precisely because the British saw Hikkaḍuvē's overtures to the Siamese as religious and therefore not political—a distinction that clearly was not operative in Hikkaḍuvē's mind.

Having read Blackburn's fascinating account of the life of Hikkaḍuvē, I am convinced that "[a] biography of Hikkaḍuvē in English is long overdue" (xi) and that Blackburn herself has masterfully accomplished this task. I am less convinced that Blackburn has proven her thesis that existing scholarly treatments of the impact of colonialism on Buddhism, including critiques of Orientalism and theories of "Protestant Buddhism" or "Buddhist modernism" are not "adequate to the evidence we have from colonial-period Laṅkā" (xii). This is by no means meant to deny the tremendous value of Blackburn's scholarship; indeed, I do not have so much a substantive disagreement over Blackburn's thesis as a disagreement over nuance. That is to say, it is not entirely clear to me that the scholarship Blackburn is critical of is as simplistic, dismissive of counter-hegemonic narratives, and ignorant of continuities between pre-colonial and post-colonial Buddhism as she makes it out to be. (Admittedly, this is difficult to judge because Blackburn is politely somewhat ambiguous about the precise identities of the objects of her criticism.) It is, after all, simply absurd to contend

that hegemonic colonial discourses changed the face of South Asia, or Lankan Buddhism in particular, overnight and without leaving a trace of what preceded it. Conversely, I would argue that Blackburn herself is deeply indebted to, for example, the work of Michel Foucault and Edward Said, without which any “micro-history” of Buddhism that takes power into any sort of account—and colonial power is very much an omnipresent specter throughout this book—would be impossible.

Having said this, I am in wholehearted agreement with what I take to be the more substantive aspect of Blackburn’s thesis, which she states most clearly in chapter six: “There is, of course, an alternative. We can choose to examine spheres of intellectual and social activity in a historical context *emphatically marked* by the presence of colonial rule instead of looking at intellectual and social *responses* to colonialism” (201). This is a goal that Blackburn accomplishes masterfully, and which moreover makes her account of Hikkaḍuvē’s life so interesting and compelling. In every aspect of Hikkaḍuvē’s life that she examines, Hikkaḍuvē’s actions are conditioned, but not wholly determined, by the looming specter of colonial power.

The juxtaposition between the discourses in which Hikkaḍuvē feels most comfortable operating and the colonial discourses he is forced to contend with is fascinating, especially in the different ways that juxtaposition plays out in each case. When Hikkaḍuvē is sued over his appointment as Śrī Pāda Nāyaka, he is forced to submit to the power of a colonial court. He naturally expresses his qualifications according to the pre-colonial discourses he is most comfortable with, but even Blackburn admits that his ultimate success “occurred not because of power emanating from Kandy or Bangkok, or because of his ability to work subtly within the idiom of monastic lineage. In the end, his position depended on the ability of his allies to develop a legal case that suited government views on local electors, Buddhist trusts, and social order” (27). Here, then, we do indeed seem to see the power of a hegemonic discourse at work, and the relative irrelevance of the non-hegemonic discourses in which Hikkaḍuvē operates. In Hikkaḍuvē’s involvement

with the Vidyodaya Pariveṇa, however, we see the sharp limits of colonial governmentality. Governor William George and the leadership of the Vidyodaya have sharply competing visions of what it means to revive the classic learning of Lanka's past, but the latter effectively win because they operate largely as an institution of civil society, in a space made possible by modern governmentality but beyond the direct reach of the same. In Hikkaḍuvē's involvement with the publishing of the Pāli edition of the *Mahāvamsa* and a Sinhala translation, we likewise see evidence of a space for dissent left in the margins of the hegemonic discourse—in this case, in a publication made possible by colonial technology but remaining invisible to the hegemonic discourse because it is in an indigenous language. Finally, in Hikkaḍuvē's ultimately doomed attempts to reestablish the link between the *śāsana* and righteous Buddhist kingship, we again find that there is space for a pre-colonial discourse between the margins of the hegemonic colonial discourse—namely, due to the arbitrary Western assumption of a dichotomy between religion and politics. Nevertheless, in this case, the ultimate power of the hegemonic discourse rears its head in the end: Even though the British are blind to the political aspect of Hikkaḍuvē's overtures to the Siamese, the Siamese are not, and as Blackburn herself notes, they are cool to Hikkaḍuvē's proposal (irrespective of the diplomatic flap over the Tooth Relic) *precisely because they recognize the political threat such an arrangement would pose to British sovereignty over Lanka.*

To my mind, then, Blackburn does not so much demonstrate the “inadequacy” of theories that emphasize the effects of colonial discourse on Buddhism as she in fact *strengthens* them, or rather makes them more robust. She does this by exploring the gaps in colonial discourse and sketching the intricate interplay between colonial discourses on the one hand and local discourses on the other, which latter—she rightly points out—demonstrate a large degree of continuity from the pre- to the post-colonial period. With Blackburn's work—and hopefully other works like it to follow in the future—we now have a better understanding of the

way in which colonial discourses *interacted* with local discourses, as well as how the power relationships between colonizers and colonized played out, often in surprising and unpredictable ways.

One final observation I would like to make about Blackburn's book pertains to the particular format in which she chooses to present her argument. As already stated, the first five chapters of the book are almost entirely biographical, with theoretical reflections reserved for the short preface and longer chapter six. With the biographical sections framed by theory in this way, Blackburn's book almost reads (although this is ultimately deceiving) like a straight, book-length biography that has been embedded in a scholarly article commenting thereupon. According to Blackburn, this choice of format is deliberate: "This is for methodological reasons. If we are to restore a greater sense of human and local agency to our studies of colonialism, it is necessary that we train our minds to recognize and find natural modes of reflection and patterns of social action that characterized the periods and people we wish to understand" (xiv). This appeal to a pre-theoretical exposure to data is, I would argue, a conceit—probably deliberate, though possibly not—on Blackburn's part. I mention this not to criticize Blackburn's decision to format her book in this way (on the contrary), but rather to point out a theoretical disagreement I have with the sentiment Blackburn expresses here—a sentiment, I believe, that sells the ingenuity of Blackburn's own writing short.

Any attempt to appeal to a pre-theoretical encounter with data, "letting the data speak for themselves," and the like runs dangerously close to a naïve empiricism that denies the theory-ladenness of data, the fact that all data is always already articulated within the framework of a theory, insofar as it is articulated in the first place. This includes human data: When we "give individual human actors a voice," we are in fact giving them *our voice*, or rather constructing a voice that is always already hybrid insofar as it is a product of the conversation between the scholar and the subject of study. Blackburn's account of the life of Hikkaḍuvē is no exception to this. Her account is not theory-neutral;

rather, it quite masterfully picks certain episodes from Hikkaḍuvē's life and presents them in such a way as to *demonstrate inductively*, rather than stating explicitly, her thesis. In this, as well as in the overall clarity of her prose—both in the biographical sections and in the final explicit theoretical reflections in chapter six—Blackburn shows a true gift for communication that cannot but leave us hungering for more.