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Seeding Buddhism with Multiculturalism: The Transmission of Sri Lankan Buddhism in Toronto

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A Review of *Seeding Buddhism with Multiculturalism: The Transmission of Sri Lankan Buddhism in Toronto*

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Seeding Buddhism with Multiculturalism: The Transmission of Sri Lankan Buddhism in Toronto. Advancing Studies in Religion 6. By D. Mitra Barua. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, xvi + 280 pp., ISBN 978-0-7735-5657-7 (Paperback), \$34.95.

D. Mitra Barua, as a “monastic ethnographer,” takes his readers on a journey to explore the struggles and successes of Sri Lankan Theravādin Buddhists to transmit their traditions, teachings, and practices from one generation to the next to ask (and answer) what happens during the transmission process within the multicultural context of Toronto, Canada. He states that “one of the important concerns that occupy many immigrant communities in diaspora [is] the transmission of the immigrant religious tradition to successive generations” (4). Barua demonstrates how this important process of *Dhamma* transmission is being managed by Toronto’s Sri Lankan Buddhists. Due to the lack of extended family and ambient Buddhist cultural environment in Toronto, *Dhamma* educa-

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tion is one of the most popular services offered by the temples that families can rely upon as a transmission conduit.

Barua's first chapter details the guiding research questions—i.e., the ways in which a religious tradition is transmitted in a new cultural setting and the changes the tradition undergoes in this process—and resulting answers to them, namely, that the formation of Sri Lankan Buddhism in Toronto and its transmission to successive generations is dialogical and ongoing (22). The theories and research methods he draws from most heavily to guide and conduct his ethnographic fieldwork include Talal Asad's notion of discursive tradition and Thomas Tweed's theory of the translocative and transtemporal nature of diasporic traditions. Further, he situates himself in his research as researcher and, to an extent, researched, by introducing the concept of "monastic ethnographer." Adopting J. Shawn Landres's vocabulary (2002), Barua describes his particular situation as involving both being in the field and becoming the field itself, in the sense that the study not only yielded detached findings but also changed his identity as a Buddhist monk and transformed his relationships with his interviewees and the population groups to which they belong. This unique positionality provided him opportunities and barriers distinct from what other ethnographers may experience, on which more will be said below.

The second chapter traces the development of the Sri Lankan Buddhist community in Toronto from a handful of immigrants with limited social ties and no temple of their own into the now "stable religious community with four vibrant Buddhist centres" (26). Barua describes how a more secular Sri Lankan identity transformed into religious solidarity centered on Sri Lankan Buddhism using three key ingredients crucial for the development of the community: the sharing, establishing, and multiplying of Buddhist resources (i.e., monks, temples, Buddhist artifacts, and religious membership). The complex evolution of the Sri Lankan Buddhist community in Toronto, which demonstrates its discursive nature in Talal Asad's sense of the term, is aptly captured through

its varying identifiers (nationalistic, ethnic, and religious) and experiences with sharing, establishing, and multiplying Buddhist resources; these are essential to understanding the community as a diasporic but also local tradition.

The third chapter delves into Sri Lankan Buddhism's legacy of *Dhamma* education and how it has undergone innovation within the Canadian context. Barua explores the importance of *Dhamma* education for Sri Lankan Buddhism to show how it has shifted to serve different purposes at different times. As a focal point for *Dhamma* education, Barua details how the image of the Buddhist child is dynamic and subjective, and he concludes that the contemporary *Dhamma* education occurring in the Sri Lankan Buddhist temples in Toronto follows a historical trajectory to "seed the dhamma in the hearts and minds of the young" (61). Barua contends that *Dhamma* education is a cornerstone of the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition and is an institutional practice that persists not because Buddhism is static, but rather because it is dynamic. It is through this dynamism that Sri Lankan Buddhism has remained relevant and present in distinct times and spaces.

The reconfiguration of Sri Lankan Buddhism within and outside of Sri Lanka has necessitated reinterpretation of Buddhist concepts, practices, and institutions, and this reinterpretation process is discussed in chapter four. Barua makes it clear that the expectation to adapt as an integration strategy is not only an external pressure: there are internal patterns within Buddhism that emphasize adaptation and change. Grounding themselves in this legacy, the monks legitimize their adaptation and integration efforts into the Canadian context and skillfully unite Buddhism with Canadian values of harmony and inclusivity. This union is made possible through "an act of omission" (139) as nonconforming elements (e.g., spirit worship) are omitted while other elements are highlighted and in time become the markers of Sri Lankan Buddhists in Toronto. Barua concludes that identities are dialogical in nature, created and recreated with and against others, and the identity of Sri Lankan

Buddhists in Toronto has metamorphosed into its current form by means of the community's choice to develop an adaptive and integrative community.

Barua's fifth chapter explores the ways in which Sri Lankan Buddhists in Toronto navigate and negotiate the individual and collective aspects of their identities and the cultures that give rise to them (Canadian and Sri Lankan). This negotiation is most prominent intergenerationally and interculturally between Sri Lankan Buddhist parents influenced by the collective nature of Sinhalese Buddhism and Canadian-born children influenced by the North American culture of individualism. Barua highlights a threefold approach to transmission from parent to child: cultural criticism (the negotiation of collective and individualistic cultural attitudes and norms); *Dhamma*-culture distinction (the decoupling of Buddhism from Sinhalese ethnicity); and friendship (lessening of hierarchical relationships in favor of egalitarian ones). While parents are the primary transmitters, they also rely on a web of strategies (143) to disseminate Buddhism. Within this web, monks are influential transmitters, but their role is more as intermediaries. Through this threefold approach, Sri Lankan Buddhist parents can more easily pass their tradition on to subsequent generations despite the difficulties of doing so in diaspora.

How successful the transmission process has been is the subject of the book's last chapter. The first generation of Sri Lankan Canadian Buddhists strived to adapt and integrate into Canadian society but also to ensure the tradition's relevancy into the future. Without successful transmission, the effort to establish, grow, and adapt has limited lasting value. Barua depicts Sri Lankan Canadian Buddhist youth as actively appropriating Buddhist beliefs and practices to suit their lives as they blend the collective and hierarchical cultural traits of their parents with individualistic and egalitarian cultural traits of Canada's broader society to create what Barua calls an "intercultural appropriation" (169). Sri Lankan Canadian Buddhist youth have various self-identifiers to display

how identity plays out on the individual level. Barua classifies them on a spectrum from “developing Buddhists,” who are marked by plasticity, ambiguity, circumspection, self-judgment, flexibility, and progression (186-187), to “self-claimed Buddhists”—youth who have reclaimed their Buddhist heritage. He points out that even though these youth identify as Buddhist, the Buddhism they practice is the result of choice and self-construction rather than parental expectation (187). Successful transmission, in the case of Sri Lankan Buddhists in Toronto, is not an indiscriminate acceptance but rather a self-conscious negotiation and renegotiation.

Barua offers two metaphors in his conclusion to capture each generation’s (re)configuration of Sri Lankan Buddhism in Toronto: a mother cat and a white swan. The first generation must be like a mother cat carrying her kittens in her jaws, being neither too tight nor too loose to ensure that the kittens are carried safely. A similar balancing act must be taken to transmit their tradition’s beliefs, values, and practices. This effort is out of love as much as it is out of a sense of obligation (204). Alternatively, the white swan symbolizes learning and receiving what has been passed on. Rather than indiscriminate acceptance, Sri Lankan Canadian Buddhist youths discern as recipients what is good and valuable to retain for their life in multicultural Canada. Sri Lankan Buddhism has been reconfigured in Canada with each generation engaging with it in varying—and at times conflicting—ways. Barua also reminds us that while Sri Lankan Buddhism has been adapted to Canadian values, the goal is not to make Buddhism Canadian; the adaptations were made to distinguish this community from other Buddhists and Buddhism found in Toronto while also establishing the community as local and translocal. In this vein, Barua offers several areas for future research on Sri Lankan Buddhism in diaspora. Key among these are, first, increased attention to (g)localization alongside Buddhism’s legacy of particularization and generalization and, second, tracing Sri Lankan Buddhist networks across regional, national, and international physical borders and into the digital

realm to continue to “nourish the research seed planted in *Seeding Buddhism with Multiculturalism*” (215).

Barua is clearly dedicated to fieldwork and maintains careful attention to the ethnographic process itself. This attention to ethnography is made palpable and personal throughout, and Barua’s unique positionality shines in the creation of the label of “monastic ethnographer.” Barua draws on the work of J. Shawn Landres’ (2002) to describe how he “became the field while being in the field” and how his “decision to be in the field in the monastic robes of a Theravāda monk compelled [him] to negotiate and navigate two distinct roles and duties: those of an ethnographer and also of a Buddhist monk . . . [gaining] a new identity as a monastic ethnographer” (13). This distinct identity of monastic ethnographer simultaneously granted in-roads, otherwise inaccessible, even as it stymied aspects of his research. As a monastic ethnographer, Barua’s interactions with fellow monks, first-generation Sri Lankan Canadian Buddhists, and second-generation Sri Lankan Canadian Buddhists were shaped by his role as a monastic ethnographer, ranging from ease of access to support for his research on the one hand to limiting his recruitment of youths and access to casual conversations on the other hand. The “halo effect” he found himself under worked in and against his favor, depending on whom he was interacting with and what he sought from those interactions.

I highlight Barua’s identity as a monastic ethnographer to underscore the backdrop behind the data collection as this identity impacted the discursive tradition of the community and who was willing to work with him (22). I would suggest that the “halo affect” surrounding him as a monastic ethnographer, even though he also had trouble accessing certain groups and types of information, assisted in the high response rate in comparison to other work on Asian Buddhist communities in North America and especially the Toronto area. Certainly, there are other reasons behind why so many in the community were willing to contribute to the study, but Barua’s dual status appears to have also been a com-

pounding factor and thus an important element to consider in the broader perspective of the research. Moreover, his identity as a monastic ethnographer grants insights into the confluences that led to this research in the first place and how it evolved. It seems evident that his decision to study Sri Lankan Buddhists in Canada was the result of his own experience of studying Buddhism from a young age in Sri Lanka and serving as a monk for the Kitchener-Waterloo area Lao and Sinhalese Buddhist community, even though he belonged to neither ethnicity (he was born in Bangladesh). His role as a monk for these communities and being an ethnic “outsider” gave him a different vantage point on ethno-religious dynamics of Buddhists in the area. Furthermore, and most importantly, he was a recipient of Buddhist transmission himself and thus has a sensitivity to it beyond scholars who are not similarly trained. While Barua drew on his textual and personal knowledge of Buddhism, he also pushed beyond these to incorporate research methods and theories from religious studies. The decision to base his research in the discipline of religious studies similarly was an influence, most evident in his research approach—ethnography—which culminated in the creation of his unique identifier as a monastic ethnographer.

Barua acknowledges that selecting a topic—*Dhamma* education—traditionally and intimately connected to monasticism granted him greater cooperation than another topic might have. His dual role, however, also presented obstacles. He wanted to study interreligious identities of children who grow up with interreligious socialization but found the research untenable in robes; being a monastic ethnographer prevented him from conducting research that might be perceived as falling outside the traditional parameters of a Buddhist monk. Similarly, he found that given his status, he missed out on certain types of interactions and had to find a way to carefully balance his expectations and responsibilities as a monk with those as a researcher (he offers a poignant example on pp. 17-19). But regardless of his status as monk, having direct access to multiple Buddhist communities within the same area was the result of the area’s multicultural context and provided Barua distinct

avenues of research compared to conducting a similar study on transmission in Sri Lanka. Without the already existing multicultural framework of Canada, the research Barua conducted would not have been possible to the same extent. The confluences of Barua's positionality as being in the field and becoming the field gathered together to influence, for better or worse, the research, and this is a key takeaway. How might this research have been influenced by an ethnographer who was not a monastic, or was a monastic in another tradition, or was not a Buddhist at all, or was less familiar with Sri Lankan culture, or was not an immigrant? What avenues would be available or unavailable to them, and how might this imaginary ethnographer's own positionality, own "unique ensemble of contradictory and shifting subjectivities" (16), impact research on *Dhamma* education and transmission in Canada? Truly, an ethnographer is, to some extent, always in the field and the field itself, and Barua's attentiveness to his particularity is apt.

Another strength of Barua's research is his evident dedication to the subject. As mentioned, Barua narrows his scope of analysis to two of Toronto's oldest Sri Lankan Buddhist temples. However, he incorporates historical, comparative, and ethnographic research methods to document "what has been retained, altered, left out, and added to the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition in Toronto's multicultural setting" (9). The specific focus on two Sri Lankan Buddhist temples within Toronto's multicultural and multireligious context, combined with his research methods and theories, strengthens the presentation of his argument and analysis.

I was initially concerned by the apparent age of the data, as the book presents the research he completed as part of his doctoral dissertation in 2010, but my concern was soon alleviated as Barua has since updated, changed, or reinforced elements of his study as necessary. For example, chapter six greatly expands on preliminary aspects included in his dissertation. In particular, he incorporates the work on second-generation Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims in Canada from *Growing Up Cana-*

dian (2013), edited by Peter Beyer and Rubina Ramji. Moreover, Barua nuances the project's discussion and constructively critiques it in light of his own extensive research on *Dhamma* education. He questions the validity of *Growing Up Canadian's* conclusion that intergenerational transmission of Buddhism has failed in Canada (173), stating that the "Sri Lankan-Torontonian Buddhist youths studied [in the research] suggest that the general conclusion of failed Buddhist transmission in *Growing Up Canadian* does not apply to the Sri Lankan Buddhist community in Toronto" (174). Therefore, while much of the fieldwork data was gathered a decade ago, the research itself remains current and relevant during the arduous dissertation-to-book transformation. Furthermore, the inclusion of his surveys and insights into his ethnographic research methods is extremely beneficial. Not only did the appendixes provide additional context to the data, they also offer a steppingstone for other scholars who may wish to conduct similar or related research endeavors of their own.

A lingering question that remains is how transmission efforts will continue to evolve into the future. While it is true that Sri Lankan Buddhists have had to navigate a lack of an "ambient Buddhist environment" to support their transmission efforts, what I wonder is, given the increased prevalence of Buddhism(s) in North America, from both immigrant and nonimmigrant communities, how much longer will this lack of an ambient Buddhist cultural environment continue to be a relevant factor in the transmission process to successive generations? Certainly, I do not think that Canada will ever achieve the same kind of ambient Buddhist environment as can be found in Sri Lanka (or other Asian countries), but Buddhism is now more present in Canada (and North America more broadly) than it has been historically and that, in turn, as shown by Barua's work, has changed the religious environment of Toronto. For successive generations, the transmission process will be different than it is currently for the first- and second-generation Sri Lankan Canadian Buddhists in Toronto. How, exactly, this difference will manifest is some-

thing that can only be guessed at, but it is an interesting question to ponder given the topic of Barua's research.

Barua concludes his analysis of *Seeding Buddhism* with a consideration of (g)localization and future research directions on Sri Lankan Buddhism in diaspora. Discussion around the local and global nature of Buddhism in diaspora has been a hot button issue for several years now and has culminated, as exemplified by the Sri Lankan Buddhist community in Toronto, in a recognition of boundaries that are both local and global. While the debate surrounding the glocal nature of contemporary Buddhism in diaspora appears to be settled, Barua contributes to this conversation from the intergenerational and intercultural perspective not previously captured to successfully strike

a balance between regionalism and globalism . . . [reminding] us that Buddhism in Canada, and by extension in the West, needs to be studied within its modern history. This is particularly true of those Buddhisms practiced in Asian Buddhist diasporas. . . . [A] translocative observation is essential to comprehend the reconfiguration of Buddhism in Canada. (212)

The same is equally true for studying Buddhism within Asia, as the flow of glocalization is not just from the "East" to the "West" but from "West" to "East" and every other direction. At times, Barua appears to indicate this reality in his analysis, but it also feels understated or muddled, in my assessment. Sri Lankan Buddhist identities are not only changing in Canada, they are similarly changing in Sri Lanka and other parts of the world where Sri Lankan Buddhism is present. In other words, contemporary Buddhism (whether Sri Lankan or otherwise) is not just local and global in diaspora, it is local and global in its Asian contexts as well. Nonetheless, Barua offers a significant contribution to multiple disciplines, including cultural studies (specifically intercultural analysis), ethnography, religious studies, and Buddhist Studies. Barua's sharp and engaging writing and dedication will be sure to please any reader.

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