

EMPOWER FROM WITHIN: PATH TO PROTECT BUDDHISM IN ASIA

A Consultative Report Prepared for the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) and Other Buddhist Organisations in Asia by Dr Kalinga Seneviratne of Lotus Communication Network

Executive Summary

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This research project and report was undertaken as a result of a suggestion made at the first Asian Buddhist Media Conclave in New Delhi in August 2018 organised by the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC)

After much discussion about media bias against Buddhists, hate speech accusations, lack of Buddhist media networks in the region and the drifting away of Buddhist youth from Buddhism, it was suggested that a study be undertaken to look at the communication needs of Buddhist communities in South and Southeast Asia.

It was recommended that Lotus Communication Network undertake the study and submit a consultative report to the IBC to be presented to the next Buddhist Media Conclave. Thus, Lotus Communication Network undertook the study supported by financial assistance from foundations and individual Buddhists in Asia. Since many want to remain anonymous, I will not name them here, but would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all of the financial contributors and to those who offered me hospitality during field visits for making this study and report possible.

This book is the result of an 18-month long research project that included literature reviews and location research. In adopting an ethnographic research methodology, I visited as many Buddhist communities as possible across South and Southeast Asia through 2018 and 2019 to gather research data.

I should point out that Buddhism in Asia face formidable challenges both from within and outside, as I have documented in the chapters.

During my consultations, some Buddhists, especially in Southeast Asia, told me that worrying is a form of suffering in Buddhism. So why worry about the socio-economic problems of the world. You need to cleanse yourself.

I do not really agree that this is the essence of Buddhism. We need to look at how to solve socio-economic problems that bring so much suffering to people. It is not worrying about it, but, mindfully understanding the root causes of the

problem and doing something to empower the people to solve their own problems, using Buddhist philosophy for guidance - it is Engage Buddhism.

We need to address the problem and work out the path to help solve it. That is the path I took in doing the study and writing the report. That is why I titled it "Empower from Within: To Protect Buddhism in Asia".

Between June 2018 and December 2019 I visited as many Buddhist communities as I can in South and Southeast Asia. Some of the places, like Bhutan, I have visited earlier.

I went to predominantly Buddhist countries such as Bhutan, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Also to Buddhist communities in Indonesia, many parts of India – including Ladakh and Sikkim – Malaysia, Bangladesh and Nepal. And I also included Singapore where I was based.

In chapters 1, I discuss how Buddhism spread across Asia over the centuries especially via the ancient Silk Routes. While in chapter 2, I examine various methods of Buddhist communications over the ages from the Kalama Sutra and Ashoka edicts to modern day digital Buddhist communicators.

Chapters 3 to 15 are country specific chapters. At the beginning of each chapter I give a brief history and background to Buddhism there. Wherever, Buddhism has ceased to be the major religion, there is some discussion about the reasons for its demise. Each chapter ends with a discussion or survey of Buddhist media in the country with interview quotes from Buddhist media practitioners and scholars.

Though Buddhism is no more a major religion in India, yet, as the home of Buddhism and the great contribution Indic-Buddhist civilization has made to shape Asian identity, a long chapter is devoted to India.

Buddhism in India

The chapter starts with a brief discussion of India's 'Soft Power' potential, as the home of the Buddha. But, it also raises the question whether a lack of indigenous Buddhist communities in pilgrim places, such as Bodhgaya and Sarnath, hinders this potential? Various ideas are discussed on how to address this issue and what role foreign funded temples in these sites could play.

Some of the problems in rekindling the glory of the old Nalanda University are also discussed, as well as the need to have more controls on local monks in Bodhgaya, who give a bad image to Buddhism in India.

Sikkim was a former Buddhist kingdom in the Himalayas that India annexed as part of its Union in the 1970s. Along with Ladakh, Sikkim is the only other Buddhist state in India that could boast of a significant living Buddhist culture and community. There is tremendous scope for promoting Buddhist tourism and pilgrimage there and this is discussed in the chapter.

Yet, talking to Buddhist leaders in Sikkim, they expressed fears of the Buddhist identity diluting there due to an influx of Nepali Hindus since the annexation. Though this would be a sensitive issue in the context of regional tensions in India today, it is important to be mindful of this and look at ways to empower the Buddhists there without creating conflict. Sikkim has the potential to offer a unique Buddhist cultural experience like in Buddhist Bhutan. Sikkimese argue that Buddhism there predates that of Tibet, and the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok preserves that heritage.

The Indian chapter also discuss how statehood may help Buddhism in Ladakh, and how Buddhism is being rekindled or revived in Bengal and Tamil Nadu, while Manipur's Buddhists are basically forgotten; Buddhists in Tripura are fighting for survival, while a growing Buddhist movement in Nagpur is poised to become the nerve center of Indian Buddhism. Yet, tension with Hindus because of Ambedkar Buddhists' strong hostility to the caste system is also discussed. Growing Indian Buddhist media networks are also surveyed in the chapter.

Buddhism In Buddha's Birthplace

Chapter 6 looks at why Buddhism is at crossroads in Buddha's birthplace Lumbini in Nepal. Lumbini is today surrounded with Muslim villages. Ven Metteyya Sakyaputta, Vice Chairman of Lumbini Development Trust explains how developing Lumbini as a Buddhist pilgrim centre where the majority local community is Muslim, creates a complex issue.

Encouraged by the Nepali government a number of foreign Buddhist organisations have built new temples in Lumbini. The chapter discusses the challenges to create Buddhist spiritual experiences that will attract international pilgrims and tourists to come and spend a few days in Lumbini. The new Lumbini International Buddhist University is critically examined for its lack of a well-planned Buddhist education strategy.

The ancient city of Patan in Kathmandu is home to the Newari Buddhists who have a unique monastic system including a tradition of Buddhist singing similar to Hindu Bhajans. These are examined as possible alternatives to the traditional monastic system that is under threat in many parts of Asia.

Buddhism in Bhutan

The uniqueness of Bhutanese Buddhism and measures to preserve this by nurturing the order of monks is discussed in the chapter. As modernization creeps in some of the problems the monastic system is facing are examined. There is also a discussion on Bhutan's National Happiness Index as well as threats faced by Christian evangelical activity. The role of the media in protecting and nurturing Bhutanese Buddhism and culture is discussed reflecting the views of media practitioners there.

Threat To Sri Lanka's Rich Buddhist Heritage

The Sri Lankan chapter traces its great Buddhist heritage and regular struggles to protect it. There is a lengthy discussion on the threats facing Buddhism in Sri Lanka

from both within and from outside. The outside forces are quite formidable coming from well-funded Christian evangelical movements and Wahabi Islamist forces, that exploit the poverty of Buddhists for aggressive Proselytism. Anti-Buddhist propaganda in the foreign media against Sri Lankan Buddhists is also discussed examining how this could be countered by empowering Buddhists to communicate their concerns peacefully but forcefully.

Buddhism in Southeast Asia

Going into Southeast Asia, the Cambodian chapter discusses its great Buddhist heritage and how it was almost destroyed by the Khmer Rouge regime, but, has been remarkably revived since Khmer Rouge was overthrown in 1979. Drawing from interviews done with Cambodian media practitioners there is a discussion on, when the state religion is Buddhism, how Buddhist is the media? This raises the question about whether media practitioners are knowledgeable enough about Buddhism to reflect Buddhist values in content production?

This same issue is also addressed in the chapter on Thailand - where the media shies away from discussing Buddhist social, cultural and political issues. Buddhism's unique position in Thailand along with its relationship to the monarchy is also examined here as an issue of national identity. There is some critical examination of Bhramanistic influence in contemporary Thai Buddhism that has led to a form of popular Buddhism and philosophical(pure) Buddhism. New Buddhist movements like Wat Dhammakaya and Santi Asoke are examined as forms of new expressions of Engaged Buddhism. Various threats facing Buddhism in Thailand – some invisible - are discussed and the media's inability to address it is critically examined in the chapter.

Vietnam and Laos are examined as interesting examples of how the communist ideology and Buddhism have come to a historic accommodation in Asia.

Drawn from literature surveys, and observations in Vietnam and conversations with Buddhist leaders during my visit to Vietnam, especially the Vietnam Buddhist University in HCM city, the chapter looks at how Buddhism is thriving and possibly expanding in the country, with both Theravada and Mahayana co-existing there, even though Mahayana tends to predominate.

Drawing on conversations with Laotian Buddhists and observation of Lao Buddhist festivals during the various visits to Laos, the chapter looks at how temples have been incorporated into the Lao government's development programs. The Marxist ideology and Buddhist philosophy has merged into a unique rural development theory. The work of some Buddhist development agencies in rural development work is explored in the chapter. Attempts by evangelical Christians to convert hill tribe people are examined in the chapter and there is an important discussion – for other Buddhist countries to learn from as well – about how the United States is accusing Laos government of religious persecution, when they are trying to protect its poor Buddhist communities from aggressive Christian proselytism, often funded by US Christians.

The Myanmar chapter has a comprehensive discussion about the Burmese Buddhist tradition and how it is under threat today from many forces. The Arakan civilization

and the Rohingya issue are also discussed, while the foreign media bias against Myanmar's Buddhists are explored.

Protecting and Nurturing Buddhism As A Minority Religion

In visits to Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia, I examined how Buddhists as minorities are faring, and how they communicate as a Buddhist community with the majority Muslim population.

In chapter 4, I focus on protecting a threatened Buddhist community and focus on the Buddhists around Chittagong and Cox Bazzar. I was not allowed to go the Chittagong Hill Tribes (CHT) areas because the Bangladesh military has banned foreigners going there. But I did meet some CHT Buddhists in Chittagong and discussed the empowerment needs of the community. The fears of the Buddhist community there living on the shadows of the Rohingya crisis is discussed.

The Legacy of SriWijaya Buddhist civilization and its demise is discussed in the Indonesian chapter reflecting on possible lessons that can be learned by modern Buddhist societies in Asia. Indonesian government's encouragement for Buddhists to develop Borobodur as a Buddhist pilgrim center is examined.

The Malaysian chapter explore how a fairly well-to-do minority Buddhist community is keeping Buddhism alive in Malaysia, with a focus on both spiritual and non-evangelical community outreach work that help poor Malay Muslim children in particular. There is also a lengthy discussion in this chapter on Dr Victor Wee's work in pioneering a Buddhist musical movement in Southeast Asia.

Singapore provides an interesting example, where the Buddhists are nominally a majority, yet, there is no rich Buddhist heritage there. However, three major schools of Buddhism – Mahayana, Theravada and Vajrayana – exists harmoniously here. The chapter examines how Singapore Buddhists are trying to give a modernist outlook to the practice of Buddhism, while their young in particularly are getting attracted to Evangelical Christianity, which they see as modern.

Common Issues

The final chapter examines common issues facing Buddhist communities across Asia and makes some recommendations to empower Buddhists to address these.

Proselytism is a major problem for most Buddhist communities and often the governments and the Buddhist leaders are in self-denial. In many Buddhist majority countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia, Buddhists constitute most of the people living under poverty. Both Christian and Muslim evangelical forces – by providing economic incentives to coerce Buddhists to convert - exploit these socio-economic situations.

In almost every Buddhist country or community, that I visited, most of the young are not interested in Buddhism anymore. Many young people see Buddhism as old fashion and even superstitious because of the ritualistic nature of Buddhism in Asia.

The Buddhist tradition – both in Theravada and Mahayana – has been built around the monastic system. Maintaining this needs a constant supply of well-educated monks and nuns. In many countries it is now difficult to get, young boys in particular, to enter monkhood, because parents don't want to give one of their sons to the monastery anymore.

Distortion of Buddhism by Buddhist monks or temples is a serious issue in some Buddhist communities.

Media bias against Buddhists, not only in the western media and among international broadcasters like Al Jazeera, but also within Asian countries is a cause for concern.

Recommendations

Among the recommendations in the book are:

- **Development of Cross-Cultural Buddhist Media**

For socio-economic and cultural empowerment of Buddhist communities across Asia, developing these networks should reflect the voices of grassroots. Most Buddhist media are mainly broadcasting long sermons by a monk seated in front of a camera and chanting. Buddhist media needs to go beyond that to networking news and cultural programs. Some existing examples are given and recommends that these have to expand with proper funding.

- **Nalanda Arts Festival**

Cultural media is needed to mobilise Buddhist artists to collaborate across borders. After the Asian Buddhist Media Conclave of 2018, IBC set up an informal committee to look into organizing the first Nalanda Arts Festival in Nalanda. The festival is expected to be a showcase of Buddhist arts both traditional and contemporary. Buddhists foundations, countries and individuals need to allocate funding for such a venture.

- **Buddhist Communication Training**

Since the 2018 media conclave, a movement has gathered momentum to set up a 'Mindful Communication for Sustainable Development' training programs in Buddhist countries across Asia, to train Buddhist communicators. Buddhist educational institutions in Asia need to give this serious attention to empower development of Buddhist media in the region that could support development needs of Buddhist communities.

- **Reaching The Youth**

It is pointed out over and over again throughout this book that young people from Buddhist families in Asia are drifting away from Buddhism. It is of paramount importance that we review the way we communicate Buddhism to them. We need to fine-tune strategies, to use the digital communication tools they use to engage them with Buddhism. Some good practices from Cambodia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Thailand are discussed in the country chapters.

It is hoped that this book will be a useful guide to develop communication structures and processes among and within Buddhist communities across South and Southeast

Asia. The book is only available as an e-publication. If funding could be sourced Lotus Communication Network hope to publish a printed version.

The pdf copy of the book could be downloaded by logging to:
<https://lotuscommnetasia.wixsite.com/lotusnews/publications>

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