

Were “Young Bengal” – the English-educated products of Hindu College, who in many cases ended up serving the Raj as Shoshee himself did – out to delight and entertain their masters with their refinement and intellectual brilliance, or to madden, humiliate and nauseate them? In “Reminiscences of a Keráni’s Life”, no one in the treasury gets off lightly – Baboos, Chotá Sáhebs, Burrá Sáhebs, all are the butt of Shoshee’s “short but brilliant chapters” and exemplify to a man that “Shirk work is the great secret of an account office, as probably of all other offices also”. Yet somehow he manages to keep his own nose clean, telling us in a chapter headed “Ugly Mistakes”: “I never received any reproof in the office but twice; once when I made a mistake myself, and another time when I corrected one made by the Chotá Sáheb. It was on this last occasion that I learnt for the first time that men in authority make no mistakes...”. How could the Empire have run without servants like him? And would it have survived its greatest nineteenth-century challenge, the Sepoy Mutiny, if the Bengali *bhadralok* had not remained loyal? In a conversation with a Colonel about it, Shoshee denies that he has plans to give his own (poetic) version of events, and says, “We must leave it to Englishmen to tell the story for us, and my confidence in Englishmen is so great that I have no doubt that, sooner or later, the tale will be most faithfully told”. But then, slippery as ever, in “Shunkur: a tale of the Indian Mutiny of 1857” he goes on to give an account that still has the power to make all his readers, British and Indian, squirm. Historically prophetic for its description of a conference between Náná Sáheb and some other conspirators in which the partition of the country between Hindus and Mahomedans is cynically agreed, it also contains a shocking rape by two English soldiers on the run of the married daughter of a village woman who gives them refuge. The narrative style is quite Kiplingesque, and one is tempted to wonder if that later master of complexity and irony read this work and took away from it more than just an ornate way of representing Indian speech.

Shoshee’s mastery of language – and his literary importance as a precursor of later Indian writers of English – is displayed to the full in the wonderful piece on “The street-music of Calcutta”: twenty-three distinctive cries of beggars and hawkers, with exuberant descriptive notes. (The editor’s notes and glossary give further, useful, translations and explanations.) Add to that his vision of an independent twentieth-century Republic of Orissa and of a British Empire “sinking fast into that state of weakness and internal division that is the sure forerunner of the fall of kingdoms”, and one wonders if the most loyal of anglicized Babus were actually (like Hurree Babu in Kipling’s *Kim*) more effective than the nationalist politicians in making the British feel increasingly uncomfortable with their role.

William Radice

RICHARD F. GOMBRICH:

Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo (Second edition.).

(The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices.) xiii, 234 pp. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. £16.99. ISBN 0 415 36509 0.

While this book – originally published in 1988 and now reissued in a revised second edition – is often described as an introduction to Theravāda Buddhism,

it is an introduction of a curious kind. It does not attempt to provide an overview of the entire international Theravāda tradition, and much of the book concerns the earliest origins of Buddhism – a time when the term Theravāda was not in existence. It would be most accurate to describe the book as a history of the Sri Lankan tradition of Buddhism, one which begins with the emergence of Buddhism in fifth-century India, continues with the arrival, establishment and pre-colonial vicissitudes of the Theravāda school in Sri Lanka, and concludes with a discussion of the changes that have occurred within Sri Lankan Buddhism in the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Like its geographical focus, the historical coverage of the book is somewhat selective, giving a great deal of space to early Buddhism and to the last 150 years of Sri Lankan Buddhist history, and dedicating only two chapters to the more than 2,000 years in between. However, all this narrowness of focus works to the book's advantage, since it allows Gombrich to provide detailed and convincing portrayals of how social, economic and intellectual factors produced religious changes in the specific times and places on which he focuses. This would simply not be possible in a more generalized introductory text. At the same time Gombrich's clear and engaging written style makes even the more complex material in the book accessible to a newcomer to the field.

There is much in the book which goes against the grain of the dominant trends in contemporary Buddhist studies. Recent scholarship has tended to question Gombrich's assumption that the Pali canon presents a single, unified set of religious ideas (p. 21); to give more attention to lay Buddhist religiosity; and to present a more nuanced portrayal of pre-modern Buddhist history than the rather static picture given by Gombrich (pp. 22–3). All of these tendencies, of course, are related to wider trends within academia which favour moving away from grand narratives and towards approaches which highlight the multivocality and ambiguity found within cultural and religious traditions. All of this raises questions about how introductory texts should be written. Should an introduction to Theravāda Buddhism be constructed as a series of themed chapters, each aiming to highlight the complexity that surrounds a particular issue and shying away from making any overarching claims about the tradition as a whole? Or is there still room for a text like Gombrich's which attempts to construct a single narrative about 2,400 years of Buddhist history? In my view Gombrich's approach remains preferable. Introductory texts must inspire and engage their readership, and this is best done through a well-written and well-argued narrative, not through stressing only the uncertainties of the discipline. On the other hand, my main reservation with Gombrich's approach is that at times he writes as if his opinion is the last word on matters which are actually the subject of much academic debate. This is problematic in an introductory text, which must ideally balance its need for an engaging narrative with some attempt to point out areas of ambiguity and academic disagreement.

This second edition is largely unchanged from the first, the main additions being the incorporation of some recent scholarship concerning Vedic and early Buddhist literature, and a new section detailing Buddhist responses to Sri Lanka's descent into civil war.

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