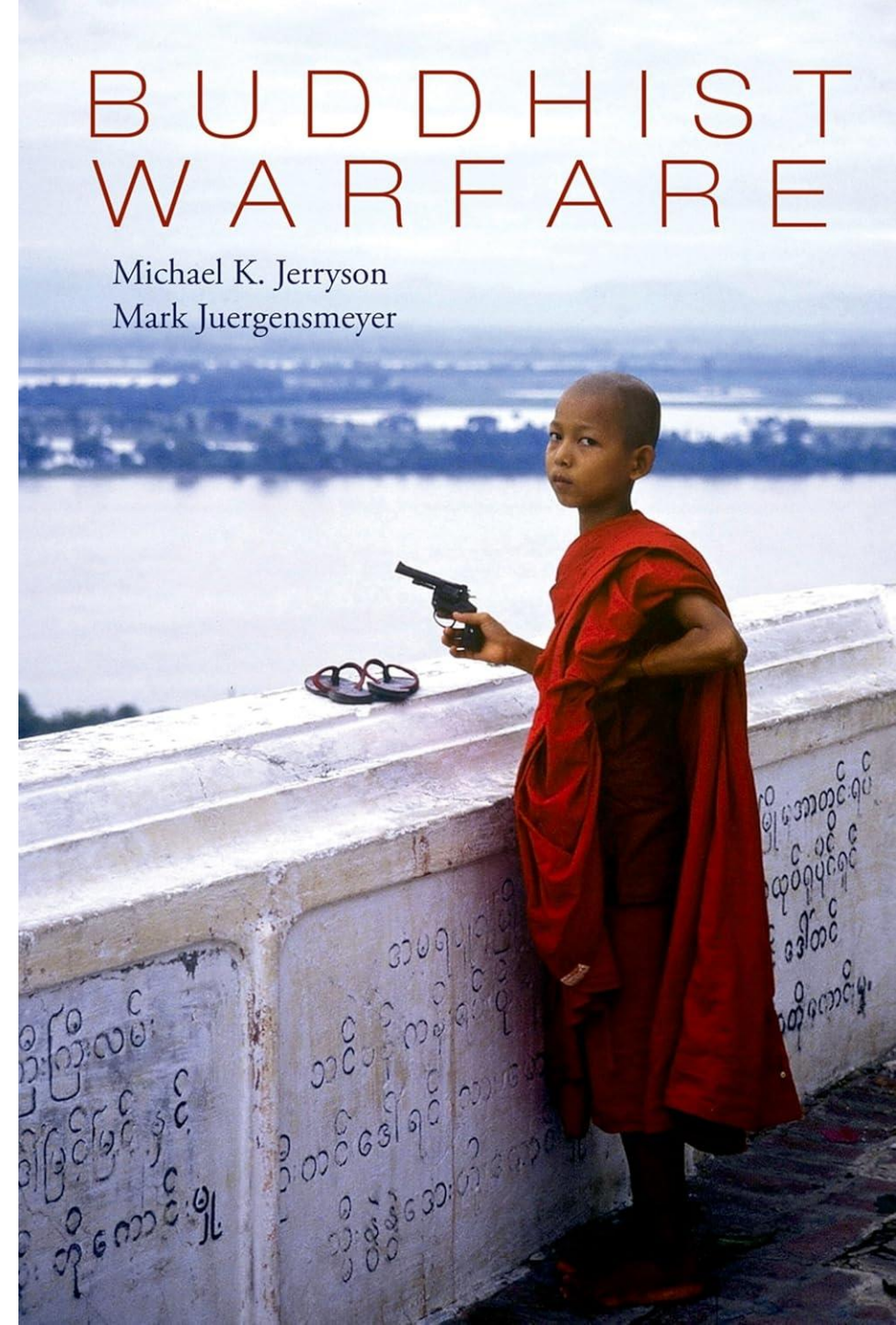


Buddhist Fundamentalism in Myanmar and Sri Lanka



“In the West, we are well aware of Christian fundamentalism, Islamist Salafism-Jihadism, militant Judaism, and maybe even of the ultra-nationalist Hindutva movement and militant Sikhism in India. **Militant and violent Buddhism, however, features only rarely in Western debates**, the current plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar (Burma) notwithstanding. Somehow, the idea of organized Buddhist mob violence targeting non-Buddhists seems to be outright ludicrous.”

Militant Buddhist strands are neither new nor aberrant

- Historical precedents make clear that “militant, extremist, and ultra-nationalist Buddhist violence [...] was kept hidden for quite a while” but in fact dates back over a century in Theravāda countries*
 - in Sri Lanka, monks helped stoke the 1915 Sinhalese–Tamil riots
 - in Burma they took up arms against the British as early as the 1880s and again in the 1938 Indo-Burmese riots
 - in Thailand, “cold war” monks fought communist insurgents in the 1970s

[*Theravāda Buddhism is the dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia]

Sinhalese–Tamil “race” riots of 1915

- rising tensions between Sinhalese Buddhists and Indian Tamil (Hindu and Muslim) communities, partly part over economic competition and the legacy of Christian missionary influence under British rule
- a group of Sinhalese clergy (including Anagarika Dharmapāla) clashed with Christian missionaries over access to the Temple of the Tooth
- in June 1915, Sinhalese mobs attacked Tamil homes and businesses in Colombo
- Tamils (and in some cases Muslims of South Indian origin) struck back
- death toll over 100 people, with many more beaten and injured on both sides

Riots and Martial Law in Ceylon (1915)



P. Ramanathan

Militant Buddhist Rhetoric

- Dharmapāla and his circle published polemics against “alien invaders” of the island
- writing just before the riots, Dharmapāla accused “Tamil Muslims” of having “shed rivers of blood” and “driven the sons of the soil to the wall”
 - invoking a narrative of existential threat to Sinhalese-Buddhists that helped prime monks and laity alike for violence
- the official Braund Inquiry (1939) into these disturbances later recorded that a number of Buddhist monks themselves took part in attacks – armed with sticks and stones—and that their involvement gave the mobs both moral sanction and organizational cohesion
- the British administration responded by imposing martial law, deploying troops, and arresting hundreds of Sinhalese leaders and monks, several prominent monks were court-martialled; dozens of Sinhalese (including clergy) were executed or imprisoned,
- these riots demonstrate that sectarian violence, religious-nationalist mobilization by monks, and colonial state interventions all played a part in setting Sri Lanka on a path toward recurrent communal conflict
- laid the groundwork for later cycles of anti-Tamil (and subsequently anti-Muslim) violence in the late 20th and early 21st centuries

The Age of Dukkha

- the “Age of Suffering” allows violence as defence
 - classical Buddhist doctrine, while privileging *ahimsa*, nonetheless permits “armed defence [...] in this current age of suffering (dukkha)” when the Dhamma* is seen as threatened. This theological hinge—violence as last resort to protect the faith—underpins much extremist rhetoric
- Ashoka’s ideal of replacing “bheri-ghosa” (war-drums) with “dhamma-ghosa” (the sound of the Dhamma)
 - exemplifies how modern “war-monks” have resurrected bheri-ghosa – using Buddhist symbols and history to justify violence and cultivate a siege-mentality among lay followers

*dharma (Sanskrit) / dhamma (Pali) – Pali is an ancient Middle Indo-Aryan language of the Indian subcontinent, primarily known as the classical and liturgical language of the Theravāda Buddhist canon, the Tipitaka

Maurya Emperor Ashoka (reigned c. 268–232 BCE), one of South Asia's most celebrated early patrons of Buddhism

- in one of his famous edicts, Ashoka declares that under his enlightened rule the sound of war-drums (bheri-ghoṣa) had been replaced by the “sound of the Dharma” (*dhamma-ghoṣa”)
- a powerful political-theological image of a ruler who renounces violence in favor of moral governance
- Ashoka as the paradigmatic “peaceful Buddhist king”, whose example of dhamma-over-bheri has long stood as the Western caricature of Buddhism's inherent pacifism
 - an ideal which militant monks today invert by resurrecting the very “war-drums” Ashoka claimed to have silenced

Transnational cooperation of “saffron armies”

- extremist networks span borders, e.g., Burma’s 969 Movement and Sri Lanka’s Bodu Bala Sena have held joint conferences, sharing tactics and anti-Muslim narratives; these “war monks” see themselves as part of a regional “saffron army”
- role of “folk Buddhism” in mobilizing followers Beyond monastic elites, Lehr stresses the importance of popular/folk practices—amulets, spirit-medium rituals, even astrology—to bind laypeople to militant causes.
- charismatic “preachers of hate” (Lehr) harness local grievances (colonial legacies, economic hardship, demographic anxieties) to their millenarian vision of a pure “Buddhist nation”
- **millenarianism or millenarism:** the belief by religious, social, or political groups or movements in the coming of fundamental transformations of society, after which “all things will be changed”

Finding safe haven in Bangladesh

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have left their ethnic homeland of Rakhine State for the district of Cox's Bazar in Chittagong, Bangladesh.



The Rohingya genocide

- since 1982, the Rohingya have been denied citizenship by successive Myanmar governments, rendering them effectively stateless and subject to “systematic discrimination” in movement, education, and livelihoods studies
- in August 2017, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) launched a “clearance operation” in northern Rakhine State following ARSA attacks on border posts
- Human Rights Watch and the UN described it as ethnic cleansing – and possibly genocide – driving ~740,000 Rohingya across the border into Bangladesh
- today, roughly 1 million Rohingya remain in overcrowded camps in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, while an unknown number (est. 100,000–200,000) are internally displaced inside Rakhine State



[...T]oday, the most formidable and dangerous ‘other’ in the eyes of both Buddhist monks and laity in Burma, Sri Lanka, and Thailand are Muslims.”

Blasphemy Laws & Persecution of Christians in Pakistan

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/08/pakistan-one-year-since-jaranwala-attack-minority-christians-await-justice/>