

Buddhicizing or Ethnicizing the State: Do the Sinhala Saṅgha Fear Muslims in Sri Lanka?

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Sri Lanka, a predominantly Theravāda state, is recovering from 30 years of civil war between the minority Tamil (largely Hindu) rebels and the State. Yet the recovery is slowed or even reversed by an extreme recentralization of power and an attempt to further 'Buddhicize' socio-politics. Part of this process is the campaign led by the Bodu Bala Sēnā (BBS) - a Saṅgha-led organization calling for severe restriction on the Muslim population and their way of life, including *halāl* food, wearing the *hijab*, and calling to prayers (especially in the early morning and late at night). The Lanka Saṅgha seems to be learning from their counterparts in Burma and Thailand, where there is strong anti-Muslim sentiment. There is evidence that certain political powers are indirectly (and perhaps even directly) supporting this group.

This essay attempts to understand the ideology of the BBS and argue that the modern Saṅgha in a majority Buddhist state such as Lanka are faced with a challenge in the shape of modern democracy and the multinational nature of their society. However, they seem to draw strength from a hegemonic past rather than acknowledge the reality of a multi-faith, multi-cultural world order. It will need a combination of Saṅgha and lay scholars and activists to find answers to allay this political anxiety and avert the carnage it promises to deliver.

Introduction

Buddhism is generally perceived as a religion of peace and non-violence. Yet empirically this hardly describes Buddhism in many countries where it is the state

religion or the religion of the majority. Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Thailand have produced and/or continue to produce protracted and bloody violence between the Buddhist majority and the ethnic/religious minorities. Even now, Saṅgha-led violence both in Burma¹ and in Sri Lanka is diminishing the hope of democratic recovery. This phenomenon has created a paradoxical paradigm in academic analyses of Buddhism, and is problematic for all who treat Buddhism as a philosophy of *ahiṃsā*, the moral principle of non-violence that is theoretically fundamental to all Buddhist traditions.

In this respect, Buddhism is not unique, for all major religions preach in favour of peace and generally deprecate violence, but tend to behave otherwise. The impact of 9/11, even after a decade, has generated an industry level production of academic material on the theme of religious violence and its socio-political ramifications. The major part of this work produced by Western scholars (and scholars located in the West) has gravitated around Islam and Judaism (Al-Rasheed 2009, Eagleton 2005, Habeck 2006, Juergensmeyer 2011, 2000, Kirsch 2009). This is not surprising, given the level of internal and cross-border conflict seen in countries where Islam is either the state religion or the religion of the majority. The domino effect of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, the continuing conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria, and the possible nuclear programme in Iran are all grist to this mill. So are the Israeli military actions and reactions.

Violence that is promoted by interpretations of a given religion is by no means limited to Islam or Judaism. Hindu-Muslim tension divided India at her independence, and the animosity between these groups still sometimes erupts in serious violence, as happened in Gujarat (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012) and in Delhi over the Babri Mosque (Misra 2012). Sikh political separatism and internal sectarianism have also been very violent (Chima 2010).

At present there appear to be at least three schools of thought concerning the relationship of Buddhism to violence:

1. The present, often violent, revival of Buddhism, especially in the Theravāda states, is largely part of the ‘return of religions’ response to the ill effects of globalization and the cultural hegemony that is being imposed (Berkwitz, 2008, Juergensmeyer 2010, Jerryson 2009, Kippenberg 2011).
2. Some have pointed out that modern Buddhism with all its fluidity and varieties is not a trans-global philosophy but a practice that is fertilized by

¹See situation report on the Buddhist-Muslim riots: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21935344>. Accessed on 26 March 2013.

- indigenous cultures, so that it produces local expressions such as Burmese Buddhism, Sinhala Buddhism, Thai Buddhism or Korean Buddhism. Such Buddhism has its own cultural DNA, either legitimizing or opposing violence (Blackburn 2010, Brekke 2013).
3. The third school argues that Buddhism, like other institutionalized religions, has used violence to advance and establish itself. Various arguments based on interpretations of texts such as the Pali Canon and the *Mahāvamsa* have been used to justify such violence. These arguments have given rise to apparent oxymorons such as ‘Buddhist Warfare’ (Jenkins 2010, Maher, 2010 and Jerryson 2010).

There is also a particular debate about Sinhalese Buddhism. This focuses on how violence has been practised and propagated by the Sinhala Saṅgha. Some have argued that Sinhala Buddhism is always a tool of state power legitimization (Bradwell 1978). Thus it has “betrayed” its essentials (Tambiah 1987). This is so because in Lanka, now as well as in the past, the Saṅgha are more than king-makers (Seneviratne 1997). This trajectory has developed a just war ideology in Sinhalese Buddhism (Bartholomeusz 2002), as in Lanka the past is always present (Kemper 1991). While these authors have thrown some new light on the topic, they have not yet been able to reach any overarching or encompassing conclusions which command general acceptance.

This essay is a brief analysis of a new, yet exceptionally vibrant, Buddhist militant agitation against the local Muslim community and how that community identifies itself in trade, politics and even socio-demography in Lanka. The state is currently grappling with the challenge of reconciliation, reconstruction and political justice after thirty years of one of Asia’s most violent civil wars. This new movement offers another window onto a topic still far too little studied: the historical role of the Saṅgha in the society and politics of Sri Lanka.

Bodu Bala Sēnā²

Many sections of Sri Lankan civil society have been caught by surprise by the appearance in many parts of the island of a systematic anti-Muslim campaign. This has largely been mobilized by a new organization called the Bodu Bala Sēnā (BBS),

²Most Sinhala names in this article are transliterated according to the traditional philological conventions, but names which in Sri Lanka have a commonly used spelling keep it. The name Gñāṇissara (see below) is a necessary compromise.

“The Army of Buddhist Power”. The BBS is mainly a lay organization, but the leadership is impressive, for it includes several prominent members of the Saṅgha. Ven. Kiraṇa Vimalajōti Thera is chairman; Ven. Galagoḍaattē Gñāṇissara Thera is national secretary and spokesperson (and particularly militant), Ven. Haputalē Paññāsāra Thera and Ven. Vitārandeṇiyē Nanda Thera are members of the executive committee. All are members of the Amarapura Nikāya. Dilanta Vitānagē, a senior lecturer in history at Sri Jayewardenepura University, has joined them as their theoretician.

The BBS is far better organized than any traditional Saṅgha organization, such as the Siyam or Amarapura Nikāya and their branches. It makes good use of information technology such the worldwide web³ and social networking sites. Its Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Wikipedia pages are more active than many Lankan state agency public profiles. They use Facebook and cell phone texting to organize their violent protest rallies at short notice without attracting the attention of the police. In many ways this neatly fits into what Juergensmeyer has labelled ‘e-mail ethnicity’.⁴

By this display of practical efficiency, so alien to the traditional Saṅgha, the BBS has projected itself as the most potential ethno-religious outfit among those seeking to intervene in the volatile postwar polity of Lanka.

Aims and activities of the BBS

The BBS started its national campaign by demanding reform of, *inter alia*, major centres of Buddhist pilgrimage: the traditional “eight great sites” (*aṭṭa maha sthāna*), including the Bo tree, at Anuradhapura; the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy; Kataragama; Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihāra; and Siripāda (= Adam’s Peak). All have become extremely wealthy down the centuries through the donations of the pious, but their accounts are not audited and they are accountable to no one. This concern seemed to be in commendable contrast to the customary lethargy of other Sinhala Buddhist organizations. However, the BBS soon moved on to rhetoric attacking Christians and, even more, Muslims. What started as a protest against some Muslim traders, who allegedly sold T-shirts and pants carrying the image of the Buddha, soon grew into a national campaign to boycott Muslim trading places and avoid selling land/property to Muslims. It then focussed on

³<http://bodubalasena.org/sinhala/>

⁴Mark Juergensmeyer, *Inside the global rebellion*, 2008: <http://rationalist.org.uk/articles/1811/inside-the-global-rebellion>.

the complex issue of *halal* food certification⁵, demanding that the government completely ban it. By March 2013 over a hundred national producers and some multinational companies had withdrawn their halal certification. The Speaker of the Parliament, Chamal Rajapaksa (elder brother of the President), had ordered the cafeteria in Parliament not merely to remove all halal food but also to sell pork, which till then had been banned out of consideration for the Muslim MPs.⁶

The BBS has also destroyed, or at the very least incited others to destroy, Muslim sites. In Dambulla a crowd attacked and seriously damaged a mosque. There are several amateur videos of this incident posted on YouTube; see for example <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BEzluoMWMk>. The incumbent of the famous Buddhist temple at Dambulla, Īnāmaluve Śrī Sumaṅgala, can be seen inciting the crowd, while police and soldiers are standing around doing nothing, and some Tamil civilians are praying in fear. The monk argues that Dambulla, having an old and famous Buddhist temple, must be reserved entirely for Buddhists. What the film does not show is that the mosque being attacked is a fairly small building down a side street which no visitor would normally notice. Of course, attacking the mosque would be indefensible wherever it stood, but this point illustrates that the anti-Muslim outrages are finding issues where there were none and have to create their own enemies. Comparable incidents have occurred elsewhere. In Colombo (Dehiwala) a crowd led by the BBS entered a mosque by force and removed all the files, computers and documents, claiming that the mosque was supporting terrorism. In Kalutara they moved building material from a site where a mosque was expanding. In Anuradhapura an ancient Sufi centre was destroyed. There is also a clip showing Ven.Galagoḍaattē Gñāṇissara Thera forcing his way into the Government's archaeology department to demand action from the Minister: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJNbKWYNIiE>.

It is evident that the present government has come either to tolerate or even to support the BBS, at least indirectly. The BBS has had private meetings not only with the President and his brother, the powerful Defense Secretary, but also sections of the diplomatic corps, including the Indian, Iranian and US embassies, who apparently fear becoming a target of their campaigns. There have been me-

⁵ *Halal* means "permissible" under Islamic law. In this context it refers to how food should be prepared, and in particular how animals should be slaughtered. Muslims are not supposed to buy meat which is not in some way officially designated as *halal*.

⁶ In Sri Lanka, members of the largest religious communities, Buddhists and Hindus, rarely or never eat pork, though it is not forbidden. The Speaker's action was thus nothing but a gratuitous insult to Muslims.

dia reports that the President has offered ministerial advisory posts to some key monks in the BBS and invited its ideologue Vitānagē to become Secretary of the national Ministry for Buddhist Affairs. Journalists have suspected that this is the handiwork of the war hero brother of the President, Defense Secretary Ghōtābaya Rajapakse, intended to lead up to a launch of a Saṅgha led political party in the 2014-15 presidential elections.

By the end of March 2013, when this is being written, the political power of the BBS has been shown by the way the state has enacted two of their demands. First, the government has declared that it is not necessary for any business entity to apply or accredit Halal certification and it is only the responsibility of Muslims to adhere to such rule.

The impact of the second enactment will be more drastic. It has been decided to ban any hospital, whether state or private, from performing vasectomy or any tubal ligation surgery on a Sinhalese. This is to satisfy the BBS, who are arguing that the growth rate of the Sinhalese is far lower than that of Muslims in Lanka, and every effort must be made to reverse this. However, Lanka's population density is already much higher than that of Brazil, China, Ethiopia, Nigeria or Turkey, which are among the most populous states in the world. This is due to its limited landmass as an island. Lanka has managed to control its birth rate far better than its South Asian neighbours, and thus achieved remarkable standards in education, health, and other features of the social index. Mismanaged population growth only promises further damage to the already fragile economy.

Buoyed by its success, the BBS has launched a campaign to ban the *niqāb* (the veil worn by Muslim women) in public and to restrict the design and the siting of new mosques. They also demand that all Muslim places of worship be monitored by the state. They are said to be hoping to propose a *Bhūmi Putra*⁷ type of special tax on non-Buddhist business projects, and to restrict any land purchase by Muslims in areas such as Anurādhapura, Daṃbulla, Kandy, Kelaniya and Mahiyangana that are considered particularly important parts of the Sinhala cultural heritage. However, the most important political question is why the rulers seem to endorse and even encourage such demands.

⁷Literally: "Son of the soil" in Sanskrit. This political term for the dominant indigenous population was coined in Malaysia by Tunku Abdul Raman to refer to Malays, and further popularized there by Mahathir Mohamad.

The Muslims of Lanka

Academic studies of the Muslims in Lanka are sparse, and those that exist are mostly anthropological. Little has been done to analyse the role they have played as an ‘in-between’ community during the last 30 years of civil war, or for that matter since Independence. But Muslim identity has been officially represented in the state affairs of Lanka for over a century. In 1889, a Muslim member was appointed to the state assembly as an expansion of the 1833 Colebrooke-Cameron reforms (Nissan and Stirrat 1990). Today there are 14 elected MPs representing two major parties and two Islamic parties. While this under-represents Muslims, in that they are 10

The Muslim-Buddhist relationship has been amicable compared to that between Sinhalese and Tamils. While the origin of the Muslim community in Lanka is still debated, Muslims have been present at least since the 15th CE, as they were first contacted by Portuguese traders round 1450. The recent history of Muslims in Lanka has generally been one of coexistence, though in 1915 there were island-wide anti-Muslim riots (Ali 1981, Kannangara 1984). During the recent civil war the Muslim community suffered huge social and economic damage from the LTTE as well as from state militarization. The LTTE in 1990 expelled some 90,000 Muslims overnight at gunpoint. While there was some element of support for the separatist cause from the Muslim polity, this ethnic expulsion pushed the Muslims to seek security in the state and in return help the state to defeat the LTTE and/or negate the Tamil demand for equality. The state used them as a ‘buffer’ community to gather intelligence or launch military operations. Both these events and increased exposure to Islamic culture via the employment opportunities in the Gulf have made some sections of the Muslims create their own identity-based socio-politics. After the war, this may have irritated the radical monks who desire to hegemonize Buddhism in the state. However, the vast majority of the Muslim community has stood with the Sinhala Buddhists in their fight for the unitary status of Lanka, and in general the Gulf states have backed Lanka when it needed international support at forums such as the UNHRC. Therefore the BBS agitation demands a much wider analysis than a Buddhist-Muslim dichotomy. It appears that the Saṅgha are eager to reposition themselves as ‘State Custodians’ in the aftermath of military victory.

Postwar Buddhist Politics

Even four years after the end of the civil war, divisions in Sri Lanka remain very deep. The wounds of war are still bleeding. There is no attempt to meet the Tamils' democratic demands. Tamils who have returned to their homes in the former war zone have to live in conditions of inhuman poverty. The international community at the UNHRC and in other forums is repeatedly calling for accountability for war crimes. The Sinhalese population, once jubilant over their victory, is frustrated, if not furious, at the abysmal corruption and nepotism. In such an inflammable socio-political situation, what is the need for a well-organized outfit of this nature? Why is the BBS on an anti-Muslim campaign? Is it only a stand-alone organization, or a symptom of a wider political undercurrent which has been developing in Lanka since the war? Why do the Sinhala Saṅgha need to identify an 'enemy' they have to defeat? Are they set to continue the course of violent ethno-religious violent nationalism which they have been pursuing? Or are they turning further inward in an attempt at self-defense against the ever-changing world around them?

In 2009, the modern state of Lanka recentralized her strong Sinhala Buddhist structure. The total defeat of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) – until then considered one of world's most effective political terror organizations – reaffirmed the political will of the Sinhala elites and their voters. For them, Lanka must forever remain a tightly centralized Sinhala Buddhist state, under a Sinhala Buddhist leader, no matter the democratic/human cost. No account is to be taken of the fact that Lanka is a multicultural island that survives on a dependent economy. There is no doubt that the present Rajapakse government, unlike its predecessors, steadfastly preserved the Sinhala determination to defeat the LTTE irrespective of internal and occasional (often marginal) international pressures. With hindsight we can see that building up a 'just war' ideology to safeguard the territorial integrity of the *Dhammadīpa* ("the Island of Buddhism") and the sovereignty of the Sinhala was facilitated by the Saṅgha. This uncompromising stand and the rhetoric of a minority, the highly mobilized radicalized Sinhala (largely southern) Saṅgha, plus the passive support of the majority of the Saṅgha of all major *nikāyas* across the island, helped to create the military mindset which won the war in 2009. Lanka since then has repeatedly rejected the credible UNHRC allegation of mass civilian killing and other punishable war crimes. Moreover, Lanka has yet to give due credit for her unforgiving victory to the two entities most responsible. The first of these is China, Lanka's regional superpower guardian which underwrote the

victory against the LTTE with weapons and intelligence, and by blocking international pressure (Höglund and Orjuela 2012, Marshall 2010:328). A recent World Bank report says that China has already invested/loaned up to US \$ 40 billion to Lanka. While there has never been public accountability for such massive funds in Lanka, at least China may be enjoying its growing influence in Lanka. The second entity is monastic leaders such as Aturaliyē Ratana, Bengamuve Nālaka and Elle Guṇavaṃsa, who vigorously Buddhicised the war, and the thousands of monks who paraded to demand a military solution. However, it appears that the rulers who have defeated the LTTE have only fulfilled one of the expectations of the militant Saṅgha. Their wider aim to (re-)establish an ethno-religious Sinhala Buddhist state is advancing more slowly than they had hoped. This is the backdrop against which the BBS is coming to the fore.

Sinhala Buddhism and Minorities

The attitude of the Sinhala Saṅgha towards the minority faiths – be they Mahāyāna Buddhists, Catholics, Christians, Hindus or Muslims – has been a flashpoint. The Sinhala Saṅgha are not known for their tolerance of other faiths and practices if they perceive them to be a threat of any kind. This issue is relevant to the broader debate of how minority rights, and even human rights at large, fare within Theravāda Buddhism. Does it support the principle of minority rights, as understood in the liberal Western tradition? The answer is far from clear.

L.P.N. Perera, a Lankan scholar of Pali, has argued that human rights are ‘in complete accord with Buddhist thought, and may be said to be nothing new to Buddhism in conception’ (Perera 1991:21). He believes that one can easily find supportive texts within the Pāli canon for every article of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. On the other hand Peter Junger, a Buddhist and Professor of Law, maintains, “The concept of human rights is not likely to be useful in . . . following the Buddha Dharma” (Junger 1998: 55). The debate here in fact should be not between Buddhism and a liberal version of minority rights, but whether or not Buddhism within its doctrine of individual salvation has enough concern for political debate on such matters. Are such ‘this-worldly’ ‘rights’ helpful in understanding human suffering and its path to nirvāna? Discussion of such rights tends to derive from the Abrahamic religious tradition. Further, the modern legal language of rights without doubt is located in Western philosophical views of life and society. Nevertheless, even if its focus is not of this world, can Buddhism afford to dismiss such political issues as irrelevant? And even if Buddhism

supports such concepts as human rights, can the dominant cultural paradigm in which modern Buddhism survives so apply the Pali teachings that they become a practical reality? Damien Keown, after editing a volume on the topic, concludes that the debate is open-ended, because most Buddhist scholars are still far more interested in historical Buddhism than in discussing its relevance in the 21st century (Keown, Prebish, and Rollen 1997). While the scholarship on this is growing (Harding 2007, Hoffman 2008, Mearns 1999, Schmidt-Leukel 2006, 2004, Traer 1988), it may take more vigorous analysis and argument before we can arrive at any common ground – if indeed that will ever be possible. The Sinhala Saṅgha, with their entrenched ethno-religious nationalism as it has operated for more than fifteen centuries since the writing of the *Mahāvamsa*, will need more convincing than by being told what the Western discourse on minority human rights has to offer them.

Trans-localizing Buddhist politics

The intrinsically interwoven relationship between the Theravādin Saṅgha and their states is a well-researched fact in the power politics of South (east) Asia. Its historical dimension is to be found in the influential *Vamsa* literature of Lanka. I have elsewhere contributed to this research to contextualize the modern Saṅgha-state nexus in Lanka.⁸ The post-LTTE resistance by the Sinhala Saṅgha and its political mobilization are grounded on two historical factors. First, the political heritage of Saṅgha genealogy: from the Ven. Mahānāma of the Mahāvihāra, the first author of the *Mahāvamsa*, to the Ven. Gaṅgoḍavīla Sōma, the modern crusader of a semi-urban charismatic Buddhist evangelism, there remains a self-defined cosmological responsibility and a belief that the Saṅgha has uncontested authority to define the Sinhala state. The late Ven. Professor Walpola Rāhula articulated this in his *Bhikṣuvāgē Urumaya* (later *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*), now in its ninth edition and considered the manifesto for modern Saṅgha politics. Second, the Sinhala Saṅgha have historically adopted, imported and exported an ethno-religious template of interpretation to understand and respond to the changes in their society. They have borrowed and localized concepts and modalities from other Theravādin contemporaries. When challenging the deeply colonized state in the 1800s they worked with the Burmese and Thai Saṅghas. An independent self-rule thesis was then borrowed from their Bengali counterparts. Anagārika

⁸See my thesis, listed in the Bibliography below.

Dharmapāla, while not a monk, projected the influential ‘Protestant Buddhist’ concept of ‘Sinhala Bauddhayā’⁹. Dharmapāla, with the help and advice of American war veteran Colonel Olcott, borrowed his agitation and its models from the Protestant Christian missionaries. Even the media-based Buddhist evangelism of Ven. Sōma, continued by others like the Ven. Īnāmaluve Śrī Sumaṅgala of Rangiri Vihāra of Dambulla, is following in the footsteps of British and American religious preachers who exploit the public space via the modern media, including the worldwide internet. Ann Blackburn, in her *Locating Buddhism* (2010), has investigated this history. Such borrowing is followed by adaptation to local circumstances; for instance, the Amarapura Nikāya, founded by importing ordination traditions from Burma in the early 19th century, broke into segments divided by Sinhala caste identities. The resultant ontological insecurities have been further deepened by forces such as market based liberal democracy, its globalization of western values, the growth of newer religions (especially Pentecostal Christianity) or the rise of a trader class like the Muslims. I argue that concepts such as minority rights and federalism have fallen victims of the Saṅgha internationalization which fuelled not only the just war thesis but also rejected all talk of federalism or power sharing and insisted that the state be recentralized. This Saṅgha worldview has generated both violent and non-violent responses. The BBS appears to have developed in this context.

Building Buddhatva – Buddhism as a Political Entity and Ideology

Scholars agree that nation state formation in South Asia has taken a direction opposite to that which it took in Europe. In South Asia, the struggles for independence from colonization by the West did not aim to build an overarching state led by a civic society with a single ethno-religious cultural identity. The multinational, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural nature of South Asian societies prevented such uniformity and civic consciousness. The post-colonial struggles for democracy in these states bear witness to the fact that independence was perceived as an opportunity for a particular ethnic group rather than for the entire state. In Lanka, the Sinhala considered independence to be their chance for majority rule. This is proved by many post independent undemocratic acts, such as the disenfranchising of the Indian Tamils, making Sinhala the only offi-

⁹“The Sinhala Buddhist”. This is the name of the newspaper that Dharmapāla founded in 1906. See Gombrich and Obeyesekere, p.207, and the whole of chapter 6 of that book for a historical analysis of “Protestant Buddhism”, a concept invented by Obeyesekere.

cial state language, giving religious supremacy to Buddhism, and discrimination in university admissions. On the other hand, after escaping from colonial rule, the Tamils seem to have dreamed of a largely autonomous, confederated or even independent homeland. Such unfulfilled, diametrically opposed, political ambitions eventually led to the thirty years of civil war.

The Sinhala Saṅgha in spiritual terms have renounced this world and are helping others to find nirvāna. However, they have had a historical socio-political mandate too: to build and maintain a state in which the ethno-religious ideology of Sinhala Buddhism dominates politics and society. Their aim recorded in the *Vaṃsa* literature is political rather than religious, or at least very different from the teachings of the Pāli canonical texts. This political Buddhism is often projected against an identified ‘other’. For the Sinhala Saṅgha, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism, Christian missionaries, Islam, and the peoples of those faiths have often provided such otherness. Some have argued that the Sinhala Saṅgha, through their agitation against the other and their political project of building a Buddhist state, have taken the same path as the Hindu nationalist mobilization for Hindutva:¹⁰ that is, to redesign the state of Lanka from a Sinhala Buddhist perspective. They intend to make every aspect of Lankan society an extended part of Sinhala Buddhism. By this, the Tamils in Lanka are to be Buddhist Tamils; Christians and Muslims are to practise their culture and religion so that it reflects the overarching ‘Buddhistness’ of Lanka.

There is an extended body of literature on Hindutva, (Kuruvachira 2006, Sarkar 1996) however; in Lanka the Saṅgha’s resistance politics is still too little studied. My own research has revealed that many scholars (Gananath Obeyesekere, H. L. Seneviratne, S. J. Tambiah and many western academics) have investigated Sinhala Saṅgha politics from an anthropological perspective, but not through the lens of political science. On the other hand, modern political science has not been good at explaining some of the transformations happening in ethno-religious politics in societies like Lanka. The contemporary Western scholarship that claims to find a ‘return of religion’ (Appleby 2000, Juergensmeyer 2003) is unconvincing, as religion never left the Sinhala or the polity they produce. Therefore, this is not a return but a reassertion of how deeply Buddhistized Sinhala politics are. Popular Western matrices such as (post)modernism (Abeysekera 2008, 2002) are even less useful for understanding the religious politics of Lanka.

¹⁰Hindutva simply means the Hindu way of life. But this in modern politics (of India) denotes restructuring the state and society on Hindu religious terms.

Are the waves of Saṅgha political resistance in Lanka showing signs of a ‘Buddhist Zionism’? By this I mean to suggest that to the eschatological belief that the Sinhala are a chosen race destined to carry out the redemptive role of Buddhism, with Lanka as their promised land, is attached a new militancy and sense of urgency in fulfilling the mission to protect and defend Buddhist territory, by force if necessary. Historical evidence from the Tamil/Hindu/Indian invasions to the modern LTTE terror campaign is neatly fitted into idiosyncratically selected portions of the *Vaṃsa* literature. Such a mindset will naturally search for every possible sign that the *Mahāvāṃsa* pattern continues, and identify the ‘enemies’ of the *dhamma* and its Sinhala custodians. The Sinhala Saṅgha and their ultra-nationalist lay allies are quick to provide long lists of such ‘enemies’, from the European colonial powers to UN funded INGOs and recently even to the Chief Justice of the supreme court.¹¹

Jonathan Fox, a world authority on ethno-religious violence, has doubted that democracy can take root where religious beliefs justify violence at societal level (Fox 2012a, 2012b). I suspect that 1948 produced two ‘Zionist’ states: one Israel, built on the Judeo-Christian faith, and the other Lanka, very surprisingly based on some interpretation of Buddhism. Defending the purity of their land in both these states is equated to defending their faiths: Israel expands its Biblical boundaries to recreate the Promised Land, while Lanka is seen as the territory of the *Dhammadīpa*, cleansed and given by the Buddha, to be ruled without sharing it, even temporarily, with citizens who are defined as ‘other’. It seems the Sinhala Saṅgha have constructed their socio-politics on a cosmion¹² basis: they perceive their country as a physical metaphor for the eternal resting place and their contemporary political structure as representing the cosmic order. They perceive their political leaders as divinely appointed (or relatives of the Buddha) and their army as sons of eternity engaged in a divine war of Armageddon. The Ven. Elle Guṇavaṃsa’s 50 odd war-songs, written, produced and distributed among the troops during the peak of the war, vividly embody this lurid eschatology.

¹¹ In January 2013, Dr. Shirani Bandaranayake, the first female Chief Justice of Lanka, was sacked by the President for refusing to approve a bill he had presented. The BBS and other pro-regime monks were quick to brand her an agent of Western powers.

¹² This concept is explained and applied in my thesis: see Raghavan pp.201 ff.

Saṅgha-Muslim animosity

It is in this context that we may understand the BBS, whose *raison d'être* is to oppose Muslim growth and expansionism under a corrupt and unfair economic system. It is statistically true that the Muslims in Lanka have grown in population, economic strength and political influence. Their religious identity is the core of their self-definition. Just as the Tamils of Lanka look to their Indian cousins for political and cultural inspiration, Lankan Muslims have looked to the pan-Islamic world for solidarity (McGillivray 2011). This international affiliation has grown stronger in recent decades thanks to the income generated by nearly two million Lankans working in the Gulf region. To this we must add the recent transformation, partly visible and partly suspected, which Muslims in Lanka have attached to their religious identity. A few decades ago, it would have been extremely rare to see a Muslim woman in a black dress with her entire face covered. Now, however, full-length *hijab* with the *niqāb* has not only become common among Muslim women, but in some parts of eastern Lanka where Muslim are the majority it has become compulsory. Islamic trading, which was traditionally focused on areas such as catering, gems, and agencies recruiting labour for the Middle East has also been transformed: today there is open Islamic leadership in sectors such as manufacturing, finance and key commodities.

However, why should such growth be an actual or perceived threat to Sinhala Buddhism? What actions or inactions of the wider Muslim community appear so threatening to the Sinhala mind, and especially to the Saṅgha? Can the Muslims, Christians and Hindus understand these Zionist tendencies in Sinhala Buddhism and deal with them without contributing to the natural desire for retaliatory violence? What should be the role of the government and the cross-ethnic civil society in fostering such an understanding? To answer such fundamental questions is urgent if there is to be any hope of stemming the mistrust, antagonism and rivalry that is being amplified by the BBS. Southeast Asian Theravāda states such as Burma, Thailand and Laos have already developed full-blown Buddhist-Muslim conflicts that are threatening those states. Can Sinhala Buddhism afford to repeat such a Buddhist-Muslim riot as happened a century ago in 1915? Can the Saṅgha in Lanka not find a way to address Muslim fears and concerns by dialogue and negotiation? What can the Muslim elites and trading communities do towards this?

No religious teaching gets into the heart or mind of the believers just as its founder preached it. They select and 'tailor make' its basics. That is how we end up

having Sinhala Buddhism (or Thai Buddhism, Roman Catholicism etc.) instead of the Buddhism found in the Pāli Canon. There again, scholars disagree about the original teaching of Gautama Buddha. However, what is important is not such quibbles about authenticity, but how the religion is applied and practiced now. Does it promote peace and harmony, or violence and hatred?

The role of religion in instigating and promoting violent conflict is not a linear progression, nor is it unique to any one religion. In real life it is contextualized and ‘menu selected,’ and therefore highly emotive and effective. Ethno-religious violence has killed more people than any disease during the last two centuries. Religiously inflected conflict offers avenues into power politics that are wider than others, because it is based on a historicized version of the religion and the cultural heritage of a particular ethnic group. Moreover, while each religion tries to set up universality within its own sphere (Pan-Buddhism: Vishva Paramārtha Bauddha Mārga, Pan-Islamic Brotherhood, Vishva Hindu Parishad, etc.), it also seeks to stake truly universal claims.

The self-interested ideology of powerful elites often provides them with the motive and excuse to use violence in their search for legitimation. In its extreme form this ‘cost effective’ strategy is justified by claims that they are defending themselves against a cosmic war of persecution. In order to hold on to power, they are ready even to resort to war themselves.

Yet the question remains unanswered. How is it that the Sinhala Saṅgha, who have witnessed a non-stop blood bath in their *Dhammadīpa* for the last 60 years, can find the rationale for another stage of such violence? Have we expected too much of the Saṅgha in Sinhala Buddhism, or have the Saṅgha got it wrong from the very beginning?

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