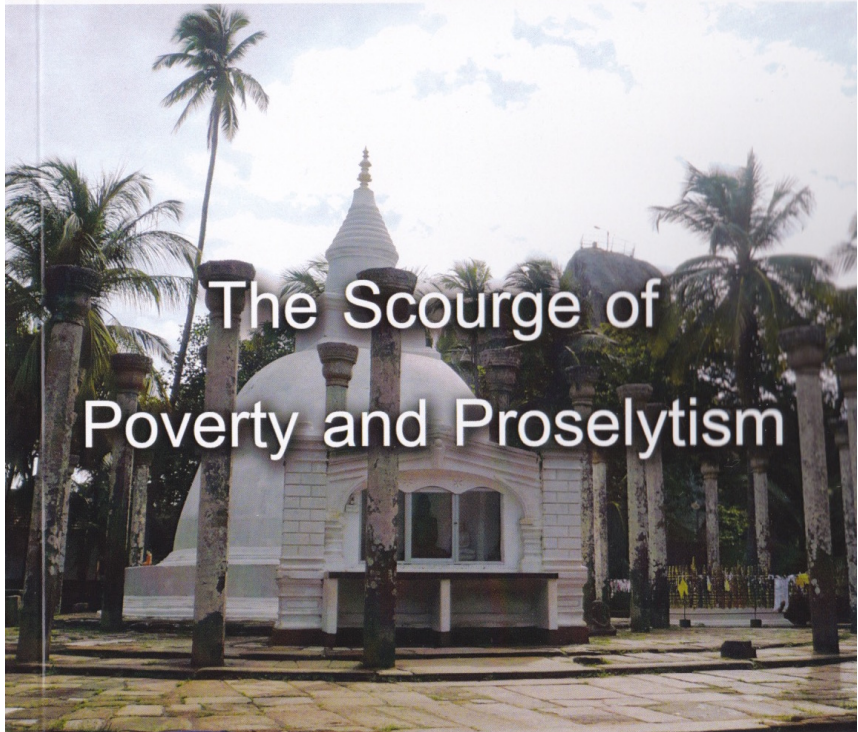


Socio-Economic and Cultural Challenges Facing  
Buddhist Communities in Asia: A Case Study of Sri Lanka



By Kalinga Seneviratne  
Research Assistance by Samanmalee Swamalatha

LOTUS COMMUNICATION NETWORK



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## Index

Forward	
Preface	7
Chapter 1 – Introduction	10
Chapter 2 – Sri Lanka’s Buddhist Heritage	13
2.1 Mahavihara Tradition	14
2.2 Writing of Tipitaka	15
2.3 Sri Mahabodhi	17
2.4 Dalada Malidawa	18
2.5 Martime Prowess and Spread of Sinhala Buddhist Heritage	20
2.6 Buddhist Architecture	22
Chapter 3 – Historical Threats to Buddhism	24
3.1 Decline of Anuradhapura and Rise of Pollonnaruwa	25
3.2 Arrival of Moor Traders	26
3.3 Arrival of Europeans: Portuguese and Dutch	28
3.4 Lost of Sinhalese Sovereignty: The British Period	31
3.5 Undermining of Buddhist Education	32
3.5.1 Buddhist Education: Mahavihara Tradition	34
3.5.2 Pirivena System of Education	35
3.5.3 Sunday Dhamma Schools	36
3.6 Buddhist Awakening under British Rule	37
3.6.1 Panadura Debate and Mohottiwatte Gunananda Thera	37
3.6.2 Colonel Olcott and Revival of Buddhist Education	39
3.6.3 Anagarika Dharmapala: Awakening the Sinhalese Buddhists	40
Chapter 4 – Independence and Buddhist Empowerment	43
Chapter 5 – Post-Independence Inquiries into Status of Buddhism	49
5.1 1956: Buddhist Committee of Inquiry	49
5.2 2002: Buddha Sasana Presidential Commission Report	51
5.3 2009: The Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire and Report on the Conversion of Buddhists in Sri Lanka to Other Religions by Immoral and Fraudulent Means	56
5.4 Views of Current Buddhist Leaders on the Reports	62
Chapter 6 – Tamil Tiger War and Implications for Buddhism	67
6.1 Impact on the Buddhists	71
6.2 Hindu-Buddhist Cooperation	72
Chapter 7 – Rise of 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Buddhist Nationalism	74
7.1 Soma Thera and Revival of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism	74
7.2 Birth of Jatika Hela Urumaya	77

7.3	Arrival of Bodu Bala Sena	82
7.4	The Social Justice Activist Monk and ‘Yahapalana’ Revolution	87
Chapter 8 –	The Scourge of Poverty and Proselytism	92
8.1	Warnings in Inquiry Reports	96
8.2	Current Activities	100
8.3	New Islamic Threat	104
Chapter 9 –	“Militant Buddhists” or Media Bias?	110
9.1	Local media reporting of Dambulla and Darga Town incidents	112
9.1.1	The Dambulla Clash	112
9.1.2	The Aluthgama/Darga Town Clash	116
9.1.3	Media Blaming the Buddhist :Extremists”	120
Chapter 10 –	Countering Evangelists - From Temple to Village	123
10.1	Sarvodaya	125
10.2	Belanwila Community Development Foundation	125
10.3	Gangaramaya Temple and Community Development	128
10.4	Dhammavijaya Foundation	131
10.5	Sri Bodhiraja Community Development	132
10.6	Jayagrahanaya – SUCCESS Sri Lanka	135
Chapter 11 –	Conclusions and Challenges Ahead	139
11.1	Addressing the Problem: Government or Buddhist Organisations?	140
11.2	The NGOs and Attempts to Undermine Buddhism	142
11.3	Threats from Within	144
11.4	Unethical Conversions, Human Rights and International Media	147
11.5	Economic Empowerment of Grassroots Buddhists	149
11.6	Lack of International Buddhist Networks	150
11.7	Recommendations: A Call for International Buddhist Support and Solidarity	151
References		155
Appendix 1:	Contents Analysis of Dambulla incident in two Sinhala Newspapers	160
Appendix 2:	Contents Analysis of Dambulla incident in two English Newspapers	166
Appendix 3:	Contents Analysis of Aluthgama incident in two Sinhala Newspapers	169
Appendix 4:	Contents Analysis of Aluthgama incident in two English Newspapers	175



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**Research Assistant:** Ms Samanmalee Swarnalatha provided research assistance to this project in Sri Lanka including the media contents analysis and field interviews under the guidance of the author. She is currently a Consultant Communication Specialist on water resources for the Asian Development Bank in Sri Lanka. She holds a MA in Mass Communications from the University of Kelaniya, MSc in Development Communications and BSc in Agriculture from the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.





## FORWARD

This book written by Dr. Kalinga Seneviratne is the result of the research project, *The Scourge of Poverty and Proselytism Breeding Religious Conflict in Sri Lanka*, supported by The World Buddhist University, Bangkok, Thailand.

The book has presented various aspects of the problems and conflicts among religious groups in Sri Lanka. It is a significant contribution towards bringing clarity to the recent complex situation, and reflects the socio-economic and cultural challenges facing Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka.

Buddhism in Asia, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, has been facing threats both from inside and outside of the religion. The inside threats come from the misbehavior of some monks who do not follow the Buddhist disciplines. Others include the sale of “merit” (*puñña*) and other forms of Buddhist commercial activities by some monasteries in Buddhist countries in Asia.

The outside threats have come from the expansion of other religions that have been trying to undermine Buddhism since the colonial period. Some of these faiths have been trying to influence key persons in the government and the parliament, by means of money and marriage, so that they could use political and legal powers for the expansion of their faith. Sometimes they use military action, including terrorism, to establish a state of their faith. They ultimately want to convert Buddhist countries in Asia to be countries of their faith.

This book opens a new horizon for Buddhists in Asia to open up their eyes to see the threats and challenges facing their own Buddhist communities, and to open up their mind to find solutions for Buddhism in their countries. We need more research of this kind to reflect the threats and challenges facing Buddhist communities in other part of South and Southeast Asian countries, to preserve the future of Buddhism in Asia and beyond.

Dr. Tavivat Puntarigvivat  
Director, Institute of Research and Development  
The World Buddhist University  
Bangkok, Thailand



## PREFACE

The motivation for this research and the book goes back to 2004 when I agreed to shoot and produce a video for a Buddhist non-government organization (NGO) in Sri Lanka to help in their awareness campaign about the scourge of Christian proselytism among grassroots Buddhist communities in rural Sri Lanka. The project came about because they found it difficult to gather financial resources to transport a group of monks to villages across Sri Lanka on weekends to talk to Buddhist communities about this scourge. I told them that I could interview these monks on camera and put a documentary style video of about 15-20 minutes together so that they could screen the videos at the meetings and just take one monk at a time to speak to the audience. The video titled “God and the Dollars” was even used (I was told) as a campaigning tool (which was an unintended consequence) in Jatiika Hela Urumaya’s (JHU) successful election campaign in 2004 that got nine monks elected to parliament.

I spent a month going around the country talking to grassroots monks and Buddhist devotees both in Colombo and rural areas, to produce this video. Before that, I was under the impression that Buddhism was stable in Sri Lanka, as I haven’t lived there since 1975, though I visit the country regularly. After having done the field interviews, I was quite aghast at the extent to which Buddhism was threatened in Sri Lanka, mainly because the new Christian evangelical groups seem to have unlimited financial resources to bribe and coerce Buddhists into the Christian faith because of their poverty – and they seem extremely aggressive. As one Buddhist activist told me, 90 percent of Sri Lanka’s poor are Buddhists, even though 70 percent of the country’s population is made up of Buddhists, and this number seem to be shrinking.

When I met Venerable Omalphe Sobitha Thera (who was later elected to parliament) at Embilipitiya in a rural town in southern Sri Lanka he related a story to me about how Korean Christian evangelists go around the villages there with a local convert and a guitar singing Christian hymns and if they notice a family interested in the songs, two days later when they open the door

of the hut in the morning they have a box full of goodies – rice, dhal, sugar, etc – at the doorstep. Few days later these people come back singing and tell the villager that they have been praying to God to help them out. “For these people this box is like something fallen from heaven, because there is nobody to help them” said Ven. Sobitha.

Another more eye-opening story I heard was from a monk in a rural rice farming community near Polonnaruwa. He described to me how this predominantly Buddhist community lived in perfect harmony with a small Catholic community that has been there for a couple of generations. They respected each other, and when someone is sick in the Catholic community the monks used to go to their house and chant ‘pirith’ to give them peace of mind. The Catholics often bring ‘dana’ (food) to the monks at the temple. Then one fine day, a Pentecostal Christian group invaded the community and started getting young people to come for picnics on full moon days (when they usually go to the temple) to the nearby lake where they were given wine and played local music and had a fun time dancing etc, which these people do not get at the temple. They also converted a local family and used their house as a “prayer centre” to convert other people. When the monks and the local Buddhists asked the Police to close this down as it is an illegal “church” set up without approval, the Police would not do it because the then Home Minister was an evangelical Christian himself. When the monk mounted a protest campaign, one morning a young man came to visit him at the temple and stabbed him with a screw driver, which almost ruptured his kidney and may have killed him.

Since this time, I have been observing with alarm how the Buddhists are coming under constant attack by evangelical forces initially by Evangelical Christianity and lately by Wahhabi Islam. Both these movements have tremendous financial resources from overseas and when the Buddhists protests they have the international media networks to project the Buddhists as “extremists” or trouble-makers (see chapter 9). Even Buddhists in East Asia and the West in particular, tend to believe these reports and have condemned Buddhist activists in Sri Lanka without understanding the socio-economic and political manipulations at play (see chapters 5-8).

This book is an attempt to put this phenomenon in proper perspectives, especially for fellow Buddhists outside Sri Lanka to understand and hopefully mobilize themselves to help Buddhists in such circumstances, not only in Sri Lanka, but also other Buddhists countries of Asia such as Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand.

I proposed this research project to the World Buddhist University initially to cover Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Cambodia. But, Dr Tavivat Puntarigvivat suggested that we do Sri Lanka first and then see if we could raise funds to do the other countries as a follow up. Having completed this project, both Dr Tavivat and I feel similar studies on Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand are urgently needed.

I would like to thank Dr Tavivat and the WBU for helping to fund this research, and Lim Kooi Fong of the Buddhist Channel for helping with arranging the type setting. I should also acknowledge the untiring efforts of Samanmalee Swarnalatha for assisting me with the research in Sri Lanka. Also my thanks to all those who gave us interviews, provided advice and documents for the research. They are too numerous to mention by name.

Having collected and documented the data, I hope this would spur the Asian and international Buddhist community to mobilize their financial resources to mount a concerted campaign to empower the grassroots Buddhist communities financially, culturally and spiritually to protect their Buddhist heritage and spur greater understanding and practice of the dhamma.

This is an issue not just peculiar to Sri Lanka. It affects all Buddhist countries of Asia. If we do not rise up to the occasion we are going to loose the Buddhist identity of Asia. Building large Buddha statues and grandiose temples are not going to help. We need an “Engaged Buddhism” strategy to help fellow Asian Buddhists that are poor and destitute. Then we could all be well and happy... and generate good karma.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kalinga Seneviratne". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Dr Kalinga Seneviratne

Author and Founder of Lotus Communication Network.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

The renowned Sri Lankan writer Martin Wickremasinghe, comparing the recorded early history of India and Sri Lanka, observed that Sri Lanka has a better authentic historical record of its Buddhist civilization.

*The Sinhalese have a comparatively accurate history of Buddhism and lives of the kings written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The earlier parts of the Mahavamsa<sup>1</sup> is legendary, but the latter part is accurate history. The Ceylon<sup>2</sup> archeologists have excavated and conserved vast amount of valuable material which would supply to the diligent student a fund of information for reconstructing the life of the ancient Sinhalese and producing a history of their culture (Wickremasinghe, 1952:21)*

Though Buddhism originated in India, it was in Sri Lanka that it flourished beginning with the introduction of the religion to the island in 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE by Bhikku Mahinda the son of the great Indian emperor Ashoka.

The Sri Lankan scholar monk late Walpola Rahula argues:

*When the Indian missionaries brought Buddhism to this island, they carried here with them not only the teachings of the Buddha, but also the culture and civilization of Buddhist India. Almost all the Buddhist rites, ceremonies, festivals and observances of Ceylon were, with slight local changes and modifications, the continuation of Indian practices which the early Buddhist missionaries introduced to this country (Rahula, 1956:1).*

The story of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka is legendary. Mahinda is believed to have arrived in Sri Lanka in the BE 236 with 4 other monks and they met the then King of the island Devanampiyatissa while he was on a hilltop near Anuradhapura while on a regular hunting expedition. After meeting the monks, and since he has heard about Buddhism from his friend Emperor Ashoka, he has invited them to his palace in Anuradhapura and treated them

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<sup>1</sup> Mahavamsa is the single most important work of Lankan origin that chronicles the life and history of the nation from Prince Vijaya's arrival in 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

<sup>2</sup> Ceylon is the name used during European colonial times and it was officially changed back to Sri Lanka with the adoption of the Republican constitution in 1972.

with utmost respect and kindness. The next day Mahinda and his companions were offered residence at the royal pavilion and they stayed there for 26 days preaching the dhamma to the royal household and officials.

With the conversion of Devanampiyatissa and his royal household to Buddhism, the religion soon spread in the kingdom and through royal patronage many Buddhist temples and monasteries were built. Mahinda brought along 4 *upasampatha*<sup>3</sup> monks so the Buddha Sasana could be established in Sri Lanka. But, once when Devanampiyatissa asked Mahinda if Buddha Sasana has been established in the kingdom, his answer was that it will be thus established when a son born in the kingdom to local parents studies the *vinaya*<sup>4</sup> in the island and recites it there, then the roots of the Sasana will grow.

King Devanampiyatissa dispatched to the court of Emperor Ashoka a request to bring his daughter Bhikkuni Sangamitta to Sri Lanka along with a branch of the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, to help establish the order of nuns. This request was granted and the Bo-Tree thus planted in Anuradhapura is being worshipped and venerated ever since. Devanampiyatissa was also able to receive from India the right collar-bone of the Buddha which is enshrined in the Thuparama stupa in Anuradhapura.

*The planting of the Bodhi-tree was symbolic of the establishment of Buddhism and Buddhist culture in the island. The relic of the Buddha were regarded as representing the Buddha himself, and their enshrinement was as good as Buddha's residence in Lanka (Rahula, 1956:58)*

During the 40-year reign of Devanampiyatissa, an unbroken link was established between the Buddha Sasana and the government of the country. It was the responsibility and custom of the rulers of the country to patronize, protect and nurture the Buddha Sasana.

Mahinda came to Sri Lanka as a young man of 32 and outlived Devanampiyatissa, living in the island until his death at the age of 80. His relics are enshrines in stupas across Sri Lanka. Sanghamitta also died at a nunnery in Sri Lanka, a year after Mahinda's death

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<sup>3</sup> *Upasampatha* monks has undergone a higher ordination ceremony to graduate from a novice to a fully ordained monk.

<sup>4</sup> *Vinaya* is the disciplinary code for self training laid down by the Buddha for monks and nuns to observe. Vinaya plays a pivotal role in their monastic way of life.



The Buddha Sasana, both helped to establish, has survived up to this date with over 70 percent of Sri Lanka's population regarded as Buddhists. After the establishment of the new religion the society has become more peaceful and harmonious and as a result a prosperous agrarian society began to flourish in the island. This has also attracted attention of first the Chola kings in South India and later the Europeans. Thus, throughout its history Buddhism in Sri Lanka has had to face many challenges and threats.

During the times of the Sinhala kings, the monarch was required to be a Buddhist. When Dravidian (Tamil) kings ruled Sri Lanka they became Buddhists, at least to justify holding to that position. There were occasional disagreements between the sangha and the state regarding religious and spiritual matters. But, the King as the "defender of the faith" did not have the power to force the hands of the sangha. On the other hand, the bhikkus have never tried to take political power directly into their hands. Sometimes the sangha has intervened to mediate on disputes between warring members of the royal family, or between the King and his Generals. Occasionally, according to the Mahavamsa, the sangha has intervenes to choose princes whom they like, even at times violating the laws of succession. It is even stated that by the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE the sangha was involved in conferring the kingship because they considered themselves as representing the public opinion of the people.

As early as 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, the constitutional position of Buddhism has been so strong that even to damage a Buddhist shrine was seen as high treason. This has also given rise to forms of Buddhist nationalism over the centuries.

In the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE when Duttagamani went to war against the Chola King Elara who was ruling Anuradhapura, his armies were accompanied by Buddhist monks, both as a blessing and protection. Some monks have even disrobed and joined the army to fight the Cholas who were seen as a threat to Buddhism in Sri Lanka (Rahula, 1956). But, generally, the monks' role has been to mediate between feuding Generals that may threaten the Buddhist kingdoms, or bless the armies that go to war against any threats to Buddhism in the country. That tradition seem to have survived up to this day, as Buddhist monks used to hold large *Bodhi Pujas* to bless armed forces before they embarked on a major battle against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during the country's civil war between 1983 and 2009.

## Chapter 2 – Sri Lanka's Buddhist Heritage

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**Summary:** The Sinhalese are proud of the fact that they have become the custodians of the purest form of the great Indian Buddhist heritage and for over 2300 years they have carefully protected and nurtured Buddhism in the island, in spite of centuries of European colonial rule and repression of the religion during these times. The Sinhalese pride themselves as a bastion of Theravada tradition of Buddhism, and being instrumental in taking the tradition to Southeast Asia. This chapter discuss the development of the Mahavihara tradition in Sri Lanka which predates Nalanda Mahavihara; the writing of the Tipitaka in Sri Lanka which is the first time any religious teachings have been put into text form; bringing of the Buddha's Tooth Relic to the island and the development of a Buddhist culture around it; Sri Lanka's maritime powers that led to the spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia; and Sinhalese Buddhist architecture, especially during the Pollonnaruwa era that led to Sri Lankan architects helping to build Siam's first capital Sukhothai.

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*Theravada Buddhism – the oldest school of Buddhism, which stayed closer to the original teachings of the Buddha – travelled from Sri Lanka across the Bay of Bengal to countries like Burma and Thailand. Buddhism is not just a religion or a religious philosophy, there were many Buddhist institutions of education, that were built across Asia. The university at Nalanda has flourished from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and many Asian scholars, pilgrims from China, Korea, Burma have come to study there. One of the key features of Buddhist monasteries and the great Mahaviharas at Nalanda, was the dedication to education – both primary and higher levels of education. That is why you find that in predominantly Buddhist countries in Asia such as Burma or Sri Lanka, literacy levels and access to primary education has been typically higher than in other societies - Harvard University Professor Sugata Bose in an introduction to a television documentary 'Path of the Dhamma' (AMIC/ISEAS 2009).*

## 2.1 Mahavihara Tradition

The Mahavihara is the oldest and foremost centre of Buddhist learning in Sri Lanka with its origin going back to the introduction of Buddhism to the island by Arahant Mahinda Thera. Mahavihara tradition has developed gradually in the country from that time. Pemaloka (2008) argues that the Buddhism brought to Sri Lanka by Arahant Mahinda is the purest form of the dhamma that was recited and confirmed by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sangayana (monks council). Walpola Rahula (1956:85) notes:

*The Mahavihara was the original and first centre of Buddhism, hallowed by Mahinda himself; its monks were proud of the great traditions, and jealously guarded the honour and authority of their vihara. They had enjoyed the undivided regard and respect, loyalty and support of the state and the public, and did not like new elements entering the field to share their privileges and dividing attention.*

And Anuradha Seneviratne (cited in Pemaloka, 2008:5) says:

*The history of Mahavihara is quite a fascinating subject for a scholar especially interested in the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Without the knowledge of the great tradition, no one is capable to understand the nature of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, preserved in Sri Lanka for more than 23 centuries.*

The preservation of the Mahavihara tradition in Anuradhapura has been a long and hard struggle with many attempts between 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and 5<sup>th</sup> century CE to undermine its importance in the Anuradhapura monastic tradition. The biggest challenge came with the building of the Abhayagiri monastery by King Vattagaminī (89-77 BCE) in Anuradhapura. He had entrusted the monastery to Mahatissa Thera from Mahavihara in appreciation of his loyal service to the king during a period of great disaster in the country. But, Mahavihara monks were not pleased because they had earlier taken disciplinary action against him for breaking vinaya rules. This resulted in the breaking up of the sangha community into two groups – Mahavihara and Abhayagiriya. In theory they did not seem to disagree on doctrine, but had different disciplinary rules and practiced independent ideology. They (Abhayagiri) welcomed any sectarian monks and often had open discussion with others (Pemaloka, 2008).

Rahula (1956:85) argues that from its very inception Abhayagiri monks seemed

to have kept up constant contact with various Buddhist sects and new movements in India and they were liberal in their views and always welcoming of new ideas from abroad in order to be progressive. They have studied both Theravada and Mahayana, and also widely diffused the Tipitakas. Thus he notes:

*The Mahavihara on the other hand, remained conservative, studied only the Theravada, was opposed to the Mahayana, and discouraged any kind of innovation. It was faithful to the very letter of the orthodox teachings and traditions accepted by the Theravadins. The Abhayagiri monks, therefore, appeared in the eyes of the Mahavihara to be unorthodox and heretic.*

The Abhayagiri complex has many historical landmarks that is part of the great Buddhist heritage of Sri Lanka. King Dutugemunu (161-137 BCE) has built a massive mansion named *Lova Maha Prasadaya* for the venerable bhikkhus of Abhayagiri. Consisting of nine floors and one thousand rooms, the *Lova Maha Prasadaya* was one of the largest buildings of the ancient world. 1,600 stone pillars on the ground floor of this building are seen there even today. Meanwhile, the great stupa *Ruwanweliseya* built by King Dutugemunu still shines in the Mahavihara complex. The compound of this massive stupa considered as the largest stupa of the ancient world is 10 acres. Its diameter is 113 meters while the height is 103 meters. The *Ruwanweliseya* is highly venerated as the stupa containing the largest amount of sacred body relics of the Lord Buddha. It is mentioned in the travelogue of the Chinese bhikkhu Fa-Hien (4<sup>th</sup> century CE) that, 3,000 venerable bhikkhus were dwelling in the Mahavihara then.

The two main Buddhist temples of Sri Lanka today, Malwatta and Asgiriya viharas in Kandy are very much ingrained in the Mahavihara tradition. Constant threats that surrounded the Mahavihara during the reign of King Vattagamani led to thoughtful Mahavihara sangha with the help of other temples in the country to organize a sangha convention that led to the writing of the Tipitaka on Ola leaf. As Rahula (1956:83) noted, “had the farsighted theras not intervened at that moment, no one could say what the fate of Buddhism and the Sinhalese race would have been”.

## **2.2 Writing of Tipitaka**

This led to an important landmark in Sri Lankan Buddhist history, when in the latter parts of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE for the first time dhamma teachings were

transformed into written text. A Brahmin named Tissa has declared war on the Sinhalese King Vattagamani and 7 Tamil Generals from South India have landed in the north and marched towards Anuradhapura with their forces. After that for 14 years five Tamils ruled in succession from Anuradhapura. King Vattagamani lay in hiding in remote parts of the country. In addition, the whole country was ravaged by a famine.

Senior Buddhist monks and Sinhalese leaders saw that Buddhism was under threat in Sri Lanka. The oral tradition of the 3 Pitakas, which has so far being handed down from teacher to pupil, appeared no longer possible under the prevailing conditions. The primary concern of the sangha during this tragic period was to preserve the teachings of the Buddha (Rahula, 1956).

Thus, in the 1st century BCE, on the advise of the sangha, King Vattagamani (Valagamba) assembled over a hundred Buddhist monks at the Aluvihare Temple in Matale to put all the Buddhist teachings to text. This was the first Buddhist Council to be held outside India. The Theravada Pali Buddhist cannon ‘Tipitaka’ was compiled here. Until then Buddha’s teachings were orally transmitted. This Pali cannon has been preserved in its purest form up till today and has been instrumental in the spread of Buddhism across Southeast Asia and other far away lands.

*Writing down of the Tipitaka in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC in Sri Lanka is one of the greatest events in the history of Buddhism. That’s because dhamma appeared in text form after that. Before that it was oral. It’s important because by that time, 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, the Vedas had not been committed to write it down. So the Sri Lankan Buddhists took a bold step for the first time in the history of religion to write the text in ola leaf – Emeritus Professor Oliver Abeynayake, Buddhist and Pali University in ‘Path of the Dhamma’ (AMIC/ISEAS, 2009).*

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, one of Sri Lanka’s greatest kings Parakramabahu was able to reunify the sangha of the Abhayagiri, Jetavana and other Mahavihara sects in to the Theravada fold. This paved the way for the spread of Theravada Buddhism to Southeast Asia and monks like Capata Thera from Myanmar came to Sri Lanka to benefit from the revival of Buddhist educational institutions. Similarly, Sri Lankan scholars went to Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand to teach Buddhism. Buddhism made giant strides and Sri Lanka became the metropolis of the whole of Southeast Asia. Sinhala literary works were studied, copied, preserved and imitated in those countries, and the study

of Sri Lankan history seem to have a special attraction (Guruge, UNESCO, 1993).

Dr Hema Goonatilake (2010) notes that from the beginning of the founding of Myanmar, Sinhala Bhikkhus have taught the Tipitaka and the Pali language, incidentally through the Sinhala script. During the time of Parakramabahu I, a delegation of Bhikkhus headed by the Myanmar Sangharaja visited Sri Lanka on pilgrimage in 1170 accompanied by a samanera Chapata, who received *upasampada* in Sri Lanka. On his return to Myanmar and with the patronage of King Narapatisithu, he set up a new sect, 'Sihala (Sinhalese) Sangha' which became dominant. In 1331, a Sinhala Mahathera, Udumbara Mahasami from Udumbaragiri (present Dimbulagala) had arrived in Bago (Pegu) in Lower Myanmar. The king impressed by the monk conferred on him the honorific title 'Udumbarapuppha Mahasami'. His fame attracted monks from Sukhothai in Thailand to go to Bago and receive *upasampada*.

After the founding of Laos in 1353 by Prince Fa Ngum, his Queen, a fervent Buddhist got her husband to introduce Buddhism. Her father sent a delegation headed by three Sinhalese monks and his proudest possession, the Buddha image Prabang with "miraculous powers" which had been gifted to him by a Sinhalese king. This image became the national Palladium of the country, and its capital was renamed after it as Luang Prabang. King Fa Ngum conferred the Sinhalese monks with the highest honorific titles designating them chief monks of the two major monasteries (Goonatilake H, 2010).

Goonatilake (2010) argues that from the 11th century to the 15th century CE, Sinhalese religious and cultural influence impacted heavily on Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. From there, it spread to southern Vietnam and the Yunnan province of China.

### **2.3 Sri Mahabodhi**

The sacred Bo-Tree – Sri Mahabodhi – in Anuradhapura is reckoned as the oldest surviving historic tree in the world<sup>5</sup>. It is believed to be the southern branch of the original tree in Bodhgaya under which Gauthma Buddha attained enlightenment.

*After the establishment of the Sri Maha Bodhi it was accorded veneration similar to a living Buddha because there was a belief*

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<sup>5</sup> It is believed that the current Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya is an offshoot of the original tree.

*that it was directly connected to kingship. The ancient chronicles have recorded various steps taken by many Kings for the protection of the Maha Bodhi and its precincts. Also the royalty saw it as their duty to attend to improvements and restoration work as and when necessary (Wijayadasa, 2003:13).*



When the Anuradhapura civilization began to disintegrate around the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE as a consequence of a series of South Indian Chola invasions, sacred places in the city were encroached by the jungle. Yet, people in the small villages that survived, looked after the sacred places, especially the Sri Mahabodhi to the best of their ability.

Today, Sri Mahabodhi is a venerated shrine to Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage and its links with India. Dignitaries – both local and foreign – come here to pay their respects. In March 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a historic visit to the Sri Mahabodhi where he offered prayers and was blessed by Buddhist monks in a special traditional ceremony.

There are several daily rituals at the Sri Mahabodhi starting early in the morning performed by special temple staff designated for the purpose. There are also 4 major festivals held here every year, one of which is at the end of the rice harvest when a portion of the new harvest is offered to the Mahabodhi.

## **2.4 Dalada Maligawa**

The Dalada Maligawa or the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy – the seat of the last Sinhalese King – could be described as the Pinnacle of Sinhalese Buddhism.



Each year around the full moon day of Esala (July-August) a world-renowned festival *Kandy Esala Perahera* is held over 10 days to pay homage to the Tooth Relic.



The relic is enshrined in a small gold casket covered by 6 outer gold caskets some of them studded with gems. The gold caskets are taken out for public viewing only on very special occasions. The traditions and rituals associated with the Tooth Relic are central to the nurturing of all Buddhist values of the Sinhalese. Traditionally, who ever held the custodianship of the Tooth Relic, was given the power of government.

The Tooth Relic of the Buddha enshrined in Kandy is believed to have been plucked from the funeral pyre by a close disciple. When it was brought to Sri Lanka in the 4th century CE, it remained at the then capital of Anuradhapura. The sacred Relic has remained with royalty ever since, and, because Kandy was the last capital of the Sinhalese kings, before British colonisation in 1815, the Temple of the Tooth remains in Kandy today. Since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the temple known as the Dalada Maligawa, has been both the pinnacle of the Buddhist faith and the symbol of sovereignty of the Sinhalese nation.

There are many rituals that take place throughout the day to pay homage to the Tooth Relic starting with the early morning ceremonial opening of the doors to the shrine to the evening drumming rituals.

The Kandy Esala Perahera takes place over a two weeks each year. It is rich in tradition dating back to many centuries with the ritual going back to pre-Buddhist beliefs that is an offering to the rain god 'Indra' symbolising the releasing of water before the next harvesting season. On the final five nights of the festival the *Randoli Perahera* takes to the streets of Kandy, where the grand processions of drummers, dancers, elephants and temple dignitaries of the Dalada Maligawa, takes to the streets of Kandy watched by thousands of local pilgrims and foreign visitors.

The drummers performing at the temple and in the Kandy Esala Perahera are the custodians of the rich musical tradition of the hill country Sinhalese. They have inherited these artistic talents through generations. During the time of the Sinhalese kings, in return for performing these voluntary duties for the temple, they were given land by the King.

*The present rituals and ceremonies of the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy are a continuation of the great and unbroken Buddhist worship not found anywhere else in the world. Its known history goes back to a period of more than fifteen centuries (Seneviratne, 1990:90)*

It is now a tradition for all the newly elected Head of Governments and Ministers, even those who are not Buddhists, to pay their respect to the Tooth Relic before taking up duties. The adjoining Audience Hall is used by the newly elected leader to address the nation for the first time. In 1989, Ranasinghe Premadasa took oath of office at the Dalada Maligawa when he was inaugurated as the President of Sri Lanka, thus restoring an ancient tradition.

## **2.5 Maritime Prowess and Spread of Sinhala Buddhist Heritage**

The arrival of Vijaya<sup>6</sup> and his followers from Orissa in India in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE is the oldest historically recorded travel by ship to Lanka. Emperor Asoka's daughter Sangamitta brought the Sri Mahabodhi sapling in the 3<sup>rd</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> According to legend, Prince Vijaya, an Indian Aryan Prince arrived in Sri Lanka with 700 of his followers by ship and his marriage to local native queen Kuveni started the Sinhalese race in the island.

century BCE also by ship.

The strategic position of the island of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean, in the middle of the maritime silk route from China to Europe, made it a hub for ancient trade. Historical records indicate that Sri Lanka was part of the international trade routes since 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The southwest monsoons carried in the sailing ships across the oceans from the west and the northeast monsoons on their return journey from the east. The natural harbours around Sri Lanka were busy seaports, with adjacent navigable rivers facilitating trade with inland cities like Anuradhapura and Pollonnaruwa. Sri Lanka has been trading in jewelry and textiles from the ancient to the modern era.

It is these trade routes that also contributed to Buddhism spreading from the island to Asia, ideas and philosophy flowed freely both ways. Sri Lankan ships have sailed as far as China and several travels of Sinhalese to China are described in Chinese records. An interesting travel was in 429 CE when Sinhalese nuns went to China to establish the Buddhist nuns order there (Goonatilake S, 2010). In the 5<sup>th</sup> century Fa Hsien, the Chinese Buddhist monk has spent a couple of years at Abhayagiri monastery collecting Buddhist manuscripts. During the Tang Dynasty in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, Amoghavajra<sup>7</sup> reached China taking with him 500 key Tantra texts from Anuradhapura. This has given rise to an important Yoga tradition in China that spread to Java and Japan in the 9<sup>th</sup> century surviving as the Shingon sect in Japan (Weerasinghe S 1995 cited in Goonatilake S 2010).

Between 9<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE Sinhala culture has spread rapidly to Southeast Asia. This flow of both trade and philosophy has been largely a peaceful process with a lot of exchange of ideas and integration. Sinhalese forms influenced not only the belief systems, but also the literature and the arts, including sculpture and architecture of these countries. Sinhalese monks taught in many parts of Southeast Asia and were sought out as model teachers. During the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Burmese, Thailand, Laos and Cambodian courts consciously adopted Sinhalese Theravada Buddhist modes in ceremony, literature, legal and monastic fields. These Theravada Buddhist exchanges helped to raise educational standards and literacy across the Southeast Asian region.

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<sup>7</sup> Amoghavajra was an Indian Buddhist monk who translated key texts into Chinese and is considered the sixth patriarch of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism (Encyclopedia of Buddhism)

Dr Susantha Goonatilake (2010:53) notes:

*What was significant about these Sinhalese religious influences was that although there was royal patronage given to these cultural and religious interactions, they were not done through force of arms, but by consent and conviction.*

## **2.6 Buddhist Architecture**

Despite political upheavals in the early stages, the Pollanaruwa period of the 12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century CE is characterized with significant technological and cultural achievements. Guruge (1993) argues that it has manifested in impressive monuments, irrigation systems, city planning and health systems. The development of architecture based on Buddhist influences has been a notable achievement of this period, which has attracted the attention of Thailand's leaders. Architects from Pollonnaruwa were very influential in the designing and building of the new capital of Siam, Sukhothai in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE.

The spread of the Sinhalese stupa architecture to other parts of Southeast Asia, began in the period following Parakramabahu I (1153-1186). It was also a time when Sri Lanka's maritime prowess was at its peak. The Kiri Vehera temple in Polonnaruwa inspired both Cambodia and Nakon Si Thammarat in the Malay Peninsula in Thailand. Si Satha, a prince monk from Sukhothai spent 10 years in Sri Lanka learning the dhamma and visiting the major Buddhist sites, and returned around 1345 along with several craftsmen from Gampola. He got the Sri Lankan craftsmen settled in five villages in Sukhothai, and through them added Sinhala style stucco motifs of makaras, to the Mahathat stupa, the centre piece of Sukhothai. These motifs were based on Gampola's Lankatilaka temple, which had been built in 1342 during Si Satha's stay in Sri Lanka. The bell-shaped stupas, which began to be built in large numbers in the middle of the 14th century CE in Sukhothai, and the Gampola Lankatilaka and Gadaladeniya temples, two sites visited by Si Satha, also inspired the standing elephants emerging from niches found in Sukhothai. Architecture of Sukhothai was thus transformed with "overwhelming adoption of Sinhalese styles (and) a multitude of Sinhalese-style stupas" (Goonatilake, 2008).

The ruins of the ancient cities of Pollonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, and Sukhothai and Ayutthaya in Thailand provide ample proof today of this Buddhist architectural collaborations.

*The Stupa, or Dagaba as it is called in Sinhala, is an integral part of any Buddhist monastery, whether in Sri Lanka or in any other Buddhist countries in South or Southeast Asia. All stupas, even those built in modern times, are supposed to contain even a small particle of the corporeal remains of the Buddha or a Buddhist saint. Stupas are also built at sites where important events connected with religion took place (Hema Ratnayake, UNESCO 1993:66).*



Pollonnaruwa



Sukhothai

Sri Lankan architectural influences have also spread to Java including the Borobudur temple complex. Susantha Goonatilake (2010:53) argues:

*Ratu Boko (8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century CE) the well known Buddhist monastery in Java as attested by both epigraphic data as well as architecture is an example of the influence of Abhayagiri Vihara in Anuradhapura. The site shows striking similarities to the tapovana meditation monasteries of Abhayagiri. Amoghavajra who went to Abhayagiri in 746 CE to collect Tantra texts for China had a disciple from Java adding a fresh dimension to the Sinhalese connection.*

## Chapter 3 – Historical Threats to Buddhism

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**Summary:** Though Buddhism came to Sri Lanka from India and so were the sapling of the Sri Mahabodi and the Tooth Relic during the reign of the great Mauryan kings of Kalinga, from time to time there have been military invasions from Tamil Chola Kings from South India. These invasions started almost as soon as Arahant Mahinda and Bhikkuni Sangamittha passed away, and King Devampiya Tissa's brother King Uttiya died in 286 BCE. These attacks on Anuradhapura continued for centuries and the city was ransacked by Chola invaders in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE and the capital of the Sinhalese kingdoms moved to Polonnaruwa, but, most of the Mahavihara tradition remained intact until the arrival of the Portuguese Catholic invaders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Being a strategically located island between the East and the West, Sri Lanka has had visitors from many parts of the world over the centuries. This chapter discusses the impact this had on Buddhism in the island. Starting with the Chola invasions it proceeds to look at the arrival of Muslims from the Arab world, which was mainly for peaceful trade; then the European arrivals starting with the Portuguese followed by the Dutch and the British. All of them came to annex land and spread Christianity. There is a detailed discussion of how the Portuguese almost destroyed Buddhism in the country, and the cunning moves by the British to undermine Buddhist education in the island. This is followed by discussions on how Buddhist monks were able to safeguard the Mahavihara tradition and also developed the 'Pirivena' education system in Sri Lanka. The Buddhist awakening under the British starting with the 'Panadura Debate' followed by the arrival of Colonel Olcott in Sri Lanka and Anagarika Dharmapala's passionate promotion of Buddhist nationalism just before independence are also discussed.

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*The study of history I consider is of the utmost importance for the development of the patriotic consciousness. No nation in the world has had a more brilliant history than ourselves. What is more, the stupendous monuments whose remains still are living evidences of our former greatness, testify to the wonderful accuracy of our records – Anagarika Dharmapala (1965:506)*

### **3.1 Decline of Anuradhapura and Rise of Pollonaruwa**

Chola King Elara ruled from Anuradhapura for 44 years before a young Sinhalese Prince from the south Dutthagamani organized an army, which fought an epic battle in Anuradhapura and finally killed King Elara to regain Sinhalese control of the Anuradhapura kingdom. This battle has been immortalized in Sinhalese history as the first war to regain Sinhalese sovereignty of Sri Lanka and hence save its Buddhist civilization. During King Dutthagamani's rule many great Buddhist stupas, such as the Ruvaveliseya Dagoba, were built and Buddhism enjoyed another great era. He was not only a great supporter of Buddhism but also a zealot follower himself (Perera, 1988).

In 103 BCE after King Vattagamani lost a battle with South Indian armies Tamil Kings ruled Sri Lanka for 14 years during which the country was ravaged with an unprecedented famine. Thousands of monks and laymen died of starvation, monasteries were deserted and Anuradhapura's Mahavihara was completely abandoned. Until this time Buddhism was transmitted orally and with many learned monks dying of starvation and some fleeing to India, there was a fear that some parts of the Buddhist teachings could be lost. Perera (1988:30) noted: "The monks in their earnestness to preserve the teachings of the Buddha, subsisted on roots and leaves of trees and recited the scriptures, lest they should forget them". After Vattagamani regained the throne soon after, he assembled 500 monks – some of whom have come from India – to put the Buddhist teachings into written form. Thus the Tipitaka was written at Aluvihare (as explained in chapter 2).

Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE climate was not good for Buddhism in Sri Lanka. This period was marked with continuous warfare between reigning kings and their rival claimants to the throne or with South Indian invaders. Often when the reigning king lost he fled to India and later came back with Tamil troops to regain the throne. As a result, Tamils who settled down in Sri Lanka became an important factor in the power play between Sinhalese leaders and were even able to grab power for themselves. It is not clear if these Tamils were Buddhists themselves because Buddhism was thriving in South India at one time.

These skirmishes with South Indian rulers over many centuries have left a strong Hindu impact on Sinhalese Buddhism. They were not religious wars, and some of the Hindu invaders even considered themselves Buddhist Kings to rule the people they conquered, but, Buddhism did not have the type of royal patronage as before. As a result of this fusion of Hindu and Buddhist



civilizations, most Buddhist temples have Hindu shrines today, and Buddhists worship Hindu deities as their protectors, such as Vishnu, Ganesh, Murugan (Kataragama). The close interaction between the two religions is evident in Buddhist festivals such as the annual Kandy Esala Perahera where the four devales (Hindu temples) surrounding the Dalada Maligawa joins the procession. It is reflective of many shared traditions of the two religions.

In 1070 CE when Vijayabahu I was able to defeat the Cholas and became the king of Sri Lanka, he moved the capital to Pollonnaruwa. He restored many of the *pirivenas* and monasteries that were in utter destruction and even build new ones. But, his greatest task was to restore the ordination of monks.

Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka has deteriorated to such an extent that it was impossible to find 5 ordained Bhikkus to perform the *upasampada*<sup>8</sup> ceremony under the *vinaya* rules. Thus, the then King Vijayabahu had to send a request to Myanmar's King Anuruddha in 1071 CE soliciting help to restore the Buddha Sasana. He sent twenty senior Bhikkhus who arrived from Ramannadesa (Lower Burma), and higher ordination was re-established in Sri Lanka. Some scholars argue that these were Sinhala monks who had fled Sri Lanka during the Chola rule, and were living in Ramannadesa (Goonatilake, 2009).

The religious revival instigated by King Vijayabahu led to a great religious reawakening and a large number of religious literature were produced in Pali and Sanskrit. After his death, there was a setback to the Buddhist revivalism but when King Parakramabahu I ascended to the throne in 1153 these attempts took off with greater vigour. The greatest task he performed during his 33-year reign was to purify the Sasana and unifying the sangha who were divided into many sects. As explained in chapter 2, this period also saw Sri Lanka becoming a maritime power and its architecture and the arts flourishing to such an extent that other Asian countries began to look up to Sri Lanka for inspiration. This religious revival continued until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, even though there was not much political stability in the country in the latter part of this period.

### **3.2 Arrival of Moor Traders**

From the late 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Arab Muslim traders have sailed to Sri Lanka from Siraf, Oman, Yemen and Persia, some settling on the Sri Lankan coast. Many Persian ships have dropped anchor in Sri Lanka on its way to China, and

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<sup>8</sup> *Upasampada* is a Theravada Buddhist tradition where a novice monk receives the full ordination as a Buddhist monk.

archeologists in Sri Lanka have found many gold and silver coins from almost every Muslim ruler between 8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. Many Arabic historical records have indicated that during this period a lot of ships sailing between China and Africa and the Middle East have set sail in Sri Lanka where much trading has occurred, sometimes, even transshipment kind.

*For at least some Muslims, Sri Lanka was the original paradise of the Abrahamaic religions where Adam set his foot. And, so they worship as the footprint of Adam the stone footprint of the Buddha on the mountain of Sri Pada (Samantakuta), which is like many other Buddha footprints dating back from around the beginning of the Christian era found all over Sri Lanka, and they named the mountain as Adams Peak. The Buddhists believe this footprint as that of the Buddha planted on one of his purported visits to Sri Lanka (Goonatilake 2010:46).*



All these interactions have been peaceful trading relations, and not the violent Turkic Mughal invasions India experienced coming from Arabia across the Himalayan mountains of Afghanistan, which destroyed much of the Taxila-Nalanda Buddhist civilization.

### 3.3 Arrival of Europeans: Portuguese and Dutch

The political stability that was maintained by Parakramabahu II and his successors until about the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE began to weaken by the end of that century. At this time, the Sinhalese king who ruled at Kotte was the head of a very small territory. The interior regions of the country were in the hands of several petty chiefs who did not care about the religion or the welfare of the people. The Moors on the other hand controlled the trade of the coastal regions. Economically too the country has sunk to such a very low levels that by this time Sri Lanka has become dependent on India even for food (Perera, 1988:69)

Such was the conditions when the Portuguese who were involved in “discoveries” in pursuit of trade and spread of the Catholic religion in the East, landed in Sri Lanka in 1505 CE.

*In Sri Lanka, the Portuguese fought with barbarous ferocity laying waste a large part of the Buddhist civilization while the Sri Lankans resisted. The Portuguese also played politics at a time when warring groups were jostling for succession to the throne. The ensuing clash of civilizations resulted in the use of considerable cruelty by the Portuguese amidst significant and deep cultural confrontations (Goonatilake, 2010:2)*

Historians –though it was restricted to a strip of land mainly in the western coastal areas – regard the period of Portuguese rule in Sri Lanka as the darkest period in the country’s history. All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) Commission report into unethical conversions in 2009 describes the Portuguese colonial conquest thus:

*The Portuguese are said to have arrived here with the sword in one hand and the Bible in the other. Historical records show how they used the sword with signifying force in the propagation of their religion. Any refusal to accept their faith resulted in harsh punishment. Babies were plucked from their mothers lap and were thrown up in the air pointing up the tip of the bayonet for the baby to fall on it. Also the babies were put in troughs and got their mothers to pound them into paste. Finally the mothers themselves*

*were beheaded as if they did not obey the orders. The temples and places of worship of others' sacred monuments were destroyed naming them idolatry. In this manner foremost Buddhist temples of the time such as Kelaniya Temple, Gnanananda Pirivena, which was a seat of learning, were destroyed (ACBC, 2012:50).*

Goonatilake (2010) notes that the religious places so destroyed were well endowed and had large numbers of resident monks. These were the successors to the Anuradhapura Mahavihara tradition. They have also attacked and destroyed the coastal ports thus cutting off Sri Lanka's trading routes. In turn, they established fortresses there and set up trading settlements. Thus, the Sinhalese King, who has shifted to Kotte (near the western coast) before the arrival of the Portuguese were at the mercy of the European invaders. In their brutal repression of the Buddhist faith, Christian missionaries have always accompanied the marauding Portuguese armies. Yet, a Catholic father de Salanova writing in 1581 has talked about the difficulty of converting Sri Lankans into Christianity and argued that they need to be "compelled" to accept Christianity because without such compulsion they will not convert.

The Portuguese succeeded in converting to Catholicism the grandson of King Bhuvanekabahu VI (1534-1551) the heir to the throne under the pretext of helping the king to prepare the grandson to succeed him. After Dharmapala was baptized as Don Juan Dharmapala and upon accession to the throne he has given the deed of Dalada Maligawa and Kelaniya Temple to the Portuguese allowing them to use all revenue from these for maintenance of missionary establishments. The Portuguese thus proceeded to give inducements, such as access to jobs, for people to convert to Catholicism and if these failed they were brutally punished, such as throwing them to the rivers to be eaten by crocodiles or tortured to death. Those who dared to wear yellow robes (monks) were put to death and libraries were burnt, monasteries destroyed and their treasures looted (Perera, 1988).

In 1592, a Sinhalese ruler Dharmasuriya I ascended to the throne in Kandy. Though educated by the Portuguese, he turned against them and started restoring the Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka. He restored many damaged monasteries, built the Dalada Maligawa in Kandy and enshrined the Tooth Relic there – which was hidden from the Portuguese in Delgamuvihare in the hills.

Finding that the Portuguese has killed most of the senior monks, he sent an emissary to Arakan (Burma) to obtain ordained monks to restore the sangha order in Sri Lanka. The mission was successful and several Burmese monks

conducted ordination ceremonies in Sri Lanka in 1597. Many men from noble families entered the monkhood at this stage.

Son Senarat and grandson Rajasingha who succeeded Dharmasuriya I had an arrangement with the Dutch to help them get rid of the Portuguese from the island. Thus, after almost a 50-year battle, King Rajasingha II was able to expel the Portuguese from the island in 1658 with the help of the Dutch. The Dutch occupied the areas Portuguese used to rule until the British arrived in 1796. The Dutch, who were Protestant Christians, had a religious policy which was in sharp contrast to the Portuguese. Their main concern was commerce and they realized that peace in the land was essential to successful trade.

The Dutch even assisted the Sinhalese kings in facilitating two embassies to Siam to obtain senior monks to conduct ordination ceremonies in Sri Lanka. Dewaraja (2003) argues the Dutch governor agreed to help because it was politically and economically advantageous for them to control the King's foreign relations.

At this time, the Sri Lankan sangha has deteriorated to such an extent that the remaining monks were not following the *vinaya* rules, indulging in astrology and business, and even raising families (Dewaraja, 2003). In May 1753, a group of 18 monks headed by Upali and Aryamuni Theras arrived in Sri Lanka on board a Dutch ship. They are believed to be from the *Sinhala Sangha* of the Mahavihara tradition who took the Tipitaka to Siam (Thailand) and established a monks order many centuries earlier. On the full moon day of Esala in 1753 these monks conducted a *upasampada* ceremony and thus re-established the proper order of the *sangha* in Sri Lanka. Thus, the *Siam Nikaya* of the Sri Lankan sangha was established with the King of Siam and the King of Kandy as its patrons. It gave rise to another Buddhist revival as Guruge (2014:6) notes:

*The resultant Buddhist revival, attended also by a renaissance in learning and literary activity, spread throughout the island. The Nayakkar kings of Kandy became the champions of the Buddhist cause. Temples were being established and renovated; monks were recruited and trained; educational activities were undertaken in every village; and literature received a new impetus.*

Compared to the brutality of the Portuguese, the Dutch were more subtle in the way they promoted their religion. They established schools in the territories they ruled where the school and the church were in the same building, and the

teacher was also the representative of the religion. Ceremonies were held regularly at these places where births and marriage were registered under Christian rites. All civil rights and inheritance depended upon a person's religious affiliations, and non-Christians could hold no government office. Thus, many Sinhalese became Christians on the surface to enjoy their rights, while they were Buddhists in their hearts. The efforts of the Dutch in propagating the religion did not have such a devastating effect on Buddhism, as the Portuguese did.

### **3.4 Lost of Sinhalese Sovereignty: The British Period**

In 1796, the Dutch, who were defeated in battle, surrendered their territories to the British. This was also a time when the Sinhalese Buddhist kingdom with its capital in Kandy now was in disarray with infighting within the royal family and his council of ministers (Adigars). King Sri Vikrama Rajasingha became nervous and punished all those who suspected were plotting against him.

In 1815, with the help of one of them Adigar Ehelepola the British were able to march to Kandy and take captive King Rajasingha. On 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1815, at a solemn assembly of Kandyan chiefs and monks, the king was deposed and his dominions were vested in the British Crown. Thus ended the line of Buddhist Kings of Sri Lanka that has lasted for over 2000 years.

At the assembly in Kandy in 1815 a treaty was signed between the British and the Kandyan kingdom in which the conquerors pledged to safeguard Buddhism, its rites and ceremonies. Known as The Kandyan Convention, Article 5 said (BCOI, 1956):

*The religion of the Buddhoo professed by the chiefs and inhabitants of these provinces is declared inviolable and its rites and ministers and places of worship are to be maintained and protected.*

What these words mean has been a subject of much discussion in the country ever since. The Presidential Commission Report into the Buddha Sasana in 2002 pointed out that, when the Kandyan Convention was sent to the King of England seeking his approval, the whole Christian clergy headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury have stood against it arguing that the British Crown should not “take the responsibility of safeguarding and nurturing a religion of heretical beliefs” (BSPC, 2002:21). The report goes on to point out that, the British Government treated this article in a “nominal sense” and gave Christian clergy who came to

covert people special powers to conduct their activities, even to the extent of allowing baptism ceremonies to take place in the Audience Hall of the Dalada Maligawa, where the Kandyan Convention was signed.

The Buddhist Committee of Inquiry report (BCOI, 1956) pointed out that between 1819 and 1853 the British systematically went about depriving Buddhist temples ownership of large tracks of land, from which they were deriving income for the upkeep of temples. An Ordinance was passed in 1846 to create a Central Buddhist Committee, and in 1853 this was used to cease direct government support for Buddhism and its institutions. By creating a land registry the colonial government was able to take over temple land under various pretext, thus impoverishing the temples and undermining their authority.

Not long after signing the Kandyan Convention, the British took steps to make Christian baptism a qualification of registering of births and marriages, and for obtaining jobs in the government service. The latter made many educated Buddhists to become Christians. They also gave all assistance for Christian missionaries to set up schools and they went about setting up schools in various parts of the island. The authorities did not insist that children become Christians before enrolling, but it was compulsory for them to attend Christianity lessons and church rituals during school time. Often the teachings of the Buddha was criticized and condemned, and their Buddhist practices were ridiculed.

This naturally had the intended effect and people gradually began to give up their national faith for the new faith, which they were trained to think as more refined and cultured. It became the fashion to adopt Christian faith and Christian names and customs. These developments led to the sangha coming to the forefront of opposition to British rule with rebellions in 1818 and 1848. It was during this time that the British declared such actions will result in the death penalty and many leaders of these rebellions were thus put to death (BSPC, 2002).

### **3.5 Undermining of Buddhist Education**

*The Dutch captured Batticaloa in 1638, Trincomalee in 1630 and Negombo in 1640. They displayed great zeal in the establishment of schools in all the areas under their control. Their aim was to produce a class of people who would be loyal to them and would execute their behests without question, a class of people who, because they were brought up with a contempt for their nation,*

*religion and culture, would be willing tools of the foreign ruler*  
(BCOI, 1956:42)

Dutch rulers used education as an instrument for conversion of the Sinhalese people to the Christian faith. In rural areas, schoolteachers were given inordinate powers such as notary and registrar. Three subjects taught in the schools were reading, writing and Christianity. They also adopted a practice of giving government jobs only to school educated Christians.

After the British became rulers of Sri Lanka they invested heavily in education, building schools and taking a special interest in promoting Christian missionary education. In 1812 the Baptist missionaries arrived in Sri Lanka, followed by Wesleyan missionaries in 1814, American missionaries in 1816 and Anglicans in 1818. Their main task was to set up schools to give locals an English education, which the British believed is well suited to serve the British Empire.

In 1824, a rather enlightened Governor of Ceylon<sup>9</sup> Edward Barnes expressed his opposition to the missionaries given the sole task of establishing schools in the country. He argued that this English schools model was unsuited to the country where there was a very small minority of Christians. His ideas were not popular and soon a well-organized Ecclesiastical Department was set up composed of Christians clergymen paid by the British colonial government. Education in Sri Lanka developed in close collaboration with this Department. While there were over 1000 temple schools across the country this Department showed no interest in developing these.

*The fact that children educated under Buddhist bhikkus grew up with a proper pride in their country and a firm faith in their destiny was not likely to be gratifying to an alien ruling class, who therefore endeavoured as far as possible to break the traditional association of the bhikkus with the education and welfare of the young* (BCOI, 1956:46).

In 1832 the British colonial government closed down all Sinhalese schools in the island and established in their place English schools in towns like Galle, Kandy, Colombo, Jaffna and Chilaw. It was part of the Government's policy that these schools function in close association with the Christian churches. In 1834 a Schools Commission was set up to supervise the educational curriculum

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<sup>9</sup> Ceylon was the name given to Sri Lanka by the Dutch because they initially came in search of the worlds-best cinnamon that was grown in the island.



and establishment of new schools. It did not contain a single Buddhist member and until 1879 all government assisted (grant-in-aid) schools were Christian. By this time the Buddhists were helpless in opposing the missionary menace, which was highly organized and very powerful (BCOI, 1956).

### **3.5.1 Buddhist Education: Mahavihara Tradition**

Sri Lanka has a long history of education from primary level to higher university levels. Sri Lanka's higher learning system was based on the monastic college system with the first of such establishments being the Abhayagiri of Anuradhapura as discussed in chapter 2. To this was added Jetavanaramaya in 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. Each of these had thousands of monks. Chinese Buddhist traveller Faxian, who studied at Abhayagiri for 2 years in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE mentions 5,000 residents at this monastery. In addition to these large ones, there have also been many smaller Mahaviharas.

In a Convocation Address to the International Buddhist College in Korat, Thailand, Professor Prasert Na Nagara (2014) observed:

*When Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE, the system of Buddhist education began to flourish on a solid ground. The Mahavihara in Anuradhapura was a center for Theravada Buddhist education after the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. It is a well-known fact that the Pali commentaries brought to Sri Lanka by Venerable Mahinda were elaborated and translated into Sinhalese language in the Mahavihara, the education center of Buddhism. The great commentator Venerable Buddhaghosa, who went to Sri Lanka in the 5th Century AD, was reported to have studied Theriya tradition in Mahavihara. Beside Mahavihara, Abhayagiri and Jetavana were other centers of Buddhist education in ancient Sri Lanka, which conducted their own ways of Buddhist learning. Sri Lanka is still maintaining its unbroken tradition of Buddhist education. The system of pirivena education, which confined itself to Buddhist education in Sri Lanka, has immensely contributed not only to the development of Buddhism, Buddhist culture and Buddhist values of the people, but also to gain much fame and honour to the country.*

### 3.4.2 Pirivena System of Education

Sri Lanka's Pirivena system of education pre-dates the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE missionary education introduced by the colonial invaders by around 1,400 years. It has its origins in the large Mahaviharas that were divided into colleges known as *Pirivena*, which had libraries attached to it. By the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, this system of education has spread into every village and by the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE there was a special Ministry of Education (Goonatilake, 2010).

In the Pirivena system discipline is as important as knowledge. To achieve the levels of required discipline, the Pirivena students were placed directly under the head monk throughout their education. The lay students were expected to behave and conduct themselves under the directions of the head monk. The teachers, on the other hand, were to guide the students with correct discipline and knowledge, as well as being sensitive to the students' needs. The Sri Lankan rulers and the sangha (monastic) community considered the education of both monks and lay people within a Buddhist society to be of utmost importance.

The resulting Pirivena education significantly assisted in the propagation of Buddhism not only locally, but also overseas. The syllabus for both monastics and lay people was originally separated into two streams: the *Suta* part included such subjects as languages, religion, philosophy, history, economics, and geography, while the *Sippa* included skills such as agriculture, astrology, and carpentry. The system remained highly standardized and methodical, and was sought by visiting scholars from countries like Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma even as recently as the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Mos, 2014).

At the time of the Portuguese arrival there were 5 main Pirivena centres of learning and many lesser ones. The main Pirivenas had links with Buddhist educational centres in countries like Siam, Cambodia and Burma.

Following the conversion of King Dharmapala to Christianity, the royal support for Buddhist education ceased. With the ensuing destruction of temples and Pirivena structures, together with the associated traditions, the Pirivena education system saw a rapid decline in Sri Lanka's coastal areas. Even during the European colonial period with constant movement of people and centres, the sangha community worked towards continuing the Pirivena system where possible. In 1839, Valane Sri Siddhartha Thera founded the

Paramadhammacetiya Pirivena that wherein were educated a number of scholars who in time became the elders of the Buddhist revivalist movement. They gave an impetus to the study of ancient literature and provided opportunities for the Sinhalese language to develop into a pliable means of communicating modern thought (Guruge, 2014).

Currently, there are three levels of Pirivena in Sri Lanka, serving both monks and lay people. Most of the Pirivenas are based at leading temples. The higher educational Pirivenas, were first recognized by an act of Sri Lankan government in 1957, and in accordance with this act, in 1959 the Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara Pirivenas of Colombo were given university status. At present, there are 794 Pirivenas on the island, serving a student community of approximately 62,000 (Mos, 2014).

### **3.5.3 Sunday Dhamma Schools**

The Sunday Dhamma Schools are the second tier of Buddhist education in Sri Lanka today. These were established during the Buddhist revival of the 1880s to mainly educate Buddhist children who were not getting a religious education of their choice in schools set up by European missionary organisations.

Held on Sunday mornings mainly in Buddhist temples, children are taught basic Buddhist teachings and traditions by both monks and lay teachers who are devout Buddhists. The Theosophical Society in Colombo, established by Colonel Olcott, originally set up these schools, but, when the demand for such education grew, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) took responsibility to conduct these classes for almost 50 years. Now most Buddhist temples across Sri Lanka conduct these classes. These Dhamma Schools like the Pirivenas and government schools are free education institutions.

There are 9582 registered Dhamma Schools throughout the island and 12,2084 volunteer dhamma teachers. Over 1,968,000 Buddhist children attend the Dhamma Schools. These figures help to understand the magnitude of the system of Dhamma Schools and commitments of Buddhist monks and laity to operate them effectively. Also the Sri Lankan Government has a separate Department of Buddhist Affairs under the Ministry of Buddhasasana, which facilitates the functioning of Dhamma Schools in the country (Dhanapala, 2014).

While general schools, teach a national curriculum of various sciences, mathematics and languages designed to lead students towards building their

future professional careers, the Dhamma Schools are platforms for the children to develop morality and to gain spiritual guidance.

*Dhamma schools in the country play vital role in the transmission of Buddhist cultural values and rituals from generation to generation. They effectively integrate the children into the mainstream of Buddhist way of life and strengthen the solidarity of Buddhist communities* (Dhanapala, 2014)

### **3.6 Buddhist Awakening Under British Rule**

It was through Christian missionary education that the British gradually started to undermine the Buddhist heritage and civilization in Sri Lanka. By 1886 there were 806 government assisted Christian missionary run schools in Sri Lanka while there were only 12 Buddhist and 5 Hindu schools. Most of the Christian schools taught English while English was not taught in Buddhist and Hindu schools. In addition to schools, Christian missionaries went from village to village distributing books and pamphlets denouncing Buddhism and espousing the supremacy and divine origin of Christianity (Perera, 1988).

#### **3.6.1 Panadura Debate and Mohottiwatte Gunananda Thera**

It is at this time around 1860 that a young dynamic novice monk Mohottiwatte Gunananda appeared on the scene and challenged the Christian missionaries to take him on in an open debate that is celebrated in Sri Lanka as the ‘Pananura Vadaya (Debate)’.

This monk has had his early education in a Christian school and was thus knowledgeable in Christianity as well as well versed in the Buddhist teachings. He went from village to village making public speeches and holding public forums in Christian communities openly challenging Christian missionaries to debate. He earned a reputation for eloquence and was attracting thousands of followers.

He was residing at a Buddhist temple in Kotahena near Colombo that was at this time in the midst of an exclusively Christian neighborhood surrounded by various Christian establishments. This was the time when Christians, especially Christian priests were quite active in openly conducting public talks against Buddhism and Buddhists. These talks were directly offensive, slanderous and derogatory, and contained information that was malicious and scornful.

The occasion for the Panadura Debate was triggered by a highly offensive and scornful sermon delivered on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1873 by the Protestant priest David Silva on the teachings of the Buddha with reference to the human soul. This was delivered in the Wesleyan Chapel in Panadura, which is one of the first churches established by the Wesleyan mission in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in an almost exclusively Buddhist area, and in the immediate vicinity of the historic Galkanda or the present Rankot Viharaya. At the time, this was a wellknown stronghold of Buddhists and Buddhist leaders, both lay and ordained. The intension of Rev Silva's sermon was to disrepute and humiliate the Buddha. He criticized the teachings of the Buddha in a most sneering and abusive manner. Both the content of the sermon and the language used was malicious, slanderous and scathing.

Buddhist leaders of Panadura were hurt and they decided to invite Mohottiwatte Gunananda Thera to reply to Rev. David de Silva. Gunananda Thera came to Galkanda Viharaya in Panadura and on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1873 delivered the reply speech denouncing as untrue the arguments of Christians. However the people of either party were not satisfied with holding speeches in separate venues and the Christians initiated face-to-face formal debate.

This famous debate with Christian missionaries at Panadura lasted for a week, and Gunananda Thera was judged to have won the debate and it attracted wide media coverage in the country and overseas. Festivities were held in every Buddhist temple, and effigies of Gunananda Thera were carried in processions in Buddhist villages. It culminated in a great Buddhist reawakening in the country (Perera, 1988).

*The 'Panadura Vadaya', the historic debate of 1873, was a landmark in recent history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka owing primarily to the leadership, initiative and actions of one of the greatest sons of our motherland – Venerable Mohottiwatte or Migettuwaththe Gunananda Thera. He defeated our adversaries and was the major force behind re-establishing the identity and pride of Sinhala Buddhists who were subject to undue oppression and discrimination during the colonial era (Hewapathirane, 2011).*

The aftermath and impact of the debate was extraordinary with far reaching national and international implications. Dr. James Martin Peebles an American happened to be in Sri Lanka during the time of the debate and had occasion to read the book on the debate published by the Ceylon Times. Upon his return to

USA, Dr. Peebles published a book with an introduction explaining how the Buddhists in Sri Lanka have shown the real position of Christianity. He gave the book the title “Buddhists and Christianity Face to Face”. As a result Europeans specially the intellectuals wanted to know about Buddhism and directed their attention towards Sri Lanka.

It helped to bring about increased awareness in the western world, about the teachings of the Buddha. Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky were among those deeply influenced by the contents of the book published by Peebles. After reading it Colonel Olcott became deeply interested in Buddhism. He felt this is one of the religions he was looking for to unearth the secret of the Universe – which led him to come to Sri Lanka.

### **3.6.2 Colonel Henry Olcott and Revival of Buddhist Education**

Colonel Henry Olcott came to Sri Lanka on the 17<sup>th</sup> May 1880, and joined forces with Mohottiwatte Gunananda Thera and all prominent Bhikkhu leaders to help accelerate the activities of the Buddhist revival movement that has gained extraordinary momentum at the time. After he came to the island with the support of Buddhist leaders he formed the Buddhist Theosophical Society where he worked tirelessly for the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. As a dynamic leader of this movement, he was able to deal effectively with the colonial rulers. The Buddhist Theosophical Society was instrumental in opening schools to provide Buddhism-based education to the younger generation.

On the full moon day of Vesak in 1881, Colonel Olcott, with the support of prominent Bhikkhu leaders inaugurated at Kelaniya a Buddhist National Fund for the promotion of the religious and secular education of Buddhist children and the dissemination of Buddhist literature.

Buddhist Sunday schools were started in 1881 in several places within Colombo. Colonel Olcott was particularly keen in promoting Buddhist English schools. This gave much strength to the Buddhist revival that was taking place across the country in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1888 there were eight Buddhist schools, which increased to 99 in the year 1898. In 1898 there were 11,577 children in Buddhist schools. The Roman Catholics had 30,425; Wesleyans 22,808; Church of Mission 14,110. In 1899 there were 134 schools in the list of Buddhist schools with an attendance of 15,490 children. In 1900 the number of schools increased to 150 in the Buddhist Theosophical Society (Hewapathirane, 2011).

At this time, the few places for Buddhist education were the Vidyodaya Pirivena, the Vidyalankara Pirivena and the Paramadhammachethiya Pirivena at Rathmalana. There were also two Buddhist schools. Of these one was at Panadura and the other one was at Dodanduwa. In his efforts to establish schools to educate Buddhist children, great Buddhist monks like Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala guided Colonel Olcott.

Although prior to 1880, the principal of the necessity of a religious education was denied to Buddhist children of the land, yet, through the efforts of Colonel Olcott and prominent monks and laymen, Buddhist children of the land began to receive that all important religious education in their most formative years. Among the over 150 schools started by the Buddhist Theosophical Society were Ananda College Colombo, Dharmaraja College, Kandy and Mahinda College, Galle for boys and Museus College, Colombo for girls. These schools were modeled in the line of the great public schools in England.

*Colonel Olcott came to this land and resuscitated Buddhist education and this culminated in Ceylon achieving Independence. Thus, the work of Colonel Olcott in Ceylon can be said to be not second to the services of Arahath Mahinda and Theri Sangamiththa to the land (Weerasinghe, 2015).*

Every year on 17<sup>th</sup> February, on the death anniversary of Col Olcott, Buddhist throughout Sri Lanka pay homage to him by holding special religious ceremonies lighting oil lamps and offering incense, monks bow in front of his photograph and children in schools throughout the land make offerings in his memory. They transfer the merit to him for gaining happiness, peace and ultimate nirvana. In 1967, Sri Lanka also issued a postage stamp in his memory.

### **3.6.3 Anagarika Dharmapala: Awakening The Sinhalese Buddhist**

A young boy of 16 with a name Don David from a wealthy Buddhist family in Colombo met Colonel Olcott and soon began to take an interest in the work of the Theosophical Society. In 1886, he changed his name to Dharmapala and joined Colonel Olcott in going from village to village to collect money for the Buddhist Education Fund. In the process, though passing the Clerical Service Examination with distinction, Dharmapala resigned from the public service job he held and devoted full time to the service of Buddhism in his country.



Anagarika Dharmapala (Wikipedia images)

This was the beginning of a remarkable journey that helped to reawaken the Buddhist consciousness not only in Sri Lanka but also its homeland in India. He has chosen the name Anagarika (homeless) along with Dharmapala.

In 1891 after visiting Sarnath and India, he was instrumental in setting up the Maha Bodhi Society in Bodhgaya in India. He played a leading role in the struggle to make Bodhgaya – the site of enlightenment of the Buddha – a centre of Buddhist pilgrimage belonging to the Buddhists. He became a good orator in English and travelled far and wide making many trips to India, Burma, Britain, USA and Japan. In 1893 he delivered an address at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago representing the Southern Buddhists. His speech received wide coverage in the US both in praise as well as in defense of Christian missionaries, which he criticized.

With his convincing and eloquent speeches on the greatness of Sri Lanka's



national and religious heritage, Anagarika Dharmapala was able to awaken the passions of people long suppressed and demoralized. Between 1890 and 1915 he attracted wide media coverage in the country and wherever he went large crowds assembled and listened to him. He was critical not only of the colonial rulers, also he mercilessly attacked the alien ways of life the Sinhalese have adopted in slavish imitation of the foreign rulers. Many people in Sri Lanka found in him a fearless and frank exponent of opinions and thoughts that they did not have the courage to express themselves (Guruge, 2014)

Dharmapala's writings and speeches came to the British colonial rulers attention in 1911 when he started calling for self-Government in Sri Lanka. They dismiss it as the language of a "religious fanatic" but later started to look at whether he could be charged and imprisoned for sedition. Instead they went after the publisher and printer of his newspaper *Sinhala Baudhaya*, jailing the owner for 3 months. He was at the time living in Calcutta and for 6 years the British stopped him from visiting Sri Lanka.

Though the British called him a "mob-leader" Dharmapala developed a calculated and well-planned strategy to awaken the Sinhala people to demand self-rule. As Guruge (2014:59) noted, "he knew a vigorous campaign was essential if the British were to be got rid of. But it has to be so planned that the benefits of Western Civilization which they brought to Ceylon such as education, science and technology were retained, while only what he termed the Western abominations were eradicated".

Anagarika Dharmapala did not live to see Sri Lanka regain its independence, he died in Sarnath near Benares on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1933. But, his contribution to awakening the Sinhala race with such passion is still held in high esteem by Buddhists in Sri Lanka, while there have also been attempts by some non-Buddhists to brand him as a racist.

*The creation of a national awareness of the political, religious, social, educational and economic problems of the country is the most remarkable achievement of Anagarika Dharmapala. This, to us, is of greater significance than the bold and tenacious struggle he carried on in India to re-establish Buddhism in the sub-continent and to restore its sacred sites, such as Bodhgaya and Issipathana, to the Buddhists (Guruge, 2014:74).*

## Chapter 4 – Independence And Buddhist Empowerment: 1956 Revolution

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**Summary:** Sri Lanka regained its independence from almost 5 centuries of European colonial rule on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1948. Unlike India, there was no fierce struggle for independence waged by outspoken advocates (like Mahatma Gandhi). It is often argued that Sri Lanka got its independence so easily because there was an English educated local elite who could take over power without disturbing British interests in the region. This chapter looks at how the Buddhist empowerment struggle continued beyond the granting of independence leading to the 1956 electoral revolution that led to Sinhalese regaining its status as the official language of the country.

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*During the British period, when there was developing in us the habit of merely imitating Western behavior patterns and the indiscriminate borrowing of other cultural traits, our culture began to change at a dangerous pace. Had that pace continued, Sinhalese culture as a tightly knit unit would have disintegrated under the stress (Martin Wickremasinghe, 1952)*

Many of Sri Lanka's post-independence leaders could fall into traits the renowned Sri Lankan writer Martin Wickremasinghe describes above. They were what Anagarika Dharmapala described as the Sinhalese who are slavish imitators of the foreign (British) rulers.

In preparation for independence, the British allowed free education to be introduced to Sri Lanka with the passage of the Education Act No.21 in 1945, in spite of strong opposition from the Catholic Church. Yet, the continuation of education in the English medium deprived a vast majority of the Sinhalese, especially in rural areas, of the benefits of free education, while the English speaking urban population enjoyed all its benefits. Britain's divide-and-rule policies ensured that the Tamil minority, especially those who became Christians, got preferential treatment in education. Thus, at independence there was a disproportionately larger number of Tamils (and Sinhalese Christians) in professional ranks, business and the civil service

The ruling elite, contemptuously labeled "brown sahibs" by the Sinhalese

nationalist forces, led a westernised lifestyle far removed from that of the humble Sinhala speaking masses. English as the language of administration, justice and secondary education exemplified this. Whisky, ballroom dancing and race-going were regarded as the tribal rites of this group (Devendra, 2015).

“In the course of one century, this English-educated class was totally alienated from the people, uprooted from the soil,” argued well-known English language newspaper editor Mervyn De Silva in an article written in 1967 (De Silva, 2015). “The Western-oriented Ceylonese is the perfect pasticheur. He is the intellectual counterpart of the Japanese manufacturer—he will copy anything or anybody. It is not that he is colourless; further, he is chameleon-like, taking the protective coloration of his immediate environment.”

However, the nationalistic platforms created by people like Mohottiwatte Gunananda Thera and Anagarika Dharmapala has been building a mass movement among the Sinhalese Buddhist, mainly rural, masses that was gathering momentum since 1951. It culminated in 1956 election campaign, which was spearheaded by what was called the Pancha Maha Balavegaya (Movement of Five Great Forces) that was led by the Monks (Sangha), Ayurvedic Physicians (Weda), Teachers (Guru), Farmers (Govi) and Workers (Kamkaru). They came under a newly formed political party the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) – Peoples’ United Front.

This Sinhalese intelligentsia was given leadership by an ironic individual Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike who hailed from the English-educated Sinhalese elite born into an Anglican Christian family, educated at Oxford University and later converted to Buddhism and married a lady from the Sinhalese Buddhist Kandyan aristocracy. He became known as SWRD, and though not as fluent in the Sinhalese language as his nationalist contemporaries, he was a great orator.

*The relentless march to 1956 has its origins in the struggle for independence, the Buddhist Revivalist Movement, the Temperance Movement and the struggle of the rural intelligentsia of the country to come forward as against the English speaking upper classes that had governed the country during the reforms introduced by the British colonial rulers (Sahabandu, 2012).*

As De Silva noted, 1956 was a national revolution.

*The challenger, the ‘new class’, which was to lead the assault was*

*sounding the alarm, choosing the battleground and shrewdly creating the casus belli which would best rally the masses behind it. .... In 1956 they moved: they moved with such a terrific momentum that it shattered the Right (temporarily) and shocked the Left. For both it was a traumatic experience (De Silva, 2015).*

They countered this by projecting the mainly Sinhala Buddhist and Leftist opposition with richly coloured posters of temples in flames with the slogan "Save Buddhism from the Flames of Marxism". The nationalist forces responded with an ingenious cartoon that rocked the nation and is credited for having propelled the movement to power.



Source: Sunday Island, 5 February, 2015

It draws on the Buddhist account of the temptations of Mara that the Buddha overcame before attaining Enlightenment, a story that resonates with every Buddhist.

In this drawing (above) the Buddha sits in Samadhi beneath a bo-tree, supremely immune to the onslaught of Mara's forces. Here the cartoonist 'goes to town' with all the hated symbols the Opposition accused as typifying the

UNP<sup>10</sup>. Sir John Kotelawala (then UNP leader) leads the fray riding the UNP elephant, hugging him from behind is his 'inamorata' the flimsily dressed belly-dancer Zou Zou Mohammed; the elephant is led by its mahout the bald Machiavelli Sir Oliver Goonetilleka (Governor General); on their right are top-hatted Uncle Sams carrying bags of dollars; in front is a carter pushing the carcass of a calf (to be barbecued on a spit as Sir John was reported to have done); behind them are couples doing ballroom dancing; ahead of them, in black coat, is a Village Headman – pillar of the UNP; behind them march the Armed Forces with fixed bayonets and, finally, bare-bodied thugs carrying flaming torches (Devendra, 2015).

“In the national process, 1956 is the crucial turning point,” argues De Silva (2015). “The 1956 movement, spearheaded by the rural middle classes and the Sinhala Buddhist intelligentsia was an anti-privilege impulse directed against the English educated establishment. It had a dual character: culturally revivalist (languages, religion, customs, dress, etc.) and economically radical, or it is loosely termed now, *socialist*”.

*Had the English educated, in his own clime, retained some of his roots; if he had critically absorbed the ideas and values of the foreigner and assimilated what was good and true for his own people; if he had gone to his own folk and engaged in generous exchange and sympathetic dialogue; if he had not so cruelly decried and degraded the traditional, but tried to foster harmonious fusion where he promoted conflict, our history may have been different. Perhaps, our politics too (De Silva, 2015).*

The 1956 victory led to many changes social, political and economic. The MEP Government first of all declared May Day - the working class day all over the world - a holiday. They next made Sinhala, the official language in Sri Lanka by the Language Act on June 5, 1956. Only the Tamil parties with the Marxist LSSP and the CP (Communist Party) voted against it. Even the UNP – the party of the English-educated elite - voted in favour of it. There was also a drastic change in foreign policy promoting closer ties with India and the opening of embassies in USSR and China. The Bandaranaike government also got the British to withdraw its forces from the Katunayake airbase and Trincomalee naval base, bringing those under Sri Lankan government control.

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<sup>10</sup> United National Party commonly known as UNP was led by the Sinhalese westernised elites that took over political power since Britain granted independence in 1948. Their leaders were mainly English-educated. Their party emblem was the elephant.

In 1815, the British dethroned Sinhala and enthroned English in its place. The Language Act 1956 was the culmination of the struggle carried on by the Sinhala people for over 140 years, to regain their lost right by making Sinhala the State language. After making Sinhala the State language in 1956, Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara Pirivenas were made Universities in 1957.

After making these two Pirivenas official Universities, thousands of students like bhikkus and teachers who had Oriental education could become graduates and become respectable citizens. When in 1960 Peradeniya University changed the medium of instruction to Swabasha (national language) both Sinhala and Tamil streams were set up.

Thus making Sinhala the State language in 1956 resulted in a social revolution in Sri Lanka. Prior to that all the job opportunities and other privileges were open only to the higher strata, those who were well versed in English. They constituted only about five percent of the population.

The ‘Sinhala Only’ policy that made knowledge of Sinhalese compulsory for public service jobs and opened up secondary and tertiary education in the Sinhalese language, has been the single-most policy that has attracted controversy ever since. The English-educated Tamil elite overnight became defenders of Tamil language rights demanding parity in the language policy. Reasonable use of Tamil in government business was advocated by the new MEP government in a pact that was negotiated between the Sinhalese and Tamil leaders. Many Sinhala nationalists saw this in terms of the old wars against the Cholas. They felt that when the Sinhalese wanted to regain their lost right and make Sinhala the State language Tamils are retaliating against it. Thus, there was a backlash from the Sinhalese resulting in the communal riots of 1958.

At the height of this debate, when the LSSP<sup>11</sup> leader Dr Colvin R de Silva was advocating a 'two languages one nation' policy, Sinhalese intellectual L H Meththananda countered it by asking whether Dr de Silva saw the reality of two nations existing in the colonial and post colonial Sri Lanka - i.e. English speaking and non-English speaking? (Fernando, 2011)

Attempts by Bandaranaike to hammer out a political deal with the Tamils for recognition of Tamil as a working language in the public service was met with

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<sup>11</sup> Lanka Sama Samaji Party (equal society party) or LSSP is one of the oldest leftist parties in Sri Lanka.

much resistance from some quarters of the Sinhalese nationalist movement. It finally cost Bandaranaike his life when he was assassinated by a man dressed in the yellow robes of a monk at his own residence on September 26<sup>th</sup> 1959. A leading Buddhist monk was charged and convicted for the murder and hanged. But up to this day there are still question marks whether he was the person who killed Banadranaike or if it was a deeper conspiracy to discredit the Buddhist nationalist movement?

Just before his assassination, a leading Buddhist monk Narada Mahathera has warned him about an impending threat to the 1956 revolution. In an open letter to the Prime Minister in March 1957, he had pointed out with almost prophetic vision, the dangerous trends appearing in the Armed Services due to the constitution of their personnel. The venerable monk had said that if prompt action was not taken to remedy the problem, a situation similar to the one that arose in South Vietnam was likely to arise here. He had drawn the attention of the Prime Minister to the disproportionate low number of Buddhist staff officers in the Armed Services. Roman Catholics and other non- Buddhists were holding most of the key positions in the Armed Services (Weeraratne, 2014).

After the assassination of SWRD, his wife Sirima Bandaranaike was persuaded by party leaders to take up the mantle of the party leadership. In July 1960 she led the party to an emphatic election victory and became the world's first female Prime Minister. Her major election platform was to stick to her late husband's 'Sinhala Only' policy.

By 1961 the English educated elite were feeling the effects of the Sinhala Only act and finding their privileged position in society being slowly undermined, many of them began to migrate overseas, especially the Christian Burghers (mixed race Eurasians) to the UK and Australia. It was in this environment that a coup attempt was foiled in January 1962 against the Mrs Bandaranaike government. The news was leaked at the nick of time, and all 24 officers from the armed forces who were later charged with conspiring to overthrow the Government were Christians with 12 of them Sinhalese. Their plan included bringing back the leaders of the UNP to power. Following the coup attempt, in 1963, the first Sinhala-Buddhist army commander Major General Udugama was appointed.

## Chapter 5 – Post-Independence Inquires Into The Status of Buddhism

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**Summary:** Though Sri Lanka gained independence from European colonial rule in 1948 and enacted the ‘Sinhala Only’ Act in 1956 to help empower the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, the question of the status of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the empowerment of the Sinhala Buddhist majority is an ongoing issue. There have been 3 major inquiries commissioned, and reports with recommendations produced. This chapter is a summary of the terms of reference of the inquiries and their recommendations. It is followed by a discussion of comments made by current Buddhist leaders during interviews conducted by the authors on the non-implementation of most of the recommendations.

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*There is a problem from unethical conversions. As Buddhists to protect and empower Buddhists we have to empower them economically... there is a book written by a Christian evangelical organization on the economic situation of different countries and they have pinpointed certain economic problems in some countries and they have said these are the target groups for evangelism. So they target them for their poverty. In Buddhism, even in Sri Lanka, there is no campaign to convert others to Buddhism. We give sermons, even help others from another religion but we don't do it to convert people to Buddhism. Christians and Muslims do social work mainly to convert people. They go to hospitals to help people, establish orphanages with the aim to convert people. Pre-schools is a major area of their activity. They give a pre-school education to poor children and Christianize them and convert families (Ven. Belanwila Wimalaratana Mahathera, 2015)*

### 5.1 1956: Buddhist Committee of Inquiry

The Buddhist Committee of Inquiry was set up on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1954 in accordance with a resolution adopted at the 33<sup>rd</sup> annual conference of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) held on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1953. Its terms of reference were to “inquire into the present state of Buddhism in Ceylon and to



report on the conditions necessary to improve and strengthen the position of Buddhism, and the means whereby those conditions may be fulfilled”.

The commission consisted of 15 members that included leading Buddhist monks and lay scholars. The “Buddhist Commission” as it was popularly known held sittings throughout the length and breadth of the country between June 1954 and May 1955. It travelled approximately 6,300 miles across the country and met all sections of the Buddhist society both lay and sangha. The full report was published in Sinhala on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1956 – exactly 8 years after Sri Lanka regained independence.

The report consisted of 8 chapters under the headings of Religion and State in Ceylon, Education, Contemporary Social Conditions, Economic Conditions, Social Services, The Sangha Today, Pirivena Education and Tolerance. Each section gave a historic background to the current situation and included a set of recommendations.

In the first chapter ‘Religion and State in Ceylon’ among the main recommendations were to declare Ceylon a republic within the British Commonwealth (this was only achieved in 1972); revise the constitution with respect to sections on religion and embody more precise definition of the religious freedom granted to individuals and prevent the constitution conferring privileges on certain religions (ie, Christianity) which is not granted to other religions; restrict powers granted to ministries to dish out money to religious bodies without regard to the wealth they already possess; education and social services should be removed from the control of religious bodies (ie. churches) and managed by Central and Local Government authorities; and immediate steps to be taken to pass a ‘Buddha Sasana Act’ to protect Buddhism in the country.

In a lengthy chapter on Education it was clearly pointed out how European colonial rulers systematically undermined the Buddhist education systems such as the Mahavihara and Pirivena education, and promoted Christian missionary schools. It recommended that all government assisted schools (which were mainly Christian) should be taken over by the State and its control and functions gradually passed over to the Local Government authorities; school administrators must reflect the religious ratio of the community it serves; religious bodies should have the right to establish schools but entirely at its own cost and not with government funds; and that the Penal Code should be revised to make it a punishable offence to attempt to convert a person under 21 years under any educational institution to another religion.

The chapter under Social Conditions recommended that members of religious orders should not be employed in hospitals, and pre-schools should be controlled and administered by Local Government bodies. Meanwhile the chapter on the Sangha recommended that there should be Training Centres established to educate those who wanted to enter the sangha, and that there should be a proper register of every bhikku and the administration of temples needs to come under the supervision of a Sangha Council at district levels. It also recommended that there should be an approval process under the Ministry of Home Affairs for setting up places of religious worship and no approval should be given if it is going to create religious strife.

The chapter on Pirivena Education had specific recommendation to sever all connections of this system of education with the Government and instead a special Pirivena Education Council be set up in association with the proposed Buddha Sasana Council to be responsible for the development of the Pirivena education system in the country. The cost of running the system needs to be covered by compensation the Government will pay to the Buddha Sasana Council for temple land confiscated by the British Government. Thus the Buddha Sasana Council will be responsible to provide all educational facilities to the bhikkhus.

## **5.2 2002:Buddha Sasana Presidential Commission Report**

On 18<sup>th</sup> July 2001 President Chandrika Kumratunga (daughter of S.W.R.D Bandranaike) appointed the Buddha Sasana Presidential Commission for the purpose of submitting facts in respect to the state of the Buddha Sasana that existed in the past, problems it confronts at the present and the recommendations required for its preservation and protection. It included 11 Commissioners that included 5 leading monks and 6 Buddhist scholars. The Commission submitted the report to President Kumaratunga on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2002.

It was a comprehensive report with facts and grassroots viewpoints on threats Buddhism is facing in the country. More than half a century after the end of colonial rule the report pointed out that there was a lack of proper government support for the Buddha Sasana, a decline in the moral and ethical standards in the community and increasing threats from Christian evangelical activity that is going unchecked by the government. It gave a good background to the historical battles Buddhists have fought in the island to preserve the Buddha Sasana and the need for the Government to step in to empower the Buddhists to help preserve its rich Buddhist heritage.

The report acknowledged that for the first time the “rightful place was given to Buddhism” in the new Republican constitution that was adopted on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1972. In chapter II of the new constitution it said, that the “Republic of Sri Lanka shall give the foremost place to Buddhism. Accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster Buddhism while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Paragraph (d) of Sub Section (1) of Section 18. This Paragraph says:

*Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.*

The government that came to power at the 1977 general election enacted a new constitution in 1978, but the safeguard for Buddhism in the 1972 Republican constitution remained in this new constitution.

The Commission however, pointed out that in oral and documentary evidence they gathered reflected that, although Buddha Sasana received constitutional security from both these constitutions, yet, in reality the required protection was not received in an appropriate manner. The evidence they receive indicated that constitutional security was confined only to the Constitution and the rules and regulations pertaining to its legal position have not been drawn up yet. The Commission endorsed this view and warned that the identity of the country based on Buddhist culture and ethics, is facing an “insidious attempt” to change this position and government need to take steps to control this attempt.

The Commission argued that the process of globalization started in the early 1990s have introduced western ideas as the norm, and that eternal Buddhist ethics are facing hostilities by this process. The consumerist culture that is now prevailing has destroyed the culture of togetherness of the society and transformed it from a selflessness to a selfishness society. The happy lifestyle promoted by advertising is also converting not only children, but also adults into a mental state that is a challenge to Buddhism.

The Commission also raised with alarm the weakness within the sangha community, where monks are falling prey to hooliganism, with some young monks not following the *vinaya* discipline properly. This they have attributed to shortcomings in the dhamma teachings to new monks, as well as many monks

getting involved in politics or looking at education as a path to economic stability through employment and consumerism. The report argued that this trend is causing much harm to the Buddha Sasana and it must be given special attention.

Other issues from within that is threatening the Sasana in Sri Lanka is the decline in the number entering the Bhikkhu order in recent years. This, the report points out is a result of a family planning program in the country under the slogan of “the small family is golden” which has been embraced by the Buddhist community. Thus, not many children are now available to enter monkhood. Even those who enter monkhood many are disrobing later due to many pressures, such as poverty in the family and the need to find paid employment to support them; disputes over temple property between monks; and shame brought about on monks due to misbehavior sometimes instigated by anti-Buddhist organisations.

However, the biggest threat facing Buddha Sasana the Commission pointed out is aggressive evangelization activities of both Christian and Muslim groups. The report allocated a lengthy chapter to document some of the case studies and activities. The report listed reasons, which Christian missionaries target to convert people to Christianity as: poverty, unemployment, social injustice, love and marriage relationships, mental and physical disorders, destitution due to terrorist activity, desire to admit a child to a good school, desire to achieve a high place in society by discarding the religion and the opportunity to behave in a freer manner.

The report pointed out that many Christian evangelical organisations come to Sri Lanka and set up Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) on the pretext of doing social services. By March 2002, such Christian evangelical organization listed in the Department of Registrar of Companies amounted to 110. Most of which have come from North America, Europe and South Korea. The Commission lamented, that the Buddha Sasana Ministry nor any other government agency paid any attention to their activities.

The report cited an article written by Dr Lalith Mendis, a local leader of the Christian evangelical church Assembly of God who gave advise to its followers on how to reach out to the 25,487 villages in Sri Lanka, which consists of the “unreached people of Sri Lanka”. In it, he has listed a number of strategies, among them how to be circumspect when establishing a new church in a village by settling down there as an ordinary villager and setting up a prayer centre in the house of a villager once a covert is found; and taking them away from their

hostile family members and attaching them to Christian families. He has also warned the evangelists that more often the conversions to Christianity takes place by fulfilling their economic needs than preaching the Gospel.

The chapter lists many case studies of what they describe as unethical conversions, where projects have been set up by NGOs with approvals that have been obtained fraudulently. Such as pre-schools set up by Christian NGOs in the vicinity of temples and in communities that are predominantly Buddhist, which are later turned into prayer centres; on the pretext of building a hostel a church erected in a Buddhist village; many instances where churches have been built in villages and towns with no Christian community to be served; and also industrial estates set up which later turns into a church complex. Most of these are “churches” that are illegal, as approval has been granted for something else.

One such case is that of a Korean firm in Kundasale near Kandy. They bought a farm property with the pretext of setting up a golf resort. Once they set up the golf course the manager of the resort asked the local school principles to send the poor children to pick up golf balls. Once they were there on the pretext of teaching them English, they were given lessons in Bible reading. These boys were all either Sinhalese Buddhist or Tamil Hindus. Another Korean project, also in the hill country, approved by the Board of Investment, was set up by a Catholic Korean, which was supposed to be a farm for an agricultural training school. The farm was later found to have neither agricultural equipment nor a curriculum for agriculture training. It was a Bible school.

The Muslims are using different methods for evangelisation the report noted.

*The worldwide Muslim incursion is rapidly spreading in Sri Lanka as well. Buddhists are being converted to the Muslim faith by creating an anticipated hope of seeking employment in the Middle East and by encouraging marriage (section 9.40, Buddha Sasana Presidential Commission Report, 2002)*

The Commission pointed out that there have been unauthorized Muslim settlements established within the limits of sacred areas of Buddhist historical sites. Some of these are:

- ***Kuragala Sacred Site in Balangoda:*** Kuragala is a sacred site with Buddhist antiquities and an archaeological excavation site comprising over 100 caves. A Muslim politician has coerced the State 9 years ago, to give a portion of this sacred site to a Muslim organization. Presently

in this site are a Mosque and a number of Muslim houses.

- ***Muhudu Maha Viharaya in Potuvil:*** In 1967 the Government gazetted 32 acres of land around the Muhudu Maha Viharaya in the east coast as the place where the famous queen Vihara Mahadevi set foot. Today only 8 acres are there. The sacred site and most of the rest are occupied by Muslim settlements.
- ***Digavapi:*** Ancient Kings have donated 8000 acres of land for the upkeep of the historic Digavapi Dagoba, but, at present only 600 acres are left, with two Mosques erected on the access roads.
- ***Katugastota:*** A part of the land belonging to 115 years old Sinhala Buddhist School Rahula College has been bought by Muslims and a Mosque built there.
- ***Kandy:*** In 1988 and 1992 protests by Buddhists have stopped the construction of a Mosque at Deyyammewela (fields supplying rice to gods). But attempts are afoot to resurrect the project in an area that used to be a Buddhist village but rapidly colonized by Muslims.

The report has noted that Muslims (who are largely a business community) have been using their financial resources to buy land and expand Muslim settlements across the country, especially around poor Sinhala villages. They usually buy a house and gradually expand this land holding to establish a Mosque or a Muslim school. The Commission has also received evidence that concerted moves are afoot to pressurize Sinhala Buddhists who want employment in the Middle East to embrace Islam.

Quoting statistics from the national census of 1981 and 2001, the Commission Report has noted that there has been a drop in the percentage of Buddhists in 9 districts of between 0.5 to 10.2 percent.

The Commission has warned that if the Government does not recognize the gravity of the serious threats to Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage and take suitable action to remedy this situation, it could lead to religious conflicts in the country with the country plunging into a state of instability. Thus, the Commission's report has made a number of recommendations to the Government. Among them are the following:

- An Act of Parliament needs to be formulated and passed to prevent acts of religious conversions exploiting poverty and using the power of wealth. Such acts of religious conversions should be treated as punishable offences under Penal Code.
- Inter Religious Board should be instituted with members from all

religions to discuss and settle any religious problems connected to various religions that may arise. The membership of this Board must be proportional to the population of the adherents of each religion. Any new missionary or evangelical organization should require the approval of this Board for registration.

- Conversion to churches of buildings constructed on nonreligious grounds for pre-schools, hostels, agriculture institutions and community halls should be stopped.
- Foreign institutions intending to invest in the country should be prohibited from engaging in religious conversions in the pretext of doing social service.
- The role of the temple as the central point of village communities should be revived with temples encouraged to set up pre-schools, Dhamma schools, youth service centres, libraries and social service organisations.
- Bhikkus should not be confined to the temples, they need to go around villages looking into the social and religious requirements of its donors.

The Report was also critical of some temple management systems, behavior of monks and lack of focus of Buddhist organisations in social and other community service work. It pinpointed the problem of conversion of Buddhists as such:

*The main reason why helpless Buddhists succumb to conversion to other religious faiths is poverty. Hence the Buddhist institutions and organisations, which receive copious income, and the wealthy Buddhists, should volunteer to uplift the living standards of these people (section 9.63-1).*

### **5.3 2009: The Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire and Report on the Conversion of Buddhists in Sri Lanka to Other Religions by Immoral and Fraudulent Means**

To inquire into the conspiracies to convert Buddhists into other religions, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) appointed a Commission consisting of eminent Buddhists to “report on and submit relevant recommendations” within 6 months. This Commission recorded evidence from 348 witnesses at 23 centres across the country and a Sinhala language report was submitted to the ACBC on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2009.

Many of the evidence gathered during the Commission investigations reflected very much the same concerns expressed in the Presidential Commission Report of 2002 discussed earlier. This report was compiled at a time when the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was intensifying and reaching its final decisive stages, while in the background, there were increasing concerns about rapidly expanding Christian evangelical activities in the country that was exploiting the political and economical instability in the country, which was creating social upheavals. Reflecting on the plight of the Buddhists under the threat of LTTE terror the report observed:

*Buddhists were reduced to living a life of psychological insecurity. These undue pressures justifiably sparked off feelings of helplessness among Buddhists. What especially caused this was the fact that the Maha Sangha<sup>12</sup> and Buddhist organisations, who should take action on behalf of the Buddhists continue to remain silent. Although a few Buddhist monks and a few Buddhist organisations tried to give leadership to the Buddhist agitations, they failed to whip up strong collective force. These non-Buddhist organisations made a scapegoat of the ethnic issue prevailing in the land, to reap maximum benefit and were sufficiently vicious as to brand the Buddhist leadership that was bold enough to speak up on behalf of the rights of Buddhism, as racists and religionists (section 54, p 33)*

The report's 20 chapters make a comprehensive survey of many threats facing the Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka. This includes moves by Christian evangelical organization in particular with international backing to challenge the Buddhist identity of Sri Lanka and the dubious and unethical strategies used by NGOs masquerading as social welfare agencies to convert Buddhists, mainly to the Christian religion. A special chapter discusses how these organisations operated in the aftermath of the Tsunami tragedy making unethical conversions. The report was also critical of the lack of Government action to address the problem of unethical conversions and it also devoted a chapter to discuss fraudulent Buddhist organisations that distort the Buddhist philosophy.

This report was compiled during a period of Buddhist agitation following the death of the popular Buddhist monk Venerable Gangodawila Soma in Russia, a death that is surrounded with many conspiracy theories with fingers pointed at certain Christian evangelical groups. Thus, chapter 2 of the report was devoted

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<sup>12</sup> The Great Community of Buddhist Monks



to discussing the frustrations faced by Buddhists and factors that are at the root of the prevailing Buddhist agitations. This chapter noted that there is a lack of proper control over Charitable Institutions that has led to disastrous consequences.

*In our country it is possible for unscrupulous persons to set up Charitable Institutions for their personal gain. .... Such unscrupulous persons have every opportunity to join religious and charitable institutions and use land and property of these institutions for their personal benefit. There does not seem to be any possibility of taking legal action against such persons.....what appears to us being most dangerous, is the host of unlimited privileges and powers conferred upon legally constituted Charitable Institutions – especially powers related to land and property (section 978, p16).*

The Commissioners called upon the government to fully examine the powers and activities of religious and charitable institutions and the State should forthwith prepare and enact new laws to regulate them. They pointed out that at the time of his assassination, the S.W.R.D Bandaranaike government was due to implement such laws and his demise led to the collapse of the proposals.

While the report welcomed the setting up of the Buddha Sasana Ministry in the late 1980s by President Ranasinghe Premadasa, it pointed out that this ministry has been abolished in 2005 and a new Ministry of Religious Affairs established. The Commissioners were critical on the lack of action taken by the Government on recommendations made in the 2002 Buddha Sasana Presidential Commission Report and a subsequent conference on the report held in December 2004. This conference asked the State to approve 4 Bills that have been submitted to parliament by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana Affairs to strengthen Buddhist institutions in the country. Subsequently a draft Buddha Sasana Bill was submitted to parliament as well. But none of these have been passed by parliament. The ACBC report was critical of the latter Bill for watering down recommendations of the 1956 and 2002 reports.

The Report also pointed out that there are no laws in the country to address the issue of religious denigration and insults, which many Christian and Muslim evangelical groups are involved in, such as calling the Buddha statues “the devil” and instigating the chopping off the head and placing it at the foot of the statues or shredding into pieces pictures of the Buddha and setting it on fire. The chapter 2 concludes with this observation:

*Christian Evangelists are well aware that they cannot convert Buddhists who have a good understanding of the teachings of the Buddha by explaining Christianity to them, but that they can do so only by bribing them with money, gifts and other allurements and by deceiving them with assurances that sickness and disease can be cured by prayer. This is why they go in search of helpless, uneducated Buddhists living peacefully in rural villages, shower them and their children with gifts and presents, help alleviate their economic hardships, take undue advantage of the quality of gratitude inborn in them precisely because of their Buddhist nature thereby enticing them into being accompanied to Prayer Centres and using other such sinister methods to wean them away from the quality of being Buddhistic and then convert them to their (Christian) faith (section 83, p 46).*

Based on evidence gathered across the country the ACBC Commissioners have documented a variety of instances where conversions have occurred because of poverty and associated socio-economic conditions. Setting up pre-schools and weaning students away from temple run pre-schools is another popular methods of evangelization where the well-known international Christian aid organization 'World Vision' is also involved according to examples cited by the report. Another area is, offering English language classes to school children and youth where Bible stories are gradually introduced. Healing programs for the sick is another popular methods of evangelisation by Christians. Presenting Christianity as a "fun religion" is another strategy where concerts and pop shows are organized with Christian themes. Sometimes paid media is used to assist in this.

As for Islamic evangelical activity, as Islamic Family Law permits polygamy, one common strategy is to use marriage to convert Buddhists according to evidence presented to the Commissioners.

*As a result of the greed women have for gold jewelry and money, Sinhalese women are tempted to embrace Islam. Vice versa, when a Sinhalese youth weds a Muslim woman, very often the youth embrace Islam. Here the tactics used by the Muslims are far more subtle than the strategies used by the evangelical Christian fundamentalists or Catholic groups for conversions. It is usually carried out at a very personal level. In two newspapers named by the witnesses where name changes of Sinhalese women are published in large numbers, there is evidence to say that this*

*happens very subtly* (section 457, p136).

The 2004 Tsunami provided Christian evangelical groups in particular a big opportunity for conversion activity as most of the effected communities were in Buddhist areas of the south of the island. The chapter 8 of the report discusses issues that came up as a result of Christian evangelical groups exploiting this tragedy to 'harvest for souls'. "It is well known that the first Good Samaritans to rush to assist the tsunami victims were the Buddhist monks. The Buddhist monks and the temples in the tsunami effected areas did everything to the best of their ability to help the victims before the government reacted" (section 683, p202) noted the Report, adding, "a few days after the Tsunami there was yet another Tsunami that hit Sri Lanka in the form of Christian Evangelical groups who had hidden agenda focusing on unethical conversions of hapless people" (section 684, p202).

A solid example of such activities the Report documented was a Christian organization called 'Service of the Voice of Temperance Living' that was located in the southern port city of Galle. About 75 to 80 foreign aid workers who arrived in the island under the cover of assisting the Tsunami victims were based here and each morning they attended briefing meetings. During the same time, a ship containing a library of Christian books and other religious propaganda surreptitiously docked into Galle harbor and held an exhibition of books. The villagers who gave evidence to the Commission have accused these groups of been involved in Christian conversion activities.

*It was clear from the evidence that one outstanding feature of the practice of unethical conversions, was making undue use of a disaster situation or total human helplessness. To such people Tsunami was a Godsend* (section 697, p205).

The ACBC Commission Report has noted as a serious concern the large number of NGOs bearing names that indicate they are involved in social welfare work, that are of Christian origin and active throughout the country. While it is difficult to provide a complete list of such organisations, in chapter 7 the Report has listed and named 379 such organisations. This list is made up of mainly organisations that are connected to new Christian evangelical churches.

Another serious issue raised by the Report is the sinister designs targeting Buddhist monks aimed at undermining the firm foundation between the monks and the lay community. A number of schemes were cited in the document such

as a Christian Fund set up to help children in their education and if a member of the family is a Buddhist monk they are disqualified from receiving any assistance (section 820, p240). When there was an international uproar about the LTTE recruiting child soldiers for their terrorist war, some Christian evangelical groups have raised the issue of child novice monks in the same wane arguing that it is child abuse and a violation of the rights of the child (section 822, p 214). There was also evidence given that some Christian organisations have offered between Rs 25,000-50,000 (USD 500) for Buddhist monks to disrobe. One witness has said that World Vision too resorted to this tactic (section 823, p241). Another tactic used by evangelical groups is to use attractive women to befriend monks and then either blackmail them to disrobe or raise public allegations of molestation (section 838 and 839, p 246). Another insidious scheme that was uncovered by evidence was how certain Christian evangelical groups have paid men to dress up as monks and misbehave in public such as getting drunk, buy meat from shops or act as hooligans. When Police arrested such people, it was found that they were not real Buddhist monks, but hired imposers (section 846, 848, p 249-250).

Pointing out the statutory responsibility of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana under Article 9 of the Constitution (as discussed earlier), in chapter 20 the ACBC Commission has listed 121 conclusions and recommendations. It has pointed out that foreign evangelical groups with their local partners have openly challenged the protection granted to Buddhism in the constitution and the government needs to take steps to stop this trend. Thus, the Report has called for a register of religious and missionary institutions and to enact strict guidelines for their conduct; a Bill drafted by Buddhist and Hindu organisations to stop Unethical Conversions to be tabled in parliament and passed; to closely monitor the use of foreign funds received by NGOs and have strict guidelines on granting of visas to foreigners working with local NGOs; and better laws and procedures to grant approval for building of temples, churches and mosques in the country.

The Report also argued that the Government should see it as their duty to provide financial and other assistance to destitute Buddhist communities because it has been established that they are vulnerable to evangelical incursions due to their poverty. The State should look at this responsibility in terms of the Article 9 of the constitution of Sri Lanka. The Commissioners have also called for the re-establishment of the Buddha Sasana Ministry and for ACBC to take the initiative to establish a ‘Grand Council of Buddhist Organization’ to coordinate activities to protect the Buddha Sasana.

## 5.4 Views of Current Buddhist Leaders on the Reports

As discussed above there have been three major investigations and reports into the state of Buddhism in Sri Lanka since independence in 1948. However, the Buddhist community, though numerically superior, face a continuing battle to safeguard and foster the Buddha Sasana in the country. In recent years there have been increasing agitation by Buddhists to protect their Buddhist heritage from many threats as already discussed. The author asked a number of leaders of such movements for their comments on the three reports featured above and whether these have made any difference to the situation of the Buddha Sasana in the country.

*The constitution says that Buddhism will be given foremost place in the country and Buddhism will be protected these are just empty words. Even the monks are now setting up political parties and want political power. I had to come back from overseas, find money from there to print Tipitaka and other Buddhist publications because the government is not doing it. There is no one to do it. Those who are supposed to be advisors are just a selfish lot, only think of themselves. Monks are now divided by sects, caste, politics ... you can get together and work together ... some monks do it on an individual basis but cannot do anything collectively – Venerable Kirama Wimalajothi Thera, Director, Buddhist Cultural Centre<sup>13</sup>.*

Ven. Wimalajothi is critical of the Buddha Sasana Ministry, which was re-established in April 2010. He calls the setting up of such a ministry as the “most foolish thing to do”. The senior monk argues that what it has done is to create a system of patronage for jobs and grants.

“This is a Buddhist country and why do you need a ministry to protect and preserve Buddhism here?” he asks. “In all 4 corners of this country are Buddhist ruins. So they appointed some officers, who get a government salary. Those officers don’t have any knowledge of this country’s Buddha Sasana, history, or culture. They just work for the salary. They are destroying the Buddha Sasana rather than protecting it. If you go to get an ID card or any other document you can’t get it without giving a bribe. The monks who are

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with author 30<sup>th</sup> June 2015.

advisors there are political appointees of the government in power. They want to build their own temples, get jobs for their relatives. I haven't seen them doing any work for the Buddhist community as a whole or trying to foster or improve the Buddha Sasana".

Ven. Wimalajothi, who co-founded the Buddhist activist group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) in 2012 to encourage socio-economic empowerment of Buddhists who were facing twin threats from Christian and Islamic evangelic activities, has distanced himself from the organisations after they went into direct political action and activity.

The chief executive officer of BBS Dilanthe Withanage<sup>14</sup> argued in an interview that if action was taken on the recommendations of the 2002 Presidential Commission Report by the then President Kumaratunga, there would have been no need for a BBS.

*In both 2002 and 2009 (reports) it clearly says why they had to appoint a commission because there was a pressing need. Unfortunately none of these governments could implement any of the recommendations. Because there is no sufficient power or support from parliament to do it..... in the 50s we could not do that, in 2000s we could not do that because of lack of support from parliament. Sinhalese are divided into many political parties and bring them into one common agenda is not possible. Also pressure from those involved in unethical conversions, fundamentalist Christian and Muslim groups they are all inside parliament and they will not allow these recommendations to be implemented (Withanage, 2015).*

He pointed out that Mahinda Rajapakse was able to narrowly win the presidency in 2005 because the Sinhala Buddhists were mobilized in his support, yet, after coming to power on the strength of this vote, he did not take any concrete steps to protect the Buddha Sasana in the country. "Rajapakse used to visit temples and he used to have very cordial relations with Buddhists. That doesn't mean it's a Buddhist government. During his time, and also during (SWRD) Bandranaike's time in the 50s people felt this was a pro-Buddhist government, but according to what we think, nothing substantial was done for Buddhists during these periods" argues Withanage (2015). "Introducing halal certificates, sharia law, sharia banking, legislation to create special Muslim zones like Wilpattu, Mannar, all happened during Rajapakse's time. He had

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with author recorded on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2015.

reasons to do it because of the UN<sup>15</sup> resolution and he got support only from Muslim countries”.

Venerable Medagama Dhammananda Thera<sup>16</sup> of Asgiriya Temple in Kandy and a Vice President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists argues that the threats to Buddha Sasana started with the arrival of the open economy after 1977 and in the 1980s.

*We are proud of our history ... it is important for a nation ... it's value is in our literature and history ... historically our culture was shaped by our Buddhist monks. Teaching history and literature in our schools were undermined starting in the 1970s under Education Minister Badduruddin Mahamood, and under the JRJ (government of President J.R. Jayawardena), he even made a comment that what is the use of literature and history, you cannot get a job studying that? Thus as a generation we were distanced from our culture. So after 1977 this process increased rapidly. In addition economic threats came in, via open economy, people were focused towards money-making and the traditional values became gradually diluted... it is this process you see today that has resulted in the drug menace etc.... including behavior that does not reflect humanism ..... international media values have also contributed (Ven. Dhammananda, 2015).*

Ven Dhammananda also points out that with the increase in population the government could not provide quality education to everyone so they were forced to let private educational institutions like international schools to flourish. “Government did not invest enough on education. Though there is opposition to private schools and education has become a privilege of the richer people, in turn this private education has undermined local culture. Yet, some of the government schools are able to protect this to a certain extent. In the current economic climate most of these international school students get jobs and they become the country’s policy makers in the future. It is their ideas and values that will enter the country’s mainstream. Thus a dangerous trend is happening through these international schools,” he warns.

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<sup>15</sup> Resolutions against the Rajapakse regime moved at the UN Human Rights Commission by the West and supported by India in 2013 and 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with author 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2015.

Ven. Dhammananda explained the background to the establishment of the Presidential Commission on Buddha Sasana in 2001 by President Kumaratunga:

*Around 2000, Christian threat became serious (and) we had information that some Christian churches were having this policy or vision of presenting a Christian Sri Lanka to their God by the turn of the century. They were not able to achieve it but they went on making conversions at a rapid space... using newspapers like Ravaya they tried to make Buddhists to be Buddhist only by name but their perceptions are influenced by Christian ideas. They made Buddhists to become skeptical or critical of Buddhism ... another is the work of NGOs. We asked the government to set up a commission to find out all these threats against Buddhism. But no action was taken on its recommendations.*

Ven Dhammananda (2015) pointed out that since there was a war going on, Catholic aid agency World Vision and over 400 NGOs were established and many of these NGOs were fronts for evangelical churches. “These NGOs acted in such a way that rather than directly converting people, (they subverted domestic politics) to changing regimes and putting in place governments that are subservient to their interests. They were supported by evangelical churches that were involved in conversions,” he argues, pointing out that “even Hindus were threatened more than the Buddhists. It was Tamil MP T Maheswaram who first brought to parliament an anti-conversion bill against a scheme by Christian evangelists to convert 7000 Hindus to Christianity. When this was presented the American embassy here questioned him why ..... Hindus and Buddhists cooperate a lot. But he was killed in Jaffna (by LTTE)”.

Ven. Dhammananda (2015) points out some sinister attempts made by anti-Buddhist forces to undermine attempts to protect Buddhism:

*In 2006 during Buddha Jayanthi year we tried to bring up these issues again. There was discussion that either the anti-conversion bill or something similar should be presented to parliament to stop unethical conversions. I pointed out that in the constitution article 14E should be invoked. It says that everyone has the freedom to practice his own religion as a human right. It says the right is there for the citizens of the country. There were attempts to change it to everyone. We*



*protested and said it should remain as citizen. We said we cannot allow room for foreigners to come and preach their religions here. So we told the word citizen should not be deleted. I suggested that we should add a clause to it to say that people should not be coerced to convert to any religion – not only Buddhism. But that was not accepted (but) Ratnasiri Wickremanayake (the then Prime Minister) tried to bring a bill on these grounds. But it didn't happen. There were 22 parties of non-Buddhists and NGOs who took the bill to courts. We also went to courts saying it is needed. Lawyers represented us without fees. Courts said some of the clauses in the bill needed a 2/3 majority to be passed. That was Ven. Omalphe Sobitha's bill. The bill was about to be presented in parliament for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time with revisions so that a 2/3 majority can be obtained when parliament was dissolved. That was 2009. It did not come again. (Ven. Dhammananda, 2015)*

Venerable Belanwila Wimalaratana Mahathera<sup>17</sup>, whose temple was among the pioneers in starting social and educational services from the temple to the community over 30 year ago, argues that monks going into politics are not the solution to the socio-economic empowerment of Buddhists in Sri Lanka. He does not think that parliamentary bills can solve the problem. “It is a human right for any person to adopt a religion,” he argues. “If by force or intimidation a person is converted there is no problem in having such a law against conversions. But we can't stop conversions by a bill it can boomerang on you. Most people embrace Buddhism after understanding its philosophy but some could use such a bill to argue that this person embraced Buddhism through various inducements. So I don't agree. In Islamic societies they have these laws. There are even laws such as death penalty if you try to convert someone from Islam. I don't think Buddhism needs to fall into those depths”.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with author 7<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

## Chapter 6 - Tamil Tiger War and Implications for Buddhism

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**Summary:** The 30-year civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan state fought between 1983 and 2009 was never a war between the Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka. For most part of this conflict, the western media often referred to it as a war between “Buddhist Sinhalese” and “Hindu Tamils”. This chapter examines the origins of the LTTE, its funding and arms procurement networks and its ability to freely operate from Western capitals; impact of the LTTE war on Buddhism in Sri Lanka; and Hindu-Buddhist cooperation in drafting an anti-conversion bill to protect both communities from a common threat.

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*The LTTE was largely supported by the Tamil diaspora overseas; although in the 1980s, the LTTE received supplies and training from the Indian Intelligence services. The LTTE was suspected of having links with a number of Islamist groups, such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines and the Taliban in Afghanistan. These links, however, were largely restricted to arms transfers and other commercial activities. The LTTE also earned a portion of their annual USD 200-300 million revenue from taxation and extortion in LTTE-controlled areas in northern and eastern Sri Lanka - Stanford University's 'Mapping of Militant Organisations' website<sup>18</sup>.*

There was much attempts both within and outside Sri Lanka to rekindle the old Chola threat to Sinhalese Buddhism in LTTE's war with the Sri Lankan government for a separate state. But, by the mid-1990s it became apparent that most of the LTTE leadership were in fact Christians – mainly Catholic – and their propaganda activities in western countries were often facilitated by the Catholic church and their agencies. In the later years, as Pentecostal Christian evangelical groups began to get access to Hindu communities living under LTTE rule, evangelical Christians also began to facilitate LTTE's propaganda activities in the West, especially with respect to asylum seekers. Thus, it is no surprise that UNP member of parliament from Jaffna, T. Maheswaram, a Tamil

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<sup>18</sup> Refer <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/225>

Hindu, who tabled a anti-conversion bill in parliament prepared in consultation with both Hindu and Buddhist lawyers, was gunned down by a suspected LTTE member at a Hindu temple in Jaffna in January 2008 (Jayasinghe, 2008).

The LTTE came into prominence in July 1983 when a bomb blast in Jaffna suspected to be the work of Tamil militants killed 11 Sinhalese soldiers. It triggered mob violence across the country by Sinhalese against Tamils, their property and businesses were set on fire, and hundreds killed, which attracted wide international coverage and condemnation. It took the government of then President J.R Jayawardena 3 days to make a public appeal for calm. Tamils were thus able to claim, that this violence was orchestrated by the government against them. Powerful segments of the western media even portrayed this violence as perpetrated by the Buddhists against the Hindus, even though no Hindu temple was attacked.

The Sinhalese and the Buddhists haven't been able recover from this worldwide negative publicity, despite of the fact that the LTTE bombed Sri Lanka's most sacred Buddhist shrine the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy in 1998 and gunned down 146 Buddhist pilgrims at the other most scared site the Sri Mahabodhi in Anuradhapura in 1985. There was no Sinhala mob violence following these attacks anywhere in the country.



Entrance to the Temple of the Tooth after the LTTE bomb attack in 1998

Source: Sri Dalada Maligawa

Analysts have often argued that the conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils is rooted in the “Sinhala only” policy that was introduced in 1956 to empower the Sinhalese community in the country that have faced discrimination under British rule when the Sinhala language was suppressed and English given prominence, and many Tamils were given preferential treatment in the English missionary education system. In 1956, the Tamils asked for equal status for the Tamil language and Prime Minister Bandaranaike was assassinated while he was negotiating such a deal. However, Tamil was recognized as a national language in the new constitution adopted in 1978. But, many Tamils still feel that their language is degraded in the Sinhala-dominated public service and thus their cultural identity is undermined (IRIN, 2012).

The LTTE however had bigger ambition than merely recognition of the Tamil language and their identity. Over the years they expanded into one of the most ruthless terrorist organisations in the world with formidable international networking for their propaganda, fundraising and arms procurements.

India initially trained and helped to set up the LTTE because the then Soviet Union aligned Indian Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi was suspicious of the US-leaning Sri Lankan President J.R Jaywardena. She suspected that he was planning to offer naval base facilities to the US in Trincomalee.

LTTE became a large international business conglomerates with a shipping line, and involvement in many criminal activities that helped to raise funds for their terrorist war in Sri Lanka.

*The LTTE also secured a significant amount of its funding from criminal activities, including piracy, human and drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and other petty crimes.... The LTTE also controlled the majority of smuggling of Tamil people to Western countries; for example, it generally costs between USD 10,000-40,000 for a Sri Lankan Tamil to get to Canada illegally. The LTTE was also known to levy an “exit tax” for individuals trying to leave Tamil-controlled areas. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Defense also reported that the LTTE was actively involved in the illicit drug trade and smuggled heroin from Burma and other Southeast Asian countries to Western Europe. Other petty crimes committed by the LTTE include passport forgery, credit card fraud, and the theft of aid donations to Tamil-controlled areas (Stanford University)*

The Stanford University database also provides information on the extensive network LTTE developed for both their fundraising activities and arms procurements. Their annual budget they estimate was between USD 200-300 million with a substantial portion of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora – who fled to Western Europe, North America, Australia and Malaysia after the 1983 riots – involved in these fundraising activities. Cambodia was a crucial source for LTTE arms procurement, estimated to contribute between five to ten per cent of LTTE total arsenal. Thailand, with a community of 10,000 Tamils, had a key LTTE arms shipping base. The LTTE also maintained a presence in South Africa that included propaganda, fund-raising, training camps, weapons procurement, and shipping activity.

Much of the LTTE terror activities in Sri Lanka were supported financially by the Tamil diaspora in the West, from where they provided propaganda material to the western media, which was ever willing to use them. The UK was a crucial component of overseas LTTE operations, via front organizations and pro-LTTE groups in the country. Norway is also a country that has supported the LTTE and provided training at the Special Forces training camp in Rena on weapons tactics and military strategy to 21 LTTE militants in 2003. Norwegian ex -Special Forces had also trained Sea Tigers in underwater demolition in Thailand. Norwegians, while admitting to helping them has at the same time said they were only on some sort of a study tour (Talpahewa, 2015). This fact made many Sri Lankans suspicious of their role as a peace mediator during the regime of President Kumaratunga and their continuing interference in Sri Lanka's internal affairs (Nathaniel, 2014).

By the mid 2000s LTTE had a naval unit and even an air force, which was able to make a number of bombing raids in Colombo in 2008 and 2009. In 2008, the FBI in the US described the LTTE as “among the most dangerous and deadly extremists in the world” and as the terrorist group “they have got quite a resume” they said, listing some of their accomplishments as:

- Perfected the use of suicide bombers;
- Invented the suicide belt;
- Pioneered the use of women in suicide attacks;
- Murdered some 4,000 people in the past two years alone;
- and assassinated two world leaders—the only terrorist organization to do so.

*Its ultimate goal: to seize control of the country from the Sinhalese ethnic majority and create an independent Tamil state. Along the*

*way, it has launched suicide attacks, assassinated politicians (including a government minister and even the Sri Lankan President), taken hostages, and committed all kinds of crimes to finance its operations. The resulting civil war has taken the lives of nearly 70,000 Sri Lankans on both sides of the conflict since 1983 alone (FBI website<sup>19</sup>).*

The freedom the LTTE had in operating in the West began to unravel as the West's own 'war on terror' took flight and many western intelligence services, especially the FBI, began to suspect links between the LTTE and the Islamic terror groups the West was fighting. In October 2003, LTTE was designated as a "foreign terrorist organization" by the US government and many European states, UK, Canada, India and Malaysia followed up and banned it operating within their country. This had a major impact on their fundraising, and intelligence sharing by these countries with the Sri Lankan government helped in LTTE's final demise as a terror group in Sri Lanka in May 2009. However many foreign intelligence groups have pointed out recently that LTTE's overseas networks have remained intact and they are still involved in fundraising to achieve their goal of an independent state.

## **6.1 The Impact on the Buddhists**

The Sri Lankan state's war with the LTTE has had major implications for Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The image of the Sri Lankan Buddhist has suffered a major setback because the LTTE propaganda machine has been able to use the western media and international human rights organisations to paint the Buddhists in Sri Lanka as ruthless. They have often projected the Sri Lankan army as a "Buddhist army" and accused them of human rights violations. In addition, Christian churches in the West working in association with their counterparts – especially Tamil Catholic clergy in the north and east – have spread propaganda against Sri Lanka, often equating the state with Buddhists.

Many of the LTTE leaders including military head Vellupillai Prabhakaran, propaganda head Tamil Selvan and the London-based international chief Anton Balasingham are known to be Christians. The research team of Asian Tribune<sup>20</sup> observed in an article written in 2005 under the heading 'LTTE and Churches

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<sup>19</sup> Refer to [https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2008/january/tamil\\_tigers011008](https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2008/january/tamil_tigers011008)

<sup>20</sup> Refer <http://www.asiantribune.com/news/2005/03/28/ltte-and-churches-protect-each-other>

protect each other’:

*Though the separatist movement claims to have its roots in the Jaffna Hindu Tamils, it has always had a strong element of Christians either leading it or influencing it. Its very first leader, S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, was an Anglican.... The history of LTTE reveals a discernible pattern in its relations with religious institutions: it has ruthlessly attacked and killed Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists but hardly ever touched Christians. It has never confronted the Churches the way it has taken on the other three main religionists. In fact, it has had a very cozy relationship with the Churches.*

The Asian Tribune goes on to argue that, the LTTE and the Churches maintain this “lovey-dovey” relationship because it serves their mutual interests. “LTTE has found in the international network of the Churches easy access to western media, politicians, churches and other powerful lobbies to cover-up their crimes against humanity. The pastoral letters written by Sri Lankan bishops and priests are distributed worldwide”. Through Tamil Christian clergy and lay preachers, some of whom have migrated to the West, LTTE sympathies have crept into church circles in Europe, Canada and Australia. On May 25, 1999, India’s Hindustan Times reported that LTTE has joined hands with the Manila-based Catholic radio station Radio Veritas to broadcast “Tamil Eelam” news to its worldwide audiences. For this purpose they have set up a joint coordinating office at a Catholic church in Mallavi in LTTE-occupied Wanni area.

There have been many theories espoused with regards to the Christian church’s involvement with the Tamil struggle. Many sympathetic Christians, especially in the West, would argue that they would support a “repressed” minority as a social justice issue that is enshrined in Christian teachings. Many Buddhists, including intellectuals, have argued that since Christians lost the Catholic enclave of Goa in India in the 19960s to Hindu India, they have been looking for such an enclave in South Asia as a springboard for Christian evangelism in the region. Thus, a Tamil Eelam state ruled by a pre-dominantly Christian leadership would be ideal. Buddhists would also point out to the strong fundamentalist Christian movements in Tamil Nadu to support this theory.

## **6.2 Hindu-Buddhist Cooperation**

By the turn of the century, aggressive Christian evangelical activities were threatening both the Buddhist and Hindu communities in Sri Lanka. Buddhists

in rural areas in the south and north-central parts of the island, and Hindus in the tea-growing central provinces and LTTE-occupied north-eastern provinces were facing the brunt of evangelical onslaught. All these communities have been devastated economically by the war.

These onslaughts created some space and common ground, for Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus to come together, especially in the capital Colombo to join forces to protect their communities from a common threat.

In mid-2003 a joint committee of Buddhist and Hindu lawyers worked for 6 months to draft a bill for the then Hindu Affairs Minister T. Maheswaran, which could ban “un-ethical” conversions in the island. Maheshwaram first mooted the idea of an anti-conversions bill, when he realised the level of conversions that have taken place in the war-torn areas of the east and north of the country. Evidence of this trend was reflected in the presence of new churches that have sprouted up in largely Hindu villages around eastern towns such as Batticaloa. The Buddhists, who said they have also been battling to “save” their communities, immediately supported Maheshwaram’s call.

“Everything applicable to us is applicable to the Hindus as far as conversions are concerned,” Gamini Perera a Buddhist lawyer told IPS newsagency (Seneviratne, 2003). “We’re not trying to prevent conversions, rather we are trying to propagate the fundamental rights of the people to protect them from those who try to impinge on their freedom of conscience, free thought and religious beliefs”.

“It is unfortunate that certain Christian organisations are unduly seeking to take advantage of the difficulties faced by innocent poor people affected by the war situation,” Kandiah Neelakandan, secretary general of the All Ceylon Hindu Congress told IPS (Seneviratne, 2003). “We are not against religious freedoms, but we are against these unethical conversions heavily funded by foreign money.”

“They (evangelists) have been creating conflicts within families and in the community, and the Buddhist monks have not kept quiet,” explained Perera. “They have led demonstrations and these have led to some violence because the police have been inactive. The police cannot stop people praying, but they can close down (prayer) centres which have been built without proper authority.”

This bill was never passed in parliament and following Maheswaran’s murder in 2008, and the alliance fell dormant as the war against the LTTE intensified.



## Chapter 7 – The Rise of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Buddhist Nationalism

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**Summary:** Following LTTE attacks on sacred Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka in the late 1990s and increasing activities of Christian evangelical groups across the country, by the turn of the century, the Sinhalese Buddhists were feeling insecure within their own country. Thus Sri Lanka saw the re-emergence of a Buddhist nationalist movement, like the one that Anagarika Dharmapala initiated during the British colonial era. This chapter discusses its development and why rather than fighting colonization from outside, this movement is more concerned about threats from the inside.

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*If we are to protect Buddhism, we must have laws to control movements that are trying to destroy Buddhism. There are no such laws. They (government) think giving some money to temples and some goods and food to monks is protecting Buddhism. That's a wrong concept. If the government is to protect Buddhism, they have to take steps to stop other religions trying to convert Buddhists to their religions – Ven. Omalphe Sobitha Mahathera (interview, 2015)*

### 7.1 Soma Thera and Revival of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism

It was at a time when Buddhists were expressing their grievances against the government that a charismatic Buddhist monk Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thera returned from Australia to lead a Buddhist revivalist movement. Though he did not come from the top hierarchy of the Buddhist clergy in Sri Lanka, while resident in Australia - where he established Buddhist temples in Melbourne and Brisbane for the Sri Lankan community – he has developed a considerable following among Sri Lankans everywhere for his forthright view on the threats facing Sri Lankan Buddhism. While warning about the LTTE and a looming Muslim threat, he also addressed the declining moral standards and values of Sinhalese Buddhists.

Ven. Soma's critique denounced the effects of, among other things, cultural and economic globalization, multicultural discourse that was supporting minority

rights while dismissing majority concerns, and greedy and corrupt politicians that are helping to weaken and threaten the Sinhala Buddhist nation. He argued that institutions like the World Bank and IMF, foreign funded NGOs, foreign investors, Christian missionaries along with the LTTE and local corrupt political elite were harming the interests of the Buddhists and threatening their future survival. These looming threats were transmitted to the Buddhist followers via sermons – making good use of the electronic media – and writings. Though these were dhamma teachings, they also had a political message and relates to the LTTE threat, and later to the Islamic resurgence.

Ven. Soma held that many forces were working indirectly and subtly by promoting immoral behavior to lead Sinhala Buddhists to destroy themselves. And as long as these threats to the religion, nation and country are left unchecked, he claimed that the survival of Buddhism, the Sinhala community and a unified Sri Lanka would remain in doubt (Berkwitz, 2008)

Ven. Soma made clever comparisons between the European colonial rulers of the past – who tried to undermine Buddhism in the island – to the corrupt local political rulers of the present. As Berkwitz (2008) observed in his study, the monk compared how a small number of corrupt politicians and their cronies are lining their pockets from the sale of liquor and licenses to do so. For him, the government role in promoting liquor consumption and cigarette smoking today is no different from what the British did as colonizers to encourage “immoral acts” of drinking and smoking among the Sinhalese Buddhist to earn additional revenue for the colonial administration.

Ven. Soma and his followers firmly believed that the correct practice of Buddhism would remedy most social problems prevalent in Sri Lanka, while his distractors claimed that he was peddling controversial racist views that were not in synergy with 21<sup>st</sup> century liberalism. He often hit back at these distractors, claiming they were paid peddlers of a foreign agenda to undermine Buddhism in the country.

To this end, Ven. Soma frequently condemned the activities of foreign NGOs, whose relief work allegedly provides a cover for converting Buddhists to Christianity. He accused such groups of using foreign money as bribes to persuade and compel Buddhists to abandon their heritage, promising help to poor villagers, if they would only come and join their religion.

As Berkwitz (2008) noted:

*The main targets of this critique of unscrupulous relief work were the newer evangelical Protestant groups who have come to Sri Lanka in recent years, rather than the well established Catholic and mainline Protestant communities who are widely seen as having respect for local customs. Nevertheless, the polemical discourse of (Ven.) Soma and others has generated much public suspicion of NGO activity in general.... that the NGOs have the goal of establishing a Christian government in Sri Lanka, offering poor people money and jobs for the sake of converting them to Christianity. Labeling such groups as “missionary” in nature, (Ven.) Soma lumped them together with other foreign economic interests who seek to promote wicked conduct among Buddhists so that they become weak, servile, and prone to abandon their traditions in favour of foreign religions and customs.*

Thus, he was highly suspicious of most foreign organisations operating in Sri Lanka – especially those claiming to promote peace - and he asked Buddhists to resist global intervention and rejected peace proposals between the government and the LTTE that would have created a self-governing territory for Tamils.

The uniqueness of Ven. Soma’s movement was that he did not belong to any political party and not beholden to its political platform nor its corrupt practice. Berkwitz (2008) observes “near the end of his life, (Ven.) Soma began to argue that virtuous monks can become lotuses in the mud hole of politics, freeing themselves from the surrounding filth of immoral conduct and acting unselfishly to protect country, nation and dispensation without seeking personal wealth of power”.

He was threatening to form a Buddhist political party and run for the office of President of Sri Lanka, when he suddenly and controversially died during a visit to Russia in December 2003. The official reason given was a heart attack but until today there are lingering questions over the cause of his death – some pointing fingers at Christian evangelists, others at the LTTE and yet others at possible Muslim involvement in his death.

Ven. Soma’s sudden rise to prominence and popularity is a phenomenon by itself, because he did not belong to any of the traditional or officially sanctioned

hierarchy of the Buddhist clergy. He was no Mahanayaka nor a Maha Thera, yet, he had a large following at the time of his death that cut across a large cross-section of the Sri Lankan society.

There was a huge emotional reaction across the country to his death with people hoisting the yellow flag of mourning in homes, businesses, cars and even government buildings. The government was forced to allow his cremation to take place on Christmas Eve (December 24<sup>th</sup>) at Independence Square – a site usually reserved for events of national prominence – and the funeral was broadcast live on national television. His funeral procession from his temple at Gongodawila (12 km away) to Independence Square attracted hundreds of thousands of white-clad devotees. Many predicted violence on the day, but, it took place with complete serenity and peace, though tempered with some powerfully emotional speeches with a Buddhist nationalistic flavor.

## **7.2 Birth of Jatika Hela Urumaya**

The death of Ven. Soma did not discourage the growing Buddhist nationalist movement in Sri Lanka. It soon led to the formation of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) or the National Heritage Party. In the 2004 general election 6 months later, it ran a large team of candidates - all Buddhist monks - and was able to win 9 seats in parliament, which virtually gave them the balance of power in the new legislature.

The JHU launched their election campaign on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the very day the Sinhalese lost their sovereignty to the British in 1815, and at the very site that the memorandum was signed – at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. As Deegalla (2006) notes “the election manifesto of the JHU is rather unique because of its rather unique religious contents and the way it was introduced to the Sri Lankan public by invoking religious sentiments”.

The JHU’s 12-point manifesto Deegalla (2006) argues was clearly designed to tackle endemic corruption and abuse of civil liberties by restoring the weakening status of Buddhism in the country. It included points such as giving strong protection to Buddhism by the state and maintain its unitary status; that cultural rights of the Sinhalese as the ethnic group that made the country a habitable civilization needs to be protected while granting cultural rights to other communities; strong controls on NGOs including its funding sources to control evangelical groups; and a decentralized development model protecting

the natural habitats, animals and humanity.

The considerable support given to the JHU, particularly by the urban middle class Buddhists and intellectuals, just 2 months after the party was formed, surprised many political analysts, and JHU monks were regarded widely as the late Ven. Soma Thera's successors. But, its critics soon started a debate on whether monks should be in parliament. They saw JHU's agenda as ethnocentric and jingoistic, and its policies cannot benefit all Sri Lankans (DeVotta and Stone, 2008).

Encouraged by the political power they have gained, the JHU soon embarked on a campaign to curb "unethical conversions" and political corruption – both campaigns begun by Ven. Soma. The party's main election platform was to preserve Sri Lanka's unitary status (and therefore oppose any devolution to Tamils in the Northern and Eastern Provinces), force the Norwegian "peace" facilitators out of the country (as they were seen to be biased towards the LTTE) and institute a "dharma rajya" (righteous state).

Recalling the formation of the JHU, one of its founders Venerable Omalpe Sobitha Mahathera<sup>21</sup> explained:

*At that time we faced three main problems. First, the LTTE terrorism, secondly Christian evangelist conversions and thirdly the declining value system. We set up JHU with these objectives. We needed to tackle the evangelical problem, which goes together with the declining values. In addition there was LTTE terrorism. We had to give first priority to eradicating the threat of LTTE terrorism.*

The issue of "unethical" conversions by Christian evangelical groups of especially rural Buddhists (and Hindus) surfaced in the 1990s with Ven. Soma himself raising this often in his public discourses. Suspicions that these groups may be involved in Ven. Soma's death has increased Buddhist anger towards them, and it was made worse after the December 2004 Tsunami where various Christian groups were accused of mixing humanitarian work with proselytism. This led to many attacks against these churches, their pastors and congregations.

On May 28<sup>th</sup> 2004 Ven. Sobitha tabled a private members bill in parliament

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with author, September 2015.

titled the 'Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion' bill. The aftermath of the Tsunami in December added further impetus to get the bill passed in parliament. While the JHU claimed the bill is designed to stop unethical conversions, civil society groups and Christian churches said it would infringe on the constitutional rights of freedom of religion and legitimize harassment of religious minorities. After the first reading of the bill in Parliament in August 2004, petitions were filed in the Supreme Court by 22 groups challenging the validity of the draft legislation.

The Supreme Court determined the draft bill to be valid except for clauses 3 and 4(b), which it deemed unconstitutional. These clauses required any person who converted or participated in a religious conversion ceremony to report to a government official and prescribed punishment for failure to report such conversions. The draft was then referred to a parliamentary standing committee for further review. In its report, presented to the House on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2009, the committee made a few amendments to the original draft in keeping with Supreme Court recommendations.

The bill was never tabled in parliament for a vote, and Ven Sobitha (see box) argues that there was a lot of pressure on the government not to do so by various parties including powerful foreign governments.

Sri Lanka's Christian community and civil rights groups have strongly objected to the draft legislation. Far from stemming alleged forced conversions, they claim the bill will become a weapon of harassment through misapplication, limiting the fundamental rights of thought, conscience and religion. These rights include the right to adopt a religion and the right to practice, observe and teach religion.

Ven. Sobitha who has now taken the mantle of Ven. Soma was also instrumental in opposing the Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (PTOMS) when he went on a hunger strike opposite Temple of the Tooth in Kandy in June 2005, calling on President Chandrika Kumaratunga to call off the signing of the agreement, which would have given millions of dollars of international aid direct to the LTTE for disaster relief work in the Tsunami hit eastern coast of Sri Lanka. He called off the fast-unto-death on the sixth day when he received assurances from the President that the agreement will not be signed (see boxed interview). When he gave up the fast, the national flag, which was flown at half-mast at the temple, was hoisted up and the national anthem sung.

The JHU was an important alliance partner of the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse from 2005-2014. In fact, it played a leading role in bringing Rajapakse to power in the Presidential election of 2005, as they felt that the Buddhists needed a strong nationalist leader to lead the fight against the LTTE terrorism. Though they succeeded in ending the war giving strong Buddhist support to the Rajapakse regime, JHU left the alliance in disappointment after President Rajapakse repeatedly blocked moves to introduce registration to stop unethical conversions in the country (see boxed story).

**Sri Lanka ruling party ally alleges government of failing to fulfill people's expectations**

Oct 9, 2013, Colombo: An ally of Sri Lanka's governing party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) says that the government elected by the people has failed to fulfill their expectations.

JHU parliamentarian Ven. Athuraliye Ratana Thero has said that the people's expectations from the President whom they wanted to be a national leader who respects the country's virtue, ethics and national policies, have now become an "illusion."

Ven. Ratana Thero has come down hard on the government saying that trying to earn revenue through liquor and gaming licenses and legalizing it is an act against Buddhism.

He observed that there was no proper opposition in the country to discuss these issues. According to the Thero, an opposition has therefore been formed within the government against issues faced by the country and people.

Referring to a recent statement made by Deputy Finance Minister Dr. Sarath Amunugama that the manufacturing and sale of moonshine (kasippu) should be legalized, Ven. Ratana Thero said that it was surprising to see a respected member of parliament making such a statement.

Source: ColomboPage.com

### **Interview with Venerable Dr Omalphe Sobita Mahathera \***

**Q:** When you went on a hunger strike against PTOMS, you probably took a huge gamble risking your life. Why did you do it?

**A:** *(President) Chandrika was working in alliance with LTTE. After the Tsunami she was bending to international pressure and decided to give international aid direct to LTTE for development in the East. (LTTE leader) Prabakaran said no Sinhalese should come to north-east we are the ones who will do that work and we need that money. He wanted more than 50 percent of the aid to come to them. Chandrika agreed to it. They set up tsunami rehabilitation organisations and via that a huge amount of money was to go to Prabakaran.*

*Lot of our intellectuals said that north-east belongs to Sri Lanka and the government must use the money to rebuilt that area. When he gets the money he will use it to buy weapons. He will use it to set up Eelam. The President did not accept that argument ..... so, we had to go to the public and launch a satyagraha. As a MP I went on a hunger strike opposite Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth). There was no other way to pressure the President. I sat with the intention of giving my life away if she doesn't change her mind. I saw it as a meritorious act to save thousands of lives and protect the unitary state of Sri Lanka. On the 6<sup>th</sup> day she gave in and decided to abolish the tsunami rehabilitation organization (PTOMS) and that money will not be given to Prabakaran. We won the battle and my life was saved.*

*This created a wave that Chandrika's time was up and a new leader should come forward. In 2005 Mahinda Rajapakse was able to win the presidency. We worked for his election after signing an agreement with Mahinda at the Dalada Maligawa that he will devote himself to save the unitary status of Sri Lanka. He came to power on the back of a national movement that was led by JHU. After that we worked with a strong conviction that LTTE military power has to be crushed.*

**Q:** The impression both overseas and even internally is that the Mahinda Rajapakse government was a Buddhist government. But, you could not get the anti-conversion bill passed. So what did his government do for the Buddhists?

**A:** *We don't see anything special he did on behalf of Buddhists. We don't want such favourite treatment either (but) we say that the government act ethically, there is a Buddhist value system out there. Sri Lankan values have been built*



*on top of Buddhist values. We need Buddhist values to take pride of place not Buddhism as such.*

**Q:** But, there is a clause in the Sri Lankan constitution that the government must protect Buddhism in the country?

*A: Buddhism must be protected and nurtured it is there in the constitution. Actually the government is not protecting Buddhism. So we asked the government to give an interpretation of what it is to protect Buddhism. That did not happen. So we have some grievances with that government..*

*We tabled the anti-conversion bill in parliament but (President) Mahinda himself intervened and stopped it being passed. He said at a time when the Eelam war was intensifying, if we pass this other religious groups will turn against us, the Americans would put barriers. He told us directly. So we said, ok lets finish the Eelam war first. After the war ended, we asked that to be brought in, but the government did not support it. So we thought if we push it for a vote and loose the Buddhists will loose face in front of the international community. There were Christian movements behind the President that blocked him from supporting it.*

**Q:** To confront the Christian evangelists and Wahhabi Islamists threats, what were the steps that the Mahinda Rajapakse government did not take to protect Buddhism?

*A: They thought if they listened to JHU they would loose international support, not get aid and they may loose power. So they wanted to weaken JHU by creating other competing movements. That is why Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) was encouraged. They use them to attack JHU. Make them look stronger and when elections come, to get them involved in it. From what happened later it became very clear to us that was the strategy. But that was unsuccessful. BBS came to contest on their own and found out that people in this country are not mad religious extremists and fascists.*

\* This interview was recorded by the author on 15 September 2015.

### **7.3 The Arrival of Bodu Bala Sena**

Sri Lanka has gone through a number of Buddhist resurgence movements as already discussed in this book. The latest incarnation was in May 2012 when the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) was launched. The BBS is registered as a non-profit

organization and is lead by Buddhist monks who broke away from JHU.

A respected soft-spoken Buddhist monk, Venerable Kirana Wimalajothi Thera, founded the BBS while its general secretary is a vociferous tough-taking monk Venerable Galagadatthea Gnanasara Thera who unsuccessfully contested a seat in the Colombo district on the JHU ticket in the 2004 parliamentary election.

Before the BBS was launched, in October 2011, Ven. Gnanasara, its CEO Dilanthe Withanage and a number of other member monks have visited Norway on a trip allegedly sponsored by the Norwegian government. According to the Norwegian ambassador in Sri Lanka, they went there to meet with representatives of the Tamil diaspora in Norway to “look for ways and means to create a common policy to solve political problems regarding the ethnic challenges in Sri Lanka” (Asian Tribune, 2013).

This trip has thus triggered suspicions among some Buddhists that this was part of a Norwegian conspiracy to undermine the Buddhist nationalist movement in the country. Yet, others have argued (see Ven. Sobitha interview in box) that the Mahinda Rajapakse regime used the BBS to undermine the JHU, whose relationship with the regime was souring by that time.

In an interview with the author in July 2015, Ven. Wimalajothi said that BBS was not set up to oppose any other religion but, first and foremost, to clean up the corruption within the Buddhist society, especially among wayward monks.

*About 3-4 years ago there was a large number of fraud monks. One category was those who are about 60-70 years old claiming to have attained enlightenment (margapala) and they had a certification scheme to train and certify others of such enlightenment as well. There was another group that said they have attained Buddhahood. There were others who said that the Buddha was born and lived here and people started going to those places where they said the Buddha was born, preached, died, etc. then there were people in robes collecting donations in the cities. There were large numbers of them. People who were attached to protecting the Buddha Sasana here came and asked me to do something about this.*

*Our Mahanayakes and Buddha Sasana Ministry were all silent and this was expanding. This was threatening to destroy Buddhism here. I was very upset and thought how to tackle this.*

*What can we do about it? That's the time that Gnanasara and others came to me and said we are going to start an organisation called Bodu Bala Sena and gives us the leadership for it.*

*I told, then we have to do something about these fraudsters, and those who are saying the Buddha was born here. There is a conspiracy behind this to undermine Buddhist history and teachings. There's about 50 books written on these and there are the fraud monks collecting donations and if you can get them and stop them, I will give the leadership (because) this was a great threat to Buddhism.*

*We took direct action. We caught them in the streets, scolded them and took their robes off and handed them to the police. When we caught some of those who were collecting donations in robes, brought them to our office and questioned them about where they came from, who is your senior monk (who trained you) and where is your monk's ID card? They didn't have any of these. They have bought robes from a shop and most were married and had children. Some have bought children from villages, shaved their heads and conducted a ceremony to make them monks, then given them holy water, pirith nool (blessed strings) and dropped them in a van in a town and they were making Rs 15,000-30,000 (USD 150-300) a day (Ven. Wimalajothi, 2015).*

Ven. Wimalajothi has parted ways with the BBS after they went into direct action following the success of this first campaign. He did not agree with BBS going into political action. Thus he has told the BBS that he cannot get involved in their political activities, he would prefer to do grassroots work to help the Buddhist communities. He argues that the need of the moment is to empower Buddhist communities both economically and culturally, and this cannot be achieved by mere political campaigns.

*If you listen to the sermons given by monks in the broadcast channels you get very disillusioned. They give these sermons at various times of the day and tell young people that life is impermanent and it is suffering. We live only a short time and it is no use making money. That's the type of message given to children. Not a message of how you can be focused, determined,*

*and with discipline builds a life. How to build successful enterprise and develop them in a proper ethical fashion. That's when the good karma would come in and help you.*

While Ven. Wimalajothi advocated a socio-economic development strategy for the BBS, Ven Gnanasara and hundreds of his youthful followers went on the offensive taking direct action against people, business and organisations they thought were a threat to Buddhists. They held mass rallies and demonstrations; stormed Christian evangelical churches which they claim were unethically converting Buddhists to Christianity; raided Muslim-owned businesses alleging that these businesses were using their economic power to covert Buddhists – especially young women – to Islam; went into a tourist hotel that had a “Buddha Bar” and forced the police to take action against them for offending Buddhism; and even stormed the Law College in Colombo alleging that exam results were being manipulated to favour Muslim students.

Actions such as these were widely reported by the international media, such as the BBC, Al Jazeera and ABC in Australia. International news wires also carried these stories widely, which created an impression overseas that Sri Lanka's Buddhists were “extremists”. Lack of action by the government or the Police to curb these activities gave rise to speculation in the foreign media, and sometimes locally as well, that the government of President Rajapakse, and especially his brother Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, were supportive of such action.

Ven Gnanasara and his BBS were particularly tough on the Muslim community, which is largely a business community with a significant stake in Sri Lanka's economy. They believed that the Muslims were using their economic clout to undermine the status of Buddhism in the country and subtly using monetary incentives to convert young Buddhists to Islam.

Withanage (2015) explained that their strategy changed after a surprise meeting with a group of young Muslims:

*One night a Muslim youth called us and said he wanted to meet us. We were surprised why. They came and saw us and exposed that there are certain elements in the Muslim community and Wahhabis were operating in the country. We have never heard about it. They said halal certification was operating in Sri Lanka in a very secret manner and we were not aware of this. They were worried their children are transforming from moderate*

*Islam to these (fundamentalist) Wahhabis practices. They said it will be a threat to Sri Lanka and gave us some links to websites and names. They pointed out that, there were clashes between moderate and Whhahabi groups in Katanwila and Beruwila. They have set fire to some mosques and killed some Muslims, When we looked at this issue we decided to expose these groups.*

*Then halal issue came. We never opposed halal needs of Muslims because we need to respect religious beliefs. But, we did not agree with the way halal certification was governed. The way it was introduced and how people collected money for that. Paint brushes, wall paintings, biscuits, water, yogurt, everything got halal certifications. We felt it was infiltration of the sharia system to the country in a very secretive manner. We opposed it and said Buddhists should boycott halal. That is our right. We said we don't need halal certificates.* The BBS has been blamed for the downfall of the Rajapakse regime at the January 2015 Presidential elections. The Muslim and other minority community overwhelmingly voted for the challenger – and ultimate winner Maitripala Sirisena - who is also a Buddhist and a former minister in the Rajapakse government. The BBS supported President Rajapakse, while the JHU defected and gave their support to Sirisena, thus tipping the scales in many crucial urban Buddhist electorates in the latter's favour. Meanwhile in the August 2015 parliamentary election, the BBS decided to form a political party called the Bodu Jana Peramuna (BJP) or Buddhist Peoples' Front.

Withanage<sup>22</sup> gave this explanation for the decision to contest the elections:

*Mahinda Rajapakse came to power due to Sinhala Buddhist vote base, but when it comes to implementation of necessary legislation for Buddhists nothing materialized. Even he wished he would not be able to do that because of contents of bill (that could upset minorities). There's not enough pro-Sinhala Buddhist MPs in parliament. We hope that we could provide that voice.*

But, this attempt ended in disaster. They contested in 16 districts and fared miserably - out of a voter base of 15 million they managed to get a mere 20,000 votes island-wide. The Island newspaper in an editorial<sup>23</sup> after the elections, made the following assessment of BJP-BBS performance at the polls:

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with author July 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Island Editorial "Happy Jumbos" 18 August 2015.

*They (voters) dealt a knuckle sandwich to the Bodu Jana Peramuna (BJP), which is the political face of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). It was simply routed! One of the main reasons why President Mahinda Rajapaksa lost the Jan. 08 presidential election was the allegation that his government was shielding the BBS responsible for anti-Muslim violence in Aluthgama and some other parts of the country.*

The August 2015 election results seem to have a sobering impact on the BBS with its leadership reassessing its strategy at the time of writing.

#### **7.4 The Social Justice Activist Monk and ‘Yahapalana’ Revolution**

While BBS got a lot of exposure in the media both domestically and overseas, the death of popular Buddhist monk 73 year old Venerable Maduluwawe Sobitha Thera due to heart failure at a hospital in Singapore on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2015, drew much attention to the waning “good governance” revolution that he helped to launch at the end of 2014. Ven M Sobitha’s deeds were mainly ignored by the overseas media, but he has got much coverage in the local media for well over 2 decades.

Ven. M Sobitha was a socialist and a social justice advocate who used the non-violent style of Buddhist social activism to take on governments when it drifted into dictatorial politics. He never joined any political party, but the power of his Buddhist sermons twined with political messages attracted a lot of charisma and he was twice instrumental in bringing down to earth powerful presidents.

As a young monk, Ven. M Sobitha got his initial inspiration from the 1956 socialist revolution that toppled an English-speaking pro-western ruling elite and brought a reformist government to power that gave the Sinhalese-speaking Buddhist majority their long-suppressed rights. He came into political prominence in the late 1980s when the dictatorial President J.R Jayawardena invited Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) to Sri Lanka, while centralizing power within an executive presidency and suppressing civil liberties.

An excellent orator, Ven M Sobitha was able to mobilise peoples’ opposition to Indian intervention, and later on when Jayawardena’s successor President Ranasinghe Premadasa became even more dictatorial and stifled all forms of dissent, he was a long voice that stood against him, until Premadasa’s assassination at the hands of a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber.

Noted Umesh Moramudali (2015):

*Just like many other Buddhist monks who had an impact on social change in the country, Sobitha Thera too started his rebellious career with nationalism. However, unlike many others, he did not stick only to nationalism, but was concerned about many other social and political issues as well. He was direct and had immense courage to stand up against the social injustice despite how strong his opponent would be.*

His social causes included playing a major role in the 1980s against an Education White Paper that would have undermined the free education system in the country. In recent years, he has campaigned heavily to abolish the Executive Presidency, which he saw as the biggest threat to democracy and freedom in the country.

In 2014, Ven M Sobitha again came into political limelight when he offered himself as the sole opposition candidate to challenge President Mahinda Rajapakse who was using Sinhala Buddhist nationalism to consolidate his power and restrict dissent, especially among the Buddhist majority.

Writing two days after his funeral, Sunday Island's columnist Ranjan Philips (2015) noted:

*By any historic measure, Sobitha Thero has carved for himself a special niche in the time honoured 'heritage of the bhikku' in Sri Lanka. As a political bhikku in the post-independence era, he has played a path breaking role in successfully championing a secular political cause, in contradistinction to other political bhikkus who have often turned secular political questions into chauvinistic slogans. The political cause he championed was encapsulated as the abolishment of the executive presidential system. It became the 'single issue' in search of a 'common candidate' to take on the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had dispensed with the term limit on presidency and turned the presidency into a family rule without rules or limits. It was a measure of his standing in society and politics that Sobitha Thero was the first person to be identified as the most suitable 'common candidate'.*

He formed the National Movement for Just Society (NMJS) and using his charisma, influence and oratory skills he was able to unite a divided opposition, as well as trade unions, rights groups, artistes and academics behind a common candidate, which he was instrumental in choosing.

This candidate was the then Health Minister in the Rajapakse regime, Maitripala Sirisena, who defected and challenged Rajapakse for the Presidency as the ‘common opposition candidate’. After Sirisena won the presidency in a shock result in January 2015, Ven. M Sobitha became the power behind the throne with considerable clout in directing government policy under a Buddhist slogan of “Maitri Yahapalanaya” (compassionate good governance). However, this policy did not restrict itself to empowering only the Sinhala Buddhists but he strongly advocated reconciliation with the Tamil minority and co-existence with the Muslims. Thus, when he died on November 8<sup>th</sup> both Tamil and Muslim leaders praised him as a genuine compassionate reformist monk.

Interestingly, he died a heart broken man. Since President Sirisena was elected to office on the “yahapalanaya” slogan to stamp out endemic corruption from the political system, he has seen his dreams shattered by a chain of government actions that seemed as if one corrupt lot of politicians have been replaced by another corrupt lot. The outspoken monk openly criticised the new government’s corrupt practices such as the multi-billion rupee Central Bank bond scam<sup>24</sup>.

The fatal blow to his dreams came after the August 17<sup>th</sup> general elections when President Sirisena using a constitutional loophole nominated to parliament candidates from his party that have lost the popular vote and named them as ministers in a National Unity Government. All these candidates served in the Rajapakse regime (like Sirisena) and were tainted with corruption allegations.

Following this action, Ven M Sobitha issued a scathing statement under the NMJS banner on the new government’s action. Few hours after it was released to the media the monk was believed to have suffered a heart attack and entered a local hospital. His health has deteriorated since and on November 4<sup>th</sup> 2015 he was taken to Singapore for heart surgery where he died.

In July 2015, after the parliament was dissolved Ven. M Sobitha has argued that people involved in corrupt practices with business interests in casino and

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<sup>24</sup> In March 2015 the newly elected Central Bank Governor Arjuna Mahendran has approved a bond issue that helped his son-in-law to cash in a multibillion rupee profit.



other gambling, drug dealings, operation of taverns and bars, should not be nominated as candidates. He told the Sirasa television network that such people are not worthy of peoples' vote and it is the people that have to provide for their wages and other perks, as well as a life-long pension if they serve 5 years as a member of parliament.

In an editorial after his death, the Daily Mirror observed that in his vision and mission for "liberative spirituality" Ven. Sobitha believed that religious leaders—while not getting involved in party politics - have a responsibility and moral duty to get involved in politics because "Deshapalanaya" (governing the country) needs to be for the common good of all the people, especially the impoverished or marginalised and not for the rich and ruling elite, to get richer and more powerful.

In a statement issued immediately after his death, President Sirisena said that Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha's "determination to bring negative political forces that existed in the country to the right path was a great guidance and stimulation for the public commitment to strengthen democracy in Sri Lanka. That inspiration gave us an immense courage to form a good governance government under my leadership to take the country towards the right path".

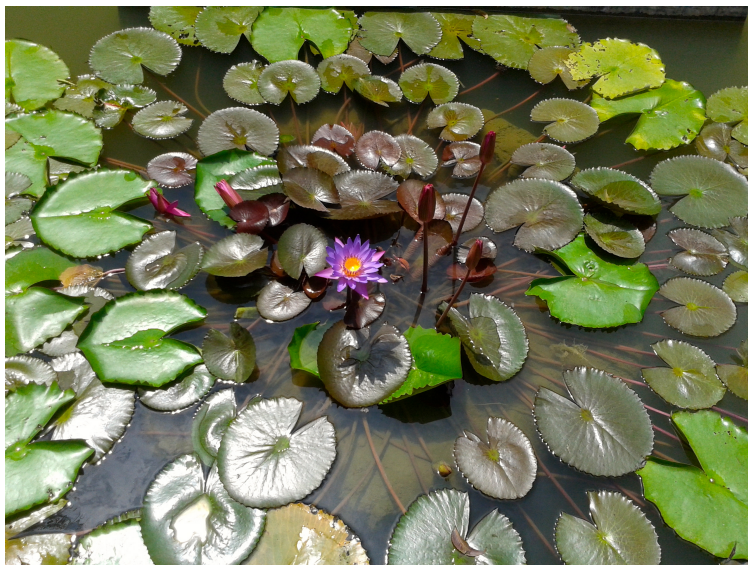
But, recalling the final conversations they had with the monk, NMSJ member and unionist Saman Rathnapriya told a media briefing after his body was brought back to Sri Lanka that the Sobitha Thera has told them that "his expectations were shattered and told us to lobby for social and political reforms continuously" (Perera, 2015)

His passing resurrected the issue of abolishing the executive presidency. President Sirisena, surprising many, said in his eulogy to Ven. M Sobitha in front of hundreds of thousands of mourners and million watching live on national television that he would do "everything in his power" to make that vision a reality.

The government declared November 12<sup>th</sup> the day of his funeral a national day of mourning and he was given a state funeral. But, many Sri Lankans from all walks of life mourned the fact that Sobitha Thera has passed away at a time when the nation needed him the most, to keep the corrupt politicians honest.

Latheef Farook<sup>25</sup>, a Muslim blogger and columnist of the Colombo Telegraph said upon his death:

*In this corrupt, criminalized and communalized political and social environment Ven Sobitha has been a ray of hope and a rare source of inspiration, irrespective of race and religion, to all those who cherish family, religious and cultural values and firmly believe and dream of a decent government, corruption free administration and a peaceful country where all could live in harmony.*



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<sup>25</sup> Refer <http://www.latheeffarook.com/index.php/9-sri-lanka/2188-ven-sobitha-thero-left-us-when-the-country-needed-him-most>

## Chapter 8 – The Scourge of Poverty and Proselytism

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**Summary:** Starting in the late 1970s, Sri Lanka's economy was gradually opened up for foreign investors and competition. Many of the subsidies enjoyed by the poor were eliminated, especially in the rural farming sector, which forms the backbone of the Sinhalese Buddhist grassroots communities. This has resulted in most of Sri Lanka's present-day poor belonging to the majority Buddhist community. This chapter discusses – with some views from the grassroots – how a lack of a safety-net provided by the government has resulted in making these communities vulnerable to proselytism by Christian and Muslim groups that often masquerades as welfare agencies.

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*The estimated number of poor people living in the country's rural areas was 4 million (World Bank) representing almost one third of the total rural population. Nine out of ten poor people in Sri Lanka live in rural areas. The 20- year civil conflict in the north and east of the country had a major impact on poverty, leading to the displacement of about 800,000 people from their homes and sources of livelihood. Thousands of children lost one or both parents, and there was an increase in the number of households headed by women, which are more likely to be exposed to economic hardship.*

*More than 40 per cent of rural poor people are small farmers. Apart from poor people in areas affected by conflict, most of the rural poor are concentrated in the Central, Uva, Sabaragamuwa and Southern provinces. Agricultural growth in those provinces has been sluggish. In some areas, seven out of ten people have no access to electricity, and almost half of the population does not have access to safe drinking water.*

*Agriculture is the major employer in rural areas and an important stimulus for other sectors of the economy. Small-scale farmers produce most of the agricultural output, but their production systems are hampered by neglect, poor economies of scale, low investment levels resulting from poor financial services, and inappropriate or limited technology (Rural Poverty*

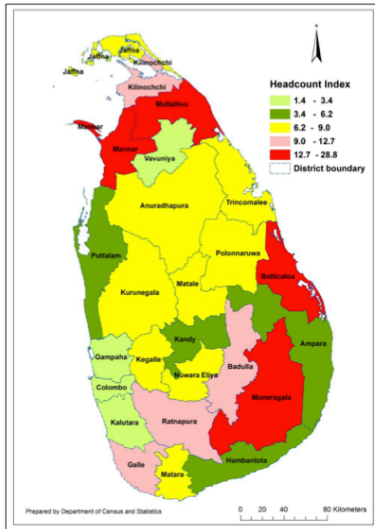
As the above assessment from the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) observes, a large segment of the rural poor in Sri Lanka are rural farmers. They are predominantly Sinhalese who live in the north-central, central and southern provinces, as shown in the poverty map produced by the Department of Statistics in 2012 (shown in the right). According to a joint World Bank – Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics study<sup>27</sup> Sri Lanka has enjoyed an average GDP growth rate of 5.5 % between 2002 and 2013 with the national poverty rate falling from 22.7% to 6.7%. Yet. A poverty headcount by districts in the study indicates that there are high pockets of poverty in districts such as Moneragala, Ratnapura, Badulla, Mannar, Batticaloa, Mullativu, Galle and Killinochi. These are areas which are either pre-dominantly Buddhist or Hindu. With high rates of literacy, life expectancy and social indicators nationally, which are in par with developed countries, there are many question marks on why poverty levels in some areas of the island are still high.

After Sri Lanka's economy was opened up for foreign investors and competition, many subsidies given to the poor were eliminated, especially in the rural farming sector – backbone of the economy at the time – this perhaps answer this question partially. In 1995, when 11 rice farmers in the Buddhist heartland of Pollonnaruwa committed suicide, attention was drawn to the plight of rice farmers after the government signed a Structural Adjustment Program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which, among others, forced the government to cut many of the assistance that were given to the farmers such as the fertility subsidy, low-interest loans and guaranteed price for their harvest. Thus, they were at the mercy of unscrupulous loan sharks who lend them money at high interest rates and purchased the paddy at depleted prices at harvest time (Seneviratne, 1995).

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<sup>26</sup> Refer [http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/sri\\_lanka](http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/sri_lanka)

<sup>27</sup> Refer [http://www.statistics.gov.lk/national\\_accounts/Press%20Release/2014ANNUAL.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.lk/national_accounts/Press%20Release/2014ANNUAL.pdf)



Ten years later, a spate of suicides by farmers and their wives in the same area drew attention again to the plight of rice farmers who were suffering from drought and lack of income to feed their families. The liberalisation of the economy in the 1980s has sent prices of farm inputs skyrocketing while the purchase price of their paddy have in fact fallen comparatively. Successive governments have promised farmers various assistance packages at election time but these were soon forgotten once they get elected.

In 1996, the Peoples Alliance (PA) government abolished the Paddy Marketing Board established in 1972 to purchase paddy at a government guaranteed price. Government-owned rice mills were also systematically closed. While the government abandoned the guaranteed price policy for farmers, throughout the past two decades the price of fertilizer has increased. In 1994, when the PA government came to power the 'SAMURDHI' program was introduced as a poverty alleviation policy. The program takes three approaches to alleviate poverty and development of rural areas.

- 1) ***Safety Nets - Subsidies - Insurance Scheme:*** To ensure minimum living standards by improving purchasing power and protection from unexpected downturns.
- 2) ***Rural development - Infrastructure development - Social development:*** Develop the infrastructure in the village to reach the rural and urban market, enhance the interdependence of rural (village) and urban (city) areas. Social Development Programs focusing on the aged, destitute, alcoholics, drug addicts, handicapped and other disadvantaged persons.
- 3) ***Income Generating and Banking:*** Provide micro financing facilities for income generating activities and train poor families to use the banking facilities.

The government established different institutions to deliver this program with the Sri Lanka Samurdhi Authority entrusted with conducting the empowerment program. Though it has existed for over 15 years it has been widely criticized, in regards to the way families are selected to receive benefits and for a lack of proper entry and exit criteria. It has also been criticized for political interference, which gives benefits to those who do not need assistance, thus depriving the very needy of such assistance<sup>28</sup>.

As Daya Hewapathirane (2013) a former Advisor to the President of Sri Lanka notes:

*The proportion of socio-economically impoverished people of Sri Lanka are far greater within the Sinhala community, especially among Sinhala Buddhists as compared to other communities. The preponderance of them are severely impoverished, living below the poverty-line with its concomitant malnutrition, disease, ignorance, unemployment, economic uncertainty, cultural disintegration, crime, violence, political conflicts and exploitation including proneness to unethical conversion to Christianity and Islam. To make matters worse, the basis of survival of this largely rural farming community which is their natural environment or the natural resources base is being steadily depleted and subject to extreme forms of abuse, exploitation and degradation. The implications of this overall deterioration of conditions of large numbers of rural Sinhala Buddhist families, are serious and most disturbing.*

In September 2005, as discussed in chapter 7, after signing a MOU with the presidential candidate Mahinda Rajapakse, Buddhist monks led by the JHU were instrumental in his victory in the November polls. The MOU included provisions to change government policy towards Sri Lanka's rural farmers and other sectors, who were predominantly Buddhist.

“What is happening is that people have mobilised, using our language and cultural heritage as the basis of the struggle’, Venerable Aturaliya Ratana, a Buddhist monk who is a member of parliament representing the JHU said when asked about their support for Rajapakse’s election platform that included policies to alleviate rural poverty (Seneviratne, 2005). “Buddhism is not about prayers and worship, it is a way of life” he argued. “This way of life is disappearing under globalisation, which is robbing us of our livelihood and our social system. We need to protect our values and culture”.

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<sup>28</sup> Source - <http://samurdhidept.gov.lk/more12.html>

JHU has accused Christian evangelists of exploiting poverty and using charitable and social work as a pretext for converting Buddhists to Christianity. Thus, the JHU launched the Sri Lanka Sangha Sabha (Sri Lanka Monks Assembly) to bring together grassroots monks from across the country to organise a grassroots development movement, which will use temples not only as spiritual centres but also village development centres. They also plan to set up a micro-credit scheme as done by some temples in Thailand.

### **8.1 Warnings in Inquiry Reports**

There is an interesting co-relationship between the neo-liberal economic policies espoused by the West since the early 1980s and rapid expansion in the funding and spread of “faith-based” NGOs that act not as missionaries but as development assistance or disaster relief agencies. While governments in the West using international agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank have forced developing country governments to cut social welfare and farming subsidies to the poor in the name of economic reforms, they have provided funds to establish NGOs that fill the vacuum created by these reforms. In 2001, during the presidency of George W Bush, a change to US government policy made it possible for “faith-based” organisations to access the US aid budget to do “development” projects overseas (Tablet, 2001). Many evangelical Christian organisations took advantage of this to increase their proselytizing activities across the world. There is no doubt that Sri Lanka too got a fair share of this.

As explained in chapter 5, the 2002 Buddha Sasana Presidential Commission report and the 2009 All Ceylon Buddhist Congress report warned about the dangerous trends with regards to Christian and Islamic organisations exploiting poverty among Buddhists for proselytizing activities in Sri Lanka.

*World Bank and the United Nations Organisations are intent in taking steps to establish Christian concepts in the world. International laws have also been promulgated to make a country that attempts to control activities of Christianizing, deem to be in violation of human rights. In such instances institutions have been structured to make it possible to impose various sanctions and trade barriers on those countries.... Internally services of “humanitarian” non-governmental organisations, which receive foreign aid, are utilized for the installation of governments that prefer Christianity and to destabilise or get rid of such governments that do not prefer Christianity (BSPC 2002:115).*

The 2002 presidential commission report listed many Christian NGOs that are active in social welfare work in Buddhist villages. Moneragala (which shows the highest rate of poverty in the island) has been particularly targeted for evangelization and another area is Hingurakgoda (near the area where farmers committed suicide in 1995 and 2005). Clashes have taken place here between local Buddhists and the evangelists due to the latter's aggressive behaviour and unlawful establishment of prayer centres.

The report warned that because the government has stopped conducting pre-schools, evangelical groups have come in to fill the gap and set up pre-schools in Buddhist areas, often close to a temple, where children usually go to pre-school. "The very young children are made to recite aloud Christian hymns daily in the morning and in the evening" noted the report, pointing out that in very poor areas, Buddhist teachers have been converted to Christianity and on the payment of a monthly salary, they are used to "ingrain in the minds of the young Buddhist children, the Christian beliefs". Catholic aid agency World Vision was particularly singled out for involving in these activities.

The report also accused World Vision (WV) of carrying out a proselytism program disguised as a "village reawakening" project. In the difficult villages of the dry zone they have provided tube wells, built cottages, pre-schools, water pumps and provided fertilizer and credit for agriculture activity – all services the government would have provided before the IMF imposed economic reforms.

In an interview, Ruwan Fernando<sup>29</sup>, Senior Coordinator Quality Assurance of World Vision Lanka (WVL) denied that their development work is designed to proselyte. He said since 1977 they have invested about Rs 350 trillion (USD 35 million) in development work in Sri Lanka. "We work with families, communities and partners to ensure that poor children enjoy good health, are educated for life, experience the love of God and they are cared for" he explained. "World Vision's approach to development is focused on improving the well-being of children, especially the most vulnerable".

While acknowledging that WVL works under Christian principles, Fernando explained that the pre-schools they set up function under Provincial Councils and Provincial Secretariat office. "We help them to develop the pre-schools and

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with research assistant Samanmalee Swarnalatha in August 2015



guide them to set up pre-schools where it does not exist. We do not pay the teachers anymore” he says, adding, “we do not try to convert the children”.

While it may be true that WVL’s pre-schools function under the Provincial Councils, but, the endemic system of corruption at this level of government may make some to succumbed to evangelical pressure in the face of monetary carrots. The 2009 ACBC report had more examples of activities by Christian evangelical groups as well as Islamic groups in the grassroots development sector. They have listed a large number of examples based on testimonials given to them by 348 witnesses during 24 public hearings in Colombo and in various villages. Among the methods that are used for proselytism are:

- ***Prayer Centres:*** The fundamentalist Christian missionaries adopt a policy of establishing prayer centres in villages that have 100 percent Buddhist population. For prayers the crowds come from other villages and often they are dropped off in an organised manner in busses or vans. Witnesses have said that even when there are no adherents in the villages they establish these prayer centres called “Deva Sabha” (Divine Assembly). When such a centre is established in a Buddhist village, the peaceful environment is disturbed by the playing of loud music and even louder singing of Christian hymns. When neighbours protest the evangelists use the argument of religious freedom. When the villages protest against these establishments – which are illegal under the law – the newspapers are fed with information that there are assaults on churches, which create a wrong negative impression of Buddhists, when newspapers and international media publish these stories. These activities are called “church planting” by the evangelists.
- ***Counselling Services and English Language Classes:*** Counselling Services and Leadership Training Programs are other ways of introducing God to people, especially for those who cannot afford to pay for such secular services. With globalisation of the economy and many poor people wanting to either obtain a higher education or go overseas to work, English language lessons are very much in demand in the country. Thus, an important *modus operandi* of Christian evangelists is to offer free English classes during which Christian ideas are gradually introduce. An organisation called the Institute of Sri Lanka Academy of English Education had attempted to introduce on a grand scale the teaching of English across Sri Lanka using their own text books, which were found to contain a high level of poems

and songs on Jesus Christ. They had the ambitious plan to train 6000 unemployed youth as English teachers. Witnesses have said that even some novice Buddhist monks have attended these classes for which they were paid Rs 500 (\$ 5) per day.

- ***Healing Prayer Sessions:*** Conducting prayer sessions for healing is a popular method of proselytizing activities. They put up posters in the area in public places advertising the event claiming that it can restore sights of the blind, get the lame to walk, heal headaches, stomach problems and even cancer. The Commission heard evidence about how people have died because they did not go to a hospital or when people were brought to hospitals seriously ill because they have not answered to “prayer healing”. The death of a 11 year old boy in a village called Hanwella in July 2003, who was refused water and held in a Pentacostal Church for many days while they prayed for his healing, became a big news story in the Sri Lankan media triggering a public debate on these methods. In subsequent years there have been a number of such cases reported, but, no police action taken.
- ***Money and Dividends:*** Needless to say, money plays a big role in Christian evangelical activities in villages. Most of this money are channeled through western countries and South Korea. As the report says: “The abundance of gifts of benefits, material support, and cash donations at the conversion of Sri Lankans by fundamentalist church groups were quite obvious. This attempt was so obvious that the whole process appears to be a business venture”. One witness said that converts were paid large amounts of money and the pastor faxes the names of the converts and amounts paid to his church supporters overseas, who then send him more money. Church groups also visit the seriously ill in hospitals and homes conducting prayer sessions and offering them money. One cancer patient refused to blow out the oil lamp he has in front of the Buddha statue at home to “allow God to enter the house to blow away the Devil from his head” to cure him from his cancer. The church group then took the money back and left the house. One witness alleged that around a fundamentalist church in a village near Gampola in the central provinces drugs were suddenly introduced to youth and once they get addicted, they are introduced to the church for rehabilitation through prayer. There are also many witness reports of how church members visit poor households in Buddhist villages chat up the people and help them with money to buy small things. Over a period of time, they see improvements to their

standards of living, these people say that is because the Christian God is helping them, and invite other villagers to come to the church with them.

## 8.2 Current Activities

Following the two above mentioned inquiry reports of 2002 and 2009, some argue that the Christian evangelical threat has somewhat subsided as the Buddhist community became well aware of the problem. Yet, others argues that they have quite consolidated their activities.

Ven. Wimalajothi Thera<sup>30</sup> is adamant that the problem has not gone away and he hints at political corruption for sustaining the problem:

*People are coming here from may be Korea or from Middle East, they get friendly with powerful people like politicians, bribe them or give them gifts, get visas, and start various organisations. They can be Muslim or Christian extremist groups, and they have come here and doing these activities for many years now. They have come up with various devices targeting poor Buddhists. It could be pre-schools, orphanages, they bring money from overseas, not only targeting Buddhists but also poor Hindus. There's a big campaign going on to convert them to their religions. There is no one (at government level) you could go and complain about this.*

Founder of the Sarvodaya Movement Dr A.T Ariyaratne<sup>31</sup> also agrees that Christian and Muslim organisations have far superior financial resources and they are able to influence government officials. “They spend a lot of money and many government officials get trapped into this” he argues. “They are able to set up programs through provincial administration officials and village council officials by providing them with many financial incentives. So these programs have government backing”.

M.D.W Ariyawansa<sup>32</sup>, acting President of the Buddhist NGO Dhammavijaya Foundation endorse this view. “Traditionally other religious groups used to

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with author July 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with research assistant Samanmalee Swanalatha, September 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with research assistant Samanmalee Swanalatha, September 2015.

work through the village temple when they wanted to help poor Buddhist villages” he points out. “ But, this system has been undermined now because they give provincial level government officials non-monetary bribes and these officials facilitate their work without any problems”.

Both Dr Ariyaratna and Ariyawansa argues that most Buddhist NGOs in Sri Lanka are very weak in financial resources and they do not have the skills to lobby organisations overseas for funds.

Between March and September 2015 we have done some grassroots research in a few rural areas that have recently experienced some tension between Buddhists and Christians. These included Beruwala-Aluthgama, Pollonaruwa, Anuradhapura and Dambulla areas. In all these areas, the Buddhists in particular, complained about religious tensions created due to proselyticing activities.

The Buddhist community in all these areas was the poorest and they suffered from lack of education, income-generation activities, problems with farming (or fishing) activities, drug addiction and various family problems including early marriages. They complained about the government’s poverty alleviation scheme ‘Samurdhi’ not been focused enough and often embedded with political corruption.

Ven. Moragolle Ariya<sup>33</sup>, secretary of the Beruwala Assembly for the Protection of Buddhism said because of the high number of tourist hotels in the area, it has given rise to many social problems such as alcohol and drug addiction and “beach party” culture. The delivery of the Samurdhi benefits to the poor Buddhists in the area has a lot of problems because of corrupt government officials. He said that World Vision came and built a number of houses for the local Buddhist community, and when they tried to evangelise within the community, the temple intervened and created a conducive environment for the development scheme to be completed without any religious tensions. Now the temple itself has begun a program to build houses for the poor in the community. This area has a large Muslim community, who dominate local business. Thus, they have induced some Buddhist youth to marry their girls and convert to Islam. Ven. Ariya says that when problems with the Muslim community arise, the local MP, who is a Sinhala Buddhist, usually side with the Muslims to woo their votes.

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<sup>33</sup> All the interviews in this section were conducted by research assistant Samanmalee Swarnalatha between March to September 2015.

Ven Badalkubure Ariya Shanta of Sri Vivekaramaya near Durga Town where major clashes happened between Muslims and Buddhists in June 2014 said that most of the poor Buddhists in the region are employed in Muslim-owned businesses. He says there have been many cases of children been sexually abused by Muslims and underage marriages. Yet, Muslim businessmen have also helped the temple in some of their building projects. Ven. Shanta claims that there are at least 34 young men from a Jihadist group in Asia who have taken refuge in Durga Town under the pretext of awaiting their visas to go to Pakistan. They have been involved with various activities disturbing the peace in the area. He also blames the local MP, who is a government minister, for not taking any action on this, fearing losing the Muslim vote. "Muslims and Buddhists lived in peace in this area" he noted. "They used to come to the temple to get character certificates for government services and for justice of peace endorsements. But, they don't come now. They have been told that if they go to the temple they will be abused (by Buddhists)".

Ven. Hikkaduwe Gnanaratna from the popular beach resort town of Hikkaduwa in the southern coast says that a lot of the young people there are involved in the fishing and tourism industry, and they have been addicted to drugs and other anti-social behaviour. Thus the temple face a huge task to save them. He says there are a number of Christian "Prayer Centres" in the area who are trying to convert Buddhists to Christianity by giving them loans, building houses and helping to put the children into good schools. "It is because of their poverty that they get caught to this" argues Ven Gnanaratana. "The government need to introduce a scheme to economically empower the poor without political interference".

W. A Podiappuhami, a member of the local Buddhist Council in a village in the rice farming Pollonnaruwa district said his village has so far avoided any religious tension because the community is almost exclusively Buddhist and involves the temple in everything they do. The Marxist JVP political party has been active in the area, even recruiting the monks to spread their nationalistic agenda warning the Sinhalese Buddhists to be on the alert against Christian and Muslim incursions into their villages. He says, though the villagers are poor and 40 percent live on Samurdhi assistance, there has been no religious conflicts in the village and when there was a rumour that a Christian fundamentalist group wanted to build a prayer centre there, the villagers have made it clear that if they come they will be chased out.

Provincial Council member of the area, Chaminda Karunanayake argues that because of the low educational level of the parents, a lot of young people in the villages have been drawn into illicit alcohol and drugs, they are also unable to get a fair price for their paddy harvest in the market place. He says people in the area need a specialised economic empowerment program and the monks in the villages have now set up a development advisory office. They have set up development committees, womens' societies and youth societies to implement the government's village awakening programs. There has been no religious conflicts in the area so far. Thus, if anyone come here for proselytism activities, they are prepared to resist it.

Catholic priest Reverend Chrishanta S Fernando from a local long-established church says there are about 200 Catholic families and 4 churches in the Pollonnaruwa district. Much of their pastoral work involves counselling to children that have been left behind by mothers who have gone overseas to work. Though there have been no conflicts in the area between Christians and Buddhists in the past, new evangelical churches who are trying to infiltrate the community and convert people without giving them a good understanding of the religion is threatening to create conflict that could effects the Catholics in the area. He says that though there are accusations about World Vision indulging in proseyltism activities, he argues no such activities have taken place in the area. He points out that another Catholic social service agency active in Sri Lanka – SEDEC – when they work in Buddhist villages get the permission of the local temple head and even get him to be the patron of the project. He acknowledges that Catholic agencies have trained Buddhists to get into the fisheries industry, but, they do not see it as creating religious conflict. Also, if a Buddhist wants to become a Catholic they insist that he/she need to come to church every Sunday for 6 months before converting.

Rice Farmer Ratnayake M Jayaweera from a village in the Anuradhapura district said that people in his village suffer from a lot of economic and social problems – the youth have no jobs and the main avenue of employment is the army; there are water shortages for farming; serious drug peddling and addiction problems; and underage marraiges. The village desperately need employment generation development schemes and not financial handouts. They have so far avoided religious conflicts because 97 of the 100 families there are Buddhists.

Though the temple is still the centre of social and spiritual activity in the village, Cooperative Commissioner of North-Central Districts, Ms Nalika Dilrukshi argues, that there needs to be more focused development activity

implemented by the government to help the poor in the area. Lack of such programs have opened the door for Christian evangelical groups to infiltrate the villages and they have come into conflict with Buddhist monks who are being mobilised by the Buddhist nationalist group 'Baudha Ravaya'. She believes that there should be laws in the country that punishes people who come to villages to merely convert people to their religion and create conflicts among people and within families.

Abusali Mohamad from the Mohidheen Jumma Mosque in the sacred Buddhist city of Anuradhapura describes the Muslims in the area as a "business community" with some rice farmers. He said that the Muslims and Buddhists have lived in peace in the city for a long time and they have built their mosques after getting permission from local temple's high priest. But, he says that recently groups like Bodu Bala Sena have questioned this and created a conflict. "We often go to the temple for advice and we have no conflict with Buddhists" he says.

Ven. Meewellawe Dharmakirithi of Sri Sumana Pirivena in Anuradhapura says there are 54 Buddhist Dhamma Schools in the area educating 8132 children and 620 teachers. Thus, much of the social activities of the villages are built around the temple. Yet, because of a lack of Buddhist NGOs to assist in development activities where a large number of poor Buddhist people live, Christian-based organisations like World Vision, Plan Sri Lanka and Care International are active in the region. "There have been instances where fundamentalist Christian groups have come to the villages and people have assaulted them and chased them away" he acknowledged. There have also been Buddhist-Muslim clashes in the region in 2012. This was due to the Muslims building a shrine in stone in close proximity to the sacred Sri Mahabodi shrine, which was in breach of the local building restriction in the sacred city area. Buddhist groups from Colombo have come and protested about this which led to the clash. "Buddhists families are shrinking rapidly in this area" warns Ven. Dharmakirithi. "The government need to help Buddhist families and empower them economically, so that they will not fall prey to other religions that have money to tempt them to convert". He believes that the government must pass laws with strict guidelines on how development schemes could be implemented by religious NGOs in villages, especially Buddhist ones.

### **8.3 New Islamic Threat**

*The outcome of the presidential election of January 2015 created expectations of change, hope and reform among considerable*

*sections of Sri Lankan society. For Muslim communities, who played a pivotal role in the election, the change in Government was billed into being in part due to the insecurity and violence suffered by Muslims particularly in the South of the country over the last two years. As indicated by the compilation of incidents carried out by the Secretariat for Muslims (SFM) from 2013 onwards, Muslims faced a hate campaign that has resulted in violence and tension, including damages to mosques and private properties, harassment and injuries to individuals and even deaths. This campaign that was carried out through a variety of methods, including direct violence, demonstrations, speeches, social media and the mainstream media had multiple impacts not just for Muslim communities but the country at large, raising serious concerns relating to the equality before the law, the lack of law enforcement, impunity and national identity. Above all it questioned the commitment of the then Government to both arrest the violence and perpetrators of the hate campaign such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), and deal with the underlying culture of hate. The hate campaign played a significant role in mobilizing the Muslim community, including many of the Muslim members in Parliament, to vote for Maithripala Sirisena, in the expectation that his Government would bring about positive change. The election of January 8<sup>th</sup> created a palpable sense of security for the Muslims, especially in flashpoint areas which had seen violence in past months and had become the focus of Sinhala Buddhist extremist groups - Colombo Telegraph<sup>34</sup>.*

Throughout 2013 and 2014 Sri Lanka's Buddhists were painted in the international media (see next chapter) as "extremists" or "terrorists" because the government of President Rajapakse was unwilling to crack down on violent direct action by the BBS and other fringe Buddhist groups. As discussed earlier (in chapter 7) there were many arguments and suspicions on who were actually behind this violence and who is funding them. This has not been resolved until the time of writing (in October 2015). However, both the Muslims and the Buddhists used social media tools to drum up much hate against each other. There were many Buddhists, especially in the urban middle classes, who felt that the Muslims as a community were very supportive of the government's

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<sup>34</sup> Refer Colombo Telegraph article of 19 June 2015 –retrieved from <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/anti-muslim-sentiment-in-sri-lanka-hate-incidents-january-to-april-2015/>



war against the LTTE, and hence the rise of Islamic fundamentalist sentiments among some younger segments of the Muslim community in the country should be handled carefully. Because of the violent direct action of BBS and others, the moderate Buddhist perspectives on the issue were drowned out and Buddhists were seen as the intolerant community. Thus let us look at the issues that alarmed Buddhists and created this antagonism towards the Muslim community, especially beginning around 2010, when the war against LTTE was ended and there was a widespread mood within Sri Lanka for reconciliation with the Tamils.

It is interesting that an article in the 'Indian Express' by its Sri Lankan correspondent B.K. Balachandran on September 20<sup>th</sup> 2010 warned about Wahhabi infiltration in Sri Lanka. "Moderates among the Muslims in Sri Lanka are expressing deep concern over a massive and determined Saudi petro dollar backed effort to spread the extremist Wahhabi ideology among Muslims in the island nation, who have traditionally been a peace loving and tolerant community" noted Balachandran (2010).

The article quoted Riyyaz Sally, president of the Islamic Solidarity Front (ISF) as saying that Wahhabi groups have set up over 200 unregistered mosques in the country, and they were using money from Saudi Arabia to give to poor Muslims to buy a house, convert it into a Madrasa (Islamic education institution) and then into mosque. They also give scholarships to young Muslims to go to religious institutions in Saudi Arabia and then they come back and spread the Wahhabi ideology.

The "Wahhabi" ideology is built on the concept of political enforcement of religious beliefs - the source of this new stream of thought was a Muslim scholar named Muhammad ibn Abd-al Wahhab, hence the name "Wahhabism." The Wahhabi ideology is antagonistic to non-Muslims, though its followers did not become overtly militant until recently. Wahhabism is also creating animosity not only towards the non-Muslims but towards Muslims - the Sufis in particular - who follow moderate forms of Islam. The Wahhabis force others in their family to follow them. The Saudis are alleged to be spending USD 87 billion a year to spread their Wahhabi ideology across the world.

According to Sri Lankan Sufist Ahmad Shah Maulavi, the Wahhabis have infiltrated the Muslim broadcast section of the state owned Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). "Ninety eight percent of the participants and staffers in the Muslim section are Wahhabi and use the programs to propagate its tenets," Maulavi said. The Wahhabis run private unlicensed radio

stations too, as a recent seizure showed. The Wahhabis have also infiltrated the International Schools system where most Muslims children are educated today in the English language. They are substituting moderate Islamic viewpoints with rigid Wahhabist thought (Balachandran, 2010).

In the past 2 years Muslim groups have been aggressively pushing for commercial banks to introduce “Sharia” banking divisions, which Buddhists suspect is driven by Arab petro-dollars and designed to change the Sri Lankan mainstream banking system to an Islamic one. The campaigns to expand Halal labeling on a wide range of products, which are not even meat products, have also upset the Buddhists, especially the nationalist groups.

A controversial Muslim housing project funded by a Qatar foundation to house Muslims in land that is classified as “conservation areas” belonging to a popular national wildlife reserve at Wilpattu upset many conservationists as well as Buddhists in 2014. The project supposedly to resettle Muslim families that were displaced during the civil war from the eastern provinces is spearheaded by a Muslim Cabinet Minister who is suspected to have Wahhabi links, especially via his Qatari contacts. The community, which consists of 179 newly-built houses was named “Jassim City”.

In an email to President Maitripala Sirisena on 27 April 2015, Toronto based Sri Lankan Lawyer Mahinda Gunasekara<sup>35</sup> asked: “The funding has been provided according to the signboard by Sheikh Jassim Bin Jabor Al- Thani Charitable Foundation based in Doha, Qatar. Does the law allow foreign organizations to establish cities for members of a particular community on Sri Lanka's sovereign territory involving the deforestation of national parks which are deemed conservation zones?”

On 9<sup>th</sup> May 2015 Adaderana<sup>36</sup> news network reported that President Sirisena has ordered an immediate halt to de-forestation and building activity in the Wilpattu National Park conservation zone and implement the law to charge any persons involved in it. His own Industry and Commerce Minister Rishad Bathiutheen who has been accused in certain sectors of the media, and social media in particular, of bringing in Muslim Pakistani “refugees” to settle here, has offered to resign if allegations of wrongdoings in his part are proven.

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<sup>35</sup> Personal email communication copied to author on 27 April 2015.

<sup>36</sup> See <http://www.adaderana.lk/news/30798/president-orders-halt-to-deforestation-in-wilpattu->

Ven Medagama Dhammananda<sup>37</sup> of the Buddhist development NGO ‘Success’ points out that minister Bathiutheen even got his supporters to stone the court house and threatened the judge after a previous judgment went against him on the settlement scheme. “It is well known and was reported in the media,” he noted. “He then started to cut the forests and establish settlements... it is a conflicts that is still ongoing”. He pointed out that the then Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, the brother of President Rajapakse, did not want to intervene to stop this because his other brother Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse was involved in the project with Bathiutheen.

“He did make BBS aware about this to show this as a national problem” pointed out Ven Dhamannada. “If you establish a beachhead in Mannar (coastal town near Wilpattu) you can bring many things to Sri Lanka .... may be drugs from India and so on. That could create future problems. Today we have places in the east coast such as Batticaloa and Kalmunai, which looks like an Arab kingdom. We cannot go to these areas ... the same would happen to these areas. Because of this national threat one side of the government did support BBS to help stem this process. Now JVP has started taking up this issue of environment destruction. Because JVP is not a religious organisation community accepts their argument”.

There have also been many allegations, much of it articulated by organisations like BBS and JHU, that land belonging to historic Buddhist sites in the eastern provinces of Sri Lanka are being bought by Muslims and settlements built on them wiping out Buddhist ruins. It is suspected by many Buddhists nationalist groups that Muslims are conspiring to claim a separate Islamic state in the eastern part of Sri Lanka – where large Muslim communities reside – as a first step towards the Islamisation of Sri Lanka.

One such site is Moodu Maha Vihara an ancient temple on the beaches of Pottuvil in the eastern coast. It is the site, Sri Lanka’s great heroine Vihara Maha Devi was washed ashore. She became the mother of King Dutugamani who fought an epic battle to reclaim Anuradhapura kingdom from Chola invaders. The temple which had 20 acres of land now only have 6 coconut trees in a small block of land, as the adjoining Muslim communities have expanded and occupied much of the land.

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with author July 2015.

Dr Hema Goonatilake<sup>37</sup>, scholar of Buddhist history and publisher of Buddhist Times argues that Muslims have become a problem for Buddhists only after groups funded by Saudis and other Middle Eastern countries became politically active in Sri Lanka in recent years. “Local Muslims were very amicable,” she notes. “Its outsiders Saudis etc influx from overseas, that’s where the problem is not the local Muslims. They build mosques and get money from overseas, that’s the problem mosques are coming up fast, seemingly it can be a threat (but) we should not exaggerate it”.

Dr Goonatilake argues that the evangelical threat from the Christians has subsided somewhat because of well-coordinated community awareness campaigns conducted by temples. “If they(Buddhists) get converted (to Islam) it is fault of the Buddhists, they don’t know their Buddhism well. That is what monks should do,” she says.

BBS and many Buddhist activist groups often point out that Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia in the Asian region used to be strong Buddhist civilizations at one time in history, and they are now Muslim. Thus, they warn – and create fear – among Buddhists that their treasured Buddhist heritage is under attack by Muslims funded by petro-dollars. In response, a sense of helplessness has driven some young Buddhist into violent direct action.

In response to the activities of BBS and other Buddhist nationalist groups, a consultative body comprising several Muslim organisations and individuals called National Shoor Council (NSC) was formed in 2012. During 2013 and 2014 they have repeatedly issued public statements in response to BBS’s anti-Muslim campaigns calling on the government to enact laws, among others, to halt what they call “hate speech”.

They have steadfastly rejected allegations that Jihadist groups are operating in Sri Lanka. NSC’s secretary Ahmed N Baudheen<sup>38</sup> argues that Muslims have lived in harmony with the Buddhists in Sri Lanka for over 2000 years as the island has been on the crossroads of the trade routes between the Arabs and East Asia. Baudheen (2015) however acknowledges that there is a genuine fear among Buddhists in the country that Muslims are out to buy their land. “This is a justified fear,” he argues. “But it is not true that Muslims get huge amounts of money from the Middle East (to buy land). I have no knowledge of it.”

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with research assistant Samanmalee Swarnalatha in September 2015

## Chapter 9 - “Militant” Buddhists or Media Bias?

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**Summary:** There were two clashes in 2012 and 2014 between Buddhists and Muslims that shook both communities and resulted in much negative media coverage both within and outside the country. The Buddhists in particular felt that they have been unfairly labeled as “extremist” by the international media. This chapter discusses results of a contents survey conducted for this report of two national newspapers on the reporting of two incidents in 2012 and 2014 that attracted wide international media coverage. The results of the contents analysis of the local newspapers were compared with selected international media coverage of the same incidents. Also, local Buddhist media personalities and a representative of the Buddhist organisation that was accused of instigating the violence responds to these media reports.

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*International media is not supportive of Sinhalese Buddhists. They are owned by Muslims, Christians, or other groups. In Sri Lanka’s situation, when it comes to English media, you need to have people with English communication skills. Due to changes in 1956 many Sinhalese changed their medium of instruction (in schools) into Sinhala. Tamils, Muslims, Christians have continued with English education. So we see many of the posts at the top of the English language media are occupied by non-Buddhist people. Thus, the communication systems don’t support us – Dilanthe Withanage, CEO Bodu Bala Sena (interview 2015).*

It is reports and headlines such as these below that attracts the ire of Buddhist activists and raise questions of media’s impartiality which the above quote reflects:

- Why are Buddhist monks attacking Muslims? – BBC, 2 May 2013
- Fear shock among Sri Lankan Muslims in aftermath of Buddhist mob violence – CNN, 24 June 2014
- Meet the violent Buddhists starting riots in Sri Lanka – Vice News.com, 30 June 2014
- How an extremist Buddhist network is sowing hatred across Asia – Time, 8 August 2014

- Buddhist monk to fight ‘jihad threat’ – Al Jazeera, 28 September 2014
- Radical Myanmar monk join hands with Sri Lanka’s Buddhists – Reuters, 29 September, 2014
- Buddhist militancy triggers international concern – Financial Times, 28 December 2014
- Sri Lanka’s not-so-tranquil Buddhists – Catholic Herald, 2 January 2015
- Sri Lanka’s violent Buddhists – New York Times, 2 January 2015
- The darker side of Buddhism – BBS, 30 May 2015
- The dangerous rise of Buddhist chauvinism – Japan Times, 31 July 2015

This is what CNN said in their report (24 June 2014) after a riot at Aluthgama:

*The rally, organized by the far-right Buddhist group Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force), was called in response to an alleged altercation in the area between a group of young Muslims and a Buddhist monk and his driver on an important Buddhist religious holiday days earlier.*

*Addressing the crowd of thousands Sunday, the BBS's leader, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, gave an inflammatory speech. Video footage from the event shows the orange-robed monk using derogatory terms for Muslims and, to approving roars from the crowd, vowing that if any Muslim laid a hand on a member of the Sinhalese majority -- let alone a monk - - that would "be the end" of them.*

*After the rally, Buddhist mobs marched through Muslim neighborhoods, torching and destroying dozens of homes and shops, witnesses told CNN.*

*Following consecutive nights of violence, in which local medical staff say at least four people were killed and sixteen seriously injured, those made homeless by the rioting were sheltering in the town's main mosque Tuesday, shell- shocked and fearful of what may come next.*

On 8 August 2014, the Time magazine referring to the same clash said:

*The anti-Muslim violence that ravaged Dharga Town, along with the nearby tourist enclave of Aluthgama, peppered with five-star resorts, has been attributed to a burgeoning Buddhist supremacy movement that has embarked on an organized campaign of religious hate.....*

*The June 15 violence was sparked by an innocuous traffic dispute between a Muslim man and a Buddhist monk. Immediately afterward, Buddhist extremists descended on the monk and urged him to report the matter to the authorities. When the police declined to take action, a rally was organized. Gnanasara was there, addressing the mob.*

*“If a Muslim or any other foreigner puts so much as a hand on a Sinhala person — let alone a monk — it will be the end of all of them!” he bellowed to raucous cheers. When the mob approached Muslim-majority Dharga Town, some people started throwing stones. This was all the provocation needed for a night of bedlam. In the aftermath of the riots, 135 people were arrested, say officials. To date, no one has been charged.*

## **9.1 Local Media Reporting of Dambulla and Darga Town Incidents**

Has the international media been biased in their reporting of the clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka? Have they taken the side of the minority – as they usually do when reporting conflicts in non-Western countries – and thus framed the Buddhists in a negative way?

Perhaps certain biases in the English language media in Sri Lanka may be feeding fodder to them? To establish whether the Sinhalese and English language media within Sri Lanka have different news values when reporting conflicts involving Buddhists and Muslims, we did a contents survey of 2 selected newspapers each from the Sinhala and English media, on their reporting of the Dambulla and Aluthgama/Darga Town clashes.

### **9.1.1 The Dambulla Clash**

Dambulla in north-central Sri Lanka is home to a famous Buddhist cave temple whose rock paintings date back to 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. It attracts millions of local pilgrims and foreign tourists each year. It was gazetted as a “sacred city” in 1982 by the Sri Lanka government and was adopted as an UNESCO World

Heritage Site in 1991.

*A sacred pilgrimage site for 22 centuries, this cave monastery, with its five sanctuaries, is the largest, best-preserved cave-temple complex in Sri Lanka. The Buddhist mural paintings (covering an area of 2,100 m<sup>2</sup>) are of particular importance, as are the 157 statues - **UNESCO website**<sup>39</sup>.*



In 2003 UNESCO has proposed the expansion of the temple area to protect possible archeological sites around it. In June 2013 the government started giving eviction orders to families living within the Dambulla “sacred city” area. They included both poor Buddhist and Muslims. Initially 22 families have agreed to move accepting Rs 100,000 (about \$1,000) as compensation to find new homes. Most of those facing eviction were small vendors, street cleaners and day labourers.

Clearing poor families from the Dambulla temple area is part of a “mega project”—the Greater Dambulla Development Plan - which covers 1,063 square km. The area has been earmarked as a “commercial hub” for investors by the government (Peiris, 2013).

It is in the midst of this eviction battle with poor residents in the area, a

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<sup>39</sup> See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/561>



religious dimension came into the equation, when a Muslim mosque and Hindu temple that have existed in this “scared city” area was given orders to vacate. On 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012, about 2,000 protestors led by Buddhist monks staged a demonstration calling for the demolition of Masjidul Khaira mosque and the Kali Amma Hindu temple, that have been at the site for almost 60 years. The monks asked the mosque in particular to be demolished because the Muslims have constructed it “illegally”.

The local media reporting of the event gave some interesting dimensions to this event. It was reported by the international media, as a major flare up between Buddhist “extremists” and a local Muslim community.

We did a contents analysis (see Appendix 1) of the Sinhalese media reports of the event from Divaina (Island) and Mawbima (Motherland) between 9<sup>th</sup> April to 3 May 2012. The Divaina is regarded as a more neutral daily in terms of Buddhist nationalism while Mawbima is regarded as more sympathetic to the nationalist aspirations.

In addition to this we also did a contents analysis (see Appendix 2) of the coverage of the Dambulla incident in two English newspapers between the same period. The two dailies are the Daily Mirror and Sunday Leader. The Daily Mirror is a daily that tend to take an independent perspective while the Sunday Leader has been well-known to be critical of the Rajapakse regime.

The analysis reflects that the two Sinhalese newspapers were generally sympathetic to the Buddhists and saw it as a land issue, which needs to be resolved amicably through negotiations with the government. While giving the Muslims a voice, it was mainly focused on the voices of moderation and accommodation from the Muslim community. Nor did they give much prominence to any Buddhist extremist voices with that of the Bodu Bala Sena (which is suspected to have organized the protests) hardly given any space. The reporting was also not clear whether the demonstrators really attacked the mosque. Meanwhile the Daily Mirror took a similar approach for the story. But, the Sunday Leader took a more critical stance in their reporting. However, the Sunday Leader reporting did not give much space to voices of the people from the area. They focused on critical voices from the NGO and leftist sector mainly based in Colombo. Thus a major weakness in both the language media is that the poor residents of the area were hardly given a voice. They were not consulted for their views.

In light of the contents analysis, it is interesting to note an article by Riza

Yehiya (2012) that was published in the Sri Lankan citizen journalism website “Groundviews” under the heading “Dambulla Mosque Attack: Is there a hidden hand?” The writer questions the timing of the attack and its international implications for the Sri Lankan government’s battle with the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) over war crimes allegations. On 22 March 2012, the UNHRC passed a US sponsored resolution against Sri Lanka accusing the government of war crimes in the final battle in 2009 to eliminate the LTTE. It was passed 24-15 with India backing it but China and Russia voted against it. Most of the other nations that voted in support of Sri Lanka were Muslim nations. Thus, Yehiya raised the question whether this was an international conspiracy. “With the end of the war and elimination of the LTTE, India and the western powers lost leverage in Sri Lanka. India lost its geopolitical spindle and so has the West. Ever since both entities were on the lookout for regaining leverage in Sri Lankan affairs” he noted.

Yehiya also referred to the fact that Britain’s Channel 4 has broadcast a highly controversial program about alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka and these powers were leveraging on this to undermine the support of the Muslim nations for Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council. “The Muslims staunchly sided with the GOSL not because they were against their Tamil brethren but because the sovereignty of Sri Lanka is a shared responsibility” argues Yehiya, pointing out that Muslim politicians and scholars from Sri Lanka even went to Geneva to support the Sri Lankan government’s case and encourage Muslim countries to support Sri Lanka.

“Those who harbour ill will against our country know that Buddhist-Muslim bond is formidable and would be a deterrent to their schemes and therefore polarizing both these communities would be the first step. Attack against the Muslims should be viewed in this light. The more we are divided external interventions would become stronger” noted Yehiya, who also pointed out that President Rajapakse opened a Mosque in Nuwaraeliya on 11 April 2012 becoming the first Sri Lankan leader to do so. “This is the first time in Sri Lanka’s modern history that the Head of the Nation, a devout Buddhist, inaugurated a Mosque for the Muslims” he noted. Thus, Yehiya asks “what national benefits does the country get by Buddhists destroying mosques? ... It is very doubtful that any sane Buddhist would embark on such a suicidal mission at a time the sovereignty of the state is questioned. “This creates suspicions about genuineness of the group that attacked the Dambulla Mosque” he says “Whether they are for a parochial gain or are mercenaries working for agents of a foreign master should be probed into”.

The international media was quick on to the story, Al Jazeera<sup>40</sup> reported on 20<sup>th</sup> April “A mosque in Sri Lanka has been forced to abandon its Friday prayers amid community tensions in the central town of Dambulla. About 2,000 Buddhists, including monks, marched to the mosque and held a demonstration demanding its demolition, along with a Hindu temple being built in an area designated as a Buddhist sacred zone...”

The BBC<sup>41</sup> also reported the attack on the same day with a similar focus and followed it with reports in the following 4 days. On 22<sup>nd</sup> they reported about the Sri Lankan government asking the Muslim to remove the mosque, followed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> with a report titled “Sri Lankan Muslims decry radical Buddhist mosque attack” and on 24<sup>th</sup> April they reported about a Muslim strike in the eastern province in protest against the Dambulla attack and they referred to “chauvinistic Buddhists” in the report.

### **9.1.2 The Aluthgama / Darga Town Clash**

Since the 2012 incident in Dambulla, there have been a number of alleged attacks by Buddhist groups against the Muslims in various parts of Sri Lanka with Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) blamed for a lot of it. This came to a peak on Poson<sup>42</sup> full moon day 12<sup>th</sup> June 2014 when a major clash took place in Aluthgama, which quickly made international media headlines with the blame put squarely on the Buddhists and the government, which was alleged to be protecting the attackers.

The clashes started when a Buddhist monk Ven. Ayagama Samitha and his driver were allegedly assaulted by Muslims in Dharga Town close to Aluthgama, a crowded town on the southern coast close to many popular tourist beach resorts. This was followed by a group from Ven. Samitha's temple, together with the priest, storming the Aluthgama Police Station demanding that immediate action be taken against those that assaulted the monk. Three Muslims were arrested and remanded until 25 June by the courts. That evening a tense situation arose in Aluthgama as a group of Sinhalese Buddhists started protesting against the alleged assault. The protest turned violent and the mob started throwing stones at the police and attacking Muslim shops. The police

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<sup>40</sup> See <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2012/04/2012420105329861814.html>

<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17781372>

<sup>42</sup> Poson full moon day is an important day for Sri Lankan Buddhists because it marks the day on which Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka by Arahant Mahinda, the son of Emperor Ashoka, when he preached the dhamma to the king of Anuradhapura.

were forced to use tear gas against the protesters. Three people were arrested over the violence.

On 15 June the BBS staged rallies in Aluthgama, nearby Beruwala (a Muslim strong-hold) and Dharga Town. Addressing a cheering crowd in Aluthgama, BBS leader Ven. Galagoda Aththe Gnanasaara is alleged to have threatened Muslims saying "in this country we still have a Sinhalese police, we still have a Sinhalese army. After today if a single Muslim touches a single Sinhalese.....it will be their end". After the speech an aroused crowd has walked home past Darga Town when they came under attack by a Muslim mob harbouring inside a mosque, which resulted in violent clashes erupting between the two groups. In the ensuing riots homes and shops of both communities have been burned, and many people were forced to flee their homes. The elite Special Task Force had to be deployed to calm down the situation and a curfew was declared in the area. A number of people are believed to have been killed.

President Mahinda Rajapakse accompanied by Cabinet Ministers visited the area on 18 June to meet victims of the riots and promised an impartial inquiry and to rebuild destroyed shops and houses. The president announced on 21 June that he would appoint a high-level panel to investigate the riots and at a meeting on the same day, he blamed "international forces" for a "concerted efforts to destabilise the country" and ordered a crackdown on "hate groups".

The news of the riots spread rapidly across the world and the momentum was kept alive for many days with many NGOs and so-called "civil society" groups feeding the international media with sensational news mainly blaming "Buddhist extremists" for the situation. Some of the news stories in the international media in the immediate aftermath are as follows:

- On June 16<sup>th</sup> 2014, BBC<sup>43</sup> reported that at least 3 Muslims were killed in overnight clashes with "hardline Buddhists" and said that they died after gunshots were fired near a mosque. It quoted Justice Minister Rauf Hakeem (a Muslim) as saying that at least 78 people have been injured and he was outraged at the Police's inability to control the crowds.
- On June 20<sup>th</sup> CNN<sup>44</sup> reported that "3 Muslims have been killed by Buddhist mob attacks" in Sri Lanka. The report also said that UNHRC's head Navi Pillay has expressed concern about the attacks.

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<sup>43</sup> See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27864716>

<sup>44</sup> See <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/17/world/asia/sri-lanka-aluthgama-violence/>

- On June 16<sup>th</sup> Al Jazeera<sup>45</sup> also reported about the riots with a heading “Sri Lanka shaken by religious violence’ accompanied with a video they have filmed in Sri Lanka that shows Buddhist mobs including monks attacking Christian evangelical churches and Muslim buildings, but at the end they showed the peaceful side of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and interviewed a moderate Buddhist monk.
- On July 18<sup>th</sup> 2014 CNN<sup>46</sup> did a special feature report with the headline ‘Fascists’ in saffron robes? The rise of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist ultra-nationalists. It was a damning report on the BBS and even suggesting at one stage that they have the support of the Rajapakse government.

In an interesting twist to the BBS saga since 2012, on July 5<sup>th</sup> 2014, the Island newspaper reported (Political Watch, 2014) that the BBS trouble-maker monk Ven. Ganasara has been given a 5-year multiple entry visa to the US in 2011, and after the Aluthgama incident the US embassy in Colombo has cancelled the visa “in a state of panic” the newspaper alleged. “The US authorities appear to have panicked that if this monk made another visit to the USA on this visa in the middle of all this controversy, their role in all this mayhem would be badly exposed” noted the Island, asking “on what basis did Ganasara qualify for a five year multiple entry visa to the USA as far back as 2011?”

The Island also noted:

*Before 2012, this monk was completely unknown to the public. Even this writer never knew such a monk existed. When his name came up in the public domain for the first time with the anti-Halal campaign, some journalists were sending in copy with his name confused with that of the Ven. Galaboda Gnanissara, the great social activist monk whom we all know so well – that was how unknown Gnanasara was at that time. How is it that the US embassy issued a five year multiple entry visa to an unknown monk whose only claim to fame at that time was having pleaded guilty to a charge of drunk driving and having disrupted meetings of the Anti-War Front? ... The natural suspicion that this writer would entertain is that this could have been an advance inducement to get Gnanasara to start something that was in the*

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<sup>45</sup> See <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/06/sri-lanka-shaken-religious-violence-201461518571482939.html>

<sup>46</sup> See <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/17/world/asia/sri-lanka-bodu-bala-sena-profile/>

*US interest and to give him the feeling that he would be looked after by the Americans if things went wrong. It should be noted that 2011 was the year in which Gnanasara got this five year multiple entry visa to the USA and also visited Norway (Political Watch, 2014).*

In an interview published in the Sunday Leader on 22 June 2014. BBS co-founder Ven. Kirama Wimalajothi has criticized Ven. Gnanasara's actions. He has said that after the attack, a meeting was called not by the BBS but certain Buddhist organizations in the area where Ven. Gnanasara was invited to address the meeting. "I don't think that it was a good idea to call such a meeting at a time when there was tension in the area" Ven Wimalajothi told the interviewer (Nathaniel, 2014), adding, "taking a closer look at the whole sequence of events I see this incident as a conspiracy against the government, and the Buddhist clergy. However, the mobs that went on a rampage later on were not residents of these areas but they were persons who had come from outside. Hence it is very clear that it was a planned, and well orchestrated attack to discredit the government".

So how did the local media cover this story? We did a contents survey of 2 Sinhalese newspapers Mawbima and Divaina between 16 June to 14 July 2014 (see Appendix 3) and also 2 English language publications Daily Mirror and the Sunday Island (which is owned by the same company as the Sinhalese publication Divaina), during the same period.

The contents survey tend to give credence to the argument that the government stage managed the coverage of the event, perhaps by pressuring the media, to steer the reporting towards government attempts to safeguard social harmony and bring the culprits to justice. In this endeavor media has used well-known Buddhist monks to express views of moderation and tolerance. Muslim spokespersons – mainly politicians – have been used to convey the same message. There were also commentary pieces that espoused the government views, one could also argue that the government view is widely supported in the Buddhist community – that there is an international conspiracy to denigrate and undermine Buddhism in the country, and it is fuelled by foreign funding (mainly from the West) that use local NGOs to feed information to the international media and human rights organisations. This conspiracy is designed to paint the Rajapakse regime as violators of human rights and rising "Buddhist extremism" as fuelling it by attacking minorities in the country. It seems that the Aluthgama clash played into this framework very well.

In this regard, it is important to look in more depth to Kirthi Warnakulasooriya's (Divaina, 18 June, 2014) article. He points out that the Aluthgama clash occurred not even a week after UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay established a investigation team to look into war crimes allegations against the Rajapakse regime. Thus he questions who is the winner of this unfortunate incident in Aluthgama?

*They are the various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work within the country to create conflicts, agents of foreign media, social media activists and LTTE diaspora propagandists. Within 24 hours of the Aluthgama incident, Geneva based Pillay got hundreds of sms messages, and many parties here sent audio-visual and other material in bulk to overseas agents. BBS correspondent immediately rushed to Aluthgama and transmitted images from there; while Qatar-based Al Jazeera broadcast reports that Muslim mosques have been attacked. Tamil National Alliance also got into the act spreading information that these clashes were pre-planned and a LTTE website in Europe operated by a brother of one of their MPs started transmitting a lot of news about the Aluthgama clashes.*

In the midst of this propaganda campaign, the US and Canadian ambassadors in Colombo has interfered in a domestic issue points out Warnakulasooriya, calling upon the government to bring the culprits to justice. UNHRC's Pillay has butted in as well saying what happened in Aluthgama could also happen to Muslim communities in other parts of the country. He argues this campaign is designed to get the Arab countries that have supported Sri Lanka against Pillay's "witch-hunt" to withdraw their support.

Warnakulasooriya warned Sri Lankans that they are facing a similar onslaught as that waged against Iraq and Libya to change regimes with same media campaigns and players involved. He pointed out that the American embassy has recently trained a number of people in using the social media and they need to be kept in check because they may not be in the business of promoting democracy in the country, but quite the contrary. He argues that Sri Lankans have to learn the lessons of what happened in Iraq, Libya and Egypt.

### **9.1.3 Media Blaming the Buddhist "Extremists"**

At the beginning of this chapter we looked at some of the international media reporting of the Aluthgama clashes. It was reported by the international media

as well as suggested in some of the reports from the local media cited in this chapter, that BBS was the trigger for the riots in Aluthgama area. When asked about their culpability, BBS's CEO Dilanthe Withanage<sup>47</sup> had this to say:

*Not only Aluthgama, if you look at some of the (earlier) religious conflicts in Sri Lanka, Dambulla, Anuradhapura, media painted that BBS was behind it and we triggered many of this. We have categorically denied all these allegations. We have never attacked any Muslim shops nor businesses or individuals. In Aluthgama we demanded from the Rajapakse government to appoint a commission and we have also asked the Sirisena government, to investigate reasons for Aluthgama incident. Actually Aluthgama is a hot spot where Muslims themselves fight with each other. Even, just a month before this incident happened these Muslim groups attacked the army. Media reported that BBS organized a rally. BBS never organized a rally in Aluthgama. It was organized by monks in the area, because there were many attacks by Muslims on the monks. They wanted to protest this and get government attention to it. We were part of that and Venerable Gnanasara gave a very hard-hitting speech. Only parts of that speech, was reported. After that speech he had meditation, calmed down people and asked them not to have demonstration and go to their houses peacefully. Unfortunately when some of these people were walking home past a mosque in Darga Town, they were attacked from within. That triggered the situation and I feel some Sinhala extremist groups used this to attack the Muslims. There may be some hooligans involved. We never were involved and we did not organized any attacks there.*

He also laments that, the mainstream English language media in particular, in Sri Lanka is very anti-Buddhists, and their reporting is picked up by the international media.

Media practitioner and lawyer Sudath Jayasundera<sup>48</sup> argues that English language newspapers in Sri Lanka are influential in setting the public agenda, but if they convey a Buddhist perspective is questionable.

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<sup>47</sup> Personal interview with author July 2015

<sup>48</sup> Interview with author July 2015.



*There are proprietors of newspapers in Sri Lanka who are Buddhists. You can take Daily Mirror, Ceylon Today, Island, Lakkima .... They are English newspapers with wide circulation readership. How influential are they in carrying the Buddhist perspective? The question lies there. The support is there to get free publicity for your events, but the influencing factor there are 1 or 2 ways that effect it. One is advertiser who gives advertisements to newspapers the MNCs, they may clip the Buddhist message. Advertiser could put pressure on the newspaper. We had this problem with Nestle, Maggie the problem of MSG. But I haven't seen anything that is against Buddhists ... for example Lever Brothers sponsors Vesak supplements. My concern is whether the journalists have proper understanding of the dhamma. They call themselves Buddhists but have very limited knowledge about Buddhism. They will know the 5 precepts but beyond that they will not be able to give a message that has substance. Either it will be very high fluent about Nidrashana Bahavana or Dhyanas etc. So the management of newspapers are Buddhists, but their staff need the knowledge.*



## Chapter 10 Countering Evangelists - From Temple to Village

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**Summary:** At the heart of the Buddhist tradition is the monastic system of monks and nuns supported by the community. Buddhist monasteries and hermitages originally came into existence thanks to the donation of wealthy patrons and, in the Buddha's lifetime, local princes. Their maintenance was also supported by charitable endowments. However, in recent decades with the impoverishment of grassroots Buddhist communities, this monastic tradition is coming under intense pressure in Sri Lanka. Now there are a growing number of Buddhists monks and temples that are transforming this monastic model to what is sometimes called in the West as “Engaged Buddhism”. This chapter examines the work of a number of such monks and temples in Sri Lanka, many of which are responding to the threat from proselytism activities of Christian and Muslim agencies.

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*The argument is that the temple survive because of the community, and the temple is monks. Buddha has told monks from the beginning that they should help lay people. It is done with dharma dana (offering teachings). From the West we got this concept of development. What is that? Is it just building roads, houses, large projects for economic gains? That's wrong.*

*In Buddhism ethical/spiritual development is number 1 and economic development is number 2. Buddhism did not help in economic development that much but help was given to spiritual development because when spiritual development takes place economic development will automatically come. Spiritual development is to make people live according to sila (morality), listen to sermon, make people feel ashamed or fear bad behavior/karma and people are encouraged to live according to ethical values. This is progress. In such a society there is no robberies, abuse of women, no alcoholism, lying and cheating, corrupt practices. Isn't this development?*

*Development in Buddhism is to develop the person first and through that the nation. That is why the monks were important to*

*do this service of dhamma dana* - Venerable Omalpe Sobitha Mahathera<sup>49</sup>, founder Sri Bodhiraja Foundation.

Early Buddhism encouraged this idea of making offerings (i.e. food and support) to contemplatives, ascetics and meditators, rather than sacrificing to deities, idols or religious shrines. Thus the supporting of the monks and nuns was presented as a spiritual act or service that every Buddhist must perform.

The monks and nuns in return were expected to become the spiritual teachers and guides of the society/community as what Ven Sobitha Mahathera calls 'dhamma dana'.. Monastery thus became the power house of a Buddhist community, and amongst Indian society a thousand or so years ago, the monasteries were frequently centres of education in general. This tradition has continued to this day, though in Sri Lanka it faced a formidable challenge during the European colonial period when Christian missionary education was introduced (as discussed in chapter 3) .

As discussed in earlier chapters and particularly in chapter 8, there is a clear breakdown in the traditionally close relationship between the temple and the Buddhist community. Much of it is due to socio-economic factors, while growing Christian proselytism has also contributed to it.

In the mid-1970s, when Sri Lanka rejected the socialist economic model and turned towards a foreign investment and export-oriented capitalist economic model, many of the social safety nets provided to the lower socio-economic groups began to gradually disappear. With it came the era of dependency on overseas aid, especially for rural development work. Thus, the traditional monastic model of the people economically supporting the temple in return for spiritual guidance came under tremendous strain.

By the beginning of the 1980s a number of monks who have returned from a stint overseas began to look at a different model, perhaps exposed to how churches work with communities in western countries. By this time there was also the success story of Sarvodaya, a movement started by a lay Buddhist and implemented by lay people, which used Buddhists ethos in rural development work, often funded by overseas donors.

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with author September 2015.

## 10.1 Sarvodaya

Sarvodaya was founded by Dr A.T Ariyaratna in 1958, when he was a teacher at Nalanda College in Colombo. “Sarvodaya is based on a Buddhist vision,” he explained in an interview<sup>50</sup>. “Majority of the poor in Sri Lanka are Buddhist in rural areas. We began by setting up 8000 pre-schools and created specialized teachers for it. We modeled them on indigenous (cultural) needs”.

At the time Sarvodaya started very few monks believed that social services was the domain of monks. But, monks began to collaborate with Sarvodaya and as Bond (1992:288) observed: “Although they (monks) have led the people spiritually in following the dhamma, now they are assisting Sarvodaya in bringing about the dual revolution: awakening the people and awakening society ... the people who worked with Sarvodaya led the people towards a reinterpreted understanding of both the Buddhist ideals and their application to society”.

Sarvodaya projects introduced Buddhist concepts in their community development projects such as *ahimsa* in treating cows for milk rather than for slaughter and introducing milk collections centres for villagers to make some money from their excess milk, organic farming to work in harmony with nature and in general putting compassion and concern for the people ahead of profits and material gain.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the success of Sarvodaya’s Buddhist development caught the attention of two monks from two important Buddhist temples in Colombo – Belanwila Raja Maha Vihara and Gangaramaya Temple. In 1981, Ven. Dr Wimalaratana started a foundation that introduced vocational training programs for young people in the area run from the temple. Gamgaramaya also started a similar program enrolling over 800 students for technical training. Both these had an important difference from Sarvodaya, in that, these were headed by monks and run out of temples.

## 10.2 Belanwila Community Development Foundation

Located just three kilometers from Colombo’s city limits, Bellanwila Raja Maha Viharaya has a long and hallowed history. The great sanctity attached to this temple is due to its sacred Bo tree that according to ancient texts is one of the thirty-two saplings that sprang from the sacred Bo tree at Anuradhapura,

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<sup>50</sup> Interview recorded by Samanmalee Swarnalatha on 5 September 2015.

planted in the 3rd century B.C.

The Sri Lanka Community Development Foundation, now popularly known as the Bellanwila Community Development Foundation was established by Ven. Dr. Bellanwila Wimalaratana Nayaka Thera in November 1980, when he returned from the UK after completing a Phd.

*After I returned from my experience overseas I saw that in Sri Lanka the temple has to change. For both old and young people to live successfully we need to establish some form of social work to help them. Only giving them sermons is not enough. This work must start from the temple (services of the temple) was limited to offering spiritual services only. At that time with the political set up here people were getting poorer and educated youngsters found it difficult to get a job. There was the 1971 (JVP) insurgency because of youth discontent... even young monks were involved in it. So in this background I thought I need to establish some organization to help these people. We set up this organization at the temple (Ven. Wimalaratana<sup>51</sup>).*

As a non-profit making organization, it has been in the forefront of technical education in the area. It is providing training to youth in a wide range of professions and skills, such as courses in house wiring, computers, draftsmanship, refrigeration, air conditioning, and motor mechanics, etc. enabling many young people to enter into the job market.

*I set up a team that was devoted to the temple, well educated and respected in the community. They were in the executive committee. Our first task was school dropouts who did not have jobs (because) there was no real scheme in this country to help them. We gave these youth vocational training at the centre here and training was given free of charge such as AC refrigeration, radio repairing, management training, photography, motor mechanism, draftsmanship. These type of subjects were introduced. We started in the dhamma hall and collected various equipment to do the training. We did not have a special building for this. We had to find volunteer instructors.*

*Our aim was not to make this a training centre. But make the*

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with author 7 July 2015.

*youngsters part of the temple activities, make use of their youthful energy for the development of the community. We gave them this message. We had more applicants than places available at the beginning. Gradually we built buildings and set up workshops and curriculums for it. Now we have a well-established training centre (Ven. Wimalaratana, 2015).*

Besides these programs, nutrition programs are conducted to prevent malnutrition in children and free medical clinics are held for the indigent elderly, as well as general welfare projects.

*There are many elders who are mistreated. When old they are not kept in home but sent to old people homes. Or there are many elderly here where both the young couple goes to work and they are left alone at home. We started programs for them – daycare centre for elders - we did not want to separate them from family and sent to elders home (because) it is looked down by society. They come here mix with other elders, listen to dhamma etc (Ven. Wimalaratana).*

The Nayaka Thera has begun expanding the activities of this organization to the remote areas of Sri Lanka where youth in large numbers need the services of such an organization to lead them to the modern society. He has refrained from asking the government for money because “you need to serve their political agendas”. But, some MPs and government agencies have given them small funds and also little funds from overseas. But, Ven. Wimalaratana says that his community development work is mainly funded by donations he gets from local devotees. When asked how can you give sermons to encourage people to donate for these activities he explained thus:

*In sermons everyone says to help the needy, the poor and treat the sick, but Buddhists like to give dana to temple to gain merit. Most think we have been born poor here because of bad karma from previous lives, we don't want the same situation in next life... so we need to do as much merit making deeds this life ... that is not a bad idea but in this life we need to live properly, help the needy and help solve their problems.*

*People can't do it alone so we need organisations to do it. We have many much organisations here like those helping in eye treatment and when it's done through temples people get a good*

*impression of the temple. Some people want to build big Buddha statues that is 18 meters long or more. There are people who want to do that (to get merit) .. there's a lot of them. It may cost Rs 500,000(USD 5,000) to help a needy sick person (but) to get people to give that money to build a statue is easier, there is a mental gap, when that money is asked to help a sick person. People see spending to build that big statue is a big merit than helping a sick person. In our traditional list of merit-making deed these action to help the sick is not emphasis that much. It is not in the priority list. There is a list called 'dasa punnuak kriya' (10 merit-making action). Helping a sick person is not there. It says Buddha helped the sick, but the list emphasise dana, sila , bavana and ata pirakara (eight essential items for a monk) donation. I think it is a bigger merit to use the cost of buying an ata pirikara to help a family that is suffering from hunger. Many monks are scared to say that in a sermon because you will be seen as talking down the tradition.*

*For all these activities our concept is to help the community and not to let the temple be a centre to bring dana, listen to chanting and sermon and feel they will attain nirvana upon their death. We want to make this temple an establishment that improves our lives in this life.*

### **10.3 Gangaramaya Temple and Community Development**

What was once a swamp adjoining the famous Beira Lake (a landmark of Colombo), is today a vibrant complex comprising the Gangaramaya Temple and a vocational training institute. The temple has been in existence for over 120 years having being established by one of the most famous scholar monks, Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumanagala Nayaka Thera, founder of the Vidyodaya Pirivena, originally an institute of oriental learning for monks, now a State University – Sri Jayewardenapura University.

Gangaramaya Temple<sup>52</sup>, under the current guidance and supervision of Ven. Galboda Gnanissara Nayaka Maha Thero (known as Podi Hamuduruwo), has always been a pioneering institution in the field of education. Recognising the importance of English Education to enable the youth to realise their potential, Ven Gnanissara introduced the Language Lab System, long before any

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<sup>52</sup> Gangaramaya website <http://gangaramaya.com>

educational institute or educationist could think about it. With the same farsightedness Gangaramaya Temple has taken steps to provide an advanced computer training facility at Sri Jinaratana Vocational Technical Training Centre, affiliated to the temple.

The Jinaratana Vocational Training Centre was established to address the issues faced by the youth, following the 1971 youth insurrection staged by mainly educated but frustrated Sinhala Buddhist youth. Training programs in masonry, carpentry, welding, mechanics and other such subjects were also provided by the Centre to equip the youth with skills that would place them in a good position when seeking employment. Today the training programs have expanded to include electronics, computer and mechanics to cater to the expanding needs of the new age.

The vocational training centre of the Gangaramaya Temple was established at a time when there was much unrest among the youth of the country. It provided the avenue for them to learn new skills, and gave them hope where they too had a future.

“During my childhood vocational training was not a necessity. That is because usually the children would follow in their parents’ footsteps. Sri Lanka had skilled masons, carpenters, blacksmiths and jewelers, people were able to secure employment according to their own skills,” furthermore, “each household was self-sufficient where they would only buy salt from outside,” elaborated Podi Hamuduruwo (Ganagaramaya website) on the changing world that has created greater demand in relation to employment and supply of food. With the market economy, and the advent of consumerism, the people felt the need for money, and also the discrepancy in wages. It is because of this that people who have and do not have any skills or degrees with no employment became agitated and started to protest. It is because of this need that Podi Hamuduruwo decided to start the vocational training institute<sup>53</sup>.

Over 50 technical courses are conducted at the Sri Jinaratana Training Institute. Over 7,000 attend classes daily. No fees are charged. The programs offered include:

- Diploma in Microsoft Office
- Diploma in Hardware Engineering with Networking
- Diploma in Network 2003/XP Administration
- Diploma in Graphic Design

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<sup>53</sup> Refer <http://exploresrilanka.lk/2013/12/gangaramaya-temple/>



- Certificate Course in Mobile Phone Repairing

The community development assistance work of Gangaramaya extent well beyond Colombo. A development project launched in 2010 under the joint-patronage of Namal Rajapaksa MP and son of the then President Mahinda Rajapakse, was located to help the people of the Hambantota District, a predominantly Buddhist area in the south of the country that used to be one of the most disadvantaged in the country. This project included a planned Spiritual Development Centre with an International Meditation Centre and a Centre for Mental Well-being. It also included a Centre of Indigenous Medicine that gives pride of place to indigenous therapy and a Garden of Medicinal Herbs, needed for that therapy. Another component was a Vocational Training Centre, for school drop-outs and a Dairy Farm for employment generation. This Na Sevana project in Hambantota is nearing completion.

Land, incomplete projects, and other assets are usually donated to the Temple by various devotees. One such donation is a house and land in the Central Colombo suburb of Borella by the Niriella family. This house is being renovated as a place of lodging for members of the clergy who come from rural areas for medical treatment in Colombo. For their convenience Ayurvedic as well as Western medicine specialists provide their time free of charge for the members of Clergy who come to this place.

The Gangaramaya Temple has always recognised the importance of ensuring the productive use of unutilised land. Agricultural technology has been utilised to determine what type of crops can be planted in these areas, so that the people in those areas will get the maximum benefit, where a good market is provided as well. These estates provide employment to a large number of people in those respective areas. When the land is assigned to the farmers, the harvest of their cultivation is bought by the Temple. The aim of these projects is to uplift the lives of these families. Farmers are encouraged to use organic fertilizer while being trained on the proper use of chemical fertilizer. They are also educated on home gardening techniques as well as the appropriate plant varieties for this type of gardening. While encouraging the growth of food crops, the Temple also encourages farmers to seek alternative sources of income through the cultivation of crops that can be used for cosmetics, shampoos and soaps. A land in Polonnaruwa has been utilised for such a purpose.

“The Clergy in temples, mosques and churches do not work to gain financial benefits. Our sole aim and objective is to help people irrespective of ethnic or racial differences. We don’t care about religious differences. That is the driving

force of our Temple. As Lord Buddha has preached, relationships between the sangha and the laity are built on trust,” stressed Podi Hamuduruwo (Raymond, 2015).

#### **10.4 Dharmavijaya Foundation**

The Dharmavijaya Foundation (DVF) was established in 1977 and it has as its objective the total development of man, both spiritually and physically, with the application of Buddhist principles to economic development and thereby establish a Dharmavijaya Samajaya or a society where dhamma or righteousness has triumphed. It emphasizes the practice of the five precepts in the establishment of a Dharmavijaya society.

Many who come within the orbit of DVF live by the five precepts, especially moving to vegetarianism and forswearing the imbibing of alcoholic drinks. They also give importance to childhood development by setting up ‘Ladaru Sevana’ (infant shelter) nurseries.

The moto of the DVF has been taken from the Asokan edicts ‘Samavayo Eva Sadhu’ – Concord indeed is commendable. The DVF reaches the community through its network of Dharmavijaya Societies numbering at present 455, covering 19 districts. The President is the Viharadhipati (Chief Abbot) or his nominee of the local temple. This is to ensure that the village temple takes the lead in the development process within its catchment area. DVF believes that the glory of the past was because of the nexus between the temple and the village based on which Sri Lanka became the Dharmadvipa (Isle of Righteousness) on the one hand and the Dhanyaghara, (Granary of the East) on the other. Anyone wanting assistance within the catchment area is assisted without any ethnic, religious, or gender discrimination<sup>54</sup>.

Among the current projects of DVF are drinking water supply project for communities where ground water is not suitable for drinking; prevention of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and hypertension.

Acting President of DVF, M.D.W Ariyawansa<sup>55</sup> says that most Buddhists in Sri Lanka have been traditionally farmers and they are currently facing hardships due to their expenses exceeding their income. This is also due to the increase in population and the division of land as a result. In addition the education system

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<sup>54</sup> See DVF website <http://www.dharmavijaya.lk>

<sup>55</sup> Interview with research assistant Samanmalee Swarnalatha, 4 September 2015

has not been structured to educate the farmers to make a better living from their vocation.

Ariyawansa argues that Sinhalese Buddhists are not been properly educated for the new jobs that are being created and Buddhist organisations like DVF do not have large financial resources to help the communities. For 30 years they have funded themselves from income coming from their coconut holdings. “Similar organisations of other religions have better financial resources,” he laments. “Thus, they are able to sneak into Buddhist villages without the temple’s consent and establish schemes. Sometimes corrupt government officials assist these by taking bribes from them”.

DVF conducts many social service programs as well including health clinics in collaborations with local temples and programs to assist those that are vulnerable to committing suicide. “Suicide is a big problem in Sri Lanka,” noted Ariyawansa. “Thus we have started a program called ‘sanasili suwaya’ (calming mind) where spiritual connections between the temple and community is improved”.

DVF prides itself on the quick mobilization of resources to help the victims of the 2004 Tsunami in Sri Lanka. They were able to dispatch lorry loads of goods to effected areas in the east and south of the country within 24 hours. They were able to build hundreds of houses in the following months, some with help from the government.

Ariyawansa believes that when people are facing hardships government need to step in to help the people economically. He argues that the implementation of the government’s ‘Samudhi’ program to help alleviate poverty need to be reviewed and it should be channeled through temples in Buddhist areas. “By giving the temple some responsibility we would be able to empower the poor communities to a certain extent,” he argues.

## **10.5 Sri Bodhiraja Community Development**

The Sri Bodhiraja Foundation (SBF)<sup>56</sup> is a non-profit Buddhist charity organization founded in 1993 by Ven Dr Omalpe Sobhita Thero. It is based in Embilipitiya, a rural township in the south of Sri Lanka. Besides bhikkhu training and religious services, the Foundation is engaged in a range of activities from education, social welfare to rural development.

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<sup>56</sup> SBF website <http://www.bodhirajafoundation.org>

*Today people talk of Engaged Buddhism, there is an accusation that monks are not contributing enough to the economic development of the community. There is large amount of monks working in that sphere as well. If you take an example, in schools about 90 percent of dhamma teachers are monks. Yes they get a salary. But they are in education sector doing a service. There are the dhamma schools (in temples) where over 5 million children learn the dhamma. Under pirivena education while monks are educated, there is also a large number of children that drop out of school who are taken into pirivena and rehabilitated and educated. In Embilipitiya we have a lot of projects that are doing a service to the community in their economic development.*

*When we set up Bodhiraja Foundation, our main aim was to help the poor women in the villages, especially pregnant women to help in their malnutrition problem. We were able to get support for it from Colombo. Then we started giving scholarships to poor children to help in their education. In the meantime we saw that people needed health services like eye testing. Then we started a water scheme for villagers with help from World Bank via the government (Ven Sobitha Maha Thera<sup>57</sup>).*

SBF set up the Bodhiraja College in 2002 in response to the growing demand for English-medium education in the area to meet the needs of the global economy. “There was a need for an English international school,” Ven. Sobitha Mahathera argues, rejecting the notion that an English language school run by a Buddhist temple would undermine the Sinhala Buddhist culture. He calls it “giving wings to our rural youth” in the global economy. While importance is placed on competency in English, much emphasis is placed on cultivating a strong Buddhist identity. “We started that when various organization came here and wanted to start those services” he explains. “We have started a pre-school network and we have 4 such schools with over 550 students”.

A joint project with the Ministry for Vocational Training, the Vocational Training Centre assist school-leavers to acquire technical skills and computer knowledge for employment. The computer centre also conduct class for children and adults to keep them abreast with the needs of the modern

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with author September 2015

economy.

The Visaka Home is a first of its kind to be run by a Buddhist temple to help single mothers who have been victims of incest or sexual abuse. The objective of the Home is to provide a shelter of compassion and caring to these girls so that they can lead a stable life forgetting their bitter and unpleasant past and facing the future without any fear, fright or distress.

In the 2004 tsunami, more than 30,000 people perished and thousands of families were left homeless in Sri Lanka. To help the many displaced, SBF, with the generous support of the Taiwan Inter-Religious Disaster Fund, the Singapore Red Cross and many kind individuals and organizations, initiated the 'Meth Sevana' project to provide 700 low -cost houses for the tsunami victims and help them rebuild their lives.

In 1995, with aid from the World Bank, SBF embarked on the community water supply project. Working closely with local community groups, where more than 3000 families in 6 villages are benefiting from this project. The families receive piped water for one or two hours daily, depending on the weather. With regular water supply, women and children are released from the burden of fetching water everyday, sometimes from sources far away.

Embilipitiya is a predominantly agricultural rural society. Poverty-stricken mothers have minimal access to health, nutritional and medical facilities which are essential for natural child birth. Therefore the foundation initiated a Maternity Welfare Service to provide medical facilities - health care and nutrition to pregnant women - to bring a healthy baby to the world.

The Cattle Saving Program has become a major activity of SBF in recent years in a bid to promote the Buddhist virtues of non-killing and compassion for all living beings. Over the past few years, the Foundation has saved more than 2150 cows from the butcher's knives thanks to the generosity of many animal lovers. The Foundation buys cows from the slaughterhouses and gives them to selected families who pledged to look after them well. The families are forbidden to sell the cows. In return, they get milk and help from the cows in the fields. The Foundation monitors the program by regular visits to the families.

Explaining the motivation to expand the temple into a unique spiritual cum development centre for the surrounding villages, Ven. Sobitha Mahathera says that there were a number of evangelical movements that came with the pretext

of providing social and educational services to the community, but their real motive was to convert the Buddhists to their religion. “We took them on face to face (and) we had to discuss with them. And now we stopped these evangelical conquests.”

“Evangelical conquests is not really about religion,” argues the learned monk. “When they come to a village with 100 percent Buddhists and start evangelical activities it creates conflicts in those villages. If it’s a village without a religion, that’s okay. But when they come to a place with established religious institutions it creates conflicts and break the family bonds, peaceful coexistence and social harmony in the village”.

## **10.6 Jayagrahanaya – SUCCESS Sri Lanka**

Jayagrahanaya (SUCCESS) Sri Lanka was started in 1991, in the ancient Hill Capital of Kandy, by a group of patriotic citizens including a few doctors, professionals of other disciplines, businessmen and a few responsible members of general public with similar thoughts. The name of the organization SUCCESS denotes Secretariat for Upliftment and Conservation of Cultural, Educational and Social Standards of Sri Lanka.

The founders felt, that, in Sri Lanka during last 30 years there has been a marked erosion of good values & discipline, disregarding the traditional Buddhist culture and a march towards a market oriented economy. Many NGO’s and other organizations funded by foreign sources that crept into the country, have mainly contributed to the above situation.

The pioneers of SUCCESS who identified the gravity of the situation and realizing its harmful effects started SUCCESS SRI LANKA to neutralize the threat and work towards an economically sound, just society without compromising their culture and Buddhism. They believed, that, helping to empower the Buddhist communities, especially in the rural areas, in socio-economic and spiritual spheres, should do it.

The organization is funded both by supporters in Sri Lanka and among the Sri Lankan Buddhist expatriate community overseas, especially in western countries. They have set up a ‘Success Trust Fund’ to which 25 benevolent members have contributed Rs.100, 000 (USD 1,000) each and deposited in the bank (fixed deposit). The interest from this account is used to fund the office expenses. From time to time ‘Success Ladies Front’ conducts sales and other fund raising activities, mainly to run their pre-schools. They also have

supporters and support groups, particularly overseas, who fund a particular project.

Since SUCCESS was born due to deterioration of good values, lack of discipline, disregard for the culture and unethical conversion going on in the country, the main thrust of their programs are to correct the above and to achieve economically and culturally strong and just social environment to protect Buddhism which is the main religion of the country for last 2300 years.

Among the special projects they have implemented is to resettle Sinhalese villagers who have been chased away by the LTTE during the civil war from so-called “border areas” and been made homeless. They were resettled with the help of the army, which provided security to the communities (see boxed story).

### **Life Flows back to Sri Lanka’s Forgotten Border Villages**

Ran Banda feels some purpose in life again.

For thirty years, he had survived from one day to the next in mind-numbing fear of the Tamil Tigers, as did everyone else in the sleepy village of Abbassa, nestling in the dense scrub jungles of Illukpitiya, in Buttala, in the Monaragala District. Then he had hardly dared to breathe, fearing the Tigers (LTTE) would hear him. Then he had feared to tread the grass, dreading the Tigers appearance from the shadows. Then the vibrant sparkle of nature had been shrouded in the murky shadows of terrorism.

It is different now.

The Tigers are vanquished. Fear has disappeared. Life is renewed with vigor. Ran Banda’s life has purpose. He is waiting patiently for the mango and orange plants to grow, mature and bear fruit. He decided that making a quick buck with water melon was not for him. This is because he understands the importance of a gestation period and the resulting stability and sustainability of long-lasting fruit trees.

The change is unbelievable. The people of the forgotten communities of the former border villages have awakened to become energetic, productive individuals with a vision in life. And behind this incredible transformation, is a California-based philanthropic organization, the BODHI (Buddhist Organization for Development of Human Individuality) Foundation, whose

mission is to discover human individuality through Buddhism, by treading the Noble eight-fold path, and to actively practice compassion and generosity by uplifting the lives of poor, needy people.

The 49-acre mango and orange planting venture is one of BODHI Foundation's initial projects, named BODHI Village Project, designed to generate hope, opportunity and economic freedom in several identified villages around Sri Lanka. The energetic local partner in this flagship project, is the Buddhist priest from Buttala, Ven. Karawilakotuwe Dhammatilleke.

When the local charity, Jayagrahana (SUCCESS) Lanka Foundation recognized the well-nigh impossible task that Ven. Dhammatilleke had undertaken, it volunteered support and assistance. Jayagrahana, with its global connections, found a ready partner in BODHI Foundation of California.

One year later, there is positive news from the project. According to Ven Dhammatilleke, since last year's Yala season, 48 acres have been successfully grown with mangoes and oranges. Of these, 10 acres of orange and mango harvest in the Maha cultivation have yielded Rs 110,000 income. The money has been reinvested in the plantation. Bibile Sweet oranges which had long disappeared from Bibile, have found a new habitat in the lush villages of Buttala.

The total cost of the existing project is Rs 158,000 (USD 1,580), of which Rs 63,000 is for 140 mango seedlings, and Rs 30,000 for 150 orange seedlings. Another Rs 48,000 is needed to cover this year's cost of existing plot.

Says Ananda Markalanda, President of BODHI Foundation, "Though the dry-zone offers much potential for agricultural development, it is still relatively underdeveloped. Jayagrahanaya, a local NGO, is helping to mobilize and organize local people for agricultural ventures. Through our partnership with Jayagrahanaya, we need to identify viable agricultural projects and assist people to engage in them and to improve their quality of life by securing sustainable incomes, food security and diversified livelihood opportunities."

The villagers of the former border villages are indeed finding purpose in life again

Source: Infolanka.com – 15 Feb 2011

SUCCESS has also helped 100 students effected by the Tsunami in 2004 to



finish their high school education by offering them scholarships for 2 years. The organization has also mounted a campaign against cruelty to animals and helped police and relevant authorities to catch those who are involved in illegal transport and slaughter of cattle. And provide lawyers (from their membership) free of charge to help in the persecution of these criminals. They are also promoting amity between Hindus and Buddhists making use of common cultural links.

Listed above are some of the Buddhist charities that are involved in the empowerment of Buddhist communities, especially the rural poor. There are now many more Buddhist charities that are working in collaboration with temples in rural areas to protect Buddhist communities from what they see as unethical conversion activities of Christian and Muslim groups. Interestingly, it was these activities, which have given rise to many temples shedding its passive role of being mere ritualistic institutions for Buddhist communities, and now becoming partners in community development and socio-economic empowerment of communities.



## Chapter 11 Conclusions – The Challenges Ahead

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**Summary:** This book has documented the complex nature of the threats facing the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka. Previous chapters have discussed Sri Lanka's unique position in having to protect its Buddhist heritage and culture from a variety of forces from overseas due in part to its geographical location. When there were serious threats to Buddhism in Sri Lanka, from time to time, Buddhist monks and the lay community has risen up to defend and empower Buddhists. Today, as the preceding chapters have pointed out, Buddhism is facing a serious threat from a consortium of forces both from overseas and within. It was also pointed out earlier that the Constitution of Sri Lanka states that it is the responsibility of the State to protect and foster Buddhism in Sri Lanka. But, throughout this research, numerous Buddhist leaders have lamented that this is only on paper and no government, since this clause was adopted in the 1972 Republican Constitution, has provide any concrete protection to Buddhism in the country. This concluding chapter would try to summarise the threats and make some recommendation or suggestions on what may need to be done to protect and foster Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

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*Sri Lanka is living in fear. Because we have an aging population those born in 50s 60s ... our temples and Buddhist organisations have failed to address the whole issue of loneliness. There are certain people who have become invalids or their children have gone overseas and they are lost-like. They feel loneliness, they need a partnership to get going, otherwise they get into depression. In order to do that they have to go to temple, the temple doesn't come to them. The evangelists come to them, they stay with them, sometimes they come and clean the houses... when there is a birthday party they will send a cake .. they make them feel special. I know quite a number of people who were staunch Buddhists from good families, towards later part of their lives they are slowly moving out of Buddhism to these evangelical thoughts. The issue of loneliness needs to be addressed. Buddhist monks are now better, earlier they expect the people to come to them. Churches go to the people, (but) our Buddhist monks accept dana (people bring to them) and give a*

*sermon and invoke the merits for departed. But now there are Buddhist monks who come and give presents and they try to bond with the community ... even then it is very limited. (There is this) idea that a Buddhist monk is a venerable person, who needs to be respected and people have to come and worship him – Sudath Jayasundera (interview, 2015).*

### **11.1 Addressing the Problem: Government or Buddhist Organisations?**

In chapter 8 in particular, we have discussed common modus operandi of Christian evangelists who use social/welfare service paths to convert Buddhists to Christianity. While one cannot outrightly condemn them for this seemingly “compassionate” behaviour, it also raised questions about the responsibility of the government, as well as Buddhist temples to provide this service.

The threat of a Muslim resurgence in Sri Lanka provide much more complex issues. Because of their high stakes in the Sri Lankan economy with their widespread involvement in local commerce, business networking and trading at community level, in an open economy, it is extremely difficult to bring any laws to control any proselytism activities, if they use this economic clout in that direction. Buying Buddhist land, expansion of their businesses, putting pressure on Buddhists to convert to Islam to get jobs in the Middle East or seducing Buddhist youth to marry Muslims and then convert to the religion, are not activities that can be curbed by legislation. Ven. Dhammananda<sup>58</sup> explains this threat thus:

*Christians don't enter a country in a violent manner. They come in a peaceful manner sometimes as NGOs. They come in a civilized manner so it is difficult to confront them directly. For example when World Vision comes in and build a community centre in a village it undermines the community role of the temple. It breaks the bond between the people and the temple. Organisations like World Vision have been doing this in north central provinces.*

*Other threat is Islamic intrusions .. they have a more violent face ... take ISIS, Taliban for example ... they try to destroy your heritage in a violent fashion. The Christians are more discreet. If you take Asia these movements are not spread in a violent*

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with author July 2015.

*fashion ... not like in the Middle East today. Muslims are quietly spreading by buying land and increasing their families, by marriage to Buddhists. Because of poverty Buddhist and Hindu children are been converted to Islam. They do it through marriage. After awhile they take her land and abandon the wife... mainly with Hindus. There are many inter-religious marriages where the two parties may follow their own religions, but Muslims force them to convert and change a whole culture... this is cultural genocide. Even the UN has defined such processes in their documents.*

Ven. Dhammananda points out that Sri Lanka's official statistics show that between the 1980s and 2012, the Muslim population has increased by 72%, Sinhalese by 35% and Tamils are low as well.

*So after a few generations Buddhists could disappear. There is a justified fear (and) various organisations like BBS is raising this point. Muslims are also involved in drug trade. This can be seen in this context as a justified fear that Muslims are trying to undermine and destroy the Buddhist community. That is why the halal question came up. ... they want sharia laws and sharia banks. Recently sharia banking is being established here. BBS recently went to the Central Bank and asked who gave permission to set up religious banks here? While government leaders say publicly that we should live together as one people at the same time they are dividing people by allowing these things.*

Buddhist lawyer and broadcaster Sudath Jayasundera<sup>59</sup> believes that the Buddhists need to get their voices (and grievances) heard, but their self-appointed political representatives have let them down:

*Its good to have a voice but they should not dilute their policies. JHU, BBS, at the beginning their policies were good and people went for it. If you take JHU today, they have lost their way. They don't know what they want. They lost focus and they are pulling towards major parties to get into parliament forgetting their policies. They haven't met the expectations of the people. They try to find short cuts to keep political power ... but by and large*

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with author July 2015.

*Buddhist control this country. Buddhist vote is very important, Sinhala vote is still important, but still the caste issue is there.*

Emiretus Professor Oliver Abeynaike<sup>60</sup> of the Buddhist and Pali University agrees that Buddhist temples need to do more, especially for the poor Buddhists living under poverty conditions in the villages:

*Because they are not provided with proper housing and education, there are hundreds of churches that have come up in those areas where poor people go and listen to what they say and they then give them various things, then they brainwash the people. There are societies of Buddhists in Sri Lanka who can provide the Buddhist people with those facilities but unfortunately they are not well organised. There are various institutions that have lot of money belonging to Buddhists but they don't spend their money to face this challenge ... solving the problem of poor Buddhist people in Sri Lanka. The state can't do it because we have a secular country. It is up to the Buddhist organisations to do something working with rural people.*

This issue of how far the temple should help the poor in the community and how can it be done or is done in Sri Lanka, was explored in chapter 10. During our grassroots consultations with village monks, many complained about political corruption at the provincial government level where the Sri Lankan government funds for development work are disbursed. The government's poverty-alleviation scheme for low-income households that has been in operation for almost 20 years is seen to be ineffective because of political interference at the Provincial Council level. Since local governing structures have also been decentralised to this level, Christian and Muslim groups have been able to bribe government officials at provincial level to get their permission to expand their activities in Buddhist communities. Many monks suggested that in Buddhist areas the local temple should be commissioned to disburse Samurdi funds and implement development programs such as vocational training programs under this scheme.

## **11.2 The NGO's and Attempts to Undermine Buddhism**

It was discussed in earlier chapters how Christian and lately Muslim NGOs have infiltrated Buddhist communities masquerading as social welfare

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with author July 2015.

agencies, but, with the sole aim of converting the Buddhists to their religion. If they came with a compassionate heart – as they often claim – to help the poor that may not have created conflict with the Buddhists. But, Ven Dr Omalpe Sobotha Mahathera<sup>61</sup> argues that they do not practice it:

*First task other religions do is to set up pre-schools. They train teachers convert them to their religion. Not all temples can do it (run pre-schools). Government has washed its hands from pre-schools. It is that weakness these organisations are using. What we did was when this situation arise we have gone to these villages and attended to the need for pre-schools. World Vision Lanka is one of the leading Christian organisations that is setting up these pre-schools. We told them it is good to assist the communities by setting up these but don't try to teach your religion to us because we have a religion. We asked them if you are helping them with love and compassion why are you interfering with their values? Interfering with their values, their thinking is like taking slaves under your command. We are against those who are involved in religious conquests.*

As Ven.Dhammanada<sup>62</sup> explains below, some Christian NGOs even go further than that and he warns that Buddhists need to be careful of arguments spread by certain anti-Buddhist NGOs that try to undermine peoples' respect and trust in the monastic system:

*They (NGOs) create conflict by making various allegations about the local monks. If that doesn't work they tell the community that you only give the temple but we help you. We provide your needs. Initially they attract people to their religion by providing such material goods. (So) today allegations are made that people give to temples they hoard them and don't give anything back to the community. If temple helps the community materially such religious conflicts will not happen.*

In addition to such NGOs, Ven Sobitha Mahathera sees other powerful forces that are undermining Buddhist values in Sri Lanka:

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with author September 2015

<sup>62</sup> Interview with author July 2015

*For example, until modern development concepts came, there was no organized system of marketing and drinking alcohol. There were no organization to give people alcohol. Earlier people used to make their own alcohol and a few drank it, but now there are international organization that are well organized to promote the use of alcohol in a big way. The same with smoking. There is a huge amount of money made from it. When these forces come together, the role monks play to create an ethical society is being undermined. So it is important for us to get organised and obtain government assistance to fight these forces. Good governance is important today, because corrupt governance has taken over society with money making at its center with multinational corporations conquering our nation.*

In July 2006, as a member of parliament of the JHU, Ven. Sobitha Mahathera succeeded in getting a private members passed to restrict the sale and consumption of alcohol and tobacco in the country. The Bill titled National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol provides for the establishment of a special authority for the purpose of identifying the policy on protecting public health and for the elimination of tobacco and alcohol related health hazard (Asia Tribune, 2006). While it has been successful in partially restricting the consumption of the two products, there have been numerous court actions and political lobbying to amend the legislation or water down implementation of it.

### **11.3 Threats from Within**

Buddhism is not only facing threats from the outside, even from within its ranks. There are many “new age” monks, new sects that do not belong to any of the traditional Buddhist orders and many fake monks who abuse the liberal laws that control the registration of monks to involve in black magic and other rituals that are not in tune with traditional Buddhist teachings and practices. There is no official body like a Sangha Council to help regulate and control the order of monks.

Ven Dhammananda<sup>63</sup> sees it as a “threat to the very core of Buddhism”. He lists some of these as follows:

- Preachers who are either monks or lay people that do various meditation programs claiming they have become ‘rahat’ or ‘sovan’<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with author July 2015

People who are mentally disturbed / depressed or don't have a good knowledge of Buddhism are attracted to this and believe what they say. They are good preachers and convince these people to join them. They teach meditation techniques or show their serene behavior patterns to be followed.

- A popular monk and preacher is spreading a view that the Buddha was born in Sri Lanka and he identifies various places associated with the Buddha's life. He has printed thousands of books and distributed, even identifying a temple near Kandy where he says the Buddha was born and a bo-tree found in Habarana about 50 km from Kandy he says is the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. He also argues that what Emperor Ashoka did was to destroy Buddhist civilization in Sri Lanka and build a civilization in India. That is what his books say.
- Another monk living near Colombo has become a creation of the media, which gives publicity to his claim of being an 'arahant' and making him into a money-making venture (for both the media and the monk).
- Astrology monks reading peoples astrological charts have also become very popular (sometimes promoted by the media). Though getting auspicious times to do various things like marriage has been a part and parcel of Sinhala Buddhist culture, these days it has been absorbed into a lifestyle, where people have become hostage to their astrologer, such as the former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who believed his astrologer's advice to go for an early election (2 years early) because his stars were told be well placed. But, he suffered a shock defeat at the polls in January 2015.
- One of the latest threats to Buddhism is the relic worship culture that is developing. Though Buddhism was originally spread through these relic worshipping, where these were taken to various places enshrined in stupas and a Buddhist culture developed. Thus what is known as "dhatu vandana" (relic pilgrimage) is closely associated with the Buddhist culture, a good example been the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. But today, this has become highly commercialized with TV

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<sup>64</sup> These terms are used to describe, usually monks, who have far advanced in the path of enlightenment (nirvana) but haven't yet reached Buddhahood.



channels getting involved to promote exposition of relics with a commercial motive, often to promote their channels. During the Vesak celebrations of 2015 every TV channel sponsored a relic exposition.

There is a popular Buddhist sect or movement called ‘Mahamevna’ that has spread rapidly across Sri Lanka and in many other countries among the Sinhala Buddhist diaspora. A very popular Buddhist monk called Kiribathgoda Gnanananda Thera, who was born as a Catholic, leads it. They have over 40 temples across Sri Lanka and branch temples in Australia, USA, UK, Dubai, South Korea, India, Italy and Germany. They have ordained over 700 monks, mainly educated young people. They also have 6 monasteries for nuns and have ordained 100 nuns. This is in sharp contrast to the 3 Theravada Buddhist sects in Sri Lanka that have so far resisted the revival of the order of nuns in the country. Some estimates put the number of Buddhist devotees of Mahamevna at 5 million within Sri Lanka. They have kept out of involvement in any nationalistic politics and have also attracted mainly urban well-to-do devotees, and the temples tend to be well supported financially.

What is worrying the traditional Buddhist community is that these temples have rejected some of the traditional ceremonies associated with Sinhalese Buddhist practices. They reject the traditional ‘pansakula’ at funerals and also the 7-day arms giving. So there are criticisms about these temples undermining Buddhist culture.

“Our culture has been threaded through these traditions,” argues Ven. Dhammanada. “If the dead person gets this merit or not is another matter. But what the monk does is when a death occurs he goes to the home and try to reduce the effect of the grieving. That is what is humanism. What 7 day ‘dana’ (arms giving) is that the sermon tries to calm the minds of those grieving. That is the idea. The dead person may be an alcoholic but the monk will not talk about it but will look at some of the good qualities of the person and give a sermon to make the grieving feel better. If you reject that, it is a big disservice to the community and the culture that it comes from. They are trying to destroy cultural traditions while introducing new religious ideas”.

While Ven. Kiribathgoda Gnanananda is well respected in the community for his knowledge of the dhamma and the skill of delivering its message, yet, the government has refused to register his temples because of protests by other monks. But, there is also a silver-lining points out Ven. Dhammananda: “There is a good technique of his sermons. Lots of young people have become monks

there. Some are from universities with engineering or medical backgrounds. Both boys and girls have been ordained who are well educated..... some see this as harmful to society to take away bright students from society (but) if they become monks, they may have an impact on society”.

“It is addressing the social issue,” argues Jayasundera<sup>65</sup>, who is very familiar with the Mahamevna temples. “ It is a movement more socially aware. They try to attract people and attend to so many other factors and try to give people guidance, it’s growing. Mahamevuna is out of the conventional system. Having 68 branches and its own monks. They are trying to do something to the people keeping in mind the spiritual needs, to develop their ‘sadha’ (faith). But that is not sufficient, you need to get into framework of society”.

#### **11.4 Unethical Conversions, Human Rights and International Media**

*Buddhist NGOs don’t have that type of international funding (Christians and Muslims have). You can go anywhere and preach your religion that is a democratic right you have in Sri Lanka. But they go beyond that, they condemn Buddhist practices, their beliefs and founder of Buddhism. That needs to be condemned. As far as I know, not only Buddhist NGOs but individual Buddhists don’t criticise Jesus, Mohammad and other religious leaders. Christian evangelists do this and this is very bad and very unethical. That is why it is called unethical conversions (Prof Oliver Abeynayake<sup>66</sup>).*

As Prof Abeynayake points out above, behavior of some evangelical groups offends local sentiments which may drive local Buddhist communities to protest, unfortunately sometimes in an aggressive fashion. The protesting Buddhists have often been labeled as “extremists” spreading “hate speech” but the activities of Christians pastors in particular, who denigrate the Buddha and Buddhism, are never mentioned in these reports, especially in the international media.

In 2015, there has been a spate of reports in the international media and reproduced/broadcast across Asia that paints Buddhists not only in Sri Lanka, but also Myanmar and Thailand as prone to extremism and violence (see Sainsbury 2015, Denness 2015). The articles have a similar trend, that the

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with author July 2015.

Buddhist majorities in Asia are discriminating against their Muslim or Christian minorities, and worse, using violent methods in the process. They never see the other side of how Buddhists have been provoked or being threatened because of the superior financial power of the other, as well as attempts to denigrate Buddhism in various ways.

They always put forward the argument that it is a human right to choose your own religion and be free to practice and worship it. However, what is not acknowledged is that if unethical means are adopted to spread one's religion and coerce others, in this case Buddhists, into your religion, that could be a violation of the rights of Buddhist communities to live in peace and harmony.

Even Ruwan Fernando<sup>66</sup> of World Vision Lanka seems to agree with this. He argues that if any development agency is trying to forcefully convert people to their religion that is wrong and the government should enact laws to stop such unethical conversions. But, many Buddhist activists have argued that it is the Catholic church, that has been in the forefront of the campaign to stop parliament voting on an anti-conversion bill .

The issue of unethical conversions in Sri Lanka has been simmering, for over a decade, with no move or support from the government to help tackle this issue. "We were able to get Hindus and Buddhists to work together on it. We went together to Hindu and Buddhist temples, we worked very hard, but it never went through parliament " laments Dr Hema Goonatilleka<sup>67</sup>. "It's a very complicated situation I can't give exact answer to this. I will hold JHU responsible for this. They washed their hands of it".

Ven. Sobitha Thera who tabled the anti-conversion bill in parliament a decade ago, explained in the interview in chapter 7 the reasons for its failure to pass through parliament. He believes that the government must pass laws with strict guidelines on how development schemes could be implemented by religious NGOs in villages, especially Buddhist ones.

Meanwhile, Dr Goonatilleka argues that the Christian evangelical threat has now subsided because of strong community awareness campaigns carried out in the villages by Buddhist organisations. "There was a lot of awareness raising activities going on, (putting up arguments) like we were born to a religion why should we change it to get some food, clothes and medicines? We were able to

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with research assistant Samanmalee Swarnalatha September 2015

<sup>67</sup> Interview with author July 2015

show that it was a form of bribery. People also realised that they end up giving the church rather than the church giving them? Many people who went to evangelical churches have given up on the way ... they themselves realised it that it was a (passing) fad”.

### **11.5 Economic Empowerment of Grassroots Buddhists**

In chapters 8 and 10 there was much discussion about why poor Buddhist communities are vulnerable to Christian and Muslim proselyting. Prof Abeynayaka believes that there are 2 weaknesses in the Buddhist community and monastic order:

*(Urban) Buddhists in Sri Lanka are not aware of what is happening in rural areas. They are very selfish, look after their temples in cities and don't know what is happening outside, especially in remote areas. Second is, they don't want to spend what they have. They are hoarding and don't want to spend to propagate Buddhism especially among the Tamil people. Muslims are not flexible, but Tamils are flexible. Members of monastic bodies don't consider that it is not some thing they should do. If they have done this before we will not be facing the problem we face today.*

Another problem Prof Abeynaike sees with Sri Lankan monastic system is that though there are thousands of monks, most of them don't have any awareness of Engaged Buddhism. “They look after their temple and set up Mahila (Womens') Society and so forth but they don't go out to the society and engage in what the society needs. Evangelical movements have understood this. First they work with the people, understand the problem they have and they address it. But temple don't do that they stick to their spiritual state” he notes.

However, a movement launched in June 2015 called ‘Dayakodaya’ hopes to mobilise the 11,000 temples and over 45,000 monks in the country in a community empowerment program. Firsts starting with 100 temples carefully chosen across the country, they plan to expand the role of monks from their usual activities of giving sermons, chanting ‘pirith’, organizing peraheras (processions), dhamma schools and pilgrimages, to do more community development work.

The ‘Dayakodaya’ in a pamphlet distributed with its launch points out, that since the 1970s reports have shown that though Buddhists constitute about 70

percent of the population of the country, they are economically the most disadvantaged. It points out a 2007 report that shows the average income of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka is Rs 4,000 (USD 40) a month, while that of the Hindus is Rs 6,000, Muslims Rs 12,000 and Christians Rs 13,000. They argue that these statistics have transformed into political conflicts in recent years.

The president of ‘Dayakodaya’ Dr Nath Amarakoon in a statement released at its launch says that the evangelical threat is not only because of powerful forces from overseas, it is also due to the lethargic attitude of Buddhists in the country as well. He argues that Sri Lankan Buddhist organisations have given too much attention to political campaigns and has neglected paying attention to the development needs of the communities. “Buddhists must develop a common strategy to develop a Buddhist economy in the country, and in that endeavor, Buddhist monks in temples need to be made aware and trained in economic development strategies to empower the (Buddhist) communities” argues Dr Amarakoon.

### **11.6 Lack of International Buddhist Networks**

Dr A.T Ariyaratna<sup>68</sup>, who has been very successful in mobilizing international funding for his Sarvodaya movements, argues that Sri Lanka’s Buddhists need to gather Buddhist leaders with good ethics and knowledge of the dhamma and set up organisations to help protect and nurture Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Because of the power of money, the media in Sri Lanka gives a lot of prominence to the work done by Christian and Muslim organisations and communities in the country, but, the Buddhists don’t get that type of positive media coverage. He believes that Buddhists need to expose political agendas that undermine them, but, need to develop a Buddhist society that is based on good practices of the dhamma. He believes the biggest handicap Buddhists have to set up powerful organisations to empower them is a lack of financial resources needed to do the job.

In chapters 2 and 3 there was much discussion about the historic links between Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia through trade and Buddhist cultural links. While much of these links have been destroyed during the European colonial period in Asia, yet, since independence over 60 years ago, Sri Lankan Buddhists haven’t given enough attention to building links with other Asian Buddhist countries. Many Buddhists in Sri Lanka see themselves as “unique” in the region and that Buddhists in other parts of Asia are culturally different – which is not the case.

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with research assistant Samanmalee Swarnalatha, September 2015

Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar share an almost identical Buddhist culture and way of life. Sri Lanka also needs to build links with the rich Buddhist communities in Singapore, Taiwan and China, where the Buddhists are moving towards a less denominational and more Engaged Buddhism type of Buddhist interaction to which Sri Lankan Buddhists could link to via Buddhist charitable work.

There are few such links that have been developed such as a multi-million dollar investment by a Taiwanese Buddhist monastery to build a posh modern International Buddhist University in Colombo in collaboration with a Sri Lankan Buddhist temple. The Sri Bodhiraja Foundation has also built links with Buddhist communities in Singapore and Taiwan that have contributed handsomely to their community development work in Embilipitiya.

In the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami a Buddhist development assistance organization was launched called Red Lotus. Its aim was to network and build a regional Buddhist aid organization. But, it has been slow to take off.

As the secretary of Red Lotus Captain Buddhadasa Weliwatta<sup>69</sup> explained “we started this organization because during tsunami work we found that there was no peak organization in the region for Buddhists to go for assistance. So the Sri Lanka National Buddhist Organization for Humanitarian Services launched Red Lotus”. It has been incorporated through a parliamentary gazette on 22 March 2011. “We are still struggling to create networking (overseas) and raise funds,” he added. “We haven’t been able to get any government patronage”.

### **11.7 – Recommendations : A Call for International Buddhist Action and Solidarity**

What we have discussed in this book drawn from both literature and field research indicate clearly the scourge of poverty that is making grassroots Buddhist communities across Sri Lanka vulnerable to proselytism activities by other religious groups, particularly evangelical Christianity and Wahhabi Islam. Many of the Buddhists that were interviewed for this project have pointed out time and again how successive Sri Lankan governments have neglected poor Buddhist communities and left them at the mercy of market forces that drive the world’s globalized economy of today. These communities need both protection and economic empowerment. Thus, some of the recommendations that could be drawn out of this research is as follows:

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with research assistant Samanamalee Swanalatha in September 2015

***Restricting NGO Funding:*** Opening up to the globalized economy has also opened up rural communities in particular, to the global forces of the NGO movements, many of which, as we have discussed are pseudo religious groups. Many Buddhist leaders argued during our consultations that there is a need for tighter control of NGOs, especially to monitor their funding from overseas and the way it is used in Sri Lanka. Many countries in Asia, such as Singapore, China, Malaysia, Bangladesh and India have tightened controls on NGOs receiving funds from overseas. As it is funding from overseas that is triggering religious conflicts in the country, there is a need to introduce strong laws that force local NGOs to be transparent about their funding sources and its use in Sri Lanka. These laws should include restrictions on such funding being used for proselytism activities in the country with severe penalties for such use. During the Rajapakse regime there have been various discussions and inquiries about NGO funding and the threat to national security. In July 2014 the government announced that a new law would be enacted by the end of the year to make all NGOs to register with National Secretariat for NGOs that will come under the purview of Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse. The law was expected to impose certain restriction on receiving foreign funding and also introduce accountability procedures. However, the calling of Presidential elections in November 2014 and the resulting change in government has stalled this process.

***Community Harmony Bill:*** As discussed at a number of points in this book, anti-conversion bill presented to parliament has been blocked and its clauses challenged in courts as a violation of constitutional rights on freedom of religious practices. Perhaps it may have been a better idea, if the bill was presented as a “community harmony bill” rather than an anti-conversion bill. The Buddhists and Hindus would have to come up with such a bill that draws from the 1976 International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights to make a strong human rights argument that they have a right to protect their cultural heritage, religious and cultural traditions from unethical proselyting activities that target their heritage and culture. They will have to focus on “community rights” – which could be described as Asian values emphasizing collective rights as opposed to Western values that focus on individuality. Such a bill will apply to activities of all religious organisations in the country, that will be called upon to protect community harmony. Such a bill may be able to address the concerns of an anti-conversion bill with clever secular-sounding wordings. It should also be able to redefine human rights and religious freedom concepts, by including right to protect one’s religious heritage as a human right, which promotes community harmony.

***Zoning Laws:*** Many countries such as Australia, have zoning laws that restrict the construction or setting up of religious buildings in residential communities, unless it can be proven that there is a need for it in the community. Such laws give the right to the local community to veto an application for setting up a new temple, church or mosque in the community, unless the community calls for it. This could be an avenue that could be explored to stop/control the setting up of unwanted prayer centres, pre-schools or madarasas in predominantly Buddhist communities.

***Redefine Role of Buddha Sasana Ministry:*** Discussions in chapters 5 and 7 indicated that there are serious shortcomings in the Buddha Sasana Ministry when it comes to the question of economic empowerment of Buddhist communities. The ministry should play a more proactive role in targeted programs to empower and protect Buddhist communities such as assisting in developing a systematic pre-school program and help temples that run such pre-schools with mobilizing government or international funding. The ministry may monitor a system where organisations like World Vision that want to fund pre-schools in Buddhist villages channel the funds through the Buddha Sasana Ministry. Also other social welfare programs that are run by foreign funded NGOs in Buddhist communities may have their funds channeled via the ministry or monitored by them.

***Monitoring Corruption At Provincial Government Level:*** During field interviews many grassroots Buddhists complained about corruption at provincial government level where Christian and Muslim groups have bribed local government officials to set up illegal churches, mosques or other projects in Buddhist areas designed to convert people to their faiths. Buddhist organization like ACBC should set up a project with paid officials that could monitor, receive complaints and investigate allegations of corruption and mount court cases against them. Funding for this may be raised through Buddhist foundation or even international funding bodies.

***International Networking:*** It is clear from the research that the greatest problem Sri Lankan Buddhists face is its inability to network in the region, especially among the richer Buddhist countries. This has been further complicated and been handicapped by the negative media Sri Lankan Buddhists have got in the region, especially due to the activities of Bodu Bala Sena in recent years as discussed in earlier chapters. It is a huge challenge for Sri Lankan Buddhists to demonstrate to the region and the international community that they are the victims rather than the perpetrators of repression or



suppression. Buddhist leaders in Sri Lanka should work with expatriate Sri Lankan Buddhists and other sympathizers to make the international Buddhist communities aware of the problem and lobby them for financial support. This needs to be done in a systematic basis with formation of long-term partnerships. Sri Lanka should lobby the international Buddhist community sighting reports like this to form a strong multinational Buddhist development aid agency similar to World Vision.

***Buddhist Heritage Protection Involves All Sri Lankans:*** Buddhists in Sri Lanka need to reach out to other communities in the country to convince them that the rich Buddhist heritage of the country (as discussed in chapter 2) is the heritage of all Sri Lankans born and bred in the country irrespective of their religious beliefs. Unfortunately many Buddhist activists tend to promote an exclusive ideology. It needs to be inclusive of all Sri Lankans whose ancestors are from the soil and they need to be made to be proud of the fact that the Sri Lankan Buddhist heritage has played a major role in the development and shaping of Asian civilization.



Sri Lankan Bo-tree sampling presented to Taiwanese monastery  
(Picture; Kalinga Seneviratne)

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## Appendix 1

### Contents Analysis of the coverage of Dambulla incident in two Sinhala newspapers

The analysis below is from the Sinhalese newspapers Divaina (Island) and Mawbima (Motherland) between 9<sup>th</sup> April to 3 May 2012.

- ***Divaina, 9 April 2012, page 12***

Quoting the chief priest of the Rangiri Dambulla temple the article says that for the past 30 years the temple development scheme has been at a standstill because the government has taken over the temple land under the sacred city development plan and they have been selling some parts of it to non-Buddhist organisations for political expediency. If the government does not correct it urgently, he has threatened to organize a public agitation.

- ***Divaina, 12 April 2012, page 1***

The main news item in this issue with pictures of monks and police in a confrontative mood but no violence, the article just reports about a tense situation in Dambulla. The heading says the monks are asking for the sacred city plan to be expedited.

- ***Divaina, 21 April 2012, page 6***

This report quotes Muslim opposition MP Kabir Hashim who has said at a press conference in Colombo that a Buddhist group has chased away those who were praying there on a Friday and torn down a mosque in Dambulla. He has accused the government of complicity, while a Western Provincial Council Muslim MP, Majibur Rahman has claimed that there is a conspiracy to chase away the Muslims from Dambulla town.

- ***Divaina, 23 April 2012, page 10***

There were three separate news stories in the same page with the first story saying that Prime Minister D.M Jayaratne, has announced that the mosque will be removed from the scared city area and the Muslim community will be assisted by the government to find a suitable site

nearby to establish a new mosque. The second story was about the visit to the site by two Muslim Cabinet ministers who assured the local Muslim community that the government will facilitate the removal of sacred objects from the old mosque to the new site. The third article was about a statement by the local district MP, a Buddhist, who said that though some have said he was involved in the protest, he did not have anything to do with it. He has said that the investigation is a police matter and there will be no political interference.

- ***Mawbima, 23 April 2012, page 1***

The lead story in the newspaper says that the Prime Minister has taken a decision to remove the mosque from the sacred city area, while a story just below it quotes Muslim Cabinet Minister Fowzie, who says no decision has been taken by the government yet, to remove the mosque.

- ***Mawbima, 24 April 2012, page 1 & page 15***

The main news item in the front page says that parliamentary MP Janaka Bandara Tennakoon has threatened to sue the chief priest of the Rangiri Dambulla Temple who has claimed at a public meeting that he is part of a conspiracy to destroy the Buddhist heritage of Sri Lanka. A small news item underneath with a picture of Muslims praying in a mosque says that the Rangiri Dambulla temple Trustees committee has taken a decision yesterday to clear out all illegal constructions in the temple lands within 6 months. The story on page 15 says that the Prime Minister has said at a temple ceremony that he has not been kept informed about the Dambulla mosque issue and the best path to solve this issue is through discussion.

- ***Divaina, 24 April 2012, page 9***

Two news on the same page with one saying that the Prime Minister has called for dialogue in solving the Dambulla issue speaking at a temple ceremony, and the second one said that the opposition UNP has released a statement saying that it will be best if disputes about erection of religious sites could be solved by discussion.

- ***Divaina, 25 April 2012, page 10***



This news item focus on a statement released by the JHU that accuses anti-Buddhist elements such as Marxist parties and pro-western political forces as ganging up to frame Buddhists in the country as troublemakers, using this dispute as an excuse. They argue that this is creating disharmony in the community.

- ***Divaina, 26 April 2012, page 9***

This is a report about a press conference held by the JHU where its leaders have defended the actions taken by protestors asking for the removal of the mosque from temple property. They have pointed out that Buddhists have protested about this issue for 3 years and the government has ignored it. That is why they had to stage a protest to draw attention to it. But, NGOs and some fundamentalist Muslims have exploited this to spread stories in the foreign media painting the Buddhists as “extremists”.

- ***Divaina, 28 April 2012, page 10***

This was a background commentary by an analyst Kirthi Warnakulasooriya points out how some NGOs and anti-Buddhist fundamentalist religious groups are trying to use the Dambulla incident to defame the Buddhists. He points out that a Norwegian funded local “peace vendor” has resurfaced to give statements to Australia’s ABC network and the BBC saying that Buddhists are disturbing the peace in the country. The BBC has taken his statement and used footage of Buddhist flag waving demonstrators claiming that they have stopped Muslims praying at the mosque and smashed their property later.

- ***Divaina, 28 April 2012, page 8***

This is a column written by a Buddhist monk who points out that media has made a big issue of a protest without paying attention to how Sri Lanka’s Buddhist heritage is being undermined by Muslims, who have been building mosques on historic Buddhist temple land. He argues that the Buddhists have a right to raise these issues because there is an Islamic fundamentalist threat to Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

- ***Mawbima, 25 April 2012, page 1, page 3 and 12***

A page 1 story continued in page 2 said that there is going to be a top-level discussion in Colombo under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister and attended by all religious leaders to help resolve the Dambulla Rangiri Vihara issue. In page 3 there were 2 further reports with the main one quoting JHU leader Ven. Omalphe Sobitha who said in a press conference that they are waiting until the mosque is removed from the Dambulla temple land as there is a history in Sri Lanka that Muslims tend to gradually occupy Buddhist temple lands this way. In the other news item, opposition provincial minister was quoted as saying that a Cabinet Minister accused of involvement in the conflict is threatening to sue the monk thus fuelling the dispute further. In page 12 of this issue the newspaper carried 5 opinion pieces reflection differing viewpoints on the issue. The head of the Dambulla Temple Ven. Inamaluwe Sri Sumangala said that for 55 years there was no mosque here and mosques should be established in places where Muslims live. He pointed out that when the government declared an area a “sacred city” in 1982 there was no such mosque documented here. Ven Maduluwawe Sobitha, a politically neutral monk from Colombo said that other religions should not try to establish their paces of worship on land legally belonging to a Buddhist temple. This issue should have been resolved by negotiations long time ago. Christian priest Cyril Gamini argued that all religion have the right of worship in Sri Lankan and if the Muslims had a mosque there for many years, they have the right to worship there. Muslim Cabinet Minister A.H.M Fowzir said that the government cannot bow to demands from each and every one, but they need to take a decision on moving the mosque based on peoples’ need and justice. Opposition MP Sajith Premadasa argued that there need to be a solution to this issue where everyone could be happy with.

- ***Divaina, 25 April 2012, page 12 and 14***

On page 12, it was reported based on a statement made by deputy opposition leader Karu Jayasuriya that the government has no policy to promote unity between religions in the country. The report on page 14 says that after a meeting with the chief monk of the Dambulla Rangiri temple, government Muslim Minister Hisbullah has said that contrary to some international media reports there have been no damage to property in Dambulla and the monk has given an assurance that until the new mosque has been built in Dambulla, the Muslims will be able to pray at the old Mosque without any hindrance.

- ***Mawbima, 26 April 2012, page 10***

The chief priest of the Dambulla temple says that in the 1982 gazette notification declaring the area a “sacred city” there was no mention of both the mosque and Hindu temple. He says the document even mention the trees in the land and a small Buddhist shrine in a corner, but no mention of mosque. The Trustee of mosque, Saleem Dheem was quoted as saying that Gauthama Buddha has preached that all beliefs have to be treated equally. But, the priestess of the Kali Amma Hindu temple was quoted as saying that they are prepared to relocate if a suitable place close by is allocated to them. The article was almost a full page feature story with pictures.

- ***Divaina, 27 April 2012, page 5***

Housing and Housing Development Minister Janaka Bandara Tennakoon was reported to have refuted claims by others that he had a hand in the dispute and he said that he has nothing to do with the Dambulla incident. He has also said that there was a planned meeting on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of this month at the Buddhist Affairs Ministry to solve the issue of other religious buildings within the temple land, but the protests on 20<sup>th</sup> April has derailed it. He thinks President Rajapakse needs to intervene to help solve it. He regrets that this has become an international news story.

- ***Divaina, 27 April 2012, page 2 and 14***

In an advertisement published on page 2, the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama and Muslim Council of Sri Lanka have warned the Muslims that there is a conspiracy to destroy the good relations between Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka and called upon the Muslim community not to get caught to some personal agendas of some groups and rather cooperate with the two organisations to work out an amicable arrangement. A news item in page 14 quoted a government press release in which they said that in accordance of the liberal development policy of the government the Danbulla area development scheme will be implemented in such a way that it will not harm any religious groups and the local residents.

- ***Mawbima, 30 April 2012, page 1 and 6.***

The front page story continued in page 2 says that the Muslim Congress has announced that the Dambulla mosque will not be moved. In the page 6 article which is a long feature a number of issues are discussed under the theme that President Rajapakse is facing a dilemma that if he stays out his wife will die and if he goes home he will die. It points out a number of developments such as a hartal by Muslims in Ampara district, more demonstrations by Buddhists calling for the removal of the mosque in Dambulla and local provincial council member saying illegal building should be demolished.

- ***Mawbima, 3 May 2012, page 10***

A very prominently displayed article in which JHU parliamentarian Ven. Aturaliya Ratana argues that the Dambulla issue needs to be looked at through legal principles and if it has been constructed illegally, it needs to be moved. But. At the same time his party is not happy with the way the government is implementing development policy, and he also warns the chief monk of the Dambulla temple to be careful of conspirators who may be trying to use him for their political agendas.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Contents Analysis of the coverage of Dambulla incident in two English newspapers**

The analysis below is from two English newspapers Daily Mirror and Sunday Leader between 9<sup>th</sup> April to 3 May 2012.

- ***Daily Mirror, 19 April 2012, page 4***

The article reported about a meeting between Prime Minister Jayaratna and Buddhist, Muslim and Christian religious leaders who have expressed concerns about the impact of fundamentalist sects and unethical conversions. They have agreed that it is the need of the hour to tackle this problem.

- ***Daily Mirror, 19 April 2012, page 1 and 2***

The page 1 story continued on page 6 said that the chief monk of the Dambulla Rangiri temple has offered a cash donations to the Muslim community to relocate the mosque from the “sacred city” area. Another adjoining article in page 1 continued in page 6 says that PM Jayaratna has said that the government is considering plans to move the mosque. Meanwhile in page 2, the Frontline Socialist Party was quoted as saying that the Dambulla incident was an attempt by some quarters to divert attention from the development problems of the area where farmers are finding it difficult to sell their rice harvest while the multi-national fertilizer companies are exploiting them with high prices.

- ***Daily Mirror, 24 April 2012, page 1***

There were 2 major articles on the front page. The main article said that the PM and the Muslim leaders are to meet to discuss 3 suitable sites in the Dambulla town to relocate the mosque, while the smaller article quoted the Dambulla Mayor Jaliya Opatha who argued that the mosque has become a communal incident because the government officials have been lethargic for 30 years and neglected implementing the “sacred city” plan.

- ***Daily Mirror, 26 April 2012, page 1 and 4***

The page 1 article said that the President has spoken to the PM and said that the Dambulla issue will be solved amicably and that he will not give into extremists or international conspirators. While in page 4 it was reported citing a press conference that an opposition Muslim provincial council member has accused the Muslim members in the Cabinet of letting down the Muslim community.

- ***Daily Mirror, 27 April 2012, page 1***

A small column article in page 1 continued in page 6 focus on Muslim Minister Fowzie's call to the Muslim community not to get involved in any protests or demonstrations on the Dambulla issue.

- ***Sunday leaders 29 April 2012, page 1, 10, 11 and 12***

This issue has given extensive coverage to the Dambulla issue with almost 5 pages devoted to it. A small column news item in page 1 quotes a Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader Rauf Hakeem as saying that the Dambulla mosque cannot be relocated. In a full page feature on page 10 with many pictures and a headline "This is a Tragedy", the article analyse the Dambulla incident in some detail. The articles starts by saying that Muslims are still reeling from last week's incident and mentions that it is a 65 year old mosque. But the article goes on to quote the chief monk of Dambulla temple quite extensively about why they want the mosque removed and the lack of documentations about its existence. But, the mosque Trustee was quoted as saying that they have title deeds going back to 19<sup>th</sup> century regarding the ownership of the land and he claims the government took it over in 1982 when the "sacred city" was declared. The article also points out that people who live in this area from all communities are mostly poor. On page 11 with a large half page picture of Muslims demonstrating, the rest of the page is devoted to a "Concerned Citizens' statement calling for the mosque not to be relocated. On page 12, a news feature that occupies 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the page with a headline "Militant Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism: Context of the Religious Freedom" discusses a chain of attacks on Christian churches and Muslim mosques allegedly by Buddhists. It quotes a well-known Buddhist monk who is against such extremism. On page 13 a long opinion piece written by the secretary of the Ceylon Communist Party (Maoist) while condemning the

Buddhists attack on the mosque, argues that the Rajapakse regime is falling prey to an international imperialist conspiracy to raise religious tension in the country to change regimes to suite their imperialist needs. He points out that the Buddhist hierarchy is ignoring the country's problems with robber barons, drug lords, pimps, high-class prostitutes, etc. He suggests that this incident is part of this conspiracy and the Buddhist "extremist" groups may be acting on their behalf. In another long opinion piece under the heading "The Mad Men of Dambulla" with a large cartoon showing "thuggish" Buddhist monks acting like a mob in front of President Rajapakse who is looking down trying to ignore it, political analyst Tisaranee Gunasekara blasted the government for the "unrepresentative" nature of consultations to help solve the issue. He argues that this is a Sinhalese supremacist issue and not a land issue.

## Appendix 3

### Contents analysis of the Aluthgama incident in two Sinhala newspapers

Following is a contents analysis of two Sinhalese newspapers Mawbima and Divaina between 16 June to 14 July 2014.

- ***Divaina, 16 June 21014, page 1***

The main headline in the front page of the newspaper says that a curfew has been imposed in the Aluthgama-Beruwala area and focus on Army Chief's statement calling upon the people not to get caught as instigators of trouble and behave peacefully.

- ***Divaina, 17 June 21014, page 1, 2 and 4***

The front page leading article is headlined "Sinhalese and Muslims Come Together to Protect the Peace" with subheadings focusing on a police statement that it is a lie that a Buddhist monk has been killed and a joint appeal from Muslims and Buddhists not to support those who are promoting conflict. The President has also warned that people will be arrested no matter what their background if they create trouble was another news item that was in page 4 with a sub-heading in page 1. A number of government politicians – both Sinhalese and Muslim - have been quoted in the article that continued on to page 4 calling for restraint. In page 2 article, government MP and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem has warned that if the government/police does not take proper action against those who attacked Muslims their party will have to take a decision whether to remain in government.

- ***Mawbima, 18 June 21014, page 1, 2 and 5***

Front page article says that the army has been deployed in Darga Town to restore peace. This article continues into page 2. There was also another article that flowed on to page 2 as well where it reported on an initiative taken by a chief Buddhist monk in the nearby Dikwella area with the help of the Muslim community leaders there to safeguard inter-community harmony. The almost full page article on page 5 focused on a statement by the Vice Chancellor of the Sabaragamuwa University Venerable Dr Kaburugamuwe Vajira thera whose statement was headlined "We should not forget that this



country does not belong only to Sinhalese Buddhists but to everyone here". Another senior monk was quoted in the article arguing that "extremism" and "terrorism" is one and the same and Buddhist should not fall into the hands of the former. A Muslim religious leader Hassan Mowlana was quoted as saying that if there are disputes we have the police to resolve it, there are also various religious leaders and organisations to do it and no religion asks its followers to go out and fight to solve their religious problems.

- ***Divaina, 18 June 21014, page 8***

In a long Opinion piece publish alongside the Editorial, this article is headlined "Trouble Makers Taking Refuge Behind the Aluthgama Incident". Written by political analyst Kirthi Warnakulasooriya, it draws attention to the chaos created in Iraq and Libya by western imperial forces and argues that Sri Lankans need to understand the political currents underneath these processes. It points out that foreign agencies are giving dollars and ideas to various organisations in the country in a big way, and they are not doing it because they love us nor the people they give the money to. The local NGOs that have joined hands with these foreign multinational forces want to spread such trouble as what was seen in Aluthgama. To such people we (people of Sri Lanka) should not provide raw material. The article discusses at length how these NGOs have provided material to the international media and human rights organisations such as the UNHRC in Geneva, within 24 hours of the event, to spread the news far and wide.

- ***Mawbima 19 June 2014, page 1***

This front page article with pictures of the two Buddhist monks reports about two meetings. In the first one, chief of a temple in Kegalle (which also has a Muslim population) is reported to have said at a public meeting that extremists whether they are Buddhist, Muslim or Tamil should be banned immediately. He argues no religion teaches people to burn and kill. In the other article another leading provincial monk is reported to have said in a meeting that people who spread rumors to promote religious conflicts should not be allowed to do so.

- ***Divaina, 19 June 21014, page 2***

This news item on page 2 focused on how local NGOs have sent information to UNHRC head Navi Pillay, who have in turn released a statement based on this information. The report also says NGOs have sent this information to the Middle East media who have widely reported on the event.

- ***Divaina, 21 June 21014, page 6***

This Opinion piece under the name of “In the Middle of the Ocean” argues that international conspirators are now trying to build a Buddhist force within President Rajapakse’s own Buddhist supporters and destroy him. Thus, if the people in this country do not understand this and accept people who come forward as Buddhist movements, they will help not only to topple the Rajapakse regime but also hold Sri Lanka hostage to these international forces.

- ***Mawbima, 20 June 21014, page 10***

An almost full page article with a bold headline on page 10 says that President Rajapakse (who is attending a G20 meeting in Bolivia) has issued a statement from there claiming that those behind the Aluthgama incident are international political conspirators and he has called upon the Buddhist and Muslim clergy to cooperate with the government to bring to justice those responsible for the incident and punish those trouble makers.

- ***Divaina, 21 June 21014, page 1***

The lead article on front page is headlined “Mosques asks to be peaceful” with a sub-heading “Come son I will show you the way” and with an accompanying large picture backgrounding the headline where a policemen with arms around a boy (wearing a Muslim skull cap) is escorted across the road. The report says that there was no truth to rumors spreading around the country that the Muslims have mounted an island-wide hartal campaign.

- ***Divaina, 21 June 21014, page 8***

This article basically summarise measures taken by the Police and the army to control the tense situation in the area following the Aluthgama incident and bring calm to the area. It lists how the Police first unable

to control the situation called on the army special forces and used a curfew.

- ***Mawbima, 23 June 21014, page 1***

This front page article has the heading "Aluthgama Clashes damage 300 shops". It says that there have been over 200 complains and the Police are investigating these. It also said that the President has ordered the armed forces to help in rebuilding and restoring the businesses damaged in the area.

- ***Divaina, 23 June 21014, page 8***

The article points out that for a long time this area has had a mixed population of Buddhists and Muslims. While there are extremists on both sides, the community has largely existed in harmony. Since the Muslims are pre-dominantly a trading community owning most of the shops there, it is important for them to have cordial relations with the Sinhalese for the success of their business.

- ***Divaina, 25 June 21014, page 12 and 14***

A news item in page 14 is based on a press conference called by the opposition UNP whose senior MP Mangala Samaraweera claimed that those behind the Aluthgama incident are not American funded conspirators (as government claims) but groups under the control of the Rajapakse regime.

- ***Divaina, 27 June 21014, page 1***

This front page article reports that the government has deployed a 700-strong armed forces team to rebuild businesses and houses damaged by the Aluthgama incident.

- ***Divaina, 27 June 21014, page 9, 12 and 14***

This full page article on page 9 has a heading that says the opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe has called for an inter-faith summit to discuss religious harmony in the country. This almost full page article on page 12 with a large picture of JHU parliamentarian monk

Ven. Aturaliya Ratana has a heading “Though Koran has valuable lessons, we cannot agree with anything on Islam in Sri Lanka” with a sub-heading that media censorship by government has hidden the truth of the Aluthgama clashes from the public. He was quoted as saying that Sri Lanka cannot look to Middle Eastern countries for good examples and we need to accept the truth that there are Muslim millionaires in Sri Lanka who are heavily involved in the drug trade and there are white-clad Sinhalese politicians who are their partners. An article on page 14 reports about a meeting local government MP and Minister Ranjitha Senaratna held in Beruwals where they discussed ways to rebuild community harmony.

- ***Divaina, 30 June 21014, page 1***

This page 1 article reports about a police operation to find illegal weapons stored in the region and also reports about the police identifying the Muslim youth who assaulted Ven. Vijitha on Poson day that triggered the clashes.

- ***Mawbima, 30 June 21014, page 10 and 12***

*On page 10 of the newspapers*, an article prominently features focus on a statement put out by 23 peak Buddhist organisations that expressed their dismay at the coverage of the event and its aftermath by both the local and foreign media. The blame government media restrictions for suppressing the Buddhist voice and hold local media executives – especially the government media – responsible for the negative image of Buddhism and Buddhists in Sri Lanka created in the international media. This report on page 12 focus on the local MP Ranjitha Senaratna who was overseas on the day the clashes happened. He is quoted to have said that if he was in the country this bloodshed would have been avoided and he has expressed regret about it and asked for forgiveness from his voters.

- ***Divaina, 1 July 21014, page 19***

This article focused on a talk given by the Vice Chancellor of the Sri Jayawardenapura University Ven. Bellanwila Wimalaratana where he has argued that the police had the power to stop the Aluthgama clashes at its very roots which they did not do. He was also critical of people who have grown up in Sri Lanka but are helping foreign forces to

denigrate the country. He noted that foreign media and other organisations are trying to paint Sri Lanka as an ungovernable country with no values, and Muslims have no place in this country – both of which are not true.

- ***Mawbima, 3 July 21014, page 5 and 10***

This article on page 5 focus on a statement issues by the Muslim civil society group Shoora Council that has complained to the President's Secretary Lalith Weeratunga that deploying the army for rebuilding before the police has documented the damage, will destroy all evidence with regards to the clash. They have argued that at least 100 police officers must be deployed to gather evidence on the damage to property of Muslims in the area. Since the police haven't done this, it will put the Muslims in a legal vacuum with regards to any compensation claims. They also accused Bodu Bala Sena for triggering the conflict and expressed regret that the media in the country has put the blame on Muslim youth attacking a Buddhist monk for the clashes. The page 10 article focus on a press conference held by BBS and quotes Ven. Gnanasara who says that the Aluthgama clash is a conspiracy that was hatched by the opposition UNP along with some government MPs and foreign embassies in Sri Lanka. He has threatened to escalate the conflict if the BBS is blamed for it and says we will then see where it ends.

- ***Mawbima, 4 July 21014, page 4***

This report focus on a letter sent by JHU leader Ven. Omalphe Sobitha that the government has hidden the truth behind the Aluthgama clashes and painted the Buddhist monks as “extremists” and “terrorists”. He has pointed out to the President that under his rule Buddhists in Sri Lanka have been internationally condemned and asked him for whose interests is he hiding the truth?

## Appendix 4

Contents analysis of the Aluthgama incident in two Sinhala newspapers

Following is a contents analysis of two English newspapers Daily Mirror and Sunday Island between 16 June to 14 July 2014.

- ***Daily Mirror 17 June 2014, page 1 and 6***

The lead article under the heading “Need for Calm” says that following the clashes several Buddhist and Muslim leaders along with local politicians have agreed to set up a mechanism to avoid further clashes. Police were quoted as having said that 2 people were killed and 36 injured during the riots. Several short reports on the Aluthgama clashes were published in page 6 where the Marxists JVP party was reported to have called for restraints on all sides, while the JHU has called on the government to take decisive actions on “extremists” and another report says that BBS has rejected accusation that they were to be blamed.

- ***Daily Mirror 18 June 2014, page 1, 4 and 6***

This lead story in the newspaper says that 41 people have been arrested and the army deployed at trouble spots in the Aluthgama area. While another accompanying story continued on page 6 refers to the JHU news conference where Ven. Ratana has warned that moderate Muslims should not be labeled “extremists” and they should be won over by the Buddhists. A front page article with bold heading reports about a court order to dig mass graves in Kattakudi that is suspected to contain bodies of Muslims killed by the LTTE during the civil war in the country. Another small column article on page 1 continued in page 6 says that opposition MP Mangala Samaraweera has claimed that the government is behind the Althgama violence. In a small article in page 4 along with a picture showing Buddhist monks at a mosque in Dikwella (a close by town) discussing peaceful co-existence with Muslims.

- ***Sunday Island, 22 June 2014, Page 1 and 5***

This main news item in the paper reports that police are investigating a fire at a Muslim-owned clothing shop in Panadura near the Aluthgama area in the context of the recent Aluthgama clashes and religious

tensions in the area. Police have not ruled out either an accident or arson attack. On page 5 writing under the name of “Political Watch” this columnist warn the government of the dangers exposed by the Aluthgama clashes, especially of attempts to link the government to the activities of BBS.

- ***Daily Mirror 23 June 2014, page 8***

This opinion piece written by a Colombo University academic Siri Hettige focuses on “ethno-religious” clashes occurring in areas with important economic activity such as tourist sites and investment parks. He points out that after the Aluthgama clashes certain countries have issued travel warnings, thus, tourist industry could be effected. Investing warnings could also go out to foreign investors. He also warns that people whom the country needs most – its skilled professionals – may migrate overseas if there is too much social and political instability in the country.

- ***Daily Mirror 24 June 2014, page 6***

This is a report on a meeting Foreign Affairs Minister G.L Peiris had with envoys of Muslim countries where he has argued that the Aluthgama incident has been skillfully manipulated by groups that have got substantial overseas funding to destabilise the country.

- ***Daily Mirror 25 June 2014, page 6***

Two articles appear on this page one of which refers to a press conference by JHU in which they argue that moderate Muslims should not be pushed towards extremism, while the other article reports about the claim by opposition MP Mangala Samaraweera that government is behind the violence.

- ***Daily Mirror 26 June 2014, page 6***

Published in the Business pages of the newspaper and written by Pathfinder Foundation this article argues that all sectors of the community need to work together for the social harmony and political stability of the country. Otherwise domestic investors from all social backgrounds will loose confidence in the country’s economic future. Another small article on the same page reports that 20 police teams are

probing the Aluthgama incident.

- ***Sunday Island, 92 June 2014, Page 1***

This lead article in the newspaper reported that the police have arrested key suspects involved in the Aluthgama riots and described them as looters from whose homes they have recovered gems and jewellery. Police have also said that there was a strong criminal element that fuelled the clashes.

- ***Sunday Island, 6 July 2014, Page 4***

In an opinion piece by political analyst Rajan Philips, he argues that the Aluthgama clash shows that it is beyond a crisis of governance. It has exposed multiple complexities of Sri Lanka's politics and there is no easy remedy. He argues that the Rajapakse government excels in mis-governance and makes it look easy and normal. So if the government is the problem it could be remedied – partially – by changing governments. But, when it goes beyond government and when presuppositions and cultural pre-requisitions are missing, then we get stuck in a vicious spiral.