



Buddhism, Religious Extremism and Muslims in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The article seeks to study the rise of religious extremism in the post-civil war Sri Lanka. This rise has resulted in selective targeting of Muslims and Christians since 2009. The rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has contributed to religious extremism which has resorted to hate speeches and violence against them. This study is an attempt to explore the teachings of Buddhism and how have Buddhist monks misconstrued the teachings of Buddha? The history of Buddhist-Muslim violence will be analyzed to understand the current discord between the community. The various factors contributing to the rise of religious extremism will be analyzed in the pretext of widespread Islamophobia, the destruction of two giant Buddhas in Bamiyan and end of three-decade war in Sri Lanka.

Teachings of the Theravada Tradition of Buddhism

Buddha believed that it was possible to rule a country by adhering to the *dharma*¹. He considered that even without resorting to “harsh punitive measures or engaging in military conquests” (Deegalle, 2009:67) a country can thrive. A cakavatti (world ruler) is considered to rule the world without any force. This emphasis on non-use of force has formed an image of Buddhism as a peaceful religion. However, there is always misinterpretation of religious texts to justify war which Bartholomeuz (2002:53) term it as a just-war ideology in the case of Sri Lanka.

Historically, a Sinhala Buddhist ethnic identity has formed, which emphasizes on the supremacy of Buddhism. It considers Buddhism under a threat and thus needs protection. “Over the 2,300 years of history of Sri Lanka, one can find many references to various types of war: internal battles, external conquests, coup, and liberation

¹ In Buddhism, *dharma* also termed as *dhamma*, is interpreted as universal truth or law—especially as proclaimed by the Buddha.

struggles" (Deegalle, 2009,71). The Pali text of Buddhism does not contain or justify violence in any form. The text of *Mahavamsa* which was compiled in the fifth century CE contains a narrative of King Dutthagamani and King Elara in which it has justified violence in case of war. To understand the rise of religious extremism and violence in Sri Lanka, a careful study of the myth of the battle between King Dutthagamini² and King Elara is essential. The *Mahavamsa* narrative discusses the war between King Dutthagamini and King Elara. While Dutthagamini was Sinhala in origin, a native of Sri Lanka, Elara was a Dravidian and an invader.

In the post-independent Sri Lanka, the politics over linguistic identity gave rise to Tamil insurgency. The three decades long civil war has seen loss of life on both sides. The end of war in 2009 had instilled a new hope within the society, but it gave rise to religious extremism and further deepened the divide between Sinhalese and Muslims. Muslims who contribute to the rich history and tradition of Sri Lanka have peaceful relation with Sinhalese.

The Buddhist teachings state that a viable solution to any conflict is less likely to be solved through violent means. According to the belief of Buddhist doctrinal foundations, violence breeds hatred. Thus, a victory achieved through violence is not a permanent solution to any conflict. As the *Samyutta Nikaya* puts it, "Victory arouses enmity and the defeated live-in sorrow." By causing pain to others, one cannot achieve happiness: one always has to think about how one's actions affect the others around oneself. The *Dhammapada* verse 131 asserts that one's happiness comes with the happiness of others:

Whoever, seeking one's happiness, harms with a rod other pleasure-loving being, experiences no happiness hereafter.

Thus, according to the Buddhist point of view, reconciliatory methods of conflict resolution are more useful than coercive methods. Buddhist extremist groups on the other hand, justify the attacks and violence in the name of protection of Buddhism. They have also been involved in acts of violence, riots, and conflicts involving the throwing of stones and firebombs on the places of worship of the religious minorities their houses and property. But this kind of violence and conflict and targeting of the other religious minorities is not a new phenomenon, which is being experienced in post-war Sri Lanka. This perception of threat persisted even before independence. The article will trace the historical roots of violence between Buddhists and Muslims and will analyze the current attacks on the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

² Dutthagamini was the King of Anuradhapura in 101 BCE.

Earlier Incidents of Violence and Conflict with Muslims

The rise of extremism and violence against Muslims in post-civil war period is not a new development. The two major riots against Muslims took place, one prior to independence in 1915 and the second in post-independent period in 1975. This section will elaborate the details about these two riots.

The Muslims in Sri Lanka are “divided into three major groups: The Sri Lankan Moors, the Indian Muslims, and the Malays” (Fowsar ,2014: 32). Historically, the Moors have been Tamil-speakers at home (while often bilingual in business). The twentieth century Tamil nationalist leaders and militants pressed the Moors to declare themselves as “Tamil Muslims” or “Muslim Tamils” (*Islamiya tamilar*), but to evade the ethnic-nationalist co-optation and domination, the Moorish leaders nurtured a “racial” identity as a community of Arab descent (“Moor”) and, after independence, adopted the religious label “Muslim” as a non-linguistic ethnic marker” (McGilvray 2015). The anti-Muslim sentiments developed during the late nineteenth century were a bi-product of the Buddhist religious and cultural awakening that started in the 1860s primarily as an anti-Christian movement.

The first wave of Buddhist revivalism is said to have sprung during the reign of Kirti Sri Rajasingha (1739-1781) in the Kandyan Kingdom (Ivan, 2009: 58). During this period the concern was related to revival of leadership within the Sangha. Unlike the eighteenth-century revivalism, its successor in the nineteenth century was mixed with politics. In both waves, the Buddhist monks played a dominant role. Weliwita Saranankara Thera in the first and Hikkaduwa Sri Sumangala Thera and Weligama Siri Sumangala Thera in the second were some of the leading spiritual heads in these movements (Ali, 2014:7).

In the nineteenth century, Muslim traders would come from South India for trade and earn while the local rural villagers were under debt and faced hardships. Under this circumstance, a group of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist was formed. Among them was David Hewawitharana Dharmapala, who was brought up in a Christian environment but later changed his name to Angarika Dharmapala, directed his attack on all foreigners in the country including Muslims. He can be termed as the father of political Buddhism in Sri Lanka who promoted Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. According to Dharmapala (1965), “The Muhammadan... is an alien to the Sinhalese by religion, race, and language. He traces his origin to Arabia, whilst the Sinhalese traces his origin to Indian and Aryan sources... To the Sinhalese without Buddhism death is preferable.” Thus Muslims became the target.

The riot which broke out in 1915 against Muslims was the result of this animosity in which the people were murdered, shops burned and various were Mosques set ablaze (Ali, 1981). Even though the riots were “a reflection of economic dislocation, price rises and political ferment of the period” (Jayawardene, 1986: 136) it is undeniable that a politicized and popularized Buddhist consciousness rallied the Buddhist masses and set

them against the Muslims. The flourishing of Muslim traders was seen as detrimental to the economic growth of the Sinhala community.

In 1973 there was spread of anti-Muslim sentiments within Sinhalese who started perceiving that Muslims are being favored in education over them. There were many clashes and violence which took place. The clash that occurred in early 1975 at Puttalam, a Muslim stronghold in the north-west of the island, was, up to the time, the worst episode of communal violence “in which 271 Muslim families lost their homes, 44 shops were looted and burnt and 18 Muslims were shot inside a mosque by the police” (Ali, 2015:494).

Thus, these incidents show that the economic hardships and the consequent favors are given to the community led to resentment and violence and conflict followed. Similarly, when the Tamils were being discriminated against the Sinhala-Buddhists, the government took half-hearted efforts to resolve the issue between the ethnic communities. This led to the formation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which took up arms against the state against the injustice. The three decades of war came to an end with a military victory over the LTTE, but there were efforts to bring about consensus between the Tamils and the government which failed. The monks had also played a major role in disrupting the peace process initiated with the LTTE, led by the Norwegian peace process.

The acrimony which developed between the Sinhalese and Tamils made the Muslim leaders accept a polity dominated by the Sinhalese and a reluctance to be assimilated within the larger Tamil-speaking community. Even though historically they are Tamil speakers, the war between the LTTE and Sinhalese made them take the more pragmatic stand which had had its benefits. Muslims have been working along with Sinhalese and they have been peaceful community. Once the war with LTTE ended in 2009, the growing Buddhist chauvinism, started persecuting and selectively targeting Muslims. The Buddhist extremist have been involved in the speeches against Muslims which include targeting for consumption of Halal certified foods, demolition or relocation of mosques, the economy, use of sterilization pills by Muslims. This has put Muslims as a threat to Buddhism.

The three-decade long war had adversely affected the Sinhalese community. Deegalle (2006) in the context of the boycott of the peace process with the LTTE by the Buddhist monks had tried to understand the Sinhala perspective and the frustration of the Sinhala people concerning the status of Buddhism. There was certain resentment with the Tamils which can be considered to lay the formation of Sinhala extremist forces in the country. He identified various direct physical attacks on Buddhist monks and the destruction of Buddhist sites as the root cause of rising extremism among the Buddhist monks. This was also the reason why these groups opposed any peaceful negotiations with LTTE who could use these violent events to manipulate and mislead the Sinhala public.

The lack of confidence and trust between the communities even after the end of war, has benefited the religious extremist organizations. The reason why it becomes important to understand this resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist extremism in the post-civil war Sri Lanka is that these Muslims have always remained latent and have supported the government. The Muslims in Sri Lanka have lived peacefully without resorting to extremism. Even during the war against the LTTE, the Muslims supported the government, and now that the war is over and they are under attack, the government has failed to take action against the Sinhala-Buddhist extremists.

Rise of Religious Extremism in the Post-Civil War

With the end of the war, the Sri Lankan society entered a new phase of negotiations and confidence-building measures. The aftermath of the war had left the Tamils of Sri Lanka devastated and the pressure of justice and accountability was building on the government. But “political Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism have created the nationalist ideology” (de Votta 2007: 3), which was supported by the Rajapaksa government. And so, instead of bridging the differences between the communities, the Rajapaksa government started “expanding and perpetuating Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy within a unitary state; creating laws, rules, and structures that institutionalize such supremacy; and attacking as enemies of the state those who disagree with this agenda” (de Votta 2007: 3) which has become the norm in the Sri Lankan society. The widely accepted Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology presumes that all Buddhists are nationalists. The majoritarianism has only strengthened the post-civil war and there is a decline in secularism. There is an attack on minorities, curbing press freedom and grave violations of human rights issues. There is also an attempt to colonize the Eastern Province rather than bridging the gaps with the Tamils and resolving the conflict.

In 2007, Neil de Votta had already hinted to the following fact:

“the institutionalization of the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology means that a political solution to Sri Lanka’s Tamils could coalesce with their ethnic counterparts and gain equality and self-respect, is also not in the offing, irrespective of how the conflict ends or the preferences of the international community...The analysis further suggests that other minorities (e.g., Christians and Muslims) also could come under attack as the nationalist ideology becomes further consolidated. The recent well-calibrated anti-Christian violence and the intermittent Buddhist-Muslim clashes hint of the dangers ahead” (de Votta 2007: ix).

The post-civil war Sri Lanka should have worked towards reconciliation with Tamils and foster an environment for all minorities such as Muslims, Christians, and Hindus to co-exist peacefully. The international should have ensured that this was followed by tactfully using the diplomatic trade and aid mechanisms. Sri Lanka is a democracy that needs to provide freedom to the religious minorities, along with preserving its rich Buddhist heritage.

However, before dealing in detail about the resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist extremism in the post-civil war era, there is a need to understand the situation during the civil war. As stated earlier there were already few incidents of violence and conflicts taking place against the minorities during the war period itself, and also that the extremist Buddhist organizations were trying to introduce a nineteenth amendment to the Constitution along with the nationalist Prime Minister under the Rajapaksa government, Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka³. According to this there would be provision of non-conversion of all those who were born as Buddhists, at the same time allowing other religion to convert to Buddhism.

According to Fowsar (2014: 33) following factors are responsible for the rise of religious extremism:

“country entered into a new era, it could be simply called a no-war era, Islamic revitalization happening in the world, fear of Islam, Islamic faith- not accommodate other religious norms into Islamic faith, prosperity of Lankan Muslims, Muslims habit of expanding for the mosques, promoting Buddhist nationalist ideology and external supports from the Jews and other western counterparts.”

The Muslims community in Sri Lanka has also been influenced by Arab. The number of hijab and abaya wearing women are increasing in the society. Though the Sinhala Buddhist extremists have not been selective in targeting Muslims, the frequency of the attacks on the Muslims is more than Christians. With the end of the civil war, the Rajapaksa government used Sinhala Buddhist nationalism to consolidate the votes of the majority. The religious extremist organizations like Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Ravaya, Ravana Balaya and Mahason Balakaya were active in the propagation of hate speeches and carrying out violence and riots against the Muslims. The government failed to curb the activities of these organizations. The Minister of Defense Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2005-2015) attended the functions of Bodu Bala Sena and shared good relations with them.

The Bodu Bala Sena Secretary General Gnanasara Galagoda Thero have been the face of Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka. It was after the speech of Gnanasara Thero that Aluthgama riots took place. However, the government have been reluctant in taking any action against it. Rajapaksa after the riots hinted at the international conspiracy to disturb the peace and harmony of the country. Similarly, the riots against Muslims in 2018 and 2019 was result of the groups like Mahason Balakaya. In 2001 two Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan was destroyed by Taliban terrorists. This has furthered the agenda of Buddhist extremist groups.

³ DeVotta (2007: 21), has explained how the extremist organizations in relation with the ruling party were involved in the Sinhalization of the Sri Lankan state.

Factors Responsible for Religious Extremism in Post-Civil War

The end of the civil war in 2009 in Sri Lanka has seen religious extremist groups targeting Muslims. The community that has remained pro-government and hardly any incident of Islamic extremism within Sri Lanka is found. The prevalent Islamophobia in the world gives a perception that Muslims themselves may be part of terrorism or extremism. However, the Sri Lankan society has seen the rise of Sinhala- Buddhist majoritarianism. This section will deal with the various factors responsible for the rise of Buddhist extremism.

1. Political Leadership

Since independence, the Sri Lankan state have reflected a tilt towards Buddhism. This was established by the successive constitution which affirmed the superiority of Buddhism and state's duty to protect the Buddha Sasana. The Sri Lankan state has always been an ethnically majoritarian and communal one (Uyangoda 2008: 9). That is why according to Uyangoda (2008), "Sri Lanka produced a deadly ethnic civil war in the early 1980s. There has also been a parallel political process in Sri Lanka in the direction of making the state multi-ethnic and pluralist through reform of the state. But Sri Lanka's political, bureaucratic, military and media establishments have never been convinced about the multi-ethnic and pluralistic argument".

There is a resurgence of religious extremism in post-civil war Sri Lanka. One of the reasons is the leadership and the regime which was ruling the country in the period 2009-2014. With the end of civil war, the Sri Lankan state should have moved towards ethnic reconciliation and constitutional reform to develop harmony and peace in the war-torn society. Instead, the Rajapaksa government moved towards a consolidation of the regime. There was increased support, before the end of civil war, for those politicians and political parties that had a pro-Sinhalese Buddhist line, and supported the maintenance of the unitary state structure and favored a military solution to the ethnic conflict. This was reflected in the fact that the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), an all-monks party, fielded 200 monks and nine of them became the members of the parliament. According to Uyangoda (2011: 134),

"the dominant thinking within the regime appeared to be premised on the assumption that there were no minority issues that needed to be addressed on a politically urgent basis because the LTTE had been crushed. This premise is also built on the assumption that reconciliation and conflict management should be managed exclusively on the terms defined by the President and his government, and not by external actors."

After the war in Sri Lanka when there was a need to recognize the plurality within the society and to build the confidence across the communities, "the Rajapaksas were extremely concerned about the maintenance not only of undisputed political power but also their position as the most fervent exponents of Sinhala-Buddhist

nationalism".⁴ Rajapaksa called for "early presidential elections in November 2009, they were constitutionally due in December 2011, seeking to benefit from the enormous popularity his regime enjoyed following the victory over the LTTE. Even the election result clearly indicated that Rajapaksa won mostly in the Sinhala-majority areas.

The influence of Sinhala-Buddhist extremist and Bhikkus increased as a result of the ethnic conflict. Though the Buddhist political parties like the JHU have not been involved in any violence and attacks directly, they have indirectly supported and represent the ideology of the extremist groups or they have not condemned the attacks by the extremist groups. Moreover, the Defense Secretary under the Rajapaksa government, Gotabaya, also participated in a meeting of the BBS, when the rumors of its extremist activities were around. This shows that the ruling regime was indirectly supporting the organization, and even though there was evidence against it, no major action was taken.

As Gravers (2015: 20) states, "the most important aspect of extremism is the relations between the activist monks and high-level political persons and parties". Though there is no evidence to prove that violence was co-organized or induced by political persons or authorities, the evidence does prove inaction by the police authorities and the government. While the government did take measures to rehabilitate the communities after the violence and riots had broken out, but there was no effort to punish the culprits who were out there in the open. And the reason behind this is cited as the alleged links between the BBS and Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Even the Sirisena government which came to power in 2015 in a hope to bring out peace and reconciliation, failed to curb the activities of religious extremist group. The frequency of attacks and violence reduced, but the perpetrators were not

"Sri Lanka's major political parties have manipulated the monks, seeking their imprimatur to legitimize political platforms but trying to counter their influence upon winning office" (de Votta 2007: 24). Politicizing religion and sponsoring extremism are done to exploit the religious identity for political polarization. According to Kadirkamar (2013), "The Rajapaksa regime mobilized Sinhala Buddhist ideological forces during the last phase of the war.... [and] gave the central stage to Sinhala Buddhist nationalist parties such as the JHU".⁵ This has led to the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism within the society and any political solution to overcome the ethnic issue has been overruled. The post-war silence of the Rajapaksa government on the activities of the groups such as the BBS, Sinhala Ravaya and Ravana Balaya has increased the suspicion of the links between them. Thus, the political parties have played a major role in consolidating the Sinhalese-Buddhist ideology and the Rajapaksa government has not only hardened it with the military victory over the LTTE but it has also tried to present a unified picture of the state.

⁴ Weerawardhana, Chaminda (2014), "Proud Inheritors or Petty Contractors? Understanding the BBS phenomenon in Sri Lankan politics", *Groundviews*, 5th July 2014.

⁵ Kadirkamar, Ahilan (2013), "The Question of Militarization in Post-War Sri Lanka", *Colombo Telegraph*, 9th Feb 2013.

2. Militarization of Society

The militarization of Sri Lanka post-civil war has made the situation within the society more complex. However, the military is not the solution to every kind of difference which emerges in the society and so the lack of political will of the leadership to build up the war-torn society is adversely affecting the people. “There is a continuity and consolidation of security, instituted by the military and shaped by neo-liberal development in post-civil war Sri Lanka. This merging of security and development is neither new nor unique to Sri Lanka,”⁶ and has been adopted by many neo-liberal states.

As the war was over,

“one expected that the government will downsize the military, which in July 2009 had over 200,000 personnel in a relatively poor country with a GDP per capita of \$2,014 (2008), a population of 20 million, and no known external enemies. In 2007 the country had 1,065 active-duty military personnel for every 100,000 in the population; the comparable ratio for India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal was 229, 569, 139, and 368 respectively, making Sri Lanka the most militarized country, is recruiting 100,000 more” (Samarasinghe 2009: 437).

So, the government has made society more militarized in the name of security and protection of the citizens. And as Samarasinghe (2009: 437) puts it, “the goal of the government says, is never again to allow the reconstitution of the LTTE or any other armed movement to challenge the state. This postwar military has important implications for Sri Lanka’s postwar ambition to build a united Sri Lanka from its multiethnic population.” Though the government does not want an organization like the LTTE to emerge again, it is difficult to understand why the extremist organizations such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Ravaya (SR) were allowed to carry out riots and conflicts in the society. As the Sri Lankan state is the most militarized country in South Asia, its failure to check and control the Aluthgama, Beruwala riots in 2014 remain unanswered.

Moreover, the organizations like BBS had, as already stated, links with the Defence Minister Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and which they had to deny after the Aluthgama riots took place. And also, there has been a “centralization of the repressive apparatus of the state under Defence Secretary, which allows the state repression, intimates dissent and continues the climate of fear.”⁷ According to Samarasinghe (2009: 176), “the post-war military strategy has important implications for Sri Lanka’s postwar ambition to build a united Sri Lanka from its multiethnic population.” This building of a strong military reflecting the Sinhalisation of the island nation can affect damage to the ethnic relations within the country.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

3. The Resurgence of Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism

Jonathan Friedman (1994: 207) viewed the connection between religion, nationalism, and violence as part of globalized identity politics: “The globalization of fundamentalism and powerful nationalisms is part of the same process, the violent eruption of cultural identities in the wake of declining modernist identity.’ It may well be that modernist identity is under pressure, but I suggest that the Buddhist monks rather ascribe to a hybrid (localized) identification with traditional Buddhist cosmological imaginary and a modern moral imaginary of the world order.” Thus, he hesitates to view traditionalism and modernism as polar points of identification. The nationalist Buddhist monks in Burma and Sri Lanka are neither anti-democratic nor anti-modern. Instead, they consider Sri Lanka a Buddhist majority state and those who will assimilate within this, will be included and others will face exclusion.

“The monks in Sri Lanka project a nationalist version of the Buddhist cosmology which carries a vision of Buddhism in danger” (Gravers 2015: 19). Gravers (2015) further states that the cosmological imaginary is applied through the promotion of democracy and individual freedoms within Buddhist ethics as well as a communitarian and xenophobic nationalist agenda. The first is, however, egalitarian; the second attack other religions and promotes violent identity politics. He suggests four dimensions of politicized religion to understand why it is used to justify violence:

- (1) A historical dimension; A social memory of colonialism or previous conflicts
- (2) Cosmological imaginaries of religion in danger
- (3) A global imaginary of ‘cosmic war’
- (4) The local political context; Religion as a medium for nationalist politics

“The use of cosmological imaginaries evokes the idea of a moral order, which has to be defended or restored” (Gravers 2015: 19). Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the Sinhala-Buddhist extremist groups have used imaginaries such as myths, legends and notions to guide and legitimize collective actions and which sometimes have been used to instigate violent riots⁸.

Thus, the “fundamental belief anchoring Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism is that Sri Lanka has been preserved for Sinhalese Buddhists, and minorities live there only because of Buddhist’s sufferance” (de Votta 2007: 3). Thus, it justifies the Sinhalese Buddhists’ superordination and minority subordination. “Adherents to this national ideology insist on expanding and perpetuating Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy within the unitary state;

⁸ Gravers (2015: 20), uses cosmological imaginary lies, myths, legends and notions to generally explain the reasons which guide the monks in Burma and Sri Lanka to manipulate and apply the above.

creating rules, laws, and structures that institutionalize such supremacy; and attacking those who disagree with this agenda “(de Votta 2007: 3).

However, the religious imaginary itself is not synonymous with violence. “Violence appears when the imaginary is integrated into a nationalist ideology of cultural/ ethnic (race) identity” (Gravers 2015: 20), and organizations that have been formed use it for creating an atmosphere of “self” and “other”. So, the whole imagery of the religion in danger has to be created to use the crowd and mobs to carry out violence against the other religious groups. In Sri Lanka too, the images from the past had been drawn to prove that the Sinhala-Buddhists are the “sons of the soil” as against the Tamils—and now that the LTTE has been defeated—a new enemy is formed as in terms of the Muslim and Christians. The strategies which the extremist organizations adopt are stated that their religion is under threat either due to the conversion carried out by the Christians or by the growing population of Muslims that soon will be taking over the *dhammadipa* i.e. Sri Lanka.

Thus, there is a resurgence in the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism post-civil war and the Rajapaksa government only fuelled the situation by letting the parties like Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) expand its influence. Moreover, the centralization and unification of the polity of the country under Rajapaksa led to the demise of democracy.

4. Perception of Threat

Bodu Bala Sena has been in the forefront in selectively targeting the Muslims. a majority harbors a threat from the minority community it is called a majority with a minority complex. The extremist groups not only create a perception of threat but they feel threatened; as is visible from the activities of the Bodu Bala Sena. The Bodu Bala Sena has been vocal about being against the halal products, *hijab* (cover for a head) or *abaya* (a material made of black cloth to cover the whole body of a female) worn by Muslim women, Shariah law of the Muslims and the conversion carried out by the Christian community. It considers Islam to be a threat to not only Sri Lanka but also to the whole world. The rise in anti-Islamic fervor in the wake of 9/11 has also contributed to raising a threat from Islam, and also the attacks by Muslims on Buddhist temples in Afghanistan and Bangladesh have contributed to the perception of threat. The Christians come as a threat because the Christian missionaries are involved in conversions and time and again there have been debates on passing a law against conversion in Sri Lanka.

The underlying Islamophobia of the Buddhist extremist groups along with ethnic supremacy has contributed to creating division in the society. While looking from one perspective as Tambiah (1986) state that Sinhalese are “majority with a minority complex.” This insecurity was visible with the discrimination and war with the Sri Lankan Tamils. However, the post-civil war in 2009, attacks on Muslims reflects the ethnic-majoritarianism of Sinhalese. They consider Sri Lanka to be the land of Sinhalese and whoever is different will be considered as an outsider. The electoral democracy has become a majoritarian democracy leading towards ‘ethnocracy’.

The end of civil war has brought out in the open the weak relation of the different communities in Sri Lanka. The Sinhala Buddhists who form the majority still suffer from insecurity. The war was supposed to bring an end to the long-drawn ethnic struggle. However, what it led to another religion/ethnic problem with the Muslims.

The destruction of Buddhas of Bamiyan has also contributed in this fear of Islam. The Buddhists consider Muslims are a majority globally, which makes Buddhists who are a minority a threat to their own existence.

5. Economic Factor

The religious extremists interpret religious teachings in a way to create an atmosphere of hatred and conflict, but underlying this there are also economic reasons. The economy plays an important part in any society and the religious extremists do not remain untouched by it. The past instances of conflicts in Sri Lankan society have been also influenced by economic factors.

During the 1980s with economic reforms taking pace and opening of the economy took place, there was a competition among the bourgeoisie class of Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslims. Of the three, it was

“the ubiquitous presence of Muslim enterprises in the Sinhalese areas that became a source of envy and irritation to Sinhalese-Buddhist chauvinists. Even the Janata Vimukhti Peramuna (JVP), founded by a group of Sinhalese-Buddhist youth in the 1960s as a class-conscious Marxist revolutionary movement, in spite of its initial revolutionary slogans and internationalism, later became captive to the prevailing ultra-nationalist and chauvinist Buddhist tendencies. The JVP recruited young Buddhist monks and organized economic boycott campaigns demanding the Sinhalese consumers not to patronize Muslim shops and businesses” (Ali 2014).

“When the social and political condition weakened the economy of the country partly as a result of severe disruptions and destructions of the two decades of ethnic turmoil (beginning from the 1983 July ethnic riots), the monastic involvement in extremist, nationalist politics gave birth to radical innovations” (Deegalle 2006: 231) There is a change in ideology of Theravada Buddhism which preaches peace. However, we find in today’s world the fight is for survival and as a result, Buddhism itself cannot save itself from violence in the name of preserving itself, hence becoming more militant, violent and ultimately intolerant towards other ethnicities and religion largely led by clergy” (Noble 2013)⁹.

Based on protecting the ‘Sinhalese’ businessmen from rising prices allegedly caused by Muslim businesses, BBS called for the ban of all halal products, since according to the organization, halal certification caused a higher cost to manufacturers which were passed on to the consumers (Colombage 2013). Imtiyaz and Saleem

⁹ For further details please check, “Overcoming the Challenges of Ethno-Buddhist Identity in Sri Lanka,” [Online: web] Accessed on 12 th March 2014, URL: [www.academia.edu/7526858/Overcoming the Challenges of Ethno-Buddhist Identity in Sri Lanka](http://www.academia.edu/7526858/Overcoming_the_Challenges_of_Ethno-Buddhist_Identity_in_Sri_Lanka).

(2015: 195-196) surveyed the growth of the BBS among people living in the areas of Kurunegala and Puttalam districts, which formulate the North-Western Province (commonly known as Wayamba); Dambulla, located in the Matale District; Central Province of Sri Lanka; localities in Anuradhapura, located in the Anuradhapura District, North Central Province; Colombo and Kalutara districts, which are the two major districts in the Western Province of Sri Lanka regarding Muslims.

According to Imtiyaz and Saleem (2015: 196) “a large portion of the Muslims surveyed drew the link between the rise of the Sinhala-Buddhist forces and Sinhala-Buddhist traders in the areas where Sinhalese are a majority, but Muslim traders pose serious trade rivalry against the Sinhalese traders”. Thus, religious extremism also has an economic factor driving it. For example, “Muslim businesses in Aluthgama town were torched and looted”¹⁰ and several areas near Aluthgama experienced the same pattern of violence.

6. Religious Biases

To understand the relationship between religion and violence, the internal socio-cultural complexities, ethnic differences, and political conjunctures¹¹ also needs examination. Understanding the rise of religious extremism in post-civil war Sri Lanka, the interesting fact that emerges is that the groups like Bodu Bala Sena serve the purpose of promoting Sinhala-Buddhism.

For the Sinhalatva groups, religion is over everything and that is the reason they supported the war against the LTTE, and now in the post-civil war period, the monks from the organizations like Bodu Bala Sena and Sinhala Ravaya have been propagating hatred and violence against the Muslims and Christians in the name of protecting Buddhism. The extremist organization aims to establish a unitary state, as for the ‘Buddhism, the Sinhala language and the island of Sri Lanka belong only to the Sinhalese as a race.’

Although Buddhism is considered as one of the peaceful religions over the world, monks in Sri Lanka and Burma have been involved in violence and conflict against other communities. One can see how “in Sri Lanka (and elsewhere) some Buddhist monks and especially Buddhist political elites have used *jathaka* tales dealing with Buddha’s reincarnated lives and Buddhist mytho-history to celebrate and justify violence. Buddhist monks, for example, conspired and assassinated Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in September 1959” (de Votta 2007: 2). The militarist posture adopted by certain *bhikkus* regarding the island’s ethnic conflict has caused even the state-owned press to note how frightening it is “to observe the insouciance with which the most revered prelates of the Maha Sangha talk of...recourse to arms” (*Sunday Observer* 2000).

Political thinker Jayadeva Uyangoda has argued that “Sinhalese Buddhism has made no significant contribution to the evolution of a non-violent social ideology. On the contrary, the Sinhalese Buddhist

¹⁰For a further detailed report on the Aluthgama, Dharga and Beruwla riots, see “Where have All the Neighbours Gone? Aluthgama Riots and its Aftermath”, Law and Society Trust, 2014.

¹¹ Juergensmeyer (2001) further explains that we tend to generalize the religious violence, but fail to recognize and identify those agents who use religion in order to justify violence and their own political agenda.

historiographical tradition and ideology inherent in it support ethnic political violence" (Uyangoda 1996: 129). The way Tamil were subjected to discrimination and exclusion from education and job opportunities immediately after independence, similarly in the post-civil war period Muslims have become the target. Both the Tamils and Muslims living in Sri Lanka have their first language as Tamil. The extremist Sinhala Buddhist do not except a multi-ethnic society. Even though their views may not reverberate with the majority, they are also not completely rejected by them.

The political alliance between the Muslim-Sinhalese, made the LTTE consider the Muslims as betrayers of the cause of Tamil Eelam and they unleashed some of their worst attacks on the Muslims and expelled the entire Muslim population from the Jaffna and Mannar districts in 1990. The military defeat of the LTTE in 2009, however, changed the whole scenario. The past strategy of aligning with the Sinhalese governments to gain benefits at the expense of Tamils now seems to have passed its use-by date (Ali 2009). However, the acrimony of the Buddhists towards the Muslims was aggravated in 1999 when Ashraff, the leader of the SLMC party challenged and engaged in a television debate with Gangodawila Somarama Thera, who considered the Muslims a threat to Sri Lanka. In 2001 a major clash broke out in Mawanella, a town along the Colombo-Kandy Road, which spread to its suburban villages causing considerable losses to Muslim lives and property. Between the 1970s and until 2002, nearly 30 violent Muslim-Sinhalese clashes have been recorded and in a number of them, Buddhist monks have played a leading role (Anas et al. 2008).

The political events after 2000 have marked a significant development in the influence of religious agencies in the political affairs of Sri Lanka. The birth of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Sinhala Heritage) in 2004, the Buddhist monks' political party, marks an important phase in the development. When the Sri Lankan government was waging war in the north of the island, the media questioned and challenged the religious and political positions of some Buddhist monks such as Ven. Athuraliye Rathana, then the parliamentary group leader of the JHU. During the war, Nick Meo (*Herald*, Scotland, 2008) criticized Rathana's political views stating, "Like every Buddhist monk, the Venerable Athuraliye Rathana believes in peace, harmony, and loving-kindness. But unlike most, he believes the best way to pursue such virtues is to fight a war to the death with his enemies".

Rathana, mischievously nicknamed a "war monk" by Sri Lanka's press, speaks passionately of harmony but he believed that peace could be established only when the Tamil Tigers have been all killed and their political movements crushed by the army. So, to carry out the aim he gave up a quiet life of meditation to find a political party to press for war, winning a parliamentary seat along with nine fellow monks in 2004. But even though the Tamil militancy has been crushed, the Sinhala-Buddhist extremism has inflicted hatred and violence on other minorities like the Muslims and Christians. Thus, even if the LTTE has been defeated, the Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has only grown stronger and to gain legitimacy within the society, it is looking for a new enemy of Buddhism.

Conclusion

Even though the Sinhala Buddhists are in a majority in the country, they still perceive a threat towards their religion, identity, and culture and to protect it, in the times of globalization, they have resorted to a fundamentalist and extremist stance. Also, to support their ideology and gain legitimacy from the Sinhala society, the Sinhalatva has been selective in its historiography, as directed by the Sangha. Thus, “we encounter therefore a double selective process in writing of history” (Schalk 2009): in the modern period, the concepts of a unitary state and a people as a race were selected; from the nineteenth century onwards, the related concepts were selected to homogenize culture and to cement apartheid. The Sinhalatva approach is that of intolerance, which is contradictory to the teachings of Buddhism. Today, in Sri Lankan society, not being a Sinhala-Buddhist is equivalent to being anti-Buddhist and thus one is termed as a terrorist. Sinhalatva is an ideology which is spread by many organizations, rather than being concentrated in a single, central nexus. Around 100 civil militant organizations were promoting Sinhalatva, or jatika cintanaya as it was then called. Such organizations flourished for some time but dissipated when their leaders fell away and were soon replaced by new groupings.

The Sri Lankan society is a democracy, which comes with constitutional safeguards for minorities, but then from time to time, the constitutional amendments to favor the majoritarian culture have degraded the society. The cause of the rise of religious extremism can be attributed to the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and the role of the government, which accentuated this further by a consolidation of power and in promoting the unified single identity of Sri Lanka.

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