

Sinhala nationalism and Sinhala-Buddhist imaginaries in post-colonial Sri Lanka

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Introduction

As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, the British colonial period was marked by continuity and rupture, both of which formed the basis of the Sinhala responses to the Other. Models of inclusivist subordination and exclusivity were present before the period. But the balance between the two shifted as British power became more entrenched and the spatial exclusivism of the missionaries more pronounced. The following discussion will try to examine how these models developed in the post-independence period, focussing particularly on the growth

of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and spatial articulations of what Coomaraswamy has termed a sense of “injured innocence or injured nobility” (Coomaraswamy 2000, 31) among Sinhalas. Both of these were linked to what Rāghavan called, “an ontological insecurity” (Rāghavan 2016, 13) in the face of threat. The discussion begins with relevant arguments from the pre-independence period and then moves on to the popular nationalism of the 1950s and spatial models suggested by key articulators of this nationalism. It then turns to the contesters of this nationalism – Buddhist monks and lay people who sought to challenge the ideas of inclusivist subordination and exclusivism which were implied through the ‘models’ discussed.

The aim of this paper is to examine inter-religious and inter-communal conflict in post-colonial Sri Lanka through the lens of space, focussing particularly on exclusion and inclusion of the religious ‘Other’, in the conviction that such a strategy will help in forming a nuanced understanding of the post-colonial and particularly the post-war period.

The beginning of the narrative

Paul Pieris tapped into the concept of the Sinhale in two historical narratives about the Kandyian Kingdom. He assumed that the Sinhale referred to the whole country. His linguistic choices were in consonance with and

appealed to an educated, largely middle-class Buddhist group which was united under the belief that the Buddhists and the Sinhalese suffered under colonialism. Three reports were commissioned to analyse the state of Buddhism in the post-colonial polity. Each of them voiced a sense of victimhood in the face of a threat.

A 1953 conference of the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress resulted in the first of such a report in 1954. Its task was 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” (Buddhist Committee of Inquiry 1956, Foreword). The report represented the island as “the oldest living Buddhist nation in the world,” which had prevented “confused and conflicting accounts of the Master’s teaching dominating the world” (Buddhist Committee of Inquiry 1956, iii). It stressed suffering at the hands of “Indian hordes” and under the Portuguese, Dutch and British (Buddhist Committee of Inquiry 1956, vii). It argued that the colonial land policy of the British resulted in the impoverishment of the *vihāras*. This is what the report had to say on the present:

Most strange of all it has become possible to build Christian Churches on land dedicated to temples. One recent case is the proposed Roman Catholic Church at Yayamulla in the Kurunegala District on

land dedicated to the Kataragama Dewale in Kandy.
(Buddhist Committee of Inquiry 1956, vii)

The common refrain through the report was that Christian bodies had influence and privileges that made them “a serious threat to the State” (Buddhist Committee of Inquiry 1956, 16). The report also detailed how Catholic action was supposedly infiltrating political structures and how the Roman Catholic church was starting colonising missions. The report made it very clear that the threat here – to Buddhism’s spatial superiority and to the state – was Christianity and the report’s recommendations were geared towards ending what it perceived as the dictatorship of the Church (1956, 23).

The second such commission was that of the Commission of Inquiry, a Sinhala Commission, appointed in December 1996 to examine Sinhala grievances in the previous two centuries, including the appropriation of Buddhist ancestral lands. However, the interim report of 1997 focused entirely on the devolution proposals of the then government of Chandrika Kumaratunge, presenting them as “the biggest threat faced by Sri Lanka in its entire history of more than 2500 years” (National Joint Committee 1997, 1) because of their stance that accepted the “Northern and Eastern Provinces’ as ‘the traditional homelands’ of the Tamils” (National Joint Committee 1997, 24), thus rendering the central government almost impotent. The final report presented the

Sinhala people as victims of vicious colonial policies that had robbed them of their livelihoods, their environment and their land, and also brought in “alien people (South Indian labour) to the lands expropriated” (Harris 2018, 146). The threat here, in addition to oppression by British colonisers, was the state itself, because it was about to sacrifice the unity of the land. The third report, commissioned after the 2004 tsunami focussed particularly on whether Buddhists affected by the tsunami had become victims of unethical conversions.

1953 also marked the publication of *The Revolt in the Temple*, designed to commemorate the 1956 Buddha Jayanti celebrations, which marked, within Sinhala Buddhist consciousness, the Buddha’s death, 2,500 years of Buddhism and 2,500 years of the Sinhala ‘race’. The work contained a history of Sri Lanka, an account of Buddhist practice and principles, remarks on ‘Sinhalese Nationalism’, and a chapter on Christianity and Civilization. With its motif of Tamils as vicious destroyers of Buddhism, the text was rife with the theme of victimhood. One such instance was its claim that, in 1215, “They [Tamils] killed man and beast, broke images, destroyed temples and books and libraries, made dwelling-places of vihāras, and tortured the rich for their wealth” (Amunugama 1953, 72). The British administration was called a “yoke” (Amunugama 1953, 98). The 1840 Crown Lands Ordinance was mentioned as the “dispossessor of Sinhalas from their lands” (Amunugama 1953,

106), condemning them to serfhood. The writers called for a Sinhala nation as a response:

Just as in the spring-time of life the same message bursts from the unconscious to the conscious self and becomes objective, so to the Sinhalese there had come a reawakening, a desire to create a State which should be Sinhalese, reared up by Sinhalese hands, and breathing a Sinhalese atmosphere in the land of Sinhalese tradition. (Amunugama 1953, 438)

As a work *The Revolt in the Temple* gave voice to the popular nationalism that linked nation, religion, language and land, which moved centre stage in the 1950s. It is important to note the double-sided lineage of the consciousness that informed it. On the one hand, there was a motif, refined in the colonial period, of the Sinhalese besieged and victimised by the British. On the other hand, there was a yearning for continuity with the perceived polity of “the pre-colonial Sinhalese kingdoms” (Arasaratnam 1998, 44), when the whole island was claimed for Sinhala Buddhism.

A common refrain in the post-colonial period, connected to the theme of victimhood was “We [the Sinhalese] only have one country. All other ethnic groups can look to other countries” (Harris 2018, 148). Such a feeling of victimhood is expressed in the following speech by a monastic Sangha when he says that:

Sri Lanka is a Sinhala Buddhist country, although non-Sinhalese and non-Buddhists have lived here for a long time... For the non-Sinhalese even if they do not have Sri Lanka as their home, their races have other countries of their own. Hence these races will never get annihilated. But the Sinhalese have one and only one country and that is Sri Lanka. (Schonthal 2016, 106)

In the face of the possible fragmentation of this idealised hierarchical model at the hands of the Tamil separatist Other from the 1970s onwards, many other spatial models emerged within Sinhala consciousness. The paper, as mentioned earlier will explore two such models: one geographical and one cultural. While the geographical model deals with the re-ordering of demography and geography to assert Sinhala dominance, the cultural model asserts that there was an underlying and unifying cultural ethos throughout the country, *Jāthika Chintanaya*, and that this extended to minorities.

Asserting Sinhala dominance through re-ordering demography

The proposed re-ordering of demography had its roots in the inclusivist subordination in the Kandyan Kingdom. It put forth the proposal that Sinhalese and Tamils should live throughout the island in numbers proportionate to their national ratio. Malinga Gunaratne, once involved with a colonisation project in Madura Oya, south of

Trincomalee, from 1983 to 1988 articulated it passionately. Gunaratne's position was rooted in the assumption that the ethnic conflict was land-based; that the unity of the country must be maintained and that separatism must be defeated. His solution was for Tamils to live alongside Sinhalas, as fraternal citizens, in the South and the North, in the overall national domain. This was done to avert any possibility of a separate state. However, his plans to make this happen failed. Gunaratne's following speech reveals the imaginary logic behind the project:

You are assembled here today, not only to get a piece of land for you to live on, but for a more lofty purpose. This country is going through her worst period in history. We are being threatened from all sides by separatists. What the separatist wants is land. A contiguous block of land which they propose to call Eelam. You are going to break that contiguity. You are going to live among the innocent Tamil people as brothers and sisters. Not as enemies. Please remember that. That is my first lesson. We go into the midst of the peace loving Tamils and we live with them. We will protect them. It is only then that there can be a united Sri Lanka. We cannot allow anyone to draw a line across this country and say this is Sinhala land, this is Tamil land. The land of this country belongs to everybody – Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Malay, Burgher. This is our heritage, every inch of it has to be looked after jealously. Anyone has a right to live wherever he wants. We cannot allow separatist terrorists to carve out a part of this country for a dif-

ferent state in Sri Lanka.... United Sri Lanka should be defended to the last drop of blood of her people. (Gunaratne 1998, 80–81)

Interestingly enough, the national ratio model was also advocated by the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP – People’s Liberation Front) before their failed insurrection of 1971 when they had come up with the idea of “the reallocation of the country’s population so that Sinhalese and Tamils would be dispersed all over the island” (Jayawardena 2003, 66).

Another version of this proposal was brought forward by C.M. Madduma Bandara. He proposed that Sinhalese should control the riverbanks and rivers, and that each province should have access to the sea. He proposed a re-drawing of provincial territorial boundaries to accord with “the hydraulic logic of river basins” (Korf 2009, 101). The Northern Province would be smaller and the East would be split into three provinces, each with a Sinhala majority. Korf termed it ‘cartographic violence’ or a “Sinhala kind of geography” (Korf 2009, 101), a nationalist solution “to exert spatial control over the island-space” (Korf 2009, 113). Liyanage, accusing Madduma Bandara of having an “abstract, narrow and empty” notion of space that ignored its socio-cultural elements called it “racism disguised in space” (Harris 2018, 152). Both these models can be seen in the light of a Sinhala imaginary that pre-dated the arising of

full-blown nationalism. Both attempted, in line with the conceptual framework of inclusivist subordination, to integrate a potentially threatening Other into the ethos of the majority.

Jāthika Chintanaya

Jāthika Chintanaya, a concept theorised by Gunadasa Amarasekera and Nalin de Silva, with its assertion that there was an underlying and unifying cultural ethos throughout the country became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Amarasekera defined it as “a culture based national ethos, and all-pervading national psyche peculiar to each nation” (Harris 2018, 153) – “a transcendent culture”. In Sri Lanka’s case it was “primarily a product of the humane, civilised way of life of the Sinhala Buddhists of this country over the centuries” (Harris 2018, 154). While he did not argue that Sri Lankan minorities did not have their own culture, he did assert that if they “went back to their own cultural roots and moorings”, they would be led to “this transcendent culture” (Harris 2018, 151), namely they would find that they were, in their hearts, in tune with Sinhala Buddhist culture. De Silva, for his part argued that this culture could be contrasted with ‘Yudev Chintanaya’ (Jewish Chintanaya), which was conditioned by rationalism, and an inability to live in harmony with nature or to see that phenomena were interconnected. Although this was idealistically advocated as a solution to ethnic division and racism,

it was nevertheless a further attempt at subordination through ideological assimilation. It meant that S.L. Gunasekera could accuse Tamils of racism for wishing to divide the island, violating its *Jāthika Chintanaya*.

The Other as threat or object of ridicule

The models just outlined represented the Other as friend provided that it was subordinate to Sinhala consciousness. However, this does not take away the fact that early on in the post-independence polity the Tamil and the Christian Other was portrayed as the outright threat. Jayawardena has demonstrated that, in the 1960s, Sri Lanka's left parties, which had supported minority rights, played a communal card, through appealing to the Sinhala perception that they were victims surrounded by "aliens" (Jayawardena 2003, 51). She focussed on the exploitation of two perceptions: that "foreign or minority-owned business ventures" had adversely affected Sinhala traders; that non-Sinhala people had an unfair share of government jobs and university places" (Jayawardena 2003: 50). In the mid-1960s, leftist newspapers carried anti-Christian articles, raised antipathy towards plantation Tamils and also opposed the Dudley/Chelvanayakam Pact on the grounds that it "betrayed the birth-right of the Sinhalese" (Jayawardena 2003: 60). A stress on the archaeological aspect whipped up the fear that archaeological remains in the North and East linked to Sinhala Buddhism were being destroyed.

Sasanka Perera has demonstrated how art and comedy played into this by stereotyping Tamils- as the Other that could be ridiculed. He drew attention to a buffoon-like Tamil character, beloved of Sinhala theatre goers – Sergeant Nallathambi, created in the 1980s by the comedian, Nihal Silva. If the wider context of Tamils being represented as a threat is considered, this can be seen as another method of subordinating the Other. However, such an attempt would never be tolerated if it was directed at Buddhism or the Sinhala nation. The mass hysteria that arose in reaction to Stanley Tambiah’s book, *Buddhism Betrayed?* was such an example. According to Perera this demonstrated both that non-Sinhalas writing about Buddhism would not be tolerated and that criticism, or even a questioning of actions undertaken on behalf of the Sinhala nation, was analogous to ‘blasphemy’. (Perera 1995, 27)

Historiography designed to affirm or contest the Sinhala Buddhist hegemony

Historiography was used both in independent Sri Lanka and the colonial times to construct and augment the imaginaries just outlined. In his work examining the inscriptional and literary evidence Paranavitana argued that the “final abandonment” of the Jaffna peninsula, by the Sinhala “seems to have taken place in comparatively recent times” (Paranavitana 1961, 190). He further argued that a separate kingdom in the North only emerged

in the thirteenth century under the name Jāvaka, because of a Malay lineage (Paranavitana 1961, 193–204). Interestingly enough used the term “traditional homeland” (Paranavitana 1961, 217) to describe the relationship between Sinhala and the North. Serena Tennekoon argues that it was after the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 that historical discussions of this kind assumed the proportions of a national obsession with political and religious leaders “reconstructing the Sinhala past” (Tennekoon 1987, 1) in newsprint media. Tennekoon examined three debates in the Sinhala newspaper, the *Divayina* one of which was concerned with whether an independent Tamil kingdom existed in the North. The debate began with Gamini Iriyagolla, who judged the idea a “blatant lie concocted by Tamil politicians” (Tennekoon 1987: 3). Carlo Fonseka challenged this position and argued that historical evidence suggested that an independent Tamil kingdom existed in the North in the thirteenth century. The heated and long debate that ensued eventually morphed into one that echoed a colonial debate: the antiquity of Sinhala presence in the North and whether the ‘Dravidians’ had always been invaders of an essentially Sinhala island. The side that seemed to win was the one stressing that it was the Sinhala, with an unbroken culture now under threat, which had historical priority. And when in 1991 the Vallipuram gold plate re-emerged in the media, Malini Dias of the Department of Archaeology claiming that it proved that by about the second century the whole of Sri Lanka was Sinhala dominated.

Anuradha Seneviratna was one such historian whose historiography justified this discourse. He argued that Sinhala and Sri Lanka were coterminous in history; Sri Lanka was the land of the Sinhala. Drawing upon the Vijaya myth he stressed that the princess whom Vijaya married might not have been Tamil but Pandyan and, therefore, Aryan (Seneviratna 1999, 12). He insisted that when Buddhism was strong in South India, Tamil was taught in Sri Lankan Buddhist monastic schools and South Indian Tamils were used as mercenaries, only later becoming invaders. He then goes on to argue that Tamil settlements in Sri Lanka were not numerous until the tenth century and that, before the thirteenth century, there were only pockets of Tamil habitation. He pointed to the changing of place names in the North from Sinhala to Tamil and the eclipsing of Buddhist devotional centres because of Tamil migration after the thirteenth century. His solution for peace in Sri Lanka was assimilation: “The people who migrated to Sri Lanka from South India over thousands of years must assimilate into the majority community by sharing each others’ cultural features and living together making the whole of Sri Lanka their only home” (Seneviratna 1999, 68–69). While lamenting the lack of this, particularly that Sinhala could not live in “Tamil areas,” he pleaded for Sinhala to respect the language and culture of the Tamils, and for Tamils to respect the majority culture in order for “harmonious living” to be established (Seneviratna 1999, 69).

In such a context, when the Tamil nationalists used the phrase “traditional homelands of the Tamil people” to denote the North and the East of the island, it became a particular Sinhala grievance. This was seen as a falsification of history and a violation of the ideal ordering of the country, namely inclusivism rather than exclusivism. All this crystallised on the eve of the 1994 elections, when a letter, signed by monastic and lay Buddhists, stated as an “inviolable” principle that the Northern and Eastern Provinces should not “be accepted as the traditional homelands of the Tamils” (Harris 2018, 152). Then in 1999, the person who wrote as Kumbakarna, lambasted with moral indignation the possibility that “not even a footprint of a Sinhalese” would be allowed on the “sacred soil of the Tamil homeland” (Harris 2018, 152).

The author of this text argues that within Sinhala consciousness, the term “federalism” carried the same connotation as ‘traditional homelands.’ Gunadheera explains this in linguistic terms. He argued that the word federalism has no equivalent in Sinhala. He also highlighted that a notable Sinhala-English Dictionary stated that it was the joining together of “two separate entities” (Gunadheera 2011, 67). Therefore federalism for many Sinhalas implied that a separate state in the North and East would precede federalism – an idea that was anathema to the imaginary just elaborated upon.

Ellawala Mēdhānanda Thera, a leader within the Jāthika Hāla Urumaya (JHU), practised this form of historiogra-

phy, through archaeological researches into what he saw as the Sinhala Buddhist heritage of the North and East. He tried to establish that Sri Lanka “from its early history” was a unitary State, administered justly by Sinhala Buddhist kings. Early Tamil inscriptions in the North were explained through the need to cater for South Indian traders. He claimed that in the Jaffna peninsula alone there were 45 sites with Sinhala Buddhist ruins (Fernando 2016, 268) and, in the East, Hindu temples had been built over 100 Buddhist *vihāras*.

Mēdhānanda insisted that this heritage was under threat—not only from Tamils but, in the East, from “a future Muslim Fundamentalist rule” (Mēdhānanda 2005, 30). The LTTE were doing further damage, for instance taking bricks from stūpas to build huts. Nevertheless, Mēdhānanda did speak enthusiastically about a friendship with a Hindu priest in “Kadurugoda”. The caption under a photograph of them both stated, “He wanted to pose with me. Then who wants to separate?” (Mēdhānanda 2005, 391). According to him inter-religious harmony was possible and necessary but on condition that this Sinhala Buddhist heritage was recognised.

The vociferous opposition mounted by the monastic Sangha, particularly from members of the JHU and the JVP, to any form of agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to enable co-operative delivery of aid to the victims after the tsunami of December 2004 should be seen in the light of this, since it appeared

to recognize these “homelands” and the LTTE as a legitimate ruler of them. A prevalent fear was that it might have enabled the LTTE to convince the international community that it was capable of administering a separate state.

Contesting the Sinhala Buddhist imaginary

Such a representation of history however did not go unnoticed and unchallenged. R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, in a classic study of historiography, contested the two historical imaginaries that he believed underpinned the ethnic conflict – that there had been a golden age of Tamil culture in Jaffna, and that Sinhala language and ethnicity had existed in Sri Lanka from the beginnings of its history. He argued that Sri Lankan Buddhism between the fifth and ninth centuries was pan-Asian and cosmopolitan by showing that Buddhists from many Asian countries, including India, lived in the island or visited pilgrimage sites. Therefore it was a false question to define Buddhist remains in the North and East as proof of Sinhala dominance. Roberts, in his article provocatively titled “History as Dynamite” similarly condemned the “retrospective romanticism” present in both Sinhala and Tamil reconstructions of the past, for instance those connected with the Vijaya narrative and the defensive Tamil reclamation of Rāvana. He pointed to the dangers of equating the “history of Sri Lanka with the history of the Sinhala,” that is, those who became Sinhala (Roberts

2000, 11). Obeyesekere also called for a deconstruction of myths of racial purity in Sri Lanka, “the freezing of categories” (Harris 2018, 154), citing numerous examples of porous boundaries between Sinhala and Tamil. Two edited collections published by the Social Scientists Association (SSA) in 1984 and 1987 were hugely influential in contesting fixed, non-porous racial boundaries in Sri Lanka’s history.

As far as media is concerned, James Rutman’s article which appeared in 1998 arguing for Tamil and European “blood” within the ruling Bandaranaike family is a prominent example. The article went a long way in contesting essentialized ethnic categories. The idea of *Jatika Chintanaya*, was also challenged. Reggie Siriwardena contested the idea and argued for a multi-ethnic consciousness rooted in “tolerance, openness and pluralism”. He argued that these qualities had been present in the borrowings that Sinhala culture had made throughout its history. H.L. de Silva, in 1991, called for a “higher nationalism”, which rose above group nationalism to embody “a concept of co-existence and solidarity among all the different groups” (De Silva 1991, 6).

Even many monks from the Sri Lankan Buddhist monastic Sangha have contested the nationalist imaginary. Delgalle Padumasiri was one such monk who had worked in the North risked his life for the defence of Tamils. This is what he has to say in this regard:

The solutions are crystal clear in Buddhism. The first step is to ask what caused the war in the North and East. Why did the young people take up arms? The same thing happened in the South. The key to the solution is rooted in this basic question. We must tackle the causes. (Harris 1998, 113)

The following is an excerpt from a speech by a monk Kumburugamuve Vajira:

The Sangha, as an intellectual and inspirational community must enable the Sinhalese to rid themselves of *avijja* [ignorance] – of misconceptions that they are the superior race on the island and that other ethnic groups have to be subordinate. (Harris, 2001, 208)

These are but a fraction of the monks who diverged from the dominant discourse represented in the Sinhala and English press.

But still the Sinhala imaginary demonstrates a “holding on” to a historiography that can tolerate the non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist Other only if it is subordinated within a united whole. If subordination of the Other is threatened within this imaginary, then the Sinhala people are seen as in danger of extinction. It was to this that movements such as the Movement for the Defence of the Motherland (Maubima Surakeeme Viyaparaya), formed in 1986, the National Movement Against Ter-

rorism (NMAT), formed in the late 1990s and the Sinhala Veera Vidhana (SVV), formed in 1995, appealed. Their consistent position was that there was no ethnic problem in the country, only a problem of “Tamil racist terrorism” that had to be defeated militarily, if the Sinhala nation was to be saved. Without a harmonious resolution of such fissures, the fissures within the Sinhala nation-space are unlikely to disappear.

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