The Wave of Sinhala Buddhist Supermacism and Muslims of Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Sri Lanka, a predominantly a Theravada state, is recovering from 30 years of civil war between the minority Tamil rebels (popularly known as LTTE) and the state. Majority of the people anticipated a dawn of peace and reconciliation, particularly among various ethnic groups, in the country following the elimination of war. However, what happened in the aftermath of the war was the reverse with a rearing ugly head of Sinhala Buddhist Supermacism that attempts to juxtapose the minorities as the others against majority Buddhists. Part of this process has been done by BoduBalaSena(BBS), a Sangha led movement espousing themselves as an unofficial police, calling for severe restriction on the Muslim population and their way of life including halal food, slaughtering cattle, wearing of hijab, and calling for prayers( especially early in the morning and late night). The Sangha in Sri Lanka seems to be learning from their counterparts in Burma and Thailand where there is a strong anti-Muslim sentiment that resulted in the persecution of Muslims in Burma lately. It is indubitably believed that a stridently venomous anti-Muslim campaign has been stirred by Sangha(BBS) with a political patronage. This study attempts to explore the ideology of the BBS and the implications of such ideology in the country. This is a qualitative study with interviews and observations being used as tools for the data collection process. The findings reveal that the modern Sangha in a majority Buddhist state such as Sri Lanka is faced with a challenge in the shape of modern democracy and the multinational nature of their society. It also shows that the Sangha seems to draw inspiration from a hegemonic past rather than acknowledging the reality of a multi-faith and multi-cultural world order. Thus, there is a greater need for, people’s representatives, scholars and social activists to find an answer to allay this political anxiety and avert a carnage that it promises to deliver.

Keyword: Peace, Reconciliation, Sinhala Buddhist Supermacism, Buddhist State, anti-Muslim Campaign.

Introduction

Buddhism is generally perceived as a religion of peace and non-violence. However, empirically, this hardly describes Buddhism in many countries where it is the state religion or the religion of majority. Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka have spawned protracted violence between the majority Buddhists and the ethnic/religious minorities. Even now, the Sangha led violence both in Burma¹ and Sri Lanka is dashing the hope of democratic recovery and reconciliation. This phenomenon has created a paradoxical paradigm in the academic analysis of Buddhism and is problematic for all those who accord Buddhism as a philosophy of ahimsa, the moral principal of non-violence that is theoretically rudimentary aspects of Buddhism.

In this respect, Buddhism is not unique, for all the major religious preach peace and harmony and deprecate violence. The impact of 9/11, even after a decade, has generated a lot of academic materials

on the theme of religious violence and its socio-political ramifications. The major part of the work produced by the Western scholars has gravitated around Islam and Judaism (Al Rasheed 2009, Eagleton 2005, Habeck 2006, Juergenmeyor 2000, 2011, Kirsch, 2009). This is not surprising, given the level of internal and cross border conflict seen in countries where Islam is either the state religion or the religion of majority. The domino effect of the so-called ‘Arab spring’, the continuing conflict in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria, and the possible nuclear programme of Iran are all grist to this mill. So are the Israeli military actions and reactions.

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

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

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

**Bodu Bala Sena**

Many sections of Sri Lankan civil society were taken aback at the sudden emergence of a systematic anti-Muslim campaign in many parts of the island. This has largely been mobilized by a new organization called the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)-The Army of Buddhist Power. The BBS is mainly a lay organization, but the leadership is impressive, for it includes several prominent members of the Sangha. Ven. Kirana Vimalajothi There is Chairman; Ven. Glagoda Gananasaara Thera is a General secretary and spokesperson (and particularly militant), Ven. Haputale Pannasara Thera and Ven.l Vitarandeniya Nanda Thera are members of the executive committee. All are members of Amarapura Nikaya. Dilanta Vitanage, a senior lecturer in history at Sri Jayawardenapura University, has joined them their theoretician.

The BBS is far better organized than any traditional organization, such as the Siyam or Amarapura Nikaya and their branches. It makes good use of information technology such as the Worldwide Web and social networking sites. Its Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Wikipedia pages are more than active than many Sri Lankan state agency public profiles. They use Facebook and Cell phone taxing to organize violent protest rallies at short notice without attracting the attention of the police. In many ways this neatly fits into what Juergenmeyer has labelled ‘e-mail ethnicity’. By this display of practical efficiency, so alien to the traditional Sagha, the BBS has projected itself as the most potential ethno-religious outfit among those seeking to intervene in the volatile post-war polity of Sri Lanka.

**The BBS and anti-Muslim campaign**

2Most Sinhala names in this article are transliterated according to the traditional philological conventions, but names which in Sri Lanka have commonly used spelling keep it. The name Gnanasaara is a necessary compromise.
3http://www.bodubalasena.org/Sinhala/
The BBS moved on to rhetoric attacking Christians and, even more, Muslims. What started as a protest against some Muslim traders, who allegedly sold T-shirts and pants carrying the image of the Buddha, soon grew into a national campaign to boycott Muslim trading places and avoid selling land/property to Muslims. It then focused the complex issue of halal food certification⁵, demanding that the government completely ban it. By March 2013, over a hundred national producers and some multinational companies had withdrawn their halal certification. The Speaker of Parliament, Chamal Rajapakse, had ordered the cafeteria in parliament not merely to remove all halal food but also to sell pork, which till then had been banned out of consideration for the Muslim MPs.⁶

The BBS has also destroyed, or at the very least incited others to destroy, Muslim sites. In Dambulla, a crowd attacked and seriously damaged a mosque. There are several amateur videos of this incident posted on YouTube; see for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEzlueMWMk. The incumbent of the famous Buddhist temple at Dambulla, Inamulwee Sri Sumangala Thero, can be seen inciting the crowd, while police and soldiers are standing around doing nothing, and some Tamil civilians are praying in fear. The monk argues that Dambulla, having an old and famous Buddhist Temple, must be reserved entirely for Buddhists. What the film does not show is that the mosque being attacked is a fairly small building down a side street which no visitor would normally notice. Of course, attacking the mosque would be indefensible wherever it stood, but this point illustrates that the anti-Muslim outrages are finding issues where there none and have to create their own enemies. Comparable incidents have also occurred elsewhere. In Colombo Dehiwela, a crowd led by BBS entered a mosque by force and removed all the files, computers and documents, claiming that the mosque was thriving terrorism. In Kaluthura, they moved building material from a site where a mosque was being expanded. In Anuradhapura, an ancient Sufi centre was desecrated and demolished. There is also a clip showing Ven. Gnansara Thero forcing his way into the Government Archaeology Department to demand action from the minister: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJNbKWWYNiE. Recently a group of Buddhist Monks under the leadership of Ven. Gnansara Thero Stormed a press conference organized by the rival Jathika Bala Sena led by Watarekha Vijita Thero and abused the monks prevented him from speaking to the journalist present in the full view of the police personal present there.⁷

It is evident that the present government has come either to tolerate or even to support the BBS, at least indirectly. The BBS has had a private meeting not only with the President and his brother, Powerful Defence Secretary, but also sections of the diplomatic corps, including the Indian, Iranian, and the US embassies who apparently fear becoming the target of their campaigns. By the end of March 2013, the political power of the BBS has been shown by the way the state enacted two of their demands. First, the government has declared that it is not necessary for any business entity to apply or accredit halal certification and it is only the responsibility of the Muslims to adhere to such rule.

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

⁵Halal means permissible under Islamic law. In this context it refers to how food should be prepared and in particular how animals should be slaughtered. Muslims are not supposed to buy meat which is not in some way officially designated as halal
⁶In Sri Lanka, members of the largest religious communities, Buddhist and Hindus, rarely or never eat pork, though it is not forbidden. The speaker’s action was thus nothing but a gratuitous insult to Muslims.
⁷More on this can be read on this link http://2.hidemyass.com/ip-1/encoded/ezovL3d3dy5j62xvbWjdGVsZWDyYXB0LmNvbS9pRleC5waHAvYmJzLWduYW5hc2FyYS1zdHpa2VzLWFhYWluLw%3D%3D accessed on 12, April 2013
Buoyed by its success, the BBS has launched a campaign to ban the *niqab* (the veil worn by Muslim women) in public and to restrict the design and the siting of new mosques. They also demand that all the places of worship be monitored by the state. They are said to be hoping to propose a *Bhumi Putra* type of special tax on non-Buddhist business projects, and to restrict any land purchase by Muslims in areas such as Anuradhapura, Dambulla, Kandy, Kelaniya, and Mahiyangaha that are considered particularly important parts of the Sinhala cultural heritage. However, the most important political question is why the rulers to endorse and even encourage such demands.

**The Muslims of Sri Lanka**

Little has been done to analyse the role the Muslims have played as an ‘in-between’ community during the last 30 years of civil war, or for that matter since independence. But Muslim identity has been officially represented in the state affairs of Sri Lanka for over a century. In 1889, a Muslim member was appointed to the state assembly as an expansion of the 1833 Celebrooke-Cameron reforms (Nissan and Stirret 1990). Today, they are represented by 14 elected MPs through two major parties and two Islamic parties.

The Muslim-Buddhist relationship has been amicable compared to that between Sinhalese and Tamils. While the origin of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka is still debated, Muslims have been present at least since the 15th CE, as they were first contacted by Portuguese traders rounds 1450. The recent history of Muslims in Lanka has generally been one of coexistence, though in 1915 there were island wide anti-Muslim riots (Ali 1981, Kannangara 1984). During the recent civil war the Muslim community suffered huge social and economic damage from the LTTE as well as from state militarization. The LTTE in 1990s expelled some 90,000 Muslims overnight at gunpoint. While there were some elements of support for the separatist cause from the Muslim polity, this ethnic expulsion pushed the Muslims to seek security in the state and in return help the state to defeat the LTTE and or negate the Tamil demand for equality. These events also propelled the community to be exposed to Islamic culture to designate their identity based on religion via the employment opportunities in the Middle East and as a result of transnational Islamic movements. After the war, this may have provoked the radical monks who desire to hegemonize Buddhism as the state religion. However, the vast majority of the Muslim community has stood with the Sinhala Buddhists in their fight for the unitary status of Lanka, and in general the Gulf countries have backed Sri Lanka when it needed international support at forums like UNHRC. Therefore, BBS agitation warrants a much wider analysis than a Buddhist-Muslim dichotomy. It appears that the Sangha are eager to espouse themselves as the “state custodians” in the aftermath of military victory.

**Implications of Sinhala Buddhism on Minorities**

The uncompromising stand of BBS and the passive support of the majority of the Sangha of all major *nikayas* across the country helped to create the military mind-set which won the war in 2009. It appears that the rulers who have defeated the LTTE have only fulfilled one of the expectations of the Militant Sangha. Their wider aim to (re) establish an ethno-religious Sinhala Buddhist state is advancing more slowly than they hoped.

The attitude of the Sinhala Sangha towards the minority faiths-be they Mahayana Buddhists, Catholics, Christians, Hindus, or Muslims-has been a flashpoint. The Sinhala Sangha are not known for their tolerance of other faiths and practices if they perceive them to be a threat of any kind. Damien Keown, after editing a volume on the topic of human rights and dominant cultural paradigm, concludes that the debate is open ended, because of most Buddhist scholars are still far more interested in historical Buddhism than in discussing its relevance in the 21st century (Keown, Prebish, and Rollen 1997). In Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese considered independence to be their chance for majority rule. This is proved by many post independent undemocratic acts, such as disenfranchising of the Indian Tamils, making Sinhala the only official state language, giving religious supremacy to Buddhism and discrimination in university admissions.

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8Literally: “Son of the soil” in Sanskrit. This political term for the dominant indigenous population was coined in Malaysia by Tunku Abdul Rahman to refer to Malays, and further popularized there by Mahathir Mohamed.
In the longstanding and uncompromising pursuit of entrenching the Sinhala Buddhist hegemony upon the minorities, the Sangha has somehow been successful under certain rulers. The present climate is so healthy for the Sangha to perpetuate their ideology to the detriment of the legitimate concerns of the minorities. However, implications of such ideology is detrimental, not just to the country’s economy, but to the social fabric of the country which is considered as the home of multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-language society. Moreover, as the country underwent a diabolical war of 3 decades, it is even more vulnerable to encounter another war or violence, may be in small scale, in the coming days. More importantly, as the Geneva resolution and LLRC recommendations focused much on the maltreatment and grouses of minority communities in the country, any attack or riot against minorities in the country may spell disaster for the fate of the country in the international arena. Thus, it is imperative on the part of the rulers and Niguyas to ensure that the country is free from intolerance and attack on the minorities and their properties.

Conclusion

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

It is in this context, the role of the government and the cross-ethnic civil society is paramount in fostering an understanding between various ethnic communities. Southeast Asian Theravada states such as Burma, Thailand, Laos have already developed full-blown Buddhist Muslim conflicts that are threatening those states. It is unaffordable for the country to bear such a Buddhist-Muslim riot as happened a century ago in 1915. It is paramount that the Sangha in Lanka should find a way to address Muslim fears and concerns by dialogue and negotiation. It is equally important for the Muslim elites and politicians to find a way to avert a repetition of earlier Sinhala-Buddhist riot in the country once again.

No religious teaching gets into the heart or mind of the believers just as its founder preached it. They select and ‘tailor make’ its basics. This is how we end up having Sinhala Buddhism( or Thai Buddhism) instead of Buddhism found in the Pali canon. There again, scholars disagree about the original teaching of Gauthama Buddha. However, what is important is not such quibbles about authenticity, but how the religion is applied and practiced now. Does it promote peace and harmony, or violence and hatred?

The role of religion in instigating violent conflicts is not a linear progression, nor is it unique to any one religion. Ethno-religious violence has killed more people than any disease during the last two centuries. Religiously inflicted conflict offers avenues into power politics that are wider than others, because it is based on a historicized version of the religion and the cultural heritage of a particular ethnic group. Moreover, while each religion tries to set up university within its own sphere( Pan-Buddhism: Vishwa Paramartha Bauddha Marga, Pan-Islamic Brotherhood, Vishva Hindu Parishad, etc.), it also seeks to state truly universal claims.

The self-interested ideology of powerful elites often provides them with the motive and excuse to use violence in their search for legitimation. In its extreme form this ‘cost effective’ strategy is justified by claims that they are defending themselves against a cosmic war of persecution. In order to
perpetuate/sustain their power, they are ready even to resort to war themselves. However, the question remains unanswered. How is it that the Sinhala Sangha that have witnessed a non-stop blood bath in their Dhammadipa for the last 60 years can find the rationale for another state of such violence?

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