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SELF, RELIGION, IDENTITY AND POLITICS

Buddhist and Muslim encounters in
contemporary Sri Lanka



DHAMMIKA HERATH & HARSHANA RAMBUKWELLA

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International Centre for Ethnic Studies

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Self, religion, identity and politics:

Buddhist and Muslim encounters in contemporary Sri Lanka

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Introduction – Why religious confrontation? Why now?

Towards the latter half of 2012, on a hot September afternoon, a few of us, including the two authors of this paper, were gathered in the Board Room of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies on Kynsey Road in Colombo. We were discussing potential project proposals to be sent to donors and one idea, which was generating much animated discussion, was the emergence of the BBS (the *Bodu Bala Sena* or ‘Buddhist Power Force’, if literally translated). This moment was suffused with multiple ironies. The ICES has long been associated with a liberal, multicultural ethos and recognized for being a nerve centre of scholarly interventions into Sri Lanka’s conflicted postcolonial identity in the 1980s through 1990s. There would have been many echoes of the kind of discussion we were having in the decades past, by people similar to us, probably driven by motives similar to ours – seeking both scholarly engagement and intervention in ongoing social issues in the country. Yet, one of the central ironies framing the discussion we were having was the fact that it was happening post-2009 – a watershed year which many in the scholarly community, the general public and international “watchers” of Sri Lanka, saw as a turning point.

At a very general and commonsensical level, 2009 was a turning point because a three-decade war that had framed most aspects of life in Sri Lanka was finally over. It was in the immediate aftermath of the 1983 anti-Tamil violence that Newton Gunasinghe wrote his influential essay ‘May day after July holocaust’ where he proposed ethnicity as the analytical category that will supersede class in scholarly and ethical interventions in Sri Lankan society. In some ways this became a self-fulfilling prophecy because ethnicity became the dominant focus through which Sri Lankan society was understood. Many of the institutional and political solutions proposed for Sri Lanka were framed through an ethnic lens and Sri Lankan society became characterized as a polity largely divided along ethnic lines. In 2009, there was an expectation that there would be a shift in this discourse – perhaps to a more citizenship-based discourse where a national Sri Lankan identity, rather than ethnicity, would become the main focus. However, due to numerous institutional as well as societal failures, which are well documented (Ali 2014; Imtiyaz 2014; de Votta 2009) the Sri Lankan socio-political discourse failed to make the paradigm shift that was anticipated. The Sri Lankan state treated the entire northern Tamil population with suspicion following the end of the war. Large numbers of civilians were held in camps, and resettlement and return of lands occupied by the military received little priority. Even symbolic gestures, such as allowing the national anthem to be sung in Tamil, were blocked by Sinhala nationalist groups. On the other hand, some of the more exclusivist aspects of the Tamil nationalist project are lingering and there has been limited effort to critically reflect on Tamil militancy and its destructive

legacies. However, much of the Tamil nationalist agency has been displaced to the Tamil diaspora in the absence of the politico-military power of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam) as a domestic force, though factions within political parties like the Tamil National Alliance also project themselves as the inheritors of the Tamil nationalist struggle.

However, while post-2009 did not become the anticipated post-conflict scenario that was envisioned, and the ethnicized discourses of the pre-2009 era continued in incipient form, in some ways there has been a change. If ethnicity was the determinant factor pre-2009, religion, a charged and often confusing term in the Sri Lankan context, began to emerge as a new defining force in the post-2009 Sri Lankan polity. Beginning with a spate of small local level incidents, sometimes against certain Christian denominations, and sometimes against Muslim places of worship and Muslim businesses, a militant and intolerant brand of Buddhist activism began to emerge within the Sinhala polity. Its most visible and organized expression was in the form of the BBS and *Sihala Ravaya* (loosely translating as ‘Sinhala resonance’), which acted as a kind of a lesser cousin to the better funded and organized BBS. This was, however, not an entirely new phenomenon. Its antecedents can be potentially traced to the emergence of Gangodawila Soma Thera, whose confrontational preachings and untimely death was catalytic in the emergence of the JHU or *Jathika Hela Urumaya* in 2004 (Deegalle 2004). It is also important to note within this narrative that a parallel radicalization was taking place within Muslim society, which had significant impacts on intra-Muslim relations in the country, especially in the East (McGilvray 2011). This emergent Muslim radicalization, however, had little impact on the Sinhala polity until Soma Thera brought it controversially into public discussion through highly publicized statements about Muslim extremism, which culminated in a televised debate between Soma Thera and a powerful Muslim government minister M.H.M Ashraf (in the then government led by Chandrika Kumaratunga) – a kind of public-religious debate possibly not witnessed in the country since the late 19th century *Panaduravadaya* between Christian missionaries and Buddhist monks. However, we do not want to dwell on the ideological antecedents of the emergence of BBS and the kind of Buddhist radicalism it represents at this point. The above account was offered mostly to provide some background to how what we tentatively call “religious confrontation” began to supersede ethnic confrontation in the post-2009 post-war period. It is, however, necessary to note that neither the BBS nor what we have termed “Muslim radicalism” are homogenous phenomena or are representative of either the Muslim or Sinhala communities as a whole. The BBS needs to be seen as a single, if vociferous, strand of Sinhala nationalism. “Radicalization” itself is a loaded term given how this term has gained wide global currency within the discourse of the West’s so-called war on terror. It is specifically associated with Islam and seems ironically less associated with extremist religious movements within Christianity, for instance. The term is also loaded because it carries with it an entire set of assumptions about how to “de-radicalize” radical groups through

various targeted initiatives, which might be based on a poor understanding of the conditions which drive so-called “radicalization” in the first place. Radicalization has become a kind of master-signifier or coverall term for any movement that might threaten the status-quo, especially in western societies. This kind of vague and fuzzy usage of a concept can have many negative implications because once a community is labeled as “radical” it is seen as engaged in certain ways that may in fact produce a kind of wash-back effect that results in forms of extremism that did not exist in the first place (Schmid 2013). We use “radical” in this paper to signify situations where religious actors deviate from what is perceived as the norm in relation to a particular religion and its social practices. The term is not necessarily negative but is descriptive of situations where new types of behavior with potential for conflict and violence emerge.

It is with this background in mind that this study attempts to address a few specific questions:

1. From a conceptual perspective, how do we understand the emergence or religious radicalism and religious conflict in post-war Sri Lanka?
2. What factors intersect with the “religious” in driving such confrontation?
3. What are the kinds of narratives deployed by individuals and organizations to propagate religious radicalism?

This paper is based on qualitative data collection and analysis which qualitatively explores the responses of the respondents. Our methodological approach is to avoid looking at religion as a homogenous and fixed category but to examine it as shifting and fluid in meaning and practice in accordance with political and social conditions. In terms of data collection tools, we used informal interviews with respondents such as Buddhist monks, Muslim Moulavis, business people, academics and the general public. We used the snowball sampling method to identify respondents to conduct the interviews rather than approach the study areas with a fixed list of interviewees because with a snowball method we could get a more organic and grounded sense of the perspectives of important actors in our study locations. Altogether we conducted 12 interviews spread across two districts. One of the districts had tensions in the preceding period while the other remained relatively calm and hence we bring a comparative element to the discussion. The researchers as far as possible conducted the interviews in-situ, in the natural environments of the respondents and in contexts that were familiar to them. The interviews were also conducted in the manner of friendly conversations allowing for the free flow of ideas from the respondents. In the section below we discuss some of the theoretical, conceptual and historical background to the study and we then bring the empirical findings of the study into focus.

“Doing religion” in Sri Lanka

Before the specific concerns outlined above can be addressed, several conceptual issues need to be resolved – perhaps most significant among these is the category of “religion”, since we are looking at radical mobilization of religious actors. Religion seemingly suggests a very self-evident category, something we can take for granted, but closer scrutiny suggests that the category of religion needs to be critically interrogated and situated in a way that allows it to be understood in the malleable, multifaceted and flexible ways in which it functions in the day-to-day lives of people. In the Sri Lankan context, even a cursory survey suggests that religion is a highly complex category. Being Buddhist in Sri Lanka is intimately tied to Sinhala cultural and political identity. Similarly, being Muslim in Sri Lanka is to be both an ethnic category as well as a religious one. While there might be a tiny minority of non-Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka, the normative assumption is that if one is Buddhist, that he or she is Sinhala, though not vice-versa because there is a significant minority of Sinhala Christians. On the Muslim side of things, being a follower of the Islamic faith means automatically that one is of the Muslim ethnicity – there are no non-Muslim followers of Islam in Sri Lanka whereas in many other parts of the world, one’s ethnic identity can be distinct from one’s identity as a follower of the Islamic faith. Thus, “doing religion” as in studying religion from a scholarly perspective poses significant empirical and conceptual challenges.

Buddhism – shifting realities

The study of religion is nothing new to Sri Lanka. Buddhism in particular has been studied from a wide variety of perspectives ranging from social anthropology, sociology, religious studies and political science to name a few disciplinary approaches (Malalgoda 1976; Gombrich Obeyesekere 1988; Bartholmuesz 1998; Bartholmuesz and de Silva 1999; Roberts 2003; Blackburn 2010; Abeysekera 2002). While some of these studies have focused on Buddhism from a doctrinal perspective, most have looked at Buddhism as a socially embedded practice. In the 1980s and 1990s, given the increasing involvement of Buddhist monks in politics at various levels, a sharper emphasis began to emerge on Buddhism and violence – in particular Stanley Thambiah’s critique that Buddhism in Sri Lanka was deviating from its pacifist doctrinal origins and the notion of the “just war thesis” forwarded by scholars like Bartholomuesz (1998). While Bartholomuesz’ position suggested that, especially in Sri Lankan or more properly Sinhala history, a political function had always existed for Buddhism, both positions implicitly suggested that this political and socially embedded Buddhism can be distinguished from a more doctrinal perspective. While this was and continues to be a powerful ethical base from which to critique the radicalization of Buddhism, it can potentially hinder our understanding of Buddhism from a discursive perspective as Ananda Abeysekera (2002) and others have recently argued. From an analytical perspective, and even from an interventionist one, it is

perhaps best to see what is denoted as “Buddhism” not as a transcendent category but as something that is fashioned out of the everyday practices of Buddhists – either lay people or monks. In that sense what counts as Buddhism can take on significantly differing inflections, depending on time and context.

To illustrate this with a contemporary example, when Maduluwawe Sobitha Thero – the figure around whom a grouping of civil society and political forces coalesced to form the “common candidate” platform which played a crucial role in the January 8th victory of Maithripala Sirisena over the incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa – first appeared as a significant presence in the Sri Lankan political landscape in the 1980s it was something unprecedented. As Abeysekera (2001) points out, in the 1980s the Jayewardene government with its *dharmishta samajaya* discourse attempted to politically neutralize the Buddhist priesthood and confine them to the religious domain. However, monks like Sobitha refused to occupy this domain and emerged as powerful voices against the political establishment arguing that monks had a role to play in the public political sphere though he refrained from becoming directly involved in electoral politics. At the time this was seen as a radical departure from the traditional role of a Buddhist monk. However, in the recent past, Sobitha’s interventions with regard to the “common candidate” movement were viewed by many Buddhists not as radical but a welcome positive intervention to safeguard democracy and promote good governance compared to what was seen as the destructive activism of groups like BBS. What this suggests is that the societal perception of what it is to be “radical” in relation to Buddhist monkhood had changed. What was considered “radical” in the 1980s was no longer valid twenty years later. There are also certain kinds of “radicalism” which the Buddhist public may find acceptable. There is a long history of Buddhist priests engaging in political activism and especially in leftist-oriented politics. For instance, Buddhist monks played a key role in the 1956 elections which brought S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike to power and this was largely seen as a progressive social intervention by monks (Roberts 1994).

Therefore, it is not only what monks do in society that matters but also the context within which they operate that gives them legitimacy as “radical” actors. For some sections of the Buddhist polity, even the actions of the BBS were legitimate and valid and the BBS activism was a justifiable intervention to prevent what they saw as the erosion of Buddhist values and the place of Buddhists and Buddhism in the country. It is largely this perspective that is adopted in this paper and we attempt to place the views of our respondents within this context, without attributing a normative value to Buddhism. However, we pay heed to the fact that within the respondents’ own worldview dichotomies such as “pure” doctrinal Buddhism versus “corrupted” political Buddhism may exist and we allow these views to speak through in the narratives of our respondents.

Muslim identity – internal complexities

There has been relatively less coverage of Muslim identity and Islam in Sri Lanka compared to Buddhism. Some of the earliest work on Muslim identity stems from the 1915 anti-Muslim riots. However, the historical context of that Buddhist-Muslim confrontation was significantly different to what is being witnessed today. As Roberts (1994) observes, the 1915 riots were primarily targeting the so-called “Coast-Moor” community which was of relatively recent provenance. The longer-standing “traditional” Muslim community was not the target though during the violence of the riot such distinctions were not always sustained. Nonetheless, as Vijaya Samaraweera (1978) notes, one of the major factors that influenced the formation of Muslim self-identity in Sri Lanka was what can be described as a Muslim “revivalist” movement, which paralleled the Buddhist and Hindu revivals in 19th century Sri Lanka.

The Muslim community leading up to the 1980s was also rarely seen as a political or existential threat by the Sinhala community. Unlike the Tamil minority which demanded equal recognition and participation in the national public sphere most Muslim politicians were comfortable with aligning themselves with mainstream Sinhala-dominated political parties or alliances that were in power (McGilvray, 2007). There was also a tradition within the Tamil political parties of attempting to speak on behalf of the Muslim community under the umbrella term of “Tamil-speaking peoples” because it was strategically advantageous for the Tamil leadership to inflate its numbers. However with the emergence of Tamil militancy, especially the LTTE, and the growing militancy in the North and the East and deteriorating relationships between Tamil and Muslim communities, the necessity to differentiate Muslim political concerns as a separate category emerged as a serious concern within the Muslim community. Allied to this was the necessity to have Muslim political concerns identified as a specific and separate concern in any political solution that was being proposed for the Northern and Eastern provinces of the country. A significant turning point in the story of Muslim politics in Sri Lanka was the formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress in 1986 – the first ethnicity-based Muslim political party in the country. Another turning point in what might be termed the political maturation of the Muslim community was the expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna in 1990 by the LTTE in what is sometimes seen as a form of ethnic cleansing. It is the historical context described above in very broad brush strokes that led to the emergence of a much more assertive and self-aware Muslim political leadership. The emergence of charismatic A.H.M. Ashraf, who Soma Thero engaged in a televised public debate on what Soma Thera and some in the Sinhala community saw as the threat of Muslim expansionism, also took place within this context. One can arguably suggest that it is the emergence of a strong Muslim political leadership that begins to register the Muslims as a serious existential threat in Sinhala nationalist thinking. This political emergence of the Muslims also begins to subject the community to closer scrutiny by

the Sinhalese in particular in terms of its cultural and religious practices, especially in the East of the country where Muslim culture had by the 90s begun to evolve a distinct identity not visible in any significant sense in other parts of the country.

However, the inter-relationships between Muslim political movements and Muslim religious-cultural movements are complex and fraught. As in the case of Buddhism outlined above, the relative influence of the two domains at times can overlap but can at times also be oppositional. As Jonathan Spencer (2012) notes, Mosque Federations, which emerged in the mid 1980s, partly as a product of the deteriorating relations between Muslims and Tamils, are highly influential bodies in Muslim society, especially in the East, but they straddle an uneasy space between the political domain and the religious. They can play a significant role in politics but can only do so by asserting their essential religiosity; if they are seen to be political they lose the moral authority with which they can intervene in politics. In some ways one can compare this with the Buddhist situation as well where someone like Sobitha Thero has moral capital that allows him to intervene in the political domain only because he remains essentially a Buddhist priest and does not push the boundary too far.

Other recent studies of Muslim identity politics, especially in the East of the country, also suggest the danger of looking at Muslim identity politics from a homogenizing perspective. As Bart Klem (2011) argues, the empirical evidence to suggest strong Jihadi, Wahaabist or fundamentalist tendencies is somewhat thin, while all of these trends may be visible in various forms and inflections within the Sri Lankan Muslim community. Klem's ethnographic work in the Eastern town of Akkaraipattu suggests the multiplicity of discourses that inform Muslim identity as an everyday practice. At a more institutional or political level the rhetoric of Muslim political and religious leaders may imply a homogenous and even fundamentalist orientation but there can be significant gaps between such rhetorical expressions and ground realities. Similarly, the fundamentalist outpourings of groups like the BBS in the Sinhala and Buddhist community should not be used to characterize the multiplicity of discourses that inform the everyday practice of Buddhism within the Sinhala community.

One aspect that emerges from the views expressed by our respondents is a serious internal struggle within the Muslim community about its self-definition in a challenging local and global context. Locally, post-2009, the Muslim community has been one of the main targets of radical Sinhala nationalist and Buddhist groups. The visibility of certain Muslim enterprises in a highly consumerist culture – which analysts such as Kadiragamar (2013) have called the second wave of neo-liberal financialization of the Sri Lankan economy – has resulted in economic grievances and frustrations being channeled as ethno-religious hatred. It is obviously not incidental that high profile Muslim enterprises were the targets of direct violence as well as hate campaigns on social media and general rumour mongering. Globally post 9/11

and the so-called war on terror by powerful western nations has also resulted in the Muslim community developing a beleaguered view of itself. Ironically a recently held US summit on countering domestic extremism in western nations focused almost exclusively on Islamic fundamentalism, which obviously begs the question of the existence of various other forms of religious and ethnic fundamentalisms in these countries. The global war on terror discourse has also had local resonance with groups like the BBS drawing on it to justify its vilification of the Muslim community. It is within such a challenging existential context that one has to place the intricate ideological battles waged between various Muslim groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat and Thowheed Jamaat (Klem 2011; Spencer 2012). This significant internal diversity and divisiveness within the Muslim community is not something that communicates itself readily to the outside – especially to Sinhala nationalist groups and others looking at the Muslim community from outside. One has to of course remember that this is also true for the Buddhist community, as we have been stressing right throughout this paper.

Drawing the threads together

The theoretical and contextual review above suggests the necessity to approach a study of this nature without too many *a priori* notions about ethnic and religious identity or what we might term as radicalization and violence. The emergence of the BBS and other groups like *Sihala Ravaya* in the Buddhist community and the emergence of radical Muslim groups such as Thowheed Jamath and Thablique Jamath need to be seen as contingent on specific socio-historical as well as cross border geopolitical moments and contexts. The relative silence of the BBS following the defeat of the Rajapaksa presidency implies that much of the BBS' high-profile appeal was facilitated by tacit state approval. Its ability to act with impunity was also facilitated by a certain political culture that was cultivated under the Rajapaksa presidency, which while may not be completely absent in the post-Rajapaksa defeat period, has certainly taken a back seat. The contingent nature of such emergent discourses and groups suggests that our own analytical focus needs to be flexible and malleable enough to accommodate such dynamic phenomena, without fixing them in ways that may not mirror social reality.

However, as our theoretical and historical overviews suggest, one can trace two broadly parallel movements within the Buddhist and Muslim communities. Within the Buddhist community Buddhist activism and the idea of what it is to be a “good” Buddhist is being redefined in novel ways with the increased activism of Buddhist monks in the public political domain. Groups like BBS stretch this responsibility of the “good” Buddhist to the position of being a kind of quasi-Buddhist vigilante – always on the lookout for threats to Buddhist identity and the Sinhala nation in general. This militant call to a radical Buddhist activism has had some resonance within the Buddhist polity, especially with the institutional framing of the 2009

victory over the LTTE as a kind of second independence for the country. Within the Sinhala nationalist mindset a familiar set of questions have taken precedence in this scenario about the rightful place of the Sinhalese within the Sri Lankan nation – if 2009 was a second independence are the Sinhalese enjoying their rightful privileges in the country in this new found era of liberation? However, while such an exclusionary discourse may have had high visibility due to the activities of groups like the BBS, there has also been a concomitant reaction within the Buddhist polity to “return” to the pacifist fundamentals of Buddhism and to question the place of Buddhist monks in public life and declare the necessity to reform the Sangha institution.

At the same time our data suggests that there are narratives that cut across ethnic and religious lines. For instance there is the conventional narrative of modernity versus tradition, increasing consumerism and loss of spirituality, the weakening of religious institutions and the existential fear of other communities encroaching on one’s existence. We now provide a more detailed account of the specific context in which our study took place and embed our respondents’ views within this contextual frame.

Radicalization as an internal critique

Is religious radicalization necessarily a movement against another religion or practices? Both Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders interviewed express a sense of beleaguement about loss of traditional culture and the impact of consumerist culture and westernization. In the case of Buddhist monks that we spoke to, their primary concern was that Sri Lankan society has become highly commercialized, consumerist and immoral. They believe that the politicians only pay lip service to protecting society and the “traditional” culture. As a result the Buddhist monks think that the community of Sangha can no longer perform the traditional role of guiding the people and the leaders in righteous behavior. In other words, the Buddhist monks feel they have lost their role in society and therefore, religion as an institution, is losing its place. For Buddhist monks, this involves the loss of traditional moral and spiritual leadership and hence they think it is their duty to point this out and protect the people and culture as they see themselves as having done from time immemorial.

On the side of the Muslim community, while an internal struggle for self definition has been ongoing due to the local and global context discussed above, it is interesting to find that the Muslim informants that we spoke to shared the core problem as one that emanates from within – a threat emanating from newer and more radical Islamic sects. In Sri Lanka the historical roots of the Muslims go back hundreds of years. The established practice of Islam in Sri Lanka is largely Sunni and has been traditionally accommodative in its religious practices, maintaining cordial links with other religious and socio-cultural groups and also allowing for a diversity of practices such as Sufi saint worship, which goes back at least a couple of centuries.

However, many of these Muslims who see themselves as “traditional” that we spoke to expressed fear that the newer sects are making inroads into their community and changing the dynamics of Muslim society by introducing stricter definitions of Islam. “Traditional” Muslims also believe that the newer sects are trying to change established Muslim cultural practices which are embedded in the Sri Lankan social structure. These cultural practices include the dress (particularly of females), funeral rites and mosque practices. The traditional saint worship among some Sufi sects has also come under threat -- “traditional” Muslim informants claimed that at times, violent reactions were visible from the newer sects. Many of the informants we spoke to expressed fear that people are being forced to change practices which they had been socialized to accept as normal from their childhood and especially practices which they consider as rightly Islamic within their cultural context. A Muslim elder from Ginthota in Galle district said:

Some people cut and killed a businessman and burnt down his shop worth millions. It belonged to a person from the traditional sect. The people who attacked and killed belonged to Thowheed Jamaat. It was over funeral rituals. The case regarding the rituals went to a special Waqf board [a kind of Islamic dispute resolution body]. They decided after performing all old rituals, that the new sect can do their own way [sic] if they want.

Traditional Muslims think the newer sects are funded by foreign elements, especially, Saudi Arabia, which they think is the funding source behind Wahhabist tendencies. One of the Muslim leaders claimed personal involvement in the distribution of financial resources from foreign sources. He said that he worked in a diplomatic mission where he was in charge of financial support which came from abroad.

Sri Lanka Thowheed Jamaat (SLTJ) was founded within the last 20 years. This Jamaat is funded by the xxx to spread their way of practicing the Islamic religion. The Tsunami was a good chance for foreign elements to come here.... From the time SLTJ was founded, clashes started among the Muslims. They say no “saints”, no birthday of the Prophet and no feast. They have a different ideology. That is one of the movements funded by foreign elements. The other one is BBS.

I was working for the embassy of xxx (in Colombo) for the past four years. Thowheed Jamaat people always came to the Embassy when I was working there. The money was coming to a center in Paragahadeniya in Kurunegala. It is the place Wahhabism was founded in Sri Lanka ... The ambassador wanted to get a monthly report as to what they have done ... Now those payments are given by the embassy. This movement gets paid more than one lakh per month ... just for spreading their ideology among the Muslims in this country.

This Muslim leader from Galle claims that a government from the Middle East is financing the spread of Wahhabism in Sri Lanka and that their primary impact group is the Muslims who follow what he considers traditional Islam. This suggests that on both the Muslim and Buddhist sides there is congruence in the narrative about “foreign conspiracies” and external involvement. At one level while there is obviously some empirical reality to these narratives they also seem to allow the two communities to displace anxieties about radicalization within their communities outwards. There is, therefore, quite a lot of commonality among the Buddhist and Muslim concerns that societal and cultural changes pose a threat that unseats community elders from roles that they have performed in society as spiritual and lay leaders and advisers. However, in the Buddhist side this narrative is primarily seen as change brought about through westernization and consumerist consumption but also framed by a host of external threats such as proselytization by Christian sects and Islamic expansionism. The Buddhist perspective is also significantly inflected by Sinhala nationalist concerns because Buddhism and Sinhala identity are intimately connected, but we will not be exploring this aspect in-depth because nationalism per se is not the primary focus of this study. For Muslims while there is an obvious threat posed by groups like the BBS and the fact that they are being increasingly targeted as a minority community there is also a significant sense of threat emanating from within Muslim culture itself. It is, however, important to remember that even in the case of extremist groups like the BBS the initial target was internal self-critique and reform and it is later that this self-critique becomes externalized as a threat posed by others. In both the Muslim and Buddhist communities there is a convergence in the view that the religious communities need to be somehow “purified” in light of their corruption in the modern world.

Islamophobia and collective threat

To an ordinary outside observer perhaps the most obvious way in which ultra-nationalist Buddhist movements are seen is as a form of Islamophobia expressed in various ways. We were interested in finding out whether there is actually such a discourse of Islamophobia among the Buddhist monks and important lay actors we interviewed. Buddhists informants strongly expressed a collective threat emanating from what they perceive as the expansion of Muslims in general and especially from what they see as radical Muslim movements which they think have the potential to cause violence – similar to the LTTE in the past.

During the recent episodes of violence and during a period of increased tensions, the Muslim population and its political and religious leadership have chosen to be pacifist, for instance, playing down the significance of the Halal certificate (the recent crisis over Halal certification raised by Buddhist groups claiming that Halal was being surreptitiously enforced on non-Buddhists) issue and offering alternative

suggestions and so on. They have also largely abstained from reacting with violence against the provocations of groups like BBS and Sihala Ravaya. However, some of the Buddhist respondents we spoke to believed that this “show of cordiality” was a deceptive ploy used by the Muslims for their advantage. So, Buddhists see it more as a means by which Muslims hope to maintain the status quo and pursue their ulterior motives.

We also repeatedly encountered the popular notion of Muslim expansionism due to rapid population increase. The fact that the Muslim population has increased in absolute terms cannot be denied according to the information from the Department of Census and Statistics but one needs to be careful as to how these numbers are interpreted. However, when we pointed out that the Muslim population is about 9% of the population and that it could not possibly pose a threat to the Sinhalese population which is 75%, informants retorted that there are some countries in South Asia such as Afghanistan and Bangladesh which were historically Buddhist but were converted to Islam and that one cannot rule out the same fate for Sri Lanka as Muslims have expansionist ambitions. It is evident that the discourse of the threat that Islam poses is one that is driven by fear of future subjugation. The fear narrative is informed by assumed pan-Islamic expansion that is said to have occurred in the past. A leading Buddhist monk from Galle, whom people in the area believe to have BBS sympathies, said the following in response to our comment that Buddhists are the majority in Sri Lanka:

Sinhalese are the majority 75% and Muslims are about 9% but you say we should not take it too lightly? That is foolishness to be complacent because we are the majority. The problem lies in the future. Who made the 75%? Our past people made it. Take Afghanistan...who made Bamiyan (statues)...who built it? The Buddhists.... Who destroyed it? Did people come from abroad or the third generation of locals do this? The current problem is not about building tall Buddha statues. We need to create a Buddhist society. The same would happen here not too far in the future. We need to produce Buddhist children.

The monk here refers to the tendency among Buddhist parents to have smaller families as against what he sees as larger families among the Muslims. This has resonance with the appeals made by the late Buddhist monk Soma Thero who led an active campaign to promote more childbearing among Buddhist parents. It is doubtful whether this has had any real impact. However, he also makes another significant point when he states that ‘We need to produce Buddhist children.’ According to the monk, currently the leaders of the country are engaged in a show of being Buddhist with massive Buddha statues being erected and so on while at the same time Buddhist values and practices are disappearing. So, he sees the problem among the Buddhists as much an internal problem as it is an external one. He stated that as long as people

do not practice Buddhist values and children are not socialized into Buddhist society, a Buddhist culture cannot prevail. He further mentioned that:

So is the threat from population expansion? No, the threat to Buddhists comes from Buddhists themselves also. They don't live according to principles. They misbehave on Poya days ... not Muslims but Buddhists even near temples ... playing drums ... so we can't blame others. So we need to be strong ... First let's look to that. Stand upright. Send children to Dhamma school on Sundays.

In this case the monk presents a self-critique that Buddhist society is immoral and that it does not live according to Buddhist principles. He mentions that young people behave unacceptably on holy days and that they consume alcohol even near temples. However, he thinks that Muslims are very religious and live according to an Islamic way of life. He reiterates that Buddhist children must go to Dhamma schools on Sundays and need to be trained in Buddhist principles and morals. This can be seen as a majoritarian self-critique that shores up a discourse of mistrust and suspicion about a minority community and allows the majority to rationalize its reaction as a legitimate one arising from an existential fear.

Cultural othering

The Buddhist informants we interviewed mentioned that Muslims are trying to be exclusivist and culturally position themselves as distinct from others. They argued that from time immemorial the Muslims have been a part of Sri Lankan society and had adopted the local culture in terms of how they dressed, use of language and interaction with other ethnic groups. But, they argue, of late, the Muslims have tried to be culturally distinct, especially, since the 1970s with the advent of foreign employment in the Middle East. Informants argued that this is the influence of Wahhabism, which tries to make Muslims appear distinct from others. They argued that in the past Muslim women wore sarees just like Sinhalese and Tamil women albeit in a different style and would cover part of the head merely with the saree itself whereas now many women wear the Hijab and a small minority the niqab (full face-cover). With the glaring publicity that BBS has given to Muslim dress of both men and women, the issue has attracted a lot of attention that may otherwise have gone largely unnoticed. The rhetoric of BBS and others has pushed Sinhala people to see changes in Muslim attire as an exclusivist trend. However, the fact that foreign employment in the Middle East has imparted some new values and dress patterns also cannot be denied.

Generally the practice of full face-covering or *niqab* is a gendered trope through which the perceived fundamentalist trends in Muslim society have been identified by other communities in Sri Lanka. It is rarely, if ever, seen as a choice made by agential

Muslim women. Many of the informants were paternalistic in that they constructed Muslim women's subjectivity as being oppressed and in need of liberation from marauding Wahhabist influence. Wahhabi practices, they believe, reduce women to child production machines and keep Muslim women in ignorance with no education and freedom of movement. We asked a Moulavi from Colombo, who is also an active leader, about his views on the dress of Muslim women.

What is your attitude with regard to dress? (laughs) ... I don't know whether dress is defined in Buddhism but in Islam dress is defined. For males, you must cover areas between the knee and waist. For females, according to Islamic law, the entire body should be covered except the face and the arms. Now Niqab, face-cover has become a problem everywhere in the world. Niqab is optional...not compulsory. In Islam there are four jurisprudential sects. Out of these three say this is optional but one sect says this is obligatory. According to the Shabi sect followed by most SL Muslims this is obligatory. This is just the ruling. Whether this is followed or not is a separate issue. But due to Indian culture etc., most of the Muslims followed the Indian culture like wearing Sarees and Blouse. Ruling is something but practice is different.

According to the above Muslim Maulavi, the Sri Lankan Muslims belong to a Muslim sect which theoretically requires followers to use the prescribed Islamic dress. However, for generations until 1970s they had not followed it and even now, in practice, it is optional although there can be social pressure to adopt the Niquab.

We also spoke to ordinary Muslim villagers and asked them what they feel about Islamic dress patterns. Some of them said that dresses such as Hijab and Niquab appeared in their communities after women started migrating to the Middle East for employment, especially to Saudi Arabia. An older Muslim man from Galle of around 65 years had the following to say about dress.

Do you think it is an appropriate dress? Now you are a man and I am a man. When women wear Hijab, we look at them less. You cannot see the body. So, you don't look twice with lust. If women wear shalwar you can see the body. You can reduce sex problems by 50% (if women wear the Hijab). I don't like the face-cover, it may suit Saudi Arabia. I am not insulting Islam. If you want to cover face, like in Saudi, you need those facilities ... a car for you ... you can even do wrong things by covering your face.

There seems to be nuances in the acceptance of the Islamic dress. For this man Hijab is appropriate because he thinks that it may help in preventing immoral behavior; looking at women with lust. He told us that 30 years back women wore sarees and

Indian shalwar kameez but he now thinks that such dresses, although they had been in use for centuries, expose women's bodies and causes sexual desire in men. His sense of morality seems to have been influenced by newer sects of Islam although he actually belongs to the traditional Muslim group. But he does not hesitate to state that he does not like the full face-cover which he thinks does not suit the physical conditions in Sri Lanka. He was also careful to note that he is not insulting Islam when he said face-cover is not appropriate. He seems to be aware of wider societal concerns because he also stated that the full face-cover could cause anxiety among onlookers.

Muslims as a homogenous bloc

Most non-Muslim respondents understand Muslims to be a homogenous community united strongly by the spiritual bonds of Islam and also by material realities of trade, because Muslims are perceived mainly as a trading community. Therefore, some of the informants were largely ignorant of internal dynamics, divisions and differences within the Muslim community. Yet some of the Buddhist informants were more careful to make a distinction between what they called the "traditional" and established Muslims and the newer sects. These Buddhists consider the "traditional" Muslims as peaceful while the newer sects as radical and potentially violent. An influential Buddhist monk from Colombo said:

We don't need to quarrel. There are Muslim people who live in peace with us ... Our problem is Muslim extremists. They can believe in their religion, make children, eat and drink, live and die ... we have no problem. Who are the extremists? They are those wretched people connected with NGOs taking money from abroad ... they take videos and show our people are attacked and get money. We don't have a problem with older Muslims. Even this morning I was helping a Muslim man address his problems. This is a problem the new youth have created.

The monk concerned is middle-aged with a good reputation among the Buddhist in the area and he thinks that the Buddhist do not have a conflict with ordinary "traditional" Muslims and implies that the issue is with newer sects, which are internationally connected. However, Muslim informants also expressed the view that Muslims feel threatened by new radical Buddhist movements and that it may lead to overarching unity over and above the internal divisions within their community in the face of an existential threat from a majority community. Thus, radical Buddhist movements may actually contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy because of their own actions – a divided population being driven to unity by the threat of a radical external group whose actions against Muslims are in part driven by the false notion of a homogenous and intensely united Muslim population in the country.

Violence as a political tool

None of the Buddhist informants we spoke to were willing to advocate violence to solve the issues they have with the Muslims. Many of the monks consider the solution as internal – especially moral upliftment within the Buddhist community is considered more important than any actions taken against external groups. Many of the monks in fact criticized the actions of BBS as morally wrong and that violence should not be used. In this sense violence that was associated with BBS was not approved although some of their policies such as opposition to Halal certification and boycotting of Muslims businesses had support.

We asked our Muslim respondents of the possibility that Muslim youth might respond with violence to violence from Buddhist groups. The older people considered this a risk but stated that violence was not a potential option given that Muslims are a small minority which would not be able to take on a large majority. However, they believed that cordial relationships, which characterized the interactions between Sinhala and Muslim population for generations, would not be replicated in the younger generation if radical Buddhist movements such as the BBS continue to pose a threat.

Competing economic interests

The other narrative that characterizes perceived Muslim ascendancy is the visible success of certain Muslim enterprises, though there is little evidence to suggest that the Muslim community as a whole is economically better off than any other community in the country. In some places business/ commercial interests have played a role in anti-Muslim political campaigns. A Muslim businessman from Colombo whom we spoke to mentioned that the success of certain Muslims entrepreneurs is seen as representative of the disproportional success of the Muslim community as a whole. Some members of the Muslim business community think their success is a cause for envy and motivation for violence. However, in places such as the Galle town area, for example, the business community has successfully resisted such “external” attempts at rousing religious divisions and the Muslim businessmen do not anticipate any threat. A representative from the Galle Chamber of Commerce (who is a Sinhalese Buddhist) mentioned that there is overarching unity within the business community that transcends religious divisions. He mentioned that external actors tried to penetrate the business association to create divisions but that these attempts were foiled. The Chamber tries to keep unity through cultural activities – especially the celebration of religiously significant events of all religions with the participation of religious actors. When riots against Muslims erupted in Aluthgama, the informant said ‘we acted quickly before any flare-up occurred here.’ We asked him about the call for boycotting Muslim shops.

There was a campaign asking people not to go to Muslim shops. But that campaign was among the consumers. Business people never asked people to do that.

An influential Muslim businessman from Galle mentioned that Buddhist and Muslim businesses as well as civil society cooperated to take preemptive action against any possible religious violence.

There was a problem in Aluthgama but it was sorted out before it spread to other places. We had discussions with police, business community, etc. There is an extremist group supported by other groups (implying BBS). They tried to have meetings here but our brother Sinhalese business community did not support it.

They are with us. I studied in the Sinhala medium. We still have that connection.

If something were to happen to me, the first person to come to help is a Sinhalese classmate. A good example was the 2004 tsunami. Water came up to this level (indicated as wall with his hand) and everything was a mess. We had no hope. That time the first person to call me was a Sinhalese person. He was a Major (in the army). He came to my place to see me with some ration items. Everything depends on how we move with people.

This Muslim businessman places special pride in his extensive network of Sinhalese friends and also his education in a Sinhala language school. While this informant may not be representative of the general Muslim population in rural areas because he had been educated in the Sinhala medium and associates closely with Sinhala people, we observed that in the town he lived as well as in some parts of Colombo and Kandy, there was a tendency among Muslim parents to educate their children in Sinhala and an inclination to integrate with Sinhala society. As stated at the beginning of this paper, Muslims in Sri Lanka are already integrated with the Sinhala society in myriads of ways but radical Buddhist movements have the potential to unsettle this integration. This seems to have some resonance with the decline in Sinhala-Tamil integration in the 70s and 80s when anti Tamil riots drove the Tamil people away from Sinhala society. The potential is there of a similar dangerous trajectory to that of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict unfolding, though possibly not on the same scale.

Conclusion

Our interactions with the respondents of this study suggest that the emergence of Buddhist-Muslim religious confrontation in Sri Lanka in the post-2009 period is a phenomenon driven by the convergence of multiple factors: a sense of beleaguement within the Buddhist (and Sinhala) community, despite the defeat of the LTTE; a sense that Buddhists and Sinhalese do not occupy the proper place within the Sri Lankan nation as a majority; rapid commercialization of society and a fear that religion and religious institutions are becoming irrelevant, which is a narrative that cuts across both the Sinhala and Muslim communities; fear of Muslim expansionism and what is perceived as the increasing isolationism within the Muslim community; the tendency by both Muslims and Buddhists to see each other as homogenous blocs;

and inadequate sensitivity to the internal conflicts and contradictions within both communities. We cannot however, claim these discourses to be representative of Buddhist-Muslim relations in the country as a whole because our study sample was numerically small and confined to two districts in the West and South of Sri Lanka.

It is, however, important to note that the macro political environment in the country can also play a significant role in shaping ethno-religious relations. The increasingly vociferous presence of extremist Buddhist groups happened in a context where the post-war government until January 2015, deliberately propagated and sustained a discourse of Sinhala triumphalism and at the same time used the media extensively to keep alive the possibility of an LTTE-like threat reemerging. Such a government-sanctioned discourse obviously has/had implications for majority-minority relations in the country. Parallel to this was the culture of impunity within which groups like the BBS and Sinhala Ravaya operated – one could assume that there was at least tacit support to these extremist groups. On the other hand a few extremist Muslim politicians were also given prominent positions within the previous government. This political context has now changed and we could perhaps expect a different dynamic between Muslim and Buddhist communities as moderates on both sides who were sidelined by the previous political regime, now find more opportunity to express themselves. However, what our study also suggests is that these discourses are successful because they can tap into fears and prejudices that are already present in the collective consciousness of these religious communities. It is perhaps, best seen as a dialectical process where pre-existent discourses become reconfigured and circulated when public and political discourse in society at large support and nurture such discourses. We would be cautious in predicting any future trends in Buddhist-Muslim relations in the country. To a large extent the shape this discourse takes will depend on the macro political environment but civil society organizations and moderates on both sides will also have an important role to play in shaping the future of these discourses.

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Self, religion, identity and politics: Buddhist and Muslim encounters in contemporary Sri Lanka

This study looks at the post-war phenomenon of rising ‘religious’ conflict in Sri Lanka, specifically between the Buddhist (Sinhala) and Muslim communities. It attempts to place these rising tensions within the context of historical ethno-religious conflict and confrontation in the country while also raising some fundamental issues about how we understand and deploy the category, religion. It also looks critically at the logic and indeed the possibility of isolating ‘religion’ from the wider social, cultural and political context within which the term gains sense. The study reports on findings from the Galle and Colombo districts where fieldwork in the form of narrative inquiry was carried out to identify a range of responses from within the Buddhist and Muslim communities about how these communities perceive themselves and relations with each other. Some of the narratives that emerged were: a sense of beleaguement within the Buddhist (Sinhala) community despite the war victory in 2009; a sense of threat posed by perceived Muslim expansionism and global islamophobic discourses; religious agents in both communities feeling irrelevant in a rapidly changing social context and a tendency for both communities to view each other as homogenous blocs, and the inability to see significant intra-community differences.

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