

Post-war Tension between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is a multi religious, multi lingual and multi cultural environment, and the members of all communities lived in peace and harmony with good social integration with one another. Since the arrival of Arab-Muslims in Sri Lanka in the early period the Buddhists and the Muslims have been maintaining a cordial relationship between them for more than ten centuries. However, in recent past years, particularly aftermath of ethnic war (1983-2009) in Sri Lanka, considerably from 2011 to later part of 2014, the unsteadiness of the relationship-a kind of tension- between the above two communities has come to be observed. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Muslims are most privileged society in terms of religious rights comparing to other minorities. Because of this reason, a few Buddhist nationalist groups posed questions on socio-cultural practices of the Muslims such as religious beliefs and practices, dressing culture and social customs. In fact, these factors have been transformed into issues and brought them out by mentioned groups on the mindset of Buddhist public as a threat against the Sinhalese and their religion-Buddhism. On the above backdrop, therefore, this paper is going to review the existing literature on post-war tension between the Buddhists and the Muslims as well as the acts of the Buddhist nationalist groups against the socio-cultural practices of the Muslims in Sri Lanka.

Key words: post-war, tension, Buddhists, Muslims, Sri Lanka

Introduction

As a small state with pluralistic in nature, Sri Lanka has been cherished historically. There were historical records of ethnic relation and ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka. It is a diverse country, and home to many religions, ethnicities and languages. The Sinhalese are the main ethnic group of Sri Lanka, consisting 74.9% of the population; among them the Sinhala-Buddhists are 70.19% (Census of Population and Housing, 2012). They speak Sinhala an Indo-Aryan language. The Tamils are the second major ethnic group in Sri Lanka, consisting 15.37% (Census of Population and Housing, 2012) of the population that includes Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils. The Muslims of Sri Lanka form the second largest minority in the island next to Tamils and consisting 9.7% of the country's population (Census of Population and Housing, 2012) and the Muslims are spread out in all twenty five administrative districts of the island.

Since the arrival of Arab-Muslim traders in Sri Lanka, the relationship between the Buddhists and the Muslims has been highly tied. This is could be understandable through the relevant literature (Dewaraja, 1994). However, in post-war (2009) context of Sri Lanka, considerably from 2011 to later part of 2014, the unsteadiness of the relationship-a kind of tension- between these two communities has come to be observed. In fact, in Sri Lanka the Muslims have got a good position in every aspect of their life, especially in terms of religious rights in Sri Lanka. There are 2500 mosques (Zulkiple & Jazeel, 2013) in everywhere of the island even in big Buddhist majority urban areas. And also the government established the Muslim schools separately for Muslim students to carry their education. In every Friday Muslim schools closed at 11.30 a.m. while the usual time for closing the schools is at around 2.00 p.m. Furthermore, the Muslims have got separate judicial system namely 'Muslim Personal Law' including Muslim Quazi courts to advance their matrimonial affairs. In fact, it is noteworthy, compare with other minorities who are living with majorities in other parts of the world; the Muslims of Sri Lanka have been enjoying variety of fundamental and other rights and socio-cultural and economic privileges.

Because of this situation, a few Buddhist nationalist groups have raised the accusation and suspicion on some socio-cultural practices of the Muslims such as religious beliefs and practices, dressing culture and social customs. In fact, these factors have been transformed into issues and brought them out by some Buddhist

nationalist groups on the mindset of the Buddhist public as a threat against the Sinhalese and their religion-Buddhism. Further, the above nationalist groups attempted to spread out a horizon of the anti-Muslim sentiment among the Buddhists through the paths of Buddhist ethno-nationalism, extremism, fundamentalism and prejudice with a great plan to collapse the relationship between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka (Yehiya, 2013). Therefore, this is the time to save the nation-Sri Lanka from the unfolding disaster unleashed by Buddhist nationalist groups and to preserve the cordial relationship between the respective societies which continued along the history.

On the above backdrop, therefore, this paper reviews the existing literature on post-war tension between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka and the acts of the Buddhist nationalist groups on the socio-cultural practices of the Muslims. While socio-cultural issues and the tension between the communities are the core thematic area of this study, the scope of this literature review is expanded to include a number of researches that examined the recent tension between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka. In this case it helps the researchers to work on the relationship between the Buddhists and the Muslims in the context of Sri Lanka for creating conditions for social cohesion and national integrity and peaceful life of all the communities, especially the Buddhists and the Muslims.

Post-war Tension between the Buddhists and the Muslims

Numerous studies have been conducted on the tension between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka since recent past years. A Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue on the theme of 'Buddhists and Muslims in Southeast Asia working towards justice and peace' (Normally called Dusit Declaration) was held at the Suan Dusit Place of Suan Dusit Rajabhat University, Bangkok from 26-28 June 2006. It was organised jointly by the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), International Movement for a Just World (JUST), Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute (SPDI). The above international group has identified in this conference the following major challenges facing the two communities in the region of Southeast Asia.

1. Rise of extremism, hate speeches and campaigns and initiation of religious unfairness and cruelty.
2. Prejudice, fear and hatred caused by ignorance, misperception, stereotyping, harmful impact of traditional and, simplification and generalization, and communal pressure.
3. Misuse of religion by certain religious, political and other interest groups and individuals.
4. Socio economic dimensions of conflict
5. Spill over effects across the region

The Dusit Declaration of 28th June 2006 endorsed by the conference and it has committed itself to implement its shared action across the Southeast Asian region. The actions included intra-religious and inter religious initiatives in education, advocacy, rapid reaction, solidarity visits, early warning, conflict prevention, strategic common action, constructive engagement with the government, and the effective use of media for affirmative messages. This declaration helps to identify the general issues facing the Buddhist and the Muslim communities, especially, in their relationship and what are the attempts to accommodate the situation with making peace and social harmony.

Fawsar (2013) conducted a study on 'Ilankai Muslimkal: Thesiya Inap pirachchinaium Adakkumuraium' (Sri Lankan Muslims: in the midst of the ethnic conflict and the repression). This is a recently published article in 'Social Vision'. In this article, he explains the challenges faced by the Muslims in contemporary context of Sri Lanka; means that the anti-Muslim campaigns unleashed by the Buddhist nationalist groups via a few intervening factors which are ethno-nationalism, extremism, and fundamentalism and how those factors have been seeding on the Buddhists' minds. His view is that this was a political issue advanced by the Rajapaksha government for the purpose of their survival with political power for long lasting. He lists out the timelines of the attacks on the Muslim lives, their business places and the religious institutions, which are held in 2012 and 2013. Also he explains that this anti-Muslim campaign has been started since 2011 to date with the moods of destroying and removing oldest worship places, prohibiting the Azan, anti-Farda and anti-Halal agitations, threatening the Muslims, boycott the Muslims' business companies, spoliation, setting fire on business properties, spreading out the hoaxes about Islam and Muslims, conducting the rallies, public meetings, conference for purpose of antagonizing the Buddhists against the Muslims, utilizing the medias to propagate the antagonism and threatening the Muslims to evacuate them from their traditional residence places. This paper helps to clearly understand the presently holding on anti-Muslim campaign in Sri Lanka and its impacts.

The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKIIRSS) organized its eighth instalment of the reconciliation conferences on 23rd of July 2013. The theme of the conference was the 'Role of religion and Reconciliation'. The conference was aimed to identify the importance of religion and religious leaders in encouraging reconciliation. Eight important and eminent dignitaries from the civil society, religious community and academia shared their thoughts, experiences, and views on how religion can be a force for reconciliation and nation building. Some major points are as follows:

1. Now the time has come to establish a specialized ministry for reconciliation.
2. Religion is not the only factor of conflict and disunity. There are many other factors. So, in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society beset with such conflicting issues, all are stakeholders in this process of reconciliation.
3. For a genuine and authentic solution to the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka, there is a strong need to understand in depth the religious dimension of reconciliation. A political solution alone cannot bring about reconciliation.
4. In order for religions to give leadership to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony emphasis should be given on altruism, because altruism can have a positive impact on society. We can be a part of one culture but should respect all cultures. While living in one country but we should respect all countries.
5. Islam totally rejects discrimination against anyone on the basis of colour, race, ethnicity, profession, geographical living etc. It also prohibits threatening, using abusive words, or publishing anything that could stir up racial hatred. According to the teachings, each and everyone is a creation of God and therefore should respect each other.
6. It should be created here an apex body of dedicated representatives from all the religions, who can work together to eradicate suspicion and to build trust and understanding; that would be the solution to address this issue.
7. We as Sri Lankans should consider seriously building of a national memorial to the many events of violence that we have all experienced and lived through in this country.

This seminar was concluded with calling upon every segment of the Sri Lankan society, has a different role in navigating nation building and reconciliation due to the process of reconciliation lies in the hands of all the stakeholders of peace.

The report of Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) formed in 1996, an independent and not partisan organization that focuses on issues of governance and conflict resolution, on 'attacks on places of religious worship in post-war Sri Lanka', is primarily attempts to identify incidents of attacks on places of religious worship in 2013. It traces the incidents within the broader context of challenges and cited threats faced by religious groups in Sri Lanka. It also seeks to understand the trends that arise from specific cases and discussions with persons interviewed for this report. This report has listed out the incidents of attacks on religious places and discussed the broader context of such attacks as a result of its commitments. Furthermore, the report illustrates that the number of incidents including mob attacks on places of worship, robberies and vandalism of religious places, the killing of clergy, protests against religious communities and hate speeches on the internet and in the media. The report says that almost all representatives of all religions interviewed for this report and they have expressed the fear that their faith, religious and ethno-cultural identity is under direct and indirect attack. There were 65 cases of attacks on places of religious worship listed in this report. Nonetheless it is clear from the list that all religious communities are being subjected to various forms of violence. This violence has been also threats to rule of law and fundamental rights guaranteed by the Sri Lankan constitution, and threatening religious and ethnic co-existence. The underlying causes of tension in this report might be emphasized as religious in nature when in fact they were an amalgam of economic, ethnic, political and other conflict. Some of the incidents of violence were seen to be taking place in a context of relative silence in terms of the media and civil society response. The report proposes some recommendations especially to the Sri Lankan government, religious leaders and some other related parties to take up for the reconciliation of such issues. Also, the Annex to this report briefly contains existing legal provisions relating to the process of conducting processions, the powers of the Magistrates and Police in restraining the same and the procedures for bringing perpetrators to account. CPA has included the Annex in light of the recent developments and incidents including the events in Aluthgama and Beruwala, Sri Lanka.

United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour prepared and released a report on International Religious Freedom Report for 2013. In this report it has listed out the instances held in

2013 against religious minorities such as Christians and Muslim, perpetrated by Buddhist nationalist group. It says that there were reports of societal abuses and discriminations based on religious affiliations, beliefs, or practices; there was an overall decrease in societal respect for religious freedom, as Buddhist nationalist groups have led campaigns targeting the Muslims and the Christians. Buddhist groups have attacked churches and mosques. The report says that the constitution and other policies and laws protect the religious freedom. In practice, however, the local authorities failed to take action successfully to communal violence, including the attacks on members of religious minority groups, and the perpetrators were not carried to justice. The officials of US Embassy asserted the government leaders to arrest and act against the perpetrators of attacks on mosques, churches, and other worship place.

A study conducted by Rifai Sulaiman in 2013 on patriotism, allegiance and loyalty of Sri Lankan Muslims to mother Lanka. The purpose of this study is to find the answers to some questions of prevailing current debates about Muslims in Sri Lanka. The questions forwarded by the researcher are that do the Muslims really have loyalty and allegiance to this land? Do they love this land as the majority people of the land do? Or do they have loyalty to another land in the world map? Do they belong to Saudi or Pakistan or to somewhere else? The researcher responds to these questions in this article and describes that the Muslims believed that everything in this universe belong to God and they are people too belong to God alone and their full loyalty should be to God alone. In these sense, castes, language, colour, tribes and country all are materialistic and temporary realities. But, indeed Islam recognises and encourages the patriotism of each and every person towards their homeland.

Another study was conducted by Riza Yehiya in 2013 on asymmetric relationship of Buddhist-Muslim bond in Sri Lanka. He gives details of the prevalence of relationship link between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka from ancient period onward, through the historical events. He explains that the relationship between these societies ever tied, but some external pressure such as imperialism, colonialism, extremism, and inner politics somewhat succeeded in dividing these two communities relationship in whole history of Sri Lanka. He discusses that following the decolonization, the post-colonial political leadership inspire with western thought and mindset, trained and nurtured in the western colonial philosophy and morals ruled the country no better than the western colonial masters. Also he explains that deplorably, in the history of Sri Lanka, the religious difference was exploited by the British colonialist and their affiliates to put a block in the tested Buddhist-Muslim relationship as a scheme of divide and rule. Furthermore, he describes that a few politicians use religion as a tool to conceal their bankruptcy and draw their energy from the religious and cultural dynamism of the people to re-launch and re-brand them. He express the Muslims view point of this current tirade against Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka that this effort constituted by a segment of the Buddhist society is not indigenous but an alien or foreign stirring by a third force that wants to attack the asymmetrical power balance that buttress the Buddhism and Sri Lanka.

The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) has been expanding its programmes since 1989 onward to enhance dialogue, understanding, and collaboration across traditional religious divisions. This includes divisions between institutions and sects in the Buddhist tradition and divisions between religious traditions. Every two years, INEB organizes an international get-together of 'Kalyanamitras', which means spiritual friends. In these biennial gatherings known as the INEB conference, opportunities are provided to discuss and formulate the ways to address these social issues, to learn more about the challenges and the specific context and of the host country and to exchange more broadly between the participants from all the countries. The INEB conference-2013 on 'Inter-Faith Dialog for Peace and Sustainability', held in Malaysia, and provided an opportunity to increase understanding and engagement with Muslim majority community. This was a timely event that in recent years, there had been examples of Muslim-Buddhist tension in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The conference organizers shared the overall goal of creating peace, justice, and sustainable global society. The specific objectives of the conference were to:

1. Enhance Buddhist-Muslim understanding and develop mechanisms for the future collaboration.
2. Encourage inter-faith dialog, exchange and collaboration on issues of common concern.
3. Celebrate and expand the spirit of 'Kalyanamitra' and inter-faith friendship.

This conference has concluded and resulted through holding a series of discussions on how to address the roots of the violent conflicts between the Buddhists and the Muslims as an international new story, particularly in countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

Latheef Farook (2014) wrote a book under the topic 'Muslims of Sri Lanka: under siege'. He says that the anti-Muslim campaign is unleashed by some small nationalist Buddhist groups and this movement, unless brought to a halt, is likely to lead to a total breakdown in communal accord to the damage of the country, which has just

emerged, from a demoralizing ethnic war. He explains that this campaign began around four years ago, coincidentally or otherwise, with the ever increasing Israeli presence in the country. Today the Muslim community has become the victim of not merely highly offensive hatred speeches but also subjected to attacks on religious schools, mosques, Halal food, women's headscarves or Niqab, slaughtered pigs thrown into the mosque, urinating and burning on Holy Quran, forcing Muslim students to kneel down and worship Sinhalese teachers, writing Allah's name on pig's face and so on and these horrible acts threaten the Muslims who live in fear with an doubtful future.

The seventh annual report of Organization Of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)-Islamophobia observatory- on the incidents and manifestation of anti-Muslim sentiments and intolerance against Islam, which covers the period from October 2013 to April 2014, illustrates that Islamophobia, as a contemporary form of racism, continues to manifest itself through different forms of prejudice and discrimination against Muslims both as individuals and as a community. Taking root in various economic, social, political and cultural considerations, Islamophobia not only contributes to the propagation of negative stereotypes against Islam and its followers, but also leads to more serious human rights violations such as discrimination against Muslims and attacks on their physical integrity, particularly Muslim women who are often more easily identified due to their distinctive attire. The report describes more of the general trend of intolerance and discrimination against Muslims and various manifestations of Islamophobia in western countries. This annual report expanded its scope of analysis and coverage taking into account the alarming incidents of manifestation of Islamophobia in many parts of the world, including Sri Lanka. The situation of Muslims in Sri Lanka is of concern to the OIC, as the persecution and discrimination against Muslims became part of the local behaviour. These attacks have been driven by a series of high-profile hate campaigns targeting Sri Lanka's Muslim community and their practices. These include advocating a ban on both Hijab and Halal certification and campaigns encouraging the Sinhalese community to boycott Muslims-owned shops and businesses.

Fawsar Aniffa (2014) studied on religious symbolism and politics in Sri Lanka: Muslim's Grievances. The paper aims to analyze the present plight of Muslim community in Sri Lanka and attempts to highlight the major issues faced by Lankan Muslims in present scenario. It further explores the causes behind the growing hate Muslim campaigns and continuing attacks on worship places and business establishments of the community. The author describes that the Buddhist nationalism has been on the rise since Post-war Sri Lanka, and some Buddhist nationalist groups and portion of ruling elites claim that some Muslim Mosque areas belongs to their holy land under the constitutional act. Further he discusses that the post-war situation could be described as a missing opportunity for sustainable peace and to accommodate Muslim minorities into the state system. Finally, he recommends inter-faith dialogues at all possible levels to build ethnic harmony in post-war Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

As a result of above mentioned studies and reports, in the recent context of Sri Lanka, a series of tense situations has been prevailed among the Buddhists and the Muslims. This has started when some Buddhist nationalist groups posed questions on ethnic and religious features of Muslim community. Apart from the discord observed in the political and economical scenarios, the impact is significantly felt in the relationship between the two ethno-religious groups. The rights of the Muslims pertaining to religious obligations have been immensely questioned through provocations by some Buddhist nationalist groups. These groups are advocating the establishment of a pure Buddhist raj in Sri Lanka. At their recent rallies, the most prominent Buddhist new hard-liner groups have used coarse, derogatory languages to undermine and question the Muslims and their religion -Islam and spread misunderstanding or misperception about the Muslims among the majority Buddhist community in Sri Lanka. There has been a number of incidents recorded attacking the Muslim's religious worship places which imposed challenges in practicing religio-cultural identity, customs and fundamentals. In this regard, in the recent past, the Muslims have been facing number of challenges in terms of anti-Halal agitations, anti-Hijab agitations, destroying worship places and refusing to call for prayers loudly, anti-slaughtering movements, anti-Shariah agitations and so on. Further, these groups are propagating and advising the Buddhists to reduce or avoid the social, cultural and economic interactions, contacts and relations with the Muslim Community.

These incidents created a suspicious and tense situation and the feeling of marginalization among the Muslims, especially those are living in the Buddhist majority areas in the country. Further, these incidents contributed to the clashes of opinions and misunderstanding, thus widening the gap of healthy relationship between the Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka. Although, Muslims are seen as having remained largely loyal to the

state during the 30-years of ethnic conflict and civil war (1983-2009), and even thereafter, However, they are now expressing the fear of religious marginalization which increased uncertainty of their co-existence and long-term cordial relationship with the major ethno-religious group-Buddhists surrounded them. All these incidents pose a question that to which extend the new re-emergence of the religious based hegemonic nationalism have impacted on the relationship between the Buddhists and the Muslims who have been maintaining historic and cordial relations in Sri Lanka. Also this situation creates a gap which emphasizes an extensive academic investigation in the process of post-war ethnic relation and religious reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

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