

Sri Lanka: Rising Sectarian Schism

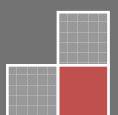
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Sri Lanka, home to a plethora of ethnically diverse communities, saw horrific communal bloodshed in July 1983. Over three decades down the line, history seems to be repeating itself as hordes of Buddhists and Muslims ruffle feathers in the nest once again. The island's hard-line Buddhist Power Force is up against the Muslims—setting towns afire, mirroring incidents of the Burmese violence. This time however, the Sri Lankan government cannot escape the ire of the world media and the international community and must do its best to come down heavily on the communal violence and seek long standing solutions for peace among its population.



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Towards India's southern tip lies the drop-shaped South Asian island nation of Sri Lanka. Officially known as the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, the nation shares maritime boundaries with India, and Maldives.

Ethnic History

Sri Lanka is home to a variety of ethnic groups in its well over 21 million population. There are four main categories of ethnic groups there the Sinhalese (73.8%), Sri Lankan Moors (7.2%), Indian Tamils (4.6%), and Sri Lankan Tamils (3.9%). The rest of the population remains unspecified or belongs to other minority groups. These groups follow distinct religions, which is at the root of most internal conflicts that has plagued Sri Lanka till date. The main religions of the Sri Lankans are Buddhism (69.1%), Islam (7.6%), Hinduism (7.1%) and Christianity (6.2%). Buddhism -- the most widely practiced religion -- is also the official religion of the Colombo administration.

The Muslims are divided into three main categories – Sri Lankan Moors, Indian Moors and Malays. The Sri Lankan Moors make up 93% of the Muslim population and trace their roots to Arab traders. It is widely believed that they came around the time the Portuguese settled in Sri Lanka. The Malays originally belong to Southeast Asia and came to the island when both Indonesia and Sri Lanka were Dutch colonies. The Malays constitute 5% of the Muslim population in the Republic.

The Sinhalese are mainly Buddhists and reside in the heavily populated southwest region of the island. Sri Lankan Tamils occupy most of the North and the East. The Indian Tamils, who were brought to Sri Lanka in the 19th century by British colonialists to work in the tea and coffee plantations, today inhabit the south-central region of Sri Lanka and practice mostly Hinduism. Lastly, the country also accommodates Muslims (both Moors and Malayas) who practice Sunni Islam; the Veddhas who are the last descendants of the ancient people inhabiting the island; and the Burghers, who are descendants of the European colonial settlers in Sri Lanka. The Burghers' population has been shrinking due to emigration.

Despite near equal representation in the country's Crimson (as also in the national flag), the ethnic communities' disregard each other and ethnic conflict in the country is at an all time high at present. There is a particular mythological and religious dispute that has been carried forward to contemporary times – i.e. who came to the island first: the Sinhalese or the Tamils?

Historically, the Sinhalese are said to have come to Sri Lanka from Northern India in the late 6th century B.C. This was followed by the introduction of Buddhism in the mid 3rd century B.C. The first Tamil dynasty was established in Northern Sri Lanka in the 14th century by a South Indian dynasty. Formerly a Portuguese and Dutch colony, Ceylon was

ceded to the British in 1796. Britain assumed total control of the island in 1815. The country was named 'Sri Lanka' only in 1972. Dutch influences can still be seen in parts of Sri Lanka, especially in some of the laws of the land. The British were successful in implementing the policy of 'Divide and Rule' in Sri Lanka just as the erstwhile rulers did in the neighboring India.

India and Sri Lanka have historic relations dating back thousands of years. Prior to independence, the Buddhist Sinhalese were enraged due to the apparent favouritism adopted by the British towards the Tamils. On the other hand, when the Tamil community saw the vast economic potential of the central part of the island, which was dominated by the Sinhalese, they gradually began moving to the heart of Sri Lanka in search of better jobs.¹

Seeds of Schism

Followed by a relatively non-violent past, the devious policy of the British sowed seeds of hatred between the Sinhalese population and the Tamil community in the post-independence period too as even the well-educated Tamilians were not given high-ranking jobs in the civil service.

After 11 years of gaining independence from the British on February 4, 1948, tension erupted between the majority Sinhalese and the Muslim separatists, which resulted into a war. India, which has had its own Tamil population in the south, deployed a peacekeeping force in 1987. Unfortunately, India was forced to withdraw three years later amidst escalating violence. During the ensuing conflict, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) emerged as a fearsome terrorist organization, known for conducting infamous suicide bombings, recruitment of child soldiers, and for its ability to challenge Sri Lankan forces right from the Jaffna Peninsula in the north down to the eastern side of the island. The U.S. State Department placed the LTTE on its terror list in 1997.²

After two decades of fighting, Norway brokered a peace deal between the then Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, which was under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran. A formal ceasefire was established in February 2002.

Meanwhile, over 70,000 people had been killed, the tourism industry was gravely affected, and the economy of one of Asia's most potent nations was in shambles. A United Nations report also highlighted several serious war crimes that were inflicted

¹ "Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka and Regional Security"

<http://www.infolanka.com/org/srilanka/issues/kumari.html> (Accessed July 4, 2014)

² "The Sri Lankan Conflict - Council on Foreign Relations"

<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations-and-networks/sri-lankan-conflict/p11407> (Accessed July 4, 2014)

upon innocent civilians by both the warring parties. This report was dismissed by the government as 'biased'. But the bone-chilling memory of the communal holocaust of 1983 went down in the history as the 'Black July' as many innocent civilians witnessed extreme brutality at the hands of both the government security forces and the rebels. It can be stated that the British policy of governing by dividing is largely to be blamed for the recurring events of communal animosity and violence in Lanka even today.

In May 2009, the government finally claimed that it had defeated the rebels and liberated the country.

Neighbors to the Rescue

The country's Gross Domestic Product is over \$134.5 billion and the national debt is a whopping 78%. Therefore, since May 2009, the Sri Lankan government has ventured into ambitious plans for economic development by prioritizing mega projects, which are financed mostly by the government of the People's Republic of China, which of late has emerged as the biggest foreign investor in several regional countries in Asia and also in some countries in Africa.

Asia's second rising power and Sri Lanka's maritime neighbor, India, shares a unique historic bond with that country. Both countries have built upon intellectual, religious, cultural, and linguistic ties. The bilateral relations have evolved to encompass broader areas of cooperation in recent times. Not to forget, New Delhi and Colombo also share a robust trade relationship.

With a considerable Indian Tamil population settled in Sri Lanka since colonial times, India reiterates the need for political settlement of the ethnic issue at the highest levels -- a political framework acceptable to all communities within a united Sri Lanka.³

In the year 2009 during the conclusion of the armed conflict, Sri Lanka witnessed a major humanitarian challenge -- over 300,000 Tamils were displaced from their homes and were clubbed in camps of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). A grant of INR 5 billion was announced by the then Manmohan Singh government in India to help the IDPs.

Black July 1983 Rerun?

Still deeply wounded by the civil war (1983-2009) between the Buddhist Sinhalese and the Tamil rebels, civil strife seems to be unending and riots in Sri Lanka have resurfaced yet again. This time though, they are waged between the Buddhists and the Muslim minority, which is rare in the communal history of the country. The recent coordinated attacks are believed to be carried out by the members of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), also known as

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs India, India-Sri Lanka Relations (Accessed July 4, 2014)

the Buddhist Power Force, a hard-line group which rails against the country's Muslim minority.⁴

The Sri Lankan Muslims are Tamil speaking. Many a time the Tamil nationalists have claimed that the Muslims are part of the greater Tamil nation. Although such claims have been rejected by the Muslim leaders worldwide, the Muslim minorities living in Tamil dominated areas of North and East Sri Lanka find them attractive.⁵

Quite contrary to the sublime Buddhist principles preached by Buddha: love or loving-kindness (*metta in Pali*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*)⁶, which the Lankan flag too demonstrates, the group tossed petrol bombs and looted businesses and homes in three coastal Muslim dominated towns of Sri Lanka - namely Aluthgama, Darga Nagar and Beruwala- leaving at least three dead and several dozens injured in the overnight attacks of June 15, 2014.⁷

The BBS alleges that it was protesting peacefully against the attack on a Buddhist monk by a Muslim youth three days prior to the riots. There are different versions of the story about the clash of the two communities that sparked the violence. It is, however, important to note that the views and methods of the BBS is not representative of the entire Buddhist Sinhalese community of the island.

The relationship between the two communal groups has further deteriorated as the BBS is allegedly receiving assistance from the state -- an accusation the State rubbishes. But adding further fuel to the fire, the communal menace is such that Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka's powerful defence secretary and the brother of the president, once made a public statement blatantly supporting the cause propagated by the BBS. The state police too have been accused of helping the BBS to carry out coordinated attacks -- a claim that the police brushes away as well.

There are also news reports of throwing raw pork at mosques premises and banning the symbol of '*halal*'-- the procedure that Muslim law prescribes for preparation of meat. The

⁴ "At least 3 Muslims killed, dozens injured in Sri Lanka attacks"

<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/16/srilanka-muslimskilled.html> (Accessed July 4, 2014)

⁵ "Muslims in Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict"

https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/17120/ISIM_19_Muslims_in_Sri_Lanka-s_Ethnic_Conflict.pdf?sequence=1 (Accessed July 4, 2014)

⁶ "Is Muslim identity a liability in Sri Lanka?"

<<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/muslim-identity-liability-sri-l-201462075937574567.html>>. (Accessed July 5, 2014)

⁷ "TWO dead from Aluthgama clashes - 80 wounded"

<http://www.srilankanews.lk/index.php/news/general-news/3632-two-dead-from-aluthgama-clashes-80-wounded-> (Accessed July 5, 2014)

Tamil community has been saddened by the recent violence as well as by the horrific memories of the bloody 1983 rampage, after which many fled to Western countries for sanctuary.

The media has also learnt from the past and it downplayed the June incident to prevent further spread of violence. However, this time around, the social media played an important role in information dissemination gave a fairly correct account of the events, which was not the case during the 1983 sectarian violence. This time the State, which has been accused of siding with the BBS secretly, knows that the world is watching too. In a bid to avoid international rebuke, the government has taken a few steps to curb the violence in its own ways, though several complains still hold against the State and its police service.

Speaking to reporters in Colombo, the general secretary of BBS, Reverend Galagoda Atte Gnanasara, said that the violence was “natural”. This he justified by explaining that the Buddhists were angry and “under pressure” about the attack that appeared to have ignited the clashes.⁸

Gnanasara has been ever infamous in the media for his upfront racist remarks and arrogance towards other communities in Sri Lanka. Besides having an appalling personal history of blatantly passing shocking rebukes against religious communities, in July 2014 yet again, he controversially demanded that the Pope apologise to all Sri Lankan Buddhists for the violence committed by the colonialists. This invited fire from even the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka (MCSL).⁹

A video clip showed Gnanasara threatening Muslim shop-owners of dire circumstances. He said: *“We still have Sinhala police in this country; still we have a Sinhala military. From today, if any Muslim... mishandles any Sinhalese; that will be the end of them.”*

In the bloody riots that followed, mosques were defaced on grounds that were built on holy Buddhist land and vehicles were piled followed by arson. The area was put under indefinite curfew.¹⁰

⁸ “At least 3 Muslims killed, dozens injured in Sri Lanka attacks”

<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/16/srilanka-muslimskilled.html> (Accessed July 4, 2014)

⁹ “Muslims Condemn Gnanasara’s Call For Pope To Apologise Sri Lankan Buddhists”

<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/muslims-condemn-gnanasaras-call-for-pope-to-apologise-sri-lankan-buddhists/> (Accessed July 21, 2014)

¹⁰ “Sri Lanka Buddhist rally erupts into fatal anti-Muslim riot”

<http://shambhalasun.com/news/?p=56702> (Accessed July 4, 2014)

The world community was quick to express its views. The United States State Department issued an official statement condemning the recent upsurge of violence stating:

*"We urge the Sri Lankan government to fulfil its obligations to protect religious minorities, including protecting all citizens and places of worship, conducting a full investigation into the violence and bringing those responsible to justice. We also urge all sides to refrain from violence, exercise restraint and respect the rule of law."*¹¹

The European Union also expressed deep concerns about the situation in Sri Lanka.

Mirror-Mirror: Burmese Buddhist Violence

The violence does not appear to have spread further than the towns mentioned above in Sri Lanka. But the increasing anti-Muslim violence in Asia seems to be mirroring anti-Muslim violence in Burma wherein riots openly provoked by Buddhist monks in 2012 and 2013 led to crowds slaughtering countless Rohingya Muslims -- said to be the world's most persecuted communities. The Rohingyas are a minority population in the world and are currently residing in the state of Arakan in Burma. They are about 800,000 in number but are not recognized by the Burmese government. Therefore stateless, under harsh circumstances, they take refuge in Thailand or Bangladesh.¹²

His Holiness the Dalai Lama -- religious head of the Buddhists worldwide -- spoke out against the anti-Muslim riots at the University of Maryland in May 2013. His Holiness expressed deep sadness over the recent violence inflicted against Muslims by Buddhist monks which shocked human rights groups and people around the globe.¹³

Buddhism, which is believed to be one of the most peaceful religions of the world, is being questioned regarding its core values of peace and non-violence following such brutal incidents. Buddhism comes with a practical method **to** of dealing with hatred -- meditation. It preaches meditation to eliminate distinction between the feelings of one with those of others. This results in the growth of compassion. But the lines between violence and peace get hazy when committing an act of violence against another person

¹¹ "Sri Lanka riots: US Condemns anti-Muslim violence after three died and almost 100 injured - Asia - World" <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/sri-lanka-riots-us-condemns-antimuslim-violence-after-three-died-and-almost-100-injured-9544643.html> (Accessed July 5, 2014)

¹² "The Embattled Rohingya Minority of Myanmar." http://asianhistory.about.com/od/Asian_History_Terms_N_Q/g/Who-Are-The-Rohingya.htm. (Accessed July 5, 2014)

¹³ "Dalai Lama speaks out against anti-Muslim violence in Burma" <http://shambhalasun.com/news/?p=46362> (Accessed July 5, 2014)

or community. History has also witnessed how the Burmese “kings of righteousness” justified war in the name of “true Buddhist doctrine”.¹⁴

A tweet by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was on a visit to Bolivia for the G-77 summit while the conflict raged in his country, read:

*"The Government will not allow anyone to take the law into their own hands. I urge all parties concerned to act in restraint. An investigation will be held for law to take its course of action to bring to book those responsible for incidents in Aluthgama."*¹⁵

Apart from this message and a similar tweet from his son, Namal Rajapaksa, there has been no official statement from the government of Sri Lanka. In the last week of June, the government arrested eight persons suspected of instigating anti-Muslim violence and some stolen jewellery worth over \$11,500 was recovered from them.¹⁶

The government will have to obviously do more than that to curb the rising violence and prevent it from getting as deadly as the one in Burma where extreme violence led to mass-scale displacement of several Muslims. The Muslim community also embarked on the holy month of Ramdan -- the Islamic month of continual fasting -- in a low key manner amidst tension of sectarian violence on June 29, 2014. The government is already facing fire from the media and human rights groups on accounts of incompetence to handle the situation with a firm hand.

The Buddhists feel that the two countries - Sri Lanka and Burma - must be unified to protect their religion which they feel is “under threat”. But an integral question remains: are Buddhist monks trying to use their “moral authority” to their undue advantage? Another question looms over the Muslim community - is their identity a liability in a country that their forefathers considered their own? Another question the people of Sri Lanka and the international community want answers to is why the leader of the BBS, who is publicly delivering hate speech against their community, has not been arrested yet by the State? Why is he shaming the religion of Buddha by resorting to bloodshed has enraged several moderate Buddhists even within Sri Lanka.

¹⁴ “BBC News - Why are Buddhist monks attacking Muslims?” <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22356306> (Accessed July 5, 2014)

¹⁵ “Communal violence in SL again: Sinhala - Muslim riots kill” <http://www.firstpost.com/world/communal-violence-in-sl-again-sinhala-muslim-riots-kill-3-1572159.html> (Accessed July 5, 2014)

¹⁶ “Sri Lanka arrests eight over riots” <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/southasia/2014/06/sri-lanka-arrests-eight-over-riots-20146285155373739.html> (Accessed July 5, 2014)

Conclusion

Violence continues to rage in South Asia against Muslims even now, as the Buddhists ride through streets of Burma shouting anti-Muslim slogans. This incidence came to light after a Muslim man was beaten severely on his way to morning prayers.¹⁷ Likewise violence in Sri Lanka does not appear to be nearing any peaceful settlement either. The recent anti-Muslim riots have got the al-Qaeda interested in the region. This will neither be welcomed by the governments of Burma or Sri Lanka, or the Buddhist populations settled in these countries.¹⁸

It is noteworthy that local elections are due in Sri Lanka next month and the government will have to act quickly to be able to make this election free and fair.

The fate of peace and mutual co-existence of the diverse communities of Sri Lanka is at stake and this time the world community and the human rights groups are watching closely to see how this South Asian nation with a promising potential for prosperity handles the situation at hand.

¹⁷ "Extremist Buddhists warns Rohingyas."

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2014/07/04/369863/myanmar-extremist-buddhists-threaten-to-kill-muslims/>>. (Accessed July 5, 2014)

¹⁸ "Furious Buddhists Are Making Life Hell for Sri Lanka's Muslims | VICE United States"

<http://www.vice.com/read/buddhists-are-making-life-very-hard-for-sri-lankas-muslims> (Accessed July 5, 2014)

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