

## The Wave of Sinhala Buddhist Supermacism and Muslims of Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** Theravada Buddhist state of Sri Lanka is recovering from 30 years of civil war that broke out between the minority Tamil rebels (popularly known as LTTE) and the state of Sri Lanka. Majority of the people anticipated a dawn of peace and reconciliation, particularly among various ethnic groups, in the country following the elimination of war. However, what happened in the aftermath of the war was the reverse with a rearing ugly head of Sinhala Buddhist Supermacism that attempts to juxtapose the minorities as the Others against majority Buddhists. Part of this process has been done by Bodu Bala Sena(BBS), Sangha led movement espousing themselves as an unofficial police, calling for control on the Muslim population and their way of life including their halal food, cattle slaughtering, wearing of hijab, and calling for prayers. The Sangha movement in Sri Lanka appears to be learning lessons from in Burma and Thailand where there is strong evidence of anti-Muslim sentiment that resulted in the persecution of Muslims in Burma lately. It is indubitably believed that a stridently venomous anti-Muslim campaign has been stirred by Sangha (BBS) with a political patronage. This paper examines the ideology of the BBS Sangha and the implications of such ideology in the country. The findings reveal that the modern Sangha movement in a majority Buddhist state such as Sri Lanka is faced with a challenges in a plural democratic society. It also shows that the Sangha appears to be learning from their past. Thus, there is a greater need for people's representatives, scholars and social activists to address this issue and find a lasting solution that can restore peace and harmony in the country.

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

### Introduction

Traditionally, Buddhism has a reputation for being a nonviolent religion. Empirically, however, this scarcely characterizes Buddhism in many nations where it is the official religion or the majority religion. Prolonged conflict has arisen between the majority Buddhists and the ethnic/religious minority of Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Even now, the Sangha-led violence in Sri Lanka and Burma is shattering the prospects for democratic regeneration ( Raghavan,2013). This phenomenon has produced a paradoxical paradigm in the academic study of Buddhism and is troubling for anyone who believes that Buddhism is based on the moral principle of non-violence, or ahimsa, which is one of the basic tenets of Buddhism

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Buddhism is not exceptional in this regard because all major religions promote harmony and peace and condemn violence. Even now, ten years after 9/11, there is a wealth of academic literature on the subject of religious violence and its socio-political effects. The majority of the research conducted by Western academics has focused on Islam and Judaism. Given the extent of intra- and interstate strife in nations where Islam is either the official religion or the predominant religion, this is not surprising. The Arab spring's effect, the ongoing wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria, as well as Iran's potential nuclear program, are all matter of concern and discussion of this paper. Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism are by no means the only faiths that advocate violence when it comes to how they interpret their own scriptures. Hindu-Muslim friction caused division in India at the time of its independence, and it occasionally flares up into significant violence, as it did in Gujerat and Delhi over the Babri Mosque. Internal bigotry and political separatist among Sikhs have both been quite violent.

The current topic of Sinhalese Buddhism focuses on the ways in which the Sinhala Sangha has exploited and spread violence. According to others, Sinhala Buddhism is always used to legitimize state power (Bradwell, 1978). However, Thambiah argues that it has betrayed, meaning the core principles of Buddhism (Thambiah, 1987). Due to Sri Lanka's perpetually present history, this trend has given rise to a just war doctrine in Sinhalese Buddhism (Bartholomeusz, 2002). While these authors have shed some new light on the subject, they haven't been able to come to any universally agreed-upon, overarching conclusions.

This study shed lights a brief review of the local Muslim community's identity in trade, politics, and even socio-demography in Sri Lanka, as well as the recent but remarkably active Buddhist militant campaign against it. After 30 years of one of Asia's worst civil conflicts, the state is today dealing with the problems of reconciliation, reconstruction, and political justice. This new movement provides another perspective on a subject that is still much too rarely researched and the historical place of the Sangha in Sri Lankan culture and politics.

### **Bodu Bala Sena as a Sangha movement<sup>2</sup>**

Numerous segments of Sri Lankan civil society were shocked when a systematic anti-Muslim campaign suddenly appeared in many regions of the island by a brand-new group named the Bodu Bala Sena, which is referred to as "the Army of Buddhist Power". Although the BBS is mostly a lay organization, its leadership is noteworthy because it comprises a number of well-known Sangha members. Kirana Vimalajothi, Ven. Ven. Haputale Pannasara Thera, Ven. Glagoda Gananasaara Thera, and Ven. L Vitarandeniya serve as the chairman, General Secretary, spokesperson, and are extremely aggressive. Members of the executive committee include Nanda Thera. They are all Amarapura Nikaya members. Their theoretician called Dilanta Vitanage, a distinguished lecturer in history at Sri Jayawardenapura University has joined with them ( Raghavan,2013).

Compared to any conventional organizations like the Siyam or Amarapura Nikaya and their branches, the BBS is significantly more organized. It effectively utilizes information technology including social networking websites and the internet. It has more active public profiles on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Wikipedia than several state agencies in Sri Lanka. They quickly plan violent protest gatherings using Facebook and cell phone technology without drawing the attention of the authorities. The BBS has positioned itself as the most prospective ethno-religious outfit among those wanting to intervene in the unstable post-war polity of Sri Lanka

### **The BBS and anti-Muslim campaign**

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<sup>2</sup>Most Sinhala names in this article are transliterated according to the traditional philological conventions, but names which in Sri Lanka have commonly used spelling keep it. The name Gnanasaara is a necessary compromise.

The BBS then used hyperbole to criticize Muslims and Christians even more. What began as a protest against some Muslim vendors who were purportedly selling T-shirts and pants with the Buddha's image quickly expanded into a countrywide movement to avoid doing business with Muslims and to avoid selling land or other property to them. It then turned its attention to the complicated problem of halal food certification and demanded that the government outright outlaw it. By March 2013, several global corporations and more than a hundred national producers had revoked their halal certifications.

Additionally, the BBS has damaged Muslim sites or, at the very least, encouraged others to do so. A mosque in Dambulla was attacked and severely damaged by a crowd. Inamulve Sri Sumangala Thero, the abbot of the well-known Buddhist monastery in Dambulla, can be seen stirring up the mob while police and troops stand by doing nothing and some Tamil civilians are seen praying in dread. The monk claims that Dambulla must only be accessible to Buddhists because it is home to an ancient and well-known temple. The mosque being assaulted is a rather small structure on a side street that no visitor would often notice. Of course, assaulting the mosque would be unjustifiable no matter where it was located, but this argument shows how the anti-Muslim outrages are creating their own opponents in order to find problems. Similar instances have also happened in other places.

A group led by BBS forcibly invaded a mosque in Colombo Dehiwela and removed all the data, computers, and documents, alleging that the mosque was a haven for terrorism. They transported building supplies from a location where a mosque was being expanded to Kaluthura. An old Sufi Center in Anuradhapura was vandalized and destroyed. A recent press conference held by the rival Jathika Bala Sena, led by Watereka Vijjitha Thero, was stormed by a group of Buddhist monks under the direction of Ven. Gnansara Thera. They abused the monks and stopped the journalist from speaking to him in full face of the assembled media.

It is obvious that the current administration has come to tolerate or even directly encourage the BBS. Along with the President and his powerful brother, the Defence Secretary, the BBS has held a private meeting with several members of the diplomatic corps, including the US, Indian, and Iranian embassies, who reportedly dread being the target of their efforts. By the end of March 2013, the state had implemented two of the BBS's demands, demonstrating the group's political might. First, the government has stated that no corporate organization is required to apply for or accredit halal certification, and that Muslims alone are responsible for abiding by such a requirement.

The second enactment has a more severe effect. Any hospital, public or private, will no longer be allowed to undertake vasectomy procedures on Sinhalese patients. This is done to appease the BBS, who contend that since the growth rate of Sinhalese in Sri Lanka is far lower than that of Muslims, every effort should be taken to change the trend. However, Sri Lanka already has a significantly higher population density than some of the most populous countries in the world, such as Brazil, China, Ethiopia, Nigeria, or Turkey. This is because it is an island with a small amount of land, but it has achieved extraordinary results by controlling its birth rate much better than its South Asian neighbours and so attained outstanding standards for health, education, and other aspects of the social index.

The BBS has started a campaign to restrict the design and location of new mosques as well as to outlaw the niqub, the veil worn by Muslim women, in public as a consequence of continuous success. Additionally, they demand that the state oversee all places of worship, to propose a special tax on non-Buddhist business endeavours akin to the Bhumi Putra and to prohibit Muslims from purchasing land in places like Anuradhapura, Dambulla, Kandy, Kelaniya, and Mahiyangaha, which are regarded as particularly significant components of the Sinhala cultural heritage. Nevertheless, it is noted that authorities appear to have supported and promoted such demands of BBS.

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<sup>3</sup>More on this can be read on this link <http://2.hidemyass.com/ip-1/encoded/czovL3d3dy5jb2xvbwJvdGVsZWdyYXBoLmNvbS9pbmRleC5waHAyYmJzLWduYW5hc2FyYS1zdHJpa2VzLWFnYWluLw%3D%3D> accessed on 12, April 2013

### **The Muslims of Sri Lanka**

The role that Muslims have played as a moderate community over the past 30 years of civil conflict, or even since independence, has not received much analysis. But for more than a century, Muslim identity has been formally recognized in Sri Lankan governmental issues. An appointment of a Muslim to the state assembly occurred in 1889 as an extension of the Celebrooke-Cameron reforms of 1833. ( Nissan and Stirret 1990). They currently have 14 elected MPs who are affiliated with two mainstream parties and two Islamic parties.

In contrast to the relationship between Tamils and Sinhalese, ties between Muslims and Buddhists have been cordial over the centuries. Muslims have lived in Sri Lanka, where their origin is still up for question, at least since the 15th century CE, when Portuguese traders made their initial contact with the country. Muslims in Sri Lanka have generally coexisted in recent years, yet there were anti-Muslim riots that took place across the entire island in 1915. (Ali 1981, Kannangara 1984). The LTTE and state militarism caused significant social and economic harm to the Muslim population during the most recent civil conflict. In the 1990s, the LTTE forcibly deported some 90,000 Muslims overnight. While some Muslims did support the independence cause, the movement shifted more to the right as a result of this ethnic flight. Through employment opportunities in the Middle East and as a result of transnational Islamic movements, these events also pushed the community to be exposed to Islamic culture and to define their identity based on religion. This may have sparked the hardline monks who want to make Buddhism the official religion after the war. However, the vast majority of Muslims have supported the Sinhala Buddhists in their fight for the island nation's unitary status, and generally speaking, the Gulf nations have stood by Sri Lanka when it needed assistance from other nations at forums like the UNHRC. Therefore, a much more comprehensive study of BBS agitation than a Buddhist-Muslim binary is required. In the wake of a military triumph, it appears that the Bodu Bala Sena Sangha is anxious to promote itself as the state custodians.

### **Implications of Sinhala Buddhism on Minorities**

The activities of the BBS and the support of the Buddhist Sangha contributed significantly to the formation of a military mentality in Sri Lanka. BBS sought to unite the Buddhist clergies and fueled the rise of religious extremism among the common Sinhalese. Although such hardline attitudes helped to win the war against the LTTE militarily, this aspect of the relationship between the Sri Lankan communities caused severe damage. However, it must be said that their program to create a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist state is moving at a plodding pace (Raghavan, 2013).

As Raghavan (2013) points out, the minority attitudes of most Buddhist Sangha do not reflect a harmonious relationship with other ethnic minorities. They have also ingrained in them a mentality of treating minorities as a threat. Similarly, unless the Buddhist scholars are in the traditional Buddhist mentality, it can be said that there is no Buddhist mentality compatible with the 21st century among them. The need for an analytical approach to the changes faced by Buddhism in the new century among Sri Lankan Buddhist scholars is pointed out as a major shortcoming. The Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka came to power after gaining independence from the British. By that, they created an opportunity to establish majority rule. There were occasions when Sinhalese Buddhist governments engaged in anti-democratic activities with anti-minority attitudes. The Sinhalese rulers deliberately established Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy throughout the country by disenfranchising the Indian Tamils, enacting the Sinhala Only Act, and establishing colonization schemes. In later times these forces caused disharmony among the ethnic communities.

Thus the efforts of the Buddhist Sangha and the hardline organizations they supported to establish Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy over the ethnic minority communities were successful during some post-independence governments' rule. In the present scenario, the active functioning of hardline organizations like BBS has increased the chances of establishing Sinhalese supremacy over minorities. But such ideological single-mindedness is not conducive to the country's development or economic prosperity. . This country is multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-social. It is very clear that Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy is not appropriate for such a pluralistic country.

It should also be mentioned here that, in a way, Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy led to more than two and a half decades of war. International criticism of Sri Lanka after the war should also be reviewed here. There is a need to develop an ideology suitable for pluralistic societies with international experiences in Sri Lanka. In this case, the targeting and attack of minorities by Buddhist extremist organizations like BBS will only increase Buddhist supremacy in Sri Lanka. They will not contribute to the future progress of the country. That is why Sinhalese social forces and Sangha should choose new religions with religious tolerance. There is a need to absorb Buddhist ideas suitable for the 21st century. That alone can contribute to the long-term development of this country.

### **Conclusion**

The BBS is working on anti-Muslim sentiment as its primary tactic. This organization has focused on building the opposite attitude towards economic development and population expansion of Muslims as its primary strategy. Although the Muslims have seen remarkable economic and political development, they have been careful to maintain harmonious relations with the Sinhalese Buddhist population. Their Islamic religion is central to their ethnic identity. Sri Lankan Muslims are viewed as part of the global Muslim Ummah on the basis of Islam. The changes taking place in various parts of the Muslim world have also severely affected Sri Lankan Muslims. They have been subject to multiple global influences in religious reform methods, dress, and other cultural matters. Some religious fanaticism has also developed among Muslims who have sought foreign employment in Middle East countries. Especially in the eastern province of Sri Lanka, Muslims live very concentratedly. Although the area has not come under the attention of radical Sinhalese Buddhist organizations such as BBS, the activities of that organization have caused serious concern among the Muslims there. As far as Sri Lankan Muslims are concerned, they are in the majority in the North-Eastern regions. The BBS has targeted Muslims living outside these areas. It is obvious that internal changes and upheavals among Muslims contributed to the rise of radical Sinhalese Buddhist forces.

Misunderstanding between the ethnic communities has arisen due to Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy that has intensified in Sri Lanka in the post-independence era. In this regard, the government and civil society are primarily responsible for building inter-ethnic harmony. In many other countries where ethnic hegemony has developed, Sri Lanka can take lessons from the crises faced by those countries and their opposite consequences. Sri Lankans have many lessons to learn from past wars and the 1915 Sinhalese-Muslim riots. There is also a suspicion that the intrusions of international political forces that create cracks in the relationship between ethnic communities have increased in Sri Lanka recently. That is why such ethnic polarization cannot be allowed to continue, and integrated programs are necessary. For this, the Sinhala-Muslim political leadership and the civil society must work together, which will contribute to the lasting unity of the country.

Religions, in general, are meant to guide people. Religious beliefs do not support division. Buddhism, in particular, lays great stress on harmonious values. Islam insists on unity among human beings. Thus, there are commonalities between the two religious values. Pure Buddhism does not condone killing or enmity. It shows how to maintain a harmonious relationship with human beings. So these issues continue beyond just believing in religions. They should have behavioural expressions. Hence the time is ripe for Buddhist Sangha to travel.

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