

Aluthgama Violence: a Reflection of Sinhala Buddhist Supremacism

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Abstract

Despite the anticipation of peace and reconciliation restoring in the country following the defeat of the LTTE and the elimination of war in 2009, what happened in the aftermath of the war is a history. It was the Sinhala Buddhist Supremacism with the support of extremist forces like Bodu Bala Sena(BBS) and Sinhala Ravaya(SR) that attempted to juxtapose the minorities as 'Others' against majority Buddhists with the patronage of then government. Aluthgama violence against Muslims on 15th June 2014 was the culmination of the well-orchestrated continuous vitriolic anti-Muslim campaign undertaken by these extremist forces. Against this backdrop, this study is an attempt to explore the causes and implications of Aluthgama violence upon the minority Muslims living in the area in particular and the communities living there in general. This is a qualitative study which employs data gathering tools such as in-depth interviews for primary data collection, coupled with secondary data relevant to the study. The findings show that the international and local dimensions that played a significant role in the advancement of Sinhala Buddhist Supremacism in the country and the Aluthgama saga, purportedly unleashed with the tacit approval of the government, was a stepping stone for a major catastrophe to come through. The violence resulted in the death of 3 Muslims, injured 88 people, vandalized 3 mosques and 174 houses, burnt 79 shops, and damaged 37 three wheelers and 15 other vehicles of Muslims. It also shows that the BBS, with its political ideology which is a post war phenomenon, is causing irreparable damage to peace and reconciliation that prevails among the communities in the country. In conclusion, the study postulated that it is imperative on the rulers to ensure that the rule and law in the country is upheld, regardless of the ethnic, religious and other differences and the civil society leaders including religious leaders representing the Muslim Umma to work together in the best interest of the community to restore peace and harmony in the country.

Key Words: *Peace and Reconciliation, Sinhala Buddhist Supremacism, Anti Muslim Campaign, Rule and Law*

Introduction

Sri Lanka is recovering from 30 years of civil war that held between the minority Tamil rebels (popularly known as LTTE) and the government of Sri Lanka. Despite the anticipation of peace and reconciliation restoring in the country following the defeat of the LTTE and the elimination of war in 2009, what happened in the aftermath of the war is a history. It was the Sinhala Buddhist Supremacism that attempted to juxtapose the minorities as 'Others' against majority Buddhists with the patronage of the government (Rameez, 2014). This process has successfully been carried out by Bodu Bala Sena(BBS), a Sangha led movement

espousing themselves as an unofficial police, calling for severe restriction on the Muslim population and their way of life including halal food, slaughtering cattle, wearing of *habaya*¹⁶⁵ and *hijab*¹⁶⁶, and calling for prayers(especially early in the morning and late night). The BBS is conspicuously supported by other movements comprising of the Buddhist clerics like Sinhala Ravaya(SR) and Ravana Balaya(RB) in their

¹⁶⁵ A long garment covering the full body of a woman including her face

¹⁶⁶ A shawl covering the head and face of a woman.

pursuit of antagonizing the Muslims and their way of life in the island. These outfits in Sri Lanka seems to be learning from their counterparts in Burma and Thailand where the anti-Muslim sentiment is plainly volatile that resulted in the persecution of Muslims in Burma lately.¹⁶⁷

Under such circumstances, the country recently witnessed outrageous carnage against Muslims on 15th June 2014 in Aluthgama, which is approximately 63.5 kilometres South of Colombo and 68 kilometres North of Galle and is in the administrative District of Kalutara in the Western Province. The Aluthgama incident, popularly known as Aluthgama riot, swept broad swathes of pre-dominant traditional Muslim settlements including Aluthgama, Beruwala, Darga Town, Welippenna and Thunduwā areas in Kalutara district. These largely traditional Muslim settlements are located adjacent to some villages and few towns inhabited by majority Sinhalese people. Thus, it is no secret that Muslims and Sinhalese in these areas have been living side by side over the years in peace and harmony with an absence of hate and suspicion. The total population of the Kalutara District is 1,102,000, of which, the Sinhalese constitute for 1,054,991(86.67 %), while Muslims and Tamils numbering 112,276(9.22 %) and 47973(4%) of the total population respectively. Thus, the largest minority group in the district is the Muslims. The major Muslims concentrations in the district are in Dharga Town, Beruwala and Panadura.

This study is an attempt to explore the causes and implications of Aluthgama violence upon the minority Muslims living in the area in particular and the communities living there in general.

In fact, this is a qualitative study which employs a number of data gathering tools such as interviews for data collection. Almost 20 people including the victims and other stakeholders were interviewed. Moreover, secondary data materials relevant to the study were also collected.

Aluthgama Violence and its implications

The incident is not a spontaneous attack on the Muslims, but a well-orchestrated venom spewed

out in the form of violence unleashed against the Muslims on 15th June 2014, following the sustained anti-Muslim campaign carried out by Bodu Bala Sena and other outfits like Sinhala Ravaya and Ravana Balaya across the country with the tacit approval of top brass of the rulers, targeting the precious lives, and economic establishments and places of worship of Muslims in the area. The riot, in fact, resulted in the death of 3 Muslims, injured 88 people, vandalized 3 mosques and 174 houses, burnt 79 shops, and damaged 37 three wheelers and 15 other vehicles of Muslims (Mohideen, 2014). Official narrative has disputed this statistics illustrating that the riot so far claimed at least four lives (3) directly, displaced over 370 families and damaged property worth about Rs. 5.8 billion.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, an arson attack was carried out on a Muslim-owned apparel factory which employed 400 Sinhalese girls at Mirisuwatta on Monday, 16th June, 2014(Farook, 2014) and on an animal farm owned by a Muslim in Welipitiya, Aluthgama that resulted in the slaughter of 242 fowls and goats with its farm keeper(Mohideen, 2014). Above all, the mental and emotional agony the Muslims families underwent during and after the riot is indescribable. It may take years and years to erase the mental and psychological trauma that the people were subjected to at the hands of goons or perpetrators of Aluthgama violence.

Factors behind the violence, and law and order of the country

It is alleged that a personal altercation between a Sinhalese driver of monk and two Muslim youth in a narrow road at Adikarigoda caused for the violence (Farook, 2014). However, such a personal altercation, though it initially settled at the spot, was morphed into a communal riot between Sinhalese and Muslims by the politically motivated BBS and its thugs, following a rally and protest march going through the Muslim majority area(Rameez, 2014). Much of the discourses on Alutgama riot pinpoint the fact that irreparable damage caused to the innocent lives of Muslims and their properties worth of millions and billions could have been thwarted had the law enforcement authorities acted swiftly or stymied the protest march held by the BBS marching through the

¹⁶⁷ Further details can be referred to at the following link. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/22/burma-end-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims>

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<http://parliament.lk/uploads/documents/hansard/1403758521021898.pdf> (Speech by MP Mohamed Aslam, 20 June 2014)

Muslim majority area, chanting slogans against Muslims and inviting troubles. A respondent states:

Things could have been brought to under-control had the law enforcement authorities acted swiftly to impose law and order in the area. Instead, what they did was they watched idly while the perpetrators unleashed havoc upon the Muslims and their properties.

The above excerpt illustrate clearly the way in which the law enforcing authorities acted, under the order of higher authorities, that facilitated the carnage to take place.

An analysis on the transcript of the speech made by Gnansara Thero, the secretary of BBS, on the fateful day in Aluthgama at the rally manifests the dynamics of the venom in the form violence or riot it was supposed to cause on Muslims following the rally:

What we have here is a Sinhala Police and Sinhala Army. From today onwards, if any Marakkalaya (pejorative term for Muslims) or any other pariah touched a Sinhalese, let alone saffron robe, that is the end of all of them.... Recently, a kid who came to a clothing shop at Aluthgama had their sexual organs squeezed. Yako! (devil), when that happened, police failed to take legal action, fearing that it would incite racism. I ask the police, did the Sinhalese and Buddhists ever attack the minorities. It is not because that we are not capable of doing that. Therefore, we are telling you, this is the time for us to organize. If we fail to do that, the next generation would curse us...(Jayasinghe, 2014)

The excerpts of the speech of BBS Secretary at the rally were full of venom and hatred stoking the sentiments of Sinhala Buddhists against the Muslims. The pejorative reference to Muslims is meant to incite hate in the audience. This reflects a total lack of respect for others and a mental readiness to humiliate others. The monk has also vowed to take the law unto his hands and punish the Muslims. He is on top of the law.

It is also reported that the curfew that was enforced to contain the violence had only confined the Muslims indoors while BBS thugs were seen

looting and torching the houses and business establishments of Muslims in Alutgama and Beruwala area(Rameez, 2014). This suggests that the government and law enforcement authorities are complicit in what turned out to be a crisply outrageous pogrom against Muslims in Alutgama. As such, this is a clearly orchestrated riot against Muslims waiting to unfold in the aftermath of the war.

A Women's Collective team¹⁶⁹ that investigated and documented the anti-Muslim clashes occurred in Aluthgama had the following observations to say:

- Initially the announcement was made that a walking procession of Buddhists would take place, for which the Muslims were prepared. However there were many eyewitness accounts that the mobsters also came in vehicles from neighbouring villages.
- Survivors' narratives imply that the BBS was planning a procession and preparing for the riot days ahead specially stocking up knives, petrol bombs, clubs and axes in Temples and bringing in busloads of attackers.
- State structures like the police, STF and government hospitals seem to be complicit in this attack: 119 numbers were disconnected, ill response of fire extinguish service, hospitals refused to treat patients, the police/STF refused to take action during the riot.
- Although the government denies involvement, people on the ground feel otherwise.
- No one has been brought before court for shooting, physical and arson attacks, leave alone provoking the riot.
- During the riot and after, no measures were taken to help the community that was trapped in the mosque due to the curfew. Many survivors stated that there was no food even for pregnant women, children and breast feeding mothers. No basic necessities were provided for by the government.

¹⁶⁹ Can be referred to further on <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/govt-complicit-in-aluthgama-anti-muslim-attacks-says-womens-collective/>

International (external) and local (internal) dimensions in the anti-Muslim campaign in Sri Lanka:

Anti-Muslim campaign spearheaded by the BBS and other outfits has been attributed to many local and international factors.

International dimensions

Firstly, it is Israel's intelligence service Mossad that is suspected to be involved in the instigation of anti-Muslim campaign via the BBS in the country (Farook, 2014). This alleged involvement of Israel emanated following the eradication of civil war with the government of Sri Lanka reinforcing its relationship with Israel. It is said that few politicians, top officials, private sector employees, and many others undertook some trips to Israel in the past, while Israel entrepreneurs began investing in many sectors in Lanka indicating the flourishing relations between Sri Lanka and Israel (ibid: 239-240). While it is largely perceived that Israel is an arch-rival of Muslims due to Israel's long record of hostility and its crucial role in the US led war on terrorism demonizing Islam and Muslims, it is quite natural people are suspicious of the involvement of Israel in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka. Secondly, the fact that the Sri Lanka's relations with the Indian anti-Muslim RSS, VHP, Shiva Sena, and Bajran Dala, whose agenda is to eliminate Muslims in their drive to turn India into a Hindu Raj, is also suspected to be a driving force on the BBS anti-Muslim campaign in Sri Lanka (ibid: 240). Thirdly, the recent visit of BBS Secretary to Myanmar to meet Asin Wirathu Thero, leader of the 969 anti-Muslim movement in Myanmar,¹⁷⁰ who has been instrumental in butchering thousands of Muslims,¹⁷¹ has been considered a significant step by the Buddhist movement to incite violence against Sri Lankan Muslims. It is said that he undertook this visit to take a cue from his counterpart in Myanmar as to how to carry out carnage against the minorities, particularly the Muslims. Finally, it cannot be discounted the fact, as the Minister Rajitha Senaratna alleges, that the BBS has a secret dealing with the LTTE remnants

¹⁷⁰ <http://lankacnews.com/english/main-news/gnanasara-thero-in-berma-to-get-advice-from-chirathu-thero/>

¹⁷¹ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/22/burma-end-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims>

in Norway.¹⁷² Overall, it becomes clear that the anti-Muslim campaign carried out by the BBS and others outfits have an international dimension.

Local dimensions

Nevertheless, the local factors are the ones that facilitate the sustained anti-Muslim campaign of the BBS and other outfits with near total impunity. As discussed earlier, the fact that the government turning a blind eye to apprehend the perpetrators of Aluthgama violence, though the perpetrators are familiar faces, suggests that they have got a seal of approval to perpetuate their vicious campaign against Muslims more vigorously. Had the perpetrators of Aluthgama violence brought to book at least now, things would have been different and such violence would not arise in the near future. Discussing about the BBS, Vishwamithra 1984¹⁷³ identified the following factors that gave rise to the emergence of BBS in the post war context of Sri Lanka.

1) Feeble feeling of inferiority

The Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka are experiencing a feeble feeling of inferiority complex despite being a great majority among those who claim the country as their motherland. They feel threatened by the dynamic growth of Muslim population, their economic stability and religious practices (Islamophobia). This, in turn, prompted them to bear hatred towards Muslims.

2) Superiority complex

The euphoria that followed the war victory and the ugly signs of triumphalism encouraged and fed by those who gain direct benefits from such a destructive social force, contributed heavily to this resultant chaos that was stage-managed in Aluthgama in June this year. The fanatics clad in robes are under an illusion that we have subdued the Tamils in 2009, and now it is the turn on the Muslims.

¹⁷² <http://www.asianmirror.lk/news/item/1828-rajitha-accuses-of-gnanasara-thera-of-holding-talks-with-ltte/1828-rajitha-accuses-of-gnanasara-thera-of-holding-talks-with-ltte>

¹⁷³ Can be referred further at : <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/rise-of-BBS-is-ai-direct-result-of-triumphalism/>

3) Distraction of continuing social and economic Malaise

The lower middle class segment of Sinhala Buddhists is an easy marketplace for vitriolic politics that is principally based on the supremacy of the Sinhala race and Buddhism. In addition to making this crucial segment of the population getting engrossed in a socio-cultural issue which anyway is quite sharp enough to reach explosive dimensions provided they are fanned with the necessary 'patriotic' rhetoric flames, the distraction it does to this class of people from the daily struggle of keeping ends meet in an economic atmosphere of spiralling living costs, is quite great. That 'distraction' factor was most cleverly used by Fidel Castro in Cuba when the Cuban economy kept struggling to stay afloat after the pipeline of massive aid from the then Soviet Union dried up.

What better way to drive real socio-political and economic issues than to addle Sinhala Buddhists minds with suspicion and hate against Muslims? (Tissaranee, 2014)

4) Equate the local Muslims to Al-Qaeda or Taliban to label them as "Terrorists"

The politicians representing the ruling political party has been successful, at least up to the present time, in keeping the people engrossed in socio-cultural issues such as imaginary Muslim domination in the business world, equating the local Muslim population to the international terrorist organizations such as the Taliban and Al Qaida etc. and thereby throwing a sense of fear and suspicion based purely on race and religion. When such racial and religious suspicions and fears start playing in a people who have been traditionally found to be gripped by an inferiority complex, violence in the gruesome form of what we recently witnessed in Aluthgama is bound to happen with organizations such as Bodu Bala Sena and Ravana Balaya running amok against Muslims. There is an ulterior motive behind the attempt labelling the Muslims as terrorists, i.e., the forces in Sri Lanka may attempt to ally with the Western Countries under the USA that are in the forefront of waging a war against 'Islamic terrorists'. As such, the Buddhist fanatics in cahoots with the USA may attempt to antagonize and subjugate the Muslims in Lanka.

5) Forthcoming Presidential election

All these signals and messages indicate one thing and only one thing- a carefully planned and plotted design is in place with only one objective in play: The next Presidential Elections and how to gain the maximum advantage from a gullible voter who has already been set up by a campaign run and sustained by pseudo-patriotism.

Moreover, Dr Jayathilake, former High Commissioner of Switzerland, argues that BBS sangha attempt to seize power/control the state so that they would install a preferred ruler as the Sinhala Buddhist hardliners did in the past(Jayathilake, 2014).

Recovering Mechanism

In the wake of Aluthgama violence, Muslims across the country registered their objection and reservation to the hate-filled Buddhist fanatics and its sponsors for unnecessarily causing such wanton destruction. With the concept of brotherhood predominant in Islam, Muslims from all over the country contributed financially or in kind to help re-build/restore their lives. Mosques around the country played a pivotal role in collecting mammoth amount of money to be sent to the victims in Aluthgama languishing in camps and schools following the incident. Civil Society organizations such as Muslim Council of Sri Lanka and Majlishus Shoora facilitated the distribution of goods collected from philanthropists to the victims in Aluthgama.

Despite the government promised to allocate 200 million to repair building shattered in the violence,¹⁷⁴ people in Aluthgama felt dissatisfied with the amount of the fund allocated since it is implicitly inadequate.

Moreover, Muslim Lawyers Association and National Shoora Council took some steps to provide free legal aid service to those affected in the area.

Conclusion

It is no secret that the Sinhala Buddhist ideology advanced by certain extremist outfits in the past with the patronage of the rulers has served the

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<http://www.lankasrinews.com/view.php?22oMM3031Oy4e2BmAca25YAdd3Y55ac3mBpe43OI30236A43>

purpose. In the same vein, the BBS, with its political ideology which is a post war phenomenon, is causing irreparable damage to peace and reconciliation that prevails among the communities in the country. The BBS's involvement in the wanton destruction in Aluthgama underlines an ominous sign or spell disaster for peace and harmony for the country. Healthy coexistence of Sinhalese and Muslims prevailed in the past has become infected with the virus of outbreak of violence as a result of vitriolic campaign undertaken by the BBS against Muslims, which still continues unabated. The recent visit of Asin Wirathu to the Island, amidst so much of objection and reservation by the Muslim civil society organizations, and resultant agreement he entered into with the BBS with the intention of promoting (militant) Buddhism in South Asia heralds a recipe for disaster in the future Lanka. The future of besieged and beleaguered Muslim community in the country looks bleak, given their fragmented politicians and feeble and vulnerable social and political leadership. Muslims in Sri Lanka have lost hope in their politicians as they disown the community at a time when their role is desperately felt to ensure the security and safety of the community in the country. Serious questions have also been raised with regard to the law and order in the country.

Therefore, it is imperative that the rule and law in the country should be upheld by the rulers, regardless of the ethnic, religious and other differences. It is high time that the perpetrators of violence including the Aluthgama saga brought to book to ensure that social justice and equality is prevailed among ethnic groups.

There is also a desperate need for politicians, civil society leaders including religious leaders representing the Muslim Umma to work together in the best interest of the community at a time when their existence is seriously challenged. They should work collectively to resort to legal and other democratic means to ensure their rights and existence in the country, given the fact that their security, economy, dietary and religious practices have come under a serious threat and challenge by the extremist outfits like BBS. It is also imperative that the collective lobbying must be undertaken in the international level to keep the international community updated of what is happening to the minorities in the post war scenario.

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