Sri Lanka is no stranger to eruptions of communal violence. The most glaring testimony to this stands in the form of the notorious thirty year civil war that was a result of conflicting Sinhala and Tamil political ambitions. Obviously, these expressions of violence do not emerge overnight but rather progress around a number of events spanning extended lengths of time, finally escalating into their terrible forms. The recent controversy springing out of the Buddhist-Muslim clash clearly shows the dangerous potential of communal rifts to disintegrate societies and dissolve them in rivalry and hatred. A look into the historical underpinnings of Buddhist-Muslim exchanges provides valuable insights into the contemporary dynamics of this relationship.

Buddhist-Muslim Riots of 1915:
Gampola, a laid back town nestled in the central hills of Sri Lanka, was the scene of the first Buddhist-Muslim clash of the island. Tensions between the two communities were running high with the Buddhists complaining about the increasing number of mosques springing up in the area, and the Muslims retaliating by objecting to a Buddhist procession conducted in the vicinity of a mosque. On 29 May 1915, a Buddhist mob torched a mosque and began to attack Muslim homes and businesses. Soon the violence spread to Central, North Western, Western, Southern and Sabaragamuwa Provinces. Some accounts state that the scale of confrontations reached a peak on 2 June when clashes broke out simultaneously in 116 locations across the country and that the Sinhalese were making a pre-emptive move. This was all prompted by a widespread rumor: that a Muslim army was going to launch an attack on the Temple of the Scared Tooth Relic in Kandy.

Large crowds were involved in the attacks on the Moors; mobs of over a thousand were reportedly involved in violent activities in Matale, Wattegama, Kadugannawa, Gampola, Rambukkana, Panadura, Godapitiya and Akuressa. Muslim violence over the Sinhalese, however, was limited to a few isolated incidents. The riots left 45 dead, 189 wounded and 4 raped. 4075 houses and boutiques were looted, 250 burned down, while 17 mosques were torched and 86 were damaged.2

Governor Robert Chalmers came down hard on the Sinhala community and declared martial law on 2 June 1915, and ordered the police and the army to shoot anyone who they deemed a rioter without a trial. They arrested local leaders D.S. Senanayake and F.R. Senanayake who were actually attempting to resolve the dispute and accused them of provoking Sinhalese against Muslims. However, it was later acknowledged by the British that these leaders were not responsible for any act of violence or incitement.

The Case of Deegawapiya
Deegawapiya is one of 16 places blessed by the Buddha's presence. The Buddha, as legend asserts, made a third visit to Sri Lanka, and was invited to Kelaniya by King Mani

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Akkika of the Naga Tribe. The Buddha accepted the invitation and to mark the 8th year of attaining Nirvana, visited Deegawapiya with 500 Arhats and spent time there in meditation.

According to the Mahavamsa, the chief historical chronicle of Sri Lanka, the stupa at Deegawapiya was built by King Saddhatissa (137-119 BC) who also had donated a precious jacket decorated with gold lotus flowers and various gems to cover the stupa. Though according to common knowledge the stupa does not contain any physical relic of the Buddha, Venerable Ellawela Medananda Thero, a prominent historian, believes that it enshrines a nail relic of the Buddha. An inscription on a gold foil unearthed during excavations discloses that King Kawanthissa (164-192) renovated the stupa during his reign. In 1757, King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe repaired this temple and dedicated it to Venerable Bandigode Neegroda Thero.

In 1853, the British initiated a number of irrigation projects in this area where they reportedly used blocks from the stupa to build anicuts. They also sold land in these areas to Muslim businessmen. Additionally, the Government Works Department was instructed by the then Governor to dig this stupa and later on uncontrolled digging brought about grave destruction to it.

In 1921, Kohukubure Rewatha Thero who came to Deegawapiya as the new Chief Incumbent of the temple, produced a letter to British Governor Manning introducing himself as guardian of the temple after Bandigode Neegraoda Thero, and asked him not to sell temple land. He then submitted a petition to the Colonial Secretariat reminding them that the British were bound by the terms of the Kandyan Treaty of 1815, which mandated that they promise to protect Buddhism on behalf of the Buddhist people.

As a result of the request of Rev. Rewaha Thero, Archeological Commissioner Hocart came to inquire about the situation in 1925 with a group that included Eastern Province government agents known as ‘Rate Mahaththaya.’ Ven. Rewatha requested lands of one square mile for the temple; but the Commissioner to whom the request was not communicated clearly ordered new lands to be provided for the temple, instead of a reallocation of existing lands. This required all the lands in the area to be re-surveyed.

However, the process of re-surveying caused a dispute between Rev. Rewatha Thero and a Muslim, known by the name Ismile, who claimed that his land had been unlawfully absorbed into temple property during the re-surveying process. Against this backdrop on 13 October 1953, Rev. Rewatha Thero was shot by an unknown gunman and at death’s door, the monk had reportedly murmured the name of Ismile. As the rumor spread, incensed Sinhala Buddhists working on the Gal Oya development project attacked Muslim shops, after the funeral ceremony of Rev. Rewatha Thero ended. Currently, the case of Ismile vs. Temple is being heard at the Kalmune Court. Ismile’s family had sold the land to another Muslim who is now claiming his right to the land.

Since then, the Buddhist presence in the area has significantly increased. The Rail Road Society of Batticaloa built the ‘Avasa Geya’ (residence hall for monks) in 1933, and the Gal Oya Development Board built the ‘Viharageya’ (temple hall) in 1935 and a Rest Hall in 1962. That construction, coupled with the historic significance of the place, encouraged a huge influx of pilgrims from all around the country to Deegawapiya.

The lands of Deegawapiya were re-distributed, according to the government gazette issued in 1973 that allocated 509 acres to the temple and 76 acres to the government as reservations for the sustenance of rivers. 90 acres had already been sold, out to Muslims, by the British.

Senerath Somarathe, a migrant worker of the Gal Oya project from the Beliaththa area in down south, initiated a program to create more Sinhala settlements in Deegawapiya. His charisma and steadily increasing popularity among the local Sinhalese led him to be elected as a Member of Parliament from the UNP in 1970. Upon assuming office, he settled 1000 Sinhalese in the high lands of Deegawapiya and dubbed it the ‘Deegawapiya Buddhist Colony.’ Most of the lands in the Buddhist colony were used for sugar cane plantation, a highly profitable business that was only beginning to thrive. Located around these lands were paddy fields cultivated by Muslims; and a Muslim village lay less than 4 kilometers away from the village temple.

The fragile state of affairs in these mixed colonies was repeatedly disturbed by new land allocation schemes introduced at the state level. The first of them was President Jayawardene’s proposed – but [luckily] aborted – plan to allocate more lands to Sinhalese in the area. An additional 200 acres of land was later given to the Sinhalese living in the Buddhist colony. This move came at the expense of Muslims in the area who were removed from the locality in order that Sinhalese may have these lands. Naturally, the Muslims complained about having to abandon the seasoned lands on which they were cultivating and relocate to new and rough lands where the process had to begin all over again. The incumbent UNP government failed to address the grievances of the Muslim community.

In 1989, the Muslim Congress was formed by M.H.M. Ashraff who promised to get the lost land back for the Muslims. In 1994, he won the election and later altered the promise and said that he would compensate them with lands that were located in close proximity to both the jungle and the temple because getting back the Sinhala-occupied lands was a nearly impossible task.

However, the boundaries of the temple were only known to its Chief Incumbent Rev. Buddharakkitha Thero. When clearing the jungle for re-surveying began, he accused government authorities of invading temple property. Monks in Colombo protested and interpreted it as granting temple lands to Muslims. In response, the Survey Department declared a buffer zone to protect temple lands and allocated to Muslims those slots that fell outside the buffer. To prevent further tensions, Mr. Ashraff appointed a task force headed by one Mr. Sunil Kanangara to achieve the following tasks within 40 days. The tasks were:

1. Demarcation of temple boundaries
2. Assisting the Department of Archeology to identify ruins in the area
3. Providing a telephone connection for the temple
4. Reconstruction of the stupa, dana shaala (eating hall of monks) and the bund surrounding the temple
5. Providing electricity for the village
6. Building a library and a nursery for the village
7. Repairing the police station

The project cost millions of rupees, and after the forty-day deadline, all new construction opened to the public and the inauguration ceremony’s chief guest was Mr. Lakshman Jayakodi, the Minister of Culture. Mr. Ashraff also provided twenty job opportunities to the Sinhalese in Deegawapiya. Despite the common accusation that he attempted to change the demographics in Deegawapiya by increasing the number of Muslim settlements, it is clear he had no such intention but rather strived to maintain peace and harmony in the area.

The accusations against Mr. Ashraff grew even stronger when an undeclared archeological site that was being excavated without public knowledge by the Department of Archeology was unknowingly harmed (partially) by a road-gravelling project. Among the damaged ruins was a stupa, which, if it were preserved, would have become the second of its sort in Deegawapiya. Adding to the tension was the fact that the Sinhala contractor
of the project had been leased some land on which to do his work by a Muslim. Since the project was part of Mr. Ashraff’s development plan, the brunt of the blame fell on him. It did not quite help that he also happened to be a Muslim.

Leading Buddhist monks of the time such as late Ven. Soma Thero, Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha Thero, and Ven. Iththapana Dhammalankara Thero criticized Mr. Ashraff for trying to erase the Buddhist history of Deegawapiya. The JHU also joined in and urged the government to take measures to protect the Buddhist heritage of the area. Some Sinhala Buddhist extremists even conducted strikes all around the country.

Shortly after, Mr. Ashraff tragically lost his life in a plane crash. Mrs. Ashraff stepped in to fill the gap and she continued her husband’s development policies. Additionally, she built a rest house for the pilgrims of the Deegawapiya temple and former president Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike opened it in 2004 and named it ‘The Ashraff Memorial Hall.’

The most recent controversy in Deegawapiya was triggered in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami that claimed an approximate 9000 lives in Ampara. New housing projects were promptly launched to help the survivors, and lands in the Akkareyipaththu division, which did not belong to the temple, were selected for the purpose. The resultant sprawling housing scheme used 60 acres of land to accommodate 500 houses, and was situated 13km away from the temple. However, houses were distributed on a discriminatory basis excluding Sinhalese and Tamils in the area. These grievances were presented to the Supreme Court by the JHU as a Fundamental Rights case, a move sponsored by one Kamal Rajapaksh in England. Rev. Buddharakkita Thero was named as the plaintiff and Rev. Omalpe Sobitha as well as Rev. Ellawala Medananda played a prominent role in approaching the court with the matter. The main complaint was that houses in the Tsunami housing scheme in Deegawapiya were being distributed exclusively among Muslims, thus depriving Sinhala and Tamil victims of the Tsunami the right to enjoy its benefits.

After taking into account the facts presented in court, Chief Justice Sarath N. Silva ruled that the manner in which the houses were distributed was illegal, that it violated the rights of the petitioners, and that since the recipients were not able to successfully support with evidence the procedure they claimed they had adopted when accepting houses, they did not enjoy legal entitlement to them. Additionally, the respondents were ordered to pay a sum of Rs. 150,000 to the petitioners as compensation. Despite this favorable verdict, Buddhists in Deegawapiya still seem susceptible to strokes of paranoia that a Muslim takeover of the area is likely. They, including Buddhist monks, are especially protective of the land belonging to the temple and the historical artifacts, which, due to their physical nature, could easily be taken away by force, thus wiping out the Buddhist heritage in the area.

Mawanella Incident of 2001

The Mawanella incident of 2001 refers to an attack on Muslims by Sinhalese in the town of Mawanella that resulted in the deaths of two Muslims and injured an approximate fifteen Muslims, along with destroying millions-worth of Muslim property in the area.

On 30 April 2001, around 9.30 p.m., a group of Sinhala thugs visited a hotel owned by a Muslim, took some cigarettes without paying, and then threatened the cashier to hand over the money. When he refused to oblige, the cashier was seized, dragged outside, tied to an iron fence and his mouth was slashed with a knife. Three policemen saw the incident but stood by and did nothing to help the victim. The injured youth could only be

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hospitalized after the thugs left. Hundreds of Muslims took to the streets in protest demanding the criminals be brought to justice by arresting those responsible, but to no avail. According to some eyewitnesses in Mawanella, the initial attack was instigated by a gang of thugs that included the bodyguards of Mr. Mahipala Herath, a government minister from the Kegalle District. However, soon after the Muslim demonstration against the police was over, an organized Sinhala mob went on a rampage, setting fire to Muslim-owned shops, houses, businesses and mosques. One group entered the town’s main mosque and dragged out the cleric, burned furniture, a funeral casket and a copy of the Noble Qur’an. According to eyewitnesses, the police actively helped the mob enter a hardware store by shooting off its padlock.

Again, a massive protest was staged by local Muslims. The police responded by firing into the crowd, killing two people, including 55 year-old Haniffa Mohamed, and injuring fifteen others. Heated at the news of the Mawanella attack, Muslim protesters took to the streets on 4 May 2001, in Colombo, Kandy, Puttalam, Hambanthota and Ratnapura. One serious clash was reported near the Maradana police station in Colombo, where the police used tear gas and batons to dissolve the crowd. Some eyewitnesses report that special police commando units were involved in terrorizing and physically attacking young people on the streets in Muslim areas. The police had arrested some Muslim leaders accusing them for violence including Mujibur Rahuman, leader of the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF), who was later released on bail. Some eyewitnesses in Mawanella held that “if the police had taken action against the thugs the situation would not have arisen; but the police and politicians collaborated with these people to provoke communal clashes.” One witness said “these thugs are connected to the minister and Sinhala shop owners. They run the police.”

The government reacted by imposing a 12-hour curfew on Colombo and the adjoining Western Province and by forming a “peace committee” in the Mawanella area to include representatives of the Sinhala and Muslim communities as well as local police chiefs. Members of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress blamed the government for instigating and being indifferent to the riots. President Chandrika Kumaratunga appeared on national television on 5 May 2001, claiming that the incident in Mawanella and the protests in Colombo, along with a recent strike by railway workers, were all part of an organized conspiracy to topple her government. Following the Mawanella attack, Mr. Rauf Hakim, a Member of Parliament, declared that “the violence in and around Mawanella was directed against the economy of the Muslims and against mosques” and called on the government to arrest this “disturbing trend.” On 7 May 2001, the SLMC issued a statement threatening to leave the ruling coalition unless the government establishes a commission for the inquiry and punishment of those responsible for the attacks and paid compensation to those affected.

The Kuragala Clash

Kuragala, a historical site in the Balangoda area, became a controversial topic between Sinhalese and Muslims because of a common archeological site both communities considered to be of religious significance to them only. Said site is home to an ancient Sufi shrine sacred to Muslims, while Buddhists claim that the rock cave there was an ancient Buddhist monastery.

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According to Muslim history, Kuragala is sacred because Arabic rock inscriptions, tombstones and other historical evidence suggest that a greatly revered Islamic saint had mediated in the rock cave for 12 years when on a pilgrimage to Adam’s Peak. Once a year, pilgrims flock to the site to commemorate the death anniversary of this saint who is identified as Sheikh Muhiyadeen Abdul Qadir. The locality is a haven for meditation and solitary reflection that Sufism preaches.

While explaining the historical relevance the site holds for Buddhists, the Chief Incumbent of the temple, Venerable Asgiri Maha Viharaye Karmacharya Poojya Panditha Dilthota Dhammajothe Thero, told: “Kuragala dates back to King Ravana’s reign. Artifacts discovered from the site have further fortified our claims that these objects are over a thousand years old.” According to the Department of Archeology, rock inscriptions over the Kuragala caves prove that the Buddhist history of Kuragala dates back to the 2nd century B.C.

Ven. Dhammajothe Thero further stated that this isolated area is now notorious for ganja cultivation. It is said that a group of Muslims had requested the village chieftain to grant them a piece of land for ganja cultivation and since this area was covered by a thick jungle, the chieftain had given it to them and they had then discovered the caves and occupied them to guard their crops. Buddhists believe that to conduct their religious activities they had to lease a small area on the Kuragala Rock, to build a mosque with the assistance of the politically influential Abusalley family. Ven. Wadassara Gnaneshwara Thero has been restoring the Buddhist heritage of the Kuragala Mountain area since 1970, and he mentioned:

“It was after this great monk had established a Buddhist statue at Kuragala that the Archaeology Department took interest in the ancient artifacts that were discovered and commenced excavations. Meanwhile the Muslims in the area had requested an alternate plot of land to relocate their mosque, and the late R. Premadasa had given them 28 acres. Even though they had accepted the land, they never relocated the mosque. Even today Lady Abusalley occupies this land.”

Ven. Dhammajothe Thero said that “Muslims have not spared a single Buddhist statue or artifact. They have completely destroyed them. Of the six rock inscriptions, many have been deliberately burnt and destroyed, which is a great shame.” The department erected a signboard stating that this site was once an ancient Buddhist monastery. It also issued a notice stating that the Muslims’ worshiping Kuragala will not be affected by any conservation work on the site. However, this issue became controversial when the hard line Buddhist group Bodu Bala Sena demanded that the Jailani Mosque be demolished as it was on sacred land belonging to Buddhist pilgrims. In January 2013, about 150 monks of Sinhala Ravaya and Bodu Bala Sena jointly attempted to storm the Jailani mosque carrying Buddha statues in their hands, but heavy showers derailed the planned venture.

In this regard on 6 February, a meeting was held in the office of Dr. Senarath Dissanayake, the Director General of the Department of Archeology. The meeting included the Trustee of the Kuragala Shrine, other representatives and scholars from the Muslim

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community, officials from the Department of Archeology, officials of the Ministry of Defense, police officers, and representatives of Bodu Bala Sena and Sinhala Ravaya to discuss the matter in Kuragala and to arrive at a peaceful settlement. Extreme factions of the BBS dominated the meeting and clearly expressed their views saying: “Neither law nor history matters – if Kuragala is not cleared by 14th February, we will bring in a force of 25,000 people and take it back ourselves.”

Muslims say that they have been visiting this site since ancient times to rest on their way to Adam’s Peak and then began treating it as a holy site of one of Islam’s greatest saints, Sheikh Mohiyyadeen Abdul Qadir Gilani who meditated on a ledge here accessible through a cave known as ‘SorangaMalai’ or the ‘Mountain of the Cave’. According to present trustee of Jailany Roshana Aboosally, this site was handed over to the Department of Archeology in 1972 by a cabinet order.

Due to the failed meetings and discussions between parties, Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse intervened and assured the Muslim community that their religious rights would not be hindered and that the government would ensure that no Buddhist monuments would be constructed on the site. Instead, the site would be a free area, open to both Buddhist and Muslim pilgrims. He then instructed Dr. Dissanayake, Director of the Department of Archeology, to appoint a committee comprising the shrine’s trustees, Medhananda Thero and other monks to work out a suitable compromise on the removal of the buildings. The Muslim representatives plainly refused to discuss the issue with hardcore Buddhist monks and that prompted the Defense Secretary to call upon a different group of Buddhist monks to discuss the matter. The second delegation included moderate monks such as Prof. Bellanvila Wimalarathana Thero who was also on the issue. The monks and defense ministry officials however were insisting that a settlement be reached at the second meeting and the matter be laid to rest. However, the Trustees and members of the Muslim delegation insisted that the Defense Secretary visit the hotly contested site before any settlement was reached.

After the visit to Kuragala, the Defense Secretary ordered all extraneous buildings in the site to be removed to make space for conservation work although said buildings were there before the handing over of the site to the Department of Archaeology. The Defense Secretary also assured that the mosque built in 1922 will not be affected, and the Director General too emphasized that the mosque will not be harmed under any circumstances and that the Muslims can conduct religious observances as they have been doing in the past.

Roshana Aboosally, the present trustee of Jailany, mentioned that “We informed the Defense Secretary and the Director General that we have commenced work and that we would begin construction in the new location when the architect submits the building plans and the cost estimates.” She further said that, “Since it has been declared as an archaeological site and no one can build on this site, I believe that both parties need to cooperate and the whole issue should be settled amicably without any disrespect or harm to either faith.”

Kuragala is one of many sites government authorities such as the Department of Archeology specially concentrates on preserving for the sake of future generations. However, it is most unfortunate that these attempts come at the cost of religious harmony. Leaders of all religions should strive to function harmoniously in such situations in order

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that a rich historical legacy is left for future generations to draw from and inspire themselves, so that a glowing Sri Lanka will not remain a dream.

**Dambulla Controversy**

The construction of a Muslim mosque in the sacred area of the Dambulla Temple recently stirred another controversy between Buddhists and Muslims. The history of the Dambulla Temple goes back to the period of King Valagamba who ruled the country sometime during the 3rd to 2nd centuries B.C. When King Valagamba was exiled from Anuradhapura, he sought refuge in Dambulla for 15 years. After reclaiming his capital, the King built a temple in Dambulla, the place that protected him during his exile, in thankful worship. He also donated more than 12,000 hectares to the temple and ordered that the royal patronage extended to the temple be continued throughout the ages. Today, the Temple is considered as one of the most ancient Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka. Its rich archeological and artistic value has made UNESCO declare it as a World Heritage Site.

The current trustee of the temple claims that illegal construction of other religious places have threatened the survival of the sacred temple and these illegal constructions are carried out with the support of politicians and other parties. According to the Chief Incumbent of the temple Ven. Enamaluwe Sumangala Thero, during the period of President Premadasa, the temple and its surrounding locality were announced as a sacred area through a gazette order. The order clearly specified the boundaries of the sacred zone; however, due to administrative delays, before an official demarcation of boundaries could take place: small groups of Muslims and Tamil Hindus settled in these areas and built their own places of worship. The sudden outbreak of protests by Buddhists was prompted by a recent decision of the government to initiate a new project to develop the Dambulla Temple and build a mosque and a kovil in the same area.

In response, a group of protestors including Buddhist monks broke into the Jumma Mosque in Dambulla on 20 April 2012 - disrupting the Muslims’ traditional Friday afternoon prayers. Despite police presence, the protestors caused damage to the property including copies of the Noble Qur’an and other religious texts. A crowd of about 2,000 people headed by Ven. Inamaluwe Sri Sumangala Thero marched to the mosque and blocked entrance to it. The protesters claimed that the mosque was an illegal construction within the Dambulla sacred zone and therefore should be demolished. Special Task Force personnel were rushed to the area to bring the situation under control after the mosque was damaged in the mob attack.22

Following the commotion, the mosque was declared a prohibited area and it was only reopened to devotees after Ministers A.H.M. Fowzie and Rishard Bathiudeen, Deputy Minister M.A.L.M. Hizbullah and Matale Mayor Hilmy Mohammed held discussions with the police, government officials and area leaders. After the attack, Sri Lanka Muslim Council President N.M. Ameen said, at a meeting attended by several MPs and civil society members that they had decided to write to President Rajapaksa requesting an impartial inquiry. He said residents in the area had told them that the mosque had been there for more than 50 years and some Sinhala residents of the area believed that the attack on the mosque was a trick to demolish all the houses in the area, which is a tourist hotspot.23

After the attack, the trustees of the mosque said that it was inadvisable to compromise the harmony of Muslims and Buddhists in the face of such events, and as Muslims they would agree to a legal settlement and the incident should not be an opportunity for religious and ethnic extremists to gain their ends.


23 I bid
However, undermining this display of solidarity between Muslims and Buddhists, Prime Minister Jayaratne ordered the removal of the mosque from the area shortly after the incident. The mosque, he said, could instead be built in a nearby location since the current location is within a Buddhist religious area. The decision also extended to the seventy-two other illegal constructions around the Dambulla temple including a kovil. All constructions were to be demolished within six months. The Prime Minister also stated that the decision was reached after consultation with Muslim political leaders, but Muslim leaders have denied this openly in the media.

Issuing a statement, the government stated that it will carry on the development project of Dambulla Temple without offending any other religion through discussion between all parties. In protest, hartal movements were conducted in a few administrative divisions in the Eastern Province including Pothuvill, Kalmune, Samathure, Akkarayipaththuwa, Nindhur, Muthur, Kinnya, and some areas in Trincomalee. The All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) said that they were waiting for an impartial and peaceful decision and expressed their faith in the authorities’ capacity to produce a just solution. However, some newspapers later revealed that the ACJU had requested from Muslim communities to fast in opposition to the decision of the government.

**Bodu Bala Sena**

Bodu Bala Sena is a Buddhist (often accused as extremist) organization comprising mainly of monks. The main objective of BBS is the protection of the primacy Buddhism enjoys in Sri Lanka. As such, monks involved in BBS have mobilized Buddhist support for quite a few controversial causes, the most recent – and perhaps the most explosive – of which was the boycott of halal food (food blessed and approved as fit for the consumption of Muslims). According to the organization, the high cost borne by manufacturers to get the halal logo stamped on their products is covered by increasing the prices of said products. In their view, this amounts to inflation caused by the religious sensitivities of a few. Hence BBS assumed an anti-halal stance while at the same time urging Buddhists to follow suit. Towards this end, thousands of supporters and representatives of the Bodu Bala Sena gathered at the Maharagama Junction to adopt a grand convention. Clad in white t-shirts bearing ‘No-Halal’ slogans, the supporters carried Buddhist flags and cheered enthusiastically when Bodu Bala Sena monks referred to the Muslim woman’s conservative clothing as ‘gonibilla’ outfits and called for a total ban on halal products by 31 March 2013.

BBS also presented the “Historic Maharagama Declaration”, a 10-point resolution that aimed to impose bans on halal certified food, sending Lankan women to the Middle East, mosque-building with Middle Eastern funds, and certain birth control methods that aimed at stunting the Sinhala population. The monks claimed that 80,000 Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Middle East had been converted to Islam and that several organizations operating in Sri Lanka were receiving Middle Eastern funding to convert Buddhists in the island. Crumbling under huge public pressure, the ACJU agreed to issue halal certified products only to Muslim consumers so that non-Muslims would not be affected by the increased price. Some of the Buddhist clergy, especially members of BBS, campaigned for the complete prohibition of the entire halal process in Sri Lanka.


Though BBS's preoccupation, since recently, has been with the halal issue, they have also been very vocal in their accusation that Muslims are encroaching on Buddhist lands in numerous parts of the country, and that they are conspiring to reduce the Sinhala population through encouraging marriage between Sinhala girls and Muslim boys as well as distributing craftily hidden birth control medication among the Sinhalese.

Ironically, these developments have all taken place against a backdrop of Muslim nations of the world supporting Sri Lanka stand against western pressure regarding the Human Rights situation in the country. Obviously, it would be a major-scale diplomatic faux pas as well as political suicide to offend these nations by extending state-level patronizing of Muslim marginalization. The state, therefore, would be best advised to reasonably negotiate with the activist sects of Buddhist clergy and show them that if the international tide turns against Sri Lanka because of a withdrawal of support from the Muslim countries, the land and the religion they so glorify and try to protect will be compromised in any case.

No Limit Crisis

Members of BBS protested outside the No Limit clothing-shop in Maharagama because the bulk of their profits were going into funding the drug-mafia. However, the fact that the clothing line is owned by a Muslim family hardly went unnoticed. The brand has long been circulated by rumors of giving out candy that makes their Sinhala employees infertile and rewarding Muslim (male) employees for marrying Sinhala female employees.

The Grandpass Confrontation

Grandpass, Colombo is home to the Samadhi Temple, which during the 1970s served as a residence hall for lay Buddhist ladies who practiced the dhamma (upasikaramaya). 20m away from the temple, is land once owned by one Somadasa who during the 1980s had sold it to a Muslim in order to build a Mosque. The Buddhists of the area opposed the construction of the mosque since the noise of daily prayers within such close proximity to the temple would be an inconvenience to carry out religious activities there. Ven. Mataraba Mahinda Thero, Chief Incumbent of the temple during the time, sent a letter to Prime Minister Premadasa saying that a Bo tree stood in the border dividing the two lands and problems might arise out of this positioning. Despite these concerns, Muslims were able to build the mosque and from time to time, they would cut branches of the Bo tree to expand the mosque. However, as time passed, harmony and fraternity developed among all Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil communities in the area. During Vesak, Muslims would give out food for free (dansal) and Sinhalese would celebrate the Ramadan festival with Muslims.

In 1987 there were only a very few amount of Muslim families compared to the Sinhala population but today there are 500 Muslim families and only 150 Sinhala families. The increasing Muslim population required a large mosque to continue their prayers. The unity among the two communities was threatened when the Muslims started to build a new building 15m away from the Samadhi temple and later revealed that it was a mosque.

The Chief Incumbent Ven. Mataraba Dhamma Nanda Thero has opposed the construction of the new building and approached all responsible authorities\textsuperscript{27}, including the President, Defense Secretary, and Secretary of Religious Affairs. He has explained how the new mosque will affect religious harmony and how it poses the threat of a conflict between the two communities. As per a complaint lodged on 23 July 2010, by the Chief Incumbent, the police investigated the contested property on which occasion the owner of the building Mr. Hassan Mubarak explained to the police through a letter that he was

\textsuperscript{27} The letter has sent in 18 July 2010
constructing the building for his personal use and not as a mosque. Throughout the investigation until 23 February 2013, Mr. Mubarak and his contractor officially maintained that the building was to serve as a store for the owner. Later, the Chief Incumbent again complained to the police that features of the building look like those of a mosque. During the investigation that followed, the police questioned Mr. Mubarak about an ablution area in the new building, whereupon he said that it was a mistake and he will remove it soon.

A number of other complaints followed, but instead of involving the police, an Islamic priest issued a statement saying that the Vakub Sabha has approved the building as a Muslim mosque and that they now have the authority to continue it in that capacity. Their explanation was that the former land owner Mr. Mubarak had sold the land to a person in Dehiwala and that person had donated the land to build a mosque.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs held a meeting on 27 November 2012, to discuss the issue. At the meeting, Muslim religious leaders said that their growing numbers required an expansion of the old mosque, but due to the presence of the Bo tree that aim could not be achieved and hence they built a new mosque in order to accommodate the religious needs of their increasing population. In response, Buddhist monks agreed to cut the Bo tree near the old mosque and requested the Muslim community to relocate there and stop turning the new building into a mosque in order to prevent future religious disputes. Both parties seemed to have agreed to the settlement. The dispute, however, was not quite done.

On 4 June 2013, it again came to the surface due to the continued functioning of the so-called store as a mosque. With the involvement of a Muslim MP of the area, Muslims had secured approval to use the store building as a mosque until the Ramadan Festival was over. Though majority of Buddhists were provoked, Ven. Anurudha was able to keep in check a possible insurgency. He again complained to the police and the Muslims agreed at the police station to stop prayers in the new building. However, since the prayers did not stop, the Buddhist community conducted a peaceful strike against conceivably double-crossing behavior of Muslims. As a result, D.I.G. of Police, Mr. Gunawaradane came to the area, removed all loudspeakers, and seized the store. A settlement was subsequently arrived at, whereby the Buddhists agreed to allow the Muslims to continue their prayers in the new mosque until the Ramadan Festival was over, and the Muslims agreed to relocate to the old mosque promptly as Ramadan came to an end.

Some thoughts

The growing tensions between Buddhist and Muslim communities, as well as the troublingly increasing frequency with which they are renewed are definitely causes for concern not only because they pose a threat to the internal peace and stability of Sri Lanka, but also because they come at an enormous diplomatic cost. Especially in light of the current upheaval in the international community regarding the Human Rights situation in Sri Lanka, it is imperative that the island strengthens its existing cordialities with friendly nations, most of whom are Muslim countries. If domestic conditions turn unfavorable to the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, it would be logical to assume that these countries would be less inclined than they are now to show their solidarity with the island nation.

How vital their support is for Sri Lanka was clearly demonstrated during the Geneva Human Rights Council session where a resolution urging Sri Lanka to probe the possible occurrence of war crimes was passed in March, 2012. Those who voted against the resolution included an overwhelming majority of Muslim countries including Pakistan, Maldives, and Iraq. Ensuring that Muslims are not marginalized or discriminated against in any way, therefore, will determine not only a sustainable peace in Sri Lanka but also a more comfortable international atmosphere for the country.
Buddhist-Muslim clashes in Sri Lanka, as this essay shows, are not a recent phenomenon. However, they did become more pronounced in the recent past with the renewed interest of BBS, among others, in the Muslim community and the [perceived] threat they pose to the Sinhala-Buddhist community. Since Buddhist monks comprise a very potent tool that shapes public opinion, it is extremely important that they deliberate on their views and stances before involving the public in certain issues because though their actions are fundamentally oriented towards the preservation of Buddhism and the Sinhalese, if their actions themselves serve to warrant international interference in Sri Lanka to probe the Human Rights condition of the country, the very entities that they strive to preserve will be the first to be compromised.