

RAMPANT LIONS: THE BUDDHIST RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE IN SRI LANKA

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Introduction

One of the primary driving forces influencing armed conflict in the period following World War Two is the call for recognition and rights among competing national ethnic groups amidst the disintegration of colonial and supra-state rule. The state of conflict present in Sri Lanka following independence in 1948 exemplifies this division along lines of ethnic, religious, and linguistic distinctions between local Sinhala and Tamil populations. However, while such distinctions are present in a number of regional conflicts, what makes the situation in Sri Lanka so unique is the active role that Buddhism has played in the creation and maintenance of state-sponsored violence against the sizeable minority of Tamils living on the island. From a macroscopic, global perspective the advocacy of violence may be seen as equally lamentable and understandable within the context of national identity and its affirmation on the state level.

However, the traditional importance attached to *ahimsa* (nonviolence) supplies an additional level of complexity to the series of events that have taken place within Sri Lanka over the past century. When viewed through the context of protecting the *Sangha* (sacred assembly of Buddhists) on the island the use of violence may, in part, be explained, but the process leading up to this shift in values is worth considering for the impact it has played in transforming the perceived duties of monks within Sri Lanka. Couched in the Sinhalese national myth, the Mahavamsa, this change in social behavior has had a profound influence on how the Sinhalese have interacted with other communities from the colonial era into the present. Additionally, the use of public spaces has generated a physical dimension in which identity has been symbolically constructed and defined through the presence of sacred sites, educational centers, and ethnic homelands belonging to the communities participating in this exchange.

Historical Context

Histories describing the origins and shared characteristics of a particular population can be found virtually anywhere in the world, ranging from the highly

mythical or religious to the purely secular and with histories both ancient and relatively modern. Typically, ownership of the land is a key component to this history – as seen in the American case of “Manifest Destiny” and the later proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in relation to regional politics – and operates as a justification or *raison d’être* for the community’s behaviors and social systems. The sixth-century Mahavamsa exists as a national myth chronicling the arrival of the first Sinhalese to Sri Lanka (Smith 1979:83), and prescribes the mission of future generations through the actions of Kings Vijaya and Dutthagamani. By incorporating a text viewed as an ethnic historical record into the body of literature used within local strains of Buddhism, the Sinhalese national identity transcended genealogical lines and became established as the accumulation of Sinhalese Aryan ethnicity, the Indo-Aryan Sinhala language, and local Theravada Buddhism. Accompanying this transition came the idea of a Buddhist *Sangha* incorporating the island of Sri Lanka in its entirety.

If any one figure can be considered the “father” of the Sinhalese identity it is King Vijaya, who is credited with establishing an Aryan community in Sri Lanka on the day of the Buddha’s death (ibid). While the exact process through which this community was formed is open to a varied interpretation – Gunawardena (Tambiah 1992:132) claims Vijaya’s role was that of an aggregator of settlements rather than a true founder – the figures invested with the responsibility of protecting this community following Vijaya’s death share one important aspect in common: defense of the Sinhala community against foreign invaders, primary Tamils. Despite the appeal this concept in relation to the contemporary politics of national self-determination and preserving ethnic identities, it should be noted that the Sinhalese themselves are outsiders within the geographic space of Dravidian South Asia and that Tamil claims to the land stretch back just as far as those of the Sinhalese (Wickramasinghe 2006:259).

This conflict over control of the land also receives attention in the Mahavamsa through the imposition of Hindu rule by the Tamil king Elara and his eventual defeat by the Buddhist Dutthagamani (Smith 1979:84). While Elara has been described as a “virtuous and just” king (Tambiah 1992:130), the increased presence of Tamil culture on the island presented a threat to the Buddhist legacy established by Vijaya, met by Dutthagamani’s advance from the south to capture the central, core region of Sri Lanka. This push, from the periphery inward, has come to represent the move toward consolidation and political unity that preserved the Sinhala state (ibid.150), yet also frames equal fears of fragmentation. The actions of Dutthagamani in the second century were later echoed by those of the British in the eighteenth century and Parakramabahu’s Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at the end of the twentieth – presenting a new view of how the Sinhalese Buddhist majority may feel like a culture under threat despite constituting 70% of the population (Ludden 2005:283).

Social Context

An interesting contrast can be observed in the social reaction to the remorse suffered by the Buddhist king Ashoka of India and Dutthagamani of Sri Lanka. Ashoka used the rewards of his early conquests to support the Buddhist community within his kingdom and offered his patronage to temples and other sacred sites (Ludden 2005:24). Additionally, he refrained from conquering territories to the south of Kalinga, preferring instead to offer spiritual tutelage in an effort to illustrate the moral righteousness and superiority of Buddhism. However, when Dutthagamani expressed his anxiety over the karmic consequences of his war against the Tamils he was assured that his violent reconquest of the island would not hinder his entry into heaven (Tambiah 1992:130). In an opposite reaction to that experienced by Ashoka, Dutthagamani was consoled by a group of *arahants* that he “need not worry because the thousands killed in war were nonbelievers who were therefore nonhuman” (Seneviratne 1992:21). From this justification of Dutthagamani’s actions comes a perceived mandate that the Sinhalese king – a representative figurehead for the entire community – has an ordained duty to uphold the integrity of the *Sangha*. While this influence Sinhalese-Tamil relations for several centuries until the collapse of the Buddhist kingship, it takes on an added measure of importance during the colonial period through the representational power allowed monks in the creation of a Sinhalese national and political identity.

The historical relationship between Buddhism and the Sinhalese kingship created strong ties of state identity at the macro level, while the prevalence of monasteries across the countryside resulted in equally strong associations at the micro level (ibid. 16-17). The permeation of Buddhism into all levels of society was aided by the educational opportunities available at monasteries and the traditional bonds between monks and the laity. However, the Portuguese assumption of control over Kotte following King Dharmapala’s death in 1597 (Wickramasinghe 2006:10) opened the area to Catholic influence as indigenous South Asian religions increasingly came under attack. While a Kandyan kingdom in the central highlands remained independent throughout the Portuguese and Dutch periods of colonial control, Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples in lowland regions were attached by Jesuits (ibid. 21) in a physical attempt to remove local cultural monuments prior to the construction of European equivalents. Less overt methods were also employed, with tax exemptions, ensured placement in mission schools, and preferential treatment given to those who converted to Catholicism. Confronted by colonial violence against religious institutions, many Buddhists fled to safety of the Kandyan highlands (ibid.), and this inward migration resulted in an increased division between the cultures of the Kandyans and Low-County Sinhalese. Although the British successfully conquered this final

preserve of Sinhalese independence in 1815, the formulation of a divergent identity would later shape the interaction between religion and politics in relation to the role of monks within the Sinhalese national identity.

Religious Revival

Initially shaped by Angarika Dharmapala's modernization of Buddhism in the nineteenth century, the role of monks within society was later shaped by two pivotal decisions by the Vidyalandara group of the 1940s. Educated at Christian College in Kotte, Dharmapala used Christian missionaries as a model for his vision of a revitalized monkhood (Seneviratne 1999:27) and administered a series of reforms that made Buddhism more accessible to the general public. Viewing his work as a "revival of the true traditional religion" (ibid. 28), Dharmapala's efforts melded Christian concern for a flock of believers with the widespread presence of monks at the village level to create a modernized conceptualization of the monk as a social worker dedicated to the community. As Seneviratne explains (ibid. 27), "the monk came to think of himself as an empowered political activist and an entrepreneur, in addition to being a caretaker of the flock". Under British colonial rule, the welfare of the Buddhist flock would necessitate an exchange between Sinhalese monks and the Christian community of Sri Lanka to ensure the protection of the *Sangha*.

Continuing Dharmapala's theme of the monk as a social worker, the Vidyalandara group went a step further in their expression of a monk's duties. Named for a monastic college in Colombo where many members associated, the Vidyalandara group instituted two practices that would play an important role in shaping post-colonial politics and ethnic relations between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. The first of these expanded on the notion of social work to state that it was, "the right and responsibility of monks to participate in politics, in matters to do with the public weal, and in the nationalist movement and decolonization process" (Tambiah 1992:17). This marked a departure from the belief that detachment from the world was a key element in the cessation of suffering (Gerber 2006:2), but reaffirmed Buddhism's place as a primary marker of Sinhalese identity. The influence of Dharmapala upon the Vidyalandaras can clearly be seen, and although it is not discussed in contemporary literature concerning the modernization of Buddhism under the colonial system, one wonders whether dissatisfied monks saw the role that Christians played in the generation of colonial policy – particularly within the field of education – as an image worthy of emulation through further modernization efforts. The second activity attributed to the Vidyalandara monks was a large-scale involvement in activist politics, particularly in support of left-wing candidates, with the aim of influencing secular affairs through the aura religious morality and

righteousness (Tambiah 1992:17). This marked the transition from theory into practice, providing a movement supportive of political figures and supported by those very same officials. The appropriation of Sri Lanka as a Buddhist *Sangha*, based on events in the Mahavamsa, provided the Vidyalkara group with a justification behind their political involvement – namely, the protection of the *Sangha* against foreign communities. While this may come across as a radical progression away from traditional Buddhist values, the interest given these monks by the Sinhalese population paved the way for the future involvement of monks in the political sphere, providing a valuable base of support for the developing Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and other leftist nationalist groups operating within Sri Lanka.

The Kotahena Confrontation

While the enduring image of conflict in Sri Lanka centers on the present divide between a Sinhalese Buddhist majority and Tamil Hindu minority on the island, the main participants involved in public displays of mass violence and agitation during the colonial period were, in fact, Sinhalese Buddhists and members of the Catholic Church. These groups engaged in protests during the late nineteenth century over the use of public space focusing on the colonial response to religious expression, the role and influence of education, and the construction of identities tied to a specific homeland that were phrased in relation to the British government and its related bodies rather than other South Asian communities present within Sri Lanka at the time. The event which best defines this opposition is the 1883 Kotahena Confrontation, initially staged as a “content over sacred space” (Wickramasinghe 2006:115). Supported by the emergence of Buddhist institutions such as the Buddhist Theosophical Society, Young Men’s Buddhist Association, and Maha Bodhi Society (Seneviratne 1999), an upsurge in anti-Catholic sentiments was expressed in response to the colonial appropriation of sacred spaces.

The British colonial empire had at its foundation a commitment to law and order (Wickramasinghe 2006:120) supported by both a colonial military presence and the entrapments of symbolic practices. A leading method through which the British colonial state was able to regulate the congregation of communities and enactment of religious activities within the indigenous population was through the issuance of permits that restricted religious processions to those times approved by the local constabulary. While such a system of state control was at first used as a simple formality, the increasing popularity in Buddhism generated by these new religious associations and the modernizing reforms through the work of Anagarika Dharmapala gave the colonial government an added impetus to control the public spaces used by this segment of society. The British regulation of public spaces was not restricted to the large-scale gathering

of community members as commonly happened during religious processions, but had deeper roots going back to the Police Ordinance of 1865 (ibid.). This ordinance was enacted as a way for the colonial government to control the use of time within Sri Lanka, and in particular served as a means to curtail night-time Buddhist healing rites involving drumming ceremonies that went against British notions of how the day should be divided between monk and leisure activities.

Conflict between Buddhists and Catholics developed in the spring of 1883 as a series of Buddhist processions near St. Lucia's Cathedral provoked outrage among Catholics due to the belief, "that Buddhists were infringing on their sacred space and even insulting their faith" (ibid. 117). Wickramasinghe (2006:115-120) provides a good account of events leading up to the Easter Sunday confrontation, so it is only worth noting here that the Catholics are described as the primary assailants against the Kotahena procession. Subsequent violence in the city saw Catholic chapels burned down in other regions of Colombo after the military had been called to disperse Buddhist gatherings. The perception that Catholicism was closely tied to the colonial administration (despite the probability that Protestantism was by and large the main version of Christianity practiced by the British) influenced Buddhist actions in the later riots of Kalutara (1896) and Anuradhapura (1903), in which pieces of the landscape were claimed as integral parts of the Sri Lankan Buddhist heritage in the face of colonial attempts at using the same public spaces for their own benefit (Wickramasinghe 2006:117-118). Directed by the Maha Bodhi Society (ibid.), Sinhalese pilgrims and residents in Anuradhapura specifically targeted Catholic spaces in the colonial center after the Public Works Department used stones from a ruined Buddhist city to construct a new road. Wickramasinghe provides an interesting commentary to this scene in her observation that, "Interestingly, Protestant and Muslim religious buildings were untouched." At this point, violence was directed on purely religious grounds and had little to do with the ethnic demographics of South Asian populations within Sri Lanka. The 1915 Sinhala-Muslim riots were a step in this direction, but economic priorities can also be given precedence in describing the causes of violence, as Muslim shopkeepers were labeled exploiters of the Sinhalese community in their commercial and financial dealings (Tambiah 1992:7). However, this issue would eventually arise in regard to education, and have an important role in the later conflict over homelands and the notion of who 'belonged' to and 'owned' the geographic spaces of Sri Lanka.

State Institutions and Identity

Education has frequently been used as an effective control in exerting cultural hegemony over communities, and in the case of Sri Lanka this meant dominance over language and the later prospect of employment within the British

colony. Earlier Portuguese mission schools included a curriculum taught in Sinhala and Tamil (Wickramasinghe 2006: 21), while British schools emphasized the role of English as the primary method of communication and served as an important foundation through which positions in professional and higher administrative offices became available (Tambiah 1992:126). This unofficial acknowledgement of English as the national language served the interests of the colonial administrators and further advanced their attempts at homogenizing society and removing the complications of diversity (Wickramasinghe 2006: 40) while at the same time removing this issue from the foreground of Sinhalese-Tamil exchange. However, in terms of employment – which would later influence the particulars surrounding enfranchisement – the division between these communities led to suspicions that gradually transformed into hostility.

Two main areas of dispute emerged within this climate; the first against Tamils employed as plantation labor, and the second in relation to the non-Sinhalese population working within an urban setting. Following the British colonial decision to concentrate on tea, rubber, and coconuts as the primary goods of export (Ludden 2005:283), a massive amount of new labor was deemed necessary to fulfill production goals. Tamil migrant workers were brought to Sri Lanka in such large numbers that “the census of 1911 reported the number of Indian laborers [sic] in Sri Lanka at about 500,000 – 12 percent of the island’s total population” (Wickramasinghe 2006:36). However, these plantation workers did not come alone; the arrival of families and whole village communities that accompanied male migrant workers provided an important preserve of Tamil culture – especially given that plantation enclaves often limited interaction between migrants and the local Sinhalese community (ibid.) The absence of a shared community between the Tamil and Sinhalese populations in areas neighboring plantations led to a reduced ability to conduct religious and linguistic exchanges, removing any chance of syncretism between the two that may have dampened animosity in later decades. The introduction of a sizeable Tamil minority into Sri Lanka – unable to interact with the majority Sinhalese community due to colonial land distribution and housing systems – raised concerns among the Sinhalese over the sudden arrival of ‘foreign invaders’ from outside the *Sangha*. While it may be argued that their work provided economic prosperity to the island through increased trade and global integration, the question of who enjoyed those benefits within society must surely be raised.

Within urban areas, the presence of a commercial class of shopkeepers, businessmen, and money-lenders formed a transitional layer connecting both the colonial government with indigenous entrepreneurs and elites to the masses. The Sinhalese opinion of banking and pawn broking, more than likely influenced by the traditional restrictions with Buddhism, resulted in contempt and hostility toward those occupations involved in the exchange of money and interest; in their

place a number of South Asian communities took up these forms of economic activity (ibid. 133). Through the void generated by Sinhalese occupational preferences, a new stratum of financially successful Tamils emerged within society, creating a new economic competitor that spoke an alien language, practiced a different religion, and participated in cultural communities outside those of Sinhalese society. Furthermore, the policy of British banks prohibiting money lending directly to indigenous populations (ibid. 139) solidified the position of communities such as the Nattukottai Chettiars of South India, and it was not until 1939 that a state-aided bank, the Bank of Ceylon, was established.

Not only did urban Indian communities monopolize financial activities and institutions, the large migration of rural, plantation laborers into Sri Lanka caused many within the Sinhalese community to question the future of their national identity. When viewed in relation to the Mahavamsa history of Tamil invasion in the second century, the continued arrival of Tamils under British colonial rule must have been seen by some as a violation of the holy Buddhist *Sangha*. Directed by monks who had fled Portuguese persecution into the central highlands of Kandy, an alternative to the prospective of an Indian franchise was proposed by the Sinhalese community to restrict the franchise requirements extended to Tamil workers (ibid. 125). Sinhalese leaders disagreed that a five year residency requirement was sufficient to justify voting rights to non-indigenous communities and instead proposed that a document of intention to settle accompany the residency requirement. From this it becomes clear that the Sinhalese community was not focused on the outright denial of franchise rights to Tamils, but instead supported greater restrictions on the franchising process (ibid.).

A key issue at stake in terms of extending the franchise to migrant workers following independence was the future of land ownership and control of resources within the state. Although the Sinhalese constitute a majority of Sri Lanka's population, the concentration of non-Sinhalese citizens in the Northern Province and Eastern Province has created an important constituency that was seen as having the ability to influence local politics. The Buddhist response to government initiatives toward greater linguistic equality in the 1950s was less than enthusiastic, as "[a] group of Buddhist *bhikkus* connected with the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna protested against the inclusion of a clause permitting individuals who had been educated in English or Tamil to take public examinations in that language until 1967 and urged the government to press ahead more rapidly with language changes. Their rally on the steps of the house of representatives culminated in a fast by a prominent university lecturer" (Wriggins 1960:260, quoted in Tambiah 1992:46). With language operating as an outward indicator of culture, this debate over the role of language within government offices served as a substitution for the general discourse concerning the place of the non-Sinhalese minority within society.

A further aspect around which the national identities of Sinhalese and Tamil communities were formed involves the perception of ethnic 'homelands' within Sri Lanka. Based on the presence of salient cultural populations, these communities have become associated with specific core areas that give an additional level of support to communal leaders and embody the process of national reaffirmation within each group. While contemporary media focuses on the exchange between the Sinhalese government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or Tamil Tigers), the Kotahena Confrontation illustrates how other religious communities have been involved in the formation of communal identities. This process of identity formation has also occurred recently in relation to the Tamil communities of Sri Lanka, with the LTTE attacking Muslims in the Northern Province between 1984 and 1990, causing "the expulsion *en masse* of the entire population of Muslims in the Northern Province" (Wickramasinghe 2006:288) in 1990. A result of this inward migration is that Muslims now constitute an even higher percentage of the population in Eastern Province (33%), while the LTTE has turned its attention toward eliminating other, competing Tamil groups (ibid. 289). By removing other organizations that offer support for increasing Tamil autonomy, the LTTE can subsequently claim to be the sole legitimate representative of Tamil rights vis-à-vis creating a defending a homeland in which to preserve Tamil culture from the majority Sinhalese population. Similarly, the purported defense of Tamil communities by the LTTE against not only the Sinhalese government, but also Muslim 'foreigners' and the Indian Peace Keeping Force validates the Tamil Tigers' actions through presenting the current conflict as one of national identity and self-determination – the very same features used by the Sinhalese to justify their acts. Although situated on opposite sides of the nationalist issue, the parallels between Sinhalese attempts to 'keep' Sri Lanka as an ethnic homeland free of foreign 'invaders' and Tamil measures toward achieving similar aims within regions with strong Tamil ethnic enclaves has fashioned a situation in which opposing interests – particularly between the LTTE and JVP – have come to define the context on their own terms, making conciliation an unlikely prospect for the immediate future.

Peasant Resettlement Programs

One arena through which the expansion of the franchise has been linked to the establishment and maintenance of ethnic homelands is in relation to peasant resettlement programs instituted to develop land within Sri Lanka's Dry Zone (Tambiah 1992:68). The spread of culture through the advance of agriculture is commonly acknowledged within the history of pre-modern India (Class lecture, 29 August 2006), and a further example of this process can be observed within modern Sri Lanka. Designed as a method to place more land under cultivation, the peasant resettlement programs have raised important questions concerning the

composition of ethnic homelands and the powers these regions hold in relation to the central government. Attached to these 'colonization' schemes was the assumption that relocated peasants be awarded an equal voice within local institutions such as government offices and educational seats. However, as the primary movement associated with these programs saw lower-income Sinhalese migrate to predominantly Tamil areas in the north and east, concerns were soon voiced from among these communities regarding the growth of transplanted Sinhalese Buddhist communities in these regions (Tambiah 1992:68-69).

In particular, Weli Oya and Madura Oya received such a large influx of migrant families that new constituencies were established in 1976 to ensure Sinhalese Buddhist representation in the Eastern Province (Wickramasinghe 2006:269). Government allocations of land to Sinhalese peasants under the governments of the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) further strengthened the Sinhalese national myth of national 'reconquest' and land reclamation by providing state-level support to peasants. The peasant vote was sought to such a degree that majoritarian governments from both parties "virtually occupied themselves with catering to the needs of the Sinhalese peasantry, while either discriminating against or being less caring about the interests and needs of the minorities who are the major native populations of the northern and eastern provinces" (Tambiah 1992:68). Added to this was the populist agitation of socially-active, leftist monks, who claimed a moral justification for resettlement programs through the story of the Mahavamsa and the precedent set by past Sinhala kings, who built an egalitarian rural society based on a combination of temple construction and irrigated rice agriculture (Tambiah 1992:60).

Contemporary Conflict

When viewed as a reiteration of Sinhalese ownership of the land and a continuation of the Mahavamsa, it is perhaps little surprise that the Sinhalese laity, government, and members of the various Buddhist schools would see the peasant resettlement programs as beneficial – even vital – to the preservation of Buddhism and Sinhalese culture within Sri Lanka. Tamil and Muslim groups, however, see the issue as one of maintaining their own ethnic identity amid increasing Sinhalese pressure since before independence. In response to Sinhalese claims of a traditional homeland forming a Buddhist *Sangha*, the Tamil community made a similar assertion in relation to the northern peninsula through the historical presence of the Jaffna Kingdom and one the basis of their own ethnic myths (Wickramasinghe 2006: 269). While the British attempted to appease the Hindu and Muslim populations of India through partition, no such overtures were made in Sri Lanka between Buddhists, Tamils, and Muslims; it was not until the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord that acknowledgement was given to

Sri Lanka's position as a multicultural and multilingual society, with the northern and eastern provinces recognized as historically Tamil settlements (Tambiah 1992:76).

The ongoing peasant resettlement programs were considered to be equivalent to Sinhalese imperialism by members of the Tamil community; the government's policy of offering assistance to Sinhalese peasants while ignoring concerns of the local majority created an untenable position for the Federal Party – founded to represent Tamil interests in Sri Lanka – and eventually resulted in calls for a separate state (Wickramasinghe 2006:269). Further complicating matters, the security forces of Sri Lanka had traditionally been comprised of members from the country's Christian population (ibid. 280), but following an abortive all Christian military coup the police and army were purged and replaced with individuals that transformed these units into Sinhalese-Buddhist forces. Restructuring the multicultural security forces into a homogenized representation of Sinhalese Buddhist identity led to increased fears among the Tamil and Muslim communities, and it is from this environment that the LTTE was formed in 1970 (ibid. 282). Amid slogans declaring Tamil rights to self-determination, the LTTE initially attacked only Tamil politicians seen as collaborators with the Sinhalese government. After Jayawardene's UNP government passed the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act, Sri Lankan security forces were allowed greater flexibility in their dealings with suspected insurgents – targeting the Tamil community and holding citizens incommunicado for up to eighteen months without trial (Tambiah 1992:71). These developments did little to assuage Tamil suspicions, and have led to increasingly public attacks by the LTTE aimed at Tamil politicians, freedom fighters associated with other organizations (ibid. 2006: 289), and Sinhalese politicians, security forces, and civilians. As the conflict progresses through the twenty-first century, the Tamil Tigers and predominantly-Buddhist JVP have formed two opposing poles concerning the integration of non-Sinhalese communities within greater Sri Lankan politics and society.

Conclusion

While public opinions must surely vary, it is hard to escape Seneviratne's judgment (1999:7) that Sri Lankan society has suffered as a result of twentieth century efforts to modernize Theravada Buddhism. Dharmapala's reforms were designed as a means to generate social work projects within the community and reaffirm Buddhist identity on a similar scale to that observed within Sri Lankan Christianity under British rule, yet the expansion of those ideas by the Vidyalankara group has led to the intersection of religion and nationalist politics that gave birth to the JVP.

Both Seneviratne (1999:17) and Wickramasinghe (2006:324) touch upon the effects of this transformation and the political consequences of social activism within Buddhism, claiming that the resurrection of a conceptualized national *Sangha* in the postcolonial era has forced successive governments to recognize a small segment of the population as having an extensive range of control over the administrative process. This transfer of power – from the national government to representative figures from the *Sangha* – harkens back to the Sinhalese national myth of Vijaya's arrival to Sri Lanka and the divine mandate to maintain a nationwide Buddhist homeland through reconquest and the protection of peripheral zones from non-Sinhalese Buddhist settlement.

The idea of national reconquest has shaped the Sinhalese national consciousness into the present and plays an important role in defining the politics instituted by the Sinhalese-majority government. Additionally, the colonial experience of religious favoritism used by the British has provided not only an example for the Sinhalese government to follow in the post-independence period, but has also created a perception of Buddhism as a religion under threat from outside forces. Although Buddhism is the majority religion in Sri Lanka, the colonial legacy still influences how the population views their position within society. While the initial transition from British rule to independence was not marked by the same level of violence found in neighboring India, Wickramasinghe's observation (2006:333) that, "the Sri Lankan postcolony seems to have failed, in many spheres, to address its past without reproducing it" seems an accurate assessment of the dilemma facing the Sinhalese-majority government today. The act of solidifying religious codes and incorporating Buddhism into the national identity served as a way to rally support during colonial rule, but in the context of a multicultural, multilingual society it only serves to divide and compartmentalize members of the population.

Recent governments have proposed a federal system with provincial councils similar to those organized in India (Tambiah 1992:77) as a means of appeasing the LTTE while preserving the unity of the Sri Lankan state; the main opposition to this program coming from the UNP and socially-active monks rather than Tamil separatists. An important obstacle that prevents progress within the national government is the divisionary tactics employed by the two main political parties (the UNP and JVC) representing Sinhalese interests – each party typically uses a platform of conservative nationalism to gain support from the Sinhalese majority before shifting to a more moderate stance once in office. Attempts to satisfy both sides in the discussion can be undermined by a variety of factors, particularly given the violent methods employed by militant organizations representing the Tamil and Sinhalese communities.

Democracy may have opened up leadership positions to a greater number of individuals, yet at the same time it has also created rifts within society that have been exploited by those best able to harness the expectations and fears of the general population. Underlined by competing national myths, conflicting views over the use of public space, and different experiences under colonialism, the distinctions between Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka have been reinforced to such a degree that the situation regarding the devolution of central authority may be seen as irreconcilable given the history of events that has transpired since independence.

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