

BUDDHIST RESOURCES FOR PEACE - MAKING IN MODERN SRI LANKA

Ven. Moragollagama Rathanasara Thera*

Introduction

Hailed as a beautiful, pleasant island by foreign visitors of yore, Sri Lanka was a peaceful country with a long and checkered history and culture. Ours was a country which was home to various multi-ethnic and multi-racial groups for thousands of years. Compared with other countries in the Indian continent Sri Lanka remained a peaceful country. (Mendis. 1943) Due to its very close proximity to South India in the Indian sub-continent, this island was not culturally free from Indian influence like the other countries. (Gunasinghe. 1989) As has been pointed out by social scientists, the impact on the religious, social and political fields in the island due to its location in the Indian cultural zone is seen even in the present day. Whatever is recorded in the chronicles of old, as elaborated above, the old Sri Lankan Society remained a society free of conflict arising out of ethnic and religious issues.

The Hindu and Buddhist traditions that grew up together and became established in this country, not only had close mutual links but were also seen to nourish each other. However, it could be said that this situation began to change with the progressive domination of the country by western powers from the 16th century onwards, first by the Portuguese, to be followed later by the Dutch and the British. In 1815 it came under the total dominance of the British empire. The administrative and economic structure established by them contributed to the rise of various ethnic prejudices in the country. It resulted in rousing mutual suspicion and distrust among multi-racial groups. The local representatives to the Legislative council established by them in 1833, were appointed on the basis of an ethnic ratio. On the one hand, we see that the colonial rulers were implementing their divide and rule policy adopted elsewhere in their colonies here too, while on the other hand their system could be seen as incorporating many features of a democratic administration.

*Ven. Bhikku Moragollagama Rathanasara Thera is Co-Coordinator of World Solidarity Forum for Justice and Peace in Sri Lanka.

According to Colebrooke recommendations, while six un-official representatives were appointed to their Legislative Council, three of these were appointed from the Europeans residents here while the other three were Ceylonese. The three Ceylonese had been appointed on the basis of ethnicity, namely, Sinhalese, Tamil and Burgher. This principle of representation on an ethnic basis had been in force for ninety-eight years until 1931. During this period various ideological conflicts had been in existence among the leaders in the pursuance of their efforts to stabilise their own positions.

However, despite this state of confusion that prevailed it is seen that certain outcomes of the British administration had contributed to fostering ethnic harmony in the country even for a brief period (Wriggins. 1960).

1. The upper classes among both the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the island received their education in a few prestigious schools and their medium of instruction was English. This enabled them to develop similar social attitudes and aspirations and also to foster mutual friendship.

2. Though the situation in the public service and the professions was not contributory to ethnic harmony, the mutual understanding that existed among the leaders in the two ethnic groups and their efforts helped to bring the two different groups closer together.

3. The third factor is more complex than the first two. It is this factor that relates to the rural society. Many Tamil traders started their business activities in the rural areas. This enabled them to establish relationships with the rural leadership and the Buddhist bhikkus as well. Also they were able to establish very close links with the rural farmers.

However, with the economic depression that set in progressively after independence in 1948 the harmonious atmosphere that prevailed hither began to disappear. This crisis worsened in the decade of the 1960s. Solutions for the competition among the different ethnic groups that arose from this crisis were attempted to be found on an ethnic basis. The government was unable to provide employment and other facilities in proportion to the increasing population of the country. It had to face the common problems that any other country with no resource and proper management had to face. In these circumstances certain upper class

groups began to act on ethnic considerations in finding solutions to their problems. Statements made by these leaders who often held leadership positions in the Sri Lankan polity resulted in rousing ethnic feelings in the people. Business men as well as certain urban based bhikkus who were nourished by these ideas worked to spread ethnic prejudices among the people as then and it has continued to this day. In doing this they resorted to giving new interpretations to certain past events and by such means attempted to justify that their line of action was correct. They also wanted to earn a name in society as patriots through these means. There is ample evidence to prove that certain politicians followed this policy as a means of obtaining the Sinhala vote.

The ethnic crisis of July 1983 can be cited as an occasion when peoples' ethnic feelings were roused up so as to cause harassment to the Tamils. On such occasions a small group of followers listened to their leader as usual and acted in an extremist manner. The conflict in July 1983 is a case in point.

A study of the Sri Lankan conflict shows that in its present state there are a number of persons who are involved in different roles. I do not intend to elaborate on this since this paper concentrates on the role of Buddhism as a means of finding a lasting solution to this problem in a context where the majority of people are Buddhists.

Population: According to religions and race

Though Sri Lanka is a country with a majority Buddhist population, as is evident from the census reports, it is inhabited by other racial and religious groups as well. The Sri Lankan population of 18.315 million is constituted as follows. (Census : 1981)

Sinhalese	74%
Sri Lankan Tamil	12.6%
Indian Tamil	5.5%
Moors	7.1 %
Others	0.8%

Of this population spread through out the island which is 62705 square kilometers in extent, 72.2% constitute the rural population while 21.5% constitute the

urban. The population in the estate sector is 6.3%. The religious distribution of the population is as follows:-

Buddhists	-	69.3%
Hindus	-	15.5%
Muslims	-	7.5 %
Christians	-	7.6%
Others	-	0.1 %

These statistics show that the majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhala buddhists. The impact of buddhism which was introduced to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, on the Sri Lanka society is tremendous. Buddhism is bound with the day to day life of the buddhists to such a degree that it has become something inseparable from their lives. The influence of buddhism is seen not only in the way of life of the buddhists but also in the building up of their attitudes. In particular, buddhism is more closely bound with the life style and attitudes of the rural buddhists who are in the majority than the urban buddhists. In this process it is the buddhist bhikkus who play a significant role. From ancient times the influence of buddhist bhikkus not only on the buddhist way of life but even on state administration is quite significant. Also, in the basic buddhist philosophy are included certain sections of the Dhamma which deal with economic and political theories. Bhikkus of the latter day are seen to be getting directly involved in political and other activities of the state. Buddhism teaches that politics should be conducted on the principle of ethical righteousness based on the ten fold royal qualities of leadership (*Dasa-Raja Dharmaya*) viz. giving (*Dana*), discipline (*Seelaya*) Sacrifice (*Parithyagaya*), uprightness, softness, simplicity, (*Thapasa*) absence of ill-will, non-harm, forbearance and non-objection. It is recorded that, once, while the sovereign state of Magadha was making preparations to wage war against the Republic of the city of Vishala, a representative of Magadha had wanted to know from Lord Buddha whether they will win their planned battle. Lord Buddha had replied they would not win since the citizens of the city of Vishala practised "*Sapta Aparihaneeya Dharma*" (*Deega Nikaya. Mahaparinibbana Sutta*)

It is on record that Lord Buddha not only expressed his views on war in this manner but also had visited the battle - fields himself on several occasions to stop fighting (*Jataka Potha*)

The process of carrying these religious ideas into the minds of people is the responsibility of the buddhist bhikku. People have to be told that politics mean the implementation of this righteous process. Politics entail the preparation of that religious and righteous atmosphere in which people will be able to live a virtuous life. (Rahula : 1946)

Several learned men have pointed out the amount of power and authority the rural bhikkus could wield (Ariyapala: 1956, Humphres: 1954). However, this situation of old has now changed for a number of reasons. (Wriggins: 1960). Yet, even today the rural bhikku enjoys some leadership in the village. People expect the patronage of the bhikku on many occasions. The temple is a centre of communication. According to a statistical survey conducted in 1984 by the Department for Buddhist affairs the number of buddhist temples in the country stood at 9319. The total number of bhikkus was 31906 the majority of whom were rural based. In any present effort to bring about peace in the country the role that this rural populace and the rural bhikkus have to play cannot be ignored.

Confronted with the present crisis, the Sri Lankan bhikkus are playing a significant role in the national effort to bring about a peaceful solution.

Certain bhikkus who enjoy the blessings and patronage of urban elite economic groups appear to be unwilling to share power on a just and equitable basis in seeking a solution to the crisis. However, at present, even among them there appears to be a change of attitude. These bhikkus who organized protests and went on hunger-strikes against Indian intervention and the Indo-Lanka peace treaty of 1987 have now changed to the extent of requesting the Indians for assistance and intervention in the present crisis.

Doctrine of the Buddha for a just Solution

Race, racism, Aryan and non Aryan are a few concepts that are embedded in the present Sri Lankan ethnic crisis. Certain extremists in their efforts to justify their extremists views use these concepts in varying degrees to suit different occasions. Among these are some buddhist bhikkus as well.

Race, caste and similar divisive concepts in society have been in existence from ancient times. Though these divisions are unscientific yet they continue to exist

in many countries in the modern world. Race and caste are unvariable enforced factors. It is believed that if a man is born to a particular race or a caste he is not in a position to change his status in the course of his life time. It follows that those who belong to superior race groups and higher castes as claimed, will enjoy privileges in life while those who belong to lower race groups and castes will be subject to oppression and exploitation.

While these ideas were prevalent even in India in the era of the Buddha, chronicles record that once there had been a debate on this issue between two youths who belonged to the brahmana caste. (*Majjima Nikaya: Vasetta Sutta*). Both had approached the Buddha and presented their problem. "Lord. Gautama, a debate has arisen between the two of us on the issue of race. He claims that one becomes a brahmana by virtue of his race. However, I believe that one becomes a brahmana by the quality of his deeds". In presenting his solution to the question Lord Buddha has elaborated in great detail with numerous illustrations:

Young men, races are varied. Let me explain it to you clearly:

1. Young men; take the grass and the trees. These possess qualities which distinguish their race.
2. Take the worms and the ants. They too possess endemic qualities of their race.
3. Take the reptiles. They too possess qualities that distinguish their race.
4. Take the creatures that inhabit water. They too are the same.
5. Young men; consider the birds that fly in the sky. They too are the same. They too possess qualities that represent their race.

Though these animal species, the grass, the plants and the trees exhibit different features that help to distinguish their race, the human race is marked by the absence of such features that help to distinguish one man's race from another. No such features are present in their hair, heads, eyes or ears. Similarly, no such race distinguishing features are present in their body, parts of the body, reproductive organs and so forth. Though such distinguishing features are present among various animal species, human beings are marked by their absence. Differences among

people appear only by name. The surface differences appearing among people are those based on traditional or conventional groupings rather than on groupings based on biological factors explained the Buddha further.

Here is another quotation from the Buddha:

"Monks, he said, the great rivers - Ganga, Yamuna, Achiravati, Sarabhu and Mahi - flow into the ocean, all ending up as salt-tasting water. No one can thereafter distinguish which water belonged to which river. Similarly, when persons of various communities enter the Sasana, no distinction of race, caste, tribe or any other can be distinguished" (*Uposatha Sutra*). This illustrates the equality of all humanity. It explained that people have no differences by birth and that race or ethnicity is a mere categorization made by individuals.

This explains quite clearly, the attitude of buddhist thinking, towards the issue of race. While one's race or kind is great to oneself there is no single race or kind in the world which could be named as the greatest. Dangerous and destructive elements can be embedded in the concept of race and racism (Malaisekera, Jaytillake, 1960)

1. denial of equal political opportunities.
2. denial of equal economic opportunities.
3. denial of equal social opportunities.
4. denial of religious freedom.
5. denial of equal rights before the law.

Within racism, it is quite possible that injustices of the above type can take place. Evidence can be cited in proof of injustices relating to numbers 1,2 and 3 above in regard to the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

Buddhist history records that, in Buddhism, not only discriminations of the above type but other types of discrimination where people had been harassed on racial grounds have been subjected to severe stricture. These facts have not been limited only to sermons. Practical opportunities had been provided for people of various races and castes to embrace buddhism. Lord Buddha had made it

abundantly clear that one's race or caste is no bar to spiritual parity. King Kosol had inquired of Lord Buddha about this. He had wanted to know that, since four different social groups namely upper-class (Kshtriya), Brahman (Brahmana), traders (Vaishya) and low-caste (Kshudra) were in existence, whether this division had any effect on these different groups in the realisation of Nibbana. On this occasion Lord Buddha had explained matters to him using an illustration.

"An emperor lights a fire using dry leaves; another person lights a fire using the dry 'Sal' wood. Yet another person lights a fire using dry 'Divul' wood. Fires can be lighted even with Mango' wood. Is there any difference in the colour or in the intensity of the heat in these different fires?"

"No, my Lord"

"Similarly, great king, race and castes assume no importance in the realisation of Nibbana".

There are a number of similar occasions where Lord Buddha had preached about the insignificance of concepts like race and caste. The one who exploits others on the strength of his race, tribe, or his wealth is a 'Wasalaya' according to Lord Buddha.

Hence, we see that Buddhism is a religion that preaches against racial prejudices. It is noble for one to work for the progress of his race but it is wrong to exploit others in the pursuit of that goal.

The Responsibility of a Contemporary Bhikku: Is it War or Peace?

A bhikku is spiritually bound to follow the doctrine of the Buddha and also to carry the Buddha's message to the layman. After the establishment of the 'Sasana', before the sixty bhikkus were to embark on their journey to spread the Dhamma, Lord Buddha gave them one advice:

*"Charatha Bhikkave Charikan
Bahu Jana hithaya, bahu jana sukaya
Lokanukampaya attaya thithaya
Sukhaya Deva manussanan"*

(Mana Vagga Pali)

What Buddha says is that the bhikkus in their journeying have to work for the good of both the devas and mankind; that they have to serve the people, provide them with advice and instruction; ensure that they plant the seeds of virtues like compassion and tolerance in the minds of the people.

However, in the present time both the bhikkus and the laymen are drawn more towards *Amisa Puja* (devotion through material offerings) rather than *pratipatti puja* (devotion shown through the practice of the Dhamma).

Organising colourful religious ceremonies, constructing giant temples and erecting colossal statues appear to be quite popular among both the Sri Lankan Bhikkus and laymen of today. While there is nothing wrong in these activities, it has to be admitted that 'pratipatti puja' is superior to any of these.

Buildings of giant *degobas* and temples in a way hints of a certain spiritual decline. *Pratipatti Pujawa* means the incorporation of the preaching of Lord Buddha into one's own way of life or in other words living your life according to the Dhamma. This Dhamma exists not only for the ritualistic aspects of it but more as a means of crossing the *sansara*, like crossing a reservoir full of water in a boat. (*Majjima Nikaya: Alagaddupama Sutta*). Hence *pratipatti pujawa* needs to be given the first importance. Bhikkus should take leadership in developing virtuous qualities in people.

Buddhist culture did not develop through one race. Books on the Dhamma written by Tamil bhikkus are in use today in Sri Lanka. This fact needs to be realised by all bhikkus. In contemporary Sri Lanka, in rural areas there is still a healthy relationship among bhikkus, Tamils and Muslims though this may not be the same in the urban scene. It is seen that Tamil doctors, and Muslim traders maintain very close links not only with the bhikkus but with the ordinary rural farmers as well. Irrespective of their religion or race they contribute to buddhist programmes and buddhist places of worship in numerous ways. They cooperate mutually in the conduct of their various activities.

After the incidents in July 83 where Tamils were assaulted, the rural populace in Sri Lanka really came under pressure. During these riots the Tamil trade establishments operating in the villages too suffered the attacks of the extremists. Hence these establishments were either closed down or subsequently sold to

outsiders. In this context the villagers had to face a trade monopoly in selling their produce. They were compelled to sell at a lesser price and buy at a higher price. The practice of transacting business on credit terms was paralyzed. Until he obtained his harvest the rural farmer bought his fertiliser, pesticides and other agricultural needs on a credit basis. When this practice was paralyzed these farmers were really thrown into a difficult situation.

Conclusion:

The above description explains how the misunderstanding that developed among the races in the 19th and 20th centuries as a strategic means of governance, was later, with the onset of the economic depression, developed into racism by the urban based extremist groups. Today it has escalated into a life destroying war. It is clear that political parties wishing to stabilize their power base are also courting these extremist groups. It is also clear that these extremist groups misinterpret certain historical events in a harmful way to justify their line of action. Despite these pressures, it is quite clear that there is a great majority of people in the country, both laymen and bhikkus who yearn for a peaceful solution to this problem. What the Buddha has preached in the Dhamma can be used very successfully to bring about a peaceful harmonious society. Buddhism is against racial discrimination. Bhikkus who know this should go among the people and give this message to them. Their minds should be directed towards this noble thinking. This is the role a contemporary bhikku has to play.

I would like, in conclusion, to deal with some real concrete situations and actions, in the modern context in Sri Lanka which I consider very important. Though the majority of the Sri Lankan people have reasonable attitudes to justice and peace, there is a minority of extremist Sinhala opinion, composed of both bhikkhus and lay people, supported by powerful commercial interests. This section of the people take advantage of such occurrences as explosion of bombs and catastrophic events involving killing of innocent people and destroying of sacred places of worship, when people's feelings tend to get roused, to inflame and manipulate the people towards unreasonable stands and actions. It is clear that the extremists have no proper understanding of the realities of the present ethnic conflict and the issues involved. They have a very one-sided view of the problems. Though they emphasize the

effects of the military activities of the LTTE, they do not take seriously the just political demands of the minorities.

In such a situation it is the duty of the bhikkus, especially, to analyse critically the ideas and activities of the extremists and develop true understanding among the people, wrong attitudes have to be given up and correct attitudes adopted and the people have to learn the importance of peace-making and the building of mutual understanding. The development through all this of a deeper spirituality is the task of the bhikku. It has to be made clear to the people that democracy and equality has to be fostered through the nurturing and protection of peace. As long as the war continues, the above values cannot be developed in the society. So in the spirit of the Lord Buddha's basic message to his disciples the bhikkus must be constantly with and among the people going from house to house and village to village, carrying the message of peace and healing.

The World Solidarity Forum for Justice and Peace, Sri Lanka Group (WSF/SL), in Sri Lanka, to which I belong, tries to take seriously these attitudes and actions. All the religions and races of Sri Lanka are represented in it and participate fully in its activities. Buddhists, who are a majority in the country, are also a majority in our organisations, so both bhikkus and lay Buddhists have performed a very significant leadership role in our organization, in complete harmony with the other religions. During the last ten years the Sri Lanka Group of the World Solidarity Forum has worked in sixteen districts in Sri Lanka among the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people. Work at the grass-roots has been its highest priority and on this basis there is constant lobbying and pressurizing of the power-centres, both religious and secular. The main theme of our activities is the whole question of the devolution or sharing of power. Sri Lanka has to find ways and means of implementing such power sharing which could be the basis of a peace settlement. This is a difficult process. It involves study, analysis, dialogue, building of trust and linkages. The preparation for peace negotiations are at a crucial stage but there may still be a long road to real peace. Our main purpose is to build a lasting peace based on equality and respect for diverse individual and collective identities.

Select Bibliography**Primary Sources:**

1. *Diga Nikaya*, 1929 Colombo (Buddha Jayanthi edition)
2. *Majjima Nikaya*, 1929, Colombo (Buddha Jayanthi editorial)
3. *Mahavagga-pali, Maha Mandhakaya* (Buddha Jayanthi edition)

Secondary Sources**Sinhala**

1. Edagama Malani: 'Kanda Udarata Rajadhani Samaya'. Sri Lankave Ithihasaya Education Publications Department, Colombo.
2. Rev. Rahula, Walpola, 'Bhikshuwage Urumaya' (Heritage of the Bhikku)
3. Gunasinghe, Newton; "Dakunu Asiyawe Upa Mohadvipika Samaja vuhattama Idiri Dekmak Sandaha Satahan" 1989.
4. "Lankave Nikayan Pilibanda thoraturu", (Information about Nikayas in Sri Lanka) Department of Buddhist Affairs, 1984 Colombo.

English

1. Malalgoda. Kithsiri : *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750 - 1900*, 1976. University of California Press.
2. Mendis, G.C.: "The Causes of Communal Conflict in Ceylon", *Ceylon Historical Journal* 1. 1943.
3. Wriggins. Howard: *Ceylon: Dilemmas of New National*, 1960. Princeton University Press.
4. Sri Lanka Socio-Economic Data - 1977. Statistics Department - Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Colombo 1977.