

Research Article

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Religion, Religious Textbooks and Territorialisation of Sinhala Buddhist Ethno-nationalism in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: The idea of ‘homeland’ performed a central role in nationalist debates, and particularly majority/ minority societies exercise the concept of the homeland, religion and religious texts to shaped their nationalist discourse and claimed their rights over a given territory. In this context, nationalism and religion can be understood as contested terms, particularly in third world nation-states including countries like Sri Lanka, which has suffered from the three-decades-long civil war between Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian government and minority-Tamil community based separatist movement of LTTE. The formation of Sinhala- Buddhist nationalism carries interesting links with the religion and religious textbooks and based on these Buddhist religious and historical claims the majoritarian political mindset of the Sinhala community believes Sri Lanka is their homeland, and other minority communities are alien for the society. The contemporary, political and security discourse of Sri Lanka has strongly brought these Buddhism and religious texts to claim rights over the territory and galvanised ‘Sinhala-Buddhist rights’ over the popular nationalist movement. In this context, the paper discusses ‘how and why Sinhala nationalist movement strongly shaped by the Buddhist religious values and books’ and the rationale behind the link between Sinhala nationalism and Buddhist religion based on the conceptual framework of “Geopietry.”

Keywords: Ethnocentrism; Religion; Sri Lanka.

1 Introduction

The post-Westphalian world has founded based on a few central concepts including sovereignty, nation and nationalism. The historical transformation of the nation and nationalism inevitably shaped by the notion of religion and in this context, ‘religion’ and ‘nationalism’ have long been contested terms, and it has addressed and reshaped each phenomenon. It is no wonder that one encounters seemingly antithetical assertions about the relation between the two. For instance, the assertion that nationalism is intrinsically can be secular, or that it is intrinsically religious; highlights that nationalism emerged from the decline of religion or that it emerged in a period of intensified religious feelings. For instance, protestant Christian values and spiritual readings have provided a solid foundation for the creation of American nationalism and contemporary nationalist and political movement of America primarily shaped by the Christian values, despite the secure nature of America. Similarly, the idea of ‘promised land’ and the state formation of Israel entirely shaped by religion and according to that, the geopolitical space of Israel is the promised land for the Jewish community, and it is the only geographical space or ‘homeland’ which promised by God for the Jewish population.

The idea of ‘homeland’ performed a central role in nationalist debates, and particularly majority/ minority societies exercise the concept of the homeland, religion and religious texts to shaped their nationalist discourse and claimed their rights over a given territory. In this context, nationalism and religion can be understood as contested terms, particularly in third world nation-states including countries like Sri Lanka, which has suffered from the three-decades-

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long civil war between Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian government and minority-Tamil community based separatist movement of LTTE. The formation of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism carries interesting links with the religion and religious textbooks and based on these Buddhist religious and historical claims the majoritarian political mindset of the Sinhala community believes Sri Lanka is their homeland, and other minority communities are alien for the society. The contemporary, political and security discourse of Sri Lanka has strongly brought these Buddhism and religious texts to claim rights over the territory and galvanised 'Sinhala-Buddhist rights' over the popular nationalist movement. In this context, the paper discusses 'how and why Sinhala nationalist movement strongly shaped by the Buddhist religious values and books' and the rationale behind the link between Sinhala nationalism and Buddhist religion based on the conceptual framework of "Geopiety."

2 The Homeland Discourse and Geopiety

Brubaker has delineated four distinct ways of studying the connection between religion and nationalism. The first is to treat religion and nationalism, along with ethnicity and race, as analogous phenomena. The second is to specify ways in which religion helps explain things about nationalism- its origin, its power or its distinctive character in particular cases. The third is to treat religion as part of nationalism and to specify modes of interpenetration and intertwining. The fourth is to posit the form of a distinctive religion of nationalism (Brubaker, 2012). The paper understands the role of religion and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism primarily based on the second and third points of Brubaker's arguments and particularly the notion of Sinhala-Buddhist homeland shaped by the religious socialisation process of Sri Lanka. "A powerful element within the socialisation process is the use of religion and religious experiences as a means of cementing the bond between a group and its territory. This form of reverential relationship between man and his/her perceived terrestrial home has been termed 'geopiety' (Newman, 1997, p. 155)." The concept highlights the sense of belonging to and ownership of a particular territory and the exclusive rights emerging from divine or other supernatural claims to the territory.

Vogel stressed that geopiety could be applied to express the emotional connection and pious regard of American Christians for the Holy Land. "Bible study an integral part of the tradition proved to be a significant influence in molding American opinion and imagery of the Holy Land (Berman, 1994, p. 497)," and history, myth and religion become intertwined features of the complex of man and territory relationship in terms of Israel. The religious concepts and utopian concepts including Zion, Garden of Eden, Promised Land, and Jerusalem became a critical religious feature of the man-territory discourse of Israel, and these utopian religious understanding has elevated the territorial claims towards claims of the homeland. (Newman, 1997)

In the context of Sri Lanka, Sinhalese resort to mytho-history to legitimise claims over the homeland or sons of the soil status. Sinhalese claiming their ancestors were the first to arrive on the island from North India. Sinhalese derive this certainty from the Mahavamsa- Great Chronicle, first written around the sixth century CE to explain Buddhism's ascendance and preeminence in Sri Lanka. According to Buddhist spiritual and mythology, Sri Lanka-Sinhadeepa is the only foreign territory Lord Buddha has visited thrice, and it is the land of which consolidate Buddhism and protect Buddhism for 5000 years until the birth of Avalokiteshvara-who embodied the compassion of all Buddhas'.

Ernest Renan has pointed out that "the nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present, One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories, the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the values of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form (Votta, 2017, p. 5)." According to Buddhist believes the Mahavamsa helps to link past and present and enables the Sinhala-Buddhist nation to link with the given territory. The theological writings draw strongly on the use of metaphors to communicate meaning the society and the image constructions and territorial claims derived from religious texts cannot be contested by any rational or logical decision-making process. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Mahavamsa, Dipavamsa, Stupavamsa and mythological texts on Rawana used to present strong territorial claims based on Buddhism over the territory, and the concepts of nation and nationalism have been hijacked by Sinhala-Buddhist society by using history and myths.

3 Fear of Numbers and the Notion of Sinhala-Buddhist Homeland

Since 2014, political and religious leaders within Sinhala-Buddhist society has questioned the radical extremist behaviour of individual Muslim organisations in Sri Lanka. Significantly majoritarian mindset promotes unilateralism in Sri Lanka based on the historical and religious texts, myths to upgrade the territorial claims of Sinhala-Buddhist society to the homeland. Galaboda Atte Gnanasara, a leader of Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), has stressed “this is a Sinhala Buddhist country; we have a Sinhala Buddhist culture, and this is not Saudi Arabia. However, you must accept the culture and behave in a manner that does not harm it (The Economist, 2013).” Why does a majoritarian society claim homeland or sons of soil status over territory?

The ethnic composition of Sri Lanka consisted of Sinhalese (73.95%), Sri Lankan Tamils (12.70%), Indian Tamils (5.52 %), Sri Lankan Muslims (7.05%) (Imtiyaz, 2014). However, the Sinhala-Buddhist mindset has identified them as an isolated nation in terms of ethnic neighbours. Having benefitted disproportionately in education, employment, and influence during the British colonial period and being able to count on the support of 70 million ethnic cousins in Tamilnadu, it is easy to see how the Tamil minority cultivated a majority complex. Similarly, despite being a clear majority, Sinhala Buddhists have long been left surrounded by non- Buddhists in South Asia. Gananatha Obeysekera stressed that “while minorities speaking Tamil and English and practising Hinduism, Islam and Christianity can look for support beyond the island’s borders, the Sinhala people and Sinhala language have only Sri Lanka to call home (Obeysekere, 2003, p. 223).”

This fear and feeling of isolation, coupled with nations of history, religion and myths; mainly, the homeland dedicated to Sinhalese “Sinhadipa” and the soil which protected by Dhamma “Dhammadipa” and familiar notions contribute to Sinhala Buddhists viewing pluralism pejoratively and framing majoritarianism as an entitlement. Buddhist religious leaders such as Walpola Rahula could argue that “Sri Lanka is a Buddhist Sinhala country. Let no one make a mistake. Seventy per cent of the country consists of Buddhists and Sinhala people. Sri Lanka is the only Buddhist Sinhala country in the world. If we do not live here, are the LTTE and some of the Tamil parties asking us to jump into the sea? (Peiris, 1997)”

The role of geopiety: use of religion, history and myths to link Sinhala-Buddhists with the territory is spread in political, military and administrative levels which profoundly shaped by the Sinhala- Buddhists. For instance, Sarath Fonseka, “who contested for the presidency and is a current Member of Parliament could likewise claim (when he was Commander of the Army) that the country belongs to the Sinhalese but there are minority communities, and we treat them like our people. They can live in the country with us. However, they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things (Devotta, 2016, p. 78).”

4 History and Myths-Link Sinhala Buddhist Society with Homeland

Each nation justifies its sense of nationalism and territory based on specific beliefs, and the most fundamental belief securing Sinhala-Buddhist territorial claims is that Sri Lanka has been preserved for Sinhala Buddhists- and minorities live there only because of Buddhists’ sufferance. The Mahavamsa stressed that the daughter of the king of Vanga, as prophesied was carried away by a lion and forced to cohabit with it. They conceived a boy: Sinhabahu and a girl: Sinhasivali. The son killed his leonine father, became king, and married his sister. They had twin sons, of whom Vijaya was the eldest. This lion related story enabled people to identify them as Sinhalese (people of a lion) and particularly mythical stories and lions feet in Sigiriya (lion rock) archaeological site has linked the history with the notion of Sinhala-Buddhist homeland. It also partly explains the sward-carrying lion of the country’s national flag. (Votta, 2017)

The Mahavamsa myth claims Vijaya landed in Sri Lanka the day Lord Buddha died, thus suggesting the island was destined to be a repository for Theravada Buddhism and leading to the widely held Buddhists believe that the country is Sihadipa and Dhammadipa. The beliefs are mainly influenced by the Mahavamsa’s claim that Lord Buddha visited Sri Lanka thrice: first in the southeast where he forced the Yakshas into submission, second in the north, where he similarly forced the Nagas into submission, and third in the South and elsewhere to consecrate the island as a sanctuary for Buddhism (Gaul, 2017) According to Buddhist mythology, during third visit God Sumana Saman invited

Lord Buddha to visit his territory: Samanthakuta and Buddha visited there and kept his footmark top of the mountain while transferring the responsibilities to protect Buddhism and country for God Sumana Saman.

The Sinhala Buddhist myth that “has been most baneful to interethnic harmony is then embellished and dissembled account in the Mahavamsa dealing with King Duthagamani (Votta, 2017, p. 8).” According to myth, Duthagamani was the son of a southern ruler who was exceedingly unhappy when Cholas from South India seized power in Anuradhapura, the island’s capital at the time. The young Duthagamani went to battle against Chola king Elara and killed him and unified the country under the Buddhist flag. The Mahavamsa makes clear that the king’s army is accompanied by five hundred ascetic Buddhist monks; one of Duthagamani’s leading generals is an ex-monk named Theraputtabhaya, who rejoins the Sanha after Elara and his army are defeated, and Duthagamani goes to war carrying a spear containing a relic of the Buddha himself. These historical stories and religious texts have constructed the idea of homeland and link Sinhala-Buddhists with the territory. Notably, the thirty years-long civil war between the Tamil separatist movement of LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka has been viewed through these historical points. The Sinhala-Buddhist mindset used this history to justified the war and unilateral status of the country by saying that the entire country has been dedicated to Lord Buddha and Buddha Sasana, therefore, no minority groups have any legit rights to claim a part of the territory. The former president Mahinda Rajapaksa cited Mahavamsa and Buddhist mythology to mobilised the general mass to fight against LTTE terrorism, and the fourth Eelam was has portrayed as the duty of all the Sinhala Buddhists to protect the unified status of the homeland of Sinhala-Buddhists. The religious texts, myths and history have legitimised the territorial claims of Sinhala-Buddhists and also justifies dehumanising the homeland claims of other minority communities in Sri Lanka, if doing so is necessary to preserve, protect, and propagate the Dhamma. Furthermore, it legitimises war doctrine, provided that war is waged to protect Buddhism and for instance, all the political leaders in Sri Lanka address Buddhist sentiments for justified war against LTTE. These myths and religious texts help solidify Sinhala-Buddhist identity and link them with the scared homeland.

5 Education and National Politics-Transforming the Idea of Homeland

David Newman argued “territorial indoctrination constitutes a nationalist focus within the socialisation process, through the use of maps, flags, symbols, and territorial semantics, all of which enable us to become more acquainted with “our” territory and to elevate it in importance in comparison with other, more distant territories (Newman, 1997, p. 154).” The school textbooks, words, narratives play a significant role in the socialisation process, and majoritarian societies use presentism: selected choice of text, historical evidence and characters to establish territorial links vis-à-vis majoritarian society and texts can be understood as managers or agents of ethnocentric socialisation.

The education of Sri Lanka is predominantly shaped by the Sinhala-Buddhist narratives and it has been vehicled to transfer the Sinhala-Buddhist ethnocentrist and hegemonic sentiments to next generation and minority communities. The presentism of history has sent a message to minority communities that the Sinhadipa, Dhammadipa or Ceylon, (Sri Lanka) dedicated to Lord Buddha and his Dhamma and minority communities can enjoy their life in Sinhala-Buddhist homeland, not because of inherent rights but based on the compassion of Sinhala-Buddhist community.

The historical books and significantly academic textbooks of the national curriculum have profoundly focus on the Sinhala-Buddhist history and national leaders. For instance, the history of school education in Sri Lanka is dominated mainly by Sinhala-Buddhist anti-colonial movement. The Christian missionary education expanded throughout Ceylon (Sri Lanka) during the British colonial period, and Sinhala-Buddhist society started the Sinhala Buddhist education and school system as an anti-colonial movement. The revival received a boost when Theosophists Colonel Hendry Steel Olcott and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky visited Sri Lanka in 1880 and worked with the Buddhist revival movement and formed several excellent Sinhala-Buddhist schools. (Durham, 2015) The Buddhist education system adopted by the government and particularly the presentation of history and independent movement has presented through Sinhala-Buddhist perspectives while linked it with Mahavamsa and early Sinhala-Buddhist heroic kings which united Sinhala-Buddhist homeland by fought against external and internal threats. For instance, national history books take the examples of Buddhist leaders like Anagarika Dharmapala and quoted “the sweet, tender, gentle Aryan children of an ancient, historical race, we now being sacrificed at the altar of the whiskey-drinking, beef-eating, belly-god of heathenism; the Aryan Sinhalese poisons of opium and alcohol which destructive for the continuance of the Sinahele

race. Believe not the alien who is giving you arrack, whiskey, toddy, sausages and instead enter into the realm of our kind Dutugemunu in spirit and try to identify yourself with the thoughts of that great kind who rescued Buddhism and our nationalism from oblivion (Votta, 2017, p. 15).” The education system, textbooks and symbols have given less priority to minority groups in Sri Lanka, and mainly the education system has been used to established Sinhala-Buddhist claims over the territory while promoting the notion of the homeland of Sinhala-Buddhists.

6 Conclusion

The extensive literature on the religious or religiously streaked language and imagery that influenced political rhetoric in many countries. This rhetoric may or may not, for the most part, liked distinctively nationalist forms of politics. However, it can be seen as part of the phenomenon of nationalism, nationhood or territorial claims, in a broader sense. For instance, “Historically, religious language and imagery have deeply informed and infused ways of thinking and talking about America and ‘Americanism’, about the origins of the nation, its mission, its destiny, its role in the world, the ‘righteousness’ of its causes and the ‘evil’ of its enemies (Berman, 1994, p. 9).” The American socio, political, territorial claims have been shaped by the protestant Christian values, and God gave rights, and this has embarked in political mindsets in American leaders.

Similarly, the extensive literature on the religion or religiously streaked language and images have influenced the socio, political rhetoric in Sri Lanka and the 1971 and 1978 constitutions of Sri Lanka can be considered as an example of that. Article 09 of the second republic constitution (1978-constitution) of Sri Lanka guarantees Buddhism the foremost place. Accordingly, the constitution casts a duty upon the State to protect and foster Buddhism while retaining the clause which assures freedom of conscience to all religions (The Parliament Secretariat, 2015). This can be understood as a continuation of the majoritarian politics and historical and religiously streaked language and images that have influenced the political realm of Sri Lanka. The Buddhist cosmology proposes a hierarchy in which the order of the parts depends on their relationship to the Buddha. Non-Buddhist people and nations are included but are naturally subordinated to the Sinhala-Buddhists and should remain in their proper place. This Buddhist hierarchical order presents a totalizing claim for Buddhist kingship or more contemporary Sinhalese hegemony over the state, and these nations have been directly shaped by the religious texts such as Mahavamsa and religious language.

However, the religiously motivated Sinhala-Buddhists mindset and political formulations have ended up violent acts against minority communities in Sri Lanka however, the paper is not denied these activities which occurred throughout history nor legitimised the majoritarian politics. However. The prime motivation of the paper has identified the role of geopeity in making claims of homeland and the formation of nationalism in Sri Lanka. In that context, the paper has identified the Buddhist history, myths, religious text and religious language have provided a sharp threshold for Sinhala-Buddhist society to claim their homeland rights over a territory which similar to the USA, Israel many states in the world.

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