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## WORLD HERITAGE IN SRI LANKA – BUDDHIST SITES ONLY

*"If a religious war is to break out in Sri Lanka, it is Buddha Sasana Minister, Ratnasiri Wickremanayake and Christian Affairs Minister, Milroy Fernando who will be locking horns first."* – **The Sunday Leader, 4 July 2004**

In March 2001 when Afghanistan's ruling Taliban destroyed two giant Buddha statues, (measuring 53metre/175-feet and 38metre/120-feet tall), Buddhists in Sri Lanka marched through Colombo protesting against the demolition of these statues. Then Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga wrote a protest letter on 05 March 2001 to the UN Secretary General Koffi Annan, ".....*The Government of Sri Lanka stands ready and willing to do everything within its own capacity, and to join all international endeavours, to save from destruction these objects of particular reverence to Buddhists which, indeed, belong to the ancient heritage of all mankind.*"

At the same time Sri Lanka made an international appeal and the Organisation of Islamic Conferences – OIC; consisting of 57 Islamic states, also appealed to the Taliban to halt the destruction of statues of Buddha.

It is understandable though mistaken to assume that a government, the President and Buddhists have such strong sentiments and values regarding their own religion, they should no doubt respect the religions of others.

### Dambulla Mosque

On 20 April 2012 thousands of Buddhist monks and their followers in Dambulla staged a protest against a Mosque and a Saiva (Hindu) Temple, setting out from a Buddhist sacred area in Dambulla. The protesters went to the Mosque waving Buddhist flags and shouting slogans (*you Muslims eat beef you can't stay here*). They tried to storm the building.

On 22 April, Sri Lanka's Prime Minister D. M. Jayaratne who is also responsible for the Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs, ordered the mosque in Dambulla to be removed from a sacred area stating that it could be relocated to "a suitable place in the neighbourhood".

Muslims living in the area say that the mosque was established in 1962 and Muslims have prayed there regularly for many decades. But Buddhist monks say that the 50-year-old Mosque had been constructed illegally and the government had unwittingly allowed its recent expansion in a sacred Buddhist area.

According to the media many religious and cultural buildings of Islamic faith (Mosques) and Saiva faith (Hindu Temples) have been marked for demolition by Buddhist fanatics in Sri Lanka.

On 10 September 2011, a group of Buddhist monks led a crowd that demolished a Mosque in Anuradhapura.

According to BBC South Asia of 20/09/11, Sri Lankan defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa clarified earlier reports about the fate of a Mosque destroyed by a crowd of Buddhist monks. The defence secretary told the BBC he could not order the structure to be rebuilt, contrary to what had been reported earlier.

### Foremost place for Buddhism

Where do all these motives and powers come from and how?

The first constitution after Independence in 1948 did not favour any particular religion in Ceylon/Sri Lanka. But the 1972 constitution gave foremost place, with state protection, to Buddhism.

The 1972 constitution has a separate chapter on Buddhism. Article 9 says, "*The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Article 10 and 14 (1) (e)*".

While this provision grants Buddhism special status and State patronage, it stops short of designating any religion as the State religion.

### **President's pre-empted speech**

When the war came to its final phase in May 2009, the President of Sri Lanka said in parliament on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2009, *"....There are only two peoples in this country. One is the people that love this country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth. Those who do not love the country are now a lesser group."* He continued, "No longer are there the Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and any others minorities."

TCHR wondered what the President and his government meant by this statement. Our press release on 22 July 2009 (Ref :QJ052/PR/2009), asked ***"What does Sri Lanka's President mean? Is he saying that those who do not love the country are traitors?" or "Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and any others minorities are now Sinhalese?" The message has a double meaning"***.

Our press release predicted what is happening today to the Mosque and the Saiva Temple in Dambulla and scared buildings in other parts of the country.

In the recent past, many Muslims and Tamils were chased out of their villages in the North and East and Sinhalese were settled in those places. Many Mosques and Saiva Temples have been destroyed and Buddhist statues have been erected in these places. Attacks on Christian Churches have also been recorded.

If Sri Lanka is a democratic and non-secular state, what have the authorities done about these attacks on Christians, Muslims and Saivites (Hindus)?

On 15 May 2005, a statue of Buddha was illegally erected overnight in Trincomalee, by Buddhist monks and fanatics. The unauthorized erection of the statue was immediately challenged in the court. It still remains as a perfect example of the ethnically-biased and partial judiciary in Sri Lanka.

### **Anti conversions bill**

*Article 10 of the constitution states, 'Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice'. Article 14 (1) (e) states that one is free either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest ones religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching.*

But the extreme Buddhist political party the Jathika Hela Urumaya - JHU in Sri Lanka, made up of Buddhist monks, tabled an "Anti conversions bill" in July 2004. The intention of this bill appeared to be to prevent Buddhists being converted to Christianity. This "Prohibition of forced Conversions Bill" went to parliament for a second reading on Friday 6 May 2005. The parliament approved the draft and the bill was then referred to a Standing Committee.

On 18 December 2011 a new request to reinstate an 'anti-conversion law' was made by the JHU. *Under the proposed new law a citizen would not be allowed to change his/her faith, except in specific cases and with the permission of a magistrate.* The nine JHU members of Parliament who are Buddhist monks view other religions as *"contamination of the country"*.

In recent days, hundreds of statues of the Buddha have been erected in the North and East and since the war concluded in May 2009, over 45 along the A9 route alone. These statues are placed in areas where no Buddhists reside.

During the war many religious places were attacked and destroyed in the North and East, Buddhist Temples being the conspicuous exceptions.

In the Jaffna peninsula, the only religious place untouched by aerial bombing, artillery shell and deliberate attacks was a Buddhist Temple in Naninathivu.

Muslims, Christians and Saivites have made numerous complaints in the past and no government in power has taken any action or punished any culprit who attacked these religious places. On the other hand, government-sponsored Buddhisisation is in process all over the Island.

The reason for continuing attacks on Muslim Mosques, Christian churches and Saiva (Hindu) Temples by Buddhist extremists, is the constitution of Sri Lanka.

## Turmoil and divide and rule

Since Independence each government came to power in Ceylon/Sri Lanka using “*divide and rule tactics*” between and within communities. As a result, ugly incidents took place between Muslims and Tamils. Tamils and Muslims had lived in peace and harmony for many centuries, irrespective of religious faith.

Muslims living in the North Eastern provinces were always part of Tamil political parties and even won in the post independence elections. The Mother tongue of the Muslims in the island is Tamil. This cannot be denied historically or legally. But these days, politically-motivated individuals come out with vague arguments depending on what their purpose is. Some sought to drive a wedge between the Tamils.

Political turmoil among the Tamils and Muslims was created only in the late 1980s when the government-motivated Muslim home guards and other notorious groups intensified their attacks on the Tamils in the East, especially those in the Amparai district.

As a consequence, Muslims living in Jaffna were evacuated by the LTTE in 1990 and were compelled to live in Puttalam.

According to the Tamil ‘Weekly Virakesari’ of 29 April 2012, Muslim intellectuals, academics and religious leaders have spoken out about the importance of unity among the Tamil-speaking people in Sri Lanka. One of the Muslim leaders told Virakesari that “If we Tamil-speaking people are not united, we may have to face defeat”.

## Riots against Muslims and Tamils

The very **first racial riot** in the island was in 1915. It was between the Sinhala Buddhists and the Muslims - 136 Muslims were killed and 205 Muslims were injured and raped. Nearly 85 mosques were damaged and more than 4,075 Muslim-owned shops were looted by the Sinhala rioters, from Central province to the Western and North Western provinces.

Since 1956 there have been five communal riots (1956, 1958, 1977, 1979 and 1983) carried out with the clear agenda of ethnic cleansing of Tamils from the Island. Hundreds of Tamils were killed, raped, disappeared and billions of rupees worth of their properties looted and destroyed.

All these riots and atrocities have been well documented by the UN and many international human rights and humanitarian organisations.

**In 1974** tension intensified between the Sinhalese and Muslims in Mylunkulam in Puttalam. Government officials and the Police showed their partiality and supported the Sinhalese.

**In January 1976**, Muslims in Sirampiaddy, Pottuvil and other villages were severely attacked and a Mosque at Pottuvil (Quela Mosque) was completely destroyed by a Sinhala mob. As a consequence in Puttalam, 18 Muslims who were assembled in a Mosque were shot dead. The Muslims working in the Cement Cooperation in Puttalam were attacked and no protection was given.

**In 1982**, from 30 July to 4 August, Sinhala-Muslim riots broke out in Galle and then spread to Kandy, Mawanella and others parts of the island including Colombo.

Long before the Jaffna Muslims moved to Puttalam, the Buddhist monks and Sri Lankan government were very careful with their political agenda ensuring that the Muslim population in Puttalam should not be allowed to spread to any other area within Puttalam.

**In November 2002**, Sinhala-Muslim riots took place in Chillaw. A group of Sinhalese burnt down many houses belonging to Muslims and several people were severely injured in this incident. A Muslim refugee camp in Puttalam was also attacked and 75 Muslim families were forced to seek shelter in the nearby Mosque. A 22 year old Muslim youth was shot dead and several others were injured in Katugoda in Galle.

**In August 2006**, a case was filed by some Sinhalese against the purchase of 30 acres of land by Muslims in Palavi, Puttalam. This case was rejected by the Court and on the same day they installed a statue of Buddha in that village.

Tamil-Muslims’ farming and fishing villages in the North and East are currently facing similar problems.

## Jaffna Muslims used for International lobby

Muslims living in Jaffna were evacuated in 1990 and they were compelled to live in Puttalam. But since 1995, the LTTE has not been in control of Jaffna. If this is the case, what has been lacking and who obstructed the resettlement of the Muslims in Jaffna from Puttalam? There are airports, harbours in Puttalam as well as in Jaffna and the land route; the A9 was opened for many years.

It is obvious that the government of Sri Lanka wanted the Muslims to remain in Puttalam, without any fundamental rights, to serve a highly motivated and intense international campaign against the LTTE claiming that the Muslims from Jaffna had been evacuated by the LTTE. In other words, the Jaffna Muslims in Puttalam were used to justify the government Sinhalaisation, and ethnic cleansing of Tamils and Muslims from many villages in the North East.

In the past when this question was raised by TCHR representative in meetings held by the Sri Lankan Mission in Geneva, the Sri Lankan Ministers and other representatives could not give a proper answer, as to why the government was delaying the resettlement of Muslims in Jaffna.

### **Divide and rule among Muslims**

In another divide and rule tactic - tensions and animosity have been created between members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community and the rest of the Muslim population, often resulting in sporadic violence and killings in Sri Lanka.

Among the Tamils, many Paramilitary groups are fighting amongst themselves, unaware that the Sri Lanka defence ministry is motivating them, so that Sinhala hegemony can be achieved.

In an overt plan to change the demography of the North East, statues of Buddha have been planted everywhere and the names of Tamil villages are renamed with Sinhalese names. The Tamils and Muslims who lived for centuries in the North and East are chased away overnight, while the Sinhalese are systematically being settled there.

### **Partiality in World Heritage properties**

Since 1982 8 (culture & natural) World Heritage properties in Sri Lanka, have been inscribed on the UNESCO list. A further 2 are in process and are on UNESCO's tentative list.

A country which proclaims to be multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-racial/multi-ethnic has submitted to UNESCO, only those properties concerning Buddhism and the Sinhalese. There are many sacred, ancient/cities, properties in Sri Lanka, which pre-date and are more historically important than those already declared to UNESCO.

Sri Lanka has deliberately ignored multi-religious sacred places and anything unconnected to Buddhism. ***Inscribed and un-inscribed lists are given below :***

#### **Sites inscribed on UNESCO's list**

**Cultural** - Ancient City of Polonnaruwa(1982); Ancient City of Sigiriya(1982); Sacred City of Anuradhapura(1982); Sacred City of Kandy(1988); Old Town of Galle and its Fortifications(1988); Golden Temple of Dambulla(1991).

**Natural** - Sinharaja Forest Reserve (1988); Central Highlands of Sri Lanka (2010)

**Properties submitted on the Tentative List** - Seruwila Mangala Raja Maha Vihara (2006); Seruwila to Sri Pada (*Sacred Foot Print Shrine*), Ancient pilgrim route along the Mahaweli river in Sri Lanka (2010) <http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/lk>

#### **Ignored properties**

- 1 - **Adam's peak/ Sri Pada / Sivanolipatha Malai / Sinhalese Samanalakanda** - is a 2,243 metres (7,359 ft) mountain located in central Sri Lanka. It is located in Ratnapura district.  
  
On the mountain top there is a sacred footprint of 1.8 metres (5 ft 11 in) .  
  
Saivites (Hindu) believe it is a footprint of Lord Shiva; the majority of Christians claim that it is of St Thomas; Buddhists believe that this is of the Buddha and Muslims say that it is of Al-Rohun (Soul) or Adam.  
  
Long before Buddhism came to Sri Lanka in about 246 BC, Sri Pada/Sivanolipatha Malai was revered. *Only in 2010 was this submitted to UNESCO, but it is still not accepted as one of the World Heritage sites.*
- 2 - **Jungle shrine of Kataragama/Kathirgamam** is a popular religious complex with Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist shrines. This is located in the Monaragala District. Kataragama has yielded evidence of human habitation at least 125,000 years ago – and of the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods.

Before 1940s, Kataragama was developed by Tamil Saivites (Hindus) and the majority of the pilgrims were Saivites. After Independence Kataragama became a popular pilgrimage site for Sinhala Buddhists. From 1940s onwards restrictions were placed on Tamil Saivites worshipping at this shrine. Many pilgrim resting places and Temples belonging to Saivites (Hindus) were nationalized by the government and gradually Tamils were forced to abandon Kataragama.

In 1950s the temple complex was declared a holy place by the government of Sri Lanka.

**3 - Our Lady of Madhu** is a Roman Catholic shrine in Mannar district.

This shrine has a history of over 450 years. Our lady of Madhu is the holiest Catholic shrine in Sri Lanka. This shrine is worshipped by both Tamil and Sinhalese, including Christians of other denominations, Saivites (Hindus) and Buddhists. It is also known as a symbol of unity between Tamils and Sinhalese.

**4 - Five Easwarams (Saiva) Temples** existed for thousands of years in Sri Lanka, long before the Vijayan era - Thiruketheswaram (*Mannar*), Thirukoneswaram (*Trincomalee*), Muneswaram (*Chillaw*), Naguleswaram (*Keerimalai*), Thondeshwaram (*Devinuwara*).

These Saiva sacred places were dedicated to Saints called Nayanmaars who lived between 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD and sung Thevaarams (devotional hymns).

In all the above Multi-religious, Saiva and Christian sacred places, Buddha statues have been erected and Sinhalese people are being systematically housed in settlements there.

### **Churches and Temples damaged/destroyed in Sri Lanka**

During twenty years of bloody war in the North-East, 2076 Hindu Temples and 299 Christian churches in the North were damaged/destroyed in Aerial bombings and shelling. **(February 2004)**

**LIST OF DAMAGED AND DESTROYED TEMPLES –**

[http://www.tchr.net/religion\\_temples.htm](http://www.tchr.net/religion_temples.htm)

**FOR FULL LIST OF DAMAGED AND DESTROYED CHURCHES –**

[http://www.tchr.net/religion\\_churches.htm](http://www.tchr.net/religion_churches.htm)

**CHRISTIAN CHURCHES ATTACKED/DESTROYED/DAMAGED BY MOBS LED BY BUDDHIST MONKS**

[http://www.tchr.net/religion\\_churches2.htm](http://www.tchr.net/religion_churches2.htm)

**(Apologies - we could not obtain a list of the damaged/destroyed Mosques in the North and East, and Churches and Temples in the East)**

**End**