

DAMBULLA MOSQUE CRISIS: NEEDED A POLICY FOR MULTICULTURALISM AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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Sri Lanka has a long and proud tradition of religious coexistence, which is attested by the presence of multireligious, sacred sites throughout the island, as well as its uniquely mixed cultural geography. Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Muslims have historically shared public space.

The solution to the unfolding Dambulla Mosque crisis must hence build on, protect and nurture these traditions of religious syncretism, pluralism and coexistence in the country. After years of conflict when the need of the hour is reconciliation and social integration, the segregation or removal of established shrines or places of worship would set a negative precedent that amounts to a form of religious and ethnic cleansing.

Kataragama, the Madhu shrine in Mannar and Sri Pada are ancient and famous multireligious sites of worship, where Hindus and Buddhists, as well as Muslims and Christians, have come together for worship for centuries, as evident in the country's archaeological and historical records. For instance, there is an ancient Sufi shrine in the Kataragama sacred area that houses Hindu and Buddhist deities and related religious complexes.

The British colonial administrator, John Still, recorded in his book *Jungle Tide*, which was published over a hundred years ago in 1911, that he witnessed a Muslim father bring his ill son to the shrine at Madhu church, which was known to be a powerful and healing sacred place. Sri Pada is a multireligious site in the central hills. In contemporary religious practice a majority of Lankans are pluralist and pragmatic, and tend to gravitate to multiple religious sites to give alms and seek the blessing and favour of various gods while 'hedging their bets,' so to speak. In Colombo it is not difficult to find a single small street harbouring a kovil, mosque, temple and church each next to the other (e.g., Mayra Place).

Indeed, the Sri Lanka Tourist Board would do well to highlight and market Lanka's unique multireligious culture in its brochures along with Lanka's Buddhist heritage! These historical facts should be the basis of any discussion, negotiation and settlement of the current crisis in Dambulla,

where attempts are being made to relocate a mosque and kovil. Unfortunately during the war, centuries of religious coexistence were slowly eroded by ethno-armed actors and nationalist politicians on all sides, as well as politicized religious organizations.

The current dispute is indicative of the need for a wider national policy and institutional architecture and capacity to pro-actively promote and mainstream multiculturalism in the arts, religious establishments, as well as in the national education system and curriculum, at war's end. Such an initiative is in any case necessary for post-war reconciliation so that the country may regain its proud traditions of multireligious coexistence and pluralism that were eroded during thirty years of armed conflict. There is need for a formal space for interfaith dialogue and negotiation in the interest of ethno-religious harmony when disputes arise, which may best be convened by the Ministry of National Language and Social Integration with the appropriate civil society expertise and institutional capacity and perhaps the help of UNESCO. Similarly, politicians and religious leaders must take the initiative to foster a tolerant public sphere and enable sharing of public religious space while respecting local communities and minorities.

Dambulla is part of the cultural triangle area which is a world heritage site as demarcated by the United Nations Education, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO.) Like other such world heritage sites in the Southeast Asian region, several of the Cultural Triangle sites epitomize Lanka's Hindu-Buddhist syncretic religious culture. This is similar to the great temple complexes in Southeast Asia such as Angkor Wat and Anchor Thom in Cambodia, and Borobudur and Prambanan in Indonesia, which are adjacent Hindu and Buddhist complexes from the Sri Vijaya period. It is relevant to note here that Buddhism and Hinduism derive from the same religious tradition, although Buddhism evolved as a critique of certain Hindu traditions and practices in India and contemporary Nepal. Buddhism also came to Lanka from Tamil Nadu with the landing of Sangamitta, daughter of Emperor Asoka, in Jaffna. Hinduism and Buddhism have coexisted for centuries in Lanka as in many other parts of south and east Asia.

Erosion of Multicultural Co-existence

Centuries of religious coexistence were slowly eroded during the conflict years due to a deliberate targeting of interethnic and interreligious ties and the LTTE's policy of ethnic cleansing of Muslims and Sinhalese they perceived as a security threat, as well as due to the lack of a policy to promote and mainstream multiculturalism in the secondary and tertiary education systems and ensure harmony and coexistence. Post-war the challenge is to regain the multicultural past and learn once again to share public religious space while respecting local communities.

As the "Multicultural National Vision for Peace in Sri Lanka," which was drafted after consultations in the various regions of Sri Lanka in 2003, noted in its preamble:

Sri Lanka was long famous for its rich social diversity and the harmonious co-existence of various communities. Since independence, however, there has been a failure to define and realize an inclusive national vision from the perspective of this distinctive heritage. Instead, divisive politics and policies have fostered deep social, cultural, political and economic schisms and engendered violent armed conflict. The two decades long armed struggle in the north (with primary focus on ethno-linguistic difference) and the uprising in the south (with primary focus on class disparity), reflect an inadequate post-colonial national vision and strategy, and an inequitable regional distribution of power and wealth ... we propose a renewed and inclusive multicultural vision for the country based on the principles of security and dignity for all groups and persons, and respect for cultural and religious diversity. Our attempt here is to address the causes of the conflict while recognizing the deep scars that the violence of the last decades has rendered upon the island's historically multicultural society.

Since independence cultural and political discrimination in governance, the lack of equitable development policies, and failure to preserve and respect local and cultural knowledge have become endemic. Competitive ethnic and religious politics became institutionalized. Democracy came to represent the 'tyranny of the majority,' while a political culture premised on the notion that 'might is right' became entrenched in the various regions of the island.

At times both parties in the war deliberately conceived to destroy multicultural coexistence and benefit politicians and or warlords in the country who sought power by playing the ethnic and religious card to capture vote banks. However,

given Hinduism and Buddhism's common heritage in the subcontinent and centuries of coexistence and tolerance, Hindu-Buddhist ties have survived the worst days of the war but are increasingly under pressure in the post-war period with the rise of a militarized public religion. A pattern of land grabbing that is destructive of centuries of cultural and religious coexistence, and giving Buddhism (a highly tolerant religion) a bad name, has emerged.

Multiculturalism in the Mixed Cultural Geography in Lanka
The "Multicultural National Vision for Peace in Sri Lanka" defines multiculturalism thus:

Sri Lanka is a plural and multicultural land. Multiculturalism refers to the island's cultural diversity inclusive of three overlapping linguistic categories (speaking Sinhala, Tamil and English, and regional dialects including Veddah languages); four great world religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, and their sects, as well as indigenous deities and spirit beliefs); more than six ethnic groups recognized in the National Census, and a number of overlapping and cross cutting castes and sub-castes. Various ethno-national groups based on linguistic, ethnic, regional and religious elements, such as the Burghers (Dutch and Portuguese), Sinhalese (Kandyan and Low Country), Tamils (Sri Lankan and Malayaha), Muslims (Moor and Malay), Parsis, Colombo Chetties, Vannialatto (Veddah) and several others have emerged as significant identities; several of these categories are composed of distinct sub-categories. Additionally, the island's population may be sub-divided according to gender, class, and regional cultures depending on the rational for classification.[2]

Sri Lanka's cultural diversity and complex mix of identities is not unique. Most modern nations are plural, diverse and complex. However, in the postcolonial period, diversity has been perceived as a threat rather than a gift. The result has been marginalization and discrimination against smaller and less powerful groups on linguistic, ethnic, religious, caste and/or class bases, giving rise to various forms of violent political conflict. In turn, many of these conflicts have resulted in riots, attacks, forced displacement and/or colonization of regions occupied by one community by another, and the building of enclaves and territories dominated by one ethnic group or another.

Acknowledgement of Sri Lanka's ancient multiculturalism and mixed cultural geography entails recognition that a majority group in a region is bound to respect and protect those who

are in the minority in that particular region. Every group or individual is in a minority outside his/her own territory, region or neighborhood, and in an increasingly integrated and globalized region and world individuals and groups must be free to move with security and dignity.

A balance of power between regional/local majorities with regard to respect and protection for the persons and property of regional/local minorities is a sine qua non for sustainable peace. It is also necessary to reverse the pattern of ethnic ghettoization and ethnic cleansing of regional and local minorities that occurred during the twenty years of armed conflict and the riots prior to it in the north and south of the country.

Several multireligious sites attest to a history of peaceful coexistence among the various religious communities in the island. These sites of multireligious significance are especially to be celebrated in the aftermath of a polarizing conflict. We propose that sites such as Sri Pada, Kataragama and Madhu shrine, with their diverse traditions, be recognized and celebrated as multireligious zones of peace and amity.

At this time, negotiation to ensure protection and accommodation of the mosque and Hindu shrine, which were long established prior to the establishment of the Dambulla sacred area and are not “unauthorized structures” towards ensuring that Lanka remains a multireligious space and country, is necessary. The historical fact of sharing public space among religions should be the basis of any discussion and settlement of the current crisis in Dambulla, where Buddhist and Muslims should be both accommodated in the same place since both have the right to be there and own the lands.

It is hence to be hoped that the solution to the Dambulla crisis would:

1. Build on existing traditions of multireligious coexistence of sharing of public space and religious syncretism in Sri Lanka, which has a long and proud tradition of religious coexistence. This tradition of religious coexistence is evident in historical sacred places and contemporary practices Kataragama, Sri

Pada, the Pada Yathra pilgrimage from Jaffna to Kataragama along the east coast, etc.

2. Those responsible for the crisis in Dambulla, who broke the law, propagated hate speech, disturbed the peace and threatened religious harmony, with implications for all other parts of the country, must be held accountable to ensure that this does not happen in the future. Meanwhile the Buddhist *Sangha* may hold an inquiry and discipline those political un-Buddhist monks responsible for leading mobs and violating Buddhist values, principles of tolerance, the *dhamma* and *vinaya*, if found accountable.

3. There is need for a Ministry to pro-actively promote and mainstream multiculturalism and enable interfaith dialogue, negotiation and ethno-religious harmony when disputes arise. Such disputes need not and should not wait to be referred to the highest in the land! Rather, independent expertise from civil society and not just religious leaders and politicians (who are often part of the problem by playing the ethnic card to win votes, territory and power), need to be engaged. This is particularly the case after thirty years of armed conflict and as part of the reconciliation process. Perhaps UNESCO could be invited to help build national capacity and institutions to develop and mainstream a national policy for multiculturalism, coexistence and reconciliation.

4. As the LRRC and the “Multicultural National Vision for Peace” recommend, legislation and a bill on the “Prevention of Incitement to Racial and Ethno-religious Hatred” should be brought into effect so that those who indulge in hate speech and attack people or property of other communities and turn them into scapegoats may be held accountable.

Finally, as the United Nations World Conference Against Racism affirmed in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, ‘diversity is a gift rather than a threat.’ The Sri Lanka Tourist Board would do well to promote the island as a uniquely multireligious land and organize a tour of Lanka’s multireligious sacred sites. Finally, it is to be hoped that the month of May, when the third anniversary of the end of war is celebrated, will be a month of reconciliation and remembrance of the past, and of present victims of violence from all religious and ethnic communities in the island. ■

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