



AN INTRODUCTION TO  
**RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**  
IN SRI LANKA



Sulochana Peiris

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# Introduct

## Introduction

Sri Lanka's diverse social fabric is made up of different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. There is a very clear distinction between different ethnic groups; Buddhism is the religion practiced by a majority of the country's Sinhala population, a larger portion of Tamils is Hindu, and Muslims are adherents of Islam. And Christianity is followed by both Sinhala and Tamil people. While religion is closely tied to the ethnicity, ethno-religious identity is somewhat fluid between Sinhala and Tamil communities since some people from both these communities share a common religion. Although religion had always played a crucial part in the country's post-independent identity politics, religion itself was never deemed as a direct cause for the armed conflict.

Post-independent constitutions of the country have accorded the foremost place to Buddhism. Notwithstanding, as discussed in Chapter One, Sri Lanka has a significant constitutional and legal framework to protect the freedom of religion and religious plurality of all ethno-religious groups. However, since the war's end in May 2009, the island nation has witnessed fresh bouts of religiously motivated violence, particularly against Muslims and Christians perpetrated by Buddhist extremist groups. The increasingly ethnonationalist post-war politics have provided a breeding ground for Sinhala Buddhist groups such as Bodhu Bala Sena (BBS) and Sinhala Ravaya to propagate hate-speech, and at times, instigate attacks and violence against Muslim and Christian religious communities by helping escalate petty personal disputes along ethno-religious lines. Although significantly less both in intensity and frequency, acts of vandalism against Buddhist shrines and online hate speech targeting Buddhists by fundamentalists belonging to religious minorities have also been increasingly reported. Owing to the highly polarized and contested post-war political context characterized by numerous new fault lines, instigators of hate speech and post-war religious attacks have been able to operate with impunity with overt and covert support from political leaders. And the overall feeling is that the media has played into the hands of extremist groups by sensationalizing attacks against Muslims and Christians

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or amplifying their voices by providing them space and coverage. This sentiment was echoed by all religious leaders and civil society representatives who were interviewed during information gathering process leading up to the writing of this booklet and excerpts of their views have been shared in the inner pages of this document.

Internews Sri Lanka has been conducting a series of trainings for journalists and civil society organizations as part of an effort to encourage positive media coverage of ongoing national and local efforts and community level examples of plurality while increasing networking between journalists and civil society groups that are working to promote ethno-religious plurality and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. 'An Introduction to Religious Pluralism in Sri Lanka' has been produced to further support the trained journalists in their post-training reportage on religious plurality in Sri Lanka.

This booklet consists of five chapters: Constitutional and Institutional Safeguards Provided for Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka; Sites of Religious Interface and Syncretism; Context of Recent Religiously Motivated Riots and Tensions; Civil Society Efforts to Promote Religious Pluralism and; Social Media as a Platform to Promote Religious Pluralism. While the first chapter looks at the existing constitutional and legal provisions for the exercise of freedom of religion and religious plurality, the other four chapters reflect upon some of the key sites of religious interface and syncretism that promote inter-religious understanding and plurality, analysis of the post-war context that has seen a marked increase in religiously motivated violence as well as existing opportunities and challenges for practice of religious freedom, examples of national and local level efforts and activities promoting religious plurality, and social media as a platform to engender religious plurality. We hope that the trained journalists will use this booklet as a guide in their new pursuits of improving the focus and coverage of religious freedom and religious plurality.

### Chapter Summary

- The 1947 Soulbury Constitution had a provision in place to safeguard the interests of different ethnic and religious groups.
- The secular tone and approach espoused by the Soulbury Constitution changed with the introduction of the 1972 Republic Constitution when Buddhism was accorded the foremost place through Article 6 ('Buddhism Clause') which stated: 'The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place'.
- The according of the foremost place to Buddhism by the 1972 Constitution was seen as a move to provide constitutional protection for the rising Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology.
- The 1972 Constitution did not provide any safeguards to protect minority community rights compared to Article 29 of the Soulbury Constitution which protected the rights and freedoms of ethno-religious minorities.
- Article 9 of 1978 Constitution states: '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 Article 14(1)e'.
- Both Article 6 of the 1972 Constitution and Article 9 of the 1978 Constitution brought to bear negative constitutional implications for religious freedom.
- Sri Lanka is a signatory to several international treaties that recognize freedom of religion, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).
- Sri Lanka has a sufficient constitutional and legal framework to protect religious freedom and but there is a critical enforcement gap that runs counter to the protections provided to minority communities by Article 10 and Article 14 (1) e.

Sri Lanka's diverse society is made up of different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. The 2012 census revealed that the Sinhalese make up 74.9%, Tamils consist 15.3%, and Moors 9.3% of the total of over 20 million population in the country. Furthermore, of the total population, 70.1% are Buddhists, 12.6% are Hindus, 9.7% are Muslims, 6.2% are Roman Catholics.<sup>1</sup> As an important marker of social identity and belonging, religion has played a salient role in cementing ethno-religious identities of different communities in Sri Lanka. Often, the distinction between ethnic and religious identity is blurred and religion is intrinsically linked to ethnicity: A majority of Buddhists are Sinhalese and a large number of Hindus are Tamil; and the word Muslim is interchangeably used for both ethnic and religious identity; meanwhile, the Christian community is made up of both Sinhala and Tamil ethnic community members. While religious identity has been one of the major fault lines that gave rise to tensions and violence between adherents of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity in the pre- and post-independent Sri Lankan society, religious identity played a comparatively less significant role in the emergence and continuation of the armed conflict between the State and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) vis-à-vis ethnic identity. "Contrary to the popular belief, religion has not figured as a factor informing the move for secession" (Udagama 2013).

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“ If religious leaders live and also guide their followers according to their religious beliefs and values, we can resolve a lot of issues that our country is currently facing. I would say 75% of the responsibility lies on religious leaders as far as religiously motivated attacks and tensions are concerned. We should be able to, as religious leaders, guide people along the correct path. And the State also has to do more to make sure that all religions and religious leaders are respected equally. We are already working together as a multi-religious group in Central parts of Sri Lanka to resolve religious disputes disturbing the peace in our area through our District Inter-Religious Committee. ”

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**S.V. Sureshvara Kurukkal, Sri Lanka Upcountry Hindu Priests' Association**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/Pages/Activities/Reports/SriLanka.pdf>

## **Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist Ideology**

Post independent ethno-religious political narratives were inspired by the interpretations of the Great Chronicle Mahavamsa- that described Sri Lanka as the place chosen by the Lord Buddha to preserve and propagate Theravada Buddhism- referred to Sri Lanka as Sinhadeepa (island of the Sinhalese) and Dhammadeepa (island where Buddha's teachings are followed and protected). Manipulating this mytho-historical interpretation, Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology has been propagated by Sinhalese leaders, including Buddhist monks, to justify their ethnocentric politics of majority domination and minority subordination (DeVotta 2007). Gehan Gunatilleke (2015) describes that the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism narrative drew impetus from the Buddhist revivalist movement that emerged during the latter part of the Nineteenth Century. To-date, Sinhala Buddhist political leadership and Buddhist monks continue to identifying themselves as defenders of Sinhadeepa and Dhammadeepa. As guardians of Buddha's teachings, Buddhist monks command influence and respect among the Sinhalese community and also give advice to political leaders and get involved in the country's political affairs. This was also the basis upon which Buddhism was accorded foremost status in the post-independent Constitutions (De Votta 2007).

## **Post-Independent Identity Politics and Negative Constitutional Implications**

The 1947 Soulbury Constitution had a provision in place to safeguard the interests of different ethnic and religious groups (Udagama 2013). Rights and freedoms of ethno-religious groups were protected by Article 29 of the Soulbury Constitution, which was considered to be a secular one in essence. However, the secular tone and approach of the country's constitution changed with the introduction of the 1972 Republic Constitution (ibid). And religion was politicised by elite groups, mainly the Sinhala Buddhist in post-independent political arena in order to appeal to their base. Deepika Udagama (2013) compared lack of provisions to safeguard minority community rights in the 1972 Constitution to the Soulbury Constitution stating "The failure to include a provision comparable to the previous Article 29 was the major cause of discontent."

Article 9 of the Second Republic Constitution of 1978 reproduced Article 6 of the 1972 Constitution which accorded Buddhism the foremost place while assuring to all religions rights granted by Article 10 and 14 (1) e. Both

Article 6 of the 1972 Constitution and Article 9 of the 1978 Constitution brought to bear “negative constitutional implications for religious freedom” (ibid). Udagama further explained how both the 1972 and 1978 Republic Constitutions of Sri Lanka have “added to a larger sense of grievance arising from other issues,” by according Buddhism, the religion followed by a large number of the majority Sinhalese, the foremost place.

It is important to look at what sort of constitutional and legal frameworks have been put in place by the State to safeguard the right of minority communities to practice their religion while also protecting religious plurality of the Sri Lankan society.

“ *Our Constitution has measures to safeguard religious pluralism. But we have to change people’s minds about the importance of religious plurality. We have to conduct at community level, the need to foster inter-religious coexistence in our communities and area. The State has very superficial programs to promote inter-religious coexistence. We have to do a lot more, organize symposiums for religious leaders, meet with different religious followers and create structures that promote inter-religious coexistence in each village. I have been doing this kind of work for about thirty years. But a lot more has to be done.* ”

**Madampagama Assaji Thero, Colombo**

## **International Treaties as a Parallel Framework which Protects Religious Freedoms**

At international level, Sri Lanka has ratified several international treaties that recognize freedom of religion, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); Article 18 of the UDHR provides that ‘everyone has a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ (Gunatilleke 2015). Furthermore, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) mentions that a person’s freedom of religion ‘shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching’ (ibid). Provisions have also been made by the Covenant that any restrictions to the freedom of religion may be ‘subject only to such limitations as are

prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others' (ibid). Article 20(2) of the ICCPR states: Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law (ibid). Sri Lanka is a signatory to these international frameworks and is therefore obligated to protect, promote and fulfil the freedom of religion (ibid). Having constitutional and legal safeguards to protect religious freedom of all communities is vital for Sri Lanka to function as a heterogeneous, pluralist democracy. The overall constitutional and legal framework governing religious freedom meets international standards (ibid).

## **Constitutional Provisions Governing Religious Freedom**

"From penal legislation enacted during the British colonial period to the 1978 Constitution and more recent legislative measures, Sri Lanka has a long history of legal provisions for the protection of religion and religious beliefs." (CPA 2014).

The Constitutional provisions that are directly associated with religion and religious freedom are Article 9,10,12, and 14(1)(e) of the Constitution. Article 9 accords the foremost place for Buddhism and the State's responsibility is, while guaranteeing to all religions rights provided for by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e), to protect and foster Buddhism (ibid). In essence, parity between all religions is protected under Article 9 (Gunatilleke 2015). However, referring to a petition filed in the Supreme Court, Gunatilleke explained that judicial interpretation of Article 9 in the past has produced a lack of parity in the case of Sister Immaculate Joseph and 80 Teaching Sisters of the Holy Cross of the Third Order of Saint Francis in Menzingeren of Sri Lanka (2004). The case dealt with a challenge to a Private Member's Bill introduced in Parliament to incorporate a Catholic religious order and the Bill was subsequently challenged in the Supreme Court on the basis that it was inconsistent with Article 9 of the Constitution.

Overall, three Supreme Court judgments (including the above-mentioned) given between 2001 to 2003 that involved petitions challenging the constitutionality of legislative Bills which sought to incorporate charitable institutions by various Christian denominations, also belied the constitutional protection of religious freedom in Sri Lanka (Udagama 2013).

Article 10 is an absolute right, which is exempted from the limitations placed on fundamental rights by Article 15. Article 10 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.” Gunatilleke (2015) further elaborates how jurisprudence articulation pertinent to Article 9 distinguishes between the right to adopt and hold a religious belief and the freedom to manifest a religious belief: “The distinction between the freedom to adopt and hold a religious belief and the freedom to manifest a religious belief is starkly revealed in the jurisprudence dealing with Article 9 of the Constitution.”

Article 12(2) states: “No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any such grounds.” Additionally, Article 12(3) provides that ‘no person...on the grounds of religion...shall be subject to any disability, liability, restriction, or condition with regard to...places of worship of his own religion.’ (ibid)

Article 14(1)(e) enshrines the right of citizens to manifest their religious beliefs and provides that “every citizen is entitled to the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship observance, practice or teaching.” However, this right is subject to certain restrictions that maybe enacted by law under Article 15(7), for the purpose of, inter alia, “securing recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others” (ibid).

In a separate Supreme Court review of a Bill entitled ‘Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution’, the Court’s unanimous judgement was that “the idea of a State religion to be repugnant to guarantees of freedom of religion, the right to profess one’s religion, and the Right to Equality, and non-discrimination” (Udagama 2013).

“ Religious leaders in Galle district work as a group in our community service work as well as in conducting activities aimed at inter-religious peace and unity. Our group has a very good understanding about each other and we respect each other. In crisis situations, we discuss and work with all responsible parties to prevent the spread of violence, we try to solve a problem at early stage without letting it escalate in to full blown violence. We can't prevent conflicts, but if we have a solid foundation, we can use that to resolve such conflict as they surface. The State should make village level administration officials responsible for the prevention of the spread of false information and hate speech damaging inter-religious unity. Media also should report more about positive inter-religious coexistence activities done by groups like us. ”

**Father Peter Wilson Nanayakkara, District Inter-Religious Coexistence Committee, Galle**

Above discussed Constitutional provisions indicate that Sri Lanka has recognized its ethno-religious plurality and committed, constitutionally, towards providing an environment for religious freedom. Gunatilleke (2015) interprets this commitment: “The overarching constitutional framework in Sri Lanka appears to uphold the freedom of religion while being somewhat ambivalent on the boundaries pertaining to the manifestation of that freedom. Propagating religion, for instance, is not a right afforded to all religions equally in Sri Lanka by virtue of the interpretation lent to certain constitutional provisions.”

## **Legal Framework for the Exercise of Religious Freedom**

Sri Lanka’s legal system includes laws that prohibit the use of hate speech that either hurt religious feelings or incite communal disharmony (ibid). The Penal Code consists of a series of offences in this respect.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of institutional and policy frameworks assuring religious freedom and fostering religious plurality, Sri Lanka has taken several measures: As part of The National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights 2011-2015 (NHRAP) line ministries for Buddhist, Hindu, Islam and

<sup>2</sup>Section 290: Injuring or defiling a place of worship with intent to insult the religion of any class

Section 290B: Acts in relation to places of worship with intent to insult the religion of any class

Section 291: Disturbing a religious assembly

Section 291A: Uttering words with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings

Section 291B: Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class, by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.

Christian Affairs and several other line ministries were made responsible for enacting all commitments enlisted in the NHRAP pertinent to religious freedom (ibid). The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in its 2011 report specifically underscored the importance of inter-faith harmony in several sections: "The LLRC recommended that the government take strong deterrent action to prevent incidents of inter-faith intolerance and make every endeavour to arrest the occurrence of such incidents" (ibid). The Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) that was established in April 2015 also implements numerous programs at national, district and regional level involving different government and civil society sectors for the promotion of inter-ethnic reconciliation.

### Chapter Summary

- Historically, different religious groups in Sri Lanka have co-existed with each other for centuries.
- Inter-religious coexistence is exemplified in key Buddhist, Hindu, Islam and Christian places of worship across the island.
- Religious sites where different religions interface are identified as 'complex religious fields' where Buddhists, Hindus, Islam and Christian devotees meet, worship, perform common religious rites and interact with each other.
- These sites are also the spaces where religious syncretism takes place as people belonging to different religions worship common deities, observe similar religious rituals and seek blessing for their health and well-being.
- The Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Adam's Peak, and Kataragama Sacred Site are the most well-known religious sites that can be associated with interfaith interface and syncretism.
- Common heritage of these religious sites has at times been contested by each religious group as they claim exclusive ownership to those sites.
- Other multi religious sites that epitomize syncretism and solidarity are the two Galebandara shrines in Kurunegala, Kahatapitiya Mosque in Gampola and St. Anthony's Church Kochchikade.
- Sites of religious interface hold potential for building peace as different ethnoreligious groups bound by their common faith in divine justice visit them and have opportunity to interact with each other.

## Centuries Old Tradition of Coexistence among Different Communities

Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic, multi religious and multi lingual society has direct links with the legacies left behind by its geographic proximity to busy maritime routes frequented by travelers and traders alike and also as a former colony of three European nations. Historically, different religious groups in Sri Lanka have co-existed with each other for centuries. The post independent armed conflict and religion-based riots and low-intensity violence between different ethno-religious communities stand in stark contrast to the "centuries old tradition of coexistence and the reality of fluid identities among the various communities in Sri Lanka" (Udagama 2013). One arena where this inter-religious coexistence is manifested are Buddhist, Hindu, Islam and Christian places of worship across the island. Additionally, close interactions between religious leaders from different religious groups and their participation in common religious, peacebuilding and social welfare efforts, especially since the eruption of the civil war in 1983, have also been a vital source for the continuation and further fostering of coexistence among different ethno-religious groups. The latter will be discussed in detail in chapter four and this chapter will focus on religious interface exemplified in iconic places of worship belonging to all main religions practiced in the country.

### Sites of Religious Syncretism where Different Religious Groups Observe Similar Rituals

Many religious sites where different religions interface are identified as 'complex religious fields' where Buddhists, Hindus, Islam and Christian devotees meet, worship, perform common religious rites and interact with each other (Silva et al 2016). These sites are also the spaces where religious syncretism<sup>3</sup> takes place as people belonging to different religions worship common deities, observe similar religious rituals and seek blessing for their health and well-being (Silva et al 2016). The Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Adam's Peak, and Kataragama Sacred Site are the most well-known religious sites that can be associated with interfaith interface and syncretism. Due to the centuries of deep links between religious traditions and incorporation of deities of Hinduism in popular Buddhism, studies of religious syncretism have mainly focused on interface of Buddhism and Hinduism (Silva et al 2016).

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<sup>3</sup>Oxford Dictionary Definition of Syncretism [mass noun] : The amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought. Interfaith dialogue can easily slip into syncretism.'

## The Temple of the Tooth in Kandy

The Temple of the Tooth in Kandy is considered the most sacred site by Buddhists as it is the place that holds and protects reverently the sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha. Thousands of Buddhists venerate the Temple of Tooth every day. However this sacred site also consists of devales (kovil shrines) dedicated to deities, Skanda, Vishnu and Pattini that are worshiped and sought blessings of by Buddhists, Hindus and followers of other religions as well (Silva et al 2016). Silva et al (2016) capture this complex relationship further: "The annual procession in Kandy venerates the Tooth Relic as well as the guardian deities in a collective effort to secure their blessing for ensuring fertility and prosperity of all living beings irrespective of who they are."

## Adam's Peak

Venerated in a similar degree of respect and belief by Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims is the Adam's Peak. There is a popular belief among the Sinhala Buddhist Population that it was one of the places that Lord Buddha visited during his third visit to Sri Lanka when he visited the Kelaniya Rajamaha Vihara. Each religious community believes that the footprint at the temple located on top of the mountain to be of their founder or God. Followers of all main religions visit the sacred site without contesting each other's beliefs or claiming exclusive right to the place.

## The Kataragama Temple Complex

The Kataragama temple complex is also thronged by all religious groups to invoke the blessing of deity Skanda and other gods seeking success in different aspects of life such as health, wealth, business, politics, as well as to rid themselves of misfortune, illness and suffering. "While their way of invoking the god may be different, as when Hindus practice self-mortification as in Kutthukaavadi and Buddhists make offerings of fruit, followers of different religions jointly participate in daily rituals and the annual festival" (Silva et al 2016). Closely linked to the mutli-religious interface experienced at the Kataragama sacred site is *Padayatra* annual walk from Jaffna to Kataragama that culminates during the annual festival at Kataragama shrine. Hundreds of devotees from all religious groups join the walk at different points and make the colourful and arduous procession that denotes their common faith in god Skanda.



*In our fact finding missions to war-affected areas, we found out that all communities have psychological wounds that need to be healed. And political leaders are manipulating those wounds and spreading false information for personal and political gain. They don't work for inter-religious coexistence or peace. Extremist religious groups should be prevented by enforcement of law. The government has a responsibility to do so. A majority of religious leaders prefer to co-exist with other religions. All religions and religious beliefs are rooted in peace and non-violence. So religious leaders should guide people towards peace. Some religious leaders don't follow their own religion according to their religious values and principles. The State should organize discussions with religious leaders and then create awareness on the importance of religious plurality at all levels of administration. The media also creates problems by sensationalising. They don't fulfill their responsibilities. Their role is as important as the one played by religious leaders. More positive and frequent reporting on ongoing inter-religious coexistence work is one way for the media to improve the current situation.*



**Meewalwawe Dhammada Thero, District Inter-Religious Committee Kurunegala**

## **Contested Common Heritage**

However, common heritage of these religious sites has also been contested by each religious group as they claim exclusive ownership to those sites. The conflicts between Buddhists and Hindus over the control of these religious sites have resulted in increased Sinhalization and Buddhization of Kataragama, the ritual complex in Kandy and Adam's Peak even though the Hindu influence in these sites have not disappeared completely (cf. Silva et al 2016).

Among other multi religious sites that epitomize syncretism and solidarity are the two Galebandara<sup>4</sup> shrines in Kurunegala, Kahatapitiya Mosque<sup>5</sup> in Gampola and St. Anthony's Church Kochchikade. Galebandara shrines and Kahatapitiya Mosque are visited mostly by Buddhists and Muslims while

<sup>4</sup>Galebandara cult belongs to the category of Bandara cult in Sinhala Buddhism. For Muslims Galebandara is an Awliyar, a category of saints in Sufi tradition. This cult is popular among some Buddhists and Muslims in parts of Kurunegala and Matale districts. Typically, a Bandara cult is a localized religious cult built around the belief in a regional deity, who is subordinate to more powerful guardian deities of Sri Lanka such as Skanda, Natha, Vishnu, Saman and Pattini (cf. Silva et al 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Kahatapitiya is an orthodox Muslim Mosque near Gampola town, perhaps dating back to the Gampola period (1314–1415). Side by side with the regular mosque, there is a separate shrine dedicated to Bawa Khauf, an Awliya (Sufi saint) who is believed to have arrived in Kahatapitiya from Mecca. As is typical of Sufi shrines, the Kahatapitiya shrine contains the tomb of the saint. This shrine is visited by both Muslims and Buddhists in the area, who seek to obtain the blessing of the Awliya for various secular problems including his mediation in divine justice (cf. Silva et al 2016).

thousands of Christians and people of other faiths pay respect to the St. Anthony's Church. At the core of interface and syncretism experienced in these places is, once again, to invoke the blessing of founder or God of the respective faith or belief for success in secular life, business or professional sphere and to be rid of malice of illness, suffering or misfortunes.

## **Sites of Religious Interface and Syncretism as Potential Peacebuilding Platforms**

All of the sites discussed above exemplify a multi-religious space that give rise to inter-faith syncretism and solidarity between different religious groups in Sri Lanka. Together, people of different religious faiths and beliefs seek divine justice in the interface of religions rather than relying solely on a single religious tradition (Silva et al 2016).

Silva et al (2016) described how these sites of religious interface hold potential for building peace as different ethnoreligious groups bound by their common faith in divine justice visit them to observe rituals and venerate gods of justice while also getting a better understanding of each other's religious and cultural differences through observation, interaction and reflection. They should be recognized as places that defy social constructs of ethnoreligious boundaries. "The 'gods of justice' are those who stand outside the bonds of obligations internal to each group and thereby able to deliver justice transcending the narrow ethnoreligious boundaries. This may be seen as an important opening for religious peace building at least in the Sri Lankan context."

Additionally, religious festivals such as Vesak, Christmas, Eid and Thai Pongal and Deepavali lend themselves as spaces and opportunities for different ethnoreligious communities in the country to interface and engage in activities of solidarity and good will. Different aspects of each of these religious festivals encourage people from other religious faiths also to take part in certain rituals such as lighting of lamps, making pandols, organizing *dansal*, organizing ceremonies and performances, conducting welfare activities for the poor, etc. At a recent gathering, Office of the National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) launched a book titled, School-based Programme to Celebrate Religious and Cultural Festivals in a Spirit of Togetherness, which will be distributed in schools at national and district level inviting them to organize and celebrate different religious and cultural

festivals. An important step in recognizing how different religious festivals also have inherent potential to create better understanding about each other's religions through collective organization and participation in festival rituals.

“ *In Sri Lanka we have the freedom to practice our religions. But there are some extremists that instigate attacks against religious minorities. They are politically encouraged and backed by political leaders. We set a bad example for other countries in the world. The media also has a big responsibility to bring attention to a lot of good, positive things taking place in terms of religious coexistence. Media pick up isolated incidents and highlight them as breaking news creating unnecessary tension in people's minds. Religious leaders also must espouse the religious beliefs and values they preach to others. We are religious leaders to all people not just to followers of our own religion.* ”

**Father Damien Arsakularatne, CARITAS Colombo**

### Chapter Summary

- Religion is neither inherently violent nor inherently non-violent but an ambivalent domain that can be effectively manipulated for both violence and peace.
- Religious leaders play a hybrid, dualistic role as agents of peace as well as agents of violence.
- The post-war context has seen the emergence of new fault lines and discourses mobilized by ethnonationalism and identity politics.
- A fault line developed along religious identity has produced new enemies and new ethnoreligious discourses that sometimes end up in escalated tensions and violence between different ethno-religious groups.
- Studies have identified that religious violence in Sri Lanka manifests in two types: low- intensity chronic violence and high-intensity acute violence.
- Chronic violence comprises of hate speech campaigns and propaganda to threats, intimidation, minor destruction of property and occasional physical violence.
- Acute violence refers to sporadic episodes of violence in the form of physical attacks, destruction to property and break down of law and order.
- Researchers link the increase in anti-Muslim narratives and attacks in the post-war era with the resurgent Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.
- Perceived fears combined with the resurgent Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism provided the context for the birth of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist political and religious groups such as Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Sinhala Ravaya.
- The BBS 's vehement anti-Muslim narratives propagated via social media platforms and off-line social networks are blamed for hate campaigns and organized mob attacks against Muslims, particularly in Southern districts such as Galle and Kandy.
- The BBS has carried out its anti-Muslim hate campaigns with impunity and also with covert and overt support from the Sinhala-Buddhist political leadership.
- A study revealed that of over 50% of attacks that took place between 2013 to 2014 were non-physical and linked to hate

speech and propaganda and over a quarter of all attacks was attributed to BBS.

- The above study also revealed that almost 50% of attacks on Christians for the same period were perpetrated by unidentified groups and individuals.
- A separate study on violence against the Christian minority documented a total of 972 incidents which took place between 1994 - 2014.

## **Politicization of Religion in Post-Colonial Sri Lankan Society**

It is important to understand that religion per se is neither inherently violent nor inherently non-violent but an ambivalent domain that can be effectively manipulated for both violence and peace (Silva et al (2016)). In post-colonial Sri Lankan society, religion is regarded not only as a problem but also a force with the potential to act at the margins of the political field to make life a little more bearable in otherwise terrible circumstances” (Spencer et al 2015 p.6).

Spencer et al (2015) used Edward Said’s description in recognizing the importance of understanding the hybrid role that religious leaders play in a society: “sometimes they may act as ‘potentates’ working to reinforce political boundaries, and sometimes as ‘travellers’ able to transgress the same boundaries.” In the Sri Lankan context, too, recent history is fraught with incidents pointing to this dualistic role played by religious leaders as agents of peace as well as agents of violence in the public sphere. Spencer et al further said that understanding the complicated work and action of well-known, extraordinary religious leaders and also lesser known religious figures and how they travel back and forth over combustible terrain is essential to having a more “complex picture of the relations between religion, politics and conflict”. Religious leaders are able to act as brokers transcending religious, ethnic and political boundaries. However, religious leaders were instrumental in stoking tension in society with the politicization of religion in the immediate aftermath of independence, which witnessed a rise of Buddhist nationalism.

The according of the foremost status to Buddhism under the 1972 Constitution normalized the involvement of Buddhist monks in the country’s policy and politics by serving as unofficial advisors to the ruling elite. And the

political leadership actively sought their blessings and advice as a strategy in appealing to their base. Religion was not considered a root cause for the emergence of the armed conflict, but Buddhist monks, as guardians of Lord Buddha's teachings that are rooted in non-violence, never hesitated to extend their approval for war. Silva et al (2016) compared the distinct roles played by Buddhist monks and Hindu priests in what emerged to be the country's most menacing and devastating problem: "It has to be mentioned here that the Sinhala-Tamil conflicts that erupted in Sri Lanka in recent decades was by no means a Buddhist-Hindu confrontation as such. Even though many Buddhist monks openly supported the Sinhala army, Hindu priests, who are ritual performers rather than political actors, opted to keep away from the conflict in spite of the LTTE efforts to drag them into the conflict."

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*As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, followers of each religion should respect others. This can be done through our education system, from childhood teaching children the importance of unity among ethnic and religious groups for our country's prosperity. And in order to foster peace and prosperity in Sri Lanka, religious leaders should follow the teachings of their own teachers and gods. That should be the first step in the promotion of inter-religious coexistence. Sri Lanka's media also have a big responsibility to maintain peace, coexistence and stability in the country by bringing people's attention to good news as much as possible and they should avoid spreading false news and activities instigating racism.*

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Ash Sheikh B. A. S. Sufyan Mawlawi, Jaffna

## **The Revival of Sinhala-Buddhist Ethnonationalism and Identity Politics in the Post-War Context Targeted at Religious Minorities**

With the war's end in May 2009, Sri Lanka witnessed the emergence of new fault lines and discourses mobilized by ethnonationalism and identity politics (Gunatilleke 2015). A new fault line developed along religious identity has produced new enemies and new ethnoreligious discourses that sometimes erupt into escalated tensions and violence between different religious groups. Studies have been conducted to understand what elements of the post-war context gave rise to those religiously motivated mob attacks and riots, particularly targeting Christian and Muslim groups that sometimes resulted in deaths and damages to private and public properties.

According to Gunatilleke (2015), religious violence in Sri Lanka manifests in two types: low intensity attacks that can be situated along a spectrum of hate speech campaigns and propaganda to threats, intimidation, minor destruction of property and occasional physical violence. Such violence can also be described as 'chronic' violence. The second type is the sporadic episodes of high-intensity violence that is characterized by physical attacks, destruction to property and break down of law and order. This form of violence can be described as 'acute' violence. Gunatilleke (2015) states "Our understanding of this dichotomy is important to unravelling the problem of religious violence in Sri Lanka and devising effective interventions."

As a researcher who has conducted extensive research on post-war ethnoreligious violence, Gunatilleke explains that the current constitutional and legal framework in Sri Lanka provides a sufficient protection framework that could prevent religious violence; however, it is the lack of enforcement that is the fundamental problem within this protection framework. He further states that inaction by law enforcement agents as a recurring theme characterizing the religious violence that has taken place in the post-war context. In his analysis of post-war religious violence, Gunatilleke revealed that chronic violence against religious minorities originates as result of the convergence of local contextual factors that produce a "host-intruder dynamic" within a local community. He therefore suggests responding to such local violence requires measures that go beyond enforcement of law and institutional reform. "Thus it is crucial that these local contexts are delved into and solutions are ultimately discovered and implemented at the community level" (Gunatilleke 2015).



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*Politicians divide and rule people for their own benefit and they manipulate people's feelings and spread wrong ideas about other communities. When their actions disturb the peace in our communities, it is difficult for our District Inter-Religious Committee to intervene. In Jaffna, Tamils and Muslims are majority communities and the majority of the Sri Lankan Security Forces are Sinhala Buddhist. Politicians manipulate these dynamics like in the rest of the country. Our DIRC intervene when we hear of conflicts and disputes, explain things to them using our common religious values. There is acceptance among the people for our work as we also conduct community welfare activities to help poor communities.*

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**Meegahajandure Sirivimala Thero, Chief Monk, Naga Vihara, Jaffna**



## **Mobilization of Anti-Muslim Narratives and Hate Campaigns**

800 years of Buddhist and Muslim interactions consist of both interface and contestation (Silva et al 2016). The most well-known violent incident between these two groups was the 1915 anti-Muslim riots. Research on impact of other episodic anti-Muslim violent incidents straining the relations between these two groups such as tensions in Puttalam in January-February 1976, Galle in July 1982, and Mawanella in May 2001, on political violence of Muslim identity, has been tentative and exploratory (Haniffa and Nagaraj 2017). The increase in anti-Muslim narrative and attacks in the post-war era have been linked to the resurgent Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism mobilizing ideas such as an organised Muslim effort to increase their population<sup>6</sup> and control of the economy by Muslim traders (Gunatilleke 2015). These perceived fears provided the context for the emergence of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist political and religious groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). Gunatilleke describes that BBS focused an overwhelming attention to develop and propagate anti-Muslim narratives. The rising anti-Muslim sentiment resulted in hate campaigns and organized mob attacks against Muslims, especially in Southern districts. Aluthgama anti-Muslim violence is directly linked to the hate campaign led by BBS: "These tensions culminated in the anti-Muslim riots in Aluthgama, which was instigated by BBS hate speech on the same date. The government was largely ineffective in containing the violence and unapologetic in its aftermath, shifting the blame to the Muslims for provoking the violence" (Gunatilleke 2015).

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<sup>6</sup>Overall Moors population since 1981 has increased from 7.05% to 9.23%

Established in May 2012, BBS, the most militant Sinhala-Buddhist movement to-date, built on the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideological platform created by Jathikia Hela Urumaya (JHU) that won 9 seats in Parliament in 2014 (Gunatilleke 2015). Before JHU, Sinhala Urumaya, appealing to the suburban Sinhala-Buddhist identity and mobilizing them into a voter base, took part in the 2000 General elections and secured a seat (Gunatilleke 2015). Gunatilleke (2015) explains that the BBS and other smaller groups possibly emerged as a result of the constant deployment of political identity narratives that appealed to the suburban Sinhala-Buddhist voter base while demonizing competing ethno-religious identities. Subsequently, BBS began to aggressively launch and spread xenophobic campaigns targeting ethnic minorities in suburban areas. The BBS received one of the biggest endorsement of its activities when the Malwatte Mahanayake, Most Ven. Tibbatuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala Thero, in early 2013, sent his blessings to the organization claiming their activities “were important to drawing attention to a drastic decrease in the Sinhalese population and Buddhist temples” (Gunatilleke 2015). Furthermore, BBS also received both overt and covert support from the country’s political leadership, including the then Defence Secretary, Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Gunatilleke 2015). Other smaller groups such as Sinhala Ravaya and Ravana Balaya also came into existence as smaller Buddhist militant groups and they also conducted their activities with impunity similar to that the BBS operated under (Gunatilleke 2015).

In analyzing anti-Muslim attacks that took place between 2013 to 2014, Gunatilleke revealed that over 50% of attacks were non-physical and related to speech and propaganda. As for perpetrators, political actors or political or social movements perpetrated more than 50% of the attacks and over a quarter of all attacks was attributed to the BBS. Another aspect of Gunatilleke’s case studies on both Grandpass and Aluthgama anti-Muslim attacks discovered that religiously diverse areas can be prone to certain ‘episodic’ violent events, which are more intense than other incidents. The BBS’s robust hate campaigns against the Muslim community preceding Grandpass and Aluthgama were considered successful given that its anti-halal campaign, for instance, forced the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama to withdraw halal certifications from all products sold in the local market. Gunatilleke opines that the culmination of months of anti-Muslim hate campaigns and propaganda was the anti-Muslim riots in Aluthgama that took place in June 2014. Although yet to be studied, the latest of such attacks took place in Ampara and Digana in late 2017 and early 2018 respectively with localized personal incidents escalating into riots against Muslim villages and businesses in those two areas.

## **Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist Ideology Provides a Breeding Ground for Campaigns against Christian Evangelical Conversions**

Meanwhile, Gunatilleke's research found that conversely to the anti-Muslim attack trends, almost 50% of attacks on Christians for the same period were perpetrated by unidentified groups and individuals. Attacks against Christians were very local in nature with local villagers and local religious clergy being identified as the main groups responsible for a majority of such incidents of physical violence, destruction to property and threats and intimidation. Gunatilleke (2015) also points out that "public officials often directly or tacitly participated in attacks on Christians." The revival of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology in the post-war context also served as a breeding ground for a campaign against conversions by the Christian community. Although the widespread attacks against Christians is a new dynamic that needs to be further explored, Christian Evangelical conversion activities are treated with suspicion and seen as inimical to the Constitutionally protected idea of foremost place accorded to Buddhism (Gunatilleke 2015).

Another study<sup>7</sup> on attacks against the Christian community revealed that a total of 972 incidents took place between 1994-2014. Attacks against Christians escalated twice during this period in 2004 and 2014 indicating their links to key national level developments although the overall nature of attacks did not bear such a correlation to national level affairs. However, over 45% of incidents involved physical violence of damages to property. The study also revealed that the highest number of attacks were found in Gampaha (146) and Colombo (135) but compared to the proportion of population, Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa reported the highest number of events suggesting that attacks were more frequent in areas where Christians are a minority. The primary targets of these attacks were clergy- 398 events, and places of worship- 430 events. Members of clergy from other faiths were responsible for 24% of cases against pastors and 19% of incidents against places of worship, demonstrating the level of hostility against religious minorities and religious freedom. In total 177 events were led by Buddhist monks.

A separate study conducted by the Minority Rights Group (MRG)<sup>8</sup> of the period November 2015 to September 2016 found that change in government led to a reduction of organized violence the against religious minorities although other forms of rights violation against religious minorities still continued. The MRG report also mentioned that State actors continue to be complicit in violation of religious freedoms and beliefs of minorities. Overall, 47 incidents against Christians were reported in 14 districts island wide.

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<sup>7</sup>Silent Suppression: Restrictions on Religious Freedoms of Christians 1994 -2014

<sup>8</sup>Confronting Intolerance: Continued Violations against Religious Minorities in Sri Lanka (2016) Minority Rights Group

### Chapter Summary

- As agents of peace who are able to transcend ethnic, religious and political boundaries, religious leaders command respect not only within their own community, but also among other communities.
- Religious leaders can function as agents of conflict resolution before, during and after conflicts and crises between different ethnoreligious groups.
- Studies have also identified that in conflict resolution activities, religious leaders can play the roles of advocate, intermediary, observer, and educator.
- Civil society organizations and groups in Sri Lanka have successfully mobilized religious leaders in their conflict resolution activities aimed at different ethnoreligious groups.

## Religious Leaders as Agents of Conflict Resolution

As discussed in chapter three, religious leaders' dichotomous role as agents of peace or agents of violence should be recognized and understood in responding to ethno-religious violence. As agents of peace who are able to transcend ethnic, religious and other boundaries, religious leaders also command respect not only within their own religious community, but also among other communities, too, for their high moral and ethical conduct in society. These positive traits of religious leaders serve as openings for peacebuilding efforts. Appleby (2000 in Tilley 2015) has identified three modes through which religious leaders can function as agents of conflict resolution: crisis mobilization, saturation and intervention. 'Crisis mobilization' denotes that religious leaders move to spontaneous action by vocalizing their opposition to a conflict as it happens. 'Saturation' involves what began as crisis mobilization action develops into long term action and engagement via institutions and organizations that aim to build peace through education and dialogue. 'Intervention' refers situations in which religious leaders that are external to conflicting parties, engage with conflict factions to mediate a solution to the conflict (Tilley 2015).

Reflecting on past and ongoing peacebuilding activities led by or involving religious leaders in Sri Lanka through the above-mentioned Appleby framework, it is quite apparent that all three methods have been applied by peacebuilding actors and organizations as strategies in bridging conflict-divided communities. Tilley (2015) also introduces another theoretical framework by Sampson (2007) that identifies four main roles that religious leaders perform in conflict resolution activities: advocates, intermediaries, observers and educators. As individuals or groups, religious leaders from all four main religions in Sri Lanka have undertaken responsibilities in their engagement in conflict management, resolution and peacebuilding efforts, which can be couched within these four categories. In order to understand further how civil society peacebuilding efforts have made use of religious leaders' conflict resolution potential to promote religious plurality, this chapter will look at four case studies. The case studies will briefly reflect on inter-faith coexistence and peacebuilding efforts done by Sarvodaya, National Peace Council, Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, and Center for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation with the participation of religious leaders from all four main religions. All these case studies demonstrate that religious leaders have been actively involved in conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities as program designers, advisors, observers, implementors and participants.

It is also important to mention that many other inter-faith coexistence and reconciliation programs have been conducted over the years since the eruption of civil war by numerous organizations and collectives, such as Muslim Aid and Inter-Religious Council Sri Lanka. These four programs were chosen mainly for their widespread nature, implementation modality, and longevity of implementation. What is obvious is that all inter-faith peacebuilding efforts originate from the understanding that all religions espouse universal spiritual truths and ethical values not unique to any particular religion per se and it is this message that all religious leaders strive to communicate to adherents within their own religion as well as those from other religions. This was a common message shared by all religious leaders interviewed for this document.

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*During the war, we were divided ethnically, now we are divided as religious communities and we see tensions between different religious groups. There are misunderstandings among these communities and some intra-group issues, too. Misbehaviour and extremism are supported by political leaders and, as a result, we have witnessed religiously motivated violence. Widespread global sentiments against Islam, the situation in the Middle East also influence the local situation. So we need a lot of interventions to bring inter-faith communities together for dialogue from the bottom to the top. We all have to first change within and then change communities through self-transformation and inter-faith dialogue by reaching out to others. Currently a lot of religious leaders take part in inter-religious activities but sometimes I wonder if their attitudes towards all communities have changed. Religious leaders are not ready to face challenges. When a crisis arises, they try to be in the safe zone without interfering, not ready to challenge politicians and extremist groups to address the crisis. Religious leaders themselves can do more for inter-faith coexistence. Any incident disturbing the peace in our community or country should be condemned by religious leaders as a collective. And we should create a national level platform among religious leaders of all faiths for implementation of a road map for religious plurality.*

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**M. B. N. Firthous Mawlawi, Katthankudy, Batticaloa**

## **Center for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation's Interfaith Dialogue Centers**

Center for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (CPBR) has been implementing inter-faith coexistence activities since it was established in 2002. One of the flagship programs of CPBR is the Interfaith Dialogue Program, which is being implemented through six Interfaith Dialogue Centers (IFDCs) in Eastern, Northern, North Central, Central, and Southern Provinces. IFDC is deemed as a neutral space where different religious leaders and community members collectively discuss, plan, design and take action to promote reconciliation and peacebuilding at local, regional, and national level. Following intra- and inter-faith dialogues, which took place over ten years, religious leaders decided to set up IFDCs to implement joint interfaith initiatives to bring conflict-divided ethnoreligious communities together and heal their wounds through joint implementation of numerous peacebuilding initiatives. At each IFDC, religious leaders meet once a month to review and plan action on their inter-faith peacebuilding and reconciliation promotion program. IFDCs implement inter-faith dialogues, exposure visits to meet other communities for relationship building, joint celebrations of festivals, awareness raising initiatives for improved inter-cultural understanding, inter-faith community development activities, language learning, information communication and computer training.

All these initiatives are underpinned by the messages of conflict resolution, peace, and reconciliation through a common ground and improved ethnoreligious and cultural understanding. Collective action aimed at improving mutual understanding and building peace has proven to be crucial in war-affected districts. And during riots in Southern districts of Kaluthara and Galle, CPBR's interfaith groups worked around the clock to appeal for calm and unity to prevent the violence from spreading. Mutual understanding, solidarity and commitment to peace fostered through interfaith dialogue have enabled interfaith groups to mobilize collective action in times of crises. Overall, IFDs have connected over 100 villages across the island through interfaith dialogue culture established and internalized at community and national level. Over 30,000 community representatives took part in a community consultative process via interfaith dialogues and at the conclusion of this process, they presented a series of recommendations to State policy makers in June 2015. CPBR's Female Interfaith Initiative (FIFI) is another unique platform that has worked with female religious leaders and women leaders and other women from different ethnoreligious communities. This program is implemented by CPBR's sister organization, WOMAN. Over 20 months

between 2015 and 2017, 20 female religious leaders and 20 other women implemented numerous inter-religious, livelihood and other social welfare initiatives and 'Raising Woman' initiative is one of the key outcomes resulted in from their effort. FIFI and Raising Women have organized themselves into two groups: Interfaith Female Leaders Circle and Interfaith Women's Collective. All of CPBR's interfaith initiatives have sought to bind conflict-affected communities through truth, justice, forgiveness, and compassion.

## **Sarvodaya Shanthisena's District Cooperation Circle**

Since 2000, Sarvodaya Shanthisena has implemented interfaith initiatives across Sri Lanka in partnership with the United Religions Initiative - URI. URI is recognized as a growing global community dedicated to promoting enduring, daily interfaith co-operation, ending religiously motivated violence and creating cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings. Sarvodaya Shanthisena localizes and activates all of URI's inter-faith cooperation and other inter-community peace, justice and healing focused efforts. The Interreligious District Cooperation Circle (DCC) is the community level structure that activates the mission of URI. Led by religious leaders belonging to all main four religions, DCC is made up of both religious leaders and community representatives. Together, they meet regularly to discuss community needs and concerns and plan and activate community level initiatives to foster inter-faith cooperation, conflict resolution and peace among the district's different ethnic and cultural groups. Another key task undertaken by this forum is to plan collectively, interventions to prevent or manage religiously motivated disputes and violence. Currently, 14 DCCs are active in Colombo, Kalutara, Galle, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Trincomalee, Jaffna, Matara, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura and Kegalle. According to Ravi Kandage, Director of Sarvodaya Shanthisena, the biggest challenge that this initiative has had to overcome is "entrenched extremist narratives." And during initial months, people were afraid or did not want to take part in any of the interfaith activities they organized: "Religious leaders did not communicate with each other much and community representatives held stereotypical views and attitudes towards each other. State officials who are normally very amenable to our work, also would not cooperate with religious leaders when they try to mediate conflict situations. These have been our biggest challenges." added Ravi Kandage. When Aluthgama anti-Muslim riots spilled over to Gintota area, Galle DCC had responded as a collective, working in consultation with police, district administration officials and civil society leaders to prevent the escalation of small incidents that they perceived as settling of old personal problems between individuals. Galle DCC, led by religious leaders, had distributed hand bills instructing people to stay calm, and made public

service announcements, held meetings at the District Secretariat Office with the participation of all religious leaders and community members, including those in dispute with each other. "Religious leaders' solidarity and friendship served as a good platform for us to convince others to come to our meetings and believe in our efforts towards interfaith unity. All religions uphold common spiritual values so we exemplify those values through out joint activities." said Father Nihal Nanayakkara, DCC member. Three years later, a separate incident involving a road accident experienced by two Muslims caused by a Sinhala driver threatened to disturb the peace in Gintota<sup>9</sup>, once again, in 2017, a similar series of activities had been implemented by the Galle DCC. "We gathered Muslims in the Mosque and advised them against instigating violence against other community members. Similarly, other religious leaders conducted meetings with their own followers. Another meeting was held at the Grand Mosque where both Sinhala and Muslim community members, including those involved in the violent incident participated. We emphasized the importance of unity. A separate meeting was organized by the Government Agent together with police and community members. Even Gnanasara monk from the BBS attended that meeting. At this forum, affected families were promised compensation, which was provided later. Because of such interventions and other activities we do, our DCC has earned legitimacy from the people in Galle." Stated M. Z. Mohammed Mawlawi, President, All Ceylon Jamiyathu Ullama, Galle District.

## **National Peace Council's District Inter-religious Peace Committees**

National Peace Council (NPC) engages religious leaders as a key actor group in addressing inter-ethnic and inter-religious disputes and issues at local level in order to build trust between communities and foster peace and reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka. Mobilizing the agency of a majority of religious leaders' commitment for inter-religious coexistence while building on the effective foundation of previous inter-religious interventions, in 2010, NPC established District Inter-Religious Committees (DIRC) across Sri Lanka. Each DIRC is made up of religious leaders, local community representatives belonging to different ethnic groups, civil society groups including media representatives, mediation board members, government officials, academics and youth; and 30% of members are female. Around 40 persons comprise each DIRC and religious leaders act as a Steering Committee providing advice and guidance for all initiatives implemented by the respective DIRC. Today there are 19 DIRCs conducting important inter-faith coexistence work across the country. Generally, DIRCs meet once in two months and their discussions

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<sup>9</sup>Sri Lanka Racialist Attack on Muslims in Gintota\* <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2017/11/21/gint-n21.html>

focus on topics ranging from local service delivery inadequacies to deeper political issues relating to inter-ethnic reconciliation and transitional justice modalities and mechanisms. Apart from their routine peacebuilding activities, DIRCs also have played a significant role in managing crisis situations or preventing the spread of violence as witnessed during all anti-Muslim riots and attacks against Christian communities since the end of the war in 2009. Galle District DIRC took to the streets to appeal for calm and worked with all groups affected by violence during the 2014 anti-Muslim riots in Aluthgama, Beruwela and Darga Town in Kaluthara district. One of the key activities conducted by DIRC is the organization of Truth Commissions allowing each district's community members to share their experiences of war and violence since the beginning of the armed conflict. In the aftermath of the anti-Muslim violence in Digana in March 2018, the Kandy DIRC formed a Truth Commission to find out the truth related to anti-religious and anti-ethnic violence targeting Muslims living in places such as Digana, Teldeniya, Balagolla, Kengalla and Katugastota areas.

Before the Truth Commission was formed, Kandy DIRC deployed their members to the affected areas to conduct a fact finding mission while appealing for calm from the public through a media briefing they held in Kandy town. They also communicated with the President's Secretariat, the Prime Minister's Office and the Central Province Governor's Office requesting urgent action to stop the violence. "Since the DIRC felt the perpetrators were able to carry out attacking Muslims in Kandy and other areas with impunity and given that such anti-Muslims attacks had already taken place in other areas such as Ampara, Aluthgama, they felt the organization of a Truth Commission to establish the truth was the first step in preventing similar incidents from happening in future." said Saman Senevirathne, Program Manager, NPC. Kandy DIRC also felt that such a Commission would also make an important contribution towards the transitional justice process that has so far not set up a Truth Commission as a recommendation made by the international community. Most members of this Truth Commission were from the Kandy Citizens Union. Among them were academics, artists, lawyers, and former public officials. On 24 April 2018, three Truth Commissions were held simultaneously in Katugastota, Uguressapitiya and Digana after requesting public to take part in the process through newspaper advertisements. Following the conduct of the Truth Commission, members compiled a detailed report, which also included recommendations and the report was widely distributed among district and national level decision makers, State officials and others.

### Chapter Summary

- Media act as gatekeepers of information by producing, circulating and mediating only certain types of contents to their media consumers.
- As opinion makers, trend setters with power to influence people's views, choices and ideologies, media's role can be both constructive and destructive to any society.
- Sri Lanka's mainstream media organisations also demonstrate their biases in content selection and reportage
- Peace journalism is when editors and reporters make choices – about what to report, and how to report it – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict.
- In reporting post-war ethnoreligious violence in places like Aluthgama in 2014, Sri Lankan mainstream media organisations have shown their biases.
- The internet based social media has given more choice for the people to choose from a large array of media contents produced locally and globally.
- Independent reporters in Sri Lanka use social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to post their media content.
- Controlling of social media communication and information sharing by the State, particularly during a crisis can prevent the free flow of information and independent reporting by journalists – as was the case during the Digna anti-Muslim riots in March 2018.
- Social media platforms are being used by extremist individuals and groups such as BBS and Sinhala Ravaya to instigate hate campaigns against Muslims and Christians.
- Sri Lanka's Penal Code has provisions to prosecute individuals and groups that engage in hate speech and propaganda to incite violence against other individuals and communities.
- Social media serves as a conducive domain to build and consolidate discourses around peace and reconciliation.
- Civil society groups, religious leaders, journalists and other individuals use social media's constructive potential for the promotion conflict resolution and ethnoreligious coexistence by sharing relevant material, reports and other content.

## Media as Gatekeepers of Information

News, views, popular culture and all sorts of globalized trends are communicated and mediated to people via media. Depending on each media organization's editorial and commercial agendas, media act as gatekeepers of information by producing, circulating and mediating only certain types of content to their media consumers. As opinion makers and trend setters with profound power to influence people's views, choices, and ideologies, media's role can be both constructive and destructive to a society. There are innumerable instances where media have played as "fearful agents of separation, purism, and ethnic and religious antagonism, as mostly chillingly exemplified in the 1994 radio broadcasts by Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines that called on Rwandans to engage in genocidal murder of their neighbours." (Eisenlohr 2011).

### Sri Lanka's Mainstream Media

In Sri Lanka, too, State and private media organizations demonstrate their biases in their content selection and reportage. While media tend to sensationalize their news and other contents for their consumers, like in other conflict-affected societies, there has been a growing discourse for 'peace journalism' over the past few decades. According to Jake Lynch<sup>10</sup> peace journalism is "when editors and reporters make choices – about what to report, and how to report it – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict." Internews Sri Lanka and other media training organizations have conducted a vast number of training programs for Sri Lankan journalists with an aim to see coverage and content that promote ethnic and religious plurality, conflict resolution and reconciliation. While those efforts have yielded significant improvements, it is also important to remember that trained journalists are still required to work within limitations and restrictions dictated by different editorial policies set by media management and ownership.

Gunatilleke (2015) summed up the role played Sri Lanka's media in relation to religious freedom by analyzing how media carried minimum coverage on the 2014 Aluthgama riots: "The mainstream media did not cover the events of Aluthgama as they unfolded. On the day of the riots, the mainstream media published updates merely indicating that a 'tense situation' had arisen in the area. It thereafter failed to accurately report what had taken

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<sup>10</sup>Transcend Media Service: <https://www.transcend.org/tms/about-peace-journalism/1-what-is-peace-journalism/>

place. The State media in particular presented a distorted and highly sanitized version of the incident by claiming it was 'isolated' and was being exaggerated. Meanwhile, Keheliya Rambukwella, then Minister of Mass Communication and Information made a statement that was carried in the Daily News directing the media to 'act with responsibility'—also insinuating that the incident was being sensationalized. Privately owned newspapers such as the Island and the Daily Mirror presented very little information on the incident. In fact, the Island's editorial on 16 June 2014 insinuated that the blame lay with the Muslim community, as it claimed that participants at the BBS rally were attacked first. The mainstream media's version of events ultimately began to resemble quite closely the government's official version."

### **Social Media as an Alternative Platform for Communication, Information Collection and Dissemination**

The advent of social media as well as the interface of mainstream media and social media have opened up new opportunities as well as thrown in some tough challenges, too. The internet based social media has given more choice for people to choose from an incredibly vast array of media contents produced locally and globally. Unlike in the past, where the communication was one to many, social media is based on many-to-many communication form, enabling citizens to not just share their views on a particular media report, but also to actively create content that can be shared on social networks. Social media encourages all users to be citizen journalists by creating contents on things they experience and witness in their locales. Reflecting on the importance of journalists' access to social media networks during the anti-Muslim Aluthgama riots, Gunatilleke (2015) stated that social media emerged as an alternative channel of information and independent journalists took to Twitter and Facebook to report the unfolding events in Aluthgama in real time. "The extraordinary controls that the government exercised over the mainstream media did not appear to extend to social media. Independent journalists were freely sharing information and updates to produce a raw and unedited version of events as they unfolded. Such information was ultimately instrumental in generating public awareness of the Aluthgama riots. The government responded sharply to this phenomenon by attempting to discredit independent journalists who were using social media platforms to report on the incident."

## Hate Speech Propagation, Monitoring and Impact of Restrictions on Social Media by the State

There is a danger in curtailing the free flow of information and communication taking place via the internet based social media platforms as such a move can set precedent for further control and surveillance of citizens' communication tools and infrastructure by the government as was the case during the Digna anti-Muslim riots in March 2018. The government imposed a total ban on social media following the riots in Digana from 6 to 15 March 2018 stating that hate groups used social media networks to rally support from sympathizers. However, a large number of people still accessed social media sites using VPN (Wijeratne Y, March 2018). There is no doubt that hate groups will find loopholes and use social media for their hate speech propaganda activities, but as discussed in the first chapter of this document, under Sections 291 A and B of Sri Lanka's Penal Code, hate-speech can be penalized (Gunatilleke 2015). A few people were arrested<sup>11</sup> by the Criminal Investigation Department for propagating hate speech during Digana anti-Muslim riots. Furthermore, lifting the ban imposed on social media, a statement<sup>12</sup> issued by the President's Media Division stated that: "The government will continue to work together with Facebook to prevent hate speech and misuse of the platform. Anyone propagating hate speech on Facebook is liable under Sri Lankan law and prompt action will be taken as per Facebook's community standards. Both sides will continue to engage extensively to discuss these matters."

In a separate study on hate speech around the 2014 Grandpass and Aluthgama Anti-Muslim violence instigated mainly by extremist Buddhist groups, Sanjana Hattotuwa and Shilpa Samaratunge concluded: "Ultimately, there is no technical solution to what is a socio-political problem. Sri Lanka's culture of impunity and the breakdown in the rule of law is what affords the space for fascist groups like Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Ravaya, and Ravana Balakaya to say what they do and get away with it...What is evident is that even without new legislation looking at online domains and content, there are a range of legal remedies and frameworks to hold perpetrators of hate speech accountable for their violence, whether verbal or physical. The issue is not the non-existence of relevant legal frameworks, but their non-application or selective application. If the trend around hate speech online is to be truly stemmed, media literacy programmes aimed at students,

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<sup>11</sup>Mallawarachchi, A. "Hate Speech on Social Media Monitored" March 10, 2018 <http://www.dailynews.lk/2018/03/10/local/145112/hate-speech-social-media-monitored>

<sup>12</sup>Restrictions to Access Social Media Removed on the Instructions of President" March 15, 2018 Issued by the President Media Division <http://www.pmdnews.lk/restriction-to-access-social-media-removed-on-the-instructions-of-president/>

teachers, parents, lecturers, government officials, civil society, media consumers and citizens, in Sinhala and Tamil, over mobile friendly, freely accessible and engaging ways is required over the long-term.”



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*Irrespective of our external differences, we all end up becoming dust of the Earth. This is what we try to illustrate in our pooja everyday. If everyone understands that, we will have less conflicts to deal with. When a natural disaster happens, all communities get affected by it. So we have to understand these fundamentals. In Galle, religious leaders work together to create peace and unity among different groups. Buddhists visit our kovil and some of them have Hindu weddings. Even Muslims come to my kovil. I don't make a difference to anyone. Religious leaders have great potential among them to foster religious pluralism in our communities. They should work to spread solidarity and goodwill among people.*



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**Siva Siri Sivanesan Jayachandradeesan Kurukkal, Galle**

There is an onus on the government to take measures for stronger enforcement of laws pertinent to hate speech as hate speech and incitement to violence, particularly the demonization of other ethno-religious groups using language and symbols, will have a dangerous snowballing effect that could possibly lead to violence against the group targeted by hate speech and incitement. However, hate speech laws should not target political opponents and journalists who are critical of government policy and decisions. Gunatilleke (2015) posits that hate groups in Sri Lanka have been able to operate with impunity in the build up to episodic acute violence against religious minorities in Sri Lanka. “Thus, enforcing laws including the Penal Code and the ICCPR Act, and prosecuting individuals that engage in hate speech, will be important in preventing acute violence from occurring. However, such prosecution will need to take cognizance of both the intention and likelihood of such speech to cause discrimination, hostility or violence.” Gunatilleke added.

## Social Media as a Constructive Domain for the Promotion of Ethnoreligious Coexistence and Reconciliation

It is vital to have a great understanding of social media's constructive and destructive potential: its constructive potential refers to the space it creates for well-meaning people to engage in citizen journalism; its destructive potential is used and manipulated by individuals and groups with extremist, fascist and other harmful ideas to spread of false information, propaganda and hate speech. Nevertheless, it is a crucial platform where public discourses on the free exercise of religious freedom, beliefs and religious plurality or lack of it due to government repression or persecution by extremist and fascist groups can be held. And importantly, social media serves as a good infrastructure to build and consolidate content of peace journalism aimed at conflict resolution and ethno-religious plurality can be hosted and shared with hundreds and thousands of people via social networks.

There are already individuals and groups using social media to communicate and share content on ethno-religious plurality and reconciliation with individuals and groups via social networks. The prominent Buddhist monk with a large number of following, Galkande Dhammananda has a Facebook page where he regularly posts messages on religious plurality and reconciliation. During the Digana riots, he made an appeal for calm and peace via a video<sup>13</sup> that was widely shared on Facebook and Twitter. CARITAS Sri Lanka, National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya are some of the other Facebook pages where content on religious plurality and reconciliation are often posted on. The Catamaran<sup>14</sup> is a website where a group of independent journalists post their articles, videos and other content on ethnic and religious reconciliation. There are other social media networks and pages that discuss religious unity and plurality in Sri Lanka and journalists can report about them in their respective media or even produce content that can be shared on social media pages and amongst networks.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Prasad.Welikumbura/videos/10160177639520296/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://thecatamaran.org/>

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*People have deep-seated wounds associated with our country's war and other political incidents. We have to heal those wounds as a society. Religious leaders can play a big role in promoting inter-religious coexistence. We see each other as enemies, there has to be a better understanding between different religious groups. Political leaders also should take decisions against hate speech and incitement. And I don't see any efforts by the media to promote coexistence among different religious groups. They put graphic images that incite hatred, causing further upset to wounded minds. The State should take action against unethical media practices without infringing on media freedom. There has to be some kind of a monitoring system in place. Hate speech must be prevented. Our education system has to be changed to suit the needs of our diverse society. Religious leaders must also understand that we cannot afford to allow more bloodshed in our country. Our role is to serve all communities, not just our own followers and religious leaders should be committed to promoting good values and inter-faith harmony.*

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## Contact Details of a Few Related Institutions (In the Alphabetical Order):

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2. Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka  
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+9411 2505582 | Fax: +9411 2505591  
Email: sechrsl@gmail.com
3. Legal Aid Commission of Sri Lanka  
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4. Ministry of Buddhasasana & Wayamba  
Development  
135, Sreemath Anagarika Dharmapala  
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5. Ministry of Housing, Construction and  
Cultural Affairs  
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6. Ministry of Mass Media  
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Email: info@media.gov.lk
7. Ministry of National Integration, Official  
Languages, Social Progress and Hindu  
Religious Affairs  
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Email: info@mncdol.gov.lk
8. Ministry of Postal Services & Muslim  
Religious Affairs  
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Email: min.info@slpost.lk
9. Ministry of Tourism Development, Wildlife  
and Christian Religious Affairs  
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10. Right to Information Commission  
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11. Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation  
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