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HINDUISM AND ISLAM IN POST-INDEPENDENCE SRI LANKA*

K. M. DE SILVA

The interaction between religion and politics, a notable feature of early twentieth century Sri Lanka was sustained throughout the agitation for independence and indeed gathered momentum since independence. Its impact on the balance of religious forces has been far-reaching and deeply significant. The Sinhalese-Buddhist majority is in firm control in most spheres of life, and the position of the religions of the ethnic minorities—Hinduism and Islam—must be reviewed in this context. Two points need special mention: there has been much less of an atmosphere of confrontation in the relations between Buddhism and Islam in recent times than between the former and Hinduism. Nevertheless—and this is the second point—Buddhist-Hindu rivalry has been much less significant as a point of contention between the Sinhalese and the Tamils than ethnicity and language. In this sense it affords a striking contrast to the situation in pre-independence British India where “communalism” was often defined largely in terms of the deep-rooted hostility to each other of religious communities. The political aspects of the confrontation between the Sinhalese and Tamils are reviewed elsewhere in this volume, and in this chapter our concern is limited to a brief analysis of the interaction between Buddhism and Hinduism—the religious facet of the complex theme of the tension between Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms—and the interaction of the Sinhalese and the adherents of Islam.

Hinduism*

The recovery of Hinduism from the pervasive pressures of an aggressive Christianity had begun a whole generation earlier than that of Buddhism. In a sense Hinduism was in a more advantageous position from the point of view of resistance to missionary encroachment in that it was possible to draw on the tremendous resources of Hinduism in India. Nevertheless in the first half of the 19th century—and for that matter even later—the missionary organizations were much stronger in Jaffna and its environs than in most other parts of the island.

* Very few published works of any substance or quality on the minority religions of Sri Lanka have appeared recently. The Revd. James Cartman's work on *Hinduism in Ceylon* (Colombo 1957) is still the only monograph of any substantial value on the subject, while there has not been a single monograph or book on Islam in Sri Lanka.

† I am greatly indebted to my colleague Dr. S. Pathmanathan for all his help in gathering material for this section of the present chapter.

The leadership in the Hindu recovery in Sri Lanka was given by Arumuga Navalar¹ and the structure of Hindu society in contemporary Sri Lanka bears his imprint to a remarkable extent in its strength and flaws alike. The two main points of emphasis in his programme of revival were: a concern to prevent conversions of Hindus to Christianity, and secondly to preserve the orthodox form of Saivism.

In opposition to the Christian missionary groups entrenched in the Tamil areas of the country he built up a network of Hindu schools for imparting religious and secular education. His work in this sphere was consolidated and expanded by eminent Hindu leaders of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, most notably Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan. The *Saiva Paripālana Sabhai* (established by Navalar) and the Hindu College Board of Management eventually administered more than 150 schools (both primary and secondary). The large majority of these were taken over by the state in the early 1960's.

The preservation of the orthodox form of Saivism had two aspects: the renovation and restoration of Hindu temples, and the publication of Saivite religious texts, in both of which Navalar was the pioneer.

Hinduism had suffered much greater damage at the hands of Christianity than Buddhism, and nearly all the Hindu temples in the Jaffna peninsula and the littoral had been destroyed by the Portuguese and the Dutch, and those that had survived were in a state of decay and delapidation in the nineteenth century. The Hindu temples of Sri Lanka, unlike those in India, are of modest proportions and have rather slender resources for their maintenance, due partly at least to the fact that the renovation and re-establishment of the temples—often financed by wealthy Sri Lanka Tamils—was not followed by a restoration of the lands that had belonged to them in pre-colonial times. The rehabilitation of Hindu temples has been continued in contemporary Sri Lanka and is a prominent feature in Hindu life in all parts of the island.

Among the Hindus the village or local temple has been and still continues to be the centre of cultural activity with the annual festival the most notable religious and cultural event of the year. While in recent times secular entertainment such as the cinema has tended to become a rival attraction to the cultural activities of the temples, the increasing popularity of the practice of holding wedding ceremonies in temples has undoubtedly helped to sustain the position of the temples as the predominant centre of cultural activity in the Hindu villages.

Hindus in Sri Lanka today are, with the exception of a few North Indian traders in Colombo, Saivites belonging to the Siddhantha school of Saivism which is dominant in South India. Perhaps Navalar's greatest contribution to the recovery of Hinduism was the publication of a large number of Saivite religious texts which have helped substantially in preserving the ideals and heritage of the Hindus in Sri Lanka primarily, and India as well. Some of these publications are still in use as texts for religious instruction in schools.

1. Despite the massive contribution made by Navalar to the Hindu revival in Sri Lanka there has been very little by way of scholarly work on the man and his career.

There have been no new developments or controversies in doctrinal matters in Sri Lanka Hinduism in recent times.

The crucial flaw in Navalar's work—and this became evident in the years after independence—was that he was not a social reformer. The Hindu revivalist movement which he led strengthened orthodoxy and did little to soften the rigours of the Hindu caste system, which unlike its Sinhalese counterpart had not merely a social sanction, but a religious one as well, and untouchability virtually non-existent among the Sinhalese was very much a problem in Hindu society in Jaffna. The *vellēlas* among the Hindus are the equivalent of the *goyigama* among the Sinhalese, and like the latter they are not a thin upper crust, but a substantial section if not a majority of the Hindus.² They have used the sanctions of Saivite orthodoxy to maintain their caste privileges at the expense of those in the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. Largely because the Harijan communities were themselves divided on the basis of caste and did not have any organization to mobilise their resources effectively for bargaining for their rights, the potential, if not latent, tensions in this situation did not emerge still after independence, and after the mid-nineteen fifties.

The attitude of the Buddhist Sinhalese to the Hindus has been essentially ambivalent. Religious sentiment should have drawn them together because of the traditional links between the two religions in Sri Lanka society. If religion was not a divisive factor, ethnic politics was. After 1956 there was always an undercurrent of hostility between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. When the latter sought to rouse public opinion (especially international opinion) against the Sinhalese majority their campaign for justice was vitiated by the orthodox Hindu resistance to the amelioration of the conditions of the Harijans. Sinhalese politicians and Buddhist activists diverted attention to the social evils of untouchability to the great embarrassment of the Tamils.

There has been a positive improvement in the position of the Harijans in recent times but it would be unfair to attribute this to Sinhalese solicitude on their behalf, for that concern was never disinterested. It was largely owing to the efforts of the Tamil political leadership itself that a movement for the removal of the disabilities suffered by the Harijans was initiated, and long before Sinhalese politicians and Buddhist activists interested themselves in the problem.³ Substantial progress has been made since 1955: cafes and restaurants in urban areas (particularly) have permitted entry to Harijans; and more importantly—despite occasional and well-publicised efforts at resistance—one by one the large temples have opened their doors to them. Nevertheless there are still some areas in which the temple entry movement and the Harijan campaign for equality have not succeeded.

2. On the caste structure in the Tamil areas of the north Sri Lanka see, M. Banks, 'Caste in Jaffna' in ed. E. R. Leach, *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*. Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology No. 2 (1960) pp. 61-77.

3. The Federal Party's first convention in 1951 had a list of basic aims which included "the regeneration and unification of the Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon by the removal of all forms of social inequalities and injustices, in particular that of untouchability wherever it exists". quoted in R. N. Kearney, *Communalism and language in the politics of Ceylon* (Duke University Press, 1967), p. 100.

Islam

In contrast to Hinduism and Christianity, Islam has had a record of harmonious relations with the Buddhist Sinhalese both in the coastal areas and in the Kandyan region. In the latter region Muslims had been afforded a refuge against the vigorous hostility of the Portuguese and the harassment of the Dutch. There they had been integrated into Kandyan society though they retained, nevertheless, their religious and cultural identity. In the early years of British rule the position of the Muslims of Sri Lanka improved quite considerably and they became in many ways a privileged group.

In the nineteenth century, like the Buddhists and Hindus, the Muslims too faced the challenge of Protestant Christianity, but to a much greater extent than both the former the Muslims were notable for a refusal to succumb to the blandishments of Christianity. The resistance to conversion to Christianity persisted throughout the nineteenth century but the survival of Islam in Sri Lanka had been secured in a sense at the expense of the social and economic advancement of the Muslims. Since the education provided in the schools was primarily an English education there was among the Muslims of Sri Lanka an attitude (natural to a conservative and cohesive community) of rejecting it because of the presumed danger of the impact of a foreign culture on Islam. Besides education was not only in English but also largely Christian in content, and for that reason they were not prepared to endanger the faith of their children even if it meant sacrificing the material benefits that an English education brought. This manifestation of their zeal for their ancestral faith had rather regrettable consequences, and by the third quarter of the nineteenth century the more enlightened Muslim leaders were profoundly disturbed to find their community sunk in ignorance and apathy, parochial in outlook and grossly materialistic.

The arresting of the decline in vitality of the Muslim community has been associated for long with the "charisma" of Arabi Pasha⁴ an Egyptian exiled to Ceylon, who jolted them out of their conservative seclusion. But much more important were the foresight and tactical skill of a local Muslim leader—M. C. Siddi Lebbe a lawyer by profession and social worker by inclination—who brought the Muslim community to the point of accepting the need for a change of outlook. Like Arumuga Navalar, Sidde Lebbe saw the supreme importance of education as a means to the regeneration of his community. The revitalising process initiated during this phase continued during the first half of the twentieth century.

Like every other ethnic and religious group in the country the Muslims found themselves called upon to define their attitude to the agitation for the transfer of power. The Sinhalese-Muslim riots of 1915⁵ had been a traumatic experience for the latter, and this strengthened the trend towards collaboration with the British which was, in any case, quite strong among the Muslim leaders. There were occasional misgivings

4. Arabi Pasha, the leader of the abortive uprising against the Western powers in Egypt in 1882 spent 19 years of his life (from 1883 to 1901) as an exile in Sri Lanka.
5. For discussion of the riots of 1915 and their historical significance see, 'The 1915 Riots in Ceylon: A Symposium'. *Journal of Asian Studies* XXIX (2) 1970 pp. 219-266.

about this policy such as, for instance, after the First World War when the Khilafat⁶ movement in India had its repercussions among the Muslims in Sri Lanka as well, but the local version of it never developed the positively anti-British tone that it had in India and the Sri Lanka Muslims did not turn away from the traditional policy of association with the imperial power. Indeed, throughout the next two decades the Muslims formed part of a phalanx of minorities under Tamil leadership which accepted the need for collaboration with the British in return for the protection and consolidation of the rights of minorities as the price for accepting the transfer of power. It was not till the early nineteen forties on the eve of the transfer of power that the Muslims broke away from them to support the Sinhalese leaders in their political campaigns for independence.

This policy of co-operation with the government of the day has been pursued by the Muslims after independence as well. And in this too they were, for the most part a contrast to the Hindus and Tamils in general. There was no support from them for the agitation for a federal political structure; on the contrary they have been among the most vociferous critics of such a move.

What they have attempted to do is to safeguard, sustain and advance their distinctive cultural identity. They have sought and obtained state support for this in two distinct fields: the consolidation and recognition of the personal laws of the Muslims; and in education. Here again, and more especially with regard to the former it was a trend which began from the earliest years of British rule.

The Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Ordinance 27 of 1929 (operative from 1937) set up a system of domestic relations courts presided over by Muslim judges (*quazis*) and explicitly recognized the pure Muslim law of marriage and divorce; and the same process may be observed in respect of inheritance, in the Muslim Intestate Succession and Wakfs Ordinance of 1931. The provision of the latter Ordinance relating to Muslim charitable trusts (Wakfs) was superseded by the Muslim Mosques and Charitable Trusts or Wakfs Act 51 of 1956, while the Ordinance of 1929 was repealed by the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act 13 of 1951 (operative from 1954) which enhanced the powers of the *quazis* who were given an exclusive jurisdiction in respect of marriages and divorces, and the status and mutual rights and obligations of the parties concerned. The Wakfs Act of 1956 established a separate government department with a purely Muslim Executive Board. The personal law of the Muslims have been preserved under the Republican Constitution of Sri Lanka.

It was in education that the greatest gains have been made, and this was especially so after 1956. The list of concessions won by the Muslims is remarkable. Special government Training Colleges have been set up for the Muslims. Arabic is taught in government schools as a language to Muslim pupils by qualified *moulavis*, appointed by the Ministry of Education and paid by the state. Muslim children had the right (till 1974) to pursue their studies in any one of the three language media—Sinhalese, Tamil or English—a privilege no other group in the country enjoyed. A

6. A Muslim movement to preserve the Turkish *khalifah* (*caliph*).

new category of government Muslim schools has been established apparently in recognition of the cultural individuality of Muslims as distinct from the Tamils whose language is the home language of the great majority of Sri Lanka Muslims. The usual practice had been to categorise schools on the basis of language of instruction in them and the Muslims formed part of the Tamil-speaking school population. In the new 'Muslim' schools the sessions and vacations are determined by the special requirements of the Muslim population. The establishment and expansion of these schools, it must be emphasised, vitiates the principle of non-sectarian state education which has been the declared policy of the government since 1960.

The concessions made to the Muslim community have been introduced partly at least in recognition of the fact that they lagged behind the other ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lanka in education. Thus some special assistance from the state may be justified as a temporary measure, even though the handicaps they suffered from were, as we have seen, largely self-inflicted. But the sensitivity to the special Muslim identity has no doubt been strengthened by the fact that a Muslim has been Minister of Education for over eight years in the period 1960 to 1974. And more importantly some Sinhalese politicians have not been disinclined to use the resources of the state to build up the Muslims as a counterweight to the Tamil community in a game of checks and balances which is an intrinsic element in the process of government in a plural society—*divide et impera*. This has been facilitated by the fact that the Muslims, in striking contrast to the Tamils, have no distinct political parties of their own contesting seats to Parliament in competition with, if not in opposition to, the main national political parties. Instead their political organizations work in association with and as adjuncts of the latter. The result is that the Muslim minority though numerically much smaller than the Tamils have greater bargaining powers electorally than their numbers warrant.

One of the benefits they have won through their electoral influence is the strong pro-Arab and anti-Israeli tilt in Sri Lanka's foreign policy. No doubt this fits in well with the ideological commitments of the SLFP and its left-wing allies, but it is significant that they have succeeded in obtaining "national" support for sectional interests in foreign policy, in contrast to the Tamils and Roman Catholics whose foreign connections and interests, real or alleged, have made them suspect to the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. These achievements are a tribute to the political acumen of the Muslim leadership and the restraint and moderation they have demonstrated in the pursuit of their objectives. But their greatest tests lie ahead of them, in handling the increasing prestige and influence that will devolve upon them in the context of the Arab resurgence and the unprecedented financial strength of the oil-producing states.