14

Cosmology, Presidentialism and J.R. Jayewardene's Constitutional Imaginary

Roshan de Silva Wijeyeratne[1]

[1] This is an edited version of R. de Silva Wijeyeratne (2014) ***Nation, Constitutionalism and Buddhism in Sri Lanka*** (London: Routledge): Ch.8. I am grateful to Routledge for permission to publish a version of Chapter 8 in this collection.

Introduction

The background to the return to power of the United National Party (UNP) in 1977 was the slow but steady disintegration of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led United Front government in the mid-1970s. First, in 1975, the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) was expelled from the coalition and by the end of 1976 the breach between the SLFP and Communist Party (CP) was irrevocable. Cynically, the SLFP tried to negotiate a deal with an increasingly frail Chelvanayakam and Federal Party (FP) to extend the life of parliament on condition that the government address the discrimination that confronted the Tamils. When Chelvanayakam died in March 1977, the negotiations came to an end. In the election of July 1977, the UNP under J.R. Jayewardene achieved a landslide victory, decimating the SLFP and leaving the LSSP and CP with no parliamentary representation. The TULF, under its new leader Appapillai Amirthalingam, emerged as the official opposition – one committed to Eelam.

With respect to Tamil nationalism, in 1975, the Tamil United Front changed its name to the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), which in May 1976 adopted the Vaddukodai resolution committing the TULF to the establishment of a Tamil State of Eelam. The territory of the new state was composed of the Northern and Eastern Provinces. This was contentious, given that the Jaffna kingdom in its most expansive period extended down the north-west coast, but not the north-east coast.[2] As a reactive form of nationalism, the Tamil variant was no less prone to phantasms than its Sinhalese Buddhist interlocutor, but these were phantasms driven by the state's desire to destroy the contiguity of Tamil habitation between the Northern and Eastern Provinces, a process that intensified under the Jayewardene regime.[3] Like its predecessors, the new government was at ease with invoking an Asokan aesthetic.

---

[2] A.J. Wilson (1994) ***S.J.V. Chelvanayakam and the Crisis of Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*** (London: Hurst): pp.125–129; K.M. de Silva (1986) ***Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multi Ethnic Societies: Sri Lanka, 1880-1985*** (Lanham, MD: University Press of America): pp.403–406.

[3] See <http://www.uthr.org/Reports/Report11/appendix4.htm> accessed 20th November 2011.

UNP Rule, Buddhist Righteousness and Authoritarianism

In the course of the 1977 general election Jayewardene invoked the Buddhist imaginary. His purpose was to initiate a period of governance according to the principles of *sādacharaya* (virtue), echoing the values of a righteous Buddhist king in the Asokan mould.[4] Consistent with the principles of modernist Buddhism, the new government set out to 'assist the *sāsana* by fostering moral behaviour on an individual basis'.[5] This was also the perfect ontological ground for the liberal economics of the regime – throwing open the doors to foreign investment and all manner of market driven excess of which the new regime would be significant architects. In stressing the moral conduct of the Sinhalese individual, this was a significant departure from the emphasis on the Sinhalese national collective that was associated with the Bandaranaike's and the SLFP. That said Jayewardene's reliance on Asokan metaphors ensued that the Sinhalese collective was never far from his horizon – he would prove adept at mediating market-driven individualism with the claims of the Sinhalese Buddhist collective.

Jayewardene exploited 'popular feeling for Buddhist moral leadership'[6] in the shadow of the Sirimavo Bandaranaike government's breach of democratic norms. This found expression in a set of practices that refracted older Asokan rituals that brought the centre, periphery and semi-periphery into a unified relation – unity being a virtuous ideal in Buddhist historiography. Thus, in redefining the administrative districts of the island, Jayewardene had saplings from the sacred bo tree in Ānuradhapura 'planted in the administrative capitals of the island's nine provinces'.[7] The meaning generated by such action was conditioned by the same ontological ground that oriented the Buddha's earlier act of claiming the island for the dhamma, with

[4] S. Kemper (1991) ***The Presence of the Past: Chronicles, Politics and Culture in Sinhala Life*** (New York: Cornell UP): pp.167–168; S.J. Tambiah (1976) ***World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*** (Cambridge: CUP): pp.159–178.
[5] Kemper (1991): p.166.
[6] Ibid (1991): p.171.
[7] Ibid.

the past providing an insight into living well in the future. Its encompassing logic (which would have been received differently in the Tamil-dominated north-east of the island) was echoed in his decision to move parliament from Colombo to Jayawardhanapura in Kōttē, which was close to the centre of power during the time of the Kōttē kingdom.

Jayewardene fashioned himself as a Sinhalese Buddhist monarch in a line that went back 2500 years to Vijaya. In engaging a set of practices that refracted the hierarchical logic of the *Asokan Persona*, Jayewardene's initial steps in government were designed to create a righteous society (*dharmista samājaya*)[8].[9] This was particularly marked in relation to his revival of an agricultural ceremony that harked back to pre-European Buddhist kings. The ceremony itself entailed entering a rice field 'behind a pair of bullocks to plow the first furrow of the sowing season – that gave expression to the king's involvement'[10] in paddy cultivation. His gesture was consistent with earlier UNP prime ministers who had made an ideological elision between their agricultural policies and the hydraulic culture propagated by Buddhist kings in the pre-Kandyan period.[11] Jeyewardene thoroughly identified with the monarchical role that such a performance sought to refract and anticipated the drift towards authoritarianism that Jayewardene's rule in the 1980s would embody.

On becoming prime minister, Jayewardene enacted his fidelity to the motivating hierarchy of the *Asokan Persona* when he spoke from the octagonal pavilion (*pattirippuva*) of the Daladā Māligāva, looking down on the gathered crowd and stating that his

---

[8] M. Roberts (1994) ***Exploring Confrontation: Sri Lanka – Politics, Culture, and History*** (Geneva: Harwood): pp.111–115; see also A. Abeysekara (2002) ***Colors of the Robe*** (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press): pp.93–94.

[9] The Asokan Persona signals a group of hierarchical cultural and ritual practices that in both precolonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka inform the imaginary of the state and the diverse ethno-religious relationships that the state institutes. In the pre-British period, the Asokan Persona was transmitted through the all--encompassing logic of Buddhist kingship. The Pāli chronicles confirm the emergence and consolidation of a Sinhalese Buddhist consciousness.

[10] Kemper (1991): p.172.

[11] Ibid: p.164–165.

government 'would usher in an age of peace'.[12] In a discursive move that bore no relation to the historical record (but one thoroughly consistent with the content of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism), he stressed 'continuity with the precolonial past'.[13] He mischievously noted that:

> "When the country enjoyed freedom it is from here the kings addressed the people. Those who became Prime Minister with your assistance spoke from here …"[14]

King Śrī Vikrama Rājasinha had built the *pattirippuwa* in 'order to watch spectacles from an elevated height'[15], but he was the only monarch to have spoken from it, and Jayewardene was the first elected leader to do so. Like his predecessors, Jayewardene was at ease when invoking the hierarchical ritual structure of the *Asokan Persona*. It shared an ontological ground that conditioned not just Sinhalese Buddhist myth, but also the Sinhalese Buddhist world of the everyday. However, the medium of the bureaucratic state ensured that the hierarchical rituals of the *Asokan Persona* that Jayewardene mimicked were subject to a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist revaluation. The institutional reforms of both Bandaranaikes ensured that the state's reflexive mode of being was one motivated by a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist cultural milieu. It was one that Jayewardene would proceed to exploit it in his monarchical persona.

While Jayewardene remained hostile to monkish political activism, his cultivated persona as an Asokan king was challenged in 1977 when lay Buddhist activists asked him to transform the semi-theocratic republic into a fully fledged Buddhist republic. However, Jayewardene's free-market ethos extended to a reluctance towards instituting a state-sanctioned religion. He responded by passing on the burden for the creation of a *dharmista samājaya* to an expanded Ministry of Cultural Affairs and by creating a Department of Buddhist Affairs that was to take over responsibility for the *sāsana*. Consistent with his free-market

[12] Ibid: p.173.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Cited in ibid: pp.173–174; see also Roberts (1994): p.138.
[15] Kemper (1991): p.173.

instincts, Jayewardene said that while the state would assist Buddhist organisations in proselytising the dhamma, the creation of a *dharmista* society depended more on 'individuals acting as individual moral agents',[16] than on legislation. Maximising the potential for individual Buddhist morality, the new Minister for Cultural Affairs, E.L.B. Hurulle, set out to revive Sinhalese Buddhist civilisation in rural Sri Lanka. He appeared oblivious to the Buddhist modernist revival all around him, although such a narrative had symbolic purchase given the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist capture of the rural heartland since Dharmapala had first invoked its centrality in the nineteenth century. At the core of Hurulle's Buddhist imaginary was the resurrection of an Asokan practice, albeit in a thoroughly modernist vein: the 'appointment of cultural officers in each electorate to foster culture at the village level'.[17]

Jayewardene's modernist imperative had to find a way to compensate for his hostility towards the Rahulite monks who continued to dominate the public persona of the Sangha. His hostility towards political *bhikkhus* was long-standing – he had in 1982 spoken out against the lay and monk activists of the Sinhala Bala Mandalaya, which echoing Dharmapala, stressed the importance of Sinhalese Buddhist unity along racial, religious and territorial lines. However, his opposition was not based on sensitivity towards the minorities, but on a modernist 'conception of Buddhism as a religion of individual responsibility'.[18] It was a Dharmapalite gesture that shifted Buddhism's ontological concerns to a much more mundane epistemological terrain concerned with crude economic utility. However, as an Asokan-style monarch, he mollified the suspicions of Buddhist activists by increasing the level of state patronage to the public display of Buddhist ritual, and the restoration of Buddhist 'sacred' sites, as well as initiating an extension of the *Mahāvamsa* – all practices that had an ontological ground, but which within the idiom of modernity became a vehicle for the consolidation of a Sinhalese Buddhist popular history cum sovereignty.[19]

[16] Ibid: p.176.
[17] Ibid: p.175.
[18] Ibid: p.178.
[19] Ibid: pp.179–180.

Jayewardene made public funds available for the task of extending the *Mahāvamsa*. Initially in charge of the project was Nandadeva Wijesekera, a former chair of the Official Languages Department. Under Wijesekera's stewardship, the *Mahāvamsa, Nutana Yūgaya* (new *Mahāvamsa*) became an ideological vehicle to 'celebrate the historical career of the Sinhala people and their culture'.[20] It also enabled the UNP, a party that sporadically had opposed the Sinhalisation of the state since the 1950s, the opportunity to fashion a 'Buddhist identity for itself'[21], a project that owed everything to the modernist reimagination of both Sinhalese Buddhist historiography and the rituals that characterised the *Asokan Persona*. The result was an over-determined reproduction of the hierarchical categories of the *Asokan Persona* that, oriented by the hierarchical (but one possessive of a fragmenting aspect) cosmic order, was now imagined through the medium of a unitary state.

The new *Mahāvamsa* was divided into two volumes, the first covering the period from 1935 to1956, the year of Bandaranaike's election victory. The second would cover events between 1956 and 1978, the year in which the second republican constitution was promulgated. Unlike the *Mahāvamsa-Cūlavamsa* proper, the focus of this new extension was significantly different – not so much an ontologically grounded account of Buddhist kingship, polity and society, but rather one whose authorising ground was epistemic. Its account, written in an accessible form of Sinhala (and not Pāli), was intended to communicate to the Sinhala-speaking laity a matter-of-fact account of how developments in Sinhala literature, music, dance and architecture in the years between 1935 and 1978 had contributed to both the renaissance and 'continuity of Buddhist civilisation'[22] among the Sinhalese people.

When Volume 1 was published in May 1987, its epistemic ground was summed up in the introduction as follows: 'history should be understood by recognising that the nation's faith in religion

[20] Ibid: p.180.
[21] Ibid: p.181.
[22] Ibid: p.186.

[Buddhism] is its context (*pasubima*).[23] The introduction speaks of a Buddhist 'religion' in the reductionist terms that came to dominate the Orientalist imaginary – it was a version that bore no relation to the diversity of *dharmaśāstric* practices that early Buddhism mediated.[24] It is only within this epistemological horizon that we can understand the author's introductory observation that the years since independence have witnessed a drive 'to recover the lost rights of the cultural heritage of the Sinhala Buddhists'.[25] Its demeanour is nationalist, transferring the Sinhalese Buddhist nation's plot on to the 'citizens and leaders of the new nation – who played a role in reclaiming the cultural heritage of Sinhala Buddhists'.[26] Its audience was the Sinhalese Buddhist laity, who in the new *Mahāvamsa* had replaced 'kings and colonial governors as the agents of Sinhala history'.[27] As with all ideological projects, there was an elision of past and present – about how the imaginary of the Sinhalese Buddhist present spoke to that of the past, about how Sinhalese Buddhists should *see their world*.[28] [29]

The ideological elision of past and present continued to provide symbolic capital to other dimensions of government policy. That Jayewardene imagined himself an Asokan[30] monarch lent itself within the horizon of the bureaucratic state to further acts of centralisation as evoked in the promulgation of the second republican constitution in 1978. The constitution was drafted by a Parliamentary Select Committee, in which the TULF, given its mandate to negotiate the terms of a separate state, refused to

---

[23] Ibid: p.188.
[24] P. Olivelle, '*Dharmasastra: A Textual History*' in T. Lubin, D.R. Davis Jr. & J.K. Krishnan (Eds.) (2010) ***Hinduism and Law: An Introduction*** (New York: CUP): pp.31–57.
[25] Kemper (1991): p.188.
[26] Ibid: p.189.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid: p.191–193.
[29] Jayewardene spent much time facilitating the emergence of an avowedly apolitical Buddhism that delegitimized monkish political activism through the establishment of a Buddhist and Pāli University, which would train monks to propagate the dhamma both locally and overseas. This short-lived act of institutionalized repression, gave way in the mid-1980s to over-determined monkish support for the JVP. Abeysekara (2002): pp.97–104.
[30] Abeysekara (2002): p.93.

participate.[31] The new constitution combined the Westminster system of cabinet government with a centralised Gaullist styled executive-presidency.[32] While the 1978 Constitution obviated the immediacy of the anti-Tamil discrimination that had being placed on the statute book by SLFP-led governments, it became the screen for Jayewardene's Asokan pretensions.

The 1978 Constitution was full of contradictory imperatives, while essentially centralising, it also ameliorated the institutionalised anti-Tamil discrimination put in place by earlier SLFP-led governments.[33] Many of these gestures however were symbolic, as far as the position of the Tamil language was concerned, it still remained fundamentally subordinate to Sinhala as per the onus of the State to promote, preserve and protect Sinhala. The Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act was incorporated into the Constitution, thus ensuring that ordinary legislation and regulations under delegated legislation could not be invoked to do further injury to the use of Tamil in judicial, administrative and public matters. But as with the passage of the Tamil Language Regulations in 1966, the problem was one of enforcement, with the Sinhalese higher bureaucracy showing little enthusiasm towards implementing what had, under the 1978 Constitution, become a *de facto* parity of status between Sinhala and Tamil.[34] However, in what appeared an advance on the existing status, the provisions on language (Chapter IV) were declared justiciable under Article 126(1) of the constitution.[35]

---

[31] The 1978 Constitution was supported by some Tamil political leaders in the belief that an executive president could insulate him/herself from the pressure of Sinhalese nationalists and hence arrive at a lasting political settlement: de Silva (1986): pp.257-261, 403–406.

[32] C.R. de Silva, '*The Constitution of the Second Republic of Sri Lanka (1978) and Its Significance*' (1979) ***The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*** 17(2): pp.192–209.

[33] In a significant conciliatory gesture, the new regime reversed the discriminatory university admissions policy that had been in force under the UF government. de Silva (1986): pp.306–311.

[34] de Silva (1986): pp.296–300.

[35] Fundamental Rights (Chapter III) under the constitution are justiciable (Article 17). However, the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court is so limited as to render the fundamental rights provisions of the constitution 'largely illusory'. International Crisis Group (2009) ***Sri Lanka's Judiciary: Politicised Courts, Compromised Rights*** (Brussels: ICG): p.9, such that between 1978-1987 there was only one petition to the Supreme Court complaining of a breach of the language provisions,

The limited protection the constitution guaranteed to the Tamil language failed to take account that the axis on which constitutional Tamil nationalism turned had moved on from language to an emphasis on radical autonomy to the north-east of the island, as Tamil separatist groups increasingly circumscribed the policy options of the TULF.[36] The constitution provided for a hierarchical model of government, guaranteeing the president (under Articles 42–61) an extraordinary level of power in relation to the executive (including the prime minister, the cabinet and the Public Service Commission, which was to have overall responsibility for the public service) and judicial (Articles 105–117) branches of government.[37] However, it was the logic of Jayewardene's performative mode as president that made possible a link between the constitution's hierarchical *telos* and the ordering/reordering capacity of violence directed at those who would disorder the state's logic of power – the arrangement of difference 'in hierarchical unity'.[38] Like an Asokan monarch, Jayewardene encompassed all before him, with the centralisation of power in the president's office refracting the hierarchical logic of the *Asokan Persona*; mediated through the bureaucratic state, this rendered ever more authoritarian possibilities imaginable.[39]

Jayewardene's approach thus made concessions on the spatial organisation of the state near impossible to countenance. Tamil nationalist politics was taking a violent turn as the LTTE and other groups targeted the institutions of the state, which entailed targeting Sinhalese public servants – particularly in the north. The TULF was increasingly in the position of the tail wagging the LTTE dog, and Jayewardene – like a demonically possessed being

---

ibid: pp.16–22. Furthermore, an incumbent president is immune from judicial review: International Crisis Group (2010) *War Crimes in Sri Lanka*, Asia Report No.191 (Brussels: ICG).

[36] de Silva (1986): pp.327–331.

[37] The reconstitution of the Public Service Commission under the 1978 Constitution did not facilitate the re-emergence of the principle of impartiality in the appointments process to the public service.

[38] B. Kapferer (1997) ***The Feast of the Sorcerer: Practices of Consciousness and Power*** (Chicago: Chicago UP): p.172.

[39] The assault on judicial independence was born of the intolerance to 'alternative centres of political power'. ICG (2009): p.4; R. Hoole (2001) ***Sri Lanka: The Arrogance of Power*** (Colombo: University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna)): pp.87-90.

– faced encompassment by both the greater demonic force of the Tamil margin and the seemingly beneficent force of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist opposition to what they portrayed as a policy of appeasement to Tamil separatism.

Jayewardene's response was contradictory. On the one hand, he initiated legislation to ban the LTTE, requesting parliament to pass what would become the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act (PTA).[40] On the other, he appointed a Presidential Commission to explore the possibility of introducing a measure of devolution to address the Tamil demand for administrative autonomy to the north-east. The result was the passage of the District Development Councils Act 1980. It was passed in the face of opposition from the SLFP and Buddhist activists. But, fearful of the devolutionary potential granted to these councils (and twenty-four councils were planned), their powers in the areas of rural development, education, employment, health services, housing, and land use and settlement were rigidly curtailed by the centre through a District Minister (appointed by the president), who would enforce the will of Colombo. The District Minister would provisionally act as a counter to the performative consequences of such autonomy. In practice District Councils were to function as an advisory body to the District Minister.[41]

As the election approached, and following the murder of three Sinhalese policemen in Jaffna, Sinhalese paramilitaries set fire to Jaffna Library in May 1981, thus destroying the most significant Tamil literary archive in the island.[42] When the elections were held in June 1981, the TULF became the largest party in the Tamil-dominated districts of the north-east. However, the District Development Councils failed in their intended purpose – Tamil autonomy – because of a failure to transfer adequate financial resources from the centre and the failure of the cabinet to delegate 'powers, duties, and functions to the District Minister'.[43] While the delegation of these powers was made in September

[40] The anti-terror legislation (renewed every year since 1979) has proved relatively ineffective, dealing with the symptoms rather than the causes of Tamil separatism.
[41] A.J. Wilson (1988) ***The Break-Up of Sri Lanka*** (London: Hurst): p.359.
[42] de Silva (1986): pp.332–333.
[43] Ibid: p.317.

1982, as late as May 1983 there had been a failure to inform the District Councils of the manner in which delegated functions were to be carried out. The good intentions of the TULF were undone by the centralising logic of the state.

Outside parliament, Buddhist activists mobilised against the UNP regime. The free-market agenda pursued by the UNP provoked Labuduwe Siridhamma, an SLFP-aligned monk, to accuse Jayewardene of creating an *unrighteous society*, the opposite of what Jayewardene had set out to create. Buddhist activists were adept at turning Jayewardene's invocation of Buddhist tropes against him.[44] Moral decline came to be embodied in the 'emigration of Buddhist women as domestic servants to the Middle East'.[45] The discursive terrain of *unrighteousness* expanded when in 1982 Labuduwe Siridhamma called Jayewardene a 'traitor' to the Sinhalese Buddhist nation – a trope that would soon be adopted by the JVP against the UNP. In the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist imaginary, Jayewardene increasingly was manifesting his disordering demonic potential – beneficent transformation was imminent in his violent encounter with the Tamils.[46]

Far from being a traitor, the UNP was consolidating a policy agenda initiated by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. In the Eastern Province, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist phantasms were being acted on. Economic development was pursued with a view towards ethnically cleansing the Tamils and Muslims from Trincomalee District in particular.[47] The state's encroachment on to Tamil land and the marginalisation of Tamil labour in the state-owned corporations in the east were a prelude to the riots in Colombo that would soon follow.

---

[44] Initially, this charge against Jayewardene's unrighteousness was framed in terms of a critique of the market reforms pursued by the Finance Minister.
[45] Abeysekara (2002): p.209.
[46] Jayewardene had irked Sinhalese nationalists when in 1979 he said that, in keeping with Buddhist principles, he did not 'differentiate between saying that this is a Sinhalese, this is a Tamil'. Abeysekara (2002): p.208.
[47] In 1993, of the 5000 acres appropriated by the Ports Authority, 700 were ceded by President Premadasa to 'government abetted encroachment by Sinhalese'. Hoole (2001): p.78.

The sacred was also a dominant trope that motivated the Sinhalese encirclement of the minorities in the east. Cyril Mathew, a government minister, had his secretary roam the environs of Trincomalee, 'figuring out ancient Buddhist sites and places to plant Sinhalese'.[48] In the Eastern Province, the discovery of sacred places played an 'expressive role in establishing the spiritual unity of the island while they simultaneously enabled its political unification'[49].[50] Such practices, which fetishised the sacred, were an ideological gesture that elided the past and the present, as old pre-colonial signifiers discovered novel import within the bureaucratic territorialisation of the colonial and post-colonial state. Usually, these sites conveyed a message of religious syncretism – Hindu and Mahāyāna Buddhist – but the ideological motivation of the state 'was that these ruins were proof of the region's Theravada–Sinhalese Buddhist past',[51] which necessitated the return of Sinhalese Buddhists to these areas. In restoring the Sinhalese to these regions, which possessed a sacred aura, the state reactivated the memory of Buddhist kingship and its symbiotic relationship with the restoration of *vihāras* and monuments to the Buddha, with the state actively engaging in a *karmic* economy.

By early 1983, the state was giving the appearance that it was preparing for the use of force against the Tamils – initially against Indian Tamils who had resettled in Trincomalee District.[52] The state set about violently evicting these Indian Tamils and relocating them back to the Hill Country – the disordering potential of the Indian Tamils re-encompassed within the hierarchical social order of the Kandyan highlands. These expulsions had the effect of further reordering the demography of Trincomalee, preparing the ground for the arrival of Sinhalese (usually landless) settlers. In Jaffna, the mood was equally tense. On 12th July 1983, in *The Island* newspaper, Vinoth Ramachandra wrote of the failure of the Sinhalese-owned press to cover the institutional violence directed against the Tamils. She wrote that if

[48] Hoole (2001): 79.
[49] Kemper (1991): p.137.
[50] When Tamils claimed recognition of Hindu sacred places in the East, they were met with contempt by Sinhalese archaeologists and epigraphers Hoole (2001): pp.75–78.
[51] Hoole (2001): p.78.
[52] Ibid: pp.79–81.

the readership in the Sinhalese south was motivated to inquire in to the cause of the separatist insurgency, 'they would soon discover that the primary cause of [separatist] terror lies in the presence of undisciplined security forces supported by repressive legislation. The arbitrary detention of young males … and the general vindictive spirit of a trigger happy military are quickly driving the public into sympathy for the Tigers.'[53]

In the eight months leading up to July 1983, the government fermented an 'atmosphere of repression and insanity'.[54] The extra-legal (neo-McCarthyite) assault on Tamil activists, politicians and people – particularly in the east – was couched in terms of a response to a Naxalite conspiracy orchestrated by the CPC, the Left activist Vijaya Kumaratunga and his partner, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. While the conspiracy was masterful UNP propaganda, it ensured that Jayewardene comfortably won the presidential election against Hector Kobbekaduwa of the SLFP in October 1982. His victory precipitated a further drift in the direction of a securitised state, with the amendment of the PTA giving the armed forces the power to dispose of bodies without an inquest – the state now given the capacity to operate in a manner that was beyond judicial scrutiny.[55]

These legislative changes provided cover for an assault on Tamil interests in general; in this task, they were assisted by the print media – independent as well as state.[56] Jayewardene went so far as to tell London's *Daily Telegraph* on 12th July 1983 that, '[n]ow we can't think of them [the Tamils]. Not about their lives.'[57] The pogrom of July 1983 was immediately preceded by the state-sponsored violence directed at Tamils in Trincomalee, which left over a dozen dead. Once again, the motive was the reorganisation of space in this ethnically contested region – a move that was aimed at diminishing the Tamil presence in preparation for the inevitable act of Sinhalisation.

---

[53] Ibid: p.86.
[54] Ibid: p.90.
[55] Ibid: pp.98–101.
[56] Ibid: pp.83–84, 96–98.
[57] Ibid: pp.60–62, 84.

In Colombo, violence irrupted on 24th July. The spark that lit the fuse was the funeral of 13 Sinhalese (all Buddhist) soldiers who had been killed in an LTTE ambush in Jaffna – their bodies were brought to Colombo and were prepared for burial in a mortuary next to the cemetery.[58] In the emotionally charged atmosphere of the cemetery, as the gathered crowd awaited the burial ceremony, the monk Elle Gunawanse (who was closely associated with Gamini Dissanayake, the minister in charge of the Mahaveli hydroelectric scheme) and head of the Sinhala Mahajana Peramuna, incited the crowd to move against the Tamils.[59]

Violence initially broke out in the vicinity of the cemetery, the consequence of an 'overflow of heightened emotions on the part of the crowd gathered there – the schoolboys and friends and relatives of the dead, some of the security forces, plus some of the local populace in Borella [a suburb of Colombo]'.[60] It then spread to other inner-Colombo suburbs. Sporadic attacks directed at Tamil drivers, shop owners, pedestrians and so on soon turned into something 'more destructive and homicidal and showed firm evidence of planning and direction, of participation of politicians, government employees … and the use of government vehicles'.[61] The state did not seek to hide its complicity – Cyril Matthew, the Minister of Industries and confidante of Jayewardene was on 26th July identified directing a Sinhalese mob as they set about destroying large Tamil businesses.[62]

---

[58] While the funeral may have been the spark that precipitated the riots, the state seemingly was planning to unleash violence against the Tamils irrespective of the death of the soldiers – one government minister boasted in early July 1983 that the Tamils would soon be 'taught a lesson'. Wilson (1994): p.104.

[59] Hoole (2001): pp.173–175. Gunawanse had allegedly drafted a list of Tamil establishments to be targeted. Wilson (1994): p.145. He would also 'became popular through the songs he wrote for the military'. I. Frydenlund (2005) ***The Sangha and its Relation to the Peace Process in Sri Lanka*** (Oslo: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs): p.24, extolling the Buddhist virtues of killing and dying for the motherland against the Tamils. R. Gombrich, '*Is the Sri Lankan War a Buddhist Fundamentalism?*' in M. Deegalle (Ed.) (2006) ***Buddhism, Conflict and Violence in Modern Sri Lanka*** (New York: Routledge): p.37.

[60] Hoole (2001): pp.105–108; see also S.J. Tambiah (1986) ***Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*** (London: I.B. Tauris): pp.21–33.

[61] Tambiah (1986): p.72.

[62] Hoole (2001): pp.110–111; see also Wilson (1994): pp.125–143, 161–170.

The attacks on Tamils and Tamil-owned enterprises spread beyond Colombo to Kandy and the Hill Country.[63] Evidence of the planned nature of the violence was not concealed – those leading the attacks carried 'voter lists and addresses of Tamil owners and occupants of houses, shops, industries, and other property'[64].[65] By the end of the riots, the Tamil mercantile class lay in ruins, with Sri Lankan citizens reduced to refugee status.[66] Up to 2000 Tamils were killed because the agencies of order were under command (tacit rather than explicit) to observe a passive deportment while 'fresh violence irrupted'.[67]

The violence of July 1983 revealed the crisis in the institutional structures of Sri Lanka's post-colonial modernity. It was a thoroughly modern riot made possible by the institutions of a bureaucratic state.[68] Cyril Matthew's Ministry of Industries was at the core of its modernity – it possessed taxonomic knowledge about the location and ownership of Tamil businesses, the specific information required for the target lists to be composed and the ministry's employees – though the Jātika Sēvaka Sangamaya (National Workers Organisation) that Matthew controlled, also provided significant labour power for the pogrom[69].[70]

The riot succeeded in reordering the ethno-social composition of capital in Colombo. Post-1977 economic liberalisation had ruined the Sinhalese-dominated light industrial sector, while the Tamil

---

[63] Hoole (2001): pp.102–104

[64] Tambiah (1986): p.73.

[65] In a candid moment in August 1983, Jayewardene conceded that the state had devised an elaborate scheme to attack the Tamils, but this concession was made in the name of trying to place the blame on another false Naxalite plot: Wilson (1994): pp.110, 144–145.

[66] ***India Today***, 31st August 1983.

[67] T. Dissanayake (1983) ***The Agony of Sri Lanka: An In-Depth Account of the Racial Riots of 1983*** (Colombo: Swastika): p.81.

[68] Z. Bauman (1991) ***Modernity and the Holocaust*** (Oxford: Blackwell). This seminal account of the Holocaust focuses on the causal relationship between an enumerated bureaucracy and extermination.

[69] Hoole (2001): pp.122–123; G. Obeyesekera, '*Political Violence and the Future of Democracy in Sri Lanka*' (1984) ***International Quarterly for Asian Studies*** 15: pp.39–60.

[70] Exemplifying the contradictions of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, Matthew's Low Country ancestry is traceable to the service castes (who have a South Indian genealogy).

and Muslim trading and service sectors benefited.[71] As the private sector expanded, job opportunities increased – particularly for the minority communities – thus circumventing the dominant patron–client networks to which Sinhalese entrepreneurs had access. Middle-level Sinhalese capitalists were disgruntled and openly vented their anger in the Sinhala language press. The import-substitution regime between 1956 and 1977 had benefited them, but an open economy forced them into competition with Tamil and Muslim entrepreneurs. Matthew's control of the Jātika Sēvaka Sangamaya was one aspect of 'networks of patronage, brokerage, and violence'[72] that expanded in the shadow of economic liberalisation.[73] The urban poor could be mobilised by these networks in the defence of their sense of the Buddhist social imaginary, as well as in defence of sections of the Sinhalese capitalist class.[74]

Tambiah has alluded to the 'theatricalization, and an accompanying ritualization and polarization, in the escalating contests of violence'[75] between the Sinhalese and Tamils. He has drawn an analogy between the euphoria that characterised Sinhalese on Tamil violence and the Sinhalese Buddhist efflorescence of 'devotion to ecstatic cults'.[76] Kapferer has captured the ontologically grounded nature of euphoria in the performative structure of violence in the 1983 pogrom.[77] The violence was, if anything, hierarchical in intent – that is, it sought to resubordinate the Tamil other who threatened the unity of the state at an ontological level.[78] Refracting the logic of a healing ritual, acting 'with the force of their own cosmic incorporation',[79]

---

[71] N. Gunasinghe, '*The Open Economy and its Impact on Ethnic Relations in Sri Lanka*' in Committee for Rational Development (1984) ***Sri Lanka: The Ethnic Conflict – Myths, Realities and Perspectives*** (Colombo: CRD): pp.211–212.
[72] Tambiah (1986): p.51.
[73] Liberalisation merely created new patterns of dependent capitalism M. Moore (1985) ***The State and Peasant Politics in Sri Lanka*** (Cambridge: CUP); Tambiah (1986): pp.52–57.
[74] Gunasinghe (1984): p.213)
[75] Tambiah (1986): p.117.
[76] Ibid: p.59. Roberts (1994): pp.317-330, has commented on the ecstatic *enjoyment* etched on the Sinhalese as they rampaged against the Tamils.
[77] Kapferer (1998)
[78] The humiliation of the TULF freed up space for the LTTE to fill the vacuum.
[79] B. Kapferer (1998) ***Legends of People, Myths of State: Violence, Intolerance***

Sinhalese rioters fragmented 'their demonic victims as the Tamils threatened to fragment them, and by doing so resubordinate and reincorporate the Tamil demon in hierarchy'.[80] Such violence, by restoring the integrity of a fragmenting Sinhalese Buddhist social order, also restores the personal integrity of the Sinhalese individual cum collective as 'both the anguish of the person and the anguish of the nation are overcome in the power of hierarchy'.[81]

The violence of July 1983 was thoroughly ontological, for intrinsic to the emergence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism as an ideological practice was 'a particular ontology of the person and the state',[82] such that the 'condition of the person is synonymous with the condition of the state'.[83] The ontological *telos* of Sinhalese Buddhist historiography is replete with this relation, with the cosmological order structuring the performative logic of the relation between Buddhist kingship, the Sangha and the individual. However, in the course of the July 1983 riots, the fury of the violence directed at the Tamils was mediated through a bureaucratic order that positioned Tamils in a subordinate relation. Violence as a cultural practice is intensified once it happens to be motivated by an ontology of the everyday that finds itself in the service of a nationalist project. Challenging 'assumptions integral to the being of the nation also attacks the person' at an 'ontological depth, at the very source of being and existence in the world'.[84] Their passions fired, Tamils literally burned in their houses in order that the hierarchy of the Sinhalese Buddhist state could be restored, with the subject discovering 'his or her internal unity as an essential hierarchical condition which, in turn, is dependent on the hierarchical encompassing unity of the Buddhist state'.[85] Violence of this nature becomes a mechanism through which the Sinhalese Buddhist subject internalises the *unifying* force of the Sinhalese Buddhist state.

---

and Political Culture in Sri Lanka and Australia (London: Smithsonian Institution Press): p.101.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid: p.111.
[82] Ibid: p.102.
[83] Ibid: p.103.
[84] Ibid: p.83.
[85] Ibid: p.103.

Instead of engaging in self-reflection on the modernist Buddhism that has provided an authorising ground for such violence, leading monks called for a military campaign against the LTTE, even advocating that monks be prepared to disrobe and join the army.[86] Jayewardene's response was contradictory: having fostered the conditions that made July 1983 possible, he questioned the Buddhism of monks who advocated a military solution.[87] Their response was vehement: Hendigalle Pannatissa accused Jayewardene and the government of being traitors to the Sinhalese Buddhist nation.[88] Young monks who had been trained within the intellectual currents of modernist Buddhism – a cultural milieu that dominated the educational *pirivenas* – questioned the Buddhist nature of the state that Jayewardene was fashioning.[89] It was only through regenerative violence that the state could become more *righteous* and hence more Buddhist.

Failing to persuade the state to launch a total military campaign against Tamil separatists, many of these young monks would shortly gravitate towards the JVP, which provided the organisational resources for a sustained campaign of regenerative violence against the state – merely a prelude in their imaginary for a final assault against the LTTE. It would fall on the JVP to save the Sinhalese Buddhist nation from those who would betray it, and in this they too would draw on a violent aesthetic intrinsic to the Sinhalese Buddhist imaginary.

Rhetorically, the charge of *betraying* the nation was a powerful weapon that was used astutely against Jayewardene. In defence of

---

[86] Abeysekara (2002): p.213. In June 1985, the chief monk of the Dutthagāmanī Vihāra near Galle raised the subject of monks disrobing in order to join the armed forces in the fight against Tamil separatist groups. One of the *sutras* chanted at this gathering was alleged to have been the one used by the Buddha to expel demons. Kapferer (1998): p.87.

[87] Abeysekara (2002): p.214. Gamini Dissanayake promised that in 14 minutes the Sinhalese could sacrifice the 'blood of every Tamil in the country' were they to continue to pressure for Indian intervention on their behalf <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/stored/pdfs/ps040.pdf> accessed 20th November 2011.

[88] Abeysekara (2002): pp.215–216. In January 1984, Walpola Rahula, Jayewardene's ally, called for the military to eradicate Tamil separatists.

[89] Abeysekara (2002): pp.218–219.

the UNP's Buddhist aura, in February 1985 Jayewardene spoke of the terror from *without* causing division *within*: 'The terrorists are attempting to shoot their way into the heart of Sri Lanka to the borders of what they call … Eelam. If we do not occupy the border, the border will come to us.'[90] Invoking the ontological ground occupied by Dutthagāmanī, and echoing the trope of Tamil *invasion* used by Gunasekera in the Constituent Assembly in the early 1970s, in March 1985 Prime Minister Premadasa, speaking in Tangalle near Magama – the birthplace of Dutthagāmanī – observed that:

> "Leaders had arisen in the south … to lead the battle against them [i.e. Tamil separatists]. Some people held the wrong belief that King Dutugemunu was a racial warrior. He was actually a rational leader, whose object was to preserve the freedom and integrity of the country. He was also a leader who realised from where the danger to the nation came from: the north and the east. That was why he went from [Magama] to Ānuradhapura to establish his kingdom."[91]

Premadasa emphasised the *unifying* and encompassing power of Dutthagāmanī in opposition to the LTTE, which had moved to a fragmenting position on the margin of the Sinhalese Buddhist state. Dutthagāmanī embodies 'ontologically the legitimate destructive, but reconstitutive violence of the state'.[92] In the ideological reading of the myth of kingship given by Premadasa, the violence directed against the Tamils by the modern state is – as with Dutthagāmanī's campaign against Elāra – wholly consistent with reason as it confronts the demonic forces of non-reason. Premadasa envisaged an encompassing 'rational violence ultimately leading to the re-establishment of the ordered [and hierarchical] state unified in reason'.[93]

---

[90] Kapferer (1998): p.86.
[91] Ibid
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid. Even among Sinhalese who would describe themselves as ethical Buddhists, there was a tendency to blame the victims for creating the conditions that provoked Sinhalese Buddhist violence. Hoole (2001): pp.189–193.

The potency of this ontological ground was once again evident in early 1985 in an encounter between the newly appointed commander of the army and the Mahānayāka of the *Siyam Nikāya*.[94] The commander told the Mahāyānayakes that Sri Lanka faced its most critical encounter with fragmentation, 'threatened by terrorists who were being aided and abetted by foreign countries and organisations'.[95] The Mahānayāka of the Asgiriya chapter replied that 'not only the Government but also the people in general and the Maha Sangha in particular have built up hopes that [the Commander] would deal with all enemy forces in the country with the blessings of the Triple Gem and all the protective deities of Sri Lanka'.[96] The Sinhalese Buddhist state encompasses the Sinhalese Buddhist nation, which in turn encompasses the Sinhalese Buddhist people in a hierarchical relation. Only through an encompassing violence can the Sinhalese Buddhist nation be reordered, simultaneously restoring the hierarchy of the cosmic order.

Political actors thus speak the world which they and others are already within – the 'ontology of evil and of the state embedded in the myths … is strongly present in current realities'.[97] As the Thimpu peace talks approached in July 1985, Jayewardene found himself the butt of humour – which also, as an ideological gesture, was informed by the ontology of the cosmic state. The talks collapsed in August 1985 when the government delegation refused to recognise the Northern and Eastern Provinces as constitutive of the Tamil 'homelands', a principle conceded in the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord of July 1987. In February 1986, Jayewardene was portrayed in a cartoon in *Divaina* (a Sinhala-language newspaper) as 'twisting and turning within'[98] the transformational and hierarchical process of a Sinhalese Buddhist exorcism ritual – the *Sanni Yakuma* rite, which is an intrinsic part of the *Suniyama*, but also an exorcism ritual in its own right. The cartoon presented Jayewardene 'as the supreme exorcist of state in a violent transformational struggle to restore the encompassing equanimity of an ordered hierarchy threatened by a demonic

[94] Gombrich (1988): pp.139–140.
[95] Kapferer (1998): p.87.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid: p.89.

possibility at its base'.[99] Jayewardene was portrayed as being in an internal struggle between Kola Sanniya, the destructive demon that inhabits the margins of the Buddhist cosmic order, and Deva Sanniya, a 'benign transformation of Kola Sanniya'.[100] Jayewardene was refracting the agony of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation, in which intra-Sinhalese Buddhist conflict echoed the transformative logic of an exorcism ritual, the demonic and the benign in a struggle over encompassment.

Thus Jayewardene increasingly was portrayed as a demonic protagonist fragmenting the Sinhalese Buddhist state/nation from within – he had been encompassed by his demonic potential. The cause of such a portrayal – he revealed an increasing willingness under Indian pressure to compromise with the non-separatist Tamil leadership. Ironically, his desire for compromise about the structure of the state had something in common with the pragmatics of the Asokan state, in contrast to its all-encompassing claims to *virtual* sovereignty.[101] However, it was a position that alienated him from Buddhist activists. As the fortieth anniversary of independence approached, one conclusion was certain: Sinhalese Buddhist notions of the demonic and legendary heroes of Sinhalese Buddhist historiography had 'broken free from their mythic and ritual containment'[102], generating a variety of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist meanings, whose potential for destruction was now mediated through a taxonomic state. The destructive impact of this taxonomic state would intensify in the years ahead.

[99] Ibid: p.90.
[100] Ibid.
[101] S.J. Tambiah (1992) Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka (Chicago: Chicago UP): pp.78–79.
[102] Kapferer (1998): p.90.