



Humanitarian Interventions and the Suspicion Factor of Faith Based Organizations in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses an important faith related episode in Sri Lankan humanitarian history. Nearly three decades of civil war in the country between the government forces and the LTTE (the Tamil separatists) had justified concerted and widespread interventions from both local and international NGOs. The 2004 tsunami, which havocted coastal Sri Lanka, strengthened these justifications and led to a manifold increase in the number of NGOs present in the country. This attracted much public and media attention toward NGO activities in Sri Lanka lead by allegations of abuse of funds, failure to deliver, lack of coordination, etc. A foremost allegation perhaps is the conversion of Buddhists using unethical methods. Allegations of such abuses of the Christian faith led to wide spread protests led by the Buddhist monks which created trying conditions for all humanitarian actors in the country; not just FBOs.

The suspicion of Faith Based Organizations (FBO) activities exploded in the final phase of the civil war with further allegations that some of the FBOs were in fact siding with the LTTE. These developments had some sway among the Buddhists who account for 70 percent of the population. The paper flags conversion as the most important concern that had soured the way Buddhists in Sri Lanka perceive FBO activities. Using the anti-conversion bill that was tabled in the parliament of Sri Lanka in 2004 as a case study we analyze how the ethno-religious cleavages of the wider community could be used to gain precise political ends in the backdrop of faith community activities. In addition the study looks into the recent agitations against FBOs within the country. The paper thereby sheds light on certain costs of faith based humanitarianism which are hitherto not examined in the literature. The costs exposed here occur to the public, to the humanitarian community and most importantly to the at-risk-populations.

KEYWORDS: Sri Lanka; FBOs; Buddhism; Religious Conversion.

1.INTRODUCTION

Faith had catalyzed many conflicts for many centuries in all parts of the world. In the recent history of the Western world 9/11 attack would probably register as, among other things, faith at its destructive best. Since those horrific events a number of academic works had looked at the relations between faith and conflicts. Interestingly the role of faith in peacemaking has been the subject of much of this work (Coward and Smith 2004; Gozdziaak 2002; Gozdziaak and Shandy 2002; Harpviken and Røislien 2008; Johnston 2003; Little and Appleby 2004). An important tenet of this literature is to do with the nature and effectiveness of Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) in the humanitarian field (Benedetti 2006; De Cordier 2009; Kirmani and Khan 2008). The present work adds to this literature an important case study from Sri Lanka. The choice of this location is timely as the end of nearly thirty years of civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the tiger separatists (LTTE) in May 2009 had produced much needed space for humanitarian and development work. NGOs have an indispensable role to play in this recovery, which is why the case study a bill which has profound implications for these organizations, particularly the faith-based ones is worth looking at.

An important argument that is upheld in the literature on FBOs is that they are a more efficient conduit to deliver humanitarian aid to populations that share the same faith. In this regard the literature particularly looks at the activities of Muslim FBOs within Muslim communities (Bano 2009; Benedetti 2006; De Cordier 2009). In Sri Lanka also there are FBOs working in communities that are of the same

faith: Muslim FBOs working in Puttalam, Buddhist FBOs working in war affected 'border villages', etc. However, for reasons that will be elaborated later, the Christian FBOs surpass all others in terms of the numbers, media attention, and the sheer size of the pool of funds they command. As the country is predominantly non-Christian (Buddhist 70 percent and Hindu 20 percent) the populations these Christian FBOs work with are in most cases non-Christian. The present paper is unique in the literature because it examines a repercussion/pitfall of FBO activity amid religious others. To put it more specifically, it documents and draws inferences from various implications of Christian FBO activity in Buddhist neighborhoods.

Much has been written on Theravada Buddhism and the conflict in Sri Lanka (Bartholomeusz 2002; de Mel 2007; Deegalle 2006a; Gnanarathana 2009; Grant 2009; Ivan 2006; Tambiah 1992). All of these works point out that religious-nationalism and ethnic-nationalism played a key role in the Sri Lankan polity. In contrast, the process of religious conversion and its impact on Sri Lankan society has also been discussed (Sangasumana 2012, 2014). We illustrate here that anti-conversion protests were/are the mainstay of all episodes of religious revivals in this Buddhist stronghold. The Christian FBOs were suspected of serving as humanitarian cover for missionary activity. It is clear that nationalist elements were quite happy to benefit from various waves religious revivals that dotted the history of the country. In this paper we document the most recent episode of anti-conversion activism as the background which led to the proposing of a bill to the parliament.

The methodology for this research primarily consists of an analysis of relevant literature. Many of the sources, particularly the newspaper articles, but also some books and commission reports, came in the local language Sinhala. The literature review provided the substance for some open interviews with key informants. These interviews were held primarily in Colombo, in the first half of 2010. Perhaps an important methodological issue that needs to be illustrated here is that in Sri Lanka the distinction between secular NGOs and FBOs blurs on the field. It is quite common to read and hear people using the two terms interchangeably. For instance there are pieces cited here that started off with an NGO related title but much of the content is about FBOs.

Some assertions have been made in the literature that development in the non-Western world should also mean that secularizations of societies (De Cordier 2009) but in the case of western FBOs in Sri Lanka this is hard to see.

2. HISTORY OF NGOS/FBOs IN SRI LANKA

The development of the NGO sector in Sri Lanka dates back to late 19th Century (Karunanayake 2008). When the country reverted to the open economic principles in 1977 it led to a broad ranging changes primarily in economic but also in social, political, and cultural realms. The way these changes affected the development sector in the country may be summarized by the emergence of a host of NGOs that were able to tap foreign funding about this time. These NGOs were seen as a productive and useful as they were engaged in

grass-root level activities in the areas of rural development, poverty alleviation, child and women's rights, environmental conservation, and human rights and democracy (Rupasinghe 2006). The grass root involvement and participatory approaches adopted by the NGO movement may have accounted for their popularity. Though Community Based Organizations and social service organizations were there before the advent of this NGOs; the funding capacity, the organizational structure, and the networking ability of the former was no match for those of the latter. As a result newcomer NGOs were able to penetrate the social services sector while the existing CBO activists receded into the background (The Interim Report of the Select Committee of Parliament for Investigation of the Operations of Non-Governmental Organizations and Their Impact 2008: 5; hereinafter Interim Report, 2008).

Another reason why these NGOs were able to establish themselves in the country was that all governments that were in power saw their usefulness in taking economic development to the grass roots. Therefore the governments of this time adopted a relaxed attitude towards the establishment and operations of these NGOs. For instant these organizations were allowed to register under numerous Acts of parliament and method (Interim Report, 2008: 11).¹ Also about this time they did not have to clearly declare the activities that they are going to engage in.

¹ Mostly under Voluntary Social Service Organization (Registration and Monitoring) Act No. 31 of 1980, or under the Companies Act No. 17 of 1982. However Interim Report (2008) identifies several other methods and mechanisms popular among the NGOs at that time.

The separatist movement which erupted into an armed conflict in 1980s was the pivotal point in the evolution of the NGO movements in the country. Their focus which was until then development related, branched into areas which were more humanitarian. Using the freedom in their operations and the lack of monitoring on the part of the GoSL, the NGOs had evidently ventured into more civic activism related work. This led to breach in the co-habitation between the governments and NGOs (Report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry in Respect of NGOs Functioning in Sri Lanka, 1991: 52-58).

With the war intensifying the affected communities increased exponentially. For instance, by 1995 conflict induced displaced persons (IDPs) had numbered over a million (IDMC 2005; UNHCR 2006). This had meant the NGOs had to launch a massive program to provide humanitarian assistance to these at-risk-populations. Under these circumstances humanitarian intervention had emerged an important, if not a key, activity of NGOs. The activities of FBOs were mostly visible in work such as IDP relief, rehabilitation of the war affected villages, conflict resolution, emergency relief, *etc.* For instance, nearly 20 percent of the NGOs active in the country continued to maintain an active presence in war devastated North and the East (Interim Repot, 2008: 14).

With the 2004 tsunami the humanitarian intervention of NGOs increased noticeably. With the tsunami the NGOs which were involved in devolution of power, conflict resolution, peace processes, *etc.* also refocused their attention on humanitarian relief. The tsunami backed inflow of funds led to an unprecedented expansion of NGO number which also meant the expansion of FBO

numbers (ACBC Report, 2009: 31). Thus it is clear that the war and the tsunami were key catalysts in increasing the FBO significance and also their numbers in Sri Lanka. The unintended and catastrophic results of the large sums of post-tsunami money that freely flowed into the country had been documented (Korf 2007; Korf, Habullah, Hollenbach and Klem 2009). In this backdrop a new term “culture of NGOs” has emerged in the vernacular which capitulates primarily negative connotations including inter alia: (1) unregulated nature of these organizations, (2) large funding base that was used to build up physical and human assets of the NGOs, (3) staff payments which exceeded market rates, and (4) their involvement in government policy making that were often described as ‘interference’. It is interesting that the proposed Post-Tsunami Operation Management Structure (PTOMS)—a draft agreement between the GoSL and the LTTE to jointly manage the distribution of tsunami aid—was also backed and supported by the NGOs. This NGO activism to resuscitate the increasingly frail peace agreement between the GoSL and LTTE had the longer view of ushering in Federal Solution to the conflict. The leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) were very much against the PTOMS the NGOs who were backing it.

The JVP and JHU liberally used the anti-NGO slogan in their campaign for the 2005 victory of the President Rajapakse. The victory was a pivotal achievement in the mobilization of the of the anti-NGO political forces. The culmination of this mobilization is the 30/08/2005 motion moved by the JVP to set up a select committee to look into the foreign aid receiving NGOs that operate in Sri Lanka. This committee submitted its report in 2008 which

listed the major allegations against NGOs which also outlined specific FBO related issues. For instance the Interim Report (2008: 36-39) give names of NGOs and even INGOs which have according to the evidence submitted committee engaged in religious conversions. These anti-NGO slogans increased with the resumption in 2006 of Eelam War IV. The media used the footage of abandoned equipment of the LTTE bearing various logos of NGOs as proof that the NGOs supported the LTTE. The government media-both print and electronic-were seen using this material to strengthen the fear psychosis among the majority Sinhala-Buddhist population against the NGOs. A major argument used here was that the NGOs which thus supported the separatist movement have a Christian fundamentalist background (Asian Tribune 17 June 2007, Lankaweb 20 May 2005, Divaina 9 September 2006). The culmination of this process is the submission to parliament of the bill for Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion which is the main case study of this paper. Hereinafter the bill will be identified as the Anti-Conversion Bill (2009).

3.RELIGIOUS-NATIONALISM AND THE CONFLICT

Sri Lanka is one of the few countries with a majority Buddhist population in spite of centuries of colonization, first with the arrival of Portuguese in 1505, then the Dutch in 1658, and finally the British in 1798 who entirely conquered the country in 1815. This has meant that that the modern history of the country is wrought with episodes which posed grave threats to Buddhism at the hands of colonial rulers (De Silva 1965; Malalgoda 1976; Phadnis 1976; Weeraratne 2005). Thus Sri Lankan freedom struggles had in most instances

developed in tandem with Buddhist revivalisms. In this work we argue that activism (sometimes violent) against the conversion of Buddhists was/is a hallmark of these revivals. For example mass agitations against conversions marked all major Buddhist revivals in the modern history including those spearheaded by Ven. Miggettuwatte Gunnanada (1823-1890), Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), etc. In fact we argue that the strength of anti-conversion movements was a key indicator of the strength of the Buddhist revivals. This string of Buddhist activism laid the foundation for what Bartholomeusz calls "Buddhist secularism".

For instance, the most recent Sri Lankan constitution grants Buddhism "the foremost place", and at the same time it protects all the religions of the island and guarantees freedom of religion. In this "Buddhist secularism," specifically local concerns, based on religion, are wedded to ideas that link Sri Lanka's present to its colonial past, which has its own secular heritage. (Bartholomeusz 2002: 5)

The ebb and flow of Buddhist revivals can be seen throughout the modern history of Sri Lanka. The upsurge of Buddhist revivals is clearly linked to the moments in history where Sinhalese nationalism reaches peaks. For example, the Buddhist revival in the 1880s had clear political ambitions of ridding the country of British colonial rulers (Tambiah 1992: 5). The flip side of this argument is that if the latter threat gives way to political freedom the Buddhist revival would recede bringing in the ebb tide we referred to above. For example the 1951 the Report of the Buddha Sasana

Commission which came at the heel of independence from British rulers in 1948 reported no threats to Buddhism from forceful conversions. We contend here that missing evidence of fear of conversion in this report is an indication of the lack of Buddhist revivalist fervor after independence. Similarly other peaks of Buddhist revivals can also be linked to various socio-political reasons as contended by (Jayewardene 1979). This is an important argument for this paper which purports to look into the most recent peak in Sri Lanka Buddhist revivalism though the lens of preceding socio-political events.

The most recent Buddhist revival is also, like the previous episodes, strongly immersed in a specific socio-political backdrop which is again characterized by an awakening of Sinhala nationalism—this time in response to the prolonged armed conflict in the country. This nationalism cannot be missed in all politically significant events during this period such as the boycotting of and court action against the PTOMS agreement (De Mel, 2007: 239), ushering in of Rajapakse regime in 2005, pushing the government for military action after the LTTE closed the Mavillaru sluice in 2006, the government's response to the reaction of the international community against the war, *etc.* It is interesting how the said the nationalist fervor feeds and is fed by Buddhist revivalist movements. If the present day solidarity in the anti-conversion movement is anything to go by this time too the revival is at a peak. However its manifestation on the field is completely different to previous episodes.

The salient features of the current Buddhist revival importantly outline how it is different to previous episodes referred to above. We identify six such features: (1) a sharp and

poignant reaction to the conversion movement of the Christian fundamentalist, (2) the conviction that the separatist movement is supported by the various FBOs, (3) most of the NGOs operating in the country have links with the Christian fundamentalist movements, (4) setting up of Buddhist FBOs which targeted to counter the work of culprit FBOs, (5) civic activism focusing primarily anti-conversion work, and (6) recourse to legal action and setting up of commissions to look primarily in allegations of unethical conversions.

All of these features are linked with Buddhist politics, which underwent drastic change with Buddhist monks launching a political party called *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU) in February 2004. This had taken the influence of Sangha in Buddhist Sri Lanka to a new level (Frydenlund 2005: 3). The advent of the JHU is directly linked with the anti-conversion movement (de Mel 2007; Deegalle 2006b). “Indeed, the ‘Anti-Conversion Bill’ was perhaps the most important issue for the *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU) monks elected to parliament in April 2004, and one that also brought them to power” (Frydenlund 2005: 9). In addition to the gradual intensification of the anti-conversion movement a single event that pushed the JHU to be formed is the death of Gangodawila Soma thera in St. Petersburg, Russia:

*Following the sudden and controversial demise of the monk, sections of the Buddhist clergy alleged that the Thera was murdered in a Christian business interest conspiracy, and whipped up the Sinhala Buddhist sentiment that also paved the way for the formation of a new political party, the *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU), in which Buddhist*

monks have a significant membership.(de Mel 2007: 34)

In the next section of the paper we establish how these features of the contemporary Buddhist revival make strong impressions among the majority Buddhists (and others) ushering in an unprecedented fear psychosis in its amid leading up to the anti conversion bill of 2009.

4. FOREWORD TO THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE BILL: ANTI-CONVERSION FORCES IN CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKA

This subsection looks at various indicators of the thinking of the contemporary Sri Lankan society regarding conversions. As documentary evidence of this we use published reports of two commissions of inquiry and various reports that were taken from local print media. The two reports were taken from Presidential Commission on Buddha Sasana 2002, and All Ceylon Buddhist Congress Commission of Unethical Conversion of Buddhists into other Religions 2009. Hereinafter, these will be identified as Presidential Commission (2002) and Buddhist Congress Report (2009) respectively.

The ninth chapter of the Presidential Commission (2002) is about conversion. It outlines the historical background of conversion as a long standing problem in Sri Lanka and then goes on to examine the current situation with regard to the phenomenon. The report outlines that 110 NGOs have registered as companies and engaged in unethical conversions (p.124 and Annex 9.3). The report further accuses that these NGOs have created a space of these conversions while or in the guise of intervening in various humanitarian conditions characterized by abject poverty,

unemployment, marginalization, and physical and mental disability. In support of this the report compiles verbal submissions, and documentary submissions totaling 443. Interestingly the documentary evidence also includes articles, correspondences, advertisements, and leaflets issued/written by Christian Evangelical organization operating in Sri Lanka.² The report also documents reported conversion events in various locations in Sri Lanka. Based on these findings the Presidential Commission (2002) proposes 131 recommendations out of which 30 are related to conversions. One of these recommendations is important for this paper: “Unethical and provocative propagation of and conversion of religions should be prohibited by an act of parliament. These should also be made punishable in the penal code.” (Author translation of recommendation No. 12.83 in p.180).

The commission appointed by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress on 11/06/2006 was exclusively mandated to report on unethical conversion of Sri Lankan Buddhists into other religions. The resulting Buddhist Congress Report (2009) is therefore pivotal to the discussion here. The report had entertained 348 submissions which had fed twenty chapters of conversion practices of FBOs in Sri Lanka. In fact the report refers exclusively to practices of Christian fundamentalist organizations. As the report in its totality is concentrating on the conversion issue it had documented even the subtle techniques used by the errant FBOs. When it comes to the recommendations, again this document is more detailed than the previous document. For instance this more

² There are also some evidence of Islamic influence on Buddhist temples and their property.

recent document proposes 131 recommendations covering measures to prevent unethical conversions as well as to ameliorate the negative impacts thereof on Buddha Sasana. Amid these proposals we have identified measures that have direct restraining implications on FBOs: (1) after a preliminary investigation ban all FBOs who are involved in unethical conversions (20.1), (2) to force the FBOs to agree to an affidavit promising not to engage in unethical conversions (20.2), (3) if found guilty of unethical conversions cancel the VISA of such FBO official (20.8D), (4) local and international NGOs should declare the foreign funding that they get and the channels must be formalized and open to government scrutiny (20.8F).

It is important that we look at some of the ideas that circulate among the public on this regard too. This is useful to establish how deeply rooted this issue is in the Sri Lankan society as a whole, not just Buddhists. Pannaseeha (1993), a chief Sanghanayake: “The practice of unethical conversions of Buddhists must be stopped immediately. For that we need to bring in a parliament act and implement that act immediately.” Other prominent Buddhist scholars and activists have also made declarations raising the need to protect the Buddha Sasana from conversion (Dhammananda 2001; Gnanarathana 2009; Wimalarathana 1990). It is interesting that representatives of other religious communities in Sri Lanka have also raised worries over the increasing trend of unethical religious conversions. We refer following two statements of Swamipullei and T. Maheshwaran;

Christians, Anglicans, and Catholics have for a long time co-existed in Sri Lanka for a long time. However, internationally

funded NGOs are undertaking well funded conversions of Buddhists, Catholics, and Hindus. This practice is threatening to disrupt inter-religious harmony in the country. (Swamipullei (2004) Arch Bishop, Trincomalee and Batticaloa).

Commercialized faith movements are threatening the existence of not only the Buddhists but also the Hindus.

(T Maheshwaran, Minister of Hindu Religious Affairs)

Apart from these opinions against conversion emanating from all religious communities in Sri Lanka the topic has caught much currency amid general populations (Jayasinghe 2006; Rajakarunanayake 2007; Waduge 2008; Warnakulasooriya 2006).

The evidence so far—two reports, and the various references to newspaper articles from religious leaders and public figures—established how deep rooted the issue of unethical conversion is in the Sri Lankan society. The evidence is very convincing that the negative image of FBOs/NGOs created by unethical conversions is a quite a complex and a serious social problem and that the humanitarian community should treat it that way. It is worrying that the situation promises to create trying conditions even for FBOs with a genuine concern for humanitarian work in Sri Lanka.

5. THE BILL: A (SHORT-LIVED?) BIOGRAPHY

The anti-conversion sentiment that overflowed following the death of Gangodawila Soma *thera*, was the key ingredient in Omalpe Sobhitha *thera*'s hunger strike (3/1/2004)

demanding that the government formulate a Parliament act against religious conversion. This triggered a response from the Ministry of Religious Affairs which appointed a committee of 31 Buddhist monks to look into the matter. A bill (proposed legislation) was thus made available to the minister on 6/2/2004. In addition the newly elected JHU MPs decided to bring another private member's bill addressing similar issues (Karunanayake 2008). Both these bills capitulate similar ideas in relations to the issue of unethical conversion.

When Omalpe Sobhita *thera* published the bill entitled Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion (Private Member's Bill) in the Gazette, Part II of 28 May 2004–Supplement (Issued on 31 May 2004) there are several responses both in favor and against it (The Dhamma Times 2004). When the bill was gazetted there were 21 petitions challenging the constitutionality of the bill. The Supreme Court rejected all of them, but ruled that the bill was constitutional subject to revisions. It is interesting that in their judgment the Supreme Court unambiguously and sternly stated that a key characteristic of the offence of 'persuasion' in this context is the offering of attractive benefits. After the revision of the draft bill it was forwarded to the parliament on the 6/1/2009. However, the rest of the process leading to tabling, debating and voting of the bill has still not happened. At the time of writing this process can best be described as stalled. It is important to highlight that the arguments and conclusions upheld in this paper is not sensitive to the final outcome of this process.

6. CONCLUSION

Faith based humanitarianism has socially recognized practice that has proved to be productive and useful. As a concept also it has gained some mileage. In the context of relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction, the faith approach has provided a more amenable platform to reach the beneficiaries in certain context. The benefits outlined here mostly materialize when the faith concerned is synchronized across the dispenser and the beneficiary of humanitarian aid. The present paper discusses the outcome of a situation where FBOs are operating with communities of religious-others. The key finding here that such operations demand careful examination and understanding of the said community, without which final outcome would become sour.

The various waves of Buddhist revivals, with anti-conversion slogans as their main characteristic, dot the modern history of Sri Lanka. It was noted here that all of the anti-conversion movements are enmeshed within strong awakening of nationalist sentiments. It follows that these movements are guided by the demands of the socio-political needs of the moment. The link between the two is so strong that the paper goes on to argue that the nature and success of anti-conversion movements depend on the political need of the time. The anti-conversion activism in Sri Lanka has invigorated with the 2004 tsunami within the backdrop of a long standing war. The movement against the LTTE separatists was married with the movement against anti-conversion in a strong way when the both processes were politicized in the current context. In this context the anti-FBO sentiments in the society ran deeper and reached a level not seen in the recent history. We contend that

these conditions indeed contributed to build the political strength needed to vanquish the LTTE. The above conditions have created a situation that is quite uncomfortable for the FBOs to operate. The situation is not all that rosy for the secular NGOs. This is unfortunate because the FBOs indeed have a role to play in rebuilding particularly the war devastated north. Within already established anti-FBO atmosphere if conversions of Hindus were to take place in the North under the guise of humanitarian activities the back lash would most likely be prompt and even violent.

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