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## Ven. Walpola Rahula and the politicisation of the Sinhala Sangha

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This essay tries to describe the influence of the Bhikkhus in Sinhala politics as demonstrated by the ideology, work and life of the Ven. Walpola Rahula—perhaps the most influential scholar monk in the modern Sangha of Sri Lanka. The attempt is to show how the Maha Sangha became the key actors in the continuum of an ideology of Sinhala ethnicity, their ownership of the island and duty to protect Sinhala Buddhist culture. Rahula's contribution has created a new brand of Sangha who are committed to a different political path to redefine Sinhala Buddhism and modern Sri Lanka.

In many states, the last few decades of the 20th century witnessed the beginning of a rapid but systematic desecularisation of the public space. The process could even be violent, with 9/11 standing as an extreme manifestation; but the phenomenon went much deeper, and had transformative effects within, as well as between, states. Some have labelled this a 'new cold war' (Juergensmeyer 2010a, 2010b, 2009, 2008, 2005) or an apolitical re-secularisation (Beyer 1994) generated within a particular religious discourse (Haynes 2001). But on closer inspection, dialectical negotiation between sovereign state power on the one hand and non-state spiritual power centres on the other is neither new nor restricted to a particular faith or nation. Almost all major religions, whether western or eastern, renouncer or redeemer, monotheist or agnostic, have contested for sovereignty, even before the idea of a state came into existence. The church/king relationship, and the idea of *Ummah* or *dharmaraj*, are well documented in the annals of political history.



Yet while the politics of religion has received the attention of a growing number of comparative political scientists, the great majority have focused on global or regional trends (such as globalisation, transnational diasporas, international religious terrorism, etc), at the cost of ignoring the microdynamics of this process of desecularisation. The power of religion to shape and direct the mind-set of an individual state is largely ignored, or at best marginalised. A notion of faith, as an independent variable affecting intra- as much as inter-state relations, is often pushed aside as epiphenomenal, subjective, and hence invalid from the viewpoint of a realist fixation on a certain type of power. But a re-assessment is long overdue, even if one takes a purely positivist approach. The power of theo-politics and its impact on the world today should impel us to adjust our focus: the relationship of religion to politics, far from being marginal, should be at the centre of the study. An open-minded but careful survey around the world, especially in relation to conflict resolution, democracy and justice, will compel us to re-engage with the instrumental capacity of faith politics with newer methodological persuasiveness and theoretical creativity. To achieve such an outcome in comparative politics, a move beyond the 'paradigms war' (Bellin 2008) is needed.

### **Sinhala Sangha activism**

Within the scope of political science, one cannot understand the processes of accessing and using power, individually or collectively, without studying those who aspire to alter the course of their society. The lives and ideologies of those individuals who venture to influence a polity must be studied in order to understand its social values and governing conditions. Just as there cannot be a balanced understanding of Buddhism without studying the life and work of the Buddha, so the same holds true for any other social movement that succeeds in creating inroads in its immediate society and its successors. The social dynamics which have been supported or reintroduced by the politically active Sangha in modern Sri Lanka cannot be analysed without understanding the primary motivations for their political engagement. These motivations, if we can identify them in their original form, will enable us to unlock the motivating ideas that legitimised the Sangha's entry into mainstream politics. The most reliable way of understanding this motivation, I suggest, is to study the life of a few key selected Sangha members, who in many ways shaped the modern political paradigm in Sri Lanka.

The arrival, establishment, growth and defence of Buddhism in Sri Lanka have always happened under the leadership of Sangha. After the initial introduction of

Buddhism from India in the third century BC, the Sinhala Sangha acted as leaders of the Sasana. Throughout its 2000 years of survival, the Sinhala Sangha has performed two fundamental functions:

- (i) Protecting and promoting Theravada Buddhism
- (ii) Fighting those who are a threat to their faith

The *Mahāvamsa* is the epic record of the historical role of the Sangha and those kings who helped them achieve those aims. Records suggest that one can identify at least seven high points of Sangha activism in recent history.

Period	Key persons	Key Features
1750–1770	Tamil King of Kandy, Kirthi Siri Rajasinghe Ven. Velivita Saranankara	Re-establishing the Sangha ordination after some 200 years
1800–1815	Dutch Rulers Ven. Ambagahapitiye Gnanawimala	Helping the Lower Caste Sangha Ordination beginning with the <i>Amarapura</i> chapter, helped by the Burmese Sangha
1860–1875	Wesleyan Missionaries: Rev. Daniel John Gogerly, Rev. Spence Hardy, Ven. Mohottiwatte Gunananda, Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala	Defending Sinhala Buddhism against Christian missionaries 5 great public debates – <i>Panadura vadaya</i>
1885–1900	Arrival of the Theosophists Col. Henry Olcott Anagarika Dharmapala	Protestant form of lay Buddhism Buddhist schools Buddhist flag
1930–1945	D.S. Senanayake Ven. Walpola Rahula	Sangha initiative for organised demand for Independence
1956–1972	SWRD Bandaranaike Ven. Walpola Rahula Ven. Mapitigama Buddharakkhita	Buddhism made state religion. Sinhala made the official language of the state. Sri Lanka declared a unitary state
1995–2010	Chandrika Kumaratunge Velupillai Prabakaran Mahinda Rajapakse Ven. Gangodawila Soma Ven. Athuraliye Rathana	Urging the Sinhala to return to their Buddhism. Advocating a Buddhist Government led by the Sangha. Justifying war against the Tamil Tigers Rejecting the Federalist Proposals

These protest waves aimed to reform Sinhala Buddhism (1750-1815), to defend the same (1860-1900), to entrench it in the Constitution and public life (1930-1972) and to war against what threatened it (1995-2010). A trajectory which started from reviving the Buddhism of the Sinhala changed into waging a war to defend their language and their right to rule a unitary island. This can be seen as re-ideologising the key themes of the *Mahāvamsa*: the uniqueness of Sinhala

Buddhism, the supremacy of the Sinhala race, their legitimacy as rulers of this blessed land whatever the context.

During the period of transformative political opportunities and challenges from 1995 to 2010, as in earlier periods of history, many members of the Sangha came forward to interpret, influence and redirect the politics, and ultimately the state of Sri Lanka. Amid the deeply destabilising forces of globalisation that had shaken the foundations of the traditional security of Sri Lanka society, these monks found a new and more energised moral authority to intervene from the sacred sphere to the secular. Added to this external influence, Sri Lanka was facing political failure, largely due to the protracted ethnic war. The majority of monks either watched passively or hoped for immediate dramatic change. However, a section of the Sangha decided to make a political intervention. From this mobilisation emerged a few key actors as *yugapuruṣa* or ‘heroes of the age’ – those who could symbolise an epoch and become the redeemers of the *Raṭa*, *Jātiya* and *Āgama* (country, race and religion). With a weak political authority unable to find a new direction, these monks became a natural focus of hope for political recovery.

For a number of reasons, I have selected the work of Venerable Walpola Rahula to explain this political phenomenon. They include, but are not limited to, the deep influence he exerted on the politics of Sinhala society during the period under study. He decontextualised the historicised *Māhavaṃsa* ideology and managed to mobilise this image as an overarching political force. This article is not a biography of this venerable activist. I confine myself to trying to uncover the key motives of a learned and eminent monk who had renounced this world but nevertheless returned to a political life, and to showing his impact by shifting paradigms in a paradoxical way.

### Life and early work of Walpola Rahula (1907–1997)

By the middle of the 1940s the British Raj, which had paid a historic price to stop the Nazi advance in Europe, was forced to rethink her colonial politics, especially in Asia, where Russia and China had emerged as new and permanent power blocks (Elbaum and Lazonick 1982:567; Jones 1982:239). Holding on to 19th-century colonial politics was promising to bring more harm than benefit. The resulting changed post-war foreign policy compelled the British Government to draw up plans to withdraw from India and Ceylon almost simultaneously. In India, by this time, M.K. Gandhi had done enough work to ignite the freedom

struggle. Many factors, combined with Gandhi's historic non-violent political engagement, had by the late 1940s rendered inevitable the political independence of India.

Sri Lanka stood to benefit from this major regional realignment, even in the absence of any similar charismatic leadership or state-wide agitation for independence among the Sri Lankan political élites (Manor 1990, 1989, 1985). Instead, the political class, which had benefited from the trade and plantation sector of the British administration, sought only a comfortable compromise with the colonists. The exclusive and inter-related families at the top of the power structure in Sri Lanka preferred to continue most, if not all, forms of colonial ties, which conferred immediate benefits on them as a ruling class (Jayawardane 2002, Moore 1989). But Sri Lanka's ruling class has never consisted only of civilians. As has often happened in the country's history, the politically motivated, often urbanised, middle-class sections of the Sangha saw an opportunity to become involved, and to regain their historic influence.

It was the Sangha who first embraced the radical spirit of the Indian movement for freedom and independence. Two Sangha academic centres in the island by then had produced many influential monks who were positioning themselves as key social authorities. Anthropologist H.L. Seneviratne (1999) has vividly documented the social transformation of these monks, as they exchanged their *lokut-tara* (supramundane) spiritual responsibilities for *laukika* (worldly) secular power politics. They moved from the position of spiritual guides, who guide society towards benefits in the other world, to that of political agitators who argue for a certain order in this world. This was a natural extension of the pioneering work of the lay Buddhist revivalists Anagarika Dharmapala and Olcott, which had yet to mature. Dharmapala and others who travelled to India for Buddhist missionary work had witnessed the radical political transformation sweeping that land. They had also experienced the transforming role of the religious authorities in shaping the politics to come in an independent state. These mobilised members of the Sangha were keen to generate and institutionalise the same social activism, and consequent impact, back in Sri Lanka. The faculty of Vidyānāyaka was arguing for the formation of a more radical opposition, aiming to transform the immediate political future of the island. Among them, Walpola Rahula was a powerful articulator with an appealing style of writing.

Rahula was born in the Walpola area of Matara District, in the deep south of Sri Lanka, on 9 May 1907. For historical reasons, southern Sri Lankan Bud-

dhism had always been the radical basis for an agitating Protestant Buddhism (Malalgoda 1979). Anagarika Dharmapala, Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala and Mohottivatte Gunananda are three examples of southern Buddhist reformists who had created a permanent radical and political facet of modern Sinhala Buddhism. Rahula's social background was one in which radical reformist Buddhist social engagement was a spiritual movement with a long and proud history.

Rahula entered a temple school as a boy and was ordained by the age of fifteen. A promising student, he continued with Buddhist studies alongside his secular curriculum, including mathematics and English literature. Rahula became the subject of a rare social debate when he entered the then Ceylon University College as the first member of the Sinhala Sangha to enter a secular university. His upper middle class social background supported this liberal move. The opportunity to read and study secular literature made Rahula immediately question some of the basic popular notions and practices of the Sangha of his time. The young monk soon became popular for his critical engagement with the traditional establishment of the temple and its social inactivity. Rahula took to preaching – of a reformist kind, calling on the institutionalised Sangha to rediscover their lost heritage.

Rahula disseminated his calls for reform through a series of pamphlets published in 1933–34 under the title *Satyodaya Patrikā* ('Truth-revealing papers'). Learning from the success of Christian missionaries at disseminating religious discourse through printed material, Rahula found the free distribution of his printed views on Buddhism, Sangha and Sinhala society a far more effective method of social engagement than the limited alternative of preaching at temples to those who were willing to gather. Rahula was keen to exploit any platform that could be used to advance his argument, thus redefining the role of the Sangha in society and the polity governing it.

In the early 1940s, Rahula became an active participant in the workers' struggle to gain fair wages and improved working conditions from the major plantations and trading companies, whose owners were often British investors. As a young, articulate monk, he was a natural leader in protest activities. Rahula's radicalism threatened the established order, and he was imprisoned for a while for his active role in inciting labour strikes. As has often happened in history when a radical is imprisoned, the effect only made him a more determined social reformer (Rodriguez 2006; Cuthbertson 2004:15-27). On his release, Rahula gave priority to calls for serious reform issued in the first place by his associates in

the traditional Sangha and then by other sectors of Sinhala society, notably lay Buddhists and political leaders. He gained popular support for his radical criticism of established, property-owning senior monks for their abject failure to lead Sinhala society to its full potential. Rahula's social agitation was well-grounded in the universal compassion of Theravada Buddhist theology, which seeks liberation and happiness for all.

Rahula by now fully understood the potential of the written word, and in late 1946 he published a manifesto for the future. This was in many ways an answer to his traditionalist critics. *Bhikṣuvāgē Urumaya* or 'The Heritage of the Bhikṣu', was eventually to become the manual for contemporary Sangha politics in Sri Lanka. It was published two years before the British left Sri Lanka. Thus Rahula by his single, comparatively small, yet strategic and well-formulated intervention laid the foundation for a redefinition of the role of the Sangha in an independent Buddhist state after 438 years of European colonial occupation. All modern Sangha activists, irrespective of affiliation or ideology, have held this text as their handbook for secular political activism. The book became, even for conservatives, a cornerstone of the Sangha's justification for secular and especially political engagement. Running into its fourteenth edition in 2009 and with thousands of copies distributed to almost every functioning temple library in the island, the 'Heritage' in many ways permanently altered the traditional understanding of the dialectical relationship between the Sinhala Sangha and the society in which they live.

### ***Bhikṣuvāgē Urumaya: The Heritage of a Bhikṣu***

The text of the *Heritage*, a work that 'has influenced the monkhood more than any other in the recent history of Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism' (Seneviratne p.135), remains, for at least two reasons, of historic importance for understanding and analysing modern Sangha politics in Sri Lanka. First, the book, while published as a single text, in fact represented the collective articulation of a pre-independence discourse of the activist Sangha. Second, it laid the ideological foundation for the post-independent/contemporary politics of the Sangha. Largely middle-class and urbanised, with above average education and exposure to foreign or regional societies, these comparatively élitist monks were eager to construct a social order where the once glorified political power of the Sangha would be re-established in the independent Sri Lanka. The Vidyalankara faculty, which envisaged a modern Sri Lanka defined only by her Buddhist past, led the dis-

course, and acted as the bridge-builders between a textualised past and an imagined future, in which the Sangha would take centre stage in the social and political order of Sinhala society.

The *Heritage* was not an isolated work. At least two previous texts paved the radical path for Rahula's publication. One was published on 13 February 1946, when the entire faculty of the Vidyalankara unanimously put forward what came to be known as the '*Declaration of Vidyalankara*', a text that called for a radical re-establishment of the powers of the Sangha in the political system. In concluding their Declaration, the faculty claimed:

'In the ancient days, according to the records of history, the welfare of the nation and the welfare of the religion were regarded as synonymous terms by the laity as well as by the Sangha. The divorce of religion from the nation was an idea introduced into the minds of the Sinhalese by invaders from the West, who belonged to an alien faith. It was a convenient instrument of astute policy to enable them to keep the people in the subjugation in order to rule the country as they pleased.

It was in their own interest and not for the welfare of the people that these foreign invaders attempted to create a gulf between the bhikkhus and the laity - a policy they implemented with diplomatic cunning. We should not follow their example and should not attempt to withdraw bhikkhus from society. Such conduct would assuredly be a deplorable act of injustice, committed against our nation, our country and our religion.

Therefore, we publicly state that both our bhikkhus and our Buddhist leaders should avoid the pitfall of acting hastily, without deliberation and foresight, and should be beware of doing a great disservice to our nation and religion.

Feb, 02 1946 Signed K. Pannasara Chief High Priest of Colombo and Chilaw district' (*Heritage*:133)

It is clear that the collective Sangha at Vidyalankara in arguing a new social order once again borrowed from the past and re-introduced the traditional notion of 'integrated governance' of religion and race, as Vesna Wallace has recently shown (2010:94). This interpretation was significant. It sprang from historicised Sinhala Buddhist ideology where violence, if needed, was justified by a 'just war' thesis

(Bartholomeusz 2001, 2002). For these monks, as leading visionaries of an independent Sri Lanka, 'our nation' meant the Sinhala race, 'our country' meant the island ruled by the Buddhists, and 'our religion' meant Sinhala Buddhism. It was actualising the ideology of the *Mahāvamsa* in modern Sri Lanka, in many ways denying and dismissing the multi-faith, multi-ethnic social structure of the island: a political tragedy from which the island has not yet been able to recover.

The second text important for the context of the *Heritage* was the *Kelaniya (Temple) Declaration of Political Independence*. On the strategically important and culturally charged full moon day of 6 January 1947, at an elaborate ceremony led by the chief monk of this historic temple, a group of monks made what in modern terms may be termed as a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). They declared Sri Lanka a sovereign, independent state with full rights to self-determination without foreign domination, and all foreign occupations illegal and immoral. After tracing the historical glory of the land, a brief statement declared:

'We, therefore, the Sangha of Sri Lanka, the Guardians of Life and Liberty and Sponsors of the Wellbeing and Happiness of the people of this island, assembled on this hallowed spot sanctified by the touch of the feet of the Master, do hereby declare and publish on behalf of the people, that Sri Lanka claims its right to be a Free and Independent Sovereign State, that it has resolved to absolve itself from all allegiances to any Power, State or Crown and that all political connection between it and any other state is hereby dissolved; and that as a free and Independent Sovereign State it has full right to safeguard its Freedom and Independence, to contract alliances and do all other acts and things which Independent States may by right do.

For due recognition of the rectitude of our action and for the support of the claim made under this Declaration, we, the Sangha of Sri Lanka, hereby appeal to the conscience and sense of justice of all right-thinking people of the world.

Declared on this auspicious anniversary of the Buddha's first visit to Sri Lanka, Monday, the full-moon day of Duruthu in the year 2490 of the Buddhist era in the new Gandhakuti of the Sri Kalyani Raja Maha Vihara' (*Heritage*:136)

The declaration could not be made in isolation. Discussions to hand over rule were well under way. However, by anticipating actual independence, the Sangha



repositioned themselves as champions of the freedom struggle. Sinhala Buddhism was claimed to be the legitimate political force in independent Sri Lanka, and Sinhala ethno-religious nationalism was superimposed on the core values of Theravada Buddhist ethics, hegemonising Sinhala rule over the entire island. The narrative style, the words chosen and the dating of the declaration all show the determination of the Sangha to return to their heritage after some 440 years of colonial rule.

This declaration dramatised the imagination of the political élite and other nationalist forces in the country. The same historical religious forces gave them the impetus to reformulate the contemporary socio-political order. Their political energy gathered around the radical monks, building a pressure chamber ready to explode in any form allowed. Rahula included both these texts in his *Heritage*, which instantly became a ready reference work for political activism amongst the Sangha.

The *Heritage* is rooted in the vision of Dharmapala and Olcott for the Sangha and its supporters: to be at the centre, not the neglected periphery, of Sinhala society and politics. The enthusiasm it generated among the Sangha across the island worried members of the political élite, including D.S. Senanayake, the agriculture minister in the last pro-colonist government. D.S. was considered a champion of the Buddhist cause, and was expected to be the first Prime Minister of an independent Sri Lanka. Yet he feared the power of this new Sangha nationalism. He tried to win over key members of Vidyānāyaka, instead the monks of this new social force organised themselves under the civil banner of the Lanka Eksath Bhikshu Mandalaya (LEBM), or the United Bhikkhu Organisation of Lanka. This was the first such organisation in modern Sri Lanka amongst the Sangha, a para-political social phenomenon that would have a deep impact in the decades to come (Kent 2010; Gamage 2009; De Votta 2007; Wickramasinghe 2006; Frydenlund 2004; Harris 2001). While an early attempt to form a civil organisation among the Sangha was made at the 1938 Lanka Bhikshu Sammelanaya (Bhikkhu Conference of Sri Lanka), it could not mobilise the same forces as the LEBM. It was against this background that the *Heritage* became a textbook for Sangha politics in the early years of the independence movement in Sri Lanka. In this booklet, Rahula provided the legitimacy and the theoretical justification for a new brand of *dēśapālana bhikṣuvā* ('political monk') or *bhikṣu dēśapālanaya* ('Sangha politics'), as he named them (*Heritage*: xiii).

To date there has not, to my knowledge, been an academic analysis of the text and the social impact of the *Heritage* from a comparative political science perspective. However, the continued popularity of the text, and the authority and legitimacy drawn from it, are testimony to the acceptance it continues to enjoy. Rahula predicted the success of his own polemic. He declared in the introduction to the second edition that through the text a new justification for the political activism of the Sangha had been realised. It is evident that Rahula foresaw that the Sangha of Sri Lanka would obtain the political role he argued for.

### Structure and narrative of the *Heritage*

Rahula shapes the narrative of the *Heritage* strategically, so that it could be divided into five basic sections as follows:

- (i) the historical development of Buddhism and the Sangha in Sri Lanka (chapters 1–5);
- (ii) the role of the Sangha in developing a unique Sinhala culture (chapters 6–10);
- (iii) the three European invasions and the role of the Sangha in the fight for independence (chapters 11–14);
- (iv) British / Christian strategies to destroy Buddhism and the Sangha in Sri Lanka (chapters 15–19); and
- (v) the essential need for a new revival (chapter 20).

Out of the vast body of canonical texts, he highlights what one might call minor themes of Theravada Buddhism to advance his political agenda. He employs at the outset a very liberal and selective interpretation of the Theravada scriptures, wilfully ignoring the holistic approach that underlies the teachings of the *Tipiṭaka*. By tradition, as most historians, anthropologists, theologians and social scientists have agreed, the Buddhist teaching conveyed in a large body of literature has predominantly advocated renouncing the world. Theravada Buddhism has championed a strict form of social withdrawal in every ideological and conceptual sense. Rahula himself, during his time at the Sorbonne, would later defend the Theravada school against its Mahayana competitors in his popular essays such as *What the Buddha Taught* (1959) and *Zen and the Taming of the Bull* (1978). However, in the *Heritage*, his mission seems to be openly political and narrowly nationalist. He focuses on the close links between the Sangha and society and adduces Buddhist canonical texts to justify his stand.

In the opening chapter of the book, Rahula uses the respectable but ambiguous conceptual discourse of Theravada and ‘service to others’. Indeed, he opens his text with the statement, ‘Buddhism is based on services to others’. This is no accident. His aim is to build a broad-based audience around a widely acceptable common currency. There can be no opposition to the call for service to society, which Rahula supports with the story (from the introduction to the *Jātaka* book) of an earlier life of the Buddha as the hermit Sumedha, who gives up the opportunity soon to enter nirvana in order to be of service to others.

‘He [Sumedha] renounced nirvana as suffering in samsara and took upon himself suffering in samsara for the others as nirvana’ (p. 3)

He continues by constructing a chronological history of the Sangha and its life, setting in a modern context the *Mahāvamsa* ideal of the hegemonic relationship of a Sinhala Sangha to the state. He begins with the birth of the Buddha, thus locating the origin and authority of the Sangha in the founder of the faith himself. After briefly giving selected highlights in the history of the establishment of the Buddhist church in India and Sri Lanka, Rahula gives an account of an ancient Sri Lanka in which the Sangha were the main religious, social and political force. His narrative is mostly based on the *Mahāvamsa*, with clever use of incidents and context that support his political aims.

Seneviratne, an unreserved critic of Rahula, maintains that the latter’s use of ‘service to others’ was nothing but a pretext: ‘The Vidyānāthā idea that the monk’s vocation is social service was revolutionary, in that it has provided monks with an unprecedented excuse to seek profit and other secular goals. It has opened the floodgates and given rise to a new monkhood that many thoughtful members of the culture view with alarm.’ (Seneviratne et al. p. 195) Elsewhere he writes, ‘The main reason why these new monks, who claimed their work is community service, have failed to live up to the standards of service envisaged for them by Dharmapala [and other key Buddhist figures] is that they have never intended any such [community service] in the first place. What they meant by community service was a licence for themselves to have greater involvement with secular society, beginning with politics’ (p. 338). Seneviratne goes on to argue that the actual impact of Rahula’s intervention is contrary to the true nature of the Theravada monkhood and is misleading the morality of the Sangha.

‘The true and clear commitment of the monk is to the other-worldly goal, and when that is taken away, the monkhood is freed of its basis

and monks can engage in any activity. ... But when the floodgates are opened, as when knowledge is elevated over practice, there is no inner way to control the activities of monks, whereas such control is the essence of the renouncer's commitment' (p. 172).

Seneviratne continues,

'In the *Urumaya* and in the *History [of Buddhism in Ceylon]* it suits Rahula to be an advocate of a Buddhism that glorifies social intercourse with lay society ... the receipt of salaries and other forms of material remuneration; ethnic exclusivism and Sinhala Buddhist hegemony; militancy in politics; and violence, war and the spilling of blood in the name of "preserving the religion"' (p. 186).

Seneviratne was prescient: many of his theses have been corroborated by the passage of time and the political developments of the Sangha. Yet, taking the *Heritage* objectively, there is no doubt that Rahula very cleverly built on what was already there and influenced the Sinhala Sangha social psyche and the society at large. It may not be close to the Pali canonical writings and their intended message, but one cannot deny the historical fact that Sinhala Buddhism has, over the course of 2000 years, evolved a different set of norms and values and transformed into a Protestant Sinhala Buddhism. As summarised by Tilakaratne:

'Throughout the history of Buddhism, there seem to have been two categories of monks, or rather, monks with two different slants. The best example of this division is the two great elders of the time of the Buddha, namely, Maha Kassapa and Ananda. The former was the epitome of relentless ascetic practice and austerity characterised by living in the forest, dislike for women, etc., clearly even more austere than the Buddha himself. Ananda was the exact opposite: city-dwelling, active, busy, a perfect private secretary, co-ordinator and champion of the liberation of women, visiting and meeting people. The texts say that Ananda could not attain arahanthood, the perfection of the path, until the Buddha attained parinibbana. But the irony is that the person who lived closest to the Buddha and who kept the entire teaching in his memory was unable to realise the main goal of his monastic life. Had Ananda not spent his time for things like preservation of the teaching, he would have attained arahanthood

much earlier, but posterity would have been deprived of the opportunity of following the teaching of the Buddha after he was gone. As Seneviratne holds, the dhamma is to be practised and not to be protected. But it does not seem that we can easily escape the hard reality exemplified in the story of Ananda. It is true that not all were like Ananda or even followed him. But the modes of behaviour exemplified in the lives of the two elders has persisted throughout the history of Buddhism. Categories such as gantha-dhura and vipassana-dhura, dhamma-kathita and pansukulika, and gama-vasi and aranna-vasi that became important in the subsequent history of Buddhism may be traced back to the two elders.' (Tilakaratne 2003, Bath Papers)

The delicate balance between this world and the other may have tilted towards historical and socio-political factors and away from doctrinal practices in the case of Sri Lanka. But the paradoxical tensions between them are real, and create opportunities which Rahula was able to exploit at a critical time.

Rahula borrowed from the argument developed by Anagarika Dharmapala. Yet the 'service to others' Rahula had in mind is far from the kind of service the average village Buddhists were familiar with. Rahula's project was to exploit the existing tradition of community service for a mass mobilisation to recapture the politically influential positions that the Sangha had historically enjoyed. This was a vision, based on the *Mahāvamsa*, targeting the future independent state of Sri Lanka and its governing structure. The *Heritage* appeared under conditions that were ripe for channelling existing social forces into a new political destiny; and as a monk with enough secular education and exposure to regional, especially Indian, political development, Rahula aimed his text at the waiting new generation of younger monks who had benefitted from a liberal education under the colonial administration. The new community of monks who were able to travel and meet more freely than their teachers, and read and understand secular sciences, were energised by Rahula's arguments and the intellectual debate he constructed. To many younger monks who desired a liberated monastic order, he had provided a blueprint for action. They had been waiting for an acceptable mandate from a respectable voice. Rahula's writing, and the argument of the *Heritage*, inspired them to take Sinhala Buddhism and its Sangha in a new direction that would alter both its own destiny and the political fate of the island.

With the success and the acceptance of the *Heritage*, Rahula took to task the relaxed, rural Sangha leadership. With self-appointed authority, he challenged

the ritualistic lifestyle of the average senior monk in Sri Lanka. He even sarcastically stigmatised the fundamental rituals of the Sangha, which were mainly limited to preaching, officiating at Buddhist funerals and conducting the calendrical festivals of the temples. Rahula's calculated attack on the rural Sangha attracted urban monks who were searching for new ways to criticise the detachment of the monkhood from the life of the average Buddhist. Rahula provided a moral justification for the many urban monks who were keener to associate themselves with the political powers of the cities than to serve in the difficult and challenging rural temples. It was also a perfect springboard for those monks who by now were fascinated by the socialist political ideologies in the political landscape. It was this section of the Sangha that the pioneering socialist movements of Sri Lanka targeted and used as an agent of social mobility. As sociologist Kumari Jayawardena noted, 'These strikes were led by petty-bourgeoisie which included Buddhist revivalists, the unorthodox fringe of the Ceylonese bourgeoisie and Theosophists, social reformers, temperance workers, and the more politically conscious nationalists who first gave the urban workers an element of trade union and class consciousness' (1973:6).

There were a number of factors that helped the *Heritage* to galvanise political sections of the Sangha. Rahula's historical contribution was to plant an ideological seed that was later to grow into one of the most significant political forces in Sri Lanka. The role of the contemporary Sangha in justifying the war against the Tamil Tigers is well recorded. Rahula's social context was characterised by a number of powerful factors:

- (i) the inescapable fact of historical political leadership by a Sinhala Sangha
- (ii) the diminished influence of the Sangha during the centuries of foreign rule
- (iii) a growing frustration with the traditional Sangha leadership
- (iv) a period of political uncertainty and transition
- (v) personal values and beliefs

Rahula stood true to his ideology of the societal role of the monkhood until his death. In the mid-1990s, towards the end of his life, he again came to the political forefront. In 1995–1997, he gave leadership to oppose the peace process and the proposed constitutional changes to accommodate the demands of the Tamil ethnic minority. The Chandrika government proposed a constitutional amendment which aimed to address the root causes of Tamil political grievances; it was well received by most moderate, intellectual and academic sections of civil society. This promised a democratic solution to the political crisis which would end the

violent war that was raging. Yet this attempt of the Chandrika government failed due to the formidable forces of the Sangha who opposed the process, largely on grounds of Sinhala Buddhist hegemony. Of course, they had the brutalities of the Tamil Tigers' terrorism as a valid excuse for their opposition.

It is therefore important to ask why Sinhala society is influenced more by the political Sangha than by the eremitic and ascetic monks who propagate a canonical Theravada Buddhism. How is it possible for individual, politically motivated monks to make their involvement in daily secular life acceptable to ordinary people and intervene in public life? It is a historical fact that socio-politics, rather than the canonical texts, has become the key point of reference for Sinhala monks. In the social debate, the Sangha have initiated and cultivated a tradition in which they are more *bhūmiputras*, 'sons of the soil' than *Buddhaputras* or 'sons of the Buddha' (Amunugama 1991a, 1991b, 1985). For these monks, the Buddha himself is the exemplar of dialectical socio-politics. He dealt with kings and advised them on war and peace. He encouraged the Sangha to remain closer to the royal courts. And finally, in the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta*, he predicted a just king in the shadow of the future Buddha.

Rahula, by his well-timed intervention in the form of the *Heritage*, seems to have achieved two distinct but convergent aims. (i) He legitimised the secularisation of the modern Sangha and its interpretation of Buddhism as exclusively Sinhala, and (ii) de-legitimised the 'other', opposing voices who disagreed with his thesis. At a time when the political future of the island was more uncertain than ever, Rahula's arguments were a focal point for Sinhala nationalism, the ancient force that had once lost its direction but was now re-conceptualised by the articulate and culturally compatible scholarship of the Sangha. The ethnic politics of later years were the natural extension of this inclusive and exclusive process. Here, as Derrida has pointed out, the 'other' becomes the historical rogue or rogue against whom society needs to be reconfigured and secured (2005:64). In Sri Lanka, in the Sinhala Buddhist narrative, there has been an 'other' who is often a 'rogue' in every political and social sense. This is how society, the state and even the future are defined: it is not an exceptional condition but rather the norm. Once the 'otherness' is constructed and established, it justifies the punitive political order which is often the centralised mechanism of exclusion and inclusion. At the dawn of Independence in the late 1940s, when Rahula presented his *Heritage* thesis, it was the colonial administration and everything associated with it that was perceived and presented as the rogue. As we have seen, it did not take long

for the ethno-religious nationalism of Sinhala Buddhism to replace them with the non-Buddhists who shared the island as the new rogues in independent Sri Lanka.

The identification of ‘rogues’ within a system naturally demands action: action by every citizen to cleanse these rogues from the societal order. The necessity of action legitimises a continued exclusion and a punitive mechanism for any alternatives or deviations. The excluded, in return, will react in a manner that further justifies the political labels of ‘other’ and ‘rogue’. The Tamil Tigers during their three-decade use of political terrorism did just that. The LTTE with their textbook terror campaign reinforced the dreadful imaginings of the majority Sinhala mind, reproducing a whole social psychology that justified a war within a Sinhala Buddhist discourse. Ven. Athuraliye Rathana, the current leader of the Jātika Hela Urumaya, the all-monk political party in Sri Lanka’s present parliament, echoed the essence of this discourse:

‘There are two central concepts of Buddhism: compassion and wisdom. If compassion was a necessary and sufficient condition, then the Buddha would not have elaborated on wisdom or *prajñā*. Hitler could not have been overcome by *maitriya* alone. Today there is a discourse about peace in Sri Lanka. It is an extremely artificial exercise and one that is clearly being orchestrated under the threat of terrorist attack. Our responsibility is to ensure that the *jātika sammuti* [national consensus] is given voice and the lie of the conflict *sammuti* is exposed.’ (Ven Rathana at Bath conference, 2003.)

This process is the result of a deep insecurity which generates a violent anxiety. Modern observers of Sri Lanka’s political process have testified that it has repeatedly reproduced this social force, often led by a culturally élitist Sangha. The Ven. Prof. Walpola Rahula was only one of those who, at a critical point in the modern history of Sri Lanka, permanently reshaped the polity of the island.

Rahula single-handedly answered those critics and scholars who lamented the development of a brand of Buddhism that contradicted, or at least diverged from, the traditional teachings of the Theravada canon and tradition (Gombrich 1998; Obeyesekere 1995; Ling 1983:60-69; Smith 1972). The trajectory conceptualised by Rahula and developed by his later followers had a decisive impact on the polity of Sri Lanka. Fractured along caste, regional and party lines, the Sangha community has often evolved as a force at the disposal of the opportunity politics of the UNP, SLFP and JVP, the three main Sinhala parties.



As Abeysekera, who looks at the relationship between the ‘Sinhala nation’ and ‘Sinhala Buddhism’, observes, the discourse shifts attention away from the relationship between Buddhism and nationalism as an enduring phenomenon, and towards the specific and contingent ways in which such notions as ‘Buddhist’ and ‘nation’ are defined. By examining particular native debates over what can and cannot count as ‘Buddhist’, Abeysekera recasts Buddhist nationalism ‘as a shifting configuration of discourse wherein competing interests struggle for rhetorical and political advantage’ (Abeysekera 2002:30–31 and Berkwitz 2008).

Between 1950 and 2000, if the politically mobilised Sinhala Sangha agreed and acted on any single issue, it was the determined and violent opposition to the proposal to share political power with the non-Sinhala minorities, which they interpreted as the death of the two fundamental features defining Sri Lanka: Sinhala ethnicity and the Buddhism of the Sinhalese.

The Venerable Walpola Rahula by his ideology, activities and, especially, writing continued the historicised role of the Sinhala Sangha. He recontextualised and intellectualised *raṭa*, *jātiya* and *āgama*, the unitary ownership of the island, the supremacy of the Sinhala race, and the institutionalising of Sinhala Buddhism, in that order of priority.

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