

# Statecraft And Sacred Order: The Collaborative Dynamics Of State And Sangha In Sri Lanka

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper examines the complex interplay between Theravada Buddhism and state power in Sri Lanka, focusing on the post-war period following the civil war's end in 2009. It challenges the commonly held belief that Buddhism inherently promotes non-violence and aligns with social justice, presenting evidence that Buddhism in Sri Lanka has been strategically mobilized to reinforce ethnic divisions and justify violence against minority groups. Through a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, the study explores the historical roots of this politicization, the role of the Buddhist clergy in political affairs, and the implications of constitutional provisions that prioritize Buddhism. Theoretical analyses reveal the broader regional dynamics at play. The paper concludes by discussing the consequences of intertwining religious and political powers, particularly the marginalization of minority rights, and suggests pathways for fostering a more inclusive national identity in Sri Lanka.*

**Key Words:** *Theravada Buddhism; Sri Lanka; religious politicization; ethnic conflict; Buddhist nationalism; Southeast Asia; State-religion relations; Religious minorities; Ethnosymbolism; Conflict Theory*

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## I. Introduction

Southeast Asia, characterized by its rich diversity and complex historical backgrounds, has witnessed a distinct pattern of religious influences on both national and ethnic identities.<sup>i</sup> Among its various religious forces, Buddhism, particularly Theravada Buddhism, has played a pivotal role, not only as a spiritual guide but also as a political tool.<sup>ii</sup>

Sri Lanka, a nation with a deeply entrenched Buddhist majority, presents a compelling case study of this phenomenon, especially in the post-war era. The end of the civil war in 2009 marked a new chapter in Sri Lanka's history, one where the role of Buddhism transcended the boundaries of personal faith and ventured deeply into the arenas of political and ethnic identity formation.<sup>iii</sup>

It is important to recognize that prior to the advent of colonialism, Sri Lanka was characterized by a remarkable religious pluralism where Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity coexisted in relative harmony for centuries. The colonial encounter disrupted this equilibrium, as they manipulated religious identities to establish and maintain control, sowing seeds of division that would later be exploited by nationalist movements.<sup>iv</sup>

Central to this paper is the thesis that challenges the commonly held assumption that Theravada Buddhism inherently espouses non-violence and aligns with social justice movements. Contrary to this belief, evidence from recent years suggests that Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka has been strategically mobilized to fortify ethnic divides, often justifying or even inciting violence.<sup>v</sup> This instrumentalization of Buddhism is not a mere anomaly but a reflection of a deeper and more systematic engagement of religion in the political fabric of the country.

Through this lens, we will explore how the perceived sanctity of Buddhism is manipulated to serve geopolitical and ethnic stratifications, thereby challenging the foundational Buddhist precepts of peace and righteousness.<sup>vi</sup>

## II. Literature Review

The exploration of Buddhism's role within political spheres in Sri Lanka has been deeply informed by scholarly discourse that critically examines the interplay between religious doctrines and state power. This literature review delves into specific scholarly contributions that provide a nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

Robert Hefner has articulated how modern states in Asia have attempted to harness religious sentiments to fortify national identity. <sup>vii</sup> In his analysis, Hefner points out that in many Asian societies, the modern state has co-opted religious symbols and clergy to legitimize its rule, thereby blurring the lines between secular authority and religious sanctity. This observation is crucial for understanding the state's use of Buddhism in Sri Lanka to consolidate power and instigate social cohesion under a singular nationalistic banner.

Stanley J. Tambiah's work is particularly seminal in understanding the specific Sri Lankan context. He provides a detailed examination of how the Buddhist Sangha has historically aligned with the laity's nationalist movements to influence political outcomes. Tambiah asserts that the Sangha has seen its role not merely as a spiritual anchor but as a guardian of the Sinhala nation, which has led to its active participation in ethno-political mobilization. <sup>viii</sup> His analysis highlights the dual role of Buddhism as a peaceful doctrine and a mobilizing force in ethnic politics.

John Clifford Holt provides an in-depth analysis of the religious and political interface in Sri Lanka, particularly how Buddhism has been utilized in the construction of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. Holt observes that the alliance between religious leaders and political entities has historically contributed to deepening ethnic divisions within the country. He argues that Buddhist monks and their institutions have often been at the forefront of promoting and sustaining the ideologies that fuel ethnic nationalism, which has exacerbated conflicts rather than fostering peace. <sup>ix</sup> This perspective sheds light on the complex role that religious doctrines and clergy play in influencing socio-political landscapes.

The historical trajectory of the state-clergy nexus in Sri Lanka reveals a pattern where political authorities and Buddhist clergy have reciprocally used each other to achieve their respective goals. Neil DeVotta offers a critical perspective on this, detailing how the post-independence Sinhalese political leaders have often utilized Buddhist clergy to validate their authority, often at the expense of minority rights and social justice. <sup>x</sup>

Mahinda Deegalle further elaborates on this theme by examining specific instances where Buddhist ideologies have been mobilized for political agendas. Deegalle highlights the case of the Jathika Hela Urumaya monks' mobilization of Buddhist doctrines in political contexts which served more to legitimize existing power structures and marginalize minorities than to promote the ethical and philosophical teachings of Buddhism. <sup>xi</sup> His research underscores the contradiction between the original teachings of Buddhism and their applications in political spheres, particularly in the context of Sri Lanka's post-war ethnic and religious dynamics.

This literature collectively establishes a critical framework for analyzing the contemporary implications of Buddhism's politicization in Sri Lanka, providing a grounded understanding of its historical roots and current manifestations. By engaging deeply with these scholarly works, this paper aims to shed light on the complex interrelations between religion and state power, challenging the often-celebrated narrative of Buddhism as inherently peaceful and apolitical.

### **III. Material And Methods**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing a comprehensive review of secondary sources to examine the politicization of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its implications on ethnic and national identities. The period under consideration spans from the time of Sri Lanka's independence (1948) to the Sri Lankan civil war and its lingering effects in the present day, focusing on how Buddhist ideologies have been integrated into political narratives and actions during this post-conflict era.

**Source Selection:** The sources selected for this study include:

- a) Academic Journals and Books:** Scholarly articles and monographs that discuss the intersection of religion and politics in Sri Lanka, with particular attention to works by experts who provide insights into the role of Buddhism in national and ethnic conflicts.
- b) News Articles and Reports:** Articles from reputable news organizations and reports from international bodies and non-governmental organizations that provide accounts of recent events related to religious and ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka.
- c) Government and Legal Documents:** Public statements, policies, and laws related to religious practices and national identity in Sri Lanka, which help to understand the official stance and legislative context concerning Buddhism.

**Study Design:** The study employs an analytical approach which is framed around the following key concepts.

- a) Historical Contextualization:** Understanding the historical dynamics of Buddhism's role in Sri Lankan society, particularly how these dynamics have evolved since the end of the civil war.
- b) Discourse Analysis:** Analysing the rhetoric used in political speeches, religious sermons, and media to understand how Buddhism is represented and manipulated in public discourse.

c) **Comparative Analysis:** Comparing Sri Lanka's situation with similar contexts in other countries in South and Southeast Asia where religion plays a significant role in politics, to draw broader conclusions about the patterns and effects of religious politicization.

**Limitations:**

This study acknowledges the limitations inherent in using secondary sources, including potential biases in reporting and analysis, and the varying quality and depth of available materials. Where possible, triangulation of data from multiple types of sources is used to mitigate these limitations and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. By systematically reviewing and analysing these sources, this methodology supports a detailed examination of the ways in which Theravada Buddhism has been used as a tool for political and ethnic stratification in Sri Lanka, contributing to the academic discourse on religion and politics in post-conflict societies.

**IV. Navigating Secularism And Sanctity: The Constitutional Role Of Buddhism In Sri Lanka**

In 1948, Sri Lanka gained independence from British colonial rule. Initially, the country adopted a secular stance in its governance structure, reflecting the diverse ethnic and religious composition of its population. This early phase was marked by efforts to forge a national identity that could unify various ethnic and religious groups under a single national framework. These efforts were initially inclusive, though the dominant Sinhalese Buddhist majority soon began to assert their cultural and religious preferences in the political arena, setting the stage for the gradual integration of Buddhism into the state's identity.<sup>xii</sup>

The period immediately following independence was crucial for setting the foundations of how Buddhism would be positioned within the new state's legal and cultural paradigms. During this time, legislation did not explicitly prioritize Buddhism, but public policy and government practices began to subtly align with Buddhist doctrines and the interests of the Buddhist Sinhalese majority.<sup>xiii</sup> This alignment was evidenced in the state's patronage of Buddhist ceremonies and the incorporation of Buddhist symbols and practices into public life, which were reflective of the growing influence of Buddhism in political expressions and identity politics. These early decisions were indicative of the Sinhalese political elite's strategy to embed Buddhism at the heart of national identity, which paved the way for more explicit constitutional recognition in later years.<sup>xiv</sup>

The Sinhalese political leaders utilized Buddhism to consolidate power and legitimize their governance, thus embedding a religious dimension into the fabric of national politics.<sup>xv</sup> Following the subtle alignment of government policies with Buddhist doctrines, the official constitutional recognition in 1972 firmly established Buddhism's foremost place in Sri Lanka. This was further entrenched with the 1978 Constitution, which continued to emphasize the state's duty to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana. These constitutional mandates were not merely symbolic but instrumental in integrating Buddhist principles into the fabric of Sri Lankan governance and public policy.

The 1972 Constitution, which marked the establishment of the Republic of Sri Lanka, was a pivotal document in this transformation. It was the first to state explicitly that "the Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the state to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana".<sup>xvi</sup> This provision underscored a national commitment to Buddhism that went beyond mere cultural acknowledgment, weaving it into the legal and governmental operations of the state.<sup>xvii</sup> The 1978 Constitution reinforced and expanded the provisions laid out in the 1972 Constitution, further legitimizing the special role of Buddhism in Sri Lankan society. It reiterated the state's responsibility towards Buddhism and detailed the mechanisms through which such protection would be implemented, influencing a range of policies from education to public administration.<sup>xviii</sup>

The following table connects abstract legal language of the 1972 and 1978 constitutions to tangible outcomes in the form of examples to understand the constitutional role of Buddhism and its impact on Sri Lankan society.

**Table no 1: Comparative Analysis of 1972 and 1978 Constitutions and their impacts.**

ASPECTS	1972 CONSTITUTION	1978 CONSTITUTION	IMPACT
<b>Recognition of Buddhism</b>	- <b>Article 6:</b> "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana."	- <b>Article 9:</b> "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e)."	State funding for Buddhist temples, in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, historical sites central to Buddhist heritage, prioritization of Buddhist sites in national preservation efforts through the 'Buddhist Revival Fund'. <sup>xix</sup>
<b>Role of</b>	- Implied alignment of state	- Further emphasized in <b>Article</b>	

<b>Buddhism in Governance</b>	policies with Buddhist principles through the state's duty to protect Buddhism.	<b>9</b> , impacting sectors such as education and public administration.	Mandatory teaching of religious studies in public schools. Buddhism is sometimes the only religion taught in majority Sinhala areas and/or rural areas. <sup>xx</sup>
<b>Protection of Minority Rights</b>	- <b>Article 18:</b> Recognized religious freedom: "Every citizen is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion..."	- <b>Article 9</b> assures rights of other religions while still prioritizing Buddhism.	The construction of a mosque in the Dambulla area was halted in 2012 following protests by Buddhist monks, arguing that it was within a "Buddhist sacred area." <sup>xxi</sup>
<b>State Support and Sponsorship</b>	- Initiated state sponsorship of Buddhism, including public ceremonies and religious observances, integrating Buddhist practices into national life.	- Expanded state sponsorship, including financial support for Buddhist institutions and broader state involvement in Buddhist activities.	Government sponsorship of Vesak celebrations as a national holiday, with extensive state involvement in organizing and funding these events. <sup>xxii</sup>
<b>Integration of Monastic Interests</b>	- Began the involvement of Buddhist monks in political processes, influencing policies on culture and religion.	- Increased representation of monks in legislative and political decision-making processes, especially in cultural and religious matters.	In 2020, the Sri Lankan government established a <b>Buddhist Advisory Council</b> , composed of leading Buddhist monks, to provide guidance on governance and policies. This council directly influences government decisions. <sup>xxiii</sup>
<b>Impact on National Identity</b>	- Buddhism became a central component of national identity, reflected in state symbols and ceremonies, aligning national identity with Buddhist principles.	- Further entrenched Buddhism in the national identity, influencing not just symbols but also public policy and societal norms.	The Golden Lion on the Sri Lankan flag represents the Sinhalese ethnicity, the eight hairs on the lions tail represent the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism. <sup>xxiv</sup>
<b>Impact on Ethnic and Religious Harmony</b>	- Established a framework that implicitly prioritized Buddhism, contributing to growing tensions between the Buddhist majority and religious minorities.	- Reinforced Buddhist dominance, further exacerbating ethnic tensions, particularly with Tamil and Muslim communities.	The ethnic conflict with the Tamil population, where the prioritization of Buddhism contributed to the perception of an exclusionary state, fuelling the civil war and ongoing tensions between religious communities.

These constitutional provisions did more than define the state's relationship with Buddhism; they facilitated a deeper integration of monastic interests into political processes. This era saw increased representation of Buddhist monks in legislative processes and their growing influence in political decisions, especially those affecting cultural and societal norms.<sup>xxv</sup>

### V. Monastic Governance: Exploring The Sangha's Official Capacities In Political Affairs

During the 1950s and 1960s, Sri Lanka experienced a pivotal shift in the role of Buddhist monks from purely spiritual leaders to active political participants. This era saw Buddhist clergy increasingly engage in nationalistic movements that not only promoted Sinhala-Buddhist identity but also actively shaped the political landscape of the country.<sup>xxvi</sup> Their involvement in protests and political movements was not merely about religious advocacy but also about asserting Sinhalese cultural dominance within the multi-ethnic context of post-independence Sri Lanka. Monks leveraged their respected status to influence political decisions, advocating for policies that reinforced Sinhala-Buddhist priorities.<sup>xxvii</sup> This period marked the beginning of a more aggressive form of religious nationalism that intertwined religious convictions with political power, often at the expense of other ethnic and religious communities within Sri Lanka.

The active engagement of Buddhist monks in political movements was particularly prominent in the context of the Sinhala Only Movement. The movement, which culminated in the Official Language Act of 1956, was strongly supported by prominent Buddhist monks who viewed the promotion of Sinhala as a return to a perceived golden age of Sinhalese and Buddhist dominance. <sup>xxviii</sup> This period also saw monks participating in anti-Tamil riots, such as those in 1958, which further entrenched ethnic divisions. Buddhist monks used historical narratives to justify political actions during this period, such as supporting the Sinhala Only policy, which had profound implications for ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. <sup>xxix</sup>

**Table no 2: Chronological overview of the involvement of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka's political history.**

DATE	INCIDENTS
1890s	Anagarika Dharmapala was a key figure in the Buddhist revival movement. He emphasized the need to protect Buddhism from colonial influences and promoted Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, laying the groundwork for later political activism by Buddhist monks. <sup>xxx</sup>
1956	Buddhist monks played a crucial role in the support for S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's 1956 Election Campaign and Sinhala Only Movement which led to the passing of the Sinhala Only Act. This act made Sinhala the sole official language of Sri Lanka, significantly marginalizing Tamil speakers. Monks actively campaigned for this policy, seeing it as cementing Sinhalese-Buddhist dominance in the country. <sup>xxxii</sup>
1972	The Sangha was actively involved in the drafting of the 1972 Constitution, which officially gave Buddhism the "foremost place" in Sri Lanka. Monks lobbied to ensure that Buddhist interests were enshrined in the constitution, marking a formal integration of religious and state interests.
1983	The rise of Jathika Chintanaya, ( <b>Nationalist Ideology</b> ), was heavily supported by Buddhist monks. This period also saw the rise of monks like Gangodawila Soma, who were vocal in promoting a Sinhalese Buddhist identity, particularly in the context of the ethnic conflict. <sup>xxxiii</sup>
2004	The formation of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a political party led by Buddhist monks, was formed with the explicit aim of protecting Sinhalese Buddhist interests in the political sphere. The JHU won 9 seats in Parliament, demonstrating the formal political power of the Sangha in state governance.
2012-2014	Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a hardline Buddhist nationalist organization led by monks, became highly active in this period. The BBS was involved in anti-Muslim campaigns and violence, positioning itself as a protector of Buddhism against perceived threats. Their activities have been influential in shaping nationalist policies and rhetoric.
2020-Present	In 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa formed a Buddhist Advisory Council composed of senior monks to advise on governance and policy. This formalized the role of the Sangha in shaping national policies, particularly those related to culture, education, and religion.

**Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU): A Deeper Look:** The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) was established in 2004 as a political party predominantly led by Buddhist monks, which was a novel phenomenon in Sri Lankan politics. This move was underpinned by the monks' desire to directly influence the legislative processes to better reflect Buddhist values and Sinhala nationalism, which they felt were being compromised in the political arena.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The JHU aimed to protect and foster Buddhist cultural and religious heritage and assert it within the governance of Sri Lanka.

**Key Philosophies<sup>xxxiv</sup>:**

- Sinhalese-Buddhist Nationalism as the core of Sri Lankan identity.
- Buddhism should hold the foremost place in the state, with policies reflecting Buddhist teachings and principles.
- Strongly opposes religious conversions from Buddhism to other religions, advocating for laws to prevent unethical conversions.
- Promotes a unitary state structure, rejecting any form of federalism or devolution of power that could weaken the central government.
- Resists any political concessions or autonomy for ethnic minorities, particularly Tamil and Muslim communities, in favour of a unified Sinhalese-Buddhist state.
- Protection and promotion of Buddhist heritage sites, rituals, and symbols.
- Emphasizes traditional Sinhalese values, advocating for policies that align with conservative social norms rooted in Buddhist teachings.
- Protection of the environment based on Buddhist principles of non-harm and respect for all living beings, opposing destructive industrial practices.
- Advocates for economic policies that prioritize the interests of the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority, opposing foreign influence and promoting local industries.

Since its inception, the JHU has been vocal and active in various national issues, particularly those affecting the status and rights of the Buddhist majority. They successfully secured nine seats in Parliament, illustrating significant public support for its platform. This electoral victory allowed them to influence national policy more directly than any religious group had before.<sup>xxxv</sup> This has sparked considerable debate about the role of religion in public governance and its implications for democracy and minority rights in Sri Lanka:

- **Ethnic and Religious Tensions:** The JHU's hardline stance on various issues has sometimes exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions within the country. For instance, their opposition to certain peace initiatives with the LTTE was seen as a factor in prolonging the ethnic conflict.<sup>xxxvi</sup> One of the JHU's notable legislative initiatives was advocating for laws against religious conversion, which they viewed as protecting the Buddhist faith from what they considered unethical conversions by other religious groups.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

- **Influence on National Policies:** Beyond parliamentary participation, the JHU has influenced broader national policies related to religious and cultural heritage, advocating for measures that prioritize Buddhist and Sinhalese perspectives in state affairs. For instance, the JHU (in cohorts with the BBS in 2013) argued that Halal certification should not be mandatory for all food products, especially those consumed primarily by non-Muslim populations.<sup>xxxviii</sup> They claimed that such a requirement was an imposition on the majority Buddhist population and pushed for policies that would make Halal certification voluntary, ensuring that it was applied only to products aimed at Muslim consumers. Due to pressure from groups like the JHU, there was a notable shift in how Halal certification was approached in Sri Lanka. The government and various business sectors moved towards making Halal certification voluntary rather than mandatory, aligning with the demands of the JHU and its supporters.<sup>xxxix</sup>

JHU's role in polarization of Sri Lankan society along ethnic and religious lines is often viewed as a setback to efforts aimed at reconciliation and unity in post-civil war Sri Lanka. The Jathika Hela Urumaya remains a controversial yet influential force in Sri Lankan politics, embodying the complexities and challenges of integrating religious authority with political power.<sup>xl</sup> Its activities continue to provoke discussion about the balance between religious rights and secularism in a diverse society like Sri Lanka.

## **VI. Divisive Doctrines: Bodu Bala Sena And The Escalation Of Ethnoreligious Tensions**

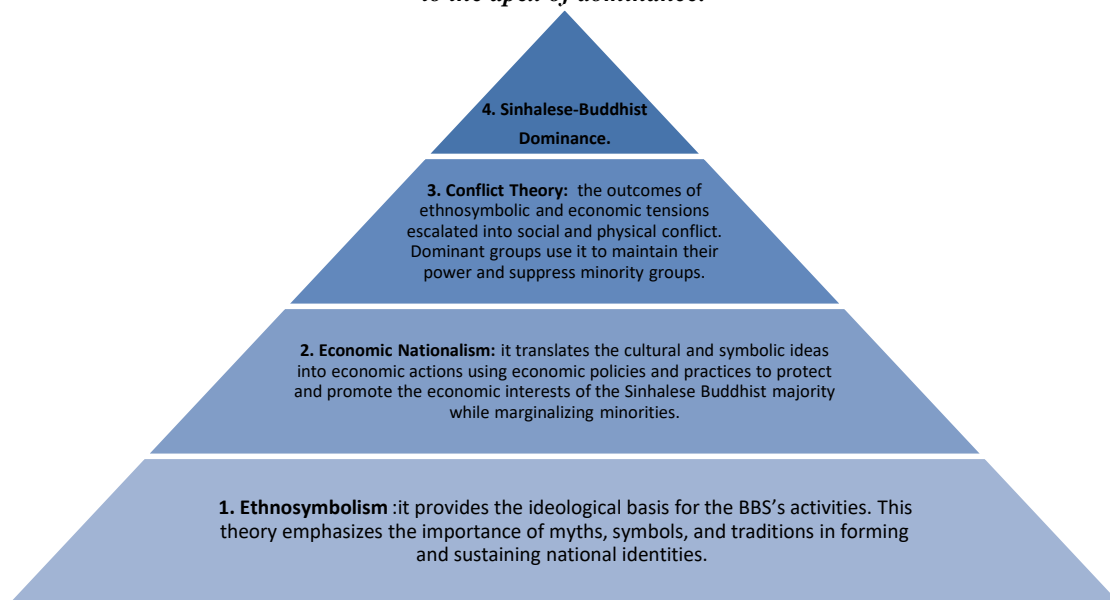
The Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), translating to "Buddhist Power Force," was founded by monks Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara and Kirama Wimalajothi in response to perceived threats from minority religious communities. It emerged as a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist organization, quickly gaining notoriety for its aggressive stance against perceived threats to Buddhism from minority religious groups. The BBS positioned itself as a protector of Sinhalese Buddhist heritage against what it described as the dilution of their cultural and religious dominance in Sri Lanka.<sup>xli</sup> The formation of BBS was a reaction to what its leaders saw as increasing influence of minority religions and the secularization of Sri Lankan society. It aimed to assert Sinhalese Buddhist supremacy in a multicultural society.<sup>xlii</sup> This move is emblematic of a broader phenomenon observed in many post-colonial societies where religious and ethnic majorities seek to assert dominance, often feeling threatened by the globalization and perceived erosion of traditional values.

The formation of BBS can be analysed through the lens of **Ethnosymbolism**, a theory in nationalism studies that emphasizes the role of myths, symbols, and traditions in the formation and longevity of national identities.<sup>xliii</sup> This perspective helps explain why movements like BBS gain traction by tapping into deep-seated historical narratives and cultural symbols.

**Anti-Halal Campaign (2013):** The campaign against halal certification, spearheaded by BBS, illustrates how economic practices can be framed as cultural threats, which is a common tactic in ethno-religious conflicts.<sup>xliiv</sup> This campaign not only sought to assert Sinhalese Buddhist dominance but also to economically marginalize Muslim businesses, which were predominantly involved in the halal certification process. This campaign can be studied under **Economic Nationalism**, where economic measures are used to define national identity and exclude 'others'.<sup>xli v</sup> This theory provides a framework for understanding how economic actions were used to reinforce national boundaries and identities in this case.

**Aluthgama Riots (2014):** The violence during these riots, triggered by a BBS rally, is a stark example of how religious nationalism can escalate into violent conflict. The riots were triggered by a rally held by BBS, during which inflammatory speeches were made by BBS leaders, including Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara.<sup>xli vi</sup> His rhetoric, charged with ethno-religious sentiment, played a critical role in exacerbating existing tensions between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority. This rhetoric included accusations against Muslims of economic domination and attempts to undermine Buddhist culture, which ignited already simmering tensions.<sup>xli vii</sup> The riots can be examined through **Conflict Theory**, which posits that societal conflicts can arise when dominant groups attempt to maintain their status over others.<sup>xli viii</sup>

**Figure no 1: The hierarchical relationship between the theories, with each layer supporting the next, leading to the apex of dominance.**



Each layer is independent, with ethnosymbolic narratives providing the ideological basis, economic nationalism translating those ideas into tangible actions, and conflict theory explaining the violent outcomes that reinforce BBS's goals. The application of each of the above theories is as follows:

- 1. Ethnosymbolism:** The BBS frequently invokes historical narratives that depict Buddhism as being under threat, positioning themselves as protectors of a sacred heritage and shared identity.
- 2. Economic Nationalism:** The BBS advocated for boycott of Muslim-owned businesses and products and targeted halal practices to protect the Sinhalese Buddhist economy from being undermined by minorities.
- 3. Conflict Theory:** Finally, when these economic and cultural tensions reach a boiling point, they manifest as social conflict. The BBS's inflammatory rhetoric and actions often provoke violence, which they see as a necessary struggle to maintain Sinhalese Buddhist dominance.
- 4. Sinhalese-Buddhist dominance:** The culmination of these 3 interconnected strategies is how the BBS achieves its goals.

The rally speeches were followed by an altercation involving a Buddhist monk and Muslim youths, which BBS used to justify calls for action against the Muslim community. The situation quickly escalated, resulting in mobs attacking Muslim homes, businesses, and places of worship. The violence led to significant loss of life and property, marking one of the most severe episodes of communal violence in Sri Lanka's recent history.<sup>xlix</sup>The state had failed in this instance to prevent the spread of violence and adequately protect minority communities.<sup>1</sup>

The Aluthgama Riots are often analysed within the broader context of post-civil war Sri Lanka, where ethno-religious lines have been sharply drawn. The state's policies and the political climate have contributed to or failed to prevent such ethnic conflicts. State alignment with nationalist groups like BBS can have adverse impact on policy formulation and inter-ethnic relations. Scholars argue that incidents like these are symptomatic of deeper structural issues within Sri Lankan society, including the politicization of ethnicity and religion.<sup>ii</sup>

The Bodu Bala Sena's foray into electoral politics in 2015 represents a strategic attempt to formalize its influence within Sri Lanka's political system. Despite their significant social presence, their success in electoral politics was limited, highlighting the challenges faced by ethno-nationalist groups in gaining legitimate political power.<sup>iii</sup> This mirrors global trends where radical groups struggle to transition from street power to parliamentary representation.

In 2017, Gnanasara Thero's imprisonment for intimidating a journalist's wife marked a significant judicial response to BBS's often unchecked aggressions.<sup>liii</sup> This event, while legally damning, paradoxically elevated his status among followers, illustrating the complex role that perceived persecution plays in martyrdom narratives within nationalist movements.<sup>liv</sup> The 2018 presidential pardon of Gnanasara Thero was controversial and signalled possible governmental leniency or sympathy towards nationalist elements. This action was criticized both domestically and internationally, reflecting the contentious role of political influence in judicial outcomes.<sup>lv</sup>

Following the 2019 Easter bombings, BBS's rhetoric intensified, framing the attacks as justifications for increased protectionism of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. Their response exemplifies how extremist groups exploit national crises to further their own agendas, impacting national discourse on ethnicity and security.<sup>lvi</sup> The alignment of BBS with political figures who see their influence as beneficial for vote banking with the Buddhist Sinhala majority underscores the interplay between nationalism and political machinations in Sri Lanka.<sup>lvii</sup>

BBS has been widely criticized for promoting ethno-religious nationalism, which destabilizes Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic composition. These criticisms are well-documented, underscoring the dangerous implications of their rhetoric. This is particularly concerning given the historical context of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka.

Notable Buddhist figures have denounced BBS's tactics as contrary to Buddhist teachings, highlighting a significant internal religious conflict regarding the group's approach. In various statements, the Dalai Lama<sup>lviii</sup> has expressed concern over the actions of groups like BBS, emphasizing that the true essence of Buddhism is about compassion and peace. He has explicitly criticized the violence incited by such groups and highlighted the incongruence of their actions with Buddhist principles.<sup>lix</sup> A respected scholar and monk, Walpola Rahula Thero has written extensively on the misinterpretation of Buddhist doctrines by nationalist groups.<sup>lx</sup> In his works, he argues that the aggressive and exclusionary actions fundamentally misunderstand and misrepresent the teachings of Buddhism, which advocate for non-violence and compassion towards all beings. International organizations also have criticised how BBS receives implicit government support for legitimizing its actions and rhetoric against minority communities, particularly Muslims.<sup>lxi</sup> The appointment of nationalist figures to lead significant legal reform tasks is also seen as a move to institutionalize ethno-religious bias by the international community.<sup>lxii</sup>

## VII. Discussion

- 1. Historical Roots of Politicization of Buddhism:** The politicization of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka has deep historical roots, intricately linked to the island's colonial past. During British rule, Buddhism was often co-opted by nationalist movements as a means of resistance against colonial domination, thereby intertwining religious identity with national identity.<sup>lxiii</sup> This trend accelerated in the post-independence era, where political leaders leveraged Buddhist identity to frame their agendas and consolidate power, as the Buddhist clergy began to play a more prominent role in politics, notably during the anti-colonial struggle.<sup>lxiv</sup>
- 2. Impact of the Civil War:** The end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 brought about an intensification of Buddhist nationalism. Political leaders increasingly used Buddhist symbolism to rally support among the Sinhalese majority while portraying minority groups, especially Tamils and Muslims, as threats to national identity.<sup>lxv</sup> This narrative was not merely rhetorical; it often translated into policies that marginalized minority communities and fuelled communal tensions, challenging the core ethical teachings of Buddhism that emphasize compassion and non-violence.<sup>lxvi</sup>
- 3. Instrumentalization for Political Gain:** Observers have noted that the alignment of state policy with Buddhist doctrine has legitimized actions that contradict the principle of ahimsa.<sup>lxvii</sup> For instance, incidents of violence against Muslim communities and the rise of extremist organizations like the Bodu Bala Sena illustrate how political rhetoric can incite communal violence while portraying such actions as protective measures for Buddhism.<sup>lxviii</sup> The case of the JHU highlights the direct influence of religious leaders in legislative processes. The party's stance on issues like anti-conversion legislation and halal certification illustrates how religious ideologies are leveraged to shape national policies and societal norms, often exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions.
- 4. Legal and Cultural Frameworks:** The integration of Buddhist principles into the legal and cultural frameworks of Sri Lanka is evident through constitutional provisions that grant Buddhism a preeminent status. The 1972 and 1978 Constitutions reinforce its centrality in national identity. This constitutional framework perpetuates the idea that state governance should reflect Buddhist values, thereby intertwining religious and political authority.<sup>lxix</sup> Such integration has implications for governance, creating an environment where religious doctrines can influence laws and social policies, often sidelining minority rights and secular principles.
- 5. Consequences on Minority Rights:** The intertwining of religious and political powers has profound consequences for minority rights. While Buddhism may provide a sense of unity for the Sinhalese majority, it often does so at the expense of the rights and identities of minority communities.<sup>lxx</sup> Critics argue that the state's endorsement of Buddhism hampers the possibility of a pluralistic society where diverse beliefs can coexist harmoniously. Instead, it fosters an atmosphere of exclusion, as seen in recent policies that favour Buddhist cultural expressions while limiting the visibility and rights of other religious groups.<sup>lxxi</sup>



## VIII. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated how Buddhism, traditionally seen as a doctrine of peace and compassion, has been co-opted by state actors to legitimize authority and reinforce ethnic divisions. This instrumentalization is not a modern anomaly but rather an extension of historical trends where religious symbols and institutions have been mobilized for political ends.

Theories such as Ethnosymbolism, Economic Nationalism and Conflict Theory provide a framework for understanding these developments, highlighting the role of religious narratives in maintaining social hierarchies and legitimizing state actions. The persistence of ethno-religious nationalism underscores the challenges of reconciling religious identity with the principles of democratic governance and pluralism.

Addressing the politicization of Buddhism in Sri Lanka requires tailored strategies that account for the unique historical, cultural, and political context of the country. Some of them are mentioned below:

- Revisiting the 1972 and 1978 Constitutions to ensure that all religions are granted equal status under the law could be a crucial step in fostering religious harmony. While Buddhism's historical significance can be acknowledged, the state must adopt a more inclusive approach that protects the rights of all religious communities.
- To counteract the influence of religious nationalism on the judiciary, it is essential to strengthen the independence of judicial institutions. Establishing a robust legal framework for prosecuting hate speech and religiously motivated violence is critical for upholding the rule of law.
- The Sri Lankan government, in collaboration with civil society organizations, should actively promote interfaith dialogue initiatives to help bridge divides, build mutual understanding, and reduce the mistrust that fuels religious nationalism.
- Revising the educational curriculum to emphasize the country's history of religious coexistence and to educate students on the importance of pluralism and tolerance is another critical step that can foster a more inclusive national identity.
- The government should establish dedicated bodies/mechanisms to monitor religious extremism and hate speech, both online and offline. They could work in partnership with international organizations to develop strategies for countering radicalization and promoting narratives that emphasize shared values.

Moving forward, addressing the politicization of Buddhism in Sri Lanka necessitates a critical examination of how religious ideologies can be disentangled from state governance. Advocating for a secular approach that emphasizes human rights and equality can facilitate reconciliation among ethnic groups while aligning more closely with the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. Engaging in interfaith dialogues and promoting policies that recognize the contributions of all communities can pave the way for a more inclusive national identity that respects the rich tapestry of Sri Lanka's multicultural society.

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