RELIGIOUS HARMONY AND COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM IN SRI LANKA

Ponnuthurai Chandrasegaram
Lecturer, Department of Hindu Civilization, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Religious harmony is a present-day issue all over the world. Sri Lanka, is a multi-religious nation with people of strong religious beliefs, (when compared to other countries). In general there had been comparative religious harmony in its long history. Occasionally, sporadic incidents of disharmony appeared. Sri Lanka is the only country which nurtured Theravada Buddhism for two and a half millennia, in its purest form. Still it continued to preserve multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups and permitted them to continue their cultural independence. As in India, in Sri Lanka too, the earlier Hindu religion continued its universal and tolerant outlook. Political events and the rise and fall of the kingdoms had their effect on Hindu – Buddhist relations. However in practice, the Buddhists continued their worship of Hindu deities. Kataragamais the centre of worship for Hindu – Buddhist worshippers. Sri Pada attracts Buddhists as the shrine for Buddha’s Foot – printand Hindus call it Sivan-Oli- Padamalai (The mountain of light of Siva’s feet). Nagadipa, the little Island in the North, attracts pilgrims – both Hindus and Buddhists.

INTRODUCTION

The age-old Sri Lankan religions Hinduism (12.61% of the Population) and Buddhism - (70.19% of the Population) look up to India for their cultural roots. The very word Hindu means those beyond the River Indus. It was used by Persians and Greeks, who lived in the West of India. The Tamil Saiva people (who practise Hinduism) prefer “Saivism” to ‘Hinduism’. Literary evidence, the Brahmi inscriptions and archeological remains prove that Siva worship was prevalent in this Island. Thirumoolar, in his “Thirumantram 3000” calls this country Siva Bhoomi (Land of Siva). Mahavamsa and allied legendary literature and commentaries speak of the Theravada Buddhism as brought and preached by Asoka’s son ‘Mahinda’ as the civilizing factor among the Sinhala people. Buddhism is no longer practise in India whereas Sri Lankans claim that they practise the purest form of Buddhism.

Sri Lankan Hindus never forget the fact that Siddharta Gautama was born and died as a Hindu. He followed the penance, meditation of the Hindus; although he abhorred Vedic animal sacrifice practiced by the Brahmins. He evolved his own Pancha Seela (Five Noble Precepts) and Dyâna (Meditation) and preached the Middle Path. The Karma theory and rebirth was accepted by him although he denied a creator to direct Karma. Sankara’s philosophy was indebted to Buddhism, to the extent that some thinkers called him Prachanna Baudha (A Buddhist in disguise) In Sri Lanka, much evidence is visible in our legendary history as well as modern historical evidences that the common people lived amicably. There was much give-and-take; foreigners rarely notice contrary evidence in our religious practices.

In the Ruwanwelisaya, the imposing Buddha image is flanked by Ganesh and Vishnu but with a screen in front of their images. At Dambulla, Rama and Lakshmana stand in life-size wooden statues. Even the recent Buddha shrine in Maradana build by the Late President Ranasinghe Premadasa has about eight minor shrines for Hindu gods. Buddhist learned monks explain that Buddhais worshipped for Nibbana (the Highest Bliss without fetters), but the Lord never prevented the ordinary folk praying to the minor deities for mundane benefits.
On the other hand, Hindus in Medieval India accepted the Buddha asanavatār of Vishnu the Protector, the second in the Hindu Trinity. Vishnu Purana added a story in its embracing fold that Buddhism was preached by Vishnu to Tripura rulers, the Triple brothers. Gita, Govindaalasospeaks of Buddha as an avatāro/Krisha. The “Light of Asia”, Sir Edwin Arnold’s poetic life of Siddharta was so popular that it was translated into Tamil by the Indian Tamil poet Desika Vinayagampilai and was a text book for our A/L students. Of the 63 great Saiva Saints was one Sākhyanāyanār. He was a Buddhist but had an inclination for Siva worship, and he daily threw a stone as a flower offering.

During the modern historical period, both Hinduism and Buddhism developed without much friction. The constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka placed Buddhism on a unique high pedestal. Buddha Sasana was given prime importance. It was also agreed that other religionists too, should be permitted to practice their religion freely. Important religious centres attract political leaders and ordinary folk alike. The Kandy Perahara is led by the DaladElephant, but four other temple caskets of Natha, Ganesha, Pattini and Skandafollow close at hand. Foreigners fail to understand how this happens in spite of much propaganda that this Island is well known for its conflicts.

**Material and methods**

In India Buddhism was known as the off-shot of Hinduism and both developed on parallel lines. Asoka, the great, after Kalinga wars, embraced Buddhism as the path to peace and perfection, “rolled the wheel of Damma to all directions”. Sri Lanka and Later Burma (Myenmar) accepted the new faith. His hundreds of Asoka Brahmi Edicts are found all over Central and North India including Andra. His religion and culture continued to influence the sub - continent. Pali (Prakrit) and later Sanskrit Buddhism continued the acculturation process. With the advent of Western scholars like Rhys Davids, Wilhelm Geiger, a new impetus was given to the Revival of Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka. Local veterans G.C. Mendis, S.ParanaVitane, Paul.E.Peris and his sons, G.Obeysekare, A.Veluppillai, K.Kanapathipillai, S.Pathmanathan, and S.K.Sitrampalam contributed their might in furthering historical studies in the South and North. Modern European scholarship, both American and Continental, added much vigour to local research and analysis. However, unfortunately, the political climate in this Island changed even some of the able historians of post-Independence Sri Lanka to adhere to perfect standards in historiography and allied sciences like epigraphy and numismatics.

As Sir Isaac Newton said, “I stand on their shoulders” and have better view of the field of historical research. I adhere to recognized standards with care not to given in when pressed by underserving deviating opinions. I prefer to follow Thucides rather than Herodotus. Here, I adopt the descriptive method rather than the analytical method due to lack of time. I believe, one day this thesis will flower into a recognized analytical work. I may refer to a wonderful essay, “Sinhalese – Tamil Cultural Relations” by W.M.A.Warunsurya, published in the Ramanathan College annual magazine, 1949, which inspired me to this way of thinking. I firmly believe that a comparative study of religion and culture based on a sound study of literature in both languages will go a long way in Religious harmony and communication. As an old head of a small pirivena mentioned to one of my teachers, “Not mere bilingual study of the market language, but deep genuine study of literature would naturally pave the way to harmony through interchange of noble thought, I shall repeat this in every university seminar, I attend.”

**RESULTS**

The hours of delving deep into Ancient, Medieval and Modern politically motivated religious policies of our rulers has revealed to research that the best period in the history were years of harmonious religious pursuits.

The other result is that, Tamil Buddhism and Sinhala Buddhism would have thrived side by side like Asokan Buddhism and Andra Buddhism in India, had not the followers of Mahavamsa. Buddhism refused to givein to the fact that other language – speakers could have remained equally firm in their faith in the Buddha.
DISCUSSION

Hindu Buddhist Patronage under Royal rule

The dynastic rulers understood that their strength depended on the contentment of themasses. So the rulers patronized the religion of the majority but, paid equal attention and patronizing supervision over other religions. Brahmmins were given separate settlements (Brahmadeya) for them to do their regular service in Hindu temples without economic stress.

Bramin astrologers and know’er’s of ArthaSastyra and Ayurveda were employed to advise the royal rulers. The Buddhist monks in charge of popular places of Buddhist worship permitted Kapuralas to perform their rites within the temple premises. The general public utilized the services of these ‘samans’ (Priests of the lower religions) freely to get rid of the evils caused by demons or psychosis. Medieval Sinhala literature - the Sandesaya poems abound in examples of royal patronage of Brahmmins and other Hindu learned men. Muslim customs officers were employed in ports of call of Muslim traders. Muslim physicians were in palace service. Mahavamsa has recorded King Mãnãbarana employing Brahmmin priests to perform domestic sacrifices for the health and welfare of royal children. So too King Parakramabahu, the Great, had Vedicrites performed in the palace. Many kings who had Indian royal princesses as wives, allowed them to worship in their own temples and offered land grants to these temple.

Royal consecration and crowning ceremonies were headed by Hindu Brahmin priests. Sacred waters from holyrivers and Theerthams were brought and used during the crowning ceremony. UpaTissa was a Brahmin connected with King Vijaya. He was granted land which he developed as Upatissagama. After Vija’s death this Brahmin was incharge of royal duties till a successor was brought down from abroad. Pandukabhaya had Pandula, a Brahmmin priest, as instructor, who taught royal arts to him. Later he had Chandran as his Brahmmin advisor. The Paliworkshrowno light on the art of ruler-ship or statecraft; therefore Sanskrit - knowing Brahmmins were employed to elucidate such works. Epigraphical evidence aboundswith such appointments. The economic and cultural development under far – seeing kings had the support of such Brahmmin advisors. KãkaVannaTissa, Duta gãmini, Vaddagamini had such officers, state the Pali works.

Buddha and the seven deities

Lanka–tilakaVihare may be taken as another example of religious harmony. The central figure is, of course, the Buddha. Vishnu is the Guardian deity. (He also holds the same position in Hindu Trinity.) Saman for the West (the deity of Samanala Kanda), Skanda Kumara or KataragamaDeiviyio for the South and Vibheeshhana for the East.

The Upulvandevale was once mistakenly identified with Varuna. The Tamils know that Oppiliappan (the peerless father) was Vishnu. Even now, the South Indian uneducated classes wrongly pronounce this classical Tamil word as Uppiliappu). The Southern Sinhala folk turned it to ‘upulvan’. But now, Evers and Paranavitana accept Upulvan as Vishnu. GananathObeyasekara, a recognized scholar, feels that KataragamaDeiviyio may become the second god next to Buddha in future. Hindus point out to Vallimalai, in South India as the place where Skanda wedded Valli, the Veddhah girl, (representing the soul taking refuge under God). But Sri Lankan tradition mentions Kataragama as the place of that blissful event.

Desmond YalliArachi in a recent article, “Lord of Katargama, the guardian deity of merchants”, written after a survey within a group of Kandy businessmen, of the six temples- DaladaMaligawa, Vishnu, Pattini, Skanda, Ganapathi and Natha, has found Skanda and Ganapathi as the dominant gods worshipped by them.

©Unique Conferences Canada publication
The Hindus observe the asterism Krithika (Karthikai) and Visaka as holy for their worship. The Buddhists believe that ThuparamaDãgéba was consecrated by placing Buddha’s Collar bone as relic on a Krithika day (Mahavamsa, ….).DevānâmpiyaTissa, was a Hindu before his conversion by Mahinda and he participated in the Visaka (Wesak) Holy day celebrations. Today Vesak is the most important religious celebration for the Sinhala Buddhists. Murukan, Skanda and Visaka are holynames of the youthful God who is enshrined in the cave of the hearts of devotees (Guha). Buddhists believe that on that day Siddhartha Gautama, the future Buddha was born, received enlightenment and attained Nibbana.

Swami Vivekananda, the Hindu Renaissance preacher referred to the Buddha as “the greatest soul-power, that has ever manifested, that ever wore a human form, the greatest, boldest preacher of morality, the greatest Hindu ever born”.

Pattini Worship

This is a popular common deity for the Sinhala and Tamil people alike. The former name her Pattini (The most venerated holy, chaste woman); the latter call her ‘Kannaki’, her original name according to “Silapatikãram” of IlangoAdikal. Although Kannaki worship has died down in South India, it is prevailing as Pathini –Kannaki worship. In Sri Lanka, she is elevated to the grandeur of a guardian Deity of the Island. She is considered a Bodhisatva, craving to attain supreme knowledge. GananathObeyasekara’s bookPahanPuyawa (Offering of Light), published in Chicago, 1984, throws much light on the subject.

Worship of (Holy) Feet

During one of the visits of the Buddha, he descended on SamanãlaKanda (SummantaKûdaParvata (Pabbata) and converted Sumana, a Yaksha, to his way of life. He imprinted the mark of his Holy feet during the third visit, says the Mahavamsa.

Hindus call this mountain “Sivan OliPadamalai” (the mountain of the Illustrious Feet of Siva). Ptolemy (2nd century A.D) refers to it as OliPãda (Light Foot). Vaishnavites claim that their worship of the Holy Feet of Vishnu is the fore – runner of Buddhist veneration of Buddha’s feet. The Saivites worship Siva’s feet as symbol of Release and Enlightenment. St.Appar has a full decade (ten verses) dedicated to the praise of the Foot in every line. (St.ApparThevaram – 6thThirumurai verses (Kappu -t-Thiruthândakam). The contemporary –Hindu sage YogarSwamikalpermitted the Feet worship. TirukkonachalaPuranam praises, Mahaweli Ganga as holy because it rises under the feet of SivanoliPadam (Adam’s Peak). IbnBatuta and other Western (Muslim) travelers called it Adam’s Peak (the Mount of Adam.

John Still in his ‘Jungle Tide” writes how orderly religionists of all faiths mingle closely to worship at Adam’s Peak. When a European commented, “This shows their lack of faith in their own religion”, he quips, “Perhaps, religious intolerance and feuds are signs of the depth in their faiths” East is East; West is West in religious toleration and compromise.

Astrology and connected Cultural aspects

Astrology is practiced fully by political leaders and ordinary people alike. There are several almanacs (Panchangams - Five limbed science of Auspicious Time),published. Some follow the nautical Almanac and other publications of international standard for correct understanding of planetary positions. The ColcuttaEphemerus is followed both by Hindu and Buddhist astrologers for correct forecast. Just as ancient royal astrologers aided the
rulers to undertake state duties at the auspicious time, so too, modern state – heads consult their trusted astrologers before undertaking any important government activity. The Sarajotimalai was an astrological work in Tamil; its author, DevinuvaraPerumal was a Hindu Brahmin of the South; He was patronized by PanditaParäkramabähù II or Paräkramabähù IV (1310) ofKotte. Astrology is a common link between Hindus and Buddhists. All the associated activities - tying holy thread for protection, talisman–wearing, going on pilgrimage for redress of grievances on the instruction of astrologers, who recommended what deity should be worshipped for a particular evil eye of a planet.

Temple Worship

Mahatitta (MahaTirtha), Holy Water that removes sins and give relief from diseases, is the basis for all water –cutting ceremonies in most of the temples. The Thirukketheeswarum temple, near the harbour town of the same name was a holy place for Buddhists as well. Two Sinhala epigraphs give proof to this. Paranivitane quotes a Sásana, which refers to a gift to Jetavanarama (Anuradhapura): “if misused, would incur the sin of killing cows in Mathoddam.” Similar sásanas were found in Kataragama as well.

This joint worship of both the religionists is a daily event in Munneswaram temple. All go there to get rid of grahadosham (evil look of planets, that act in order to reduce our acts of good and evil) to reduce karma. Certain Villages jointly perform special festival pujahs (NaimithikaMahotsavams). Similar worship is found in Naga Bhoooshani Amman Temple of Nagadipa (Nainativu). Not only famous temples likeVishnuDevale of Devi Nuwara (Dondra Head),NallurMurukan Temple but also other temples in Colombo likeMayurapati Amman Temple, BampalapitiyaManikkaVinayagar Temple. Fire walkingandKãvadi are taken up by devotees who took an oath to get rid of diseases or evils. Especially, Kali worship is completely alien to Buddhism but common people resort to it. Ayurvedic Physicians direct their patients to ‘please’ the ferocious deity against some Karmic diseases. A Tamil Christian judge was directed by a Buddhist, Ayurvedic physician to perform worship of Kali and other minor deities. Soothsayers get into frenzy and call Pattini, Vibheeshana and other minor deities to send their choicest blessings to the diseased.

Teravåda Buddhism became the standard religion of the state and the people. But, the daily life of the people, adopted many religious rites and rituals contrary to Buddha’s teachings: Antony Fernando has tabulated these into three categories.

1. Those recognized directly by the bikkus, which include Buddha Pûjah, chanting of Pirit, to please the Deity, (Bana preaching) to enlighten the laymen to understand the tenets of the Buddha.

2. Those that are alien to standard Buddhist teachings. As these are practiced by lay Buddhists, the bikkus do not directly oppose it. These include the worship of Hindu deities, Female deities (Pathini, Kali, etc).

3. Forecasts in trance, “Tholuvil ceremony” (drive devils)

Sri Lanka is free from atheism and blatant secularism. Sri Lankans, both Buddhists and Hindus spend much of their time and money on pilgrimages both internal and external. Buddhists go to Buddha Gaya, Lumbini, Patna (Pataliputra). Hindus go to hundreds of pilgrim centres including Benares, KedarNath, Kailas and the Saiva Shrines consecrated by the Thevaram hymnists. Statistics show that pilgrimages overstep the mark of 50,000. Mention should be made of the onslaught of different yoga systems and SathyaSai Baba cult especially among the middle classes of Hindus and Buddhists.
Efforts to develop religious harmony among the people

In spite of so much of common elements in popular worship there is a substratum of religious dissensions preached by politically - motivated people. There is fear among serious leaders of thought that unknown hands add fuel to the fire. There are laws in the statute books and clauses in our Constitution, to safeguard religious freedom but in practice much contrary events happen.

In 1953, July 12th Dudley Senanayake, Prime Minister, opening the R.K.M. new Pilgrim’s Rest at Kataragama declared that Kataragama is a symbol of religious unity. But later, events proved otherwise.

Sir John Kotalawela laid the foundation for the Main Gopuram (tower) of Thiruketheeswaram Temple. Thirukonamalai Temple received much attention and help for its renovation. But recent events are not happy to any peace-loving citizen. There are organizations like Hindu-Buddhist Forum following the lead of Ambedkar, in India; some Tamil Buddhist schools rose up in Jaffna. Everywhere, the politicians put their dirty hands in and spoil the noble goals of such organizations. Intellectuals and laymen with no political motive have formed such councils give a new emphasis to build up genuine Religious harmony. But alas, some second grade leaders sabotage such efforts.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of the rulers in Sri Lanka knew that equal attention for the majority and minority communities will result in contentment of the population and their own. Sporadic individual rulers acted contrary to the general trend but learnt their lessons and adopted religious harmony as their general policy. Their rule was marked by peace and prosperity. When their scepter swerved, internal dissenters allied with foreign invader and caused damage to social and religious harmony. However, all historiographers of the epic type and even modern ones did not stick to principles and distorted history which was cunningly used by politicians to their advantage. They have to learn their lessons from the 2000 year – old history.
References


- Glassnapp, H.Von. 1960. Vedanta and Buddhism, The wheel publication, Kandy


