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Three churches attacked on Christmas Eve

Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (29.12.2013) - As the world prepared to celebrate Christmas on the 24th evening, three churches in the South of Sri Lanka were attacked by mobs.

1. The pastor of the *Assemblies of God* church in Angunukolapalassa was surrounded by a mob of over 300 villagers together with Buddhist monks, demanding he stops all worship services planned for Christmas day. The mob alleged that there was a police complaint made by a Buddhist monk against the pastor's religious activities. However, the pastor cited his fundamental rights and refused to stop holding services. The pastor was provided police protection from the night of the incident.
2. The same night, the *Assemblies of God* Church in Hikkaduwa was attacked by a group of unidentified assailants throwing fire crackers into the church premises and into the pastors residence adjoining the church.
3. At approximately at 11.30p.m., another group of unidentified assailants began to hurl stones at the *Light House Church* Hikkaduwa. Some minor damage was reported with glass windows being shattered by the stones.

All three pastors have lodged police complaints in the respective area police stations.

A brief history of Christianity

Ceylon Society of Australia (25.08.2013) - In recent years the History of Sri Lanka has become an important subject, not only because it is in school curriculum, but also because it has been used to shape politics and justify the ethno-religious basis for State policies. Sri Lankan history has been rewritten, amplifying Portuguese atrocities, making authoritative claims on myths and mere conjectures and overlooking historical facts and archaeological discoveries.

Some Buddhist monks and nationalists are preaching an exclusive Buddhist-Sinhalese history that ends in intimidation, verbal abuse and violence against minorities. Prof. W.I. Siriweera, (Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Peradeniya) expressed his concerns on the misuse of History in Sri Lanka in saying that "*the challenge for Sri Lankan historians today is to study, teach and write history, stripped of its myths, distortions, deformations and communal or religious bias...We are one people. Patriotism should encourage living in harmony*" (The Sunday Times, March 17, 2013).

The History of Christianity in Sri Lanka can be divided into 3 eras;

- (1) Pre-colonial (72-1505)
- (2) Colonial (1505-1948) and
- (3) Post-colonial eras (1948- current).

The history of the pre-colonial era is aptly described by Archbishop Emeritus Dr Oswald Gomis (2004), in his book, 'Some Christian Contributions in Sri Lanka'. During the pre-colonial era, two groups of Christians, St. Thomas Christians and Nestorian Christians lived in Sri Lanka, and later they established union with the Catholic Church. *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Nikephoros Xanthopulos written from Constantinople (present Turkey) states that St. Thomas the Apostle of Jesus preached to Brahmans on a hill at Ginthupitiya in the island of Taprobane. In the 5th century during the Sigiriya period, 75 ships carrying Murundi Christian soldiers from Mangalore (India) landed in Chilaw at the request of queen Sangha to protect her son King Dhatusena, after he defeated the Pandyan. Migara, King Dhatusena's nephew and the commander of army was a Christian. His wife, the sister of Mogalan and Kashyapa was also a Christian. The discovery of coins of King Dhatusena with Christian symbols, statues of 'Abissheka Buddha' (Paranavithana 1972) and a carved cross on a granite column in Anurhadapura testifies for the presence of Christians in the 5th century. This was the 3rd such cross to be discovered, as De Queyroz (1688), the Jesuit Portuguese historian referred to a cross discovered by the Portuguese in the ruins of St. Thomas Church at the Mouth of Kelani River, Mutwal. When the Anurhadapura cross was discovered in 1912, the Archaeological Commissioner R. Ayrton thought that it was a Portuguese Cross, as it resembled the 2nd cross, found at Kotte, and Kotte was associated with the Portuguese. Later W. Cordrington confirmed that Anurhadapura cross was indeed the cross of St. Thomas Christians found in Mylapore, Chennai and not a Portuguese or Nestorian cross as previously thought (Figure 1).

Cosmos Indicopleustes, an Egyptian monk who visited Sri Lanka in 550 wrote "*The island has a church of Persian Christians who have settled there, and a presbyter who is appointed from Persia, and a deacon and a complete ecclesiastical ritual*". Muhammad Al-Idrisi, the Sicilian cartographer, who visited Sri Lanka between 1100 and 1166, found four of the 16 advisors of the king were Christians. After Yahbalaha III, the Nestorian Primate accepted the union with the Catholic Church Fr. Jordanus Catalha arrived in Sri Lanka in 1329 and Fr. Giovanni de Marignolli as Papal Legate in 1348/49 to assist the Christians in the country. So, there were Christians in Sri Lanka before the arrival of Portuguese in the 16th century.

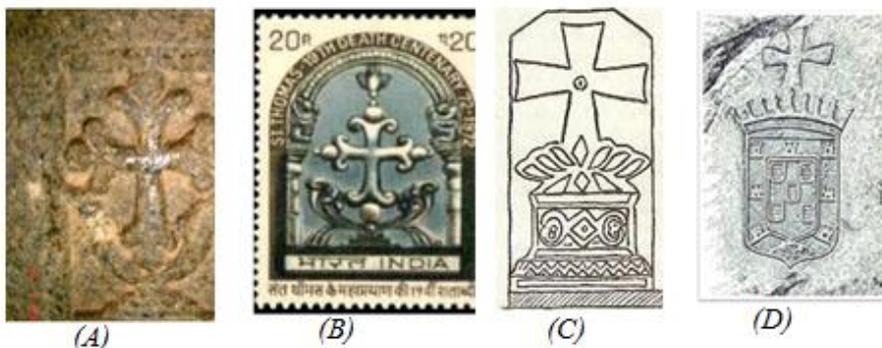


Fig.1. (A) Anurhadapura cross, (B) St. Thomas' cross, India (C) Nestorian cross, China, (D) Portuguese cross, Colombo Jetty. Note the typical lotus at the foot of the oriental crosses (St. Thomas' & Nestorian crosses).

Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka by accident in 1505, and established friendly relations with King Vira Parakramabahu VIII. Portuguese were involved in trade for the next 13

years. In 1521 the three sons of Vijayabahu VI killed him, divided the kingdom to three and ruled from Kotte, Sitawake and Raigama. When the ambitious Mayadunne of Sitawaka became a threat to Kotte of Buvanekabahu VII, he requested military aid from the Portuguese. In 1542 King Buvanekabahu sent a delegation to Portugal with a silver effigy of Prince Dharmapala, his grandson to be crowned by the king of Portugal and Franciscan missionaries were welcomed in Kotte. When Don Juan Dharmapala died in 1559 without an heir, he bequeathed his kingdom to the king of Portugal, the greatest betrayal of the country. The invitation of the Portuguese for assistance turned into a Portuguese invasion, as Portuguese claimed the right to the kingdom.

When Rajasinghe I, son of Mayadunne invaded Kandy in 1581, King Karalliyadde Bandara, baby daughter Kusumasana Devi and nephew Yamasinghe escaped to Portuguese territory. Following the death of Karalliyadde Bandara, Kusumasana Devi was brought up by the Portuguese as Dona Caterina in Mannar. Yamasinghe became Don Phillip and went to Goa. When Rajasinghe I conquered Kandy and appointed Virasundara Bandara of Peradeniya to govern Kandy, Rajasinghe imposed the policy of persecuting Buddhist monks. Rajasinghe had embraced Hinduism after killing Mayadunne and monks have rebuked him that he will be punished in his next births. The Hindu priest Arittakeevendu Perumal had offered an alternative through animal sacrifices. As Virasundara Bandara did not obey king's orders, he was killed and his son Konappu Bandara took refuge with the Portuguese. He was baptized as Dom John of Austria and trained in Goa. In 1592, Portuguese took over Kandy, installed Yamasinghe (Don Phillip) as the king and Konappu Bandara (Dom John of Austria) as the commander of the Gannoruwa Fort. Shortly, Yamasinghe was poisoned by Konappu Bandara. When the Portuguese proclaimed his 12-year son, Dom Joao as king, Konappu Bandara overthrew him and chased away the Portuguese from Kandy.

In 1594, Portuguese brought the 13-year old Dona Catarina to Kandy, hoping to make her the queen of Kandy. Konappu Bandara defeated the Portuguese at Danture and took Dona Catarina as his queen becoming king Vimaladharmasuriya I. Dom Joao, the son of king Yamasinghe joined the Portuguese, studied at the University of Coimbra, Portugal and was ordained a Catholic priest. He was the parish priest of the Church of Our Lady of the Gate of Heaven that he built at Telheiras Portugal, which exists to date. The King of Portugal looked after him well, with a royal grant. Prince Nikapitiye Bandara of Sitawaka also studied at the University of Coimbra, but died before his ordination. Vimaladharmasuriya I instituted the Temple of the Tooth. As they were familiar with Catholic environment, they had their children educated by Franciscan priests. When Vimaladharmasuriya I died in 1604, his cousin Senarat, an ex-Buddhist monk married Dona Catarina. King Senarat poisoned Dona Catarina's eldest son Mahastane by Vimaladharmasuriya, and she spent the rest of her unhappy life at Wellimantotta, Kegalle. Before her death in 1613, at the age of 35 she called Marcellus Boschouwer, the Dutch Envoy and Kuruvita Rala and handed over the children to their care. She was given a Royal Catholic funeral. The perpetually burning lamp and the Mausoleum built by Kuruvita Rala and the 7 acres archaeological site set aside by H.C.P. Bell, the Archaeological commissioner in Rock Hill Estate have disappeared.

Portuguese also invaded Jaffna in 1560 after King Cankili I of Jaffna Kingdom killed 600 Catholics, the 'Mannar Martyrs' for their faith. Fishermen of Mannar had invited St. Francis Xavier from Goa to preach and baptize them in 1543. Paranirupacinkam, the elder brother of Cankili and king Pararasasekeram, princesses Dona Clara and Dona Antonia and prince Dom Constantino of the Jaffna became Catholics. The Catholics of the Kandian royalties included Jayaweera Bandara, Karalliyadde Bandara, Yamasinghe, Dona Catarina and her sons Kumarasinghe and Wijepala.

Church law forbids forced conversion to Catholicism, then as it is now. The spiritual values that the missionaries preached, their example, preference for life-style and some fringe benefits may have contributed to their conversions. The destruction of temples by

the Portuguese needs to be assessed in the context of thinking of people (paradigm) about 500 years ago, when idolatry was considered to be an evil and when there was no international Human Rights Law or International Humanitarian Law. War is a great evil, and we have experience its atrocities, even in the 21st century. The recent ethnic war in Sri Lanka killed more than 100,000 and fully destroyed 93 churches and affected 2076 Hindu temples and shrines. Sri Lankan kings made the mistake of fighting among the brothers for power rather than co-operating, invited a foreign military force and bequeathed Sri Lanka to a foreign country.

Vimaladharmasuriya I invited the Dutch to evict the Portuguese. Admiral Joris van Spilbergen landed in Batticaloa in 1602 and by 1658 Admiral Rykloff van Goens captured Jaffna, evicting the Portuguese from the entire island. The Dutch banned Catholicism, expelled all Catholic priests and took over Catholic churches and schools. After 30 years in 1687 an Indian priest, Fr. Joseph Vaz came to Mannar, disguised as a coolie. In 1689 Dom Pedro, a layman had secretly arranged Christmas masses to be celebrated in Jaffna houses by Fr. Vaz, when the Dutch apprehended the Catholics gathered for the mass. Dom Pedro was badly beaten; he succumbed to flogging, becoming the 'first Martyr of Jaffna'. Fr. Joseph Vaz escaped to Puttalam and then to Kandy. He was imprisoned by king Vimaladharmasuriya II, but later he was released. When an outbreak of smallpox occurred and people fled, Fr. Vaz and Fr. Carvalho cared for the sick and buried the dead, without contracting the disease. Fr. Vaz was allowed to build a church in Kandy, but his church was destroyed in 1745 after his death in 1711. Another scholarly priest to arrive from India was Fr. Jacome Gonsalves, who learnt Sinhala from the Buddhist monks of Malwatte. He excelled in poetry and music, and wrote 22 books in Sinhala, 14 in Tamil, 4 in Portuguese and 1 in Dutch. He introduced *simile* to the Sinhalese literature. The Nayakkar king, Sri Vijay Rajasinghe expelled all the Catholic priests from Kandy in 1746. When king Kirti Sri Rajasinghe went to war with the Dutch in 1762, they brought mercenaries from Europe that included Catholics. As a result, Catholics were allowed to practice their religion.

British were also invited to replace king Sri Wickrema Rajasinghe, the tyrannical king of Kandy, by the Kandyan chieftains who escaped to Colombo. Governor Thomas Maitland gave freedom of religions in 1806. British conquered the entire Sri Lanka in 1815. Interested in developing the colony, the government invited institutions that could help in education and welfare. As the *pirivena* education did not provide secular education, foreign missionaries were welcome. The American missionaries who went to Jaffna established the first medical school in the country in 1848, twenty-two years before the Colombo Medical School. Dr. Samuel Fisk Green translated 8 medical books, including Gray's Anatomy to Tamil and opened a hospital in Manipay, before the Colombo Hospital was established. The government adopted the denominational school system, which helped the Christian schools to expand rapidly. In 1886 missionary nuns were invited to work in public hospitals.

A surge of nationalism against the colonialists occurred towards the middle of 19th century, which took diverse forms. The anti-Christian feelings were high among the Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalists, and the expression of such feelings in debates as in the Panadura debate of 1862 turned into a violent clash at Kotahena in 1883 and the burning of a Catholic Church in Anuradhapura in 1903. After independence, anti-Christian sentiments were institutionalized in the take over of the Christian schools in 1960, removal of nuns from all public hospitals and cancellation of visas of missionary priests, Brothers and Sisters. During the 26 years of ethnic war, there was another surge of Buddhist-Sinhala nationalism, which was characterized by the direct involvement of monks in politics, particularly through *Jathika Hela Urumaya* (JHU). After the end of the war, triumphalism is directing Buddhist-Sinhalese nationalism in confrontational and mutually exclusive direction through radical organizations, such as *Bodu Bala Sena*, *Ravana Balaya* and *Sinhala Ravaya*. The government shows little interest in applying the

laws of the country to Buddhist monks, for their political advantages. Catholic Church in Sri Lanka is handling these issues calmly, prudently and judiciously.

Sri Lanka allows Colombo mosque expansion despite Buddhist hardliners' objections

Reuters (13.08.2013) - Sri Lanka's government said on Tuesday it would give the go-ahead to plans to develop a mosque in central Colombo, despite objections from Buddhist hardliners who have targeted members of the minority Muslim community in a spate of recent attacks.

Requests to expand the mosque had been repeatedly rejected, Muslim clerics said, because the building work would mean having to cut down parts of a large bo-tree, considered sacred by Buddhists.

A three-storey mosque was built in its place around a month ago, but it was attacked late on Saturday, triggering clashes between Muslims and Sinhala Buddhists and a two-day curfew in the neighborhood in the center of the capital.

There has been increasing violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka since last year, mirroring events in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, which has also seen a surge of attacks by members of the majority community against Muslims.

In Myanmar, hardline Buddhist monks have been at the forefront of campaigns against Muslims.

In Sri Lanka, a group known as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), or the "Buddhist power force", has been trying to win over Buddhists to their own campaign. But the BBS has denied any involvement in the latest mosque attack.

"The Urban Development Authority will hand over the land to the earlier mosque and the bo-tree will also be completely removed to facilitate the construction," M.K.B, Dissanayake, secretary at Ministry of Buddhism and Religious Affairs, said.

"The expansion of the mosque also will be allowed," he told Reuters. "The government will help construct the earlier mosque, if they (Muslims) request help."

At the same time, the government said it would close down the new mosque, although it gave no reason for the decision. Buddhists in the area say that the new mosque was built without proper approval.

As elite police officers armed with guns looked on, local authorities began to cut down the bo-tree to make way for the expansion, a Reuters reporter at the scene said.

Local residents said that police could have prevented the weekend violence if they had acted more decisively. CCTV footage taken from a nearby house, and seen by Reuters, showed people attacking the mosque despite the presence of police.

According to the Sri Lanka Muslim Council, a body representing most Muslim organizations in the country, the incident was the 25th attack on mosques reported to them from across the island nation.

A European Union delegation in Colombo condemned the rise in attacks on Muslims.

"The right to freedom of peaceful assembly and the right to freedom of worship are fundamental to democratic societies and should be protected by the state," it said in a statement.

"The European Union looks to the Sri Lankan authorities to ensure justice through speedy, impartial investigations and to enable all Sri Lankans to exercise their human rights freely."

Buddhists make up about 70 percent of Sri Lanka's population of 20.3 million. Muslims make up about 9 percent.

Buddhists attack Sri Lankan Mosque, 12 injured

The Huffington Post (11.08.2013) - A Buddhist mob attacked a mosque in Sri Lanka's capital and at least 12 people were injured, the latest in a series of attacks on the minority Muslim community by members of the Buddhist majority.

A mob of Buddhists, who are mainly ethnic Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, threw stones at a three-storey mosque and nearby houses in a central Colombo neighbourhood during evening prayers on Saturday, residents told Reuters.

Later, hundreds of Muslim residents took to the streets, some clutching sticks, to prevent any further attacks on their community, witnesses said. Police reinforcements were sent and authorities imposed a curfew until Sunday morning.

A senior member of staff at one of the city's main hospitals said 12 injured people, including two police officers, had been brought in. Three people were still in hospital on Sunday.

Police appealed for calm and imposed a night-time curfew in the area.

"Support the police to maintain the law and order," Inspector General of Police N.K. Ilangakoon told state media.

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A spokesman for the BBS, Dilantha Vithanage, denied any involvement by his organisation in the latest mosque attack.

"EXTREMISTS EMBOLDENED"

Buddhists make up about 70 percent of Sri Lanka's 20.3 million population. Muslims make up about 9 percent.

"The lukewarm and ineffective measures taken by the law enforcement agencies on previous occasions ... seem to have emboldened some extremist groups who seem to be determined to create chaos in the country," Muslim ministers in President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government said in a joint statement.

The mosque damaged in the Saturday night attack was only built a month ago after hardline Buddhists forced a nearby mosque to close.

The U.S. Embassy in Colombo said the incident was particularly troubling in light of a number of recent attacks against the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

"Targeting any place of worship should never be permitted and we urge calm from all sides. We call for prosecution of perpetrators in this attack and an end to religious-based violence," the embassy said in a statement.

N. M. Ameen, president of Sri Lanka Muslim Council, said more than 20 mosques had been attacked since last year.

In a separate incident, a hand grenade was thrown at a Buddhist temple in the Jaffna peninsula, on the northern tip of the island. There were no injuries, police said.

Jaffna is largely made of ethnic minority Tamil people, most of whom are Hindu and Christian. The area was fiercely contested in a 26-year war between government forces and Tamil separatists that ended in 2009. (Editing by Robert Birsell and Jeremy Laurence)

Anti-Muslim campaign causes fears of a new wave of ethnic violence in war-torn Sri Lanka

AP (08.04.2013) - A red-robed Buddhist monk calmly picked up stones and hurled them at a security camera. Then, as police looked on, his followers smashed up a popular, Muslim-owned clothing store.

Last month's attack on the Fashion Bug chain near the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo, filmed by a local television station whose cameraman was attacked by the mob, was the most public outburst in a growing anti-Muslim campaign by Buddhist nationalist groups in the island nation.

The escalation in attacks and anti-Muslim rhetoric has caused fears of a new wave of ethnic violence in a country still recovering from a quarter-century civil war between the government, controlled by ethnic Sinhalese Buddhists, and a mainly Hindu ethnic Tamil rebel group.

"They just finished hunting the Tamils, without solving any of the issues, and now they are starting on the Muslim hunt. Virtually all minority communities are being threatened," said Muslim political leader Azad Salley.

The anti-Muslim campaign has been led by Buddhist monks and is fast gaining ground among youth through raging speeches and ludicrous conspiracy theories spread on social media.

The leaders of the campaign complain that Sri Lanka's ethnic Sinhalese Buddhists, who make up almost 75 percent of the country's 20 million people and control the government and the military, are under threat from the 9 percent of the country that is Muslim. They say Muslims dominate the nation's businesses, are fomenting religious fundamentalism and are conspiring to demographically take over the country by increasing their birthrate while secretly sterilizing the Sinhalese.

A Muslim volunteer group, which does not wish to be identified for fear of reprisals, has documented 33 anti-Muslim incidents since September 2011. They include at least five attacks on Muslim places of worship, attacks on businesses and an episode where Muslim students at a government agriculture school were served pork, which their religion forbids them from eating.

Buddhist nationalists demanded Muslim religious leaders stop issuing "Halal" certificates, which certify that local products comply with Islamic tenets, charging that the fees paid for certification were passed onto unwitting — often non-Muslim— consumers and used to construct mosques. Certification was made free of cost last month.

They have also campaigned for laws aimed at the Muslim community. One would stop women from wearing a veil.

"I have a fundamental right when I go in the street to see the face of a person," said Dilantha Withanage, an official of the prominent Buddhist nationalist group Bodu Bala Sena, or Buddhist Force.

Another proposed law would stop Muslim men from being able to marry up to four women.

"What we are fighting for is a single legal system in this country. If a Muslim has the right to marry four wives let the Buddhists also have that," he said.

Sri Lanka allows citizens to marry according to the customs of the four main religions — Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

Withanage denied having an anti-Islam agenda, saying his group wanted only for Buddhism to get the credit for building up Sri Lankan civilization. Other religions can still be practiced, he said.

The attack on Fashion Bug came a week after a monk accused the company and other Muslim businesses of committing "sexual crimes" against Sinhalese female employees and converting them to Islam by marrying them to Muslim employees. The mob stormed the store on the pretext that a 15-year-old girl had been raped inside, an accusation that proved to be false.

Another monk told a rally that another Muslim-owned clothing store was giving free candy to Sinhalese women customers with ingredients that caused miscarriages and infertility. He said men's belts sold by these companies caused kidney diseases and damaged customers' testicles.

Text messages were sent en masse accusing another Muslim company of manufacturing sanitary napkins that turned women barren. The claims were passed around on Facebook and Twitter as well.

The campaign has frightened Muslims, who suspect the government is not just refusing to protect them, but is actively fomenting the tension, a charge the government denies.

Sri Lanka's national telecom provider started selling the Buddhist Force theme song as a ring tone to help raise funds for the group. Following protests, the company apologized for any "emotional distress" any community might feel — but refused to withdraw the tone.

Suspicion that authorities were complicit grew after the police stood by and watched the Fashion Bug attack.

Amid criticism of police inaction, 17 suspects, including three monks, were brought to court. The court later released them, saying the parties arrived at an amicable settlement. The injured cameraman also withdrew his complaint, saying fighting his case might create social unrest.

The powerful defense secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the president's brother, was recently a chief guest at a Buddhist Force event, where he defended the group.

"The venerable monks always came forward to protect our country, race, religion and culture. This effort is to bring them to a correct course, not to spread hatred," he said.

Mohamed Saleem, a Muslim community worker in Colombo, called the defense secretary's endorsement of an extremist group "worrying."

"Are the Muslims equal citizens of this country or not?" he asked.

Presidential spokesman Mohan Samaranayake dismissed accusations the government was involved in an anti-Muslim campaign as the "usual finger pointing" by the opposition.

"I need to emphasize the fact that from the beginning, the government has treated every community equally," he said.

He said the government would not restrain anyone's freedom of expression, but would take action if they violated the law

The Muslims, descended from Arab traders who came to the island more than a millennium ago, are considered a separate ethnic group. But they have had a relatively amicable history with the Sinhalese majority and were persecuted by Tamil rebels for siding with the state during the war.

Kusal Perera, a Sinhalese political analyst, said he believes the anti-Muslim campaign is aimed at distracting Sri Lankans from the rising cost of living and other contentious issues. Sinhalese traders have also seen an opportunity to "grab the market" dominated by Muslim businesses, he said.

Mohammed Thanis, a resident of the eastern town of Kantalai, says the government is more concerned about retaining the votes of its Sinhalese base rather than taking action against anti-Muslim forces.

Opposition politician Mujeebur Rahman said the Muslim community has so far been restrained in responding, but he feared what would happen when that patience ran out.

"If they try to react, it can flare up into a major clash," he said.
