

Sacred Sites, Humanitarian Assistance and the Politics of Land Grabbing in Eastern Sri Lanka: the Case of Deegavapi

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Abstract

Eastern Province is ethnically and religiously diverse having Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils as well as smaller, but distinct communities such as Portuguese Burghers and Veddas who live in close proximity to one another. The inter-ethnic relations were disturbed time to time by the war, ethnic riots, tsunami, the state-aided colonization programmes as well as attacks by the LTTE on civilians; nevertheless, a pattern of peaceful coexistence has prevailed in the long run. After the end of the war, the government started a programme for rebuilding the East (Nagenahira Navodaya). The Eastern Provincial Council was established under the leadership of a newly elected Chief Minister, who incidentally, was an ex-LTTE cadre. The process of ethnic reconciliation, however, has been hampered by a variety of unresolved issues such as rival claims to scarce land, ill-conceived and partisan state policies, politics of land grabbing, development programmes lacking conflict-sensitivity and, above all, religiously-inspired sectarian tensions within and between religions. Efforts to demarcate, rehabilitate and expand the Deegavapi sacred site, identifying it as an exclusive Sinhala Buddhist heritage and its possible implications for the land rights, demonstrate how land rights are intricately tied up with heightened ethnic and religious identities and sentiments. This paper examines the circumstances under which the politics of preservation and restoration of the Deegavapi sacred site has infringed on the land rights of the Muslims.

Keywords: sacred sites, humanitarian assistance, politics, land grabbing, Eastern Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The Eastern Province is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse regions in Sri Lanka¹. Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils as well as smaller, but distinct communities such as Portuguese Burghers and Veddas live in different parts of Eastern Province, sometimes in close proximity to one another. The ethnic relations among the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslims have been disturbed from time to time by the war, ethnic riots, disasters like the tsunami, large scale population movements and displacements induced by these events, state-aided colonization programmes, as well as by ruthless violence against civilians by the armed actors, but a pattern of peaceful coexistence has prevailed in the long run. The government forces effectively suppressed LTTE activity in the area since 2006, and a programme for rebuilding the East (Nagenahira Navodaya) was launched by the state with some support from international donors. The Eastern Provincial Council started functioning under the leadership of a newly elected Chief Minister who incidentally was an ex-LTTE cadre. The process of ethnic reconciliation, however, has been hampered by a variety of unresolved issues such as rival claims to scarce land resources, as well as ill-conceived and partisan state policies, politics of land grabbing, development programmes which are not conflict-sensitive and, above all, religiously-inspired sectarian tensions within and between religions. Efforts to demarcate, rehabilitate and expand the Deegavapi sacred site on the part of the state, identifying it as an exclusive heritage of the Sinhala Buddhists, under the influence of partisan and ideologically-driven external actors and its possible implications for the land rights and the very existence of ethnic and religious minorities, including the Muslims, is an example of land rights are intricately tied up with heightened ethnic and religious identities and sentiments in post-war Sri Lanka. This paper examines the circumstances under which the politics of preservation and restoration of the Deegavapi sacred site has infringed on the land rights of the Muslims who have lived in the area for several generations.

In the modern world religious nationalism often serves to blur the distinction and boundary between religion and politics. Even

¹ This is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented to The American Association for Asian Studies conference held from 26 to 29 March, 2009. This paper also borrows extensively from Chapter Four in Spencer et al. 2015 authored by Silva and Hasbullah

though the religious pertains to the spiritual and the divine, and politics are formally separate from each other, among other things religion has always played an important role in providing moral legitimacy to rulers in power. Interaction between religion and politics has been particularly strong in Sri Lanka (Spencer et al. 2015; Spencer, 1990; Daniel 1990). Even though Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu nationalist movements in Sri Lanka evolved as ardent anti-colonial forces, simultaneous internal efforts to purify and revitalize religion and culture since the 1956 political change, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism representing the majority ethnic group has become the most important force driving popular politics and state policies and programmes, including development and colonization of the underdeveloped dry zone regions in the country. With the emergence of the Hela Urumaya in 2003 and Bodu Bala Sena in 2012 as nationalist mobilizations led by urban Buddhist monks, the politicization of religion has reached a new height in Sri Lanka. This, in turn, has had serious implications for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in the country.

The establishment, renovation, management and appropriation of sacred spaces (temples, mosques and churches) has emerged as an important rallying point for the emergence of mass politics and mobilization of religious communities in South Asia (Brass, 2000; Gupta, 2005). For instance, Barber-Masjid issue was a major flashpoint in Muslim-Hindu relations in India (Appadurai, 2001). The processes of communal violence in South Asia have had complex roots and pathways, but ethnic, religious and caste rivalries have often been implicated in these processes. The representation of the past, politics of memory, and related processes are often implicated in formation of identities and contestations among communities. Archeology has been deeply involved in the invention and construction of national identities (Appadurai, 2001; Seneviratne, 2008). If ‘nation’ is understood as an “imagined community” as claimed by Anderson (1991), representation of the past and demarcation of cultural heritages become an important enterprise in the relevant processes of imagination. At the same time, history has also become “a highly charged field of political rhetoric” for rival communities as identified by McGilvray (2008). Further, he has noted that “... controlling and shaping historical discourses is what modern Sri Lankan communal identities are all about” (Anderson, 2008, p.12).

The interaction between identity politics and conflict over

limited resources such as land has received considerable attention in South Asia (Appadorai, 1996). In his analysis of the politics of peasantry in Sri Lanka Mick Moore (1985) argued that identity politics accompanied by the role of the state in dispensing political patronage via networks linking elected politicians and their electoral supporters served to undermine the development of a broader articulation of small farmer interests that cut across the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka. Korf (2005) argued that a pattern of “ethnicized entitlements” has evolved in relation to land and agricultural development projects, blocking access to state controlled resources for minority ethnic groups. It is, however, important to point out that in contrast to Tamil politicians, who were increasingly compelled to turn to separatist politics around the notion of a Tamil homeland in a violent struggle against the Sinhala dominated state, the Muslim politicians from the east coast have always sought to enter strategic partnership with ruling governments irrespective of their specific party affiliations in order to maintain their power bases. The establishment of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) by the charismatic and politically astute M. S. M. Ashraf enabled him to tap ethnicized entitlement within the Sri Lankan state by playing one ruling party against the other, but the break-up of this party after his untimely death enabled leaders in the centre to reverse the favor by playing one faction of this party against the other.

Using historical and ethnographic material, this paper seeks to understand how a certain representation of the past in relation to Deegavapi has emerged as a flash point in ethnic relations in Ampara District in eastern Sri Lanka. The field work for this study was conducted from 2008 to 2009 as part of a collaborative ethnographic study of war and peace, the overall results of which are reported elsewhere (Spencer et al., 2015). In exploring Buddhist and Muslim perspectives relating to Deegavapi, the two authors conducted rapid ethnographic assessments in Buddhist and Muslim communities respectively, and followed the developments relating to Deegavapi and the surrounding communities from 1916 onwards. The period from the last years of the war and the early period of post-war Sri Lanka constitutes the ethnographic moment of this study. The collaborative ethnographic research framework documented in more detailed in Spencer et al 2015, was particularly useful in exploring the diverse and contrasting viewpoints of local Buddhists and Muslims who were party to the Deegavapi dispute and a related controversy surrounding a new housing project

established in a nearby site for the benefit of tsunami victims from the Muslim community. The paper works backwards and forwards in trying to understand how local Sinhala-Muslims relations evolved over time and what the post-war and post-tsunami period have in store for the local communities, heavily influenced by decades of suffering on the one hand and divisive politics and conflicting representations of the past driven by ethnonationalist mobilizations on the other (Brow, 1990).

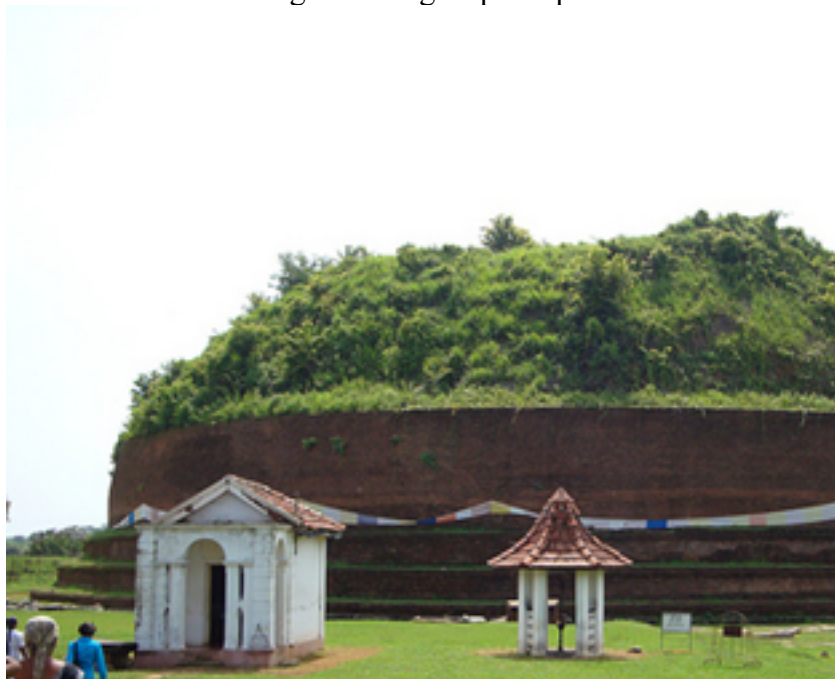
Time and place

Deegavapi² (literally ‘long tank’) refers to an ancient stupa or dagaba reportedly built by King Saddhatissa, the brother of the celebrated Sinhala king, Dutugamunu, between 200 and 100 BCE and reportedly containing the sacred nail relic of the Buddha, according to some popular accounts, and a Buddhist temple and land and settlements surrounding the dagaba. Presently Deegavapi is a partially renovated ancient stupa (See Figure 1) and an accompanying Buddhist temple situated between the heavily congested Muslim and Tamil settlements in the eastern coastline and the Sinhala settlements mostly established under the Gal Oya Valley Irrigation Development Project with effect from 1949. Situated in the Addalachennai Divisional Secretary area of the Ampara District, it marks the border area between mainstream Sinhala populations in the western part of the District and a predominantly Muslim belt spreading from Kalmunai to Akkaraipattu (see Map 1). The temple controls 585 acres of a total of 20,758 acres (about 3% of all land) in the Addalachennai Divisional Secretary area. There are a number of partially ruined ancient irrigation tanks as well as numerous ruins of an ancient civilization, referred to as Deegavapi Janapadaya (Deegavapi settlement) in the popular Sinhala nationalist literature (Medhananda, 2000). Muslim and Tamil concentrations spread along the narrow coastline but they hold cultivable paddy and highland in interior areas with lower density of settled population. The main economic activities in the area are rain-fed rice cultivation, livestock keeping, limited chena cultivation, extraction of gravel for building purposes, and sugar cane cultivation started by a private company in 1973 under the auspices of the ruling government at the time. Even though the area came under the Gal Oya project, irrigation, colonization, and related services were not extended to the area as it was located in the Eastern bank of Gal Oya river, that was more or less

2 This is also referred to as nakavihara in some ancient records.

untouched by this development project.

Figure 1: Digavapi Stupa



Population

The population in the area live in villages evolved over a long period of time and new settlements established through government initiatives of one kind or another. As evident in Table 1, many of the inhabitants in the Addalachennai Division are Muslims, with a sprinkling of Sinhala and Tamil settlements.

It is important to point out that while Muslim and Tamil villages situated in the eastern part of the DS Division have evolved through a long process of habitation and natural increase, the Sinhala settlements were newly established with state patronage particularly after 1970, following the efforts to restore the Deegavapi temple and the accompanying stupa. Interestingly, the Sinhala settlements in the area were not established through state intervention under the Gal Oya Project that was primarily responsible for expansion of Sinhala settlements in the area. Rather they were established as host communities (goduru gammana) for the Deegavapi temple established on the phoenix like ruins of an ancient stupa.

Table 1: Population in Addalachennai Divisional Secretary area by Ethnicity, 2006

| Ethnic Group | Number of people | % Distribution |
|---------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Muslim | 36702 | 93.13 |
| Tamil | 518 | 1.31 |
| Sinhalese | 2190 | 5.56 |
| Total | 39410 | 100.00 |

Source: District Statistical Handbook, Ampara District, 2006

Overview of recent history of Deegavapi

The Deegavapi ruins were first discovered by the British surveyors who surveyed all potential crown land declared under the Waste Lands Ordinance of 1840. Although temple lands were normally not declared as crown land in keeping with the Kandyan Convention of 1815, Deegavapi land was not treated as temple land, presumably due to nonexistence of a functioning Buddhist temple in the site at the time of survey of crown land. In 1916 a highly motivated monk named Godakumbure Revatha, reportedly sent by the Bibile Rajamaha Vihara in Uva Province, built a temple near the ruins and claimed that the sacred site identified as Deegavapi saya and the accompanying land belonged to the Bibile Rajamaha Vihara to which the land along with all its assets, including villages, cattle and buffaloes (grama gavamaheesadi) had been donated through a sannasa (deed inscribed in rock) by the Kandyan king Kirthi Sri in 1756³. One unconfirmed story widely circulated among the Sinhalese is that when Rev. Rewatha first visited the site in 1916, the Muslim villagers were removing brick from the chetiya site for building their own houses, which in turn prompted him to stay on site in order to safeguard the remains of the chetiya. In 1916 Rev. Revatha petitioned to the then governor in Ceylon, Manning, requesting that the land to the extent of 1000 amunas (roughly 3000 acres) be restored to the Bibile temple. As there was no immediate response, the monk sent a reminder in 1924 and reportedly a team headed by the Commissioner of Archeology,

³ This rock inscription was apparently discovered in the Deegavapiya site by Rev. Bandigode Nigrodha Buddharakkita also from the Bibile temple somewhere in 1840s. A copy of the sannasa is available with the Government Agent of Ampara, but the original inscription has reportedly been displaced since then.

Hocart, was sent to the site sometime in the 1930s. The team, however, did not grant the request of the monk and instead proposed to him to find an alternative site where his temple could be built with the permission of the state. The monk insisted on his original request and continued to live in the Deegavapi site, asserting what he considered as his legitimate right to safeguard this sacred site. Thus initially there was only a conflict between the temple and the colonial state over the control of the site and there was no conflict whatsoever between the temple and nearby Muslim communities along ethnic lines⁴. These developments occurred as a consequence of nationalist campaigns that unfolded in the post-independence era.

The chief monk in the Deegavapi temple, Rev. Revatha, was assassinated by an unknown party during the 1950s. This potentially explosive event indicated some friction at the ground level but it did not lead to any ethnic tension as such at the time. Meanwhile his successor, Rev. Nannapurawe Buddharakkita, continued to live in the temple and looked after what he claimed as temple land. He brought some peasants from Bibile and settled them in the vicinity of the temple in order to facilitate the upkeep of the temple. Some of the temple land, however, was leased out to Muslim tenants from nearby villages indicating a degree of trust established with them over time. In addition, cattle from nearby villagers were allowed to graze freely in temple land irrespective of the ethnic identity of the owners concerned. Due to representations made by certain Sinhala politicians in Ampara, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka at the time, arranged to transfer the title of 585 acres of temple land after surveying it to the Deegavapi temple through a gazette notification issued in 1973. The boundaries of the land so allocated, however, were not marked, and this gave rise to some confusion about boundaries in time to come. This was amplified by the fact that the amount of land reportedly donated by the kings to the temple varied according to different sources. According to Rev. Medhananda (2000), all land within the hearing distance of a *lokada tammattama* (deep sounding drum made of bell metal typically used for announcing royal decrees) was originally granted to the temple by King Saddatissa.

⁴ It is not clear if this story of Muslim villagers removing brick from the Deegavapiya site actually came from Rev. Revatha who apparently established a good rapport with Muslims in the area after he moved to this sacred site or whether it is a later construction by his disciples and followers.

He estimated that this amounted to some 12,000 acres of land. This stretchable and expandable notion of land sometimes enabled militant Sinhala nationalists to claim that all surrounding villages are actually encroachments on Deegavapiya temple land.

In 1973 a leading Sinhala politician in the area established a Sinhala Buddhist settlement of 100 families, selected from among second generation colonists in the Gal Oya project in nearby vacant crown land. The aim of this settlement reportedly was to facilitate the upkeep of the Deegavapi temple. These settlers were initially provided with highland allotments only. Subsequently some 130 to 140 acres of lowlands in Ponnaveili, previously cultivated by Muslim farmers from nearby villages, under annual permits, were transferred by government officials under the influence of the same Sinhala politician, to the new Sinhala settlers, creating an understandable animosity among long-established Muslim residents in the area. This is a clear instance of the majoritarian Sinhala state making an unfair transfer of land from established minority communities to Sinhala new settlers. In the 1970s, Hingurana Sugar Factory was established by a private company under the auspices of the Sri Lanka government and crown land was allocated to Muslim and Tamil villagers and Sinhala settlers for cultivation of sugar cane. It appears that local Sinhala politicians used this opportunity to expand Sinhala settlements adjacent to the Deegavapi temple in an obvious attempt to establish a substantial Sinhala Buddhist presence in the vicinity of the sacred site. With this initiative the Sinhala population in the area substantially increased, and possible expansion of congested Muslim villages along the coastline towards the hinterland was further inhibited.

In 1980 the cabinet of ministers decided to renovate Deegavapi, identifying it as an important Buddhist heritage in the Eastern Province. Only the base of the stupa, however, was renovated and the larger project seems to have been abandoned due to scarcity of funds. From 1987 onwards many villages in the area became depopulated due to LTTE threats and attacks targeting Sinhala settlements and some Muslim villages. In an LTTE attack in 1987 some 13 Muslims and 12 Sinhalese in border villages were killed, and many of the remaining people in these villages moved out to safer areas with a larger concentration of people belonging to the respective ethnic groups. People started returning to the abandoned villages after the inception of the peace process in 2002.

Deegavapi came to national prominence in 1997 due to alleged charge against Mr. M. S. M. Ashraf, leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and an influential member of the cabinet in the ruling government, for being responsible for “bulldozing” deegavapi ruins in his attempt to provide alternative land to Muslim people who lost land in Ponnawelli. Subsequent archeological investigations revealed that the damaged ruins were those of an old dagaba claimed by some nationalist scholars as a “parivara chaitya” (satellite dagoba) to Deegavapi chaitya. This received much publicity in the Sinhala nationalist press and the Minister was charged for a deliberate effort to demolish sacred Buddhist ruins and thereby to erase the ancient Sinhala Buddhist presence in the area. This led to an understandable hostile reaction from the Buddhist leadership. The bulldozing took place in a site called Pallekadu, situated just outside the Deegavapi temple premises. This crown land under thick forest cover had been identified for distribution among Muslim peasants by Mr. Ashraf, who was apparently under considerable pressure from his Muslim voters to secure alternative land for the lands they had lost in Ponnawelli. According to Muslim accounts, damage to the ruins was not deliberate but an accident in what appears to have been a haphazardly planned and executed, and politically motivated, project to provide land to his Muslim constituency. Due to public pressure and bad publicity, the project was immediately stopped and plans for distribution of land among Muslim peasants was abandoned. Mr. Ashraf had been a major provider of state patronage to the Deegavapi temple, providing electricity, telephone connections, as well as many other services to the temple⁵. As a result, he had established a good rapport with the chief monk of the Deegavapi temple by this time. He admitted and apologized for being responsible for the accidental digging up of ruins and tried to correct it by having Deegavapi site surveyed once again, clearly demarcating temple lands and erecting boundary markers, and having an archeological survey done in surrounding areas, identifying and marking over 30 new archeological sites in nearby areas, including Muslim and Tamil villages. The aim of this exercise was to prevent any accidental damage of such sites by actual or potential users of the land and to facilitate any future restoration work in the relevant sites.

Rev. Gangodavila Soma, a charismatic urban Buddhist monk

⁵ It must be noted that Mr. Ashraf also supported a number of temple expansion projects in Buddhist temples in Ampara town.

who had returned from a period of Buddhist missionary work in Australia, came to national prominence by the early 1990s for his popular preaching style on television. He was instrumental in drawing public attention to the Deegavapi issue, openly charging Mr. Ashraf with the planned destruction of Buddhist heritage. He challenged him to come for a television debate over the issue and as this challenge was duly accepted by Mr. Ashraf, a television debate was arranged. In the debate Mr. Ashraf, a lawyer by profession and who came armed with maps and other information about the area, emphasized the peaceful relations that existed between Buddhists and Muslims in the East, the services he rendered to Buddhist establishments, including Deegavapi, and he denied any conscious or deliberate effort to alienate or damage Buddhist sites. Rev. Soma, who made several unsubstantiated or poorly supported claims of Muslim encroachment of Buddhist sites, could not achieve the limelight he sought through this debate. Being an urban monk who rose to prominence through mass media, he clearly demonstrated a lack of understanding of ground realities in the East during this debate.

Norochchhole housing scheme: a monument of development failure

Just as the dust over the Deegavapi dispute was settling to some extent, the tsunami of December 2004 occurred and initially it led to a degree of healing of ethnic tension as many of the Muslim and Hindu persons displaced by the tsunami were assisted by Buddhist temples and organizations in Ampara. Apart from providing temporary shelter for tsunami victims from the east coast, many Buddhist organizations provided relief items collected from donors in an obvious outpouring of sympathy towards the disaster victims irrespective of their ethnic identity. The situation, however, changed over time with the influx of many NGOs and INGOs channeling external assistance and the state agencies and international donors looking to resettle tsunami victims in the interior hinterland characterized by an expanding Sinhala frontier. As already pointed by many other researchers (McGilvray & Gamburd, 2010; Silva, 2009; Stirrat, 2006; Ruwanpura, 2008), the state policy of resettling tsunami victims in alternative sites led to considerable tension along ethnic, caste, and social class lines. In the East coast of Sri Lanka a vast majority of tsunami victims were Muslims, followed by Tamils and Sinhalese. Finding alternative sites to resettle Muslim IDPs posed a serious threat due to already existing congestion in Muslim bazaar towns along the east coast, the reluctance of Muslim

IDPs to move to areas outside Muslim concentrations due to security concerns and possible reaction from host communities belonging to other ethnic groups (McGilvray & Gamburd, 2010).

Since 2006 a serious contestation from Sinhala nationalists has emerged in response to the Norochhole Housing Scheme established by the National Housing Development Authority under Mrs. Ashraf as the minister in charge, with Saudi support for housing Muslim tsunami victims from the east coast. This 500 unit housing project equipped with a supermarket, community centre and other facilities, were built on crown land selected for the purpose with effect from 2005 in Norochhole located 8-14 km away from the Deegavapi temple. This housing project is actually located not in Addlachennai Division, but in the adjoining DS Division of Akkaraipattu. Similar tsunami housing projects for Muslim tsunami victims (e.g. Ashrafnagar housing project situated within 2 km from the sacred site) had already been established in Addalachennai DS Division in closer proximity to the Deegavapi sacred site, but they did not receive the attention or criticism of Sinhala nationalists. Some internal conflict among prominent Muslim politicians in the area itself along with the high profile nature of the Norochhole Housing Project may have contributed to it being targeted by militant Sinhala nationalists. This housing project triggered an immediate reaction from activist nationalist Buddhist monks in Colombo and Ampara. Newspaper articles in the nationalist Sinhala press accused Muslim politicians of encroaching into sacred Buddhist land and using tsunami as an excuse. The housing scheme was seen as an unacceptable expansion of the Muslim frontier in close proximity to the Deegavapi sacred site. Largely through the initiative of politically active JHU Buddhist monks in Colombo, a “non-political organization open to Buddhist monks from all three Nikayas and all political parties” called Digamadulla (a Sinhala Buddhist label for Ampara District) Sangha Saba was formed in 2007, and agitations included a protest march to Deegavapi temple where a dharmasala (preaching hall) had been erected by Mrs. Ashraf in memory of her dead husband, Mr. Ashraf, and named after him with a sign board “Ashraf Dharmasala”. This sign board was forcibly removed by the protestors in spite of opposition by the incumbent chief monk. The Digamadulla Sangha Saba made various representations to leading politicians, including Mahinda Rajapaksha, the President of the country. They requested the President to intercede in the matter and immediately stop the allocation

of newly built houses to Muslim IDPs. Further, they requested the President to declare the Deegavapi area as a sacred site. In 2008 the Deegavapi temple premises was declared through a gazette notification as a sacred site under the Urban Development Authority. This meant restrictions on use of Deegavapi land for purposes other than approved religious and archeological purposes. This, however, did not satisfy the nationalist monks, as it did not have any bearing on the allocation of housing in the Norochhole Housing Scheme, which lay outside the sacred area so demarcated.

In 2008 a fundamental right lawsuit was filed in the Supreme Court by a group of Buddhist monks led by the JHU parliamentarian scholar monk, Rev. Ellawala Meddhananda, against allocation of housing exclusively to Muslim IDPs, claiming that “the very existence of the Deegavapiya Rajamaha Viharaya depends on the Buddhist population in the Deegavapiya village and steps taken to colonize the new housing scheme with non-Buddhist discriminating against Buddhists will result in a violation of their fundamental rights”. Even though the chief incumbent of the Deegavapi temple was one of the petitioners in this case, he appears to have been co-opted by militant monks from outside. An interim order preventing the allocation of housing to any beneficiaries was obtained and on June 1, 2009 the Supreme Court gave a judgement in favour of the petitioners preventing exclusive allocation of the newly built houses to members of one ethnic group only. As of 2017, the newly built housing scheme, built at a cost of about US\$ 5 million, remained a ghost city with no party being able to benefit from the colossal expenditure on this ‘show case’ humanitarian/ development intervention, reportedly due to a court order prohibiting allocation of housing (See Figure 2). The overgrown trees and decaying buildings served as a monument of development failure triggered by ethnic mistrust and fueled by nationalist sentiments.

Figure 2: Norochcholai Housing Scheme



These developments indicate how a certain historical perception about Deegavapi and its conceptualization as “a sacred site” exclusively belonging to the Sinhala Buddhists have emerged as a serious threat to land rights and development initiatives of an ethnic minority in Eastern Sri Lanka. While all the Buddhist monks from Ampara interviewed in this study did not necessarily agree with the nationalist representation of claims emanating from outside, the more militant among them strongly held the view that the Norochcholle housing scheme should be distributed only among Sinhala peasants from the area, totally disregarding the original purpose for which the housing scheme had been funded and constructed. Some were of the opinion that the housing scheme should be distributed among tsunami victims among ethnic proportions in the country. Many Buddhist monks complained that the Muslim politicians from the East were using their disproportionate political power in the new government to divert resources, including land and development funds, to support their Muslim constituents while Sinhala politicians merely looked after their own personal interests without helping their constituencies as such.

Sinhala Buddhist perspectives

To the Buddhists, Deegavapi is a sacred site not only because it is believed have been visited by the Buddha during his second visit to Sri Lanka, so that it has received the touch of the living Buddha

(budupahasa), but also because the stupa is believed to contain the sacred nail relic of the Buddha, even though there is no support for the latter claim in the Buddhist chronicles. The significance of the Buddha relic in the world view of Sinhala Buddhists and in the conception of the island of Sri Lanka as the *dhammadipa* (island of dhamma) has received wide attention in the anthropology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka (see Obeysekere, 1995 & Gombirch and Obeysekere, 1989; Nissan, 1985). As Nissan (1985, p. 95) has pointed out, veneration of dhatu is considered equivalent to the veneration of the Buddha himself. While the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, repository of the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha, signifies a Buddhist centre of some kind, identified sacred Buddhist sites in the periphery such as Somavatiya near Polonnaruwa, Seruvila near Trincomale, Buddhangala, and Deegavapi near Ampara signify an island-wide spread of Buddhism in ancient Ceylon on the one hand, and consecration of the entire Sri Lanka by sacred Buddhist symbols on the other. Deegavapiya has been particularly significant for the nationalist Buddhist imagination in that it is seen as evidence of a historical Buddhist presence in the East currently marked by a significant presence of non-Buddhist populations. In their view it has also provided adequate legitimacy to state-sponsored Sinhala colonization of the East spearheaded by the Gal Oya Scheme.

The popular history of Deegavapi has been written by Ellawela Medhananda, a Colombo-based political monk in the Hela Urumaya with some training in archeology. As already noted, he has been the prime mover of a recent court case against the Norochchole Housing Scheme. He was a popular writer to the nationalist press from 1980s and his book “Eithihasika Deegavapiya” (Historical Deegavapi), published in 2000, examines the history of Deegavapi using chronicles and archeological sources. His writings have influenced a number of Ampara-based Sinhala journalists such as Ariyaratna Ranabahu and Sisira Paranatantri. According to Rev. Medhananda’s view, ancient Deegavapi was a Sinhala settlement (*janapadaya*) established by a prince named Deegayu at the time of king Pandukabaya (3rd century BC). According to him, the chronicles Mahawamsa and Deepavamsa refer to the Buddha’s visit to the site and his blissful meditation (*samadi suvayen*) on the site of the future stupa. The writings of Rev. Medhananda and his colleagues to the press heavily influenced the popular Buddhist imagination and representation of the past. The presence of the Buddha relic in the stupa is not mentioned in

Rev. Medhananda's writings but some other newspaper columnists (e.g. Sisira Paranatantri) have mentioned it in their writings. The writings to the press in particular have alluded to the threat to the ruins from Muslim politicians and villagers in particular. Terms such as "Bulldozing of Buddhist Heritage" (Buddha Urumaya dosara kirima), "Attack of Sacred Buddhist Sites by Non-Sinhalese and Non-Buddhists" (Asinhala, Abuddha *Sanharaya*) have been used to depict a siege mentality with regard to this Buddhist site. Politically these narratives have animated the JHU and, to a less extent, the JVP at the national level and the newly-formed Digamadulla Sanga Saba at the district level. The protection of Deegavapi has become an important rallying point for militant Buddhist monks, certain Sinhala nationalist politicians, and some media personnel. As was evident in many border villages vulnerable to LTTE attacks, in Deegavapiya where the LTTE was also identified as a potential threat, a permanent security post was established from the late 1990s. These developments in Deegavapiya paralleled similar nationalistic processes at work in Anuradhapura sacred city, as reported by Seneviratne:

As Anuradhapura was directly located in the border area facing "Tamil country" the site was transformed into a powerful territorial benchmark and, as such, had to be safeguarded and protected. Not coincidentally, Anuradhapura has since been transformed into the largest military base in Sri Lanka (Seneviratne, 2008, p. 186).

The nationalist narratives about Deegavapi and related representations of the past tried to identify it as an exclusive Buddhist site with no infiltration of Hindu or popular religious elements. Some tendency towards re-imagining or re-inventing the past is evident in history writing by Rev. Meddananda and other nationalist writers, who claim that in a certain period devout enlightened (rahat) monks used the caves and abodes within the complex for meditation. A similar process is evident in the Museum established more recently with artifacts on display being carefully selected to signify the exclusive Buddhist identity of the site. For instance, *deva rupa* (deity images) normally found in most ancient Buddhist sites do not appear or appear only sparingly among the exhibits. On the other hand, some Buddhist objects from other countries in South Asia which floated to the east coast of Sri Lanka during the tsunami of December 2004 are prominently displayed in the Deegavapi museum, identifying a miraculous unification of Buddhist sacred objects within this pure

Buddhist site. The notion of an uncontaminated and pure Buddhism advocated by militant Buddhist nationalists is not supported by other popular functioning Buddhist ritual complexes such as Kataragama, the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, or even in Anuradhapura (See Obeyesekere, 2005; Seneviratne, 1978; Seneviratne, 2008). As pointed out in a sister essay evolved from this project, efforts at the purification of religion is often a means to solidify boundaries between otherwise interacting religious communities (Goodhand & Bart Korf, 2009).

Deegavapi is one of the main pilgrimage sites for the Buddhists. It is indeed considered one of the *Solosmastanaya* (16 great places of pilgrimage). All 16 places of pilgrimage are considered “great” because each of them was believed to have been visited by the historical Buddha (Nissan, 1985). An interview with the chief incumbent monk in Deegavapi in 2008 indicated that on the average 200 to 1000 pilgrims visit the site every day. Through pilgrimage a large number of Buddhists have seen Deegavapi and this in turn has heightened its significance at the national level. As pointed out in the emerging literature on the politics of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka, it has become a powerful means to disseminate ideas about national and cultural heritage among the participants (Nissan, 1988; Winslow, 1984) The Deegavapi temple had two senior monks and a number of junior monks, some of whom were studying in educational institutions outside the area. The surrounding Buddhist settlements neither offer alms (dane) to the temple on a regular basis nor receive religious services (for instance at funerals), defying the objective of establishing these Buddhist settlements for the upkeep of the temple. This was partly due to the senility and poor health of the senior monks in the Deegavapi temple. When the local Buddhists needed the services of monks, they invited monks from various temples in Ampara town, situated some 17 kms away. On the other hand, some of the nearby Buddhist settlers cultivated temple lands on leasehold arrangements to create an economic tie between the temple and the settlers. Currently Muslim villagers in the area have limited contact with the temple as they are no longer given any temple land for cultivation. On the whole, in spite of the political and ideological significance of Deegapiya for Buddhists from outside the area as a sacred site and a pilgrimage centre, it does not cater to any religious needs of Buddhist settlers in the nearby area, to justify the act of establishing these settlements as *goduru gammana* (host villages) for the sacred site.

Minority perspectives and reactions

Muslim and Tamil villagers in the area have not had any religious friction with each other or with the Sinhala Buddhist cultural and religious heritage as such. Nearby Muslim and Tamil villagers refer to Deegavapi area as '*Visari Vattai*' (literally 'Temple land'), clearly acknowledging it as a Buddhist site. Even though they are not connected to the Deegavapi temple in terms of religious practice and rituals, many local Muslims had cultivated temple land in the past under lease arrangements with the temple priests indicating some economic linkages with the temple. The relations however have deteriorated in more recent times due to a combination factors, including increased state intervention in a number of civic and religious matters.

The state intervention in the area began with the development of minor irrigation schemes during the colonial period. The Tamil and Muslim farmers in the east coast were the prime beneficiaries of these irrigation projects. On the other hand, the Gal Oya Project that began in 1949 brought large numbers of Sinhala settlers from Central and Southern parts of Sri Lanka and provided irrigation to a limited number of Muslim and Tamil villagers. Both Tamils and Muslims see state aided colonization as a primarily Sinhala project that deprived them of any space for the expansion of congested settlements along the east coast. Furthermore, excess water from the Gal Oya project was released to the eastern part of the Ampara district, causing flooding of some paddy fields cultivated by minority communities. The sugar cane cultivation introduced through state initiative expanded economic opportunities for some Muslims and Tamils, but it took away some of the crown land used by them and moreover brought more Sinhala settlers to their doorstep. This created an impression among the minorities that they were mere "victims of development", to use an expression used by Scudder (1990) in another context. Some of the more recent state interventions in the area, including efforts to build a harbour in Oluvil and establish a forest reserve near Alimchenai village in Addalachennai Division are also understood as ways of limiting further land resources available for their use. Moreover, the war and the Tsunami have displaced many Tamils and Muslims, who have found it necessary to move to alternative sites. On the whole the local residents in the eastern coastline have a sense of being restricted and hemmed in due to these developments from the hinterland.

The above impression is not purely imagination. As shown in Table 2, the predominantly Muslim and Tamil divisions report some of the highest population densities compared to local Sinhala settlements and Ampara District and Eastern Province as a whole.

Table 2

Population Density in Selected Administrative Division in Eastern Part of the Ampara District

| Villages/District | Land area (in Sq.Km) | Population (2007) | Density (Living Population per Sq. km) |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Addalachenai (Muslim) | 38.065 | 22,353 | 587 |
| Palamunai (Muslim) | 12.676 | 8,948 | 705 |
| Olluvil (Muslim and Tamil mixed) | 19.7 | 8,221 | 417 |
| Deegavapi (Sinhalese) | 13.20 | 2,225 | 168 |
| Addalachenai D.S Division | 83.64 | 41747 | 499 |
| Ampara District | 4356.5 | 610,719 | 140 |
| Eastern Province | 9,996 | 1,578,000 | 157 |
| Sri Lanka | 65,610 | 19,007,000 | 289 |

Source: Ampara Kachcheri Records

The land has a premium value in both Muslim and Tamil settlements, being predominantly agricultural communities. In addition, land is given as an important component of the dowries given to daughters, with the result that absence of land seriously limits the value of daughters in the local marriage market.

Under these circumstances the settlement of Sinhalese from outside near Deegavapi and archeological work extending to their villages have irked Muslims and Tamils alike. The Muslim farmers in Oluvil area have a clear sense of state misappropriation of the paddy lands they cultivated in Ponnaweli by Sinhala settlers brought in from outside. The archeological work that began since the 1990s has created a number of problems for the Muslim and Tamil farmers in the area. Once an archeological site in a particular landholding is identified, it is first visited by Police officers from Damana Police station situated in a predominantly Sinhala area to the south of Addalachenai. The local Police in Addalachenai, with a predominantly Muslim population,

are not involved in the process, creating an impression among the Muslim residents that they do not get a fair treatment in this process. Once an archeological site is identified by the Police, they inform the Archeology Department in Ampara Town, staffed mainly by Sinhala officers. Once they officially designate a certain archeological site, the owners of the land are ordered not to cause any damage to the site and to exclude a 300 meter diameter area from the site from any activity, including cultivation or building. In the view of government officials, ownership of the land is not taken away from the original owners, but they are simply required to look after the archeological site in their land holdings. But the landowners feel that this reduces the market value as well as the productive use of their land. Even landowners distant from archeological sites are scared to report any evidence of an archeological nature in their vicinity, out of the fear of losing their land. One family in Alimnagar could not occupy a newly built house once some ruins were discovered in their house site. Some were scared to dig up their lands for cultivation or house building purposes for the fear of accidental discovery of ruins of one kind or another. There is also the fear of other people who discover artifacts in their land depositing them in somebody else's land, putting the latter in trouble! This shows the degree to which the Sinhala Buddhist project of archeological work has disturbed these communities.

Muslims and Tamils reacted to this situation in rather different ways reflecting their significantly different positions in the modern Sri Lankan polity. The affected Muslims, especially those who lost land in Ponnaweli, approached their political patrons, who are key Muslims politicians in the area, and reported their problems, and these politicians have not sought to confront the Deegavapi project or the archeological project in view of their seemingly accommodative or conciliatory stance vis-à-vis ruling governments. They have sought to find alternative crown land to distribute them among their political followers, not always successfully, as indeed was discovered in the case of Ashraf arranging to dig up ruins in one site. They have also sometimes ventured into crown land currently or previously used by Tamil farmers, further marginalizing them and sometimes giving rise to land disputes between Tamils and Muslims. The struggle for access to crown land has been one of the key motivations for carving out separate DS divisions for Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese in the whole of the Eastern Province.

The Tamil reaction to Deegavapi has been non- action on the part of any Tamil victims, most of whom are severely marginalized both in ethnic and caste terms. The LTTE identified the Deegavapi issue as an aspect of state-aided Sinhala colonization in what they consider as part of the Tamil homeland and alluded to Deegavapi in their propaganada condemning the Sinhala state and Sinhala colonialism in their websites. Some ruthless attacks by the LTTE on Sinhala border villagers and Buddhist monks in the area may be seen as some of their reactions to this situation.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how the work of discovery, narrative construction, and demarcation and restoration of a sacred Buddhist site in a predominantly minority area has served to aggravate tension between the country's majority ethnic group, Sinhala Buddhists, and the Muslims in eastern Sri Lanka, seemingly recovering from decades of war and the 2004 tsunami. The militant Sinhala Buddhist nationalists have employed the narrative of 'sacred Buddhist site' to deprive land-hungry Muslims, mobilized by Muslim politicians, of access to land, to create anxieties about their future and their right to survival. The nationalist narrative about Deegavapi has animated a high profile media campaign against selected Muslim politicians, state policies, and programmes of development, human settlement, and surveying and preservation of archeological sites, and even a legal dispute targeting a tsunami resettlement. As a legal concept and a planning tool adopted by the state since 1980s, the notion of 'sacred site' has represented such a site as a mono-ethnic and mono-religious homogenous space where minorities and "the ethnic other" are not welcome. This goes against the spirit of religious syncretism and peaceful coexistence among various religious communities widely reported in Sri Lanka by various researchers. This is very reminiscent of Valisinghe Harischandra's campaign to make Anuradhapura sacred city an exclusive Sinhala Buddhist space, subsequently translated into the Anuradhapura Preservation Ordinance (1942) and actually implemented in the form of a town planning exercise commissioned by late S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake (Nissan, 1985; Seneviratne, 2008). This, in turn, resulted in the relocation of non-Buddhist religious establishments (churches, mosques and kovils) from the Sacred city of Anuradhapura to a new town established, with resulting spatial segregation of religious communities contrary to religious syncretism

evolved in Sri Lanka over centuries (Obeyesekere, 1995). The current study clearly revealed that religious intolerance and ethnic hatred are not so much processes emanating from the ethnically heterogeneous periphery, but rather a top-down hegemonic process whereby some members of the urban elite with a rather superficial and partial understanding of the reality at the ground level, use their influence over mass media and bureaucratic, political and legal machineries to 'reconstruct' what they perceive as the legitimate past.

The dispute surrounding the Norochchole Housing Scheme reveals the manner in which a poorly conceived and foreign-funded plan for resettlement of Muslim tsunami victims concentrated and crowded in the East coast area has been blocked by an equally ill-conceived notion of an ethnically and religiously homogenous Deegavapi sacred site. Even though that housing scheme is located some distance away and in a different administrative division, an extended notion of sacred site has been invoked both in mass media and in the court house in order to block the establishment of an ethnically homogenous Muslim housing scheme. This may have important lessons not only for those seeking to work with religiously inspired public action but also those, including donors, involved in designing such ethnically/religiously homogenous development projects in potentially volatile multiethnic settings. The fact that this housing scheme built on scarce crown land with a heavy investment of donor assistance remains unutilized some 10 years after the completion of the project can be seen as a colossal monument to the failure of externally driven development and humanitarian assistance. The abandoned Norochchole Housing Scheme also points to the need for ethnic and religious reconciliation as a prerequisite for post-war development in Sri Lanka.

Addressing conflicts arising from concern about preserving historical and cultural heritage and sacred spaces on the one hand, and the actual land rights and human rights of people who may be located in such sites, is a complex issue that requires careful analysis and review of good and bad practices across the world. It is clear that Sri Lanka has a long way to go in terms of dealing with this complex issue at a time of political and social crisis. While mediated settlement appears to be the best solution given the circumstances, it is unclear why a multi-party government (both of the contesting parties, Muslim parties and Hela Urumaya, were constituent parties in the ruling regime at the time), failed to provide anything other than a problematic

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legal mediation. For any breakthrough towards an effective mediation, religious moderates on both sides of the divide and the views of people directly affected by these developments must be identified, articulated and empowered to determine the course of history and development.

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