

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljbs.v7i1.14>

Changing Attitudes to Violence among Particular Sri Lankan Buddhists

Eshan Imalka Wijerathne

eshanpanhinda@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7977-8699>

Abstract

This study examines the historical and ideological transformation of attitudes towards violence within Sri Lankan Buddhism, challenging the conventional perception of Buddhism as a uniformly non-violent tradition. While early Buddhist teachings strongly emphasized *ahimsā* (non-violence) as a central ethical principle, this paper argues that significant shifts occurred over time, particularly through myth, political association, and socio-religious developments. By drawing on both canonical texts and post-canonical literature such as chronicles, commentaries, and myths, the study highlights how the image of the Buddha and Buddhist ethics were reinterpreted to accommodate changing historical realities. The research situates the origins of Buddhist non-violence within the broader context of ancient North India, a period marked by intense warfare and socio-political upheaval. The teachings of the Buddha and *Mahāvīra* are interpreted as reactions to these violent conditions. However, in the Sri Lankan context, evolving relationships between the Buddhist sangha and political authority, along with external religious and military pressures, contributed to a gradual reinterpretation of non-violence. Particular attention is given to mythological narratives, such as the Buddha's

encounters with the *yakkhas*, the origin of the Sinhala dynasty, and the story of *Duttagāmaṇi*. These narratives function as symbolic mediators of contradiction, transforming violence into a morally justified or even necessary act under certain circumstances. Such reinterpretations facilitated the emergence of a distinction between “good” and “bad” violence, thereby enabling a reconciliation between the Buddhist ethical ideals and the practical demands of statecraft. The accommodation of violence, though not universally accepted, represents a significant ideological shift with enduring implications, including its influence on contemporary socio-political attitudes toward religion and conflict.

Keywords: ahimsā, Buddhism, myth and violence, religious transformation, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

It was not so long ago when it was the fashion in academic circles to see ethnic conflicts as the product of ancient and persisting enmities or the working out of "primordial cultural forces." This, of course, does not mean that the answers to the questions we have raised can be found only within the confines of the modern history of Sri Lanka or of Buddhism. One of the central ideas in my presentation is that the study of the more ancient history of *Theravāda* Buddhism is as relevant as the more recent history of Sri Lanka in the search for answers to certain problems of our times.

Buddhist myths of Sri Lanka, I have been trying to understand how the personality of the Buddha is cast and recast in these myths, and particularly how the Buddha, generally a symbol of non-violence, is at times transformed in these myths into a symbol of violence. It was *Lévi-Strauss* who directed our attention to the importance of myths in mediating contradictions. In *Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's* study of the myths in the *Matsya Purāna* and the *Vāmana Purāna*, such as those of *Harikeśa*, *Sukeśin* and *Bali*, she has focused attention on the role of these myths in mediating contradictions between *svadharma* and *sādhārana dharma* or concepts of relative and absolute duty. (Doniger, 1978, pp.101-104.) The transformation and the manipulation of symbols in Sri Lankan myths, too, became necessary for the mediation of contradictions, in this case, between teachings of non-violence and the acquiescence in violence.

Buddhism arose at a time of violent and rapid change in North India. The history of the period leading to its emergence had been one of protracted inter-tribal struggle which, through a process of defeat and

elimination of some polities, had brought into being sixteen large political groupings by the sixth century before Christ. Of these sixteen groupings, four major polities had emerged as the pre-eminent. Most of these sixteen polities were being ruled by single leaders while some polities were of what may be called the non-monarchical, oligarchic, type.

Associated with the frequent warfare of the period which preceded the emergence of Buddhism had been the development of elaborate ritual amongst which was the ritualization of warfare in the form of the *aśvamedha* or "the horse sacrifice." While war brought destruction to humans, those sacrificial rituals which were of crucial symbolic significance in political life brought destruction to animal life and the dissipation of wealth.

The warfare was particularly destructive on the tribal form of organization and was bringing into being a new type of supra-tribal, more organized and more extensive form of polity in place of the old polity based on ties of kinship and tribal identity. A noteworthy outcome of this evolving process of political change was the impact of warfare on the fragile and vulnerable polities of the non-monarchical or oligarchic type. Most of these smaller polities were overrun and incorporated into the kingdoms of growing power.

Of particular interest in this context is the fact that the leaders of the two major religious movements of that time, the Buddha and the *Mahāvīra*, the founder of Jainism, were men from the non-monarchical type of polities. The Buddha's own clan, that of the *Śākyas*, was to be annihilated and its territory conquered by the emerging, powerful kingdom in Kosala while *Mahāvīra*'s homeland, the *Jñātrika* land, was

annexed by *Magadha*. I would strongly suggest that it was not a mere coincidence that both the Buddha and the *Mahāvīra* paid close attention to the problem of violence, and emphasized in their teachings the doctrine of non-violence or *ahiṃsā*. Their teachings embodied a strong reaction to the pervasive violence of their times, violence in politics as well as violence in sacrificial ritual. Perhaps it was also a personal reaction to the threat that their own polities faced.

2. Literature Review

In Buddhist thought as embodied in the *Pāli* Canon of the *Theravāda*, there is consistent opposition to The good Buddhist was expected to refraining from causing physical injury. He was to refrain from taking life even of the simplest forms. Both Buddhism and Jainism opposed sacrifices involving injury to life, and they stood for an alternative system of ritual on the argument that a ritual offering should not involve inflicting pain but should be an embodiment of moral values. In this early tradition of Buddhist thought, the life of the man in politics was understood as being invariably associated with violence. The practice of politics was represented as a single-minded quest for power during the course of which the codes of ethical conduct were trampled underfoot. As such, the "science of politics" or the "science of the *ksatriyas* as it was called, was described as "a base science" (*hinavijjha*) or "a science of the animals" (*tiracchinavijjha*). It was argued that the seeker for power was encouraged by the science of politics even to murder his own parents in order to secure his path to power. In some of the *Jātaka* tales, the exemplary Buddhist, the *Bodhisatta*, abdicates the right to the throne because of the association of politics with violence.

The concept of *ahiṃsā* was certainly known before the time of the Buddha and *Mahāvīra*. The term may be traced even back to the *R̥gveda* though it has been suggested that, in such early contexts, it carries the meanings "security" and "safety" rather than "abstention from causing injury" associated with it when it occurs in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. (*R̥gveda*, 1896, p.5.64.3:125) However, it is in Buddhism, and particularly Jainism, that non-violence was developed into a powerful ethical principle. This ethical principle was utilized in both Buddhism and Jainism to criticize, to disapprove and to oppose destruction of life. In these contexts, *ahiṃsā* is understood in certain instances in abstract terms. It is also spelt out in more specific, concrete, terms as destruction of life in war, in sacrificial ritual and in daily life as in the killing of animals for food. between Buddhism and Jainism - story of *Devadatta*. *Cullavagga: Devadatto pothujjanikam iddhim abhinippadesi* (Oldenberg, 1977, p.183).

It is likely that the implications of the principle of *ahiṃsā* for the daily life of the Buddhist cleric were the subject of debate within the community of Buddhist clerics for a long time. The story of *Devadatta* provides pointers to what probably was an early stage of the debate. *Devadatta*, the kinsman of the Buddha, was the leader of a group of monks who demanded the adoption of a more strict, ascetical code of conduct which sought to thoroughly apply the principle of *ahiṃsā* in the daily life of the monks: *Devadatta* wanted all Buddhist clerics to strictly adhere to vegetarianism. (Oldenberg, 1977, pp.183-200) The proposed reform would have brought Buddhism closer to Jainism, and this may partly explain the resistance to the idea. *Frank Reynolds* and *Charles Hallssey* have characterized the early period after the emergence of Buddhism as its 'sectarian phase' when the Buddhist religious sought to strengthen their identity and deliberately distanced

themselves from other religious communities. (Reynolds, 1989, pp.6-8). The opponents of the reformist proposals evidently argued that any individual could follow the ascetical codes of conduct, but that such codes should not be imposed on the Buddhist *Saṅgha* in its entirety. The would-be reformers appear to have brought about the first schism within Buddhism. The *Theravāda* texts maintain that the break-away group was defeated and that its followers were brought back within the mainstream within a short time. (Oldenberg, 1977, pp.200-206) On the other hand, the accounts of visiting Chinese pilgrims would suggest that followers of *Devadatta* were active in India several centuries later. In fact, vegetarianism became popular within the Chinese Buddhist tradition. (Li Jung-hsi, 1981) In India the debate was probably a long one and its intensity is reflected in the manner *Devadatta* is depicted in the *Theravāda* texts. It is indeed ironical that this monk who espoused ascetic ideals, and is depicted in certain contexts as a man of spiritual attainments, praised by the Buddha, and popular among a large following at the *Magadhan* city of *Rājagaha*, (Oldenberg, 1977, pp.183-190) came to be routinely cast in *Theravāda* texts as a violent man who tried to murder the Buddha.

3. Methodology

The Research problem of this study is formulated within a historical analytical framework. Since the study is based on historical analysis, the collection of data and its interpretation are carried out through the historical research method in examining the selected theme. This is a Qualitative Textual Analysis Study. Furthermore, in order to explore and develop knowledge within the research process, the positivist approach is employed as the epistemological framework of this study. too many people are involved in the business of violence in Sri Lanka,

either actively as perpetrators or passively as victim of violence while too few appear to be giving serious thought to the problem of violence either at an abstract level or at the more practical and immediately relevant level of seeking a way out of the morass. Scholars specializing in the study of Sri Lankan society were offering us their considered opinion that politics of violence would not thrive and were unsuited to a country where one of the gentlest of world religions was the dominant religious force. While the influential views of these times appear to be so naive today, they nevertheless confront the scholar of our times with important problems: How is that the politics of violence could emerge with such shattering force on the centre stage of Sri Lankan politics apparently encountering no serious problems arising from religious, especially Buddhist, ethos ? Why is it that we have not witnessed opposition to war as a mass phenomenon in these violent times despite the fact that about 70 per cent of the population of the island is of Buddhist persuasion? One of the central ideas in this presentation is that answers to these questions cannot be found within the confines of the modern history of Sri Lanka or of Buddhism, and that the study of the more ancient history of Sri Lankan Buddhism is as relevant as its more recent history in the search for answers to problems of our times.

4. Findings

The findings of this study reveal that attitudes toward violence among particular Sri Lankan Buddhists have evolved through a long historical process shaped by changing political, religious, and socio-cultural circumstances. While the early teachings of the Buddha, as preserved in the *Pāli* Canon, consistently advocate *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) as a universal ethical principle, the historical evidence demonstrates that later interpretations of Buddhism increasingly accommodated the use of violence under exceptional circumstances. This transformation was

neither abrupt nor doctrinally explicit; rather, it emerged through the reinterpretation of Buddhist myths, chronicles, and commentarial traditions in response to changing historical realities.

The analysis further indicates that the relationship between the Buddhist *Saṅga* and political authority played a decisive role in this ideological transformation. As Buddhism became closely associated with the protection of the state and the preservation of the *Sāsana*, narratives concerning the Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka, the establishment of the Sinhala polity, and the military campaigns of King *Duttagāmaṇī* were reinterpreted to provide moral legitimacy for violence undertaken in defence of religion and the kingdom. These narratives functioned not merely as historical accounts but as symbolic constructions that mediated the apparent contradiction between the Buddhist ideal of compassion and the practical demands of governance and warfare.

The study also finds that the distinction between "good" and "bad" violence gradually emerged within particular Sri Lankan Buddhist traditions. Violence motivated by personal desire, hatred, or greed continued to be condemned, whereas violence portrayed as serving the protection of Buddhism, political stability, or social order was increasingly represented as morally defensible. Consequently, the accommodation of violence reflects a historically conditioned ideological adaptation rather than a rejection of the fundamental ethical teachings of early Buddhism. These findings further suggest that many contemporary religious and nationalist interpretations concerning violence in Sri Lanka are rooted in this long process of historical reinterpretation rather than in the original doctrinal foundations of Buddhism.

Discussion

This study addresses the problem of how attitudes toward violence within particular Sri Lankan Buddhist traditions evolved despite the early Buddhist doctrine of *ahiṃsā*, which unequivocally advocates non-violence as a fundamental ethical principle. It seeks to examine the historical and ideological processes through which violence came to be interpreted as morally justifiable under specific political, religious, and socio-historical circumstances. The primary aim of the study is to analyse the transformation of Buddhist attitudes toward violence by critically examining canonical and post-canonical sources, including the *Pāli* Canon, chronicles, commentaries, and Buddhist mythological narratives. The scope of the research is confined to a historical and qualitative textual analysis of selected Sri Lankan Buddhist traditions, with particular emphasis on the relationship between religion, political authority, myth, and the reinterpretation of Buddhist ethics. By tracing these historical developments, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the interaction between Buddhism, state formation, and political violence in Sri Lanka.

The principal argument presented in this paper is that the attitudes toward violence in *Theravāda* Buddhism underwent a significant change from those of opposition to violence to a situation in which certain prominent strands of Buddhist opinion reflected a considerable degree of accommodation with violence. In making this claim, I am emphasizing the view that *Theravāda* Buddhism underwent significant change during the course of its long history in Sri Lanka. Buddhist scholars in Sri Lanka have sometimes claimed that it was the "pure" form of Buddhism that has been preserved in Sri Lanka. A leading European scholar claimed that the form of Buddhism he observed in the central highlands of Sri Lanka was not very different

from the Buddhism of the canonical texts datable to a period about two thousand years earlier. (Gombrich, 1971, pp. 10-11) It is certainly accurate to say that the canonical texts in the *Pāli* language have been remarkably well-preserved, though it would be unwise to underestimate the extent of change in the course of transmission over time or the significance of variant readings in manuscripts, especially those pertaining to such themes as the position of women or the way the person of the Buddha was perceived. Changes in Sri Lankan Buddhism are to be observed more in the way the canonical texts were interpreted in the extensive body of commentarial literature and in the Buddhist discourse represented by myths, legends and the influential chronicles written by Buddhist monks. (Gunawardana, 1978). It becomes evident from a study of this material that profound changes were taking place in such areas as attitudes to violence and attitudes toward property. These changes pertain to such aspects of fundamental importance that represent radical departures from the positions reflected in the *Pāli* canon.

It is in fact possible to trace several different stages in the change of attitudes toward violence within Sri Lankan Buddhism. Of course, what comes first and foremost to one's mind is the attitude towards violence associated with, and arising from, the close identification of Sri Lankan Buddhism with an ethnic group. However, I would suggest that the strong linkage between ethnicity and religion, as expressed in the term Sinhala-Buddhist which has become an emotive and powerful symbol today, is a more recent phenomenon, and that profound changes in attitudes toward violence had developed long before the Sinhala-Buddhist identity had been forged. In fact these changes first began at a time when Buddhism was influential among Sinhala as well as Tamil speakers.

In the period between the fifth and the ninth century AD a radical change was witnessed in the patterns of navigation and trade in the Indian Ocean, intensifying the maritime contacts between South, Southeast and East Asia. This period saw the continuation at an accelerated pace of the expansion of Buddhism begun earlier, and the development of close contacts between monastic communities within this widespread Buddhist world. For a very long time, clerics in these monastic communities were linked by their shared reverence for the Buddha and for sacred sites associated with him which drew pilgrims from distant parts of this Buddhist world. Monks and nuns who crossed the seas for the propagation of Buddhism were inspiring models for members of this "imagined community." (Benedict, 1991) There was a vision which transcended political boundaries and ethnic groupings. Two trans local languages, *Pāli* and *Sanskrit*, helped to integrate this community. These religious actively cultivated multilingualism. Even as late as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the ideal Buddhist scholar in Sri Lanka was a *ṣaḍbhāṣāparameśvara*, a person who had mastered six different languages. These attitudes represented a willingness to accept, rather than reject, the "other," the stranger. Thus, attitudes towards violence do not appear to be related to, or stemming from, xenophobia in a general sense, though the growth in power of kingdoms neighbouring Sri Lanka, such as those of the *Pallavas*, *Pāṇdyas* and *Cōḷas*, and their association with a militant form of *Śaivism*, did probably have an effect on this development.

Perhaps the most significant factors behind the change in attitudes toward violence stemmed from the strong and close links that developed between Buddhism and the state in Sri Lanka. A second group of factors may be traced to the increasing threat that Buddhism encountered from a militant form of *Śaivism*. The development of the

monastery as a property-owning institution may represent a third factor. Though Buddhist clerics had determinedly avoided contacts with the judicial organs and the penal system, especially judicial proceedings involving corporeal punishments, in earlier times, it was no longer possible to adhere to this stance since ownership of property would invariably lead to entanglements in legal proceedings. Fourthly, it is important to remember that the early attitude of consistent opposition to violence represents merely one of several approaches to the question of violence in South Asian thought. An entirely different approach may be recognized in the concept of *daṇḍa* as outlined in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Dharmaśāstra* literature. *Danḍa* represented in principle, violent, coercive force. It was activated internally, within the kingdom, as penal force in judicial administration, while in external relations, *daṇḍa* was represented by military force. In certain theoretical works, *daṇḍa* is presented in a positive, almost reverential, manner. According to these theories, *daṇḍa* ruled the world, and the proper functioning of the social order depended on it. It was the supreme duty of the ruler to set *daṇḍa* in motion and, if he were to ignore his duty, or exercise it improperly, *daṇḍa* would turn back on him and destroy him. (*Mahābhārata Dharmaśāstra*) It is not perhaps inaccurate to suggest that these theories represent the approach to coercive violence in the more powerful, and militarily more successful, polities. Closer the Buddhist clerics came to be associated with such successful, functional polities, greater was the likelihood that they would be influenced by such thinking.

The close links between the *sangha* and the rulers also meant that non-violent ideals would come to bear some influence on the polity. The non-violent ideal did receive support from several rulers in South Asian history. *Aśoka*, who is recognized as a *Cakkavattin* or an

"imperial wheel-turning monarch" in Buddhist writings was perhaps the first ruler of an extensive empire to attempt to put these ideals into practice. Perhaps it is pertinent to note that the empire had been already extended to its furthest extent, less by *Aśoka* than by his predecessors. As is well-known, *Aśoka* renounced warfare after his *Kalinga* campaign and diverted his energies to the propagation of his *dharma*. However, even in this case, it does not seem likely that the use of violent force had been renounced to such an extent that his armies had been disbanded. It is evident that *Aśoka* was in a position to use the threat of resort to force to maintain his hegemony. Buddhist writers did note this variation on the *Cakkavattin* theme. As John Strong has pointed out, the *Aśokāvadāna* refers to Asoka not merely as *Cakkavattin* but as *balacakravartin* with emphasis on his power. (Bechert, 1978)

In Sri Lanka several rulers attempted to follow the non-violent path, but, as would be expected, these were, on the whole, unsuccessful experiments. At least one king is said to have formulated a penal code which was not based on resort to physical injury on the offender. Kings espousing the cause of non-violence, such as *Sirisanghabodhi* (A.D.251-253), were easily deposed. They were, at best, ineffectual rulers. (Mahāvamsa, 1950,36, pp.80--92) While most Sri Lankan kings were generous patrons of Buddhism, they appear to have confronted the community of Buddhist clerics with a serious problem since, in other respects, they were very distant from the Buddhist ideals of kingship. In fact, some of the greatest patrons of Buddhism were also great warriors. *Dutthagāmani*, or *Gāmani* "the Wicked, (161-137 BC) had fought an extensive series of campaigns to unify the island during which great carnage was wrought; but he was also the munificent patron of the *Mahāvīra* monastery who built the *Mahāthūpa*, the largest monument in the Buddhist world at the time, and many other monastic dwellings

and shrines besides. *Kassapa V* (AD 914-923), *Mahinda IV* (956-972) and *Parākramabāhu I* (1153-1186) also fall within this category of warrior-kings who were generous patrons of Buddhism. Examples could be multiplied from other Buddhist lands. The attitude that clerics should adopt towards such men of violence who were, nevertheless, generous patrons, would have been a problem which bothered many a conscientious monk or nun, at least in the early days.

Clearer evidence that a crucial transition in the attitudes toward violence had been made comes from the tenth century. This was the time when the claim was put forward that only Bodhisattvas, or men destined to be Buddhas in the future, became kings of Sri Lanka. (Epigraphia Zeylanica, p.237) The view that all kings of the island were to be considered Bodhisattvas carried the implication that even warrior kings were men destined to be Buddhas in the future, and, as such, exemplars of the Buddhist way. (Mahāvamsa, 1950, pp.73-97). The transition had probably begun even as early as the middle of the ninth century. *Sena I* (833-853) who ruled during this period was described as a person who aspired to be a Buddha, but his pious aspirations evidently did not prevent *Sena* from sending agents to a neighbouring kingdom in the Indian subcontinent to assassinate a rival who was living there in exile. It is interesting to note that the king's aspirations to Buddhahood and his success at physically eliminating a rival are both described in the same chapter by the monk who wrote this particular section of the Sri Lankan chronicle *Cūlavamsa*. Similarly, the tenth-century king *Mahinda IV*, who declared that all kings were *Bodhisattvas*, spoke with pride in the very same inscription about the victories he had gained in his military campaigns. If it was possible to see a Buddha-to-be in a person who eliminated his political rivals through resort to assassination or a king who wielded the sword with

vigour, it would mean that, by this time, a fundamentally new attitude toward violence had emerged among Sri Lankan Buddhists.

How was this transformation achieved and how were the attendant contradictions mediated? We have already considered some of the possible factors behind this transformation. I am of the view that some of the key ideas basic to this transformation may be traced in some of the early Buddhist myths and legends. Three examples may be cited, each of which occupied a position of primary importance in ancient Sri Lanka. They first appear in the *Pāli* chronicles, but are repeated in *Sinhala* writings of a later time. The first is the myth of the visit of the Buddha to the island, which has been analysed by me elsewhere. (Gunawardana, 1978, pp.96-106). The second is the myth of the origin of the *Sinhala* dynasty which has been studied by several scholars, (Basham, 1952, pp. 163-171; Perera, 1959, pp. 98-111 ; Mendis, 1965, pp. 263-292; Obeyesekere, 1970, pp. 43-63; Gunawardana, 1990, pp. 46-57)

In the myths the Buddha makes three visits to the island, but it is the first and the second visits that are relevant to our present task. The second visit relates to the Buddha's encounter with the *nāgas*, the benevolent non-human beings who appear in either theomorphic or divine form and are favourably disposed towards the Buddha's teachings. In this encounter the Buddha is presented as a most compassionate personage, *mahākāruṇika*, who intervenes to prevent war between two groups among the *nāgas*. This depiction of the Buddha is in accord with such canonical texts as the *Ālavaka* Sutta in which the Buddha is a kind and gentle person who, in the face of hostility and harassment, responds with love, kindness, goodwill and tolerance.

On the other hand, what is striking about the myth of the first visit of the Buddha as recounted in the *Mahāvamsa* is the manner in which a symbol of non-violence is subverted and transformed into a symbol of violence. Here the Buddha encounters non-human beings of a malevolent type - the *yakkhas*, but this encounter assumes a form which is very different from the encounter narrated in the *Ālavaka Sutta*. In this myth the Buddha is presented as a conqueror and his personality is totally recast so that it is quite a contrast to the way he is presented generally in the *Theravāda* Canon.

In the myth of the first visit, the Buddha utilizes his miraculous powers to transport himself across the sky from Northern India to central Sri Lanka where the meeting place of the *yakkhas* is located. There, standing above the *yakkhas* in the sky, he begins, despite the absence of any provocation, to torment the *yakkhas*. Through the power of the Buddha, torrential rains, descend on the *yakkhas* followed by storms and massive floods. Then they are pelted with showers of stones. Masses of weapons fall on the *yakkhas*, again through the will of the Buddha, followed by showers of burning embers, hot ashes, and sand which descend on them one after the other. Finally, again through the will of the Buddha, a shower of mud falls on them. After this shower and mud treatment, the *yakkhas* are kept in total darkness, and then they are attacked by biting, cold winds. The terrified *yakkhas* appeal to the Buddha, who stands above them in the sky, for help. Help is not rendered immediately. The Buddha first asks for a place to sit in return. The *yakkhas* offer him the entire island. Again, the Buddha is not quick to help, but expresses the doubt that the offer may be withdrawn. The *yaksas* formally and solemnly promise to keep their word. Then the Buddha spreads his rug, sits on it and restores normalcy except for the cold. The *yakkhas* complain of the cold. The Buddha causes his rug to

emit an intense heat and flames. Then he causes his own body and the rug to dramatically expand until the body and the rug cover the entire island. The *yakkhas* retreat before the expanding rug and its wall of flames till they reach the sea. It is only at this point that the Buddha is moved by compassion. But he does not extinguish the flames: he transfers the *yakkhas* on to another island. It is ironical that the "compassionate act," in effect, deprives the *yakkhas* of the island in which they originally lived. (Oldenberg, 1879).

Let us now move to another myth, that of the origin of the Sinhala dynasty. Vijaya, the mythical founder of the Sinhala dynasty, is the son of *Simhabāhu* who is the progeny of a lion by a human mother. He is held captive by the lion, together with his sister and his mother. When they flee from the lion's den, the lion attacks human settlements and ravages the land. The son decides to kill his father. His first arrow fails to wound the lion, it is said, because the lion was still moved by loving feelings toward his son. The moment the lion is moved by anger, the son's arrows wound the lion mortally. In this story, it is the parricide who is the hero. *Simhabāhu* founds a kingdom and enjoys a long and prosperous rule.

The third is the story about the warrior-king *Dutthagāmani* who, in his quest to build a unified kingdom, fought a series of campaigns to defeat a large number of small-scale polities. It is said that *Dutthagāmani* was moved with remorse at the thought that his campaigns brought death to so many. According to the story, several *arahants*, or monks with high spiritual attainments, visited him to reassure him that there was no cause for worry and that he would be born in heaven. It was their calculation that only one and one half individuals had been killed by him. One was a Buddhist who had sought

refuge in the *Buddha*, the *Dhamma* and the *Saṅgha*. The other practised the five precepts. All others, they argued, were unbelievers and men of sinful ways who were "like unto beasts." The inconvenient question whether, from a Buddhist standpoint, the killing of men, even those "like unto beasts," was in itself not an evil action, is left unraised. (Geiger; 1950 : *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī*, 1935, p. 261).

The three stories are extremely rich in symbolism and may be understood at several different levels of meaning. What is common to all three stories is that they seek to make very strong statements on the problem of violence. I would suggest that the Buddha in the first myth, *Simhabāhu* in the second and *Dutthagāmaṇi* in the third story are cast in such roles which in effect transform "bad" violence into "good" violence. This is the vital role that Rene Girard has drawn attention to in his study of myth and ritual. In the Sri Lankan myth the Buddha torments the *yaksas* in many ways, proceeds to take over the island which belonged to them and expels them from their home. In explanation of the uncharacteristic, un-Buddha-like steps taken by the Buddha, it is stated in a commentary that the *yaksas* were incapable of understanding the true teachings and were opposed to the Buddhist order. Therefore, they had to be removed from the island. It is quite clear that the message in the myth embodied an ethical principle different from those enunciated in the Canon. The new principle was that violence was permissible in the interests of Buddhism, for its expansion and perpetuation, against those who were opposed to Buddhist teachings. In this myth the Buddha is converted into a symbol of violence, violence that is justifiable. The principle was reiterated in the story of *Dutthagāmaṇi*. Here again, we find a distinction being drawn between violence toward Buddhists and the virtuous and violence toward non-Buddhists and the perpetrators of evil deeds. Bad

karma would arise from the first category of violence, but not from the second. The myth of the origin of the *Sinhala* dynasty does not relate to the problem of threats directed against the Buddhist order. The rampaging lion is more a symbol of chaos. It is also a symbol of violence in the form of an intrusive, external threat to the social order.

Permit me to rephrase Lyotard with a slight twist and to say that what is important in these stories is not merely what they meant, but what they did and incited to do and what types of action they valorised. It may have been noted that all three stories I have examined deal with exclusion, expurgation or katharsis involving varying degrees of resort to violence. In the first myth, the *yakṣas* are tormented, dispossessed and transferred to a different location. Just as the exclusion of the *pharmakos* purifies the city in the Athenian context in Phaedra's, the exclusion of the *yakṣas* enables the island to develop into a place where the Buddha's *dharma* and the *śāsana* would shine forth. In the second myth, the lion is killed while in the third a large group is annihilated. The stated objectives behind these cathartic acts were those of purification and preservation, restoration of order and unity. Generally, in most historical contexts, the *katharma* or the *pharmakos*, the object of the sacrifice, is a single object or an individual. It may be noteworthy that, in the myths I have examined, what is removed is not necessarily a single object or an individual. In two of the myths it is an entire group.

The idea implicit in these stories is that violence was not invariably associated with evil and that a distinction has to be drawn between permissible and non-permissible types of violence, between maleficent and beneficent violence. This was a crucial idea which facilitated the process of mutual accommodation between Buddhism and the state. The distinction made it possible to argue that violent and

warlike men who practised the real politic were not necessarily evil men. This was precisely the argument which evidently became popular in Sri Lanka in the ninth and tenth centuries, and came to be embodied in the claim that all men who ascended the Sri Lankan throne were Bodhisattvas or Buddhas-to-be. This idea also marked a radical departure from the earlier positions of consistent opposition to violence.

Conclusion

It is very important that I add some caveats at this point to prevent misunderstanding. I do not intend to leave you with the impression that what I have described amounts to a wholesale transformation of Buddhism and that these new attitudes toward violence became the norm. These ideas represent only one among several strands of Buddhist opinion. Perhaps they represent the views of a minority rather than a mass phenomenon, but if it was a minority, it was also an influential group with links to the politically powerful. However, it is not possible to say that there ever was in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhism a situation of perfect fit between the interests of the rulers and those of the community of Buddhist clerics. Consequently, the strand of opinion on violence I have highlighted did not go uncontested. It may even be suggested that these new ideas did encounter resistance from among some Sri Lankan Buddhists. While the ideas mentioned above found expression in monastic chronicles and lithic records set up by kings, we still find some other writers, such as the twelfth-century author of the Sinhala text *Karmavibhāga*, arguing from an entirely different point of view that all violent acts, including even the implementation of judicial punishments involving physical injury, were evil deeds which were to be meticulously avoided by the good Buddhist. (Wijerathne, 2024; 2025) A fourteenth-century Sinhala text,

the *Saddharmālaṅkāra*, which recounts the *Dutthagāmaṇi* story we examined earlier, gives the story a markedly different twist. It is particularly noteworthy that this text, while quoting the *Mahāvamsa* version of the story, pointedly raises the question as to why the it had been stated that the king did not accumulate bad *karma* or *pāpa*. The position of the author of the *Saddharmālaṅkāra* appears to have been that *Dutthagāmaṇi* did accumulate bad *karma* through his involvement in war, but that he escaped suffering for it only because there would be no opportunity for this *karma* to bear fruit. The myth of *Kāli* in the Buddhist textual tradition is another example of a humane story which moves in a direction that is different from the myths examined earlier. As *Ranjini Obeyesekere* has pointed out, it seeks to suggest that violence and counterviolence engulf the involved individuals in a vicious cycle of common suffering that does not distinguish between the initiator of violence and the original victim. The story seems to suggest that those so caught would be able to break out of the cycle of sufferings only through an enlightened act of kindness. It would thus appear that some of the later Sinhala literary works, written for the common rural folk, rather than the ruling stratum in mind, reflect an attitude toward violence which was different from the attitudes reflected in state-sponsored edicts and chronicles written in *Pāli*. By emphasizing the existence of such divergent strands of opinion, even what appear to be contradictory positions on matters of such fundamental importance, I want to draw attention to the complexity of what we call the *Theravāda* Buddhist tradition and the diversity within the ideology it represents.

This is not to underestimate the significance of the changes that had taken place. The introduction of the idea that not all violent acts were to be abhorred and that certain categories of violent acts were

positive and beneficent in their effects represented a change of profound significance in the history of *Theravāda* Buddhism. They were powerful ideas which had a deep and durable impact in the history of Sri Lanka. It is perhaps correct to suggest that their impact is being felt in the attitudes toward violence in our own times. It would, however, be incorrect to suggest that Buddhism was totally opposed to politics as such. There is also a more positive approach to politics in a strand of early Buddhist thought in which an attempt is made to formulate a vision of an alternative, ideal political order, based on the principle of *ahiṃsā*, and to present a model of a state which did not use coercive force as an instrument to maintain its power. The ideal Buddhist king, the *Cakkavattin*, more the preacher and less the warrior; he represented a charismatic personality who brought other rulers within the political system under his hegemony, through persuasion.

References

- Benedict, A. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Basham, A. L. (1952). Prince Vijaya and the Aryanization of Ceylon. *Ceylon Historical Journal*, 1(3).
- Bechert, H. (Ed.). (1978). *Buddhism in Ceylon and studies on religious syncretism in Buddhist countries*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Epigraphia Zeylanica. (n.d.). Vol. 1 (p. 237).
- Oldenberg, H. (Trans.). (1879). *Dīpavaṃsa*. Williams and Norgate.
- Doniger, W. (1978). The clash between relative and absolute duty: The dharma of demons. In W. Doniger O'Flaherty & J. D. M. Derrett (Eds.), *The concept of duty in South Asia*. Vikas & School of Oriental and African Studies.
- Gombrich, R. (1971). *Precept and practice: Traditional Buddhism in the rural highlands of Ceylon*. Clarendon Press.

- Gunawardana, R. A. L. H. (1978). The kinsmen of the Buddha: Myth as political charter in the ancient and early medieval kingdoms in Sri Lanka. In B. L. Smith (Ed.), *Religion and legitimation of power in Sri Lanka* (pp. 96–106). Anima.
- Gunawardana, R. A. L. H. (1990). The people of the lion: The Sinhala identity and ideology in history and historiography. In J. Spencer (Ed.), *Sri Lanka: History and the roots of conflict*. Routledge.
- Geiger, W. (trans). (1950). *Mahāvamsa*, Colombo.
- Mendis, G. C. (1965). The Vijaya legend. In N. A. Jayawickrama (Ed.), *Paranavitana Felicitation Volume*.
- Malalasekera, G. P. (Ed.) (1935). *Vamsatthappakāsinī*, Vol I, London.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1970). Religious symbolism and political change in Ceylon. *Modern Ceylon Studies*, 1(1), 43–63.
- Perera, L. S. (1959). The early kings of Ceylon. In S. Paranavitana (Ed.), *University of Ceylon history of Ceylon* (Vol. 1, Pt. 1, Chap. 7). University of Ceylon.
- Li, J.-h. (Trans.). (1981). *Biographies of Buddhist nuns (Pi-chiu-ni chuan)*. Tohokai.
- Reynolds, F., & Hales, C. (1989). Buddhist religion, culture and civilization. In J. M. Kitagawa & M. D. Cummings (Eds.), *Buddhism and Asian history*. Macmillan.
- Reynolds, F. E., & Hallisey, C. (1989). Buddhist religion, culture and civilization. In J. M. Kitagawa & M. D. Cummings (Eds.), *Buddhism and Asian history*. Macmillan.
- Ṛgveda*. (n.d.). 5.64.3.
- Oldenberg, H. (Ed.). (1977). *Vinaya Piṭaka* (Vol. 2). Pali Text Society.
- Wijerathne, N. E. I. (2024). Karmmavibhaga: The Sa-Skya Codex Relations between Sri Lanka and Tibet based on the circumstantial evidence. *Journal of Indian History and Culture*, 125–145.

Wijerathne, N. E. I. (2025). Methods, techniques and challenges in deciphering the Sa-Skya Codex: Karmmavibhāga as the oldest Sinhala manuscript into modern Sinhala. *Vidyodaya Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10(1), 166–176.

Author Biography

Eshan Imalka Wijerathne is a Sri Lankan Historian. He was educated at the University of Peradeniya and later received PhD in History from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Subsequently, his academic journey, encompasses Master of Arts from the University of Kelaniya, a Master of Philosophy from the University of Colombo and PGD in Education from the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology and an M.Ed. from the National Institute of Education.