

Lankan monk's death, a grievous blow to Sinhala-Buddhist revival

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The sudden death of the popular Buddhist preacher, the Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thera, in St Petersburg in Russia, has plunged Sri Lanka into unprecedented grief. On hearing the news, Sinhala-Buddhist women wailed inconsolably. Crestfallen men put up little ochre flags atop their houses and vehicles as a sign of mourning. Streamers and banners, also in ochre, the colour used by monks, spanned streets in town after town. Men and women, the old and the young, all dressed in white, flocked to the Buddhist viharas to pray. And in Colombo, thousands braved the hot sun to have a glimpse of his body.

"He was killed. He did not die a natural death", had been a constant refrain among folk in the towns and villages of the island, till a panel of top doctors, which conducted the post mortem, had declared that the death was natural. And yet, to the people, Soma Thero's death at 54, would always remain mysterious. It is believed that this doughty fighter, upholding controversial causes, might have stepped on the toes of powerful domestic and international interests. Writing in *Sunday Island*, columnist Nan said that Soma Thera would have influenced at least 10 million of the 19 million Sri Lankans.

As Soma Hamuduruwo (an honorific for monks) campaigned against "unethical conversion" to Christianity, a major problem in Sri Lanka, the Catholic Bishops' Conference promptly came out with a statement denying that it indulged in such conversions. It said that the culprits were the new-fangled, foreign-funded, "Fundamentalist Sects", and that, actually, the Catholic Church was the main victim of their evangelism.

Considering the depth of feeling for the monk, the Sri Lankan government has decided to give him a state funeral in the prestigious Independence Square, the venue of all important state functions, in Colombo on December 24.

Sinhala-Buddhist icon

What did Soma Thera have in him to elicit such an extraordinary response? Put simply, he had taken up the cause of reviving Buddhism and Sinhala culture, and restoring a sense of nationalism and pride among the Sinhala-Buddhists, who perceived themselves as the weakest of three major communities inhabiting the island, though they constituted 70% of the population.

Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was getting eroded by a perceived inability to face up to the challenge posed by minority Tamil militancy and a tendency to give in easily to influences from the West. Theravada

Buddhism, the core of the Sinhala identity, was being subjected to an unmitigated and multi-dimensional onslaught from alien forces.

The people were aware of these, but they did not, and could not, articulate them, because power was firmly in the hands of a Westernised, comprador bourgeoisie. It was through Soma Thera that the suppressed feelings of the people found utterance. He personified Sinhala-Buddhism, becoming a "totemic figure", an "icon", to use the words of the veteran commentator, Ajith Samaranayake of Sunday Observer.

Soma Thera wove his mission around the axiom that the survival of Sinhala-Buddhism was necessary for the survival of Sri Lanka. Because Sinhala-Buddhism is peculiar to Sri Lanka, and gives the country its uniqueness, its disappearance or even dilution beyond a certain point, will be the undoing of Sri Lanka itself, it is believed.

Hindu threat

Soma Thera fought several enemies at the same time. But this writer found his campaign against the popular practice of worshiping Hindu and local Sinhala Gods and occult forces, to be most unusual. Hindu practices had gained so much acceptance, that most Buddhist temples had shrines for Hindu and local Gods. The popular Hindu Gods were Vishnu, Siva, Murugan (Subramanya) and Ganesh.

Buddhism tells its followers to be self reliant, and not to depend on Gods and other supernatural forces. Also, the Buddha does not grant boons. These had resulted in Buddhists habitually deviating from their religion and turning to the Hindu Gods and spirits to help them get over life's crises.

Traditional Sinhala-Buddhism (like Buddhism itself) had not been dogmatic on this and had accepted the deviation as a necessary evil. However, the Hindu Gods were accorded a subordinate position, a secondary status. As the late Gamini Iriyagolle, a well known Sinhala-Buddhist ideologue said, the Hindu Gods were only meant to protect the Buddha and Buddhism. They could not supplant or be considered to be greater than the Buddha, he clarified.

Domestic aide, Shiromi Perera, is an ardent listener of Soma Thera's TV lectures. She pointed out that, in many Buddhist temples, the Hindu shrine was in the forefront and the Buddhist one was at the back. " The minds of many of the worshippers are on the Hindu deities even when they are bowing before the Buddha!" she observed.

Soma Thera was very troubled by the Satya Sai Baba cult, which had swept Sri Lanka. The elite of Sinhala-Buddhist society had become ardent devotees of the Baba and were going to his ashram at Whitefield near Bangalore at the drop of a hat. The traffic had become so heavy that the airlines found it profitable to operate services between Colombo and Bangalore! Like the rationalists in India, Soma Thera was appalled by Sai Baba's producing wrist watches and gold chains from the air and giving them to his favourite devotees.

He thought it was sacrilegious for Buddhists to get swayed by such mumbo jumbo.

Soma Thera insisted that men and women come to temples in a simple white dress, and not in ostentatious and revealing clothes.

"While other regions have defined themselves rigidly, and do not allow admixture, alien elements have been allowed to get into Sinhala-Buddhism. There are Hindu Gods in Buddhist temples here, but no Hindu temple in Sri Lanka has the Buddha in it," pointed out Shiromi. The Hindus say that the Buddha was an avatar (reincarnation) of Vishnu, but they do not worship him.

Due to the intense efforts of Soma Thera, in which his television appearances played a very major role, some Buddhist temples did away with the Hindu shrines in their midst. But most did not.

Hindu shrines a source of income

For many Buddhist temples, the Hindu shrines were an important source of income. The temples did get grants from the influential, and some held lands, but most were poor. And the Buddha would not accept any offering other than the lotus flower. Money could not be offered to him. But the Hindu Gods accepted money and the Buddhist devotees were only too pleased to give generously, if they could get a wish fulfilled. It is widely acknowledged that income was a very important factor in ensuring the continuance of Hindu shrines in most Buddhist temples.

Soma Thera's followers admired him for his courage in propagating a pure, superstition-free Buddhism, but his injunction against the worship of Hindu Gods was routinely and unabashedly flouted by an overwhelming majority. His dicta were considered highly desirable from a purist's point of view, but quite impractical from the point of view of the folk. According to Samaranayake, Soma Thera did not pursue this campaign for very long. Perhaps he saw the futility of it.

Argued senior journalist and a devout Buddhist, Mallika Wanigasundara: " The Buddha never said that one should not worship the Hindu Gods. He was not dogmatic. When one needed the help of Gods to tide over a difficulty, one was permitted to seek their help. It is like leaning on a wall if one is tired."

Wanigasundara pointed out that when the Buddha wanted Sri Lanka to be protected, he had asked Brahma to do it. But Brahma delegated the task to Vishnu, which was how the Hindu God, Vishnu, came to be accepted as the protector of Sri Lanka, she said.

"My visiting Hindu kovils in no way diminishes my adherence to the teachings of the Buddha," she asserts. "The worship of Hindu Gods are part our culture and tradition because we brought it with us when we came from India in ancient times," she said.

The Sinhalese believe that they are Aryan migrants from what is now Bengal.

Christian proselytism

Towards the end of his life, Soma Thera was very concerned about conversion to Christianity and the encroachments on Sinhala-Buddhist property by Muslims. "He was not against any religion. He was only against poaching of this sort," as a devotee said.

Conversion to Christianity became a major issue in Sri Lanka when the Fundamentalist Christian sects, with heavy funding from America and other countries of the West and also South Korea, entered the scene to exploit the poverty, lack of economic development, and the displacement and deprivation brought about by the unending Tamil-Sinhala war. Many of these new churches registered themselves as companies under the Companies Act and were borrowing from banks, supposedly for secular welfare projects. They promised instant cures and solutions to problems, and enticements were offered to the poor.

The "unethical conversion" menace became so acute that many Sinhala-Buddhist and Hindu leaders began to seek a legal ban on conversions, as in some Indian states.

To wean away the Buddhist poor from the wily evangelists coming with inducements, Soma Thera would hammer home the point that it was quite possible to solve the problems of one's life by living according to the precepts of the Buddha. He would explain that unlike the Christian churches and priests, the Buddhist temples and their monks were not meant to distribute goodies and largesse to the congregation. "They are there only to preach the Buddhist way of live," he would say.

In lecture after lecture, TV programme after TV programme, Soma Thera spoke about the relevance of Buddhism and Buddhist principles for the present day world. He took up day to day problems and pointed out how these could be solved by following the pristine Buddhist precepts. "He used to appear in a TV series with a well known psychologist and showed us how **Buddhism could help us solve our psychological problems,**" said Kantha, a company driver.

Saving Sinhalese from extinction

Soma Thera fought relentlessly for the survival of the Sinhala people and their culture, which were being threatened by Westernisation and a striking lack of nationalism. "The Sinhalese absorb other cultures like a blotting paper," observed Wanigasundara. No wonder then, Sri Lankans are the most westernised of the South Asian peoples, which is reflected in their dress and names.

Soma Thera would **warn that the** Sinhalese might one day be outnumbered by the Muslims who, he believed, did not adopt birth control and family planning unlike them. He exhorted the Sinhalese to have more children to keep Sri Lanka, Sinhala-Buddhist.

Populism

One reason for Soma Thera's immense popularity was that in his bana (sermon) he spoke on contemporary secular, social, economic and political problems. **He did not hesitate to express**, in the strongest terms, the frustrations of the common man vis-à-vis the governments of the day. "And his bana was always couched in simple Sinhala while most monks used highfalutin stuff interspersed with quotations in Pali. I found the latter very boring," said Shiromi.

Soma Thera's was the second Sinhala-Buddhist revivalist movement in recent Sri Lankan history. The first was led by Anagarika Dharmapala in the early part of the 20th century.

Both tackled the same problem, namely, Western/ Christian/ Hindu influences smothering a society lacking in a strong sense of nationalism and the will to face challenges. Both movements were inconclusive.

Soma Thera's movement had barely taken off when death snatched him away. The people of Sri Lanka know that today there is no one to carry the torch which he lit and bore. That explains the widespread grieving.

(PK Balachandran is the Sri Lankan correspondent of Hindustan Times)