

of the passage also reflects a general romantic orientation Dharmapala had towards the Sinhala past as one of prosperity and contentment – a narrative shared by many educated Sri Lankans of the early twentieth century, including Bandaranaike.

A footnote to this discussion of Dharmapala's view of the relationship between Buddhism and Sinhala identity would be to suggest that Buddhism also served to give Sinhala culture global importance. In promoting Buddhism abroad Dharmapala often presented the religion as something that had contemporary relevance and global significance. The belief that Buddhism is non-theistic and scientific and therefore modern in relation to religions like Christianity and Islam is a perennial theme in his writing. From one of his earliest international speeches at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, 'The World's Debt to Buddha' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 3–22), to articles he wrote in the late 1920s, the idea that Buddhism has a vital role to play in the modern world is a continuous theme.

Although this 'modernist' view of Buddhism was part of Dharmapala's vision of Buddhism as a universalist discourse, at times it also folded into a more culturally specific narrative. For instance, Dharmapala weaves the absence of Buddhism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India into an argument about Sinhala exceptionalism. He argues that 'India, the birthplace of Buddhism, has no living witness of its forgotten greatness', but in contrast 'the glorious inheritance of Aryan ancestors, uncontaminated by Semitic and savage ideas, though lost to India, has been preserved by the Aryan Sinhalese in the luxuriant isle of Ceylon' (Dharmapala 1907, 284). He further suggests that 'In its primitive purity ... it is generally acknowledged that this religion is only to be found in the Southern Church of Buddhism, which is identified with Ceylon' (Dharmapala 1907, 287). The term 'Southern Church' with its direct Christian connotation suggests that Dharmapala's identification of Sri Lankan Buddhism as a pure form derives from Orientalist scholarship. However, the view of Sri Lanka Buddhism as 'pure' also had precolonial antecedents (Blackburn 2010). Scholars like T. W. Rhys-Davids, following the pioneering work of Eugene Burnouf, drew distinctions between a more austere 'Southern' Buddhism and a ritualistic Mahayana Buddhism, based on the Protestant–Catholic divide in Christianity (Snodgrass 2007). But, as Charles Hallisey (1995) has suggested, nineteenth-century Western scholarly interpretations of Buddhism were not entirely arbitrary. The idea that Buddhism would decline in India and that Sri Lanka would be the repository of Buddhism is deeply encoded in the *Mahavamsa* narrative (de Silva 1981, 4). Thus,

local traditions and Orientalist discourses combine in Dharmapala to produce a narrative where an untainted form of Buddhism is associated with the Sinhala nation. This in turn places the nation on the global map given the emergent international recognition of Buddhism in the early twentieth century. In essence, what one sees in Dharmapala is a comparative urge that sought to reinterpret his home culture in worldly terms – a dynamic visible in Bandaranaike as well, where the imagination looks simultaneously inwards and outwards, shuttling between home and the world.

Dharmapala and others

Dharmapala did not have a singular Other, which distinguishes him from contemporary Sinhala nationalist thinking, where Tamils and more recently Muslims are seen as distinct political enemies. Although Sinhala racial identity and Buddhism were constants in his thinking, other ethnic and religious communities figure in different guises – at times condescendingly seen as hapless victims of colonialism, at others more insidiously as corrupting and threatening influences. Some insight into Dharmapala's view of contemporaneous society may be gained from a piece from 1922, entitled 'A Message to the Young Men of Ceylon'. The term 'Ceylon' in the early twentieth century had resonances of a 'Ceylonese' identity – a broadly inclusive term that conflated different ethno-religious communities but was circumscribed by class, wealth and anglophone privilege (Roberts 2000). Dharmapala's use of the term appears to oscillate between this more inclusive sense and a more particularistic Sinhala-centric ideology. He begins the piece by invoking the legend of Dutugemunu:

I have been asked to deliver a message to you, and now that a crisis in the history of our nation has arrived, it is proper that we the heirs of our beloved Lanka, should gird our loins, and put our shoulders to the wheel, and arrest the decay that is visible on all sides ... We have to ransack the literature of the science of patriotism to learn to act as patriots should for the glorious religion, at whose source our fore-fathers drank deep ... to fight against foes since the time of our heroic and patriot king, the righteous Dutthagamani [Dutugemunu], who with the help of his mother and his Sangha [the priests], reinvigorated and revitalised the nation, 161 years before the birth of Jesus Christ whose followers, from the West

came to our blessed land, 1505 years after the Nativity, and laid waste our fertile lands.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 501)

The call for national revival, heavy in biblical rhetoric, is informed by a particularistic Sinhala and Buddhist historical vision. Given the historical material available to Dharmapala, this is not surprising. Even Sinhala Christian scholars like James de Alwis, in the early nineteenth century, expressed quasi-nationalist sentiments that were inspired by the same Sinhala and Buddhist historical grand narrative (Dharmadasa 1992). The grand narrative of the Sinhala past was simply a means of claiming cultural pride. There is no evidence to suggest that de Alwis viewed other non-Sinhala communities with antipathy (Dharmadasa 1992, 77). In Dharmapala, however, historical consciousness shapes the view of the present more significantly. Though the article begins by invoking a Sinhala and Buddhist imaginary, Dharmapala also writes, 'Christians and Buddhists should unite and work for the elevation of the Sinhalese people. Religion should in no way hinder our patriotic activities, and it had not prevented Sun Yat Sen, the son of a Chinese Christian, from working for the elevation of the Chinese people' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 510).

But Dharmapala cannot acknowledge Sinhala Christians unconditionally. Contrasted with the historical narrative of a homogeneous Sinhala and Buddhist identity, they are a reminder of a history of colonial miscegenation. He goes on to state, 'A small portion of the Sinhalese nation, under the compulsion of the invading freebooters and pirates in the 16th century of the Christian era adopted the religion of the Roman Pope' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 502). Sinhala Christians are therefore positioned as a kind of fallen minority within the larger Sinhala Buddhist ethos. Other ethno-religious groups do not figure at all here but his use of the term 'nation' is not coterminous with 'nation state' in the contemporary imagination. The sense that Sinhala identity is beleaguered is clearly visible, though the sources of this beleaguerment are indistinct. For instance, Dharmapala repeatedly warns that Sinhala identity is threatened with dissolution: 'Think that you are now surrounded by a host of enemies who encompasseth [sic] your destruction, who is trying to make you a slave in your own land by giving you to drink the poison of alcohol' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 510)

The most immediate threat here is identified as the 'alien white [man] who for the sake of filthy lucre gives us alcohol' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 511), but the perception of threat also spills over into a narrative

of economic exploitation in which other communities are seen as having an unfair share of national resources and employment opportunities. For instance, looking at revenue from the Railways Department, Dharmapala suggests that locally generated wealth is being expatriated and that ‘Tamils, Cochins [traders of Indian origin], Hambankarayas [a disparaging term for Moors] are employed in large numbers to the *prejudice of the people of the Island* – sons of the soil, who contribute the largest share’ (Guruge 1991 [1965], 515, emphasis original). It is important to historically contextualise Dharmapala’s use of the term ‘Tamil’. The reference here is to Indian Tamil labour – migrant workers brought to the country by the colonial administration. In 1921, fearing a labour shortage in the plantations, the colonial government passed legislation favouring immigrant labour and facilitating the movement of labour between different sectors of the economy (Peebles 2001, 175). Dharmapala’s attitude here follows that of the Sinhala political elite, who tended to lump together all people of Indian origin as ‘Non-Ceylonese’ (Peebles 2001, 175). This also anticipates the anti-Indian sentiment in the labour movement in the late 1920s with the impact of the Great Depression. As Kumari Jayawardena (2003, 27) notes, the labour movement was multi-ethnic from the early to mid 1920s and during this phase pioneering Sinhala labour leaders like A. E. Goonesinghe closely collaborated with figures like Natesa Iyer, a South Indian journalist who became a labour activist. However, by the end of the 1920s even people like Goonesinghe were complicit in promoting anti-Indian-Tamil sentiments – particularly in the pages of *Weeraya* (Hero), a newspaper published by the labour movement (Anandalingam and Abraham 1986). What Dharmapala’s comments reveal is that the terms of inclusion and exclusion varied over time and were often informed by immediate economic circumstances.

One could suggest that the greatest Other for Sinhala discourse in the 1920s was the ‘Hambankarayas’ or the Moor community – particularly those identified as Coast Moors as opposed to Ceylon Moors and Malays, communities that had a longer history in Sri Lanka (Roberts 1990). A popular negative stereotype of the Moor community in the early twentieth century was the cunning Moor trader who exploited innocent Sinhala villagers (Moore 1992; Jayawardena 2003). The specific target here were Coast Moors (Jayawardena 2003, 13). Some segments of this community had significant control of the island’s internal and external trade and were in direct competition with an emergent Sinhala merchant class. Dharmapala’s family had a strong trading-merchant basis and his views of Moors were potentially shaped by family concerns. On 31 May 1915 rioting broke out when Sinhala mobs, particularly

Sinhala railway workers, targeted Moor traders in Colombo, hundreds died and martial law was declared by the colonial government (de Silva 1981, 382). The 1915 riots led to several prominent Sinhala public figures being incarcerated; two of Dharmapala's brothers, Edmund and Dr C. A. Hewavitharana, were among them (de Silva 1981, 383). Dharmapala's response to the riots, which drew on anti-Semitic rhetoric, is indicative of the antipathy towards Moors:

The Muhammedans [Moors], an alien people, who in the early part of the 19th century were common traders, by Shylockian methods became prosperous like the Jews. The Sinhalese, sons of the soil, whose ancestors for 2538 years had shed rivers of blood to keep the country free from alien invaders, who had constructed gigantic tanks to irrigate millions of acres ... to-day [sic] they are in the eyes of the British only vagabonds ... The alien South Indian Muhammedan comes to Ceylon, sees the neglected illiterate villager, without any experience in trade, without any knowledge of any kind of technical industry and isolated from the whole of Asia on account of his language, religion and race, and the result is that the Muhammedan thrives and the son of the soil goes to the wall.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 540)

This passage is an extract from a letter Dharmapala wrote to the Secretary of State for Colonies in the immediate aftermath of the riots. The anti-Semitism could potentially be a strategy of gaining British sympathy by invoking a longstanding European stereotype of the 'scheming Jewish merchant' (Erens 1984, 30, 70). Dharmapala opens the letter with a reference to his family background which provides insight into the economic basis of the Sinhala-Moor conflict: 'The writer of this letter is a Buddhist Missionary ... He is a native of Ceylon belonging to the [sic] leading Buddhist family. His father was honoured by the Ceylon Government for the many philanthropic acts done for the Buddhists of Ceylon, and he was one of the leading Native merchants of Ceylon' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 538). By claiming to speak on behalf of the interests of the 'neglected illiterate villager' he makes a greater claim to speak on behalf of the Sinhala nation. There is also no principled objection against capitalism, which might have been expected from a spiritual figure like Dharmapala. There seem to be echoes of a kind of Protestant ethic in Dharmapala's thinking – where productive economic activity and Buddhist religiosity are reconciled. This is borne out in the restless energy that characterised Dharmapala's life and his many initiatives to modernise Sri Lankan life

in different spheres. The emphasis is on critiquing foreign or ‘alien’ economic interests while promoting an emergent Sinhala capitalist class.

The economic imperatives informing Dharmapala’s view of the Moor community are suggestive of how identity politics in early twentieth-century Sri Lanka were informed by immediate economic and social conditions. Rather than hoary notions of Sinhala–Tamil conflict, what is visible is a shifting and contingent discourse premised not against a singular Other but multiple Others whose visibility as potential threats was heightened by competition for resources within the colonial economy (Rogers 1997).

Framing Dharmapala: Dharmapala as national hero

There are a number of hagiographic accounts of Dharmapala’s life in English and Sinhala. Two texts stand out among these. One is *Return to Righteousness*, published in 1965 and edited by Ananda Guruge, a civil servant and diplomat who also researched and published on Buddhism. The other is the Sinhala text *Anangarika Dharmapala* written by David Karunaratne (1964). These two texts were central to introducing Dharmapala to English and Sinhala audiences in independent Sri Lanka (Jayadeva Uyangoda, personal communication, 15 August 2017). They both take a similar hagiographic approach to Dharmapala’s life and career. *Return to Righteousness* is the more comprehensive of the two and gathers a large corpus of Dharmapala’s writing from scattered sources. It was a text that had institutional backing and was published by the Government of Sri Lanka to mark Dharmapala’s birth centenary. Its accessibility to foreign scholars as an English-language publication contributed to the scholarly equations of Dharmapala with the revival of Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism.

The historical context of this text’s production and the institutional support given to its publication are important indicators of the conditions under which Dharmapala’s legacy became institutionalised and visibly appropriated by nationalist discourse. The decade beginning in 1956 saw significant shifts in the political culture of the country. The year 1956 marked the institutionalisation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism when S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was elected as prime minister on a wave of popular Sinhala and Buddhist support (Manor 1989). The sense of beleaguerment that features prominently in post-independence Sinhala nationalist discourse was especially visible in this period. Though formal independence had been gained in 1948, influential Sinhala and Buddhist

pressure groups felt that, culturally and institutionally, little had changed from colonial times.

The Official Language Act of 1956, one of the first legislative acts by Bandaranaike's government, made Sinhala the sole official language of the country. This move was considered an important step in decolonisation by groups sometimes referred to as the 'intermediary elite' (de Silva 1981, 517; Roberts 2000) owing to their social status of coming from rural middle-class backgrounds positioned between the peasantry and the anglophone elite. The disastrous consequences of this legislation are well known and still felt in the country (DeVotta 2004). Guruge's compilation of Dharmapala's writing emerged in this charged nationalist context and is resonant of the institutionalisation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in these years. The text was published by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and Information and the then Prime Minister, Dudley Senanayake, provided a preface.

A related discourse marking this period concerned a sense of Buddhist millennialism coinciding with the year 2500 in the Buddhist calendar, which fell in 1956. In anticipation of this event a commission, consisting of influential Buddhist monks and lay public figures, was appointed to enquire into the status of Buddhism in the country. The report of this commission was published in 1956. Expressing a beleaguered worldview, the report traced a narrative of Buddhist decline since Portuguese colonisation in the sixteenth century (Bond 1988, 81; Tambiah 1992, 33). The English version of the report was published with the provocative title *The Betrayal of Buddhism*. The report argued for the reinstatement of Buddhism to its precolonial position of pre-eminence and recommended legislative, financial and institutional reforms. This heightened sense of cultural nationalism is reflected in the preface and introduction to *Return to Righteousness* and in Karunaratne's book. They are in effect textual and ideological frames that seek to position Dharmapala as nationalist hero and father figure.

The preface by Senanayake is indicative of how Sinhala identity and the Buddhist religion are often conflated in Sinhala nationalist discourse, effectively suppressing or marginalising the multicultural and multi-religious nature of independent Ceylon – despite the fact that in the 1947 Constitution, which was still in effect in 1965, the state was identified as secular. Senanayake begins the short preface by briefly sketching Dharmapala's contribution to the nation: 'The Anagarika's services to his country were many. But the two outstanding services he rendered were to resuscitate Buddhism and Sinhala culture in Ceylon at a time when over 300 years of foreign rule had sapped their vitality. His

other outstanding contribution was an unswerving loyalty to the nationalist movement and the nationalist cause' (Guruge 1991 [1965], v). If in these comments Sinhala identity and Buddhism are held separate, at least at the level of rhetoric, from 'the nationalist movement and the nationalist cause', they become clearly conflated in the next few lines. Senanayake sketches how Buddhism suffered during colonial occupation and says this had 'debilitating effects on the national life and national culture because of the close and inextricable link between Buddhism and Sinhalese culture' (Guruge 1991 [1965], v). Senanayake's position was not unique among English-educated Sinhala politicians of the time: at every opportunity they sought to position themselves as protectors of Buddhism and Sinhala culture, intensely self-conscious of how they were criticised as anglophile by Sinhala nationalist pressure groups. As words from the highest political authority in the country, Senanayake's preface to Dharmapala's writing carried significant institutional and political weight.

Ananda Guruge's introduction seeks to articulate Dharmapala's heroic stature more explicitly. The title *Return to Righteousness*, which was presumably Guruge's choice, is resonant of the discursive framework informing the compilation of this text. 'Return to righteousness' suggests a moral and ethical imperative associated with a way of life from which the nation is seen to have deviated. It echoes Dharmapala's reformist impulse but can also be seen as referring to the historical context of the text's production – a time when a return to things considered indigenous was being increasingly articulated in public and political discourse. The introduction opens with a sub-section entitled 'The Commemoration of a National Hero', where Dharmapala is placed in a pantheon of heroic historic figures:

Ceylon, with her twenty-five centuries of recorded history, is endowed with a generous quota of national heroes who are gratefully remembered by the people for the wars they fought for national independence, the movements they sponsored for the welfare of the masses, the books they wrote, the monuments they erected and the contributions they made to the individuality and richness of the national culture. The heroes of ancient times whose fame lives in legends and songs, folk-tales and chronicles, have acquired for themselves in the minds of the people an image which has remained unaltered for centuries. So indelible is the impression thus created in their minds that even a critical student of history – not to speak of a cynic or sceptic – runs

the risk of courting popular disapproval if anything which deviates, though very slightly, from the popular image were to be said or written. This is not an attitude of mere apotheosis. To a Sinhala [person], Dutugemunu, Parakaramabahu, Madduma Banda, Keppetipola & c. are not deities or super-men, to be venerated or appeased on account of any super-natural power or ability they are believed to possess. These men are honoured and remembered for the greatness they displayed through piety, patriotism or bravery and for the sacrifices they made for their honour or their motherland.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], xvii)

The warning about courting popular displeasure anticipates the ideological work Guruge's introduction does. It draws Dharmapala into a mytho-historical genealogy of national heroes and interprets his life and work in terms of a laudatory narrative of service to the nation. The self-imposed task of the introduction is to place Dharmapala within a perceived popular tradition of celebrating national heroes. There is a conscious distancing from any critical evaluation or historicisation of Dharmapala. Guruge too reproduces the predictable narrative of Sinhala Buddhist decline under colonialism against which Dharmapala's achievements are positioned. He makes references to Dharmapala's international missionary work and especially to his role as a Buddhist representative at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 – to highlight Dharmapala's global fame.

The introduction also highlights Dharmapala's anti-colonialism, projecting him as a heroic anti-colonial figure. In doing so, Guruge concedes that Dharmapala's views on colonial governance were ambiguous. Thus Guruge writes, 'It was the Anagarika's aim that Ceylon should be independent' (Guruge 1991 [1965], lxxii) but at the same time observes, 'The Anagarika's attitude to the British had changed from time to time' (lxxii). Such statements indicate the difficulty of placing Dharmapala within a neat anti-colonial nationalist framework given the complexities of his socio-historical context. Though the thematic thrust of the introduction requires the depiction of Dharmapala as an outright anti-colonial figure, Guruge struggles to do so because Dharmapala's own writing is not conducive to such a one-dimensional reading.

The introduction also focuses on what is termed Dharmapala's 'policy on aliens' (Guruge 1991 [1965], lxxix). Guruge suggests that Dharmapala anticipated the 'Indo-Ceylon problem', referring to the

agreement between the Ceylonese and Indian governments to ‘repatriate’ about half a million of the Indian Tamil community in 1964. However, the interest in constitutional issues regarding minorities which Guruge attributes to Dharmapala is not visible in his writing or thinking. Dharmapala seems to have been oblivious of constitutional affairs as a whole.

The citizen–alien dichotomy is strongly articulated in Guruge’s introduction and can be seen as emerging from the cultural-nationalist fervour of the times. Guruge even reproduces a cartoon published by Dharmapala in the *Sinhala Bauddhaya* which shows a hapless Sinhala man being blindfolded and robbed by a host of ‘aliens’ (Guruge 1991 [1965], lxxx). However, despite the fact that the first instance of post-independence ethnic rioting between the Sinhala community and the Ceylon Tamil community had occurred in 1958 following the implementation of the 1956 Language Act, Guruge’s introduction does not conflate Ceylon Tamil and Indian Tamil identities – an important point demonstrating that nationalist discourse rarely remains stable. It is only much later in the 1980s that Sinhala nationalist discourse begins to regard Tamils as a single homogeneous block, but even today Sinhala nationalists make distinctions between Jaffna Tamils, Colombo Tamils and Indian Tamils when such distinctions are strategically useful. Similarly, Tamil politicians incorporate Indian Tamils when it is useful but exclude them at other times. As a category of practice, nationalism generates a seemingly homogeneous imagined community but, as a category of analysis, we can see this imagined community as something that is never what it claims to be.

Conclusion

The preface and introduction of *Return to Righteousness* reflect a process whereby an institutional discourse appropriates the legacy of a public figure. The title of national hero was not associated with Dharmapala in his own time; it was conferred retrospectively. Though both these framing narratives highlight themes that Dharmapala himself promoted and do not radically reconstitute or reinterpret him, the institutional context of the publication of *Return to Righteousness* and the specific socio-historical moment of its production point towards the way that Dharmapala’s legacy became reified in post-independence nationalist discourse. The complex and contradictory set of discourses that informed Dharmapala’s nationalist imaginary are simplified as he is re-presented

as a national hero. Dharmapala in his own writing reductively interprets the precolonial history of the island and projects concerns of his own time into the past. Ironically, a similarly reductive move is visible in the ways his biographers, and Sinhala nationalist discourse in general, have appropriated his legacy.

The themes that emerge in Dharmapala's writing appear in differing but analogous forms in [Chapters 4 and 5](#). The most dominant of these is the sense of beleaguerment that coordinates much of Dharmapala's proto-nationalist thought. The desire to locate markers of indigeneity which authenticate the self and nation also remains an abiding concern. The repetitive articulation of this discourse of authenticity points towards a crisis in defining the authentic Sinhala self. Paradoxically, the very attempt to locate this essence becomes the moment when its existence appears tenuous, fleeting and only partially realised. The framing of Dharmapala's writing by Guruge provides an apt transition to the [next chapter](#). S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike rose to power with the support of the groups that produced *Return to Righteousness*. In his writing we can see how Sinhala nationalism's cultural imaginary became an institutionalised political discourse. It is a moment when a politician aspiring to be a popular leader fashions his identity to fit a perceived notion of authenticity but in that very move raises questions about what constitutes the authentic Sinhala self.

4

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike: the paradox of authenticity

Introduction

The first thing I must do is to apologise to you for speaking to you in English. Owing to my long absence from my country, I am not sufficiently fluent in Sinhalese to be able to address you in Sinhalese at length. That is a fault that can be easily remedied. What is more important is that my heart should be sound. And I can assure you that my heart is Sinhalese to the core.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 83)

These words were uttered in 1925 by Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike, who in 1956 became independent Ceylon's fourth prime minister, riding a popular wave of Sinhala nationalist support to power. The extract above is from a speech he made just after his return to Sri Lanka, having completed undergraduate studies at Oxford. Young Bandaranaike was groomed for a career in the colonial administration by his father, Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, who was the *maha mudaliyar*, head of the colony's 'native administration' (Manor 1989, 14). Bandaranaike was addressing a crowd gathered near his ancestral home at Horogalla, in the Gampaha district, about 40 kilometres from Colombo. Having been schooled by a British tutor and later at the exclusive St Thomas' College, Bandaranaike knew little or no Sinhala at the time of his return from Oxford. What he says here therefore can be seen in part as political posturing by a callow and politically immature youth eager to appear progressive and nationalist. However, the desire to project an authentic image speaks to an abiding concern in Bandaranaike's political life – the claim to indigeneity as a decolonising leader.