

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE RECEPTION OF PROTESTANTISM BY THE TAMIL AND SINHALESE COMMUNITIES IN SRI LANKA.

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In the island of Sri Lanka, the ratio of the population consists of 74% Sinhalese , 18% Tamil, 7% Moor , and 1% Burgher, Malay, and Vedda. The religious ratio is, 69% Buddhist, 15% Hindu, 8% Muslim, 8% Christian.¹ Out of this 8%, approximately one tenth consists of Protestants and the majority of them are Tamils, residing in the North, East, West and the hill country. From these statistics we would expect that comparatively the percentage of Sinhalese Christians ought to be high. However, this is not the case and Sinhalese Christianity declined more than the Tamil Christianity. This article seeks to analyze the events that contributed to the decline to come to a conclusion as to why the Tamil Community was more receptive to the gospel than the Sinhalese community.

Nationalism, Language, Ethnic Identity and the Culture.

The Sinhalese people in general were hostile to Christianity since it was a religion of the invaders, identified with the Portuguese, Dutch and British. Nationalistic feeling hindered the Sinhalese from becoming Christian. The Sinhalese identified religion with the state because the religion of Buddhism was brought during the reign of “King Devanampiya Tissa who employed Asoka's strategy of merging the political state with Buddhism, supporting Buddhist institutions from the state's coffers, and locating temples close to the royal palace for greater control”². Nearly 600 Christians in Mannar were martyred by Sankili the King of Jaffna for the same reason, namely the close State – Religion identity in 1543. “The

¹ Census of Population and Housing 2001,
<http://www.statistics.gov.lk/census2001/population/district/t001c.htm>

² <http://countrystudies.us/sri-lanka/4.htm>, also see Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Dehiwala: The Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1993, 52.

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connection between religion, culture, language, and education and their combined influence on national identity has been an age-old pervasive force for the Sinhalese Buddhists”³. A British missionary, William Oakley also mentions this in his letter to the secretary of CMS mission. He stated that the rebellion against British rule also reduced the growth of their mission, because people identified religion with the state⁴.

In the country’s history, King Dutugemunu (BC.167-137) had a fifteen year dispute against Elahara and finally deposed him. This was sometimes interpreted as a major racial confrontation between the Tamils and Sinhalese. This conflict, recorded in the *Mahavamsa*, marked the beginning of Sinhalese nationalism and Dutugemunu’s victory is commonly interpreted as a confirmation that the island was a preserve for the Sinhalese and Buddhism. Some historians maintain that the story is still capable of stirring the religio-communal passions of the Sinhalese⁵. This move towards nationalism may be regarded as one of the reasons for the Sinhalese community, being less receptive to the gospel. This trend still prevails even in today’s society.

The other reason was that people struggled to understand the preaching and teaching of the missionaries during the Dutch period and they nominally embraced Protestantism, due to a fear of the Dutch rulers, who declared the non - inheritancy of lands and properties for non-Christians⁶. People lost their ancestral property unless their parents were legally married. The only marriage registrar was the minister in the church and to get married in the church both bride and bridegroom had to be baptized. So many couples with children married again in the church to save their property. They became Christians by baptism and they still worshiped their gods⁷. This was one of the causes for people going back to their original religion with an antichristian feeling after the British declared

³ <http://countrystudies.us/sri-lanka/4.htm> - for information read Kenneth D. Bush, *The Intra-Group Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Learning to Read between the Lines*, Palgrave Macmillan , 2004.

⁴ William Oakley, *Letter to the Secretary, Kandy, 12.09.1848*, University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Original papers, C CE O 92/56, also see 11.08.1848, C CE O 92/55 and 13.11.1848, C CE O 92/58.

⁵ <http://countrystudies.us/sri-lanka/6.htm> For information read: Kenneth D. Bush, *The Intra-Group Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Learning to Read between the Lines*, Palgrave Macmillan , 2004.

⁶ Robert Mayor, *Letter to Joseph Knight, 20.12.1819*, University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Mission Book, C CE - M1, p.23 – Rev. Joseph Knight was ordained by the Bishop Ryder of Gloucester. He arrived in Ceylon on 28.10.1818

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religious liberalism. Even today, if we visit the grave yards of the southern part of the country the surnames inscribed on the tombs are Christian names. Many Buddhist carry still carry their Western names today such as, David, William, Cornelius, Adam, Silva, Alexander, Richard, Julius, etc. Also, many people became Christians and followed the new religion only to gain material benefits⁸, such as education, medicine, employment, and social status⁹ because priority was given to the people who had good English education in the English schools for government jobs. A government servant was well paid and had a respectable position in society. Higgens said that “the Sinhalese were naturally about the most apathetic and thoroughly irreligious people in the world”¹⁰. But it is said that the Tamils were very receptive to the gospel, when it is preached¹¹.

Thirdly, in the island society was divided into many castes, each performing a certain occupation¹². The cultivators - 'Govi' or Vellala' were considered to be the highest caste, though many other castes were also engaged in farming. Non-agricultural people were divided into occupational “low caste groups”, such as barbers, washer-men, and fishermen¹³. The Sinhalese had a social structure and they were ruled by their Modaliyars¹⁴ or village headman, so people were prepared to attend or not attend public worship on their instruction¹⁵, whatever caste they may be. However, Tamils had no social system or structure and they had the independence to decide their own will and this paved the path for their numerous conversions.

⁷ His Excellency the Governor of Ceylon, *Minutes of the Government Relations to the Churches 16.12.1819*, University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Mission Book, C CE M-1, 84 & 85.

⁸ *Benjamin Ward’s Journal, 1819, (27.03.1819 - 16.07.1819)* University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Mission Book, C CE M1, 4.

⁹ Latourette-6, *Op Cit.*, 221.

¹⁰ E.T.Higgens, *Report of the Itinerating Branch of Kandy Station, 01.10.1855-30.09.1856*, University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Original Papers, C CE O 69/69

¹¹ R.P.Butterfield, *Padre Rowlands of Ceylon*, Marshall, Morgan, and Scott Ltd., London and Edinburgh, p.35

¹² *Missionary proceedings, 1818, Op Cit.* 530.

¹³ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (London, Helen Hemingway, 1973), 3.

¹⁴ The tax collector appointed by the British government, considered as a chief man in a district or province.

¹⁵ *Missionary Proceedings, 1819, Op Cit.* 193.

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Only after Arumuga Navalar, (1822 – 1879) the reformer of Tamil Hinduism¹⁶, Hindus began to contemplate defending themselves. He was a student of the Central College of Jaffna and studied under Christian missionaries. He adopted Christian methods to reform Hinduism, such as preaching, teaching and singing devotional songs. This did not bear much fruit and the people sought the help of the Christian missionaries belonging to several denominations for their social upliftment¹⁷, because the ‘low caste’ Tamils were kept away from the Kovils from worshipping their gods. Also Navalar’s attempt was only limited to the northern part of the country and it didn’t make any impact on the East, Colombo and hill country mission, which bore much fruit.

The religion of Buddhism, its revival and counter conversion

Against Christian missionary activities the Buddhist clergy reformed the sangha¹⁸, to adopt counter conversion methods to stop the missionary work. In the 1875, an American, Colonel Henry Steele Olcott, an ardent abolitionist in the years leading up to the American Civil War, founded and later became president of the Theosophical Movement¹⁹. Shortly after his arrival in Sri Lanka in 1880, he organized a Buddhist campaign against British missionaries. He founded the following rival education institutes against the missionaries namely, Ananda College, Mahinda College, and Dharmaraja College to impart Buddhist education with a strong nationalist bias²⁰. In this way Buddhism in Ceylon was organized to eradicate Christian missionary work. In other places too Buddhist priests put their whole effort into bringing children to their schools, under their instruction.²¹ They started rival schools and taught Pali and native medicine. There are reports of children abandoning the missionaries due to fear and joining these rival schools and the work of the

¹⁶ http://members.tripod.com/kanaga_sritharan/eelaventhan.htm

¹⁷ Tamils had the disproportionate percentage of educational and other institutions maintained by missionaries.

¹⁸ The religious community

¹⁹ This was organized on a worldwide basis to promote goodwill and to champion the rights of the underprivileged.

²⁰ <http://countrystudies.us/sri-lanka/16.htm>

²¹ *C.M. Gleaner*, 1849, Vol-IX, C CE O 59/40, p.63-65

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missionaries declined²². Although some parents were stubborn in sending their children to the mission schools their motive was two fold, (1) to obtain good respected positions in the civil service and (2) to make them more respected in society²³.

Buddhist priests organized gatherings and assembled together and accused missionaries of forcing their religion on natives, although they are not able to present any proof of it²⁴, and in some places organized mobs assaulted catechists and believers to make them abandon their work²⁵. They formed ‘Gam Sabbas’ (village societies) to settle the problems of the people in the villages, since many people found their day to day problems were not solved and their needs were not met in their philosophical religion. Buddhist priests were openly and sometimes secretly behind these societies to stop conversion and to promote their ideology. People who refused to join them were harassed and persecuted in their villages. Their prime target was the Christians living in the villages, some of whom joined these societies and renounced their faith, while others stood steadfastly against persecution²⁶. As a result the work among the Sinhalese community declined.

Christian Literature, Liturgy, Bible and hymn Books

Christian literature such as Bibles, Tracts, Liturgy, Hymn Books and Devotional books and hand-written literature²⁷ were distributed²⁸ and

²² Gleaner, April/1898, 292.

²³ George Parsons, *Report of Baddegama Station, 1853*, University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Original Papers, C CE O 95/42

²⁴ George Parsons, *Report of Baddegama District for the year ending 30th September 1865*, University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Original Papers, C CE O 95/50

²⁵ George Parsons, *Report of Baddegama District for the year ending 30th September 1865*, University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ C CE O 95/50

²⁶ Alexander D. Gordon, *Report of Cotta Station, June, 1850*, University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Original Papers, C CE O 59/40

²⁷ Joseph Knight, *Letter to the Secretary, 22.02.1822*, p.360. see also *Knight's Journal, 08.11.1820 - 12.02.1822* (18.10.1821) Ceylon Mission Book, C CE M-1, p.385; *Joseph Knight's Journal, 03.03.1822 - 30.06.1822*, (28.05.1822) University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Original Papers, C CE O 77/51

²⁸ *Joseph Knight's Journal, 03.03.1822 - 30.06.1822*, (24.05.1822) University of Birmingham, ‘Special Collection’ Original Papers, C CE O 77/51

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explained by the missionaries to the people, many of whom were illiterate²⁹, although there was opposition³⁰.

In spite of all these happenings the Tamil Christians in India and Sri Lanka received abundant blessing through the Indian SPCK. The Indian SPCK was a successful indigenous publisher. SPCK has been active in India since the early 18th century. A distinct SPCK in India was established in 1935, and became a fully autonomous organization in 1958. They established libraries for the use of clergy and their parishioners, giving them access to a range of theological and other books to support their ministry. Frequently, shipments of books were sent across the ocean to Sri Lanka establishing and maintaining a substantial network of libraries. They published the first Tamil Bible translated by Danish Lutheran missionaries. The SPCK has continued to work closely with churches of many different denominations, whilst retaining a special relationship with the Anglican Communion. The SPCK also developed an important role in supporting the planting of new churches and funds were provided for church buildings, for schools, for theological training colleges.

The Impact of the South Indian Mission in Ceylon

In the hill country of the Island there were coffee and latter tea estates, each with European superintendents and plantation workers. The door was wide open for missionary work and the European planters desired to bring the gospel to these people, and requested the missionary societies to send catechists to minister to them. The Tamil Speaking Catechists were brought from South India and there was a spirit of awakening amongst the 'coolies' and many requested baptism. Some of the planters were Christians and prayerful, godly men³¹. The Catechists were involved in³², (1) Itineration, (2) Street preaching, (3) Ministering in the Schools, and (4) Sale of Scriptures and educational books. This hill country mission made an

²⁹ *Joseph Knight's Journal*, 03.03.1822 - 30.06.1822, (18.04.1822 and 27.05.1822) University of Birmingham, 'Special Collection' Original Papers, C CE O 77/51: *Joseph Knight's Journal*, 01.07.1822 - 19.06.1823, (08.06.1823) University of Birmingham, 'Special Collection' Original Papers, C CE O 77/52

³⁰ *Joseph Knight's Journal*, 03.03.1822 - 30.06.1822, (28.05.1822) University of Birmingham, 'Special Collection' Original Papers, C CE O 77/51

³¹ John Pickford, *The Annual Report of the Ceylon Tamil Cooly Mission for 1865*, University of Birmingham, 'Special Collection' Original Papers, C CE O 102/19

³² John Pickford, *The Annual Report of the Ceylon Tamil Cooly Mission for 1866*, University of Birmingham, 'Special Collection' Original papers, C CE O 102/20

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impact and caused a sudden growth in the Tamil ministry³³. Also the work was self supported, since the plantation workers and planters supported it financially³⁴. The mission schools in the hill country too were supported by the superintendents and the estate workers themselves³⁵.

The Tamil ministry in Ceylon was successful also because missionaries were sent from Tinnavelly, who served many years there and had a good experience in this ministry and a good knowledge of the Tamil language³⁶. However, before missionaries came, scattered Tamil congregations met in Colombo³⁷ and it made the missionary work easy, in places such as Maradana, Kollupitiya, Kotahena, Mattakkuliya etc., These members were Indian traders, skilled workers, shop keepers and some of them were labourers in the harbour.

The ministry of Padre Rowlands of Ceylon

Rev. Rowlands was born in Worcester in October 1837, and he was 24 years of age when he arrived at Galle on 07.12.1861. He reached Colombo on 09.12.1861 and was transferred to the 'Tamil Cooly Mission'. It is worth mentioning him in this article, as one who was called "The father of Tamil Christianity in Ceylon". He says, when he preached on the streets, the Tamils were very receptive to the gospel³⁸. There was another reason for the success of the Tamil ministry in Colombo. This was that the Tamils were probably more numerous, numbering 60,000³⁹. The majority of them were from South India - Tinnavelly and Palayamcottai⁴⁰. The Tamil churches grew without any hindrances, because there was no organised social system among Tamils. The Kovils were owned by private Mudalalis and families. There was no denominational system among Tamil Hindus,

³³ John Pickford, *The Annual Report of the Ceylon Tamil Cooly Mission for 1866*, University of Birmingham, 'Special Collection' Original Papers, C CE O 102/20

³⁴ John Pickford, *The Annual Report of the Ceylon Tamil Cooly Mission for 1866*, University of Birmingham, 'Special Collection' Original papers, C CE O 102/20

³⁵ R. Abbay, *Tamil Cooly Education in the Planting Districts of Ceylon, 27.11.1873*, University of Birmingham, 'Special Collection' Original Papers, C CE O 6/32

³⁶ R.P. Butterfield, *Padre Rowlands of Ceylon*, Marshall, Morgan, and Scott Ltd., London and Edinburgh, 30.

³⁷ A History of Diocese of Colombo. 1946, 154.

³⁸ R.P. Butterfield, *Padre Rowlands of Ceylon*, Marshall, Morgan, and Scott Ltd., London and Edinburgh, 35.

³⁹ *The Annual Report of the Church Missionary Society*, 1872, 168.

⁴⁰ *The Annual Report of the Church Missionary Society*, 1858, 167.

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such as Buddhist ‘Sangha’ or ‘Nikkaya’. The missionaries preached in coffee stores in Colombo, and all kinds of places in the Colombo city, such as Colpetty, the Slave Island lanes, Police Court at Wolvendhal, and Kayman's Gate at Pettah, Borella, Grandpass, Mattakkuliya, Maradana, and Mutwal⁴¹. This was the beginning of the successful Tamil ministry in Colombo. Rev. Rowlands was transferred to the ‘Cooly Mission’ and he had a successful ministry in the estates as mentioned before with the help of the Catechists. The Eastern coastal area was reached by the Wesleyan missionaries from Valaichenai to Pottuvil and many churches were planted in many places in the Eastern part of the country.

Finally, the success of the Tamil mission in Sri Lanka was also due to the fact that there were many Tamil Christians lived in Colombo who came from South India, as traders and there were ministers and catechists freely available to the Ceylon Mission from South India. The Christians who came from South India were lonely because the majority of them left their family behind, and sought peace in their hearts in the churches. South Indian Christianity was strong, and is still strong making an immeasurable impact on the island's Christianity even today by sending preachers, teachers, The Tamil Bible, Christian literature, devotional books, music, Hymn Books, tracts and Evangelists. So the Ceylon mission flourished. Also Christians, who left their villages in South India, used the church to build up their community life and fellowship. The Tamil missionaries had only mild opposition to the gospel because the Tamil Hindu community in Colombo, North and East was not systematically organized to oppose it, since their social system, such as their religion and caste divided them. And also they were divided, since they were shrewd, witty, selfish, and in their circumstances very independent⁴, according to Joseph Knight in Jaffna. These were the reasons for Tamils to be more receptive to the gospel.

⁴¹ Rev.S.M.J.Jebamony, ‘*The History of St.James Church, Kotahena*’, Republished article on the 125th Anniversary Souvenir, 2002. also see Napoleon Pathmanathan, ‘*The History of Christ Church Galle Face*, 150th Anniversary Souvenir, 2003, 52.

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