

# **Sri Lanka: Surge in Hindu nationalism concerns Tamil community**

Sunday 24 September 2023, by [GUNASEKARA Skandha](#) (Date first published: 26 August 2023).

**In recent years, a growing undercurrent of Hindu majoritarianism and nationalism within the Tamil community has raised significant concerns about their potential repercussions on communal harmony in Sri Lanka. This phenomenon has come under scrutiny due to its manifestations in both online rhetoric and real-life actions, with implications for minority rights and cross-community relations.**

Attorney-at-Law and former Commissioner of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) Ambika Satkunanathan has highlighted the emergence of Hindu right wing groups within the Tamil community, whose actions and affiliations have stirred debates about the direction the community is taking.

## **Shift to offline activities**

These groups, which include entities such as Shiv Senai, Rudra Sena, and Ravana Sena, were initially confined to online spaces but have gradually ventured into offline activities that have tangible consequences.

“In recent times we have seen attempts to ignite Hindu majoritarianism and nationalism within the Tamil community. In particular, in the past seven years, the increase in anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric, particularly evident on various social media platforms, has started to manifest in real-life actions. Shiv Senai propagates this ideology while other groups such as Rudra Sena and Ravana Sena have emerged in the last few years,” Satkunanathan said.

Instances of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric, often propagated through social media platforms, have begun to materialise as real-life actions, attributed to these very groups. This shift from the digital realm to the physical world has been marked by the posting of inflammatory posters, protests against Muslim teachers wearing traditional attire, and alliances formed with Buddhist monks, State authorities, and even military factions.

“Although many of these groups initially operated primarily within the digital realm, some are now making their presence felt in offline activities. For example, instances of posting anti-Muslim and anti-Christian posters and even protesting against Muslim teachers wearing abayas have been noted.

“These groups have also seemingly forged alliances with Buddhist monks, State authorities, and even military factions. Notably, figures like Maravanpulavu Sachchithananthan have shown support for and collaborated with movements like Bodu Bala Sena, advocating for bans on cow slaughter and denouncing perceived ‘forced’ conversions,” Satkunanathan elaborated.

## **Alignment of Tamil politicians**

One striking factor is the apparent alignment of certain Tamil politicians with these Hindu right wing groups, raising concerns about their potential influence on State policies and Tamil nationalist agendas. Some of these politicians are accused of downplaying or dismissing the impact of ethnic conflicts and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, instead emphasising caste discrimination as the sole rights issue faced by the Tamil community.

“Hindu right wing organisations have formed connections with State/Rajapaksa entities and have even been accused of downplaying or dismissing the effects of ethnic conflicts and the influence of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Instead, they focus on highlighting caste discrimination as the sole existing rights issue faced by the Tamil population,” Satkunanathan said.

While acknowledging the existence of caste-based discrimination as a deeply-rooted concern, it is noteworthy that neither Tamil political parties nor civil society organisations have taken significant steps to address this issue effectively. Some political actors appear to exploit anti-caste activism to further their support for State entities that have been criticised for human rights abuses.

“It is important to acknowledge that caste discrimination is indeed a deeply rooted and unaddressed concern within the Tamil community. Strikingly, neither Tamil political parties nor civil society organisations have taken substantial measures to address caste-based discrimination and violence. Some pro-State actors seem to exploit the cause of anti-caste activism to cloak their support for abusive State entities. Paradoxically, these same individuals actively engage in anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric and actions,” Sathkunanathan said.

### **Inaction of Tamil political parties**

The complex situation is further exacerbated by the hesitancy of Tamil political parties to challenge the growing anti-Muslim and anti-Christian sentiment, fearing potential backlash from their constituents.

Even within the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), derogatory comments about the faith of Christian members by fellow party members have gone unpunished. This dynamic underscores the need for a broader realisation within the Tamil community that certain right wing Hindu groups may not genuinely represent their best interests.

“Adding to the complexity of the situation, Tamil political parties appear hesitant to challenge the growing anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric, fearing potential voter backlash. Even within the TNA, Christian members have faced derogatory comments about their faith from fellow party members, with no official reprimand from the party itself.

“This scenario necessitates the realisation within the Tamil community that certain right wing Hindu groups may not necessarily be acting in their best interest. While claiming to advocate against issues such as caste discrimination, these groups simultaneously enable discriminatory structures like the military and lend support to the propagation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.”

### **Sowing communal discord**

Of particular concern is the erosion of cross-community alliances, particularly between Muslims and Tamils, as these right wing groups inadvertently sow discord and undermine the collective efforts to achieve justice, rights, and harmony among Sri Lanka’s diverse communities.

“They could potentially undermine the ability to forge cross-community alliances and exacerbate strained relations between Muslims and Tamils. While presenting themselves as champions of certain causes, these groups deliberately undermine the larger cause of ensuring justice, rights, and

harmony across the diverse communities in Sri Lanka,” said Satkunanathan.

### **Limited traction**

TNA MP M.A. Sumanthiran acknowledged the existence of these groups for a while, but he believed their traction was limited.

“They have been around for a while but don’t seem to have got much traction – that’s my take on it,” Sumanthiran said.

He pointed out an increase in their activities lately but downplayed the likelihood of them becoming significant movements. He also noted that there was no apparent involvement of Sinhala elements in encouraging these groups.

“Of course, in recent times their activities have somewhat increased and they are trying to whip things up, but generally it doesn’t lead towards such things. However, there is definitely an effort to ratchet up such feelings and so on. I’m not aware of any Sinhala elements encouraging this. This Shiv Senai was established around seven or eight years ago and there were some links to some Indian movements, but I haven’t got any information on whether anyone in the south is connected to that,” Sumanthiran observed.

Sumanthiran also revealed that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – an Indian right wing Hindu nationalist extremist group – was connected to the Shiv Senai.

“I don’t know if the BJP is involved, but certainly RSS factors – a radical Hindutva movement in India – were involved in the original establishment of the Shiv Senai.”

### **‘Fringe efforts’**

Ahila Ilankai Tamil Congress (AITC) Leader MP Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam expressed scepticism regarding the viability of these movements, characterising them as fringe efforts that were unlikely to gain substantial ground within northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

“I think there is an attempt to try and promote and build up this notion of political Hinduism or Hindutva ideology. But my view is that it is very much a fringe movement and it will fail.”

Ponnambalam noted a fundamental contradiction in the alignment of these groups with extreme Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, which clashed with mainstream Tamil political ideology.

“If the Rajapaksas are the ones who want it, they will try to sow conflict between Sinhala Buddhist nationalists and Tamil Hindu nationalists, because that is the kind of dynamic that they would consider favourable to their vote bank.

“However, in practice, what you have is a scenario where the Hindutva movement here, which is led by what is known as Shiv Senai movement headed by Maravanpulavu Sachchithananthan – is doing the opposite. He is completely in harmony with extreme Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

“I believe that this in itself will run counter to mainstream Tamil political ideology – Tamil nationalism – a very firmly anti-religion-dominated ideology. In fact, Tamil nationalism has entirely been non-religious to a point where it has accepted S.J.V. Chelvanayakam as its leader, who is a Christian. Therefore, it is very difficult to see how this Hindutva movement is going to take hold within the north and east.”

He further questioned the credibility of these groups in the northern and eastern regions.

“They propagate anti-Christianity in the north and anti-Muslim sentiments in the east. In that sense, dividing the Tamil community by bringing in religion might be something the Rajapaksas prefer. But this movement very openly aligns with the hardline Sinhala Buddhist nationalist sentiments in the south and when that happens, it is very difficult to gain credibility in the north and east,” Ponnambalam said.

---

### **Skandha Gunasekara**

*[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.*

---

### **P.S.**

The Morning

<https://www.themorning.lk/articles/SX6ExzwZEokbdYLty8t0>