



# THE ISLAND WHERE TEMPLES COLLIDE

Photo by Ian Nicol

IAN NICOL revisits Sri Lanka after 10 years and finds the divide between ethnic Tamils and Sinhalese is deeper than ever.

The civil war that has been raging in Sri Lanka for 18 years has certainly taken its toll. Since my last visit 10 years ago there have been vast changes, some that were immediately evident upon my arrival at Colombo's airport. Many Sri Lankan nationals were carefully and lengthily checked on arrival, while tourists were able to go through customs practically unhindered. In the background, soldiers stood about listlessly, machine-guns swung over their shoulders.

Catching a local bus to Colombo's city centre, it was clear that the fiscal strain caused by massive

military spending was having a detrimental impact on civic infrastructure. Roads were in poor condition, piles of garbage lay uncollected at the side of the road, buildings hadn't been painted, burnt-out buildings hadn't been rebuilt, and there was a much bigger military presence on the streets. More distressingly, there had been an increase in people who seemed homeless or impoverished and had to beg.

This was in contrast to other changes. Glittering hotels had sprung up. Hyper-modern office blocks loomed over the skyline. General

tourist areas were well maintained with army personnel deterring touts and beggars. In the business areas well-dressed nationals walked. Some people in the community had benefited from the war — their sons roared around in fast European cars and their daughters dressed in contemporary fashions. There was a general increase in expensive cars and four-wheel drives insulating the politicians, merchant, and trader occupants from the harsh realities outside the nice areas. Also proliferating were international NGO vehicles rushing earnestly around with grim faced drivers



The increased military presence meant more checkpoints, and more patrols wandering around with guns slung nonchalantly from their shoulders. Very rarely did any checking occur in more affluent areas. Further from the city-center itself and in areas of special interest (such as Parliament or army bases) there were sandbag structures on street intersections with heavy calibre machine-gun barrels. There seemed to be a "hands off Europeans" policy operating, which was one less concern to have to deal with. But this could also be a trap for the complacent so I felt I had to be quite careful about what I photographed, and who could see me doing so, and to carry appropriate documents.

Not too many tourists were visible on the streets and none were using public transport. Those that had come were mainly in the central or older parts of Colombo - tourism or commercial areas like Pettah and Port. They were herded around in groups, on and off coaches, or in smaller independent groups nervously zipping from one place to the next. The up-market tourist places and shopping-towns had their usual quota of visitors obtaining artifacts and cheap clothes. The backpacker contingent was unusually absent.

As the first few days went by I became aware of how general circumstances for ordinary people had worsened. There was more touts pressuring me with a desperate persistence, to buy their wares. Also noticeable was the unusually dishevelled appearance of some people for whom hygiene and neatness is a given, irrespective of caste or socio-economic status. The population density seemed greater, due perhaps to an exodus from impoverished, embattled rural areas into Colombo. The predominance of women reflected how the deaths of men-folk had forced wives and daughters from villages into Colombo's labour-force.

What had not changed was the overall charm and civility of people generally. Children attempted to practice their imperfect English on

me. Older residents, with very good English, were only too happy to engage in conversation. They told me there were busses aplenty although constant fare-rises to pay for the war had impacted on ordinary people quite heavily and was a cause for much complaint. In fact the war generally seemed to be disapproved of due to the many disadvantages incurred, at least by the people prepared to talk to me.

I was staying in a Sinhalese area. There seemed to be a certain amount of cautiousness towards me, but no animosity I could detect. It was a residential area where once separate

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Even the postcards relating to things Hindu were gone

villages had expanded into each other to form a suburban sprawl around Colombo. The street-side markets had a local flavour and specialised in certain vegetables, fruits and other consumables. The identity of each village area was evident, and each had its own character. Assisting this sense of locality was the presence of the white smooth domed village temples with their golden pinnacles. The Bhikkhu's (priest's) daily monastic activities set the pace for the laity's life.

When I found the Tamil area, the temple was still a place of predominance. Its tower was covered in multitudinous carvings depicting Hinduism's pantheon of deities and was a multicolored splendor visible around the neighborhood. The Tamil suburb was more economically disadvantaged than others were. People looked haggard. Buildings were decrepit. It even seemed hotter, dirtier, more polluted, and the air, thick with diesel fumes, was more difficult to breathe. Military personnel had fear in their eyes, moved in groups, and held weapons at the ready.

Having a more vigorous military presence compounded the area's misfortunes. Whilst I sat in the shade

and shadows of eating-houses I could see busses being stopped and boarded by soldiers for document checking. But if I was on board the soldiers would smile and disembark politely.

Some passengers would be taken off the bus for more detailed checking of travel passes and identity cards. Some were allowed to re-board the bus before it departed. Those remaining stood in the dust and heat of the street as more complex and lengthy investigations were made via the radiophones. Suspicions alleviated, some people got to scurry off or hop on the next bus. But others eventually got taken away on army transport with armed escorts. Their fate is unknown.

My academic mission in Colombo was to search out books for an honours degree in anthropology. I wanted texts that related to an interaction between past traditional Hindu practices and present-day praxis. Many hours were spent scouring the shelves of bright modern stores and dark chaotic back-street shops. If I was lucky there was a whirring fan or humming ancient air-conditioner to alleviate the heat exacerbated by frustration and disappointment.

Books relating to Hindu matters were few and far between. Even allowing for the need that they be in English, there was a conspicuous paucity of Hindu related materials. Any misconceptions I may have had, imbued by smiling faces, tropical plants, exotic food, and quaint customs were dispersed by the stark reality of the sanitised bookshelves.

A few books did engage directly with the conflict, its polarisation of society, and consequences upon people. Brave writers they were too, risking serious sectarian disapproval from either side. Some actually received a bullet from unnamed assassins

What was more obvious though was the de-Hinduisation of the shelves. Sri Lankan history had been manipulated. It had been given a Buddhist veneer that was so obvious it was almost laughable. Even the post- ▶





cards relating to things Hindu were gone, so tourists didn't get the wrong impression about Buddhism's glorious mono cultural state.

As an adjunct to my clinical work with the Sri Lankan community in Australia, I wanted to talk with Sinhalese and Tamil religious practitioners, who are the traditional alternative to what we in the West might call therapists. There

is a relative absence in Sri Lanka of any widespread public health care, especially of a psychological nature, due to resources being reallocated to the war. This means Sri Lankans in need of 'counselling' usually seek the advice of spiritual practitioners.

I was introduced to the *bhikku* of a Buddhist temple near to where I was staying. An older chap, in his saffron robe with shaved head, he was playing with a kitten when we arrived. It had been said that he spoke English but my host's son, who had accompanied me, was called upon to translate. What a bitter experience it must have been for him.

The monk was convinced that no Sinhalese people would ever need to seek asylum from the Sri Lankan government because the Government never did anything adverse. Similarly, no Sinhalese would ever need to seek assistance if traumatised because of their belief in Buddha. What then transpired was an hour of bigoted ranting about how the Sinhalese bought Tamils to Sri Lanka as slaves to row boats. He believed their intentions now were to take over the whole country.

The *bhikku's* perspective reflected the increasingly cornered opinions of the priesthood's hard core elite who call for "peace by war". The *sangha* (monkhood) elite encourages recruitment of young Buddhists to kill the Hindu Tamil opposition, and reject attempts at negotiation and compromise. I now understood why the monks were referred to as "thugs

in robes" and why terrible slaughters had sometimes been perpetrated by the usually gentle Sinhalese.

The conversation enabled an insight into the thinking of the Buddhist *sangha*. His trope also revealed the type of propaganda inflicted on local people. But there are generally high levels of education in Sri Lanka, and the Sinhalese tend to have a good understanding of the circumstances surrounding the conflict. People must have had less than complementary opinions about *bhikkus* like this one.

What a different experience it was going to the *kovil* (temple) to meet a Hindu priest. This was a chap who seemed to understand both the complexities of the circumstances and the suffering that had occurred. He also disapproved of the violence being used in an attempt to achieve victory. The priest's approach to trauma management was a combination of contemporary and traditional methods. The traditional methods included the use of ritual ceremonies, astrologer's consultations and homeopathic remedies. He even photocopied an article for me, linking Hindu religious techniques with behaviourist-type counselling treatments. I left feeling as if I'd made contact with an astute and sensible person.

It was after these two contrasting experiences that I prepared to leave Colombo and venture over onto the southeastern coast. Away from the tensions of the west coast it was far less hectic and I could actually relax. It also provided an opportunity to visit Katragamma, where Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist holy shrines stood together. This is somehow the true spirit of Sri Lanka: a complex and tolerant synthesis of differences. Perhaps one day this spirit can be restored.

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## Sri Lanka Background Briefing

Formerly the British colony of Ceylon, Sri Lanka became independent in 1948. The tension between Tamils and Sinhalese has existed for much of the island's history.

The Sinhalese are the dominant ethnic group in Sri Lanka comprising 74% of the population. Most Sinhalese are Buddhists and they occupy the majority of government and other influential positions. Sri Lankan Tamils are descended from the Dravidians of South India and account for 20% of the population, located in the north and east of the island. They are usually Hindu.

The civil war in Sri Lanka began in 1972 and continues to this day. The current conflict is between government troops and groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (known as the Tamil Tigers) who are fighting for an independent Tamil state in the northern part of the country around Jaffna.

About 40,000 Tamils fled Sri Lanka in 1983 during a particularly vicious stage of the war. Many more have fled since then and today there is a large Tamil population living in exile.

Other nations have been involved in brokering peace agreements in Sri Lanka over the last 18 years but so far all attempts have been unsuccessful. The fighting has resulted in the deaths of 60,000 people, including the former Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa who was assassinated in 1993.

By Helen Basili