

15

The 'Line' Between Religion and Politics

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In the early 1980s, when President Jayewardene was arguing that the ideal monastic life entailed abandoning politics, his prime minister, Ranasinghe Premadasa, began to argue just the opposite. As early as 1983, Premadasa stated that the “success of the present or the future efforts of our government lies in the hands of the Maha Sangha,” and he invited monks to play an active role in the affairs of the government:

“It is the Maha Sangha who in the past had the key to the success of the nation and possesses it now and will also possess it in the future. It is the Maha Sangha who can exercise the most effective influence over the people to bring about peace, unity and discipline ... No government can give this position of power and influence to the Maha Sangha nor can any government deprive the Maha Sangha of that position.”¹

In 1985 Premadasa pronounced that, “traditionally the Maha Sangha has given its guidance to the government and its people at all times. It is in need of that guidance as never before to lead the country through the present critical period.”² Again, two years later, the prime minister asserted that the “responsibility of directing the rulers along the right path lies with the monks”;³ he said he spent much of his time with monks because they were his ‘best friends’ (*hodama milhrayō*).⁴ Sometimes Premadasa sought to demonstrate the closeness of his friendship with the monkhood so far as to implicitly challenge the authority of President Jayewardene. In 1985, for example, despite reported warnings from his colleague-ministers, Premadasa attended the funeral of the Buddhist monk Labugama Siridhamma, who has once denounced Jayewardene as a ‘traitor.’⁵

¹ ‘Success of Govt’s Effort in Hands of MahaSangha’, *Daily News*, 29th January 1983.

² ‘PM Calls for Maha Sangha’s Guidance’, *Daily News*, 16th July 1985.

³ ‘Pālakayan Yahamaga Yāvīme Vagakīma Sangharatnayatayi’ (‘The monks are responsible for guiding the rulers’), *Silumina*, 8th March 1987.

⁴ ‘Budu Dahama Jivita Hādagasvana Jīvana Kramayak’ (‘Buddhism is a way of life that moulds human lives’), 8th January 1987.

⁵ Author’s interview with monks at the Getambe temple, 7th August 1996.

Premadasa's position became even more visible during his presidency. In 1989 he remarked that, "kings and ministers sought the Buddha's advice. We have to seek the advice of the Maha Sangha to the solution of the [ethnic] crisis that we are facing today."⁶ Premadasa took some prominent monks to the 'battlefield' in the north to inspect enemy bunkers and 'bless' Sinhala Buddhist soldiers fighting the war.⁷

This chapter examines how a particular kind of relations between Buddhism and the state (and by extension Buddhism and the nation) during Premadasa's prime ministry and presidency came to be authorised. Central to my inquiry is the examination of the dynamics of several significant 'Buddhist' projects – such as the construction of a so-called golden canopy for the Temple of the Tooth – that Premadasa undertook and completed. The significance of such practices is far from self-evident. For me, they make sense only when we look at how some authoritative Sinhala narratives made centrally visible a specific relation between Premadasa's 'Buddhist' identity and the 'Buddhist' nation of Sri Lanka. This relation, however, was subsequently contested by competing discourses that generated a very different kind of a relation between Buddhism and the nation, focusing on Premadasa himself.

My task here is not to provide an account of 'why' a decidedly complex political figure like Premadasa, unlike any other politician in the modern history of Sri Lanka (or South Asia for that matter) undertook so many costly state-sponsored 'religious' projects. The 'why' of his undertaking such unprecedented religious projects is precisely what governs the theoretical structure of Josine van der Horst's important book on Premadasa's religious rhetoric and performances.⁸ Referring to the bloody political climate that characterised Premadasa's presidency (about this, more later), van der Horst argues that

⁶ *Daily News*, 8th July 1989.

⁷ 'Rata Rakina Sebalunta Āsiri: Malwatu Maha Nāhimiyō Uturē Yudha Bimata Vaditi' ('Blessings to the soldiers protecting the country: The Malwatu chief monk visits the battlefield in the north'), *Dinamina*, January 1992.

⁸ J. Van der Horst (1995) *Who Is He, What Is He Doing: Religious Rhetoric and Performances in Sri Lanka during R. Premadasa's Presidency, 1989-1993* (Amsterdam: V.U. University Press): p.131.

Premadasa's "almost frantic engagement in religious observances and performances of meritorious deeds" was a result of his "anxiety concerning the balance of his merit ... over the excessive violence Premadasa [had] been in charge of."⁹ This was van der Horst's own learned view: "I do not doubt that Premadasa was anxious over his merit status."¹⁰

It is clear that such a claim presupposes a direct relation between the modern present and the ancient past – that is, between Premadasa's religious practices and those of the famous third century B.C.E. Buddhist emperor Asoka, who supposedly turned to Buddhism after waging a bloody battle over Kalinga, that cost one hundred thousand lives. Van der Horst states that Asoka's "plans of action are discernible in Premadasa's performances."¹¹

For van der Horst, then, Premadasa's observable 'religious' practices are self-evident; that is, they are available for identification and explanation in relation to a presumed given model (the emperor Asoka). As Nietzsche argues,

"The question 'why?' is always a question after the *causa finalis*, after the 'what for?' ... Here Hume was right; habit ... makes us expect that a certain often-observed occurrence will follow another: Nothing more! That which gives extraordinary firmness to our belief in causality is not the great habit of seeing one occurrence following another but our inability to interpret events otherwise than as events caused by intentions. It [the question 'why?'] is a belief ... in will, in intention ... it is a belief that every event is a deed, that every deed presupposes a doer, it is belief in the 'subject'."¹²

I argue that Premadasa's practices are significant within particular debates in which they are battled out and defined as a Buddhism and difference. Here I examine some of those debates that authorised and contested a particular line between religion and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid:p.130.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² F. Nietzsche (1968) *The Will to Power* (Trans. W. Kaufmman & R.J. Hollingdale) (New York: Vintage): p.295.

the nation-state during the Premadasa prime ministry to show how that line can be invested and divested of distinct meanings in differing conjunctures.

Authorising a Ruler, Religion, and Nation

The new constitution that made Jayewardene executive president in 1978 rendered the office of prime minister “lower in status than that of the prime minister of the fifth French Republic.” Some scholars argue that under the new constitution, the prime minister (who in theory was also the “chief of government majority”) “did not have the authority to direct, supervise or command his colleagues.”¹³ Premadasa himself exaggerated at one point that, as prime minister, he “did not have the powers even equal to [those] of a peon.”¹⁴ However no sooner did he become prime minister than a number of authoritative discourses began to construct a particular relation between Premadasa, his political office, Buddhism, and the nation.

In the late 1970s, the state newspapers recognised that the office of prime minister had “lost some of its power” after Jayewardene’s introduction of the executive presidency; however, they went on to claim that the office had gained “enhanced importance” because the man who then held it, Premadasa.¹⁵ For several weeks, explaining this supposed enhanced importance of the office, the newspapers carried a flood of articles that portrayed Premadasa as a “man of the people” who had “a deep understanding of the problems of the underdog which few Sri

¹³ A.J. Wilson (1980) *The Gaullist System in Asia: The Constitution of Sri Lanka* (London: Macmillan): p.62 cited in K.M. de Silva & W.H. Wriggins (1988) *J.R. Jayewardene of Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press): p.385.

¹⁴ Quoted in ‘Groups with vested Interests trying to Oust President’, *The Island*, 21st September 1991.

¹⁵ *Ceylon Daily News*, 11th February 1978.

Lanka politicians can match”;¹⁶ he was, they said, an “asset to the nation.”¹⁷

One writer observed that, “the mantle of this high office sits lightly on Premadasa, who is in a sense the real man of the people to achieve the distinction of becoming the country’s first prime minister. Very much unlike prime ministers before him, from D.S. Senanayake to J.R. Jayewardene, Premadasa was not born into wealth and is proud of his humble origin.”¹⁸

Newspapers carried reports of many influential Buddhist monastic voices speaking his praises. Madihe Paññasiha celebrated Premadasa as a “great leader who has always wished for the prosperity of the motherland and the Buddha Sasana [and who] strives to follow the [Buddha’s] middle path.” Paññasiha said Premadasa followed “in the footsteps of Anagarika Dharmapala, a great religious leader whose worthy example Premadasa is emulating.

A non-smoker and teetotaler, [Premadasa] observes the five precepts very devoutly.”¹⁹ Welagammedde Wimalajoti exalted the new prime minister as a “good Buddhist” and a “good Sinhalese patriot.” “It is very rare”, the monk said, “that a person who is religious, nationalistic, and patriotic is born to the world. It is a great blessing to the nation that such a person has been born. Prime Minister R. Premadasa is a person who possesses such rare qualities.”²⁰ A day after Premadasa was sworn in as prime minister, the newspapers highlighted his Buddhist identity in front-page headlines: “The Prime Minister Attends Pooja [offering] at Temple as First Official Act.”²¹

My point is that, even though the new Jayewardene constitution symbolically demoted the office of prime minister, diverse

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ ‘A Friend to All- an Asset to the Nation’, *Ceylon Daily News*, 11th February 1978.

¹⁸ ‘The Prime Minister’, *Ceylon Daily News*, 7th February 1978.

¹⁹ ‘His Happiest Moments Are Spent in the Service of the People’, *Ceylon Daily News*, 24th February 1978.

²⁰ ‘A Blessing to the Nation’, *Ceylon Daily News*, 7th February 1978.

²¹ *Ceylon Daily News*, 7th February 1978.

monastic and lay discourses conjoined to enhance the post by giving a particular 'Buddhist' identity to Premadasa, making him and it key to the future of the Buddhist nation. These depictions of Premadasa gained prominence a few years after he came to the premiership.

In 1982, at a Bōdhi Pūja ceremony at Kelaniya temple to invoke blessings on the prime minister, Walpola Rahula asserted that Premadasa was "devoted to Buddhism and the [Sinhalese] race" (*jātihitaishī āgamika bhaktiyen*). Rahula went on to claim that "if there are two or three people like Premadasa, everything in the country could be achieved, and that because of Premadasa, now ordinary Sri Lankans could have hopes unthinkable before."²²

What interests me here is tracing the rise and fall of this relation between the prime minister, nation, and Buddhism (rather than the rise and fall of Premadasa himself). Let me first discuss some dimensions of the very publicised relation between Premadasa and one of the most popular Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka – the Temple of the Tooth. Of interest to my inquiry is a particular a set of practices that enabled that relation to come into public view: the construction of the golden canopy (*raṇa viyana*) over the Temple of the Tooth.²³

What is in a Name? A Golden Canopy for the Tooth Temple

The Temple of the Tooth (*daladā māligāwa*), as its name suggests, is believed by many Sinhala Buddhists to house the Buddha's tooth relic.²⁴ I will not retell the entire long story of how Sri Lanka came

²² 'Avankakama Ātma Ōnāma Usas Tatvayak Lābiya Haki Bava Agamātigen Oppuvenavā' ('The prime minister exemplifies that honestly can achieve any high status'), *Divamina*, 4th April 1982.

²³ Mark Jeurgensmeyer states wrongly that the canopy was constructed by J.R. Jayewardene; see M. Jeurgensmeyer, 'What the Bhikku said: Reflections on the Rise of Militant Religious Nationalism' (1990) *Religion* 1: p.68.

²⁴ For an account of the significance of the tradition of relic veneration in Buddhism, see K. Trainor (1998) *Relics, Rituals, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravāda Tradition*, Vol.10 (Cambridge: CUP).

to inherit one of the Buddha's teeth, except to note that, by about the twelfth century, the tooth relic, as the conventional narrative of it goes, "became the palladium of the Sinhalese kings."²⁵ Over the centuries, the relic, it is said, was shifted from place to place as kings changed the capitals of Sri Lanka.

In the sixteenth century, the tooth relic was moved to Kandy, where it was housed in the Temple of the Tooth that King Wimaladarmasuriya (1593-1603) constructed. Today the Temple of the Tooth is controlled by the two chief monks of the Malwatta and Asgiriya temples and by a lay Buddhist custodian (*diyavada nilame*). It is frequented daily by thousands of visitors, both local and foreign.

The history between the 'public' relation between Premadasa and the Temple of the Tooth, so far as I can gather, begins in the mid-1980s. In 1986, according to a newspaper report, the prime minister made an official visit to the temple to "pay homage to the Sacred Tooth Relic."²⁶ On that day, responding to a complaint by the chief monks of the temple about water leaking from the temple's roof, Premadasa pledged to cover the roof with "a bronze sheet."²⁷ Six months later, Premadasa announced his plans to build "a golden canopy" over the inner shrine room of the temple.

Initially, a number of people, including the then director of the Sri Lankan Archaeology Department, objected to the plan. They argued that a canopy over the roof would not only put the safety of the building at risk but also damage the very 'antiquity' of it since no additions to the building had been done since the last king of Kandy, King Kirti Sri Rajasimha.

The protest did not deter the prime minister from continuing the project: as a monk pointed out to me, "during that time Premadasa was extremely popular in Sri Lanka – even more so

²⁵ K. Malalgoda (1976) *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900: A Study of Religious Rival and Change* (London: University of California Press): p.14; also see H.L. Seneviratne (1978) *Rituals of the Kandyan State* (Cambridge: CUP): p.17.

²⁶ 'PM Promises Maligawa Repair, too, in Shelter Year', *Daily News*, 30th December 1986.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

than President Jayewardene himself. There was almost nothing that Premadasa could not do” (*karanda bāri deyak tibunnā*).²⁸ On December 31, 1987, (exactly a year before he would become president), the golden canopy, costing more than twenty million rupees, was ceremonially unveiled by Premadasa.

The occasion made possible a public space for the articulation and authorisation of a particular relation between Premadasa, Buddhism, and the nation that would later prove to be critical to his campaign for the office of president. The media portrayed the prime minister’s offering of the canopy to the temple as an “historic event” that “provided shelter to the Tooth Temple, the highest lasting object of reverence [*sadā vandanīya mudun malkada*] of all Buddhists in the world.”²⁹ The unveiling ceremony was nothing short of an extraordinary affair. The state newspaper carried front page reports of eyewitness accounts testifying that immediately after the canopy was unveiled by the prime minister, the “rays of the Buddha emanated from the Maligawa.” It was described as a miracle (*prāthihāraya*); such an event, the reports claimed, occurs only when ‘great people’ do ‘great’ acts of merit.”³⁰

Days after the construction of the golden canopy, chief monks from various Buddhist fraternities used statements that made an explicit connection between Premadasa, the Buddha, the Sinhala nation, and its past Buddhist rulers. The head of the Asgiriya chapter, Palipana Chandananda, spoke of Premadasa as a “supreme individual” (*śreṣṭha pudgalayek*) who always delivered his promises; others stated that by offering the canopy to the Maligawa, “like Ancient kings such as Bimbisara and Anata Pindika ... [Premadasa] donated shelter to the Buddha. Premadasa’s act is memorable, and all Buddhists should honour it.”³¹ In letters to newspapers, Madihe Paññasiha praised

²⁸ Interview with Warakawe Dhammaloka at the Nata Devale Temple (near the Tooth Temple), 8th-10th August 1996.

²⁹ ‘Golden Canopy for a Historic Day’, *Daily News*, 1st January 1998; ‘*Sādu Nāda Mādde Ranviyana Pidē*’ (‘The golden canopy offered amid the cries of *Sādu*’), *Dinamina*, 1st January 1988.

³⁰ ‘*Daladā Mādurin Budurās*’ (‘Buddha’s rays emanate from the Tooth Temple’), *Dinamina*, 1st January 1988.

³¹ ‘*Daladā Vamsa Katāvata Ran Pituvak Ekkalā*’ (‘[Premadasa] added a golden page to the history of the Daladā’), *Dinamina*, 1st January 1988.

Premadasa's leadership: he followed in the "footsteps of ancient kings"; "I have no doubt that it is the Buddha-influence which had motivated [Premadasa] to undertake this great task," wrote Paññasiha. Paññasiha went so far as to predict that the merit gained from this act would help Premadasa achieve "the highest things in life" such as the presidency of the country.³² Lay Buddhists, too, commented on Premadasa's construction of the canopy and his "close association with monks as the sign of a noble leadership." (*udāra nāyakatvayaka lakshanyak*)³³ The lay custodian of the Tooth Temple, Neraanjan Wijeratne, declared that, "Premadasa's name will be written in gold in the history of Sri Lanka."³⁴ As if acknowledging these representations, Premadasa, in a special message, linked the construction of the canopy to the "distant" past of the Sinhala Buddhist nation: he said he decided to build the canopy because "The Sacred Tooth Relic is held in Supreme veneration by the Buddhists all over the world. Our kings of old have valued and venerated the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha and protected it with their very lives."³⁵

Serving Temples, Saving the Nation

At the opening ceremony for the canopy, Premadasa made several important remarks about the 'Buddhist' identity of himself and the nation. Addressing a massive rally of monks and lay Buddhists, Premadasa spoke of his "good knowledge of Buddhism" and acknowledged his indebtedness to monks for helping him acquire it. He stated that he honoured and venerated the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha because of the "noble advice he received from monks."³⁶ He went on to discuss a highly

³² 'The Ceremonial Opening of Ran Viyana: More Messages', *The Island*, 29th December 1987.

³³ 'Daladā Vamsa Katāvata Tavat Alut Pituvak Ekkala' ('A new page to the history of the daladā worship'), *Dinamina*, 1st January 1988.

³⁴ 'Daladā Vamsa Katāvata Ran Pituvak Ekkalā' ('Golden page to the story of the tooth relic'), *Dinamina*, 1st January 1988.

³⁵ 'Golden Canopy- Fulfilment of a Pledge, Says PM', *Daily News*, 30th December 1987.

³⁶ 'Ran Viyana Pidīmata Hāki Vūyē Ahinsaka Janatāvage Ādāra Nisayi- Mahanuvara Mahapinkamedi Agamāti Tumā Pvasayi' ('I could offer the golden

contentious national issue that had taken place six months earlier: the arrival in the island of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF).

In July 1987, as part of the Indo-Lanka Accord, signed by President Jayewardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, forty thousand Indian troops assigned to the IPKF landed in the north of Sri Lanka to end the escalating separatist war.³⁷ The signing of the Accord took place amid island-wide curfew because scores of young Buddhist monks and lay Buddhists, led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), rioted in Colombo against the arrival of a foreign army. The Accord did not help the diminishing popularity of Jayewardene. As a Sri Lankan commentator put it, “Jayewardene, in his last five years, had been spendthrift with the unprecedentedly massive charisma that he attained at the election in 1977 and had become the lodestar of dissidence and disaffection.”³⁸ Immediately after the Accord was signed, many voices accused Jayewardene of “betraying the nation” to a foreign country; posters reading “Kill J.R.” appeared overnight in several parts of the country.³⁹ Prime Minister Premadasa openly objected to the Accord and refused to appear at its signing, an event watched live on TV by many Sri Lankans.⁴⁰ Monks, too, spoke out, among them Walpola Rahula, who later stated that Sri Lanka “lost its freedom after thirty-eight years because of the Indo-Lanka Accord.”⁴¹ It is widely believed that Premadasa secretly masterminded damaging images of the Accord and of Jayewardene so as to produce a picture of a nation in desperate need of a new political leadership (presumably under

*canopy because of the donations of the poor people- prime minister says at the great ,meritorious ceremony in Great Kandy’), **Duvayina**, 1st January 1988.*

³⁷ The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), headed by V. Prabhakaran, were then fighting for a separate state in northern Sri Lanka.

³⁸ ‘President’s [Premadasa’s] ‘Horoscope’: He Has Not Put a Foot Wrong So Far’, **Daily News**, 16th February 1989.

³⁹ ‘Observations in Colombo and Kandy 1987’, author’s interview with Dewalegama Medhananda, 15th-16th November 1996.

⁴⁰ Another member of the government who did not support the peace accord was Lalith Athulathmudali; many believed that he, too (like Premadasa), was a sure contender for the presidency of Sri Lanka.

⁴¹ ‘Indu Sri Lanka Givisuma Nisā Apata Vasara 38 Kata Pasu Nidahasa Ahimi Unā’, **Duvayina**, 2nd July 1990.

Premadasa).⁴² On the day the Accord was signed, one of Premadasa's allies, the monk Golaboda Ñanissara mobilised scores of youths to put up black flags throughout Colombo, symbolising the death of the country.⁴³ The black flags, made from polythene garbage bags, were said to have come from the Colombo Municipal Council, manned by Premadasa's friends.⁴⁴

If his opposition to the Accord did not become centrally visible in July 1987, Premadasa made it glaringly public at the canopy ceremony. He pointed out that he was not afraid to say that the peace accord and having the Indian army in Sri Lanka was a mistake: the Indian troops failed to end the "chaos" (*arbudhaya*) in the country. "It was some people's view," he added, "that only force can solve the problems of the country, if so, why can't the present problems of the country be solved with an army of 40,000 at the present. There are others who view that a political solution can be found. If so, why can't the problem be solved by the signing of the agreements [between Jayewardene and Rajiv Gandhi]."⁴⁵

The point of all this is that Premadasa's rendering visible his opposition to the peace accord – which was an implicit form of support for the Sinhala nationalist forces who were by then seeking to remove the Jayewardene government – became possible in the context in which that particular relation between Premadasa's 'Buddhist' identity, Buddhism, and the Sinhala nation came to be authorised. Take, for example, the following key statement made on the day of the canopy unveiling by the chief monk of the Tooth Temple, Sirimalwatte Ananda. Praising Premadasa as a "pious, principled Buddhist," he asserted that, "as long as our great shrines such as the sacred Tooth Relic ... exist on the soil of this Isle it will remain a Sinhala Buddhist country. The presence of non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist minorities will in no way make it a multinational or a multi-religious country."⁴⁶

⁴²Interviews with Buddhist monks at Jayewardenapura University, 15th-17th July 1995.

⁴³ Interview with Galaboda Ñanissara, 20th October 1996; '*Loku Vāda Karana Podi Hāmuduruwō*' ('The title monk who does big things'), *Iridā Lankādīpa*, 12th December 1993.

⁴⁴Interviews with monks in Colombo, July 1996 and October 1997.

⁴⁵'*PM Offers Golden Canopy*', *Island*, 1st January 1988.

⁴⁶'*Paying Homage with a Golden Canopy*', *The Sun*, 31st December 1987.

Such assertions, which strategically challenged the authority of Jayewardene, who argued for the importance of a multi-ethnic Sri Lankan society, suggested that Premadasa's support of the Tooth Temple was a form of support of Sri Lanka as a Sinhala Buddhist country 'betrayed' by Jayewardene to a 'foreign' country. This was the context in which Premadasa came to construct the golden canopy for the Tooth Temple.

Exactly a year after the canopy was built, Premadasa became president, promising the immediate withdrawal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka, an idea that appealed to many Sinhala Buddhists at that time. In December 1988, a few days prior to Premadasa's inauguration, the media celebrated the anniversary of the canopy with a specific kind of rhetoric that sought to localise and nationalise the canopy: one newspaper article carried the title "The Golden Canopy Materialised by [Local] Scientific Knowledge." The text insisted that each year Sri Lanka celebrates the "miracle" of the canopy because it was created by "local [Sinhala Buddhist] engineers" (*dēśīya injinēru*) without assistance from "foreign engineers."⁴⁷ Thus the context of the canopy enabled the central visibility of Premadasa's Buddhist identity and its relation to the safeguarding of the 'embattled' Sinhala Buddhist nation, an identity that became a crucial part of Premadasa's bid for the presidency.

The election of Premadasa as president became a contentious topic in Sri Lanka. Rumours circulated, as S.B. Dissanayaka informs us, that Premadasa won his presidential nomination by strategically 'terrorising' the lives of Jayewardene and some of his ministers. Premadasa, according to Dissanayaka, maintained secret links with the members of the JVP and eventually assisted them in creating a period of 'terror' threatening the Jayewardene government.⁴⁸ Some Sri Lankans claim that although Jayewardene's first choice for the succession was Lalith Athulathmudali, one of the most popular cabinet ministers in the country, the president nominated Premadasa out of fear for his

⁴⁷ 'Vidu Nuvanin Māvumu Ranviyana' ('The canopy materialized by the [local] scientific knowledge'), *Vidunāna*, 31st December 1988.

⁴⁸ S.B. Dissanayaka (1992) *Mā Atsan Kala Dōshābhiyōgaya (The Impeachment I signed)* (Colombo: Sirilaka): p.34.

life.⁴⁹ In fact, the whole election process was considered spurious because “Premadasa’s people” controlled the ballot boxes.⁵⁰ It is in this controversial context that Premadasa’s continuing relations with the Tooth Temple and its chief monks should be understood.

Just days after being elected executive president, Premadasa announced that he would take his oaths on the octagon (*pattirippuwa*) of the Tooth Temple. This was a novel political practice: no leader of the country had ever been sworn in on the octagon. It is said that King Kirti Sri Rajasimha built the *pattirippuwa* in 1783 and used it to address the nation.⁵¹ Jayewardene had been sworn in Colombo and later went to the Tooth Temple to address the nation. Premadasa changed that convention. He not only officially became president on the octagon but also invited the temple’s chief monks and others to witness the occasion.

As preparations got under way for the inauguration, scheduled for January 4, 1989, the media began to depict the history of Premadasa’s relation to the Tooth Temple in a particular way. For several days, the state newspapers carried elaborate pictures of the Tooth Temple showing the glittering golden canopy. One picture had Premadasa holding a tray of flowers, against a background of the temple with the canopy in full view.⁵² It introduced Premadasa as the “president of the common people” and invited every citizen of Sri Lanka to participate in his inauguration.⁵³

The media representations of the relation between Premadasa and the Tooth Temple can be explained in terms of the Sinhala

⁴⁹ Conversations with people in Colombo, Kandy, Dambulla and Sigiriya, 1994-1997. The relation between Jayewardene and Premadasa became so sour by the early 1990s that the former prohibited mention of the latter’s name in his home. Conversation with Mrs. Hettige, the librarian of the Jayewardene Cultural Centre, Colombo, 6th October 1997.

⁵⁰ Dissanayaka (1992): p.34.

⁵¹ ‘*Hela Raja Sirita Hā Pattirippuwa*’ (‘*The Sinhala royal tradition and the octagon*’), *Island*, 1st January 1989.

⁵² The image of Premadasa holding a tray of flowers became so popular that he came to be nicknamed “prince of flowers” (*puṣpakumāra*).

⁵³ *Dinanmina*, 1st January 1989; also see *Dinanmina*, 2nd January 1989, where another full page picture of Premadasa’s whole family appeared against the background of Tooth Temple.

concept of *älluwa*, a term that one of my main informant-monks used to characterise relations between the president and monks. The term means, among many other things, “seized” or “caught,”⁵⁴ but, as my informant used it – “*Premadasa älluwanē daladā māligawat*,” meaning “Premadasa seized the Tooth Temple, too” – points to the strategic ways in which a particular narrative came to authorise, enable, and indeed oblige monks to “show,” or “exhibit,” (*penmanna*) a particularly privileged relation between the president and the temple, Buddhism and the (Premadasa) state.⁵⁵ When Premadasa was sworn in, for instance, his wife and two children appeared beside him on the *pattirippuva*. This well-known incident provoked vehement public criticism since no women had ever appeared on the octagon, and it was believed that the violation of that tradition would bring about harmful effects (*vas*). (Some Sri Lankans attribute Premadasa’s premature death at the hands of an assassin to the ill effects of his wife’s presence on the *pattirippuva*.)⁵⁶ The two chief monks of the Tooth Temple disregarded that tradition and ‘permitted’ Premadasa’s entire family – his wife, daughter, son and son-in-law – on the *pattirippuva* because, as another informant noted, the relations between Premadasa and the chief monks had become such that “monks could not say no” (*nähä kiyanda bähä*) to him.⁵⁷

What I want to emphasise, reminded of the final Foucauldian formulation of discourse/power, is that these kinds of relations between Buddhism, monks, and the nation cannot be conceptualised in terms of domination or coercion. Rather, they show how particular discourses enable and authorise particular forms of practices and persons to come into view as representing Buddhism and nation. These kinds of ‘Buddhist’ relations between Premadasa and monks became more prominent during the presidential inauguration ceremony. Delivering a speech to a

⁵⁴ *Äluwa* is the past tense of *allanavā*, which means “catch”, “touch”, “seize”, “arrest”.

⁵⁵ Interview with Medhananda, 15th-16th November 1996.

⁵⁶ Interview with Dhammaloka and conversations with several people in Kandy in August 1996. After Premadasa’s death, some monks publicly charged that he “desecrated the hallowed Pattirippuva”; see ‘*Grandeur at Gam Udawas to Hide Own Atrocities*’, *Daily News*, 23rd August 1996.

⁵⁷ Interview with Dhammaloka, 8th August 1996.

“sea of people,” as newspapers reported it,⁵⁸ Sirimalwatte Ananda said that Premadasa was “a real Buddhist” (*niyama buddhayek*), a “heroic person” (*vīra puruśayek*), and a “noble individual” (*śrēstayeku*), who achieved a status of “nobility” as a “great ruler”⁵⁹:

“You are a good Buddhist. We know that prior to this occasion you have come to the Tooth Temple and enjoyed worshipping the Three Jewels, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Not every politician can do that. We also know how you venerated the Three Jewels, prostrating on the floor [*pasaga phituvā*]. You are used to it. You have also donated a golden canopy for the beauty and the continuity of the Tooth Temple. Numerous are other Buddhist services you have done. A noble person [like you] will never have a bad rebirth.”⁶⁰

In a separate message, Sirimalwatte Ananda wished Premadasa “the strength to protect the Buddha Sasana and the country” and stated that, “our history records that it is natural that noble [*udāra*] people appear in times of chaos in the country”; he expressed confidence that the new president would fulfil that role.⁶¹ Palipana Chandananda supported this view and said that, “monks have accepted that ... [Premadasa is] a real Buddhist” and reminded the new president that the “time has come to safeguard the Buddha Sasana and the Buddhist sacred places.”⁶²

These representations of Premadasa as a ‘real Buddhist’, born to rescue the nation from a time of ‘chaos’, are located in the context in which the golden canopy came into existence. It must be evident by now that, in making this argument, I am not

⁵⁸ It is said that the government bussed thousands of people to Kandy for the ceremony. Each was given a few hundred rupees and a packet of rice. This practice continued annually.

⁵⁹ ‘Senkadagala Yali Iyithāsika Vū Dā’ (‘The day Senkadagala [Kandy] became historic again’), *Dinamina*, 3rd January 1993; ‘Nava Janādhipati Usas Dēapālakayek’ (‘The new president is a great ruler’), *Davasa*, 2nd January 1989.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ ‘Budusasanat Ratat Rākumata Śaktiya Lābēvā’ (‘May [Premadasa] have the strength to protect the Buddha Sasana and the country’), *Dinamina*, 4th January 1989.

⁶² ‘Obē Jayagrahanaya Nivāradi Tīnduvak’ (‘Your victory is a right decision [of the people]’), *Dinamina*, 4th January 1989.

suggesting in any way that the canopy should be taken as a monolithic, single ‘event’ in itself; rather, constructed during what was called a ‘time of chaos’ in Sri Lankan history, this ‘Golden Canopy’ is a different name for a particular conjuncture of narratives that made centrally visible a specific relation between Premadasa, Buddhism, and the nation. It was in the space of communicating this relation that more tangible gestures of monastic support for the president became possible.

For example, for three years the chief monks of the Tooth Temple permitted, and presided over, the annual celebrations of Premadasa’s inauguration as president at the Tooth Temple, a practice that no previous government in Sri Lanka had cultivated.⁶³ Also each year, the chief monks, along with other monks, accompanied the president to his *gam udāva* festivals in various parts of Sri Lanka. They appeared on stages and spoke to masses of people about the benefits of the president’s project to the country. The *gam udāva*, a project that Premadasa began as prime minister, proposed to ‘awaken villages’ by building houses for the needy. It became a controversial project: each year’s ‘awakening’ of a village included extravagant festivities that cost millions of rupees.⁶⁴ Some Sri Lankans considered such celebrations an abuse of public money, and in August 1991 the issue formed an important aspect of the opposition’s agenda to impeach Premadasa for ‘violating’ the constitution.⁶⁵ The monks continued to praise the project as a “cultural renaissance” (*sanskritika navōdayak*) and argued that it showed Premadasa’s diligence in the footsteps of Gandhi to “bring people happiness.”⁶⁶

The kind of authorised relation between Premadasa and monks, Buddhism and the nation, did not remain unchanged, and I now wish to examine the gradual emergence of a starkly different identity of the president in relation to Buddhism and the nation. In complex ways, competing and opposing narratives began to oust identity from its authorised domains, to turn the table on

⁶³ See *Dinamina*, 4th January 1990.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 25th June 1989-1993.

⁶⁵ See Dissanayaka (1992): p.5; for an English version of the charges presented to Parliament, also see van der Horst (1995): p.260.

⁶⁶ See, for example, ‘*Gam Udāvata Sangaruvanē Āsiri*’ (‘*Sangha’s blessings to Gam Udāva*’), *Dinamina*, 23rd June 1989.

identity, so to speak, and represent identity as difference, as the dangerous ‘other’ to be subdued and subverted.

Identity as Difference: From Real Buddhist to Killer

I alluded earlier to Premadasa’s alliances with the popular monk Galaboda Ñānissara, of the Gangaramaya temple. In the late 1970s, these alliances had enabled Ñānissara to solicit financial support from the business community of Colombo and inaugurate the annual Buddhist procession Navam Perahāra as well as several other ‘social service’ projects at the temple. Even during the Jayewardene presidency – Jayewardene himself was one of the chief patrons of Ñānissara’s temple – Ñānissara made no bones about his exclusive support for Prime Minister Premadasa. After Premadasa came to power, Ñānissara made his support for the new president even more public. In the midst of that ‘time of chaos’ in July 1989, which coincided with President Premadasa’s sixty-fifth birthday, Ñānissara wrote to the newspapers extolling Premadasa as a “national treasure [*jātika vastuwak*] of the Sinhala’s and Buddhists.” He disparaged other politicians (supposedly the former President Jayewardene and some of his ministers) and praised Premadasa as a “Sinhala Buddhist” leader who did not wear “[western] trousers at home and the [Sri Lanka] national dress in public.”⁶⁷

In the wake of the impeachment controversy in the early 1990s, Ñānissara extended the president his unstinting support. Once he addressed a meeting of five hundred Buddhist monks gathered at the public library in Colombo and attacked the impeachment attempt as the work of “a group of people who are trying to perpetuate a system that enables an elite class to enjoy wealth and comforts which the ordinary man is deprived of.” He went on to call for the immediate withdrawal of the impeachment proposal and argued that the whole “country should be eternally grateful to

⁶⁷ ‘Janapati R. Premadasa Mē Yugayata AvaŚya Vunē Āyi?’ (‘Why was President Premadasa needed for this era?’), *Divayina*, 23rd June 1989.

Premadasa” just for the fact that he got rid of IPKF, “an invasion of our country.”⁶⁸

The relation between the president and the monk became the target of much controversy. Many of my informants in Colombo characterised Ñanissara as an aggressive monk who spoke loudly and had a quick temper, not fearing even the demon.⁶⁹ Ñanissara is said to have engaged in physical confrontations with people and have struck even police officers who failed to follow his instructions during the Navam (Perahāra) procession.⁷⁰ Some held that Ñanissara committed such acts with impunity because of Premadasa’s influence.⁷¹ It is widely rumoured that during the JVP insurrection Premadasa authorised Ñanissara to carry a handgun for self-defence. Some even gossiped that Premadasa and Ñanissara were in the business of printing money; one monk remarked that this was a “famous secret” (*prasiddha rahasak*). Such gossip became widespread because for three consecutive years Ñanissara held elaborate almsgiving ceremonies at his temple, offering, in addition to robes and other conventional gifts, “brand new thousand rupee bills” (*alutma dāhe kola*) to eleven thousand monks.⁷² My aim here, it should be obvious by now, is not to determine the authenticity of these opposing claims or rumours, but rather to point to the context in which they began to emerge, displaying a different kind of relation between the president, Buddhism, and the nation.

Something of the significance of the emergence of such competing claims can be located by examining briefly the relation between Premadasa and one of the most prominent Buddhist monks, Kotikawatta Saddhatissa. Saddhatissa, unlike chief monks of the Tooth Temple, came from a temple of relative obscurity, in Kolonnawa, near Kaleniya. By the early 1980s, however, Saddhatissa had become one of the most popular Buddhist monks

⁶⁸ ‘Groups with Vested Interest Trying to Oust the President’, *The Island*, 21st September 1991.

⁶⁹ ‘Podihāmururuwane Mokadda Oya Jaramare?’ (‘What is this rumble?’), article in unidentified newspaper, n.d.

⁷⁰ ‘Who Was Behind the Gangarama Clash?’, unidentified newspaper, n.d.

⁷¹ Conversation with five people in Hunupitiya and several monks in Colombo, 1st-4th November 1997.

⁷² See *Jinaratana Kārmika Vidyālaya*; interviews with monks who attended the *dāna* at the Gangarama temple, 4th October 1997.

in Sri Lanka. He earned his island wide reputation as an eloquent, mesmerising' (*vāsi karana*) preacher, and his Buddhist sermons (*bana*) were regularly broadcast over radio and on television. Saddhatissa, as one monk noted to me, was a popular UNP supporter, but there was a mass of people (*janagangāyak*) who disregarded the monk's political orientations and became devoted followers of his sermons. As the monk put it, "people had differentiated between his politics and his sermons" (*eyāge bana saha dēshapālanaya*). It is perhaps because of Saddhatissa's appeal to many Sinhalese Buddhists across political boundaries, my informant conjectured, that Premadasa allied himself with the monk.⁷³

The history of the relationship between Saddhatissa and Premadasa, as far as I can determine, goes back to the early 1980s. In 1982, when Premadasa suffered from a minor illness, for ten days Saddhatissa conducted a massive bōdhi puja ceremony at his temple and rallied monks island-wide to do so in order to 'invoke blessings' on the prime minister. At such events Saddhatissa, like other monks of his time, began to represent Premadasa as a "superior person" (*śrestha puḍgalayā*) who "won people's hearts."⁷⁴ Saddhatissa went so far as to hyperbolise that "the whole country has accepted Premadasa as a man of merit who has reaped a noble harvest through his own effort."⁷⁵

In the early 1980s, Premadasa invited Saddhatissa to deliver the annual Vesak sermon at his official residence, Temple Trees.⁷⁶ Telecast nationwide, the sermon provided the occasion for the public depiction of Premadasa and his family as devout Buddhists listening to the words of the Buddha. This practice, which no other politician had cultivated at the official residence in modern history, continued every year for more than a decade.⁷⁷ In 1989, after he became the president, Premadasa made the practice

⁷³ Interviews with Medhananda, 16th November 1996.

⁷⁴ '*Janatāva Set Pātuvē Agamāti Janahada Dinū Nisayi*' ('People invoked blessings [on Premadasa] because he won people's heart'), *Lankāpīpa*, 5th January 1982.

⁷⁵ '*Agamāti Utsahayen Śrestha Pala Belgat Putāglayek*' ('The prime minister is a person who has reaped noble results'), *Davasa*, 30th June 1980.

⁷⁶ Vesak, a public holiday, falls in the month of May; it celebrates three major events in the life of the Buddha: birth, enlightenment, and passing away.

⁷⁷ *Dinamina*, 22nd May 1989.

more frequent, inviting Saddhatissa to preach a sermon every Sunday at President's House. These sermons, some of my informants noted, were nothing more than forms of elaborate praise (*gunavamanāva*) of the president's virtues. By the late 1980s, Saddhatissa's relations with the Premadasa government had become so well known that he came to be called "the monk who preaches at the royal palace" (*rajagedara bana kiyana hānuduruwō*).⁷⁸

Other practices emerged that brought into public view this close 'Buddhist' relation between the president and the monk. In 1984, with the help of Muslim friends and businessmen, Premadasa constructed a massive preaching hall (Saddhatissa Dharma Mandiraya) at Saddhatissa's temple to mark the monk's forty-fourth birthday.⁷⁹ The preaching hall proved quite useful to a specific kind of practice that the newspapers called *pinkama* (religious ceremony), held annually at the temple. The pinkama, organised every year by the Premadasa's Sucharita movement, was a massive meeting of monks transported to Saddhatissa's temple from different parts of the country. A newspaper report described the nature of the pinkama one year: "Over 1,500 Bhikkhus from several parts of the country along with thousands of devotees participated in the Pinkama ... [They] offered pirikara [gifts] to the monks... [The monks] walked in a colourful procession from the Kolonnawa junction to the [temple] and the Prime Minister Premadasa and Mrs Hema Premadasa ... also took part in the procession."⁸⁰ Notable features of this pinkama were the speeches that Premadasa and some of his close colleague-ministers delivered at the temple. Nobody quite knew the purpose of the annual meeting, but "every year [for seven years] they talked about the problem of 'terror' and 'terrorism' in the country."⁸¹

⁷⁸ Author's interview with monks at the Mahabodhi Society, 6th-8th October 1997; Author's conversations with monks and lay people in Kolonnawa, 9th-10th October 1997.

⁷⁹ 'Taruna Bhiksūn Vahansēlā Bana Kīmata Peramuna Gatayutuyi' ('The young monks must learn how to preach baba'), *Davasa*, 23rd July 1984.

⁸⁰ 'Terrorists Fight Not to Win Ethnic Rights', *Island*, May 1987.

⁸¹ Author's interview with Kolonnawe Dhammika, 10th October 1997.

Dhammika used the words *terrorism* and *terror* interchangeably to characterise the political context in 1984; 'terror' as a conceptual category, however, was constructed and deployed within a particular political context in 1989.

By then (the late 1980s), the country had already witnessed the emergence of the LTTE as a formidable guerrilla force beginning to battle for a separate state in the northeast. During this time, at Saddhatissa's temple Premadasa produced a particular narrative about this condition in the country. As it was reported in *The Island*, addressing a meeting of one thousand monks, Premadasa stated:

“The country was facing a grave threat due to the inhuman and vicious acts of a small group of people. They have resorted to the most beastly methods of killing innocent civilians and even infants and children. This showed how sick minds could disrupt the majority peace loving people ... it was indeed a great injustice done to Sri Lanka ... These terrorists with assistance from outside were bent on destroying civilisation and civilised ways of living.”⁸²

The picture painted by these words is clear: Sri Lanka, “facing a grave threat,” is on the brink of losing its “civilisation” (one may compare these words to the speech Premadasa gave at the canopy opening in 1987). My point here is that the possibility of voicing these warnings about the danger of terrorism to the “civilisation” of Sri Lanka in front of thousands of monks, “the sentinels of the nation,” was generated by the relations between Premadasa and monks like Saddhatissa. The cant about “terrorism” run amok enabled the implicit representation of himself as next president, who, if elected, could eliminate the threat.

Monks like Saddhatissa supported Premadasa because, as Saddhatissa's own student-monk put it, they “liked to be in the spotlight” (*āsaya rūpa rāmuwata*), to “appear visible” (*penī indīmata*). Saddhatissa's popularity –boosted by the president's “alliance” (*sambandatāvaya*) with the temple – attracted many Buddhist “donors” to the temple. Through the monk's influence and intervention, the donors themselves “got things done” (*vāda karagattā*) by the government.⁸³ It was because of Saddhatissa's

⁸² ‘*Terrorists Fight Not to Win Ethnic Rights*’, *Island*, May 1987.

⁸³ Interview with Dhammika, 10th October 1997. Dhammika now berates those who, after benefitting from his teacher, abandoned the temple following his death.

continuing quest for popularity, my informant continued, that the monk lost his life at the hands of an assassin. What is important about Saddhatissa's assassination is that it marked the emergence of a space that contested the formerly authorised relation between Premadasa, Buddhism, and the nation, authorised in part by monks like Saddhatissa. The context of Saddhatissa's assassination shows how competing and opposing narratives sought, on the one hand, to produce Premadasa's 'Buddhist' identity as difference and, on the other, to subvert it.

As early as June 1989, Premadasa was lobbying to send the IPKF back to India, a promise he made as part of his campaign for president.⁸⁴ Here it is crucial to bear in mind some aspects of the political climate of the country. The JVP, which had begun its own 'war' to overthrow the Premadasa government, also demanded the removal of the IPKF. Since January 1989, the JVP had killed, according to the government's estimate, more than seventeen hundred "police officers, politicians, and ordinary citizens" who had failed to comply with its (the JVP's) own law. For several months, this unwritten JVP law brought the country to a virtual standstill, demanding the closure of shops, business establishments, schools, and universities, and the stoppage of work and transport.⁸⁵ In June 1989, the government imposed island-wide curfew, claiming to quell such "violent activities" (*pracanda vāda*).⁸⁶

It is in the wake of what he himself called "chaos" (*arbudaya*) that Premadasa, as president, spoke of sending back the Indian army as a "common" challenge shared by his government and the JVP opponents.⁸⁷ This he claimed was the duty of "patriotic"

⁸⁴ 'Text of Premadasa-Gandhi Letters Tabled in House: No Mandatory Role for Indian Army in Lanka', *Daily News*, 8th July 1989.

⁸⁵ 'Hadisi Nītiya Yalit Pānevve Akamāttē Uvat Karanna Siduvelā, Ranjan' ('The curfew was imposed again because of necessity'), *Dinamina*, 21st June 1989; also see C.A. Chandraprema (1991) *Sri Lanka: The Years of Terror" The JVP Insurrection, 1987-1989* (Colombo: Lake House): pp.265-286.

⁸⁶ Ibid.; 'Pracanda Kriyā Vāda Varjana Ādiyen Ārtikayatat Jana Jivītatat Bādā' ('The violent activities and strikes are barriers to the economy and the lives of the people'), *Dinamina*, 21st June 1989.

⁸⁷ 'Vāda Bēda Tikakata Amataka Kara Sāma Hāmudāva Yavana Abhiyōgayata Ekānmen Muhuna Demu' ('Let us forget debates and confrontations and face the challenge of sending back the IPKF as one'), *Dinamina*, 17th June 1989.

(*deshaprēmi*) Sri Lankans, which, of course, was the favoured term that the JVP used to define its own identity. A few weeks later, Premadasa asserted a direct correlation between this “patriotic duty” – sending back the Indian army – and Buddhism. In a public address about India’s refusal to pull out its army, Premadasa warned Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi: “Keeping armed forces in a country without its consent [is] a violation of Panchasila [five precepts of Buddhism].”⁸⁸ It is at the juncture of constructing such a strategic link between Buddhism, patriotism, and the nation that Premadasa invited Saddhatissa to support the government’s cause by making a statement on television.

Issuing statements favourable to the government was seen as a dangerous practice at the time because the JVP considered any support for the government a ‘crime’ punishable by death. Despite these visible dangers, on July 29, 1989, the anniversary of signing the Indo-Lanka Accord – and this seems far from a coincidence – Saddhatissa appeared on television and commended the president’s labour to send back the Indian army and invited all Sri Lankans to join in the cause. A day after his statement, Saddhatissa received a hail of anonymous calls threatening his life. The calls continued until August 3, 1989. That night, according to some reports, two ‘unknown’ men arrived at the temple. They informed the elderly temple attendant that they had come to invite Saddhatissa to an almsgiving ceremony. As they entered Saddhatissa’s reading room, one of the men greeted the monk by offering a tray of betel and worshipping him. Then the other man pulled out the gun and fired two shots, killing the monk on the spot.⁸⁹

The case of Saddhatissa’s assassination is still unsolved. It might be called a mystery. No one – neither the resident monks at the temple nor the Buddhist neighbours – is said to have seen the perpetrators of the killing. There are people who might have seen

⁸⁸ ‘Keeping Armed Forces in a Country without Its Consent: Violation of Panchasila, President’, *Sunday Observer*, 23rd July 1989.

⁸⁹ Interview with Dhammika, 10th October 1997; ‘*Rūpavāhinī Prakaśāyen Pasuva Nādunana Aya Durakatanayen Nāhimīta Bāna Vādunā*’ (‘After statement on TV unknown people telephoned and scolded monk’), *Rivirāsa*, 6th August 1989.

the killers, suspected to be the members of the JVP, and who now recall sketchy details of what happened, but at the time no one would dare identify them. Even President Premadasa, who spoke at Saddhatissa's elaborate state funeral, did not refer to the killing of Saddhatissa as an assassination but simply as a "sudden death" (*hadisi āpavatīmā*) and "a loss to the entire world."⁹⁰ Later the government conducted an investigation: it lasted only a few days, and no arrests have ever been made. Even today, some maintain that given the conditions at that time in Sri Lanka, they could spread rumours linked the president to the monk's assassination, maintaining that the government ordered it as part of a strategy to blame it on the JVP (*jvp eka udin yanna*). Killing monks, as some hold, authorised the government to launch an island wide counteroffensive on the JVP, portraying them as killers of "pious monks."⁹¹

Questions about the identity of the assassin are not, of course, of interest to this study. But the assassination, marking the conjuncture discussed above, made possible a series of competing narratives that tried to authorise a very different kind of identity of Premadasa and his relation to Buddhism and the nation. This new identity of Premadasa is one of a "killer" (*mini maruwā*) who unleashed a period of "terror" that he himself claimed to have eliminated by restoring peace in Sri Lanka.⁹² Subsequently, the government of Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga officially endorsed this identity of Premadasa as a "killer" – of not only monks but various political figures as well. It announced that special presidential commissions had uncovered "hard evidence" that pointed to Premadasa's complicity in the assassination of his

⁹⁰ 'Saddhatissa Nāhimiyanṅe Viyōva Mulu Lovatama Imahat Pāduvak' ('Saddhatissa's passing away a great loss to the entire world'), *Dinamina*, 11th August 1989.

⁹¹ I heard these rumours many times from a number of monks and lay Buddhists in Kolonnawa, Kelaniya, Colombo, Kadawata, Kandy, Andiambalama, and Dambulla during my research in Sri Lanka, 1994 to 1997.

⁹² At the beginning of every year after 1989, the government newspapers devoted pages listing various "achievements" of the Premadasa government. In 1993, two whole pages in the *Daily News* and *Divamina* credited Premadasa with, among other things, the following noteworthy accomplishments: 'Four Years Record of 'New Vision-New Ideal' for Mother Lanka', *Divamina&Daily News*, 2nd January 1993. These were described as "immortal services", *Divamina*, 4th May 1989.

former UNP ministerial colleague and rival Lalith Athulathmudali, and a senior Sri Lankan soldier, Lieutenant-General Denzil Kobbekaduwa.⁹³ These kinds of counter-narratives not only contested the formerly authorised identity of Premadasa as “a real Buddhist” but also cast doubt on the ‘Buddhist’ identities of those (monks) who helped to produce it. The counter narratives about the president became so pervasive that a few days prior to his death in 1993, Premadasa himself implored people: “Kill me by any means ... but do not kill my pure character (*pirisidu charitaya*).”⁹⁴

It is in the context of the voicing of these kinds of rival narratives that I wish to locate one of President Premadasa’s final ‘Buddhist’ projects, the construction of a massive Buddha statue at a temple popularly known as the Bahirawakanda. But I must point out that Premadasa undertook and completed various other ‘Buddhist’ projects prior to his death in 1993. Among them were the creation of a separate Ministry for Buddhist Affairs (Buddha Sasana Ministry) in 1989 and a Buddha Sasana Fund in 1990;⁹⁵ the establishment in 1990 of a Supreme Sangha Council, which would “advise the government on the measures needed to be taken to foster and develop the Buddha Sasana;”⁹⁶ and the much contested plan in 1992 to ordain 2,300 Buddhist monks as part of celebrating the 2,300th anniversary of the introduction of Buddhism to the island.⁹⁷

The plan to ordain monks, proposed a few months after the impeachment attempt, unlike other Premadasa projects created a hail of criticism from many members of the Sangha. One monk

⁹³ ‘Premadasa Involved: Assassination of Lalith and Kobbekaduwa Commissions Point Finger at Ex-President’, *Midweek Mirror*, 8th October 1997; ‘Premadasa Targeted Kobbekaduwa’, *Daily News*, 9th October 1997.

⁹⁴ ‘Mā Marā Dāmuwāta Kamak Nā; Mage Charitaya Ghātanaya Karanna Epā’ (‘Kill me; but do not kill my character’), *Dinamina*, 3rd May 1993.

⁹⁵ ‘Buddha Sāsana Aramudala Ārabhū Vagayi’ (‘The Buddha Sasana fund created’), *Dinamina*, 6th December 1990.

⁹⁶ ‘Supreme Advisory Council on the Buddha Sasana Formed’, *Observer*, 30th September 1990. For more of these events, see Van der Horst (1995): pp.135-145. There is more on the Ministry of the Buddha Sasana in C.R. de Silva, ‘State Support for Religious in Contemporary Sri Lanka: Some Ideological and Policy Issues’ (1997) (Unpublished paper delivered at the Sixth Sri Lanka Conference: Peradeniya, Sri Lanka): pp. 6-7.

⁹⁷ *Divaiyina*, 28th February 1992.

described it as “one of the places where Premadasa failed [to win the approval of monks]” (*ekatānakin Premadasa pārādunā*).⁹⁸ A few monks did express support for the proposal, but many popular monks who had endorsed earlier Premadasa projects raised severe objection to the ordination plan.⁹⁹ Walpola Rahula, a vocal advocate of Premadasa’s gam udāva movement and his effort to withdraw the IPKF,¹⁰⁰ had praised Premadasa as the most “genuine, qualified person for the leadership of uniting all Theravada Buddhist countries”;¹⁰¹ but he proposed the president’s plans to ordain the twenty-three hundred monks. He surprisingly stated that it was not an effort to “develop Buddhism” but a political strategy to “win votes at the next election. It is a disgrace [*nindāvaka*].”¹⁰² In the wake of the objections, the big ordination ceremony came to an abrupt halt: only a few hundred monks were ordained.¹⁰³

These narratives about Premadasa, it is important to note, began to emerge in late 1991, when powerful anti-government forces (for example, the impeachment attempt) charged the president with a variety of constitutional and ethical violations. By early 1992, a number of monks began to view Premadasa’s projects (for example, the village reawakening celebrations and annual festivals at the Tooth Temple) as “insane activities” (*piṣṣuvāda*),¹⁰⁴ even though they had been authorised by monks themselves. This criticism became conspicuous in regard to a particular feature of the awakenings. At each gam udāva, Premadasa built a *cēliya*, or pagoda, and named it after a king, a prime minister, or a political

⁹⁸ Author’s interview with Medhananda, 16th November 1997; Dhammaloka, 8th August 1996; and conversations with monks in Kandy and Colombo, 5th-8th August 1996 and 5th-9th October 1997.

⁹⁹ See the debate in the newspaper. For example ‘*Kula daruvan Mahana Karaīma*’ (‘Ordination of young boys’), *Silumina*, 8th May 1992.

¹⁰⁰ See *Dinamina*, 21st April 1989; *Dinamina*, 6th June 1989.

¹⁰¹ ‘*Theravādi Baudha Ratavala Sandhanayaka Nāyakatvayata Niyama Sudsā Apē Janapatiyi*’, *Dinamina*, 4th July 1991.

¹⁰² ‘*Rahaya 2300k Mahana Karanna Yannē Labana Pārat Balaya Labana Aramunin*’ (‘The government plans to ordain two thousand three hundred boys with the intention of obtaining power next year’), *Divanyina*, 2nd February 1992.

¹⁰³ Conversation with monks in Colombo and with the staff at the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, 5th October 1997.

¹⁰⁴ Author’s interviews with Madhananda, 16th November 1996; Dhammaloka, 8th August 1996; Dhammika, 10th of August 1997; and several other student monks at Peradeniya University, 9th August 1996.

leader considered to be a “great patriot.”¹⁰⁵ It was novel practice since, as one monk pointed out, in the entire history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka not a single cētiya had been constructed in honour of a layman. Usually found at Buddhist temples, cētiyas enshrine relics of the Buddha and the arhats and are objects of Buddhist veneration; thus, many monks considered Premadasa’s random erection of pagodas for lay people a “great shame” (*maha lājjāvak*) and “dishonour” (*avanambuvak tuttudekē vāda*) to Buddhism, and the nation.¹⁰⁶

The point should be obvious: a few years after he became president, a number of varying rival discourses emerged, competing to contest the formerly authorised relation between Premadasa, Buddhism, and the nation. This contestation, it is well to note, coincided with the impeachment attempt, which, among other things, depicted the president as suffering from “mental illness” (*mānasika ledak*).¹⁰⁷ It was under the heading of mental illness that the impeachment, led by Lalith Athulathmudali and others, portrayed Premadasa’s construction of temples and pagodas as acts of “blind devotion” (*anda visvāsaya*) that conspired to “deceive the public.”¹⁰⁸ One cannot overlook these competing narratives: the impeachment attempt became the site of debate on public platforms and in the media.¹⁰⁹ The power and persuasiveness of these new narratives about Premadasa grew in the context of Athulathmudali’s assassination, which was widely suspected to have been ordered by Premadasa. The assassination had groups of Buddhists stoning temples and setting them on fire, among them those of monks considered to be the president’s close

¹⁰⁵ Premadasa, for example, named cetiyas in 1990 and 1991 after Devanam Piyatissa (*devana pātis mahāsāya*) and Weera Keppetipola, respectively; See *Dinamina*, 17th June 1990; *Daily Mirror*, 19th and 22nd June 1992. Premadasa is said to have begun this tradition by naming the first pagoda at a gam udāva after King Dutugāmunum the archetypal hero-defender of Buddhism in the *Mahāvamsa*, the greatest chronicle of Sri Lanka.

¹⁰⁶ Author’s interview with Medhananada, 15th November 1996.

¹⁰⁷ The copy of the impeachment motion in Dissanayaka (1992): p.113.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid: p.115.

¹⁰⁹ On the details of the fierce impeachment campaign led by Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake, two of the most prominent cabinet ministers in the Jayewardene government, see Dissanayaka (1992).

allies.¹¹⁰ It is in the context of these shifting discourses, which produced an identity of Premadasa as a killer and a danger to Buddhism and the nation, that I want to discuss his involvement in the construction of the Bahirawakanda Buddha statue at the Sri Mahabhodi Temple in Kandy.

The Sri Mahabhodi Temple, or Bahirawankanda temple, is located on a hilltop, Bahirawankanda (“the hill of the Bahirawa demon”), that overlooks the entire city of Kandy.¹¹¹ Of relatively recent origin, the temple was built on land donated in the early 1970s to Ampitiye Dhammarama, a monk from the Amarapura Nikāya, by the minister of land in the SLFP government. Initially, the monk resided in a makeshift residence on the hill, soliciting funds for the construction of a temple. The head monks of the Temple of the Tooth, however, protested the plan, claiming that given its strategic location on a hill facing the Tooth Temple, a new temple from a different Buddhist fraternity would overshadow the “centre” (*mulastānaya*) of the Siyam Nikāya. In the early 1980s, the monks wrote to President Jayewardene and demanded the removal of Dhammarama from Bahirawankanda, claiming that he was not a “proper monk” (*koheda yana unmānsē kenek*). The ownership of the land remained contested until, in the mid- 1980s, a chief monk of the Amarapura Nikāya, Hinatiyana Dhammaloka, compelled Premadasa to intervene and legally grant the land to Dhammarama. The sole intervention remained Premadasa’s only support for Dhammarama’s temple until early 1990.

During the early phases of building the temple with the support of only a handful of businessmen from Kandy, Dhammarama extended several invitations to Premadasa to visit Bahirawankanda. Premadasa turned down such invitations, so it is said, because he did not want to be seen patronising a temple with which the powerful monks of the Tooth Temple had sour

¹¹⁰ I have in mind here the case of Elle Gunawansa, one of President Premadasa’s close confidant monks. During the funeral procession of Athulathmudali, people stoned Gunawansa’s temple, forcing him to flee and live in exile for several months: author’s interview with Elle Gunawansa and other monks in Colombo, July 1995.

¹¹¹ The following information about the temple’s history comes from two interviews conducted with the monks at the Bahirawakanda temple, 17th-18th July 1996.

disputes.¹¹² Later, all that changed. In the late 1980s, Dhammarama began to build a Buddha statue that would stand more than eighty feet in height – a tall task that many thought would be impossible for a single monk unless he had substantial financial backing. In January 1992, a few weeks after Athulathmudali had held one of the largest impeachment rallies against the president in Kandy, the newspapers flashed front page headlines announcing Premadasa’s sudden visit to the Bahirawankanda temple “to investigate the construction work on the Buddha image” in Kandy. The newspapers portrayed Premadasa as the sole architect of the project, when in fact much work, worth almost two million rupees, had already been done on the statue.¹¹³ During his visit, Premadasa donated a half- million rupees from the President’s Fund to the project; he also planned to unveil the statue ceremonially a year later, when he would be celebrating the fourth anniversary of his presidency. In January 1993, the government newspapers ran poetic front-page headlines about Premadasa’s unveiling of the Buddha statue¹¹⁴ - an occasion that “brings peace to the entire island of Sri Lanka.” The Buddha statue at Bahirawankanda, one paper said, “brightens not only the Buddhists in Kandy but the entire Buddhist world”; it “adds a new chapter to the ... history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka ... it will become an object of veneration in the Buddhist world.”¹¹⁵

Significantly, this event did not seem to attract the support of many monks. Despite the government’s (and also Dhammarama’s) attempt to portray the construction of the statue as an “historical event,” there were hardly any articles about it in the newspapers, no words of praise by his former friends in the monkhood about his involvement in the project. The statue’s unveiling marked that particular context in which Premadasa’s image as a real Buddhist had come to be questioned by both monks and lay Buddhists. The chief monks of the Tooth Temple

¹¹² Author’s interviews, Bahirawakanda temple, 17th-18th July 1996.

¹¹³ ‘*Bahirawakande Idivana Budu Pilimayē Vāda Piriksīmata Janapati Yayi*’ (‘*The president goes to investigate the construction works on the Buddha statue at Bahirawakanda*’), *Dinamina*, 2nd January 1992.

¹¹⁴ One headline read, ‘*Sambudu Piliruva Bahirawakande- Tunhelayata Sisilasayi Nibande*’ (‘*Buddha statue at Bahirawakanda, always a blessing to the whole country*’), *Dinamina*, 2nd January 1991.

¹¹⁵ *Dinamina*, 1st January 1991.

and many other Buddhist monks and lay people in Kandy considered that a new statue, painted gold,¹¹⁶ situated on a hill facing the Tooth Temple, posed a “challenge” (*abhiyōghayak*) to the Tooth Temple. It was seen as a disgrace. This intimated also that Premadasa was an accomplice to, if not the architect of, that disgrace.¹¹⁷ So the ‘Buddhist’ project of constructing the Bahirawankanda Buddha statue produced the ironic effect of contesting the ‘Buddhist’ identity of the president.

It is interesting, however, that three days following the unveiling of the Bahirawankanda statue, despite implicit objections of the chief monks who had supported the president earlier, Premadasa returned to the Tooth Temple to celebrate the anniversary of his presidency and address the nation from the octagon with his family and the monks of the Tooth Temple at his side. Once again the state newspapers carried announcements with pictures of Premadasa standing with a tray of flowers against the background of the Tooth Temple. One announcement read: “May the sacred tooth relic bless his excellency the president, who ushered in a new era to our motherland, bringing solace to the poorest of the poor, dispelling the darkness in their lives.”¹¹⁸ This I see as an example of the ways in which the Tooth Temple had been made a particular ‘Buddhist’ site that enabled the Premadasa government to make centrally visible an authoritative public discourse – one that sought to attenuate the force of rival contesting narratives about the president’s ‘true’ Buddhist identity and the nation.

Conclusion

In providing this account of the shifting fortunes of Premadasa’s ‘religious’ identity, its rise and fall, I have wanted to argue that the configurations of questions about who and what kinds of practice do and do not define what kind of relations between religion, the state, and the nation are located in specific conjunctures of debates. The identity of Premadasa as a real Buddhist leader born

¹¹⁶ After Premadasa’s death, the statue was painted white.

¹¹⁷ Author’s interview with Dhammaloka, 10th August 1996.

¹¹⁸ ‘*A tribute to Our Leader*’, *Daily News*, 2nd January 1993.

to liberate the Buddhist nation came to be authorised in a particular context. Significant to making centrally visible these relations between Premadasa, Buddhism, and the nation were practices like the construction of the golden canopy for the Tooth Temple. These relations, however, were contested in a different conjuncture: competing discourses began to portray Premadasa as a man whose practices disgraced Buddhism and who had forfeited the right to rule the ‘Buddhist’ nation. The agents of these kinds of rival narratives were the same monks who had been his former intimate allies. Premadasa himself responded to this challenge, as we see in his completion of the Bahirawankanda statue and his official return to the Tooth Temple to celebrate his presidency. But such responses themselves produced ironic effects: they came to be seen as efforts of a beleaguered president, in the face of an ocean of controversy and contestation, desperately seeking to assert and keep in public view his formerly authorised ‘Buddhist’ identity. The emergence and submergence of this identity is a crucial instance of how identity, as Foucault has noted, is both an instrument and effect of discourse / power. A conjuncture of discourses not only produces identity but “undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile, makes it possible to thwart [contest] it.”¹¹⁹

In concluding, I want to make clear that, in using terms like ‘Buddhism’ and ‘nation’ frequently throughout this chapter, I have not sought to pursue an argument that informs some contemporary disciplinary studies on ‘religion’ and ‘nationalism’ in South Asia. Put broadly, that argument wants to show how “religion” – or ‘religious movements’, be they Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, or Buddhist – plays an instrumental part in the processes of establishing and defining the identity of the ‘nation’. It is this argument that comes to us in terms of ‘religious nationalism.’¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ M. Foucault (1978) *History of Sexuality*, Vol. I (Editions Gallimard): p.101.

¹²⁰ Here I am particularly thinking of P. van der Veer (1994) *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (London: University of California Press). For others who are interested in understanding religious nationalism in terms of “religious symbols in the political field,” see T.B. Hansen (1999) *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press): pp. 148-150. In the context of Sri Lanka, see R.L. Stirrat, ‘Catholic Identity and Global Forces in Sinhala Sri Lanka’ in T.J. Bartholomeusz & C.R. de Silva (Eds.) (1998) *Buddhist Fundamentalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press): p.153. Stirrat,

Now this concept, religious nationalism, it seems to me is another disciplinary category to capture the supposed fusion of religion and politics, seeking to avoid confining nationalism to a public domain of purely 'secular' modern politics. This is because, as some argue, the distinction between the secular and the sacred, religion and politics – a distinction that sees such ideas as belonging to separate spheres – “is an ideological element in the Western discourse of modernity” [located in the Enlightenment and colonialism].¹²¹ As two recent scholars, van der Veer and Lehmann, argue, this dichotomy has enabled the West to understand both its own self/identity as secular hence nonreligious, and non-West as embodying “a history of dangerous politicization of religious difference”¹²²

Understandably, what this kind of dichotomy that privileges the West with an exclusive identity of rationality that the 'backward' non-West supposedly lacks, van der Veer and Lehmann wants to contend that religious and nationalism are interrelated in complicated ways, not only in the East but in the West as well.

While I sympathise with this argument about the Western discourse of modernity, I am sceptical of the analytical soundness of disciplinary concepts, like that of religious nationalism, that labour to illuminate the interconnection between religion and the nation. I suspect that such labours do not yield any new insight into the discursive formations of the altering meanings of categories like “religion” and “nation” and that, instead, they participate in a set of presumptive questions about what constitute the identity of nationalism. To suggest, in other words, that nationalism should be seen as something conditioned or influenced by “religion” is to assume that religion embodies some

building upon van der Veer, argues, “Certainly religion has become one of the key features in the definition of the nation and national identity in Sri Lanka.” Similarly, speaking of the global emergence of two kinds of nationalism, ethnic and ideological, Mark Juergensmeyer writes that “if the ethnic approach to religious nationalism, *politicizes* religion by employing religious identities for political ends, and ideological approach to religious nationalism does the opposite: it *religionizes* politics”: see M. Juergensmeyer, ‘*The Worldwide Rise of Religious Nationalism*’ (1996) *Journal of International Affairs* 50: p.5.

¹²¹ P. van der Veer & H. Lehman (Eds.) (1999) *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press): p.3.

¹²² Ibid, see also van der Veer (1994): Ch.1.

independent autonomous “religious” identity. Here I am in agreement with Talal Asad, who has raised some serious misgivings about the supposed interrelation between religion and nationalism:

“To insist that nationalism should be seen as a religious, or even as having been shaped by religion is, in my view, to miss the nature and consequence of the revolution brought about by the Enlightenment doctrine of secularism in the structure of modern collective representations and practices. Of course modern nationalism draws on pre-existing languages and practices- including those that we call, anachronistically, “religious.” How could it be otherwise? Yet it does not follow that religion forms nationalism.”¹²³

In making this argument, what Asad wants to point out is, of course, not that nationalism should be taken as a secular matter. Rather Asad wants to point out that categories like “religion” and “secular” are not things but efforts to identify and define elusive and opaque sets of “particular ideas, sentiments, practices, institutions, and traditions- as well as followers who instantiate, maintain, or alter them.”¹²⁴

It is the instantiation, maintenance, and alteration of the relation between religion, identity, and the politics that have preoccupied me. I have sought to demonstrate the ways in which differing persons, practices, and narratives come to authorize what should and should not belong to the identity of religion, nation, and politics. Thus one would not hurry to identify what religion and politics are, what nationalism is, whether it is religious or secular; or whether it is an “imagined community.”¹²⁵ Rather one must *look* for the discourses embedded in relations of power that authorize particular persons and institutions that seek to define such categories. Since the relation between religion and politics is

¹²³See T. Asad, ‘*Religion, Nation-state, Secularism,*’ in van der Veer & Lehman: p.187. Note that, surprisingly, this article is in van der Veer & Lehman’s edited volume.

¹²⁴ibid.

¹²⁵B. Anderson (1983[1992]) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso).

located in particular discourses, then the questions about whether it is religious nationalism, or whether religion influences nationalism, are theoretically faulty.