

## Special Issue: Buddhism and Politics

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 25, 2018

# The Politics of Buddhist Relic Diplomacy Between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

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# The Politics of Buddhist Relic Diplomacy Between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

D. Mitra Barua<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Buddhists in Chittagong, Bangladesh claim to preserve a lock of hair believed to be of Sakyamuni Buddha himself. This hair relic has become a magnet for domestic and transnational politics; as such, it made journeys to Colombo in 1960, 2007, and 2011. The states of independent Ceylon/Sri Lanka and East Pakistan/Bangladesh facilitated all three international journeys of the relic. Diplomats from both countries were involved in extending state invita-

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tions, public exchanges of the relic and a state-funded, grand scale display of the relic.

This article explores the politics of such high profile diplomatic arrangements. For the Bangladeshi Buddhist minority, these international relic exchanges help them temporarily overcome their marginalized position in a predominantly Muslim society and generate religious sympathy among the Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka. Such Buddhist fellowship and sympathy results in sponsorship for Bangladeshi Buddhist novices to attend monastic trainings in Sri Lanka and the donation of Buddhist ritual artifacts like Buddha statues, monastic robes, begging bowls, and so forth, for Buddhist institutions in Bangladesh.

But how do the relic exchanges benefit the Islamic state of Bangladesh and the Sri Lankan government? That question leads to an analysis of the relic exchanges in relation to global and trans-national politics. I argue that the repeated exchanges of the relic are part and parcel of creating “good” governance images for both Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi governments for both a domestic and transnational audience respectively.

## **Introduction**

Buddhists in Bangladesh are a religious minority that constitutes less than 1 percent of country’s huge population. They have exchanged Buddhist relics through diplomatic relations with fellow majority Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Relic distribution and procurement go far back as to the life

of Sakyamuni Buddha, and historic accounts of Buddhism in Asia record many such events (Strong 98). But the particular significance of the international relic exchanges between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka is that they demonstrate the politics of/on a religious minority that is pressured by rapidly increasing Islamic fundamentalism.

This politicization of a vulnerable Buddhist minority through international Buddhist relic exchanges in Muslim Bangladesh is intriguing for two reasons. First, the exchanges take place between unequal partners: the Bangladeshi Buddhist minority versus their majority counterparts from Sri Lanka. This unequal partnership is mitigated through the second reason: the engagement of non-Buddhist high profile political leaders of Bangladesh. The latter is politically precarious in Bangladesh, where political Islam is increasingly becoming prominent since it became the official religion of the country in 1988. This official declaration marks the beginning of Islamization of Bangladeshi politics that betrays the country's initial commitment to secular governance and democratic principles. This article asks: what motivates or drives the partners to engage in these political arrangements? In other words, how do Buddhist relic exchanges benefit the Bangladeshi Buddhist minority and the Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi governments?

I contend that the recent Buddhist relic exchanges in Bangladesh demonstrate a two-dimensional politics associated with a vulnerable religious minority. On the one hand, the Bangladeshi Barua Buddhist community strives to shed light on their marginalized Buddhist presence through transnational Buddhist networks with fellow majority Buddhists in the region. On the other hand, such impulses for transnational Buddhist fraternity provide the means for the Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan governments to enhance their "good" governance images for the consumption of domestic and foreign audience respectively.

This article develops in three sections. First, I document Bangladeshi Bengali Buddhists' relic exchanges with fellow majority Buddhists in Sri Lanka via diplomatic relations of both countries. By situating the relic exchanges within two intertwined contexts—religious minority status and transnational Buddhist networks—I briefly discuss the centuries long history of Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Buddhist connection in the second section. Finally, in the third section, I explain the significance of relic exchanges by theorizing the politics of/on a religious minority within a globalized, transnational political domain of the twenty-first century.

### **International Buddhist Relic Exchanges in Bangladesh**

A letter from the Madampe Senanayakaramaya<sup>2</sup> in collaboration with the Colombo Gangaramaya, a temple with shifting political clouts, requested that the Nondonkanon Buddhist Monastery in Chittagong Bangladesh share a few strands of hair believed to have belonged to the historical Buddha Sakyamuni. According to Priyaratna Thero—a Nondonkanon resident monk educated in Sri Lanka who negotiated the subsequent relic exchanges—the main point of the letter was that the hair relic of the Buddha, distributed and preserved in other Buddhist countries like Myanmar and Sri Lanka, are currently invisible as they are enshrined in stupas. Only the hair relic at the Nondonkanon is available for Buddhist devotees to directly see and worship. So the Sri Lankan Buddhist population wishes to receive a small portion of the relic for public exhibition

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<sup>2</sup> The Madampe Senanayakaramaya is the same temple that received hair relics in May 1958 from Chittagong under the patronage of Dudley Senanayaka (1911-1973), then the prime minister of Ceylon. It seems that the request was intended for a hair relic exhibition to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the inauguration of the granite stupa in which the hair relic brought from Chittagong, Bangladesh was enshrined in 1958 (Amarasekara 2007).

and veneration. The letter also highlights that such generosity and co-operation would mark the continuation of long-lasting Bengali-Sinhalese Buddhist relations.

After some consideration, the Chittagong Buddhist Association, the governing body of the Nondonkanon, expressed that they would honor the request as a gesture of gratitude for Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Buddhist brotherhood that traced back at least to the mid-nineteenth century. However, the Chittagong Buddhist Association reminded the Colombo Gangaramaya to involve the Sri Lankan government, as the hair relic is, in the negotiator's words, "a national treasure of Bangladesh." Accordingly, the following Bangladesh-Sri Lanka relic exchanges took place at the Nondonkanon via the diplomats of both Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan governments (Interview Notes).

On July 18, 2007, a high-profile Sri Lankan Buddhist delegation<sup>3</sup> led by Buddharakkhita Mahanayakathero, the prelate of the Siyam Nikaya (the Asgiri Chapter) arrived in Chittagong to receive the hair relic. Among others, a few senior ministers and Sri Lankan President Rajapakse's son comprised the delegation. They brought a bronze carved footprint and statue of the Buddha to reciprocate the hair relic. A few representatives of the Bangladeshi interim government (2006-2008) actively participated in the ceremony held at the Chittagong Buddhist monastery. Although two Sanghanayakas (heads of the Buddhist order) representing Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi Sangha were present at the ceremony, relic exchanges took place between two diplomats. Rohitha Bogollagama, the Sri Lankan foreign minister received the hair relic

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<sup>3</sup> Rohitha Bogollagama (Foreign Minister), Bandula Gunawardena (Trade and Marketing Development Minister), Pandu Bandarnaike (Religious and Moral Upliftment Minister) and Rohitha Rajapakse (Youngest son of President Mahinda Rajapakse) were noticeable members of the delegation.

from his Bangladeshi counterpart Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury. On the next day, July 19, 2007, Rathnasiri Wickramanayaka, the prime minister of Sri Lanka ceremoniously received the hair relic at the Colombo Bandaranayaka International Airport and transported it via an elaborate parade to the Colombo Gangaramaya. In subsequent years, many public exhibitions of the hair relic were held in many parts of Sri Lanka, starting at the presidential residence (The Temple Trees) in February 2008 (Munasinghe). The pinnacle of the countrywide hair relic parade was the three-day public exposition of the relic at the Colombo Gamgaramaya for the celebration of Vesak 2011. Interestingly, another hair relic brought by the president himself from Bangladesh just a month ago was added to the exhibition.

In April 2011, Sri Lankan President Rajapakse made a three-day (April 18-20) official visit to Bangladesh. In addition to signing five memoranda of understanding between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in the fields of agriculture, education, information, livestock and commercial cooperation, the President made a private visit to the International Buddhist Monastery in Dhaka and, after participating in a short Buddhist ritual there, unveiled a commemoration plaque there. The highlight of the President's visit was his direct audience with a small Buddhist delegation led by Sangharaj Dharmasen Mahathero, the head of the Bangladeshi Sangharaj Buddhist order, at the Sri Lankan high commission in Dhaka. At that meeting, president Rajapakse received a few strands of hair relic of the Buddha.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The photo credit goes to the International Buddhist Monastery, Dhaka and it is used with permission.





In fact, it was the third reception of the hair relic by Sri Lanka from Bangladesh. The first was in 1960 (received by then Ceylon Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake and enshrined in the Sri Sambuddha Jayanthi Stupa at the Senanayakaramaya, Madampe), and the second was in 2007 via the diplomats of both countries discussed above. President Rajapakse's return with the hair relic got grand publicity. D. M. Jayaratne, the minister of Buddhasasana and religious affairs ceremoniously received the relic. Monks and politicians performed rituals at the airport itself before the relic was handed over to the Colombo Gangaramaya for the public display along with the ones received in 2007.

In reflection of the President's 2011 visit, the Sri Lankan high commission in Dhaka stated:

The President's visit became more significant with the generous donation of Sacred Hair Relics of The Lord Buddha offered by the Bangladesh Buddhist Society in Chittagong on behalf of the people of Bangladesh and which was received by His Excellency the President with great honor on 19th April 2011. The Sacred Hair Relics of The Lord Buddha are now respectfully placed in Gangaramaya

Temple, Hunupitiya, Sri Lanka for public veneration.  
(High Commission of Sri Lanka)

Unlike the 2007 relic obtained through the mediation of both Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan governments, the relic brought in 2011 was a “private” donation to the Sri Lankan President Rajapakse by the Bangladeshi Buddhist community. A report indicates that the President’s three sons are trustees of the hair relic (*Daily Mirror*). In between these two public and private hair relic donations from Bangladesh to Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan government publicly reciprocated Bangladeshi Buddhists with different type of relics.

On April 30, 2010, a Sri Lankan government delegation arrived at the Dhaka international airport, Bangladesh with a five-foot-high Buddha statue made of marble and a Bodhi sapling. The stature was the replica of the famous Samadhi Buddha Statue and the sapling was an offshoot of the sacred Bodhi tree in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. Both claim to have a history of over two millennia; therefore, they express the pride of Sri Lankan Buddhist religiosity. The Buddhist relics were accompanied by a few monks from Colombo and a group of artisans specialized in the arts of making Buddha statues. Sarath Weragoda, then Sri Lankan high commissioner to Bangladesh ceremoniously accepted the relics along with a few Sri Lankan expatriates and Bangladeshi Buddhist monks. These relics were jointly enshrined by representatives of both Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi governments at the Bodhinana monastery in Ashulia, a Dhaka suburb. The craftsmen who came with the relics made another set of miniature Buddha statues representing all the twenty-four Buddhas in the Theravāda Buddha lineage (Interview Notes). The significance of these Buddhist relic exchanges remind us of the vibrant Buddhist connections between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

### The Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Buddhist Connections

Historical evidence suggests that Buddhist connections between Chittagong and Sri Lanka trace as far back as to the medieval period. The Tibetan medieval great Buddhist pilgrim and historian Lama Taranatha's *History of Buddhism in India* (written in 1608 CE) records that a Chittagong monk named Vanaratna (born in 1384 CE) traveled to Sri Lanka in early fifteenth century and studied Buddhism there for six years. He returned to India, and later (1426 CE) he left for Tibet for Buddhist mission. There, in Tibet, he earned a great reputation in teaching and explaining Buddhism to the Tibetans. Tibetan sources refer to him as one of the last Bengali scholarly (*pandita*) monks who propagated Buddhism in Tibet (Taranatha 440).

Such medieval Buddhist educational journeys of Chittagong Buddhist monks to Sri Lanka were revived in the mid-nineteenth century. For example, Chittagong, born Punnachar Chandramohan (1835-1908), who eventually became the second monastic leader (*Sangharaj*) of the Sangharaj Nikaya in Bangladesh, participated in the establishment of the Ramannya Nikaya in 1861. He had met the Sinhalese delegation in Calcutta when they were on their way to Burma for monastic initiation so as to establish a “purer” monastic order in mid-nineteenth century Sri Lanka. With the Sinhalese monks, Chandramohan went to Burma and received initiation there. Instead of returning to Chittagong or Calcutta afterward, he ended up making the historical journey to Sri Lanka with his fellow Sinhalese monks who established the Ramannya Nikaya—the last of three monastic sects introduced from Southeast Asia to Sri Lanka (Sasanatilaka 48-49). Afterward, Chandramohan studied Buddhism along with the Pali and Sinhalese languages at the Vijayananda Pirivena Vihara in Galle for five years before he returned to Chittagong with a Sri Lankan monk in 1866 (Pragyalo 23-24). Many Chittagong monks followed Chan-

dramohan's steps and continue to do so during the latter part of nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries.

All three major monastic orders (*nikayas*) in Sri Lanka have attracted Chittagong monks to study Buddhism and to receive monastic training. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Chittagong monks gravitated toward the rigid and ascetic monastic decorum of the Ramannya Nikaya monks. Ramannya Nikaya monastic centers, like the Galle Vijayananda Pirivena and the Panadura Dharmodaya Pirivena, housed many Chittagong monks. In the early twentieth century, the Siyam Nikaya educational centers became popular destinations for Chittagong monks seeking Pāli and Buddhist studies. The reputation of the Colombo Vidyodaya and the Kalaniya Vidyalankara Pirivenas as international Buddhist educational institutions was one of the major factors for the shift. But it was also due to Chittagong Buddhists' familiarity with Buddhist missionary works of the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta that enabled them to build connections with the Siyam Nikaya monks. For example, Chandramohan's disciple Karmayogi Kripasharan (1865-1926), who came to settle in Calcutta in the late 1880s, visited Sri Lanka in 1911 upon the request of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), the founder of the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta (Brahmachari 2007: 47). He stayed at the Colombo Vidyodaya Pirivena. Pragyalo Sthavir enumerates that, by 1940, nearly fifty Chittagong monks received Buddhist education and monastic training from Sri Lanka (Sthavir 141-2).

In the second half of the twentieth century, it was the Amarapura Nikaya, particularly the Colombo Bambalapitiya Vajirarama's monastic training, that fascinated Chittagong monks. From the 1960s onward, several waves of Buddhist novices arrived at the Maharagama Bhikkhu Training Centre to receive Buddhist education and monastic training (Interview Notes). For the last 150 years or so, Chittagong monks have received Buddhist studies and monastic trainings from all three Sri Lankan

monastic orders. Although they exclusively associated with the Rammanna Nikaya monks in the second half of the nineteenth century, they sought out the Siyam Nikaya and Amarapura Nikaya educational centers in the first and last parts of the twentieth century respectively. Currently a few hundred Buddhist monastics from Bangladesh study Buddhism and oriental languages and obtain monastic training at various monastic educational centers that are associated with all three major monastic orders in Sri Lanka (Interview Notes).

Buddhist education, particularly monastic training, has been the glue of the Sri Lanka-Bangladesh Buddhist connection. Buddhists in Chittagong, Bangladesh, as a religious minority, have lacked Buddhist educational resources such as Buddhist scholars, scriptures, education, and training facilities. Sri Lankans have plenty of them, and, more importantly, they have shown a natural inclination to share them with the Chittagong Buddhists. They also have expressed sympathy for the Chittagong Buddhists' struggle as a religious minority in a predominantly Muslim society. In addition to educational support, some Sri Lankan monks have established scholarships to encourage monks from Chittagong to pursue Buddhist education in Sri Lanka.

For example, an erudite Sinhalese monk named Ven. Dharmakirti, the principal of the Dharmagupta Pirivena, wanted to share the proceeds of his books. Accordingly, after his death a "Dharmakirti Scholarship" was established to support four monks: two Sinhalese monks studying Buddhism in Burma and two Bengali monks studying in Sri Lanka. Dharmadhar Bhikkhu of Dharmapur (who eventually became an erudite monk and lived in Calcutta) and Anomadarshi Sraman of Jaldi received the scholarship in January 1929 (Sangha Shakti 91).

In addition to Buddhist knowledge and practices, some of Chittagong monks also brought back Buddhist relics, scriptures, ritual artifacts, monastic paraphernalia, and so forth to Chittagong. Sasanadwaja Pra-

gyatishya Mahasthavir (1871-1932) went to Sri Lanka in 1894. He studied Pāli, Sinhalese, and Buddhism at the Panadure Dharmodaya Pirivena led by Ramannya Nikaya monastic leader Kodagoda Upasena Mahathero. He also sought out the Siyam Nikaya monastic leader Ven. Hikkaduwe Sumangala Nayaka Thero and received higher education in *Tipitaka* studies at the Colombo Vidyodaya Pirivena (Bhikkhu 23). On his way to Chittagong, he brought Pali *Tipitaka* texts with him. He also made another two trips to Sri Lanka to bring over more texts as well as Buddhist relics to Chittagong. He convinced Ven. Dhirananda Mahathero at the Eluketiya Temple in Kandy, Sri Lanka to donate Buddhist relics to accompany them to Chittagong. According to Sumangal Bhikkhu, the donated Buddhist relics were enshrined in the Dhatu Chaitya (stupa) at the Mutsuddipara Vivekaram Vihar (26).

Throughout the twentieth century, Chittagong Buddhists, mainly monastics but also a few laity, made repeated journeys to Sri Lanka for Buddhist education as well as for pilgrimage to Buddhist sacred sites in Sri Lanka. Such journeys were not often made to the opposite direction, i.e., Sri Lankans' visits to Chittagong. A few Sri Lankan monastics and laity, however, visited Chittagong out of personal curiosity. The most notable ones were Anagarika Dharmapala's visit to Chittagong in 1915 (Brahmachari 47) and Madihe Pannasiha Mahanayaka Thero's 1996 visit (Tilakaratne 276) to some of his Chittagong students who received Buddhist education and monastic training at the Maharagama Bhikkhu Training Center.

Although none of these Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Buddhist connections, including those of high profiles mentioned in this section, involved politics, they have the most enduring outcomes. For the last one and half centuries, these Buddhist connections have given the Chittagong Buddhist community the essential religious aspiration, leadership and moral support that enabled them to sustain a distinct Buddhist

character. I will examine and analyze the political character of the Buddhist relic exchanges discussed in the first section of the article. This analysis highlights the politics of/on a religious minority.

### **Politics of/on a Religious Minority**

I observe two defining characteristics of Buddhism in Bangladesh. First, Buddhism in Bangladesh, due to transnational Buddhist connections like the one discussed in the last section, is increasingly developing a distinct transnational feel. The main temples in Dhaka and Chittagong now display some architectural and ritual artifacts that resemble of those in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar. Features include temple architectures, Buddha statues, reliquaries, monastic requisites, shrines around Bodhi trees, wall pictures, and so forth. I also notice that temples in Dhaka and Chittagong often cater Sri Lankan expatriates who happened to be in those cities for higher education, diplomatic, and garment industry-related employments.

On the other hand, as in Sri Lanka, many novices and fully ordained monks from Bangladesh are currently receiving Buddhist education and monastic training in Thailand and Myanmar. These phenomena demonstrate the financial, institutional, and, more importantly, the inspirational and moral support that Buddhists in the region have received from fellow Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia. At a more psychological level, Buddhists in Bangladesh often tend to idealize Theravāda Buddhist lands as the best countries (in Bengali *Protirup Desh*) for a Buddhist way of life (Bhikkhu 23). This idealization derives from the lack of Buddhist ambient culture in Muslim majority Bangladesh.

This idealization itself relates to my second observation, namely Bangladeshi Buddhists' persistence as a distinct religious minority for

centuries in the midst of majority Muslims. The transnational character of Buddhism in Bangladesh seems to be intimately connected to its socio-political status of minority. Minority groups often get marginalized within local/national political boundaries; that certainly is the case with the Bengali Buddhist minority in Bangladesh (Ayub 155). They also often subject to majority pressure to adopt the latter's' linguistic, religious, and/or ethnic expressions. According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the status of majority is "a state of domination" that often tends to absorb its opposite status of minority which often becomes just "an aggregate or a state" (291). Theorizing the majority-minority interactions, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, "a minority is capable of serving as the active medium of becoming [for the majority], but under such conditions it [the minority] ceases to be a definable aggregate in relation to the majority" (291). To avoid the predicament of being absorbed and ceasing to be a definable aggregate, I suggest, minorities often seek support from communities living beyond their national boundary. Thus, the minority status and the transnational connections of minorities are intimately connected.

Buddhist relic exchanges through diplomatic relations and the politics of/on a religious minority take place within these two interconnected contexts. An announcement and invitation from a temple in Dhaka reads:

It is a great pleasure for us to inform you . . . the occasion of the Installation of the Buddha Statue at the prayer hall of Bodhinana Meditation Centre . . . on Friday, the 20th December, 2013 . . . . [T]he formal installation ceremony of the *Buddha Statue from Sri Lanka* followed by farewell ceremony of His Excellency Sarath K. Weragoda, Honorable *High Commissioner of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka* to Bangladesh will be held from 15:00 hours to 17:00



hours. His Excellency Mr. Dilip Barua, Honorable Adviser to the Prime Minister of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh shall remain present as the Chief Guest . . . . The rituals of the unveiling of the Buddha Statue will be conducted by Venerable Wathuruwila Sri Sujatha Thero, Chief Incumbent of Sri Sudharmarama Vihara, Rajagiriya, Sri Lanka [emphasis added]. (Bodhinana Meditation Centre)

The above statement includes all three parties involved in the politics of/on a religious minority. They are Bangladeshi, particularly the Bengali Buddhist minority; the Sri Lankan government, representing a Buddhist majority nation; and the Bangladeshi government, with Islam as the state religion. How do they all benefit from this international Buddhist relic exchanges, and what motivates them to engage in this type of politics? The following analysis will answer these questions and will also attempt to theorize the “politics of a religious minority” in a globalized world of transnational politics.

Obviously, the exchanges of Buddhist relics via national and foreign diplomats benefit Bangladeshi Buddhists in multiple ways. They gain donations in financial and/or material forms, e.g., relics, statues, monastic requisites, and so forth. However, more long-lasting benefits derived from these encounters take indirect, symbolic, and intangible forms. When political dignitaries from Buddhist majority countries like Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand visit Buddhist institutions and meet with Bangladeshi Buddhists, the latter receive a publicity in the respective country of visiting dignitaries, particularly in relation to Bangladeshi Buddhists' struggle to survive as a tiny religious minority within a dominant Muslim majority society. For example, in his 2011 visit to Bangladesh, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa connects the ancestors of the Sinhalese people to Bangladesh. He said:

Sri Lanka and Bangladesh share a long-standing friendship based on history and old civilizations, with cultural links and commonalities. The origins of our ties go back to many centuries. According to our great chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*, Prince Vijaya and his 700 followers, who are our forefathers, had come to Sri Lanka from ancient Bengal, which is now part of Bangladesh. History and culture bind us together. (Rajapakse)

This popular chronicle account of Bengali Prince Vijaya being the forefather of the Sinhalese people is an integral part of lineage texts-based history of the Sinhalese. Therefore, the Bangladeshi Buddhist minority's cry for help from fellow Buddhist majorities receives a sympathetic ear from the Buddhist population in Sri Lanka. Such co-religious sympathy, I suggest, becomes symbolic capital for Bangladeshi Buddhist monastics living in Sri Lanka by generating monastic institutional and educational support to continue their pursuit of Buddhist education and monastic training.

In addition, diplomatic connections between Bangladesh and majority Buddhist countries sometimes ease the bureaucratic red tape in obtaining legal documents for Bangladeshi Buddhist monks studying in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand. The influence of Buddhist education from these countries has kept alive the Theravāda Buddhist character in Buddhism in Bengal since the mid-nineteenth century (Pragyalok 21). Therefore, I would argue that Theravāda Buddhist monastic training and formal Buddhist education have been the highest gains that the Bangladeshi Buddhist minority has received from fellow Buddhist majority countries like Sri Lanka. Buddhist relic exchanges through national and foreign diplomats highlight, facilitate, and solidify Bengali Buddhists' connections to fellow majority Buddhists in Sri Lanka that trace back to over one and half centuries. The political and public displays of the Bud-

dhist relic exchanges are significant in that they ease those minority/majority Buddhist connections that are increasingly becoming obstructed and jeopardized by national boundaries and international legal documentations.

By connecting themselves to majority Buddhists through diplomatic mediation, the Bengali Buddhist minority enjoyed the spotlight of international politics. Such publicity was the immediate outcome derived from the politics of relic exchanges discussed above. It momentarily released the Bengali Buddhist minority from the shadow of marginalization and Muslim majority pressure. Such social and psychological outcomes, I suppose, provide the impetus required to persist as a religious minority.

In such a process, the role Buddhist relics play as the mediator is not unprecedented. For example, Elizabeth Guthrie observes that Khmer Krom, the ethnic Cambodian minority Buddhists living in South Vietnam, “have relied on international connections for support in their struggles against Vietnamisation” (125). As a part of this strategy, the Khmer Krom Buddhist leader Son Thai Nguyen (1910-1977) invited the well-known Sinhalese missionary monk Ven. Narada Thera (1898-1983) to bring a Buddhist relic from Sri Lanka to Kampuchea Krom (Guthrie 128).

Accordingly, Ven. Narada Thera repeatedly accompanied Buddhist relics to Kampuchea Krom in South Vietnam in 1952, 1955, and 1963 for the benefit of Khmer Krom Buddhists. Guthrie notes, “Narada Maha Thera . . . was sympathetic to the precarious situation of Khmer Krom Buddhists in the Mekong Delta and was happy to supply them with Buddha relics and supported their attempts to join the international community of Buddhists” (Guthrie 139). As we noticed earlier, like Khmer Krom Buddhists, Bengali Buddhists engaged in relic exchanges to mitigate their religious minority status by connecting themselves to the

wider transnational Buddhist community. The difference between two cases is that unlike Khmer Krom Buddhists, Bengali Buddhists were approached to share their precious Buddha's hair relic with the Sri Lankan government. That leads us to better understand the politics of the relic-related diplomacy from the Sri Lankan perspective.

How then do politicians representing the Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka benefit from the transnational exchanges discussed above? Certainly, one can interpret their participation in Buddhist relic exchanges as the expression of personal Buddhist piety and an extension of benevolent Buddhist brotherhood to minority Buddhists in Bangladesh. However, given the timing of the exchanges, I would contend that the international public exchanges of Buddhist relics also function as a minor political strategy of public relations in constructing and enhancing the image of "righteous government" in Sri Lanka. In postcolonial Sri Lanka, Buddhism emerged as a major source of legitimacy in gaining and maintaining political power. Since the S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake administration in 1956<sup>5</sup>—the first parliamentary-elected government in postcolonial Sri Lanka—all successive governments have more or less used Buddhism to legitimize their grasp of political power and to maintain it (Hennakaye 17). In the late 1970s, Buddhism imbued "righteous society" became a political manifesto (Abeysekara 94).

In that political lineage, the Rajapakse government (2005-2015) was no different. Rajapakse's political manifesto *Mahinda Chintana* envisioned "a disciplined society" (4) "a virtuous citizen" (4) and more im-

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<sup>5</sup> The All Ceylon Buddhist Congress established the Buddhist Commission of Inquiry in 1954. It issued a 400-page report in February 1956 just before the first parliamentary election held in April in the same year. The promise of political support for the report delivered a new government led by S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake. Under the newly-elected government's patronage, the 1956 Buddha Jayanti, the celebration of the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Buddha's *parinibbāna*, was arranged in grand scale.

portantly “a virtuous state” (27). His government, I would suggest, bore a close resemblance to the 1956 Bandaranayake government (1956-1959) in multiple ways, including the public endowment and celebration of Buddhist festivals. The 1956 Buddha Jayantiya, the celebration of the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Buddha’s *parinibbāna*, was the public display of the Bandaranayake government to highlight its commitment in safeguarding Buddhism. Similarly, the 2011 Sambuddhattva Jayanthiya<sup>6</sup>—the 2600<sup>th</sup> celebration of the Buddha’s awakening accordingly to Sinhalese Buddhist chronicles—played the same role for the Rajapakse government.

For the celebration in May 2011, public funds were distributed to renovate temples across the island (Sunday Leader). President Rajapakse’s return from Bangladesh with Buddha’s hair relic added extra glory and enthusiasm to the celebration. The visit was his first foreign visit after his landslide victories in presidential and general elections in 2010, following the 2009 end of the civil war. I wonder whether it was strategically scheduled to solidify his political authority with the subsequent grand scale celebration of the Sambuddhattva Jayanathiya along with the newly received hair relic from Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> In fact the 2011 Vesak statement of Galboda Gnanissara Thera, the monastic leader who orchestrated the Buddha relic exchanges revealed, “We are very fortu-

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<sup>6</sup> Buddha Jayanthi marked the completion of 2500 years of the Buddha Era (*Buddha Varsha*) starting from the death of the Buddha. Adding forty-five years from the life of Buddha and another fifty-five years since 1956, the Vesak 2011 (Samboddhattva Jayanthiya) marked the 2600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Buddha’s awakening which is believed to have taken place forty-five years prior to the Buddha’s death.

<sup>7</sup> Buddhist Relics from the Pakistan National Museum were also borrowed for the 2011 Vesak celebration. Unlike the relics from Bangladesh, neither the President nor his ministers went to receive them. Similarly, no Buddhists were in Pakistan to present them. With the absence of living Buddhists in Pakistan, relic exchanges lacked the vitality and the power of politics that their Bangladeshi counterparts displayed.

nate to receive the Sacred Relics due to the mediation of President.” Udagama Buddharakkhita Thera, the prelate of Asgiri Chapter of the Siyam Nikaya who went to Chittagong to receive the hair relic in 2007, also acknowledged the President’s role in obtaining the relic from Bangladesh. On June 23, 2013, President Rajapakse enshrined the relics received from Chittagong, Bangladesh, in the Anuradhapura Sanda Hiru Seya to honor those who sacrificed their lives in the nearly four-decade-long civil war which ended in May 2009. The *Asian Tribune* observes, “The Sanda Hiru Seya close to the Sacred Jaya Sri Mahabodhi is the first of nine such Stupas to be built in the nine provinces in honor of the fallen War Heroes” (*Asian Tribune*).

In retrospect, the timing of relic exchanges in 2007 (when the last phase of the civil war in Sri Lanka was intensifying) and 2011 (the celebration of President Rajapakse’ military and election victories in 2009 and 2010 respectively), and the subsequent grand style relic display culminating with the 2013 relic enshrinement, fit the classical description below:

At times of heightened military and political activity . . . the protection and deployment of relics, and their ritual engagement, formed part of the state’s central technologies. During periods of victory and restoration, relic festivals and the enhancement of a landscape embedded with relics, were used to display, affirm, and protect the royal court.” (Blackburn 317)

The preceding quote illustrates the political use of Buddhist relics in Theravāda political history. In summary, the Sri Lanka-Bangladesh Buddhist relic exchanges were part and parcel of “the state’s central technologies” that the Rajapakse government employed at a critical juncture of the recent political history in Sri Lanka. Those technologies strive to portray President Rajapakse to be the pious and righteous Buddhist ruler

of contemporary Sri Lanka. Explaining the political role of Buddhist relics in medieval history of Sri Lanka and Thailand, Anne Blackburn further reminds us that relics “provided ritual-magical protection and buttressed claims to rightful rule” (319). The Rajapakse administration followed a long history of the Buddhist relic politics.

The next puzzle is how the Buddhist relic exchanges have benefitted the third-party involved, the Bangladeshi government. The religious nature of the political exchanges discussed above translates into economic politics for the Muslim state of Bangladesh. Buddhists, being hardly 1 percent of the country’s population, have essentially no power in political constituency. Their socio-economic status also has little political recourse (International Religious Freedom Reports 6). However, they, as one of three officially recognized religious minorities (others are Hindus and Christians) in Bangladesh, hold symbolic power in shaping Bangladesh’s image as a democratic country. Ensuring the rights of protection and religious practice is a duty of ideal democratic states. Since independence, all Bangladeshi governments have more or less used religious minorities to project itself as a country committed to democratic principles and human rights. High profile politicians issue statements, allocate public funds (Buddhist Welfare Trust 5), and participate in religious festivals of minorities wherever possible (Hasina).

One particular theme is underscored in all these cases: the Bangladesh government is committed to maintain a peaceful, diverse, and harmonious society. For example, on the eve of Buddha Purnima—the biggest Buddhist festival in the country—the Bangladeshi President Abdul Hamid and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina held receptions at their official residences for the representatives of the Buddhist community in 2013 and 2014 respectively. Both assured them regarding communal harmony in the country and the government’s commitment to uphold religious freedom (Buddhist Channel).

Similarly, attending the annual robe-offering ceremony (in Bengali, *Kothin Chibor Dan*) on 9 November 2012, Sheikh Hasina the prime minister of Bangladesh assured:

We are determined to establish Bangladesh as the most peaceful country in the [sic] South Asia in addition to contribute to restore the world peace. We, in turn, have attached *highest priority to maintain religious harmony* and inclusive development . . . . *This is the country for the people of all religions*. Everyone has equal rights to everything and everywhere . . . . We are proud of our communal harmony and cordiality [emphasis added]. (Hasina)

This assurance came after “the Ramu Violence” on September 29, 30, 2012. The violence was the worst atrocity that the Bengali Buddhist community has suffered so far. Islamic fundamentalists looted Buddhist villages and set fire to many ancient Buddhist temples in the southeast region of Bangladesh. Interestingly, and to the surprise of many, nineteen of the temples that were burnt to ashes were reconstructed within a year at the government’s cost by the Bangladeshi army (Rahman).<sup>8</sup> A national and international audience, including journalists and diplomats representing foreign embassies in Dhaka, attended the grand-scale inauguration ceremony of the reconstructed temples. It was an ample opportunity for the government to showcase its commitment to human rights,

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<sup>8</sup> Sheikh Hasina’s government (2009–2013) was the most Buddhism friendly of all Bangladeshi governments. It appointed Dilip Barua as the industry minister, the first ever Bengali Buddhist to enjoy such a government position. Barua was not even elected as a member of parliament (Bengali Buddhists are dispersed, lacking a unitary political constituency). He was Hasina’s handpicked appointment on the basis of Buddhist minority representation. Ironically, during her tenure, the Bengali Buddhist minority suffered from the worst religious violence, particularly the 2012 incident known as the “Ramu Violence.”



particularly religious freedom. Addressing the audience, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said,

The Ramu incident was a shame for all. *The interfaith harmony*, being nurtured for thousands of years, *should be preserved at any cost*. The situation was horrible and we could overcome it with united efforts of all . . . . Peace, friendship and harmony are our pride” [emphasis added]. (Daily Star)

Why does Sheikh Hasina think that interfaith harmony needs to be defended at any cost? The reconstruction of the temple cost her government hundreds of thousands of US dollars, if not millions. What is the political (perhaps even economic) stakes in defending or violating communal harmony and religious freedom? We may find the answers for these important questions in her 2014 address to a Buddhist audience.

By linking the 2012 Ramu violence to the Bangladesh National Party (BNP)—the opposition party with a political alliance with the Islamic fundamentalist political party Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami—Hasina complained,

BNP-Jamat activists . . . unleashed destructive acts in Ramu of Cox's Bazar in 2012 by torturing and damaging many religious establishments of the Buddhist community . . . . *Bangladesh's image was tainted* during the rule of BNP-Jamat alliance government from 2001-2006 *when minority people were killed, attacked, tortured* as well as their properties and religious establishments were destroyed in many parts of the country with *the state patronization* [emphasis added]. (Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha)

In addition to blaming the BNP for instigating the 2012 Ramu violence, an unproven political accusation, Hasina expressed two important

points: First, she portrayed the BNP as an anti-minority party because the latter formed the government (2001-2006) with the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami party that envisions an Islamic theocratic state in Bangladesh. Such a political alliance itself is “the state patronization” of violence against minorities, a point of distinction between her government and the previous BNP led government. The quick protection and compensation provided to the victims of the 2012 Ramu violence vindicated the Hasina government from the same accusation. Secondly, Hasina connected the treatment of minorities, particularly how a government treats its minorities, to the image of the country (Bangladesh).

I argue that this relation is the crux of the politics of religious minorities. To maintain a positive image of a country such as Bangladesh as a harmonious, peaceful, and inclusive society, is a political priority. This political priority, I contend, turns to become an economic priority in the context of Bangladesh, a country heavily dependent on the international community for aid.

Due to high, dense population, lack of enough natural resources, and susceptibility to natural disasters like cyclones and floods, Bangladesh is “widely characterized as an international basket case, and it became heavily dependent on foreign aid” (Haider 329). The Bangladesh government’s ministry of finance, particularly its economic relations division, reports that from independence in 1971 to June, 2013, the international community pledged over US \$81 billion to the Bangladesh government; however, the latter actually received only US \$59.3 billion (Economic Relations Division). This nearly US \$22 billion discrepancy between the commitment and the actual disbursement of foreign aid to Bangladesh derives from multiple factors, mainly the Bangladesh government’s performance in meeting or not meeting the accompanying foreign aid conditions.

Scholars who study the politics behind foreign aid find a correlation between good governance (that includes democracy and human rights) and the flow of foreign aid. They suggest, “the direction of foreign aid is dictated as much by political and strategic considerations, as by the economic needs and *policy performance of the recipients* [emphasis added]” (Alesina and Dollar 33). So, by receiving foreign aid, what are the policy performance or conditions that Bangladesh is expected to fulfill? Commitment to democratic governance stands out among the abiding conditions of foreign aid. Canada, Japan, Germany, the UK, and the USA are the biggest donor countries to Bangladesh (Haider 335). All of them expect, albeit in varying degrees, democratic institutions and good governance from their aid-receiving countries like Bangladesh. Canada, the UK, and the USA are at the high end of those expectations, while Japan and Germany are at a lesser degree (Alesina and Dollar 49).

In commenting on the correlation between democracy and foreign aid, Alesina and Dollar conclude that “we find that shocks to democracy are good predictors of shocks to aid” (52), and “there is clear trend for democratizers to get a substantial increase in assistance (50 percent on average)” (57). Honoring and defending human rights are integral parts of democracy and good governance. Religious freedom is one of the central tenets of human rights. From that perspective, it is no wonder that Bangladeshi politicians believe that “interfaith harmony . . . should be preserved at any cost,” (Daily Star) as it flags that Bangladesh is a harmonious, peaceful, and inclusive country with democratic good governance. Such a positive image is crucial for Bangladesh in attracting and sustaining foreign aid. In such an economic and political arena, state facilitation of Buddha-relic exchanges between the Bangladeshi Buddhist minority and their fellow Buddhist majorities certainly help the Bangladesh government to showcase its commitment to democracy, good governance, human rights and religious freedom.

### **Conclusion: The Insight of Politics of/on a Religious Minority**

In this article, I have discussed a few relic exchanges between Bangladeshi Buddhist minority and their Buddhist majority counterpart in Sri Lanka. Following the first East Pakistan-Ceylon Buddhist relic exchange in 1960, the Sri Lankan foreign minister received the Buddha's hair relic from his Bangladeshi counterpart in 2007. In his 2011 visit to Bangladesh, Sri Lankan President Rajapakse also accepted another few strands of the same hair relic from the head of Bangladesh Sangharaj monastic order. Unlike its 1960 and 2007 predecessor, the relic President Rajapakse received in 2011 was a "private" donation. These public and private donations represent Bangladeshi Buddhists' transnational networks with fellow majority Buddhists in Sri Lanka. These minority-majority exchanges of Buddhist relics remind us of the Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Buddhist connection. Such connections have generated spiritual inspiration, Buddhist educational opportunities, and Buddhist institutional support that have shaped the character of Buddhism in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Buddhist connection goes far back at least to the mid-nineteenth century; however, only for the last decade or so it has taken an overtly political character. The Buddhist relic exchanges that engaged high profile diplomats of both Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi governments illustrate that new development.

This development is precarious. Any minority's alliance with a particular political party may be damaging to the minority when that political party is not in power. It seems that Barua Buddhists are trying to mitigate that danger by building an alliance to the existing government rather than to a particular political party. Such a political move of the Buddhist minority suggests that it is the government, only if it wishes, could provide protection to religious minorities. It also indicates that such political strategy has become a necessary due to the fact that Bangladesh is increasingly becoming a minority-unfriendly country with the

rise of Islamic fundamentalism jeopardizing Bengali society's long-held character of communal harmony. As the 2012 Ramu atrocities illustrate, the survival of minority groups solely depends on in the hands of the existing government.

Historically, transnational Buddhist connections with majority Buddhists like the Sinhalese, the Burmese, and the Thais have helped Bengali Buddhists to strengthen and sustain the Buddhist character of the community. Such a relationship is becoming increasingly more challenging as Islamaphobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric are in the rise in those Buddhist majority countries. Therefore, Bangladeshi Buddhists' close connections with majority Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia seem to endanger their survival as a Buddhist minority, as their struggle to survive has been used by Buddhist conservative groups in Theravāda Buddhist majority countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand to justify their anti-Muslim movements.

For example, the Buddhist conservative group Bodu Bala Sena, which claims to represent and defend Buddhist "majority rights" in Sri Lanka, organized a public rally in Colombo on October 13, 2012 to condemn the 2012 Ramu violence against Buddhists in Chittagong. One of the posters at the rally rightly condemns "world Islamic terrorism." It portrays transnational Buddhist brotherhood with the Buddhist minority in Bangladesh. However, it does so with a twist, as the same poster reads in bold and bigger letters, "Today, Bangladesh . . . Next, Our Mother Land?"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The photo was taken by a friend who attended the rally, and it is used here with his permission.



The Buddhist majority's sympathy toward the Buddhist minority was overshadowed by the Bodu Bala Sena's anxiety about the radicalization of the Sri Lankan Muslim minority and their influence on Sri Lankan society. Such a Buddhist majority's politicization of the violence against a Buddhist minority makes the latter more vulnerable to such attacks. It is no coincidence that Bengali Buddhists suffered the worst religious violence in their history when the Muslim minority in Rakhine state complained about injustice and suffered atrocities at the hands of Rakhine Buddhist fundamentalists. In other words, the Buddhist minority in Bangladesh pays a price for the anti-Muslim injustice and atrocities in Buddhist majority countries. Violence against minorities in one country breeds similar violence in another country. What the Bangladeshi Prime Minister said below, at the inauguration of the reconstructed Buddhist temples destroyed by Muslim mobs, equally applies to Buddhist intolerant groups in Buddhist majority countries in the region:

As a Muslim-majority country, it is our responsibility to ensure security and safety of the minorities. If they are tortured here [Bangladesh], minority Muslims in other countries might face similar intimidation. (Daily Star)

That reveals the precarious existence of religious minorities within national boundaries of countries with rising religio-nationalism and fundamentalism. Within this context, the public minority-majority Buddhist relic exchanges discussed above seem to be counterproductive in achieving what the Buddhist minority in Bangladesh intended to achieve.

In my analysis of the exchanges, I have explained what motivated all three parties involved. Bangladeshi Buddhists received ritual artifacts, religious inspiration, and, more importantly, Buddhist educational assistance from the exchanges. However, the ways two other parties involved (the governments of Buddhist Sri Lanka and Muslim Bangladesh) benefit from the public exchanges of relics are not readily noticeable. For both governments, I have argued, the Buddhist relic exchanges were strategic means of public relations to boost their images of good governance. The act of receiving and distributing Buddhist relics internationally conjure up the image of what Blackburn calls “rightful rule” (319). Such political intent was neither explicitly expressed nor was it completely absent given the exchanges took place aligned with the 2011 Sambuddhattva Jayanthi celebration commissioned by Rajapakse government.

Similarly, the Bangladeshi government also emerged as a democratic state by facilitating the relic exchanges of its Buddhist minority. The image of a democratic state that honors human rights and religious freedom of minorities was constructed not necessarily for the Bangladeshi Muslim majority but rather for the international community, particularly donors of foreign aid to Bangladesh. Such a positive image is crucial in attracting and sustaining the flow of foreign aid. The Buddhist community, with less than 1 percent of the country’s population, lacks actual political clout; however, their status of religious minority seems to bear a symbolic economic stake for the Bangladeshi government as long as the latter heavily relies on foreign aid. Perhaps it was this eco-

conomic priority that propelled the Bangladesh government to protect the Buddhist minority and compensate them for the property damage caused by Muslim fanatics in 2012.

The preceding analysis of the Bangladeshi government's politics on a religious minority highlights the leverage the international community, particularly the donor countries and agencies, have on the protection of religious minorities in a foreign aid-receiving country like Bangladesh. Particularly bilateral foreign aid is an integral part of donor countries' foreign policy. Zaglul Haider asserts, "Foreign aid is an instrument of foreign policy, a means by which one nation exerts influence over other nations. Thus, *foreign aid policy is foreign policy* [emphasis added]" (337). The 1990s marks the rise of religious nationalism in many developing countries that receive foreign aid; such trends challenged the secular nationalism in those countries (Thomas 133). By declaring Islam as the state religion in 1988, Bangladesh has exemplified the trend. The declaration was the beginning of the Islamization of Bangladesh politics, which proliferated in the 1990s, resulting in an Islamic BNP-Jamat coalition government that ruled the country from 2001 to 2006. Exploring the connection between foreign policy and faith-based organizations, Scott Thomas believes that "finding out what it means to take cultural and religious pluralism seriously has become one of the most important aspects of international politics in the twenty-first century" (134).

A recent example from Canadian politics illustrates the challenge. The Canadian conservative government led by Stephen Harper (2006-2015) established the "Office of Religious Freedom" within its Foreign Affairs in February 2013. The mandates read that the Canadian office's role is to:

1. Protect and advocate on behalf of religious minorities under threat;
2. Oppose religious hatred and intolerance; and



### 3. Promote Canadian values of pluralism and tolerance abroad.

Although the Justin Trudeau's liberal government that came into power in November 2015 abolished the Canadian Office of Religious Pluralism in 2016,<sup>10</sup> the office's short-lived existence exemplifies how to take religious pluralism seriously in international politics. It brought *religious freedom*, rather than secularism, to the front and center of foreign policy. Such a move of donor countries like Canada could have given greater hope for the survival of all religious minorities in aid-receiving countries like Bangladesh.

My analysis of the Buddhist relic diplomacy indicates that the Bangladesh government has effectively used a religious minority to boost its image as a democratic state. The Hasina government's quick and effective response to the 2012 Ramu violence and inviting the foreign diplomats in the country to witness it suggests that donor countries—rather than fellow majority Buddhists in neighboring countries—could be the most effective allies of religious minorities in Bangladesh, a country that is increasingly becoming seized by Islamic fanaticism.

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<sup>10</sup> Despite of the abolition of the office, Canada's mandates remain the same (Freedom of Religion and Belief 2017).

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