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# Contesting Buddhisms on Conflicted Land: Sarvodaya Shramadana and Buddhist Peacemaking

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*Buddhism in its various incarnations has both aided and hindered the peace processes in Sri Lanka. Sarvodaya Shramadana, a Buddhist development organization, stands out in the way it uses religion to promote peace through a more humanist interpretation of Buddhist teachings. While Sarvodaya's alternative approach toward the religion provides an optimistic space for promoting peace, its connections to and dependence on populism can also complicate its politics. This article argues that the most effective means of peace work can be found through the same channel of collective mobilization that hindered it, Buddhism.*

**Key words:** *Buddhism, peace, Sarvodaya Shramadana, collective mobilization, populism*

We believe in one undivided Sri Lanka; we believe that without any discrimination to any race or religion, we in Sri Lanka can live together in a righteous society. We can build such a society! Ariyaratne (1989, p. 244)

In July of 1983, when the mostly Hindu Tamil population of Colombo and other major Sri Lankan cities were persecuted, killed, and expelled from their homes, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, the founder of Sarvodaya, took the risk of housing seventeen Tamil people in his own home. When a Sinhalese gang came to his house for the Tamil inhabitants, they found Dr. Ariyaratne's

daughter, who explained to them, "My parents' instructions are that if my father is here, he will have to be killed before any Tamil family member is touched. If my mother is here, she will die first. Now, as I am the oldest in the family and my parents are not home, I will have to die before you touch them" (Ingram, 1990, p. 128). The Sinhalese gang, recognizing the gravity of her words, apologized and left. A few days later, Ariyaratne published a statement chastising the nominative Buddhists who participated in and allowed the riots. He wrote:

For the ensuring of narrow political tribal, religious and economic gains should we be participants in the destroy[ing] of human qualities of kindness, truthfulness and justice—the patrimony of Sinhala Buddhists? To deviate from neutrality is against the Buddha's words 'Dammohave Rakkathi Dhammachari'. Should we deviate from the Dharma path and help to build a society that adulates violence, bribery, corruption? Should we reinforce a party system that ruptures the fabric of the Sinhala race? If we do not indulge in such a train of thought, nothing would be left of the Sinhala race and Buddhism. (2001, p. 834)

In his statement, he emphasized that the state of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was in crisis on account of the violence. If Sri Lanka had any hope for peace, its majority Sinhalese Buddhist population would have to return to its doctrinal and spiritual roots that recognized the sanctity of all life.

The story of Buddhism in Sri Lanka is both long and complex. In Sri Lanka, a country known today as the traditional home to Buddhism, the religion has transformed in many diverse ways. Since the introduction of Buddhism to the island in the third century BCE, the religion came under attack during the colonial period, was re-invigorated in the post-colonial era, and, subsequently, became politicized as a national project (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1998; Obeyesekere, 1991; Scott, 1999; Seneviratne, 1999; Tambiah, 1992).<sup>1</sup> Buddhism in one of its current incarnations has been implicated in an exclusive nationalist project that abstracted it from its spiritual identity. Buddhist Sinhalese nationalism, in conjunction with Tamil nationalism, has polarized the population of Sri Lanka

and has often justified the use of violence under the pretext of identity preservation.

Operating within this context is Sarvodaya Shramadana—a Buddhist development organization earnestly trying to apply Buddhist ideals and principles to its work in order to differentiate itself from the politicized forms of Buddhism in the country. Sarvodaya has participated in supporting Buddhism as an anti-imperialist project, yet it has also promoted Buddhism as an open, non-exclusive religion—making it popular among its majority Sinhalese constituency, while pushing them towards a more progressive ethnic perspective. While Sarvodaya's use of Buddhist principles in programs for general welfare can be extremely helpful, the Buddhist political agenda in Sri Lanka puts Sarvodaya in a delicate position. Sarvodaya's effort to maintain a strictly spiritual, humanized, and non-political Buddhist approach to its peace work is difficult in the context of high Buddhist politicization and a political conflict.

The Sri Lankan war, which ended in 2009, is best known for the tactics of terror employed by the Tamil insurgent group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and counter-insurgency warfare conducted by the Sri Lankan government. However, the conflict has much deeper roots seated in the greater consciousness of the population where ethnic animosity and fear has been brooding for decades.

In Sri Lanka, one peace solution comes in the form of Engaged Buddhism. The term "Engaged Buddhism" is applied to the use of Buddhist practices and principles to combat situations of oppression, marginalization, and suffering. Activists within this field are largely informed by Buddhist principles of nonviolence, interdependence, and inward meditation and reflection (Jones, 1989; Queen & King, 1996). Currently, the scholarship on Engaged Buddhism within Sri Lanka has focused on grassroots connections and holistic peacemaking (Almeida, 2008; Ariyaratne, 1978; Bond, 2004; Macy, 1985). Engaged Buddhism, as operated by Sri Lankan grassroots-oriented Sarvodaya Shramadana, establishes itself in direct contrast to international interventionist approaches, making it more appealing to the Sri Lankan populace. Sarvodaya is a very large and encompassing organization whose work extends far beyond the scope of nominative peacemaking activities. Although Sarvodaya mostly focuses on development,

it adopted an identity as a peace organization when it directed its efforts towards addressing the escalating ethnic conflict in the 1970s. Since this shift in focus, it has won numerous peace awards. In the realm of peacemaking, Sarvodaya provides an intriguing vernacularized and popular model that incorporates the often-ignored aspects of spirituality into its work.

Sarvodaya has called itself, among other things, a social movement. This self-identification comes from their commitment to envisioning change through mobilizing the grassroots, marginal, and/or subaltern populations. Academic trends within the social movement field have placed a large emphasis on studying movements in terms of collective identity and alternative forms of resistance within new sites of conflict (Kelley, 1993; Melucci, Keane, & Mier, 1989). Within the discussion, theorists such as Alberto Melucci have argued that resistance within the realm of conventional political channels can limit the scope of social movements, and that new sites of resistance provide metapolitical challenges to modernity (Melucci et al., 1989). James Scott extended this concept to the "infrapolitical" level through his explanation of a "hidden transcript" of a subtle dissident political culture in which larger issues of hegemony can be challenged by small acts of everyday unorganized resistance (Scott, 1985, 1990). In this sense, social movement approaches towards peacemaking can both center on goals of institutional change, yet have also recently shifted to validate a more decentralized, identity-oriented approach towards change-making that widens the concept of socio-political citizenship (Escobar & Alvarez, 1992). While large parts of the peace process will depend on political and governmental change, a change within the rest of the population is also necessary to reinforce an infrastructure conducive to maintaining peace. The conflict in Sri Lanka is not only an elite-centered case of insurgency and counter-insurgency, the conflict also has popular participation, and popular consent. For this reason, Sarvodaya's work with the grassroots populations is extremely important to the equation of peace work in Sri Lanka.

## Nationalist Buddhist Activism in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka

In the post-colonial years, Buddhist activism became mostly synonymous with pro-Sinhalese activism. A prominent instance of this can be traced to 1956-1958 when the Sri Lankan political elite drafted a new constitution for the country. In 1958, the government tried engaging in the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact, which would have instituted more linguistically equal options for its constituents. One of the first monastic political parties, the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna (EBP), or "United Front of Monks," led rallies at the state building with other monks and put up a strong resistance to the pact, claiming that it would denigrate the role of the Sinhalese. Some monks claimed that it would "lead to the total annihilation of the Sinhalese race" (Tambiah, 1992, p. 50). The monks organized marches from the capital to the most prominent temples, participated in sit down protests, and were known to have been involved in anti-Tamil riots. The activism was successful to the point that the pact was dissolved, and subsequently Tamil was excluded from future legislation establishing significant barriers between the Tamil constituency and the Sri Lankan government.

As tensions between Tamil and Sinhalese people were exacerbated and violence between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government intensified, political Buddhist monks also intensified their own activism. Often these monks based their arguments on Sinhalese protectionism and against making any concessions to the LTTE or Tamil people (Seneviratne, 1999; Tambiah, 1992). An interesting debate that grew during the increasing violence between the government and the LTTE was that of "just war." While Buddhism is considered to be a peaceful and non-violent religion, Sri Lankan monks during this time began to back the anti-LTTE violence using Buddhist principles to support their politics. Some monks, such as the Venerable Professor Bellanwila, explained that sometimes war is inevitable. Others, such as the Venerable Athurliye Rathana, crafted comparisons of the LTTE to Hitler, explaining that *maï-triya*, or compassion alone, is not sufficient to eradicate evil (Frydenlund, 2005).

More recently, Buddhist monks have organized to create their own influential political party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) in 2004. Described by Iselin Frydenlund (2005) as a "protest party," (p. 14) the JHU advocated for Sinhalese rights and policies privileging Sinhalese Buddhists on the island. The monks, characterizing themselves as the protectors of Buddhism, ground their views in spiritually authoritative texts. During the 2006 Norway-facilitated peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, many monks, including the JHU, protested what they interpreted as a process ultimately aimed to disempower the Sinhalese. During these processes, monks staged demonstrations in front of the state building and at local religious sites, with actions ranging from sit-down protests to burning the Norwegian flag.

There have been no studies specifically gauging the politics of Sri Lankan monks. However, Frydenlund's (2005) survey of monks' views of the conflict showed that many monks theoretically supported notions of state decentralization, but felt threatened by a federal political solution that could offer more opportunities for Tamil self-representation. He also found that the majority of the activism performed by Buddhist monks was actually done against Tamil interests. Incidentally, those who fought for Tamil interests cited political, rather than religious, reasons. As Seneviratne (1999) reflected on the irony of the majority of monk political allegiances, "[W]hen the idea of a political solution is suggested to replace this slaughter [of the conflict], the chief monks who oppose it are more numerous than the bearers of arms" (p. 280).

While it is impossible to make general claims about all Buddhist political ideology in the country, a prominent theme is pro-Sinhalese activist work.<sup>2</sup> This may more of a reflection of the political situation and the historical connections between Sinhalese nationalism and the religion than with religious doctrine in itself. Many monks, out of their responsibility to their constituents, felt the need to engage in issues of social justice. In Sri Lanka, where the ethnic conflict has colonized the domain of politics,<sup>3</sup> monks seeking to be active have been funneled into Sinhalese nationalist causes. Monks responding to the needs of their constituents risk adopting populist politics, even when those politics may contradict certain aspects of their religion.

It could be seen that populism, which can be easily hijacked in multiple directions, may be the strongest factor motivating monks to campaign in the interest of Sinhalese nationalism. While this form of Buddhism has many adherents, there is another form of Buddhism that offers an alternative view. Following is the story of an organization that tries to inform its practices with Buddhist spiritual ideology rather than with the Buddhist political identity.

### Sarvodaya's Buddhist Activism in Sri Lanka

The story of Sarvodaya, while maintaining many Sinhala Buddhist traditionalist themes, has shown an interesting deviation from the mainstream Sinhala nationalist narrative. Sarvodaya tries to demonstrate that it is an organization built along Buddhist ethics, spirituality, and principals, not one that condones a harmful and exclusive Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. Emerging from an anti-colonial Sinhalese nationalist tradition, Sarvodaya tried to differentiate itself by applying its traditionalist Buddhist rhetoric to projects encouraging inclusivity. From the moment of its inception in the 1950s, Sarvodaya demonstrated this inclusivity through its extension of projects to Tamil areas where it hired Tamil leadership, and later through its peace and dialogue projects.

George Bond (1996) wrote that Sarvodaya was able to reappropriate Sinhala nationalism as a more ecumenical cause given its ability to "cleans[e] it [Sinhalese nationalism] of racial claims for the superiority of the Sinhalese" (p. 133). They achieve this through emphasizing the strength and power of Sri Lankans, rather than of the Sinhalese alone. Carrying some elements of Sinhalese traditional nationalism,<sup>4</sup> Sarvodaya leadership also tends to romanticize the pre-colonial past and strives for the aesthetics of the rural village unblemished by today's materialism. This traditional nationalism helps explain why Sarvodaya has gained popularity among its Buddhist constituency, and also demonstrates the ways in which Sarvodaya has evolved as a product of its context.

Sarvodaya, starting purely as a development organization in the 1950s, located its first project in a village of low caste people who previously had been shunned by their local society. In an



effort to validate the agency of the villagers while helping the population develop, Sarvodaya engaged in a local participatory voluntary work program. This program later expanded nationwide to include Tamil and Muslim areas. Now, Sarvodaya is one of the largest development organizations in the country, with a network of over 15,000 villages (Ariyaratne, 2008). In every area where Sarvodaya has programs, the leadership is almost always local and representative of the people who are being helped. When the ethnic tensions of Sri Lanka escalated in the 1970s and 1980s, Sarvodaya quickly emerged as one of the leading peace-oriented organizations. Recognizing the Buddhist principle of interrelatedness, Sarvodaya leaders felt that the engagement in peace was crucial to its investment in development. Accordingly, Dr. Ariyaratne, the organization's founder, initiated further programs of dialogue and exchange. In the months leading to the racial riots of 1983, Dr. Ariyaratne took special measure to encourage exchange programs between youth of the conflicting groups, and to participate directly in discussions of peace with the Tamil population.

It was the violent riots of 1983 that placed Sarvodaya in the public eye as one of the firmest advocates of peace. On July 23, 1983, Dr. Ariyaratne, once aware of the violence plaguing his immediate surroundings, mobilized areas of protection for the Tamil victims within twenty-four hours, sheltering some in his own home. Additionally, he published strong statements condemning the violence, and later organized large interfaith and interethnic meetings to brainstorm options for pursuing peace. Within the aftermath of the violence, Ariyaratne was the first Sinhalese leader to visit the Tamil refugee camps in the north of the country to offer condolences and donations for their recovery (personal communication, Devanesan Nesiah, Summer, 2009).

In the decades since the riots, Sarvodaya bolstered its existent peace programs. Its approaches towards peace range from dialogue and exchange to meditation and peace walks. Sarvodaya's dialogue and exchange programs have been aimed at all sectors of the population from more powerful politicians to rural youth. Its youth program, "Shanthi Sena," focuses both on dialogue and connecting people from areas in conflict through local four-day amity camps. The program has

been active since the 1970s and currently has a membership of over 86,000 youth. The Shanthi Sena program, like many of Sarvodaya's initiatives, does not focus strictly on nominative peace projects. The youth also are trained in leadership, mediation, and first aid. Sarvodaya's "5R" program, based largely in the North and East, approaches peace work as a multifaceted project based in "relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction, reconciliation, and reawakening." The success of Sarvodaya's multi-layered peace projects depends largely on its connections to its larger network of self-governance and development.

In order to tap into more spiritual sides of peace work, Sarvodaya organized mass peace marches around the country and large conferences including over 2000 people. Twice, it has organized mass peace meditations which have demonstrated its impressive ability to mobilize large groups of people. Its most recent mass meditation in 2002 brought together 650,000 people at Sri Lanka's ancient capital, Anuradhapura, to meditate with spiritual leader Deepak Chopra.

As Ariyaratne noted, "people can write entire books about Buddhism and Sarvodaya" (personal communication, Summer, 2009) as almost every aspect of the organization has been built with Buddhist principles in mind. Ariyaratne explained that the organization is especially focused on the Four Brahma Viharas ("divine abidings" or positive conditions of being) as its "guiding principles" (2001, p. 467).<sup>5</sup> In terms of peace, these principles interact with two prominent elements of Buddhism in their ability to inform Sarvodaya's peace activism. The first relates to the Buddhist notion of self and interdependency. The second pertains to action and the concept of ahimsa, or non-violence. Both work together in the context of Sarvodaya to help pursue a sustainable peace in the country.

The Buddhist notion of self can first be informed by the concept of anattā, or selflessness. Selflessness can be interpreted in several different ways. In one way anattā can be seen as nonattachment, and the absence of selfishness. Another way addresses the myth of self and questions the hardened categories of an individual and collective identity. The way to conceptualize the idea of anattā is to examine the ways in which the individual is distinguished from others. Nhat Hanh and Kotler (1987) explained the interrelated quality of the self through the

term, "interbeing" which he took from the Avatamsaka Sutra. Through this notion of interbeing, the particularity of the self also reflects the universality of its connection to all beings and entities.

Someone, by using the concept of anattā to inform her own definition of self, is compelled to rethink the way she is distinguished from others. If the self is inherently interrelated and dependent on other people, then personal welfare is also dependent on the welfare of others. On the individual level, this means that a person's happiness is predicated on the happiness of her neighbor. On the collective level, it questions the distinction between one group and another (e.g. Tamil and Sinhalese groups). The removal of socially constructed divisions allows for the development of new concepts of self, self-protection, and inclusivity. If one group is separated from the other in terms of hardened categories, it is easy to see welfare as a zero-sum game wherein the power of one group depends on the disempowerment of another. The concept of anattā unsettles the notion of competition for prosperity. It both exposes humanity as a large interrelated group, and questions the notions of boundaries as they appear (Galtung, 1993). As Ariyaratne explained, an acceptance of the concept of anattā has a liberatory quality that can lend towards more peaceful thinking. Ariyaratne wrote, "in that highly evolved state of a living being called 'human,' there is a potential to free the mind from narrow barriers of family, race, color, religion, national borders and fragmented ideologies" (1980, p. 78). This is apparent in the case of Sri Lankan identity formation and mobilization where scholars, such as Valentine Daniel (1996), see the conflict in similar terms:

[O]ne way of understanding the current violence on the island is to see it as a check on the narcissistic expansiveness of infantile impulses, impulses that fail to recognize that the whole world is not one's own and that all of being is not encompassed within the boundaries of an ever-expanding identity. (p. 68)

Sarvodaya's attempts to break away from exclusionist identities and to construct a more fluid sense of self delegitimizes the psychological foundations of war.

Obeysere (1991) argued for a humanist Buddhism with a conscience that can communicate more effectively to the Sri Lankan heart, rather than the head. Through this conscience, the Sri Lankan populace can break down societally constructed barriers and develop compassion for others. Sarvodaya, in its engagement of *anattā*, discourages the fashioning of differences between the Sinhalese and Tamil participants in order to encourage Sarvodaya members to resist discriminating against each other and recognize their common identities and needs. When asked what his thoughts were about the Sri Lankan president declaring that minorities did not exist in Sri Lanka,<sup>6</sup> a peace program leader expressed, "No minorities is a very good idea ... Now Sri Lanka only has Sri Lankan people. This is a very good philosophy" (personal communication, Summer, 2009). While the president's attempt at a rhetorical erasure of minorities has many problematic political implications, the leader's optimistic interpretation of the statement reflects a genuine effort to impart the belief of *anattā* onto the situation. This enthusiasm for supporting the "no minorities" stance of the president was reflected by the majority of the Sarvodaya staff in interviews conducted for this paper. To them, this idea of "no minorities," rather than discounting the diversified experiences of people in the country, discouraged people from thinking of each other in terms of their racialized collective identities, but rather in terms of their common humanity and their shared investment in a peaceful future.

The overwhelming support of the president's statement, however, also highlights tensions within the interpretation of *anattā*. It complicates the notion of one-ness in comparison to same-ness. Whereas a universalism reflected in policies of equal protection and access can demonstrate a support of unity, there is also the risk of unity becoming an oppressive project of appropriation, codification, and forced conformity to certain prescribed norms. This could easily allow people a way to avoid dealing with issues of past discrimination and issues of redistribution. In the case of Sri Lanka, ideas of unity and oneness have tended towards echoing majoritarian Sinhala-normative sentiments, in which a Sri Lankan identity is overtly or more subtly equated with the Sinhalese identity. Specifically in the case of the President's speech, it was understood that while ethnic minorities no longer existed, those

who were not considered patriotic enough would be chastised as the new "minority." While Sarvodaya's higher leadership has been clearer in its cautious interpretations of majoritarian-dominated unity, it is not always reflected further down the leadership structure.

Another important aspect of Sarvodaya's peace activism is the concept *ahimsa*. *Himsa* translates to violence or harm and indicates its negation. Thus, *ahimsa* is most commonly translated to the term "nonviolence." Dr. Ariyaratne has many ways of interpreting violence, which then leads to a broad interpretation of *ahimsa*. Dr. Ariyaratne explained that violence can be enacted by citizens of the government as well as by organizations such as the LTTE. Additionally, violence can manifest in terms of the poverty in the country. Dr. Ariyaratne thus included notions of structural and cultural violence in his conception of violence and the process of fighting it. Structural violence can be interpreted as the mechanisms of institutional coercion that prevent people from aspiring towards their potential (Galtung, 1965).<sup>7</sup> Poverty constitutes structural violence because it creates conditions where people's investment in their own survival forces them to into situations of conflict. In trying to diminish violence, Dr. Ariyaratne has worked to combat the poverty of the country as well as the psychological factors encouraging people to become physically violent towards each other. He called this building a "psychological" and a "spiritual infrastructure." Other manifestations of structural violence can be interpreted as inequitable power structures. Engaged Buddhist theorist Ken Jones (1989) explained that addressing structural and cultural violence can be interpreted to be the core of Engaged Buddhism. He wrote, "To see only the violence of those who, in desperation, answer intolerable institutional coercion with overt violence is to become party to the hypocrisy of established power" (Jones, p. 146).

It is generally accepted amongst the Engaged Buddhist scholars that the genesis of ostensible outer peace is inner peace. The belief is that if one is inwardly peaceful, she or he will be able to interact non-violently with the outer world. In this sense, the inner cultivation of peace is also an essential part of practicing *ahimsa* (Bond, 2004). Conversely, violence in one's mind also can condone or lead to external violence.

Vietnamese non-violent Buddhist activist Nhat Hanh wrote, "We usually think that killing occurs in the domain of the body, but a fanatical mind can cause the killing of not just one, but millions of human beings" (cited in Sivaraksa, 2005, p. 15). Sarvodaya works to cultivate inward peace so as to prevent outside violence before it starts. This explains the emphasis it places on group meditation programs and small-scale amity camps. Thus while meditation programs might not overtly address issues of structural inequalities and injustice, they address a deeper part of humanity—hopefully preventing the very thought processes that lead to structural and physical violence.

This interpretation can inform the practice of ahimsa in terms of politics as well. The relationship of Sarvodaya's politics to peace is significant because of the political nature of peace work in the country. Violence comes about through many different factors: some are merely psychological, yet others are related to institutional and structural coercion. The political structures and practices of the country, such as majoritarian governance, have led to both state and extra-state violence. Accordingly, while undertaking the project of individual transformation is an important factor of fighting violence, it is also essential to understand and address the structural issues. Sarvodaya's relationship to politics becomes quite complicated in light of the way Sarvodaya vocally chooses not to align itself with specific political parties and policies. In his essay, "Weaving Peace from Bottom-up," (2008) Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne explained that while implementing the principles of non-party political power and seeking participatory politics and democratic self-governance, Sarvodaya creates a constructive, non-violent and peaceful power influence at the national level, including moral power, meditation power, and people power (p. 5).

Here, we see that Sarvodaya tries to establish change while avoiding the institutions of party politics which have often been major sources of violence in the country. Within this excerpt, politics is framed in two ways. The first is in terms of "party politics"—often a corrupt and violence-perturbed arena that has not seen much progress in terms of the conflict. The second is "participatory politics"—a political model Sarvodaya

supports because of its connection to grassroots empowerment and its ability to allot agency to populations beyond the elite.

Sarvodaya's decision to step away from larger issues of politics can be interpreted in two opposing ways. In one way, its divorce from party politics contrasts it to the long history of Buddhist actors in the country that have associated themselves with politics, often to pursue and support projects of exclusive Sinhalese nationalism. As discussed before, the engagement of Buddhist monks in elections, campaigning against more inclusive policies towards the Tamil population, and recently in their establishment of their own political party, all are examples of ways in which the engagement of Buddhists in politics has even hurt the peace process. Sarvodaya, by not engaging in politics, also distances itself from this form of contaminated Buddhism. Sarvodaya stands as a quiet model of an ecumenical and inclusive Buddhism unhindered by the binds of politics.

Additionally, by not involving itself in politics, Sarvodaya protects itself from undue governmental attack. Acting primarily as a large development organization, Sarvodaya interacts with the Sri Lankan government through multiple organizational and financial channels. In many areas of its operation, the organization depends on governmental cooperation in order to fund its projects and gain access to certain areas. While Sarvodaya has a history of cooperation with the government, it also has a history in which it has been persecuted by the government. Its large share of non-political power with a network of over 15,000 villages has already made it seem quite menacing to the government, and it has been the victim of multiple governmental campaigns (Perera, Marasinghe, & Jayasekera, 1992).

Due to its large constituency and encouragement of non-governmental autonomy, Sarvodaya first came under government suspicion for unproven issues such as corruption and funding in the 1970s (Perera, Marasinghe, & Jayasekera, 1992). In 1980, the Volunteer Service Organization Registration and Supervision Act required Sarvodaya and all other NGO organizations to register with the government and share information about its funding and its activities. In 1990, Sarvodaya became one of the largest targets of the inquiry of a presidential NGO investigation in which leaders within the organization were

continually questioned by the government and taken into custody for up to six months. During this time, Sarvodaya lost government support of several of its programs, and was blacklisted by UNESCO. The government encouraged newspapers, especially through the government-run "Lake House" publishing company, to write stories slandering the organization. In 1992, when Sarvodaya won the Niwano peace prize, the Sri Lankan ambassador to Japan tried to discourage the organization from giving Ariyaratne the prize. It has been speculated that the government targeted Sarvodaya because it viewed Dr. Ariyaratne as a political threat. Nonetheless, this forever shaped the relationship between the government and Sarvodaya, making its leader more adamant that he would stay far away from politics, and the organization was strongly warned by the government of the repercussions that awaited it if it were to pose any challenges. Rather than playing within the dangerous realm of politics, it chooses to make the most change possible outside of it.

However, the lack of engagement in politics also has some unintended consequences. Sarvodaya's lack of participation in overtly questioning the government's role in both systems of violence and coercion could also be seen as indirectly legitimating governmental violence. While Sarvodaya literature reflects the beliefs of its leaders that violence has been committed both by the state and by extra-governmental people and organizations, there still is a gesture in the direction of military legitimization. This can be seen further back in Sarvodaya literature, where Sarvodaya commanders have suggested that Sarvodaya youth volunteers be prepared to enter the army (Ariyaratne, 2001). This appeared more recently with Sarvodaya staff who, in interviews, unanimously heralded the 2009 military victory of the government over the LTTE as a great step forward without voicing much concern for the violence committed by the government or the current/past treatment of minorities, such as the conditions of the Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps (Amnesty International, 2009), or allegations of war crimes (Permanent People's Tribunal, 2010; United Teachers for Human Rights, 2009). While in principal the notion of ahimsa plays a large role in Sarvodaya ideology, many Sri Lankans still find difficulty with the concept of just war in understanding their own politics towards



minority rights or governmental minority concessions. This brings about questions of how “engagement” works within Engaged Buddhism. Does engagement require a certain disengagement from politics, or does it require further participation, even at the expense of endangering one’s own existence?

The multiple challenges within the politics of peace have placed Sarvodaya in a delicate position in terms of peace work. As seen through its work, it tries to build a “psychological” and “spiritual infrastructure” among the Sri Lankan population that reconceptualizes identity in ways that will make adherents more caring and invested in the well-being of others. To add to the difficulty of being associated with politicized Buddhism, the organization is placed under strict scrutiny by a paranoid government to which it is already indebted through their collaborative projects to help the Sri Lankan populace. Sarvodaya, recognizing that peace work is only one aspect of a largely intertwined project of social uplift, also has many other projects that do not relate directly to the ethnic conflict. Similar to the delicate position Sri Lankan monks have been placed in, Sarvodaya’s responsibility to its large network of predominantly Sinhalese people complicates its dedication to ahimsa in regards to the minorities in the country. Populism and progressive conflict politics clash and the way to navigate through the disagreement is not clear. As a result of the delicate political situation, Sarvodaya is able to vaguely allude to the specific changes needed to alter the inequitable social structure, but cannot make controversial claims without further quivering the tightrope strung up by the complicated politics of its situation.

### The Benefits and Challenges of Populism

In a country where the majority of society identifies as Buddhist, the type of Buddhism followed becomes an important factor in the pursuit of peace. Both Sarvodaya Shramadana and the Sri Lankan monks will eventually have to come to terms with the way they navigate the populist elements of their religion. The monks’ investment in populism arrives from their commitment to care for the interests of their constituents. Sarvodaya’s investment in populism comes from its mission of prioritizing the agency of the grassroots

organizations. In the case of peace, Sarvodaya makes a large effort to demonstrate that the people, too, can be a part of the peace process. Ariyaratne (1989) explained that Sarvodaya is trying to "increase the space available for the people to participate in a lasting peace process without peacemaking remaining a monopoly of a few privileged groups circumscribed by their limited concept of peace" (p. 146). It is evident in Ariyaratne's statements regarding peace work that he closely links the process to his goals of smaller governance and to the demopolization of the general governing apparatus. Working outside the contours of elitist politics provides larger opportunities for participatory state building, making the constituents more apt to locate their own role within peace work.

A difficulty, then, is for Sarvodaya to form a strong and consistent ideological front with control over its own projects that extends from its central leadership to its more distanced constituents in light of its efforts to prioritize grassroots empowerment. While its leaders may have very clear ideas about the problematic aspects of all violence, state legitimated and otherwise, the same politics may become diluted further down. This means that no matter what is written in Sarvodaya literature, its mostly Sinhalese employees, and majority Sinhalese Buddhist constituents may still look out for Sinhalese interests in political rather than spiritual ways. This is especially the case when Sarvodaya members must decide how to interact with a government that seems to prioritize mostly Sinhalese Buddhist interests. Sarvodaya emphatically discourages extra-governmental violence—which may serve to discourage another ethnic riot. However, the ambiguity of governmental morality in terms of the conflict continues. Through Sarvodaya's programs, members might learn to prevent themselves from being violent to other minorities on the island, but they still may condone violence when performed as a governmental maneuver of righteousness.

While Sarvodaya's multiple and intertwining projects encounter many questions, its peace work highlights some that are particularly relevant: How can it use its own Buddhist ideology to pursue peace without letting Buddhism's historical political identity make its religious identity reign imperial within its projects? Does its decision to not engage in politics separate it from the communalistic Buddhism in the

country, or does it allow Sarvodaya to quietly condone state actions while it tries to pursue greater change through outside channels? As Sarvodaya is such a large, popular, and populist organization, its actions have implications far beyond its headquarters. In fact, the uniqueness of its work can set the tone of possibility for most peace-oriented civil society in Sri Lanka and the world. Similarly, by not considering issues of power, privilege, and political urgency, it risks narrowing the field of possibility for others.

However, Sarvodaya's connection to such a large portion of the Sri Lankan demographic places it in a prime position to change their mentality. In this sense, populism, which could be perceived as a challenge to Sarvodaya's peace work, can also be its greatest strength. Identifying as a social movement, but in light of its persecution by the government, Sarvodaya has worked at the grassroots level—focusing on changing the ways society perceives the conflict, and accordingly their own actions within it. Through the far reaches of its programs, the diversity of its projects, its connections to Sri Lankans of almost every demographic, its reputation of caring for peace, and its ability to mobilize large masses of people, it provides one of the strongest spaces of potential to realize Obeyesekere's (1991) concept of a humanized, heart-centered Buddhism. How far they can take this humanized Buddhism within the space of the political Sri Lankan context is largely up to them.

As Escobar and Alvarez (1992) explained, struggles focusing on daily life rather than on changing governmental policies also deserve to be recognized for their transformative qualities. They wrote that these struggles show the "... intersection of processes of articulating meaning through practices, on the one hand, and macro processes of domination, on the other ..." and furthermore, "... struggles over meanings at the level of daily life ... are the basis of contemporary social movements" (p. 71). In this sense, Sarvodaya, by engaging itself in multifaceted and spiritually focused peace projects, has the ability to infuse its conceptions of peace into the minds of its constituents at the level of daily life. In this way, it is an actor in a larger project. Sarvodaya challenges the concept of violence as an acceptable norm and pushes for its participants to adopt more peaceful ways of interacting with each other. While this does not always directly address the political implications of

the conflict, it does locate an avenue of peace work within the political opportunity structure of the conflict (Tarrow, 1994). Considering the political opportunities and constraints in the political and historical context, Sarvodaya is able to mobilize around the resources and political opportunities opened to them.

It can be seen that when stuck in such a precarious position, Sarvodaya is doing remarkable work as a Buddhist organization. Operating with a predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist demographic, it has Sinhalese normative tendencies, but tries hard to perform through the good will of a spirituality that comes from Buddhism, but does not impose it. Because the question of peace inevitably includes politics, a non-political religious peace project is quite a challenging aspiration. However, by planting the seeds of peace in the minds of the Sri Lankan people, Sarvodaya strives towards cultivating a new Sri Lanka ready to move past the conflict.

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#### (Endnotes)

1. Though, as Anne Blackburn (2010) points out in *Locations of Buddhism*, the trajectory of Buddhism in the country is certainly not linear. Many elements of nationalism and ritual maintain continuous ties throughout its history of the island.
2. There have also been Buddhist monks that have worked for minority rights. An extraordinary example is a counter-rally partially organized by the All Lanka Bhiku Organization against a nationalist Buddhist rally in 1997. The counter-rally, which boasted of over twice the amount of attendance than the former rally, was conducted in three languages, and donated two truck-loads of coconuts to the mostly Tamil North-East of the country (Abeysekara, 2008). Unfortunately this type of activism is not typical and less documented.
3. In the 1800s, monks were more involved in anti-colonial movements as evidenced in the monk rebellions of 1818, 1834, and 1848. Later, in the early 1900s, monks were more active in leftist labor activism, seen in their participation in the general strike of

1923 and the Harbor strike of 1927. It was only later, that Sinhala nationalism became such a strong theme in monk political work (Tambiah, 1992).

4. The Sinhala Buddhist national consciousness has several main themes: a romanticization of the pre-colonial past of the island, where Sri Lankans were able to tend to their agricultural projects in an atmosphere of unadulterated Buddhist simplicity. In modern times, this is coupled with the frustration with the current situation influenced by the capitalist and industrialized influences of colonialism and globalization.

5. "1. Metta—Respecting life and having loving-kindness for all, 2. Karuna—Looking at the causes of suffering and employing various progressive measures to eliminate them, 3. Muditha—Witnessing the joy of others and being happy (Nissarana joy), 4. Upekkha—Developing equanimity and depth of thought, and facing the eight fold path [steps toward right action] courageously" (Ariyaratne, 2001, p. 467).

6. On May 9, 2009, the Sri Lankan government claimed victory in the protracted conflict through their massacre of LTTE leaders, including the infamous Velupillai Prabhakaran. In his widely quoted speech following the military victory, the Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapaksa rhetorically attempted to inaugurate Sri Lanka into a post-identity era in a frequently quoted speech: We have removed the word minorities from our vocabulary three years ago. No longer are the Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and any others minorities. There are only two peoples in this country. One is the people that love this country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth. Those who do not love the country are now a lesser group. (Rajapaksa, 2009)

7. It is worth noting that Galtung is also affiliated with Sarvodaya. He has made several visits to the Sarvodaya headquarters and published a book on Buddhism and Peace through Sarvodaya's publishing company. Sarvodaya's 2003-2004 annual report states, "Addressing the gathering, Prof. Galtung stated that the foundation for universal peace as well as lasting peace in Sri Lanka can be found in the Sarvodaya philosophy and that everyone in the country should cooperate with Sarvodaya so as to translate this philosophic context into action to achieve permanent peace" (Sarvodaya Shramadana, 2004, p. 77).