



Heritage at Crossroads: Unveiling Neo-Tamil Buddhist Awakening in Jaffna Peninsula

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Abstract: The Jaffna Peninsula, located in Northern Sri Lanka, has long been recognized for its rich cultural heritage. However, recent incidents have revealed the emergence of a Neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening. This awakening signifies the resurgence of Tamil individuals embracing Buddhism as their religious and cultural identity, which has sparked conflicts affecting the region's precious heritage. Therefore, this study aims to understand the deeper aspects of this complex ethno-nationalistic narrative, exploring its causes, impacts, and implications for Jaffna's heritage. This study reveals the historical and contemporary factors that have led to the Neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening in Jaffna and will examine the socio-cultural consequences of this awakening on the local community and their religious practices. Furthermore, this study examines the conflicts that arise from the coexistence of Hindu and Buddhist cultures in Jaffna and their impact on the preservation of heritage. As the methodology of this study employs a mixed-methods approach. Interviews with residents, community leaders, and religious scholars will be conducted to gather qualitative insights into the Neo-Tamil Buddhist Awakening. Additionally, surveys and statistical analysis were utilized to quantify the extent of conflicts affecting heritage preservation. Preliminary findings suggest that the Neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening in Jaffna is influenced by a variety of factors, including historical legacies, socio-political developments, and personal spiritual quests. The socio-cultural impacts of this awakening on the Jaffna community have been significant, leading to both positive changes in interfaith understanding and negative consequences such as tensions and divisions. Conflicts arising from heritage preservation are multifaceted, involving challenges in maintaining the sanctity of existing heritage sites while accommodating new religious practices. In conclusion, this research study strives to shed light on the Neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening in Jaffna, examining its causes, consequences, and conflicts affecting the heritage of the region. By understanding these dynamics, it is hoped that this research can contribute to promoting interfaith harmony and facilitating sustainable heritage conservation in Jaffna.

Keywords: Ethno-nationalism, Heritage preservation, Neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening

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INTRODUCTION

The Jaffna Peninsula, located in northern Sri Lanka, is known for its rich cultural heritage and as a center of Tamil civilization. Historically, the region has been predominantly a region of people following Hinduism. According to some ancient texts, other religions such as Buddhism and Jainism also spread over there (Harris 2019). In the colonial period, Roman Catholicism and Christianity and their different chapters spread their ideologies among the Jaffna people by using different kinds of strategies (Suseendrarajah 1980). According to the manuscripts or colonial reports, could not be identified that does not provide evidence of the gradual development of Buddhism or Jainism over the Jaffna peninsula. However, after civil war witnessed the emergence of a distinct neo-Tamil Buddhist movement among the Tamil community in the Jaffna peninsula. This article aims to explore the origins and implications of this awakening, examining the interplay between heritage preservation, religious revival, and ethnic identity in the region.

METHODS

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, ethnographic research, and textual interpretation. Primary sources include interviews with key figures within the neo-Tamil Buddhist movement, as well as observations of religious ceremonies and practices. Also, this study has used a mixed-method approach to collect the data and analyze the collected data. Secondary sources comprise scholarly works, archival records, and media reports. In the conceptual framework of this study, a fundamental theoretical examination of the four notions of power, ethnonationalism, contested heritage, and territorialism has been used to understand the behavior of the Neo-Tamil Buddhist Awakening in the Jaffna Peninsula.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Context

There are two different regions where mainly Tamils live as a majority. Tamil Nadu in Peninsula India is one of the most Tamil populated areas in the world and secondly, the Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka is the highest Tamil population live as a majority in one particular region. Most of the Tamils believe in Hinduism but some of them follow Buddhism, Christianity, etc. The history of Tamil Buddhism in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the 3rd Century BCE. There are a number of cave inscriptions have mentioned '*Demeḍa Samana*' (Tamil Bhikku), and '*Demeḍa Upaśka*' (Tamil lay devotee) that gave their properties to Sangha (EZ. v:242). Some inscriptions have mentioned South Indian invaders who were patrons of Buddhist Temples in the Anuradhapura Period (EZ. iv:113,114; EZ.iii:218). The decline of Buddhism in the region coincided with the rise of Hinduism, brought by invading Chola forces. This transition led to a period of cultural assimilation and the dominance of Hindu religious practices. Following Sri Lanka's independence, a discourse on Tamil nationalism gained momentum, further reinforcing the primacy of Tamil Hindu identity. The Colonial Census reported that there were Tamil Buddhists in some parts of Sri Lanka including the Northern Province (Denham 1912:245). According to the Census Report of 1971, there were more than 50,000 Buddhists in the Northern Province. But both Vanni and Nuwarakalaviya Districts with the majority of Sinhalese community were also included in the Northern Province at that time (Williams 1873:151). (See, Table No.01)

Table 1: Percentage of Sinhala and Tamil Buddhist by Gender (1881-1911), Denham 1912; Lee 1892; Williams 1873)

Year	Sinhala Buddhist		Tamil Buddhist	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1871	52213 (including Vanni and Nuwarakalaviya Districts)			
1881	69.0	97.6	.01	.006
1891	60.3	88.8	-	-
1901	76.9	93.9	.001	-
1911	72.6	83.4	.005	.003

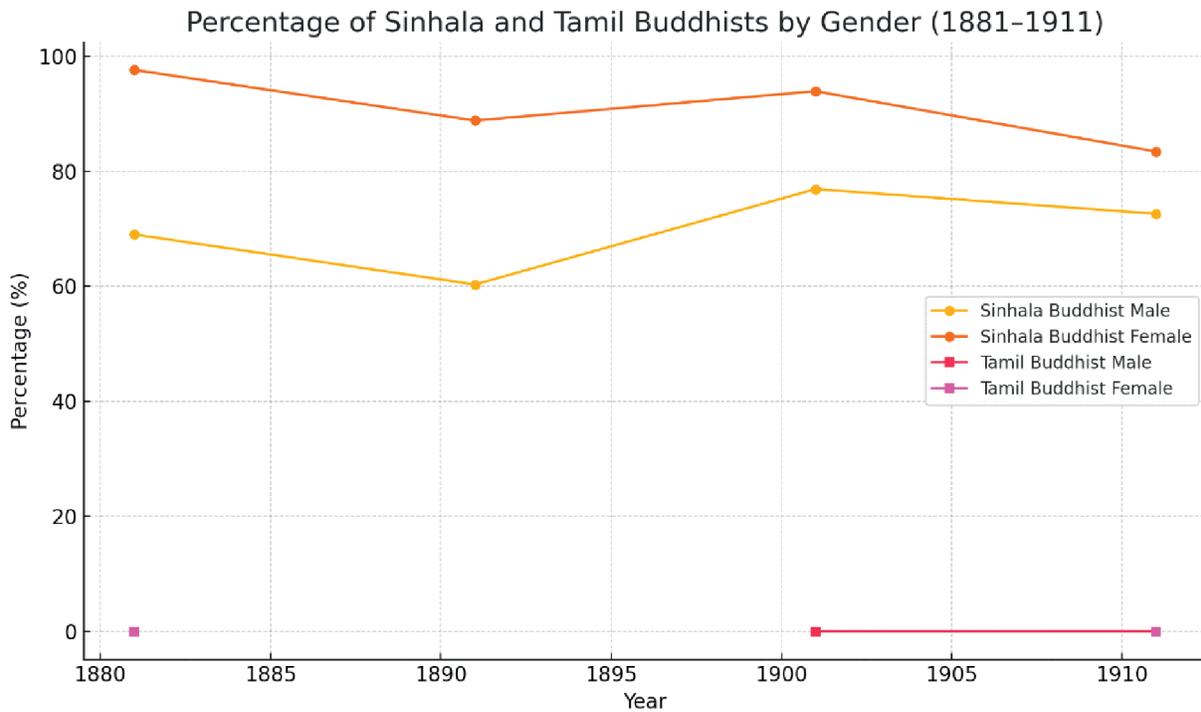


Fig. 1: Percentage of Sinhala and Tamil Buddhists by Gender (1881-1911)

After a century the first census of Sri Lanka, in 1981 census report also mentioned the Tamil Buddhists as a category. But in 1981 report did not record the Tamil Buddhist population in Northern Province but the report stated the total amount of Tamil Buddhists in Sri Lanka (See, Table 2)

(Table 2: Census of Population and Housing 1981)

Religious Composition	Percentage
Sinhalese Buddhists	99.3
Sri Lankan Tamil Buddhists	1.8
Indian Tamil Buddhists	1.8

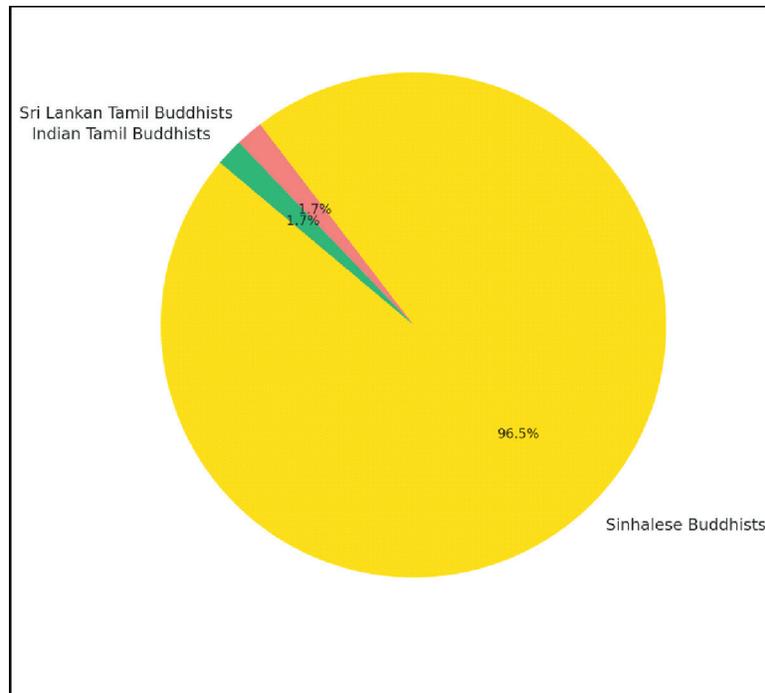


Fig. 2: Census of Population and Housing 1981)

NEO-TAMIL BUDDHISM

The neo-Tamil Buddhist movement in Jaffna can be seen as a response to post-war challenges, such as reconciliation and identity reconstruction. The movement seeks to revive and reclaim a Tamil Buddhist heritage that has been neglected or overshadowed by dominant religious narratives. It emphasizes the commonalities between Tamil and Buddhist cultural traditions and advocates for a syncretic understanding of Tamil identity. Key elements of this awakening include the establishment of Buddhist centers, the propagation of Buddhist teachings, and the organization of religious festivals and pilgrimages (Samarathunga et al. 2020; Schalk 2013).

NEO-TAMIL BUDDHIST AWAKENING AS A RESISTANCE TO THE CASTE HIERARCHY

The caste system is a social structure that has been deeply rooted in many societies, including the Tamil community in the Jaffna Peninsula. The caste system in this community has played a significant role in shaping social interactions, relationships, and opportunities for centuries.

Historically, the caste system in the Jaffna Peninsula was divided into five main groups known as the Brahmins, Vellalar, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra (Pfeiffenberger 1982). Each group had its distinct social status and occupation. The Vellalars were considered the highest caste and traditionally held positions of power, authority, and landownership. They were mainly involved in agriculture and owned vast stretches of land. The Kshatriyas were warriors and rulers, responsible for protecting the community. The Vaishyas were involved in trade and commerce, while the Shudras were considered laborers and occupied the lowest rungs of society.

The caste system in the Jaffna Peninsula was deeply rooted in the Hindu religion and influenced every aspect of social, economic, and religious life (David 1976:185). It determined things like marriage partners, occupations, and social standing. In the past, inter-caste marriages were strongly

discouraged, as it was believed that marrying outside one's caste would pollute the bloodline and bring dishonor to the family. Caste identity was passed down through generations, and one's caste determined their place in society.

Education opportunities were also affected by the caste system in the Jaffna Peninsula. Historically, members of the higher castes, such as the Vellalars, had better access to education and resources compared to those in the lower castes. This led to disparities in educational attainment and limited opportunities for upward mobility for individuals belonging to lower castes.

While the caste system in the Jaffna Peninsula was an integral part of the community's social fabric, it has undergone significant changes over the years. Modernization, urbanization, and education have contributed to a decline in the strict adherence to the caste system. With the advent of modern education and increased exposure to different cultures and ideas, many people from lower castes have been able to break free from the restrictions imposed by the caste system (Kuganathan 2014:78-81).

However, it is important to note that remnants of the caste system still persist in certain aspects of daily life in the Jaffna Peninsula. Despite efforts to eradicate discrimination based on caste, there are instances where caste-based prejudices and biases continue to influence social interactions and opportunities.

It is crucial to highlight that not all members of the Tamil community in the Jaffna Peninsula participate in or support the caste system. Many individuals and organizations actively work towards eradicating caste-based discrimination and promoting equality within the community. Through various initiatives, such as advocating for inter-caste marriages, promoting education for all, and encouraging social integration, these individuals and organizations aim to challenge and overcome the negative aspects of the caste system (Kuganathan 2014:78-81).

The caste system has historically played a significant role in the Tamil community in the Jaffna Peninsula. It has shaped social interactions, occupational opportunities, and marriage practices. Although the strict adherence to the caste system has declined over time, remnants of it persist in certain aspects of daily life. Nevertheless, there are ongoing efforts within the community to challenge caste-based discrimination and promote equality and social integration.

The Neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening in Jaffna stands as a remarkable resistance to the deeply ingrained caste discrimination prevalent in the Tamil community. This movement represents a significant shift in religious affiliation and a powerful rejection of the oppressive caste system that has long divided society.

This awakening, which gained momentum at the end of the civil war, saw a considerable number of Tamils in the Jaffna Peninsula embracing Buddhism as a means to challenge the social hierarchy and discriminatory practices associated with the caste system (Silva 2021). Many individuals, particularly those from lower castes who faced marginalization and limited opportunities, found solace in Buddhism's teachings of equality, compassion, and self-reliance.

By embracing Buddhism, individuals sought to break the shackles of caste-based discrimination that had for generations determined their social standing and limited their aspirations. The Neo-Tamil Buddhist movement aimed to create a more inclusive and egalitarian society by rejecting the notion of inherent superiority or inferiority based on birth.

Through the teachings of Buddhism, individuals found a means to challenge the divisive nature of the caste system. The principles of non-discrimination, social harmony, and the concept of a universal human kinship found within Buddhism resonated deeply with those seeking liberation from the

shackles of caste-based oppression. Moreover, Buddhism's emphasis on personal spiritual growth and introspection provided individuals with a path toward self-empowerment and liberation from social constraints.

The Neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening led to the establishment of several Buddhist temples and meditation centers throughout the Jaffna Peninsula (These centers became hubs for intellectual discussions, inter-caste interactions, and collective efforts towards building a more egalitarian society. Individuals from different castes would come together, practicing Buddhism side by side, breaking down the barriers that the caste system had erected.

Furthermore, this movement sparked a renewed interest in ancient Tamil Buddhist history, emphasizing the shared heritage and cultural ties between Buddhism and the Tamil people. It sought to reclaim and celebrate this forgotten heritage, asserting that Buddhism was not only a religion of the majority Sinhalese community but also an integral part of Tamil identity (Weerasuriya 2023:285).

The Neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening in Jaffna created ripples in the social fabric of the community, challenging the existing power dynamics and notions of caste-based superiority. It became a symbol of resistance against the oppressive caste system and an inspiration for others to question and transcend the limitations imposed by societal divisions.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the Neo-Tamil Buddhist movement does not seek to replace one form of discrimination with another. Rather, its purpose remains centered on promoting equality, inclusivity, and social justice within the broader context of Tamil society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening in Jaffna serves as a powerful resistance to the caste discrimination deeply entrenched in the present-day Tamil community. By embracing Buddhism, individuals challenged the social hierarchy and sought to build a more egalitarian society. This movement has revitalized interest in Tamil Buddhist history and provided an avenue for individuals to come together, transcending caste boundaries and working towards a society free from discrimination and prejudice. The neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening also highlights the significance of heritage preservation as a means of cultural revitalization. The movement actively engages in archaeological research, restoration projects, and the preservation of Buddhist sites in the Jaffna Peninsula. These efforts not only contribute to the rediscovery of forgotten aspects of Tamil Buddhist history but also foster a sense of pride and connection among Tamil Buddhists.

The neo-Tamil Buddhist awakening presents both opportunities and challenges in the context of post-war Sri Lanka. While it promotes interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange, it also raises questions about inclusivity and sectarian tensions. The movement's relationship with Tamil Hindu communities remains complex, with some perceiving it as a threat to existing religious and cultural practices (Weerasuriya 2023:285). Furthermore, the movement's aspirations for recognition and support from state institutions confront issues of majority-minority dynamics and the politics of heritage.

The emergence of the neo-Tamil Buddhist movement in the Jaffna Peninsula reflects the dynamism and complexity of heritage preservation and religious revival among Tamil communities in Sri Lanka. As the region navigates the path of post-war reconciliation, understanding the motivations and implications of this awakening becomes crucial. By exploring the historical and cultural factors driving this phenomenon, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving landscape of religious and ethnic identity in Jaffna.

ABBREVIATIONS

- EZ : Epigraphia Zeylanica
 IC : Inscriptions of Ceylon

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