
SOMA THERO: SIGNIFICANCE OF HIS LIFE AND DEATH

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The year 2003 ended with a huge public controversy in Sinhalese society about the sudden death of Gangodawila Soma Thero. Many of his colleagues and lay disciples thought that he did not die a natural death. The fact that he suddenly took ill on a visit to St. Petersburg in Russia to accept an honorary degree and passed away there has led to many speculations and conspiracy theories. Many of Soma Thero's disciples and admirers believe that his death was a deliberate killing occurring as a result of a conspiracy hatched by Christian evangelical groups. Posters appeared in Colombo suggesting that missionary groups as well as Christian NGOs and a prominent businessman were responsible for the monk's mysterious death.

After his funeral, an agitation was launched by a group of Thero's colleagues demanding the government ban what many Buddhists believe is the "unethical conversion" carried out by Christian evangelical groups. Soma Thero was a severe critic of Christianity as well as Christian religion conversion. He was also a strong critic of Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. At the time of his death, he was the leader of a small political party which he founded about a year ago. He publicly announced that he would contest the next presidential election on a platform of Sinhalese-Buddhist political interests as well a moral re-generation of the country.

Funeral

The funeral of Soma Thero, which took place on December 24, was one of the biggest public events in Sri Lanka in recent years. The organizers of the event were reported to have wanted the funeral to be held on December 25, as a mark of Buddhist assertion vis-à-vis the Christians. A truly huge crowd attended his funeral, obviously to pay homage to a religious personality whom they admired, worshipped and even identified themselves with. Banners, posters and funeral decorations appeared in almost every town and street. Traders and three-wheeler drivers were most active in putting up funeral decorations. In many small towns and street junctions, recorded sermons of the Thero were played on loudspeakers. In some places, videotapes of his sermons were played on wide screen to the mourning crowds. There were also extremist Sinhalese political groups who turned the death and funeral of Soma Thero into a great political spectacle. In his political beliefs and practices, Soma Thero's loyalties and associations were with Sinhalese nationalist groups of the extreme fringe. They used the funeral of the Thero as an occasion for political mobilization as well as anti-Christian agitation.

Soma Thero's life as well as the message was a colorful one, interspersed with controversy, innovation, fearlessness and

immense public attraction. Unlike the vast majority of Sri Lanka's Buddhist monks, he was ordained not as an under-aged boy, but as a mature man, at the age of twenty-five. The legend has it that he decided to renounce the lay life after repeated failures of his business attempts. Having become a monk at such a comparatively late age, Rev. Soma did not have a formal *pirivena* or university education. He did not have such formal academic titles as *Panditha* or *Shastravedi* or *Shastrapathi*. Neither did he have a position in the *Bhikku* hierarchy. He appeared almost a self-made intellectual, enjoying a considerable measure of personal autonomy from the established Buddhist church. That personal autonomy at times appeared as an excessive liberty for self-indulgence, quite uncharacteristic of a Buddhist monk who appeared erudite and at the same time a symbol of piety.

Media and the Message

Nonetheless, Rev. Soma seems to have obtained an excellent and rigorous training in the Buddhist doctrine at the Maharakshita branch of the Amarapura sect. Even without a formal *pirivena* education, he seemed to possess a working knowledge of the Pali language, but not much Sanskrit. More than anything else, he possessed extremely effective communication skills. He obviously knew the magic of the color TV. He demonstrated a keen sensitivity to the effects of the colour and light on the television screen. Having spent some time in Australia engaging in missionary work, Soma Thero had also acquired good communication skills in the English language. Bilingual, articulate and charismatic, his image on the TV screen was tremendously attractive. Without any doubt, he had mastered the art of communication on color television. If Pelene Vajiragnana Maha Thero, the founder of the Vajiraramaya temple in Bambalapitiya, was the first Buddhist monk to master the radio medium for preaching, the Soma Thero was the first Sri Lankan Buddhist monk to successfully conquer the TV medium.

Soma Thero's message as a Buddhist missionary in Sri Lanka was a complex one. He began his public religious career in Sri Lanka through a weekly discussion series on the ITN. That was towards the end of mid-1990s. His sermons initially drew much attention because of his relentless critique of what some Buddhists view as corrupt practices that practical Buddhism had incorporated from

Hinduism. In that sense, he had a reformist project, to reform Buddhism from within. It was a kind of Buddhist purism attractive to the lay intellectuals who were disillusioned with the entire institution of the contemporary Buddhist Sangha which many lay people believe to be corrupt, politicized and decadent. Hence, many Buddhists in Sri Lanka saw in Soma Thero the image of an exemplary pious Bhikku, an alternative Sangha leadership and a fearless religious reformer.

Although Soma Thero's initiation to Sri Lanka's public culture was through the ITN, later on, the government-owned ITN decided to cancel this program in a context where the Thero's political message had taken a clear ethnic bias directed against Tamil and Muslim business communities. That was the time when the PA was in power and the PA's information minister was also leading a public campaign for ethnic harmony and peace. A distraught woman listener went to the Supreme Court, although unsuccessfully, claiming that the ITN violated her fundamental rights. The ITN's loss was the rival TNL's gain. The TNL, a lackluster TV channel at the time owned by the present Prime Minister's brother, immediately offered the Thero generous TV time. The TNL of course knew the commodity value of the monk and his message. The rest is of course history.

Political Vision

It is the political message of Soma Thero that is most problematic. In a gentle voice, clever turn of phrase, sardonic smile and carefully chosen language, Rev. Soma was devastating in his critique and even denunciation of what he believed as the cunning and manipulation of Tamil and Muslim traders at the expense of hapless Sinhalese Buddhists. One point he repeatedly emphasized in his sermons was that the Sinhalese-Buddhist economic interests were directly threatened by Tamil and Muslim traders who he thought were well-organized and socially cohesive entities. He appealed to Sinhalese-Buddhist traders to be more active and assertive and chided them for not facing the challenge of the traders and industrialists belonging to ethnic minorities.

Soma Thero also propagated the amazing theory that by the year 2025, the majority Sinhalese-Buddhists would become a demographic minority. In propagating this theory, Rev. Soma was critical of the Muslim community even to the extent of going beyond the limits of irrationality. His basic argument was that while the Sinhalese Buddhists were practicing family planning and birth control, the Muslims were breeding freely. Incidentally, the extreme Hinduthva ideologists in India also have a similar demographic argument against Indian Muslims. The ideology of

Sinhalathva has the same framework of irrationality on which the ideology of Hinduthva in India has based itself. If we analyze this phenomenon sociologically, we could see that Soma Thero was giving expression to the fears, anxieties and insecurities of the class of small Sinhalese traders whose interests are threatened not only by Tamil and Muslim traders in Colombo, but also by globalization.

In sociological terms, the appeal of Soma Thero was primarily among the communities of small traders, middle-level wage earners, the self-employed, women and youth. The Colombo-based bourgeois and professional sections of the Sinhalese-Buddhist society were not attracted to him. They were indeed devotees of a more powerful living saviour, Sai Baba of Bangalore. Rev. Soma's constituencies were basically the middle and lower-middle classes in the urban and semi-urban milieu. Women were attracted to his message for the main reason that he discussed quite openly the widespread problem of male alcoholism and drug addiction which so often leads to household and family violence. His moral message against alcohol and narcotic drugs also had a socially cathartic dimension. Those are issues that politicians in Sri Lanka never take up as real social problems. Rev. Soma in a way provided the voice for the suffering women caught up in the prison house of Sinhalese-Buddhist patriarchy. Paradoxically, his project was to reinforce a nationalist-moralistic practice of Buddhist patriarchy. The media reported after his death that one of the public engagements he had planned on his return from Russia was to felicitate Sinhalese-Buddhist women who had given birth to more than ten children. This event was going to be in Galle, the capital of the Southern Province which many think quite erroneously as a citadel of militant Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism. Soma Thero was socially and politically conservative. That conservatism had an appeal in the Sinhalese society which is going through a painful process of change and transformation.

Limits of Nationalism

Soma Thero was like a comet in the night. He appeared in the public sphere in the most dramatic manner and he disappeared suddenly leaving room for more dramatic interpretations and theories about his departure. He also encapsulated many contradictions of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese-Buddhist society today. Primary among them is the inability of the Sinhalese-Buddhist political ideologues to constructively engage with diversity, pluralist democracy and multi-culturalism. Charismatic and articulate, Soma Thero had a limited social and political vision that was outdated and irrelevant to any democratic reform agenda today. His memory is most likely to be utilized by small political and ideological groups in Sinhalese society who seek to thrive on all varieties of minority-phobia. ■