

Sri Lanka: A Monk On The Rampage

Ven Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero – Chief Priest Of The Dambulla Viharaya

Friday 3 August 2012, by [ARIYAWANSHA Niranjala](#), [Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero](#) (Date first published: 6 May 2012).

Ven. Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero, the Chief Priest at the Rangiri Dambulla Viharaya was in the forefront in recent times leading a protest at Dambulla to relocate a mosque which was within the sacred Vihara land, disputed by the Muslim fraternity. The issue is yet on the boil and the government has not resolved this sensitive stand off.

Inamaluwe Sumangala Thero is no stranger to controversy and has time and again led protests against the administrative and political structure. Our reporter Niranjala Ariyawansa interviewed the Chief monk. At the conclusion of this interview Sumangala Thero warned our reporter of dire consequences if she ever stepped foot into Dambulla.

Excerpts:

Niranjala Ariyawansa (SL): You were first identified with protests against the construction of the Kandalama Hotel. What was the final outcome of that protest?

Ven Inamaluwe: I will continue that protest as long as I live. That is my position. I did not join that protest as a mere visitor. I joined the protest as the President of the Kandalama Left Canal farmers society though the media reported that I was acting as the Secretary General of the Sangha Society.

I knew the importance of the kandalama tank and the environs, being the leader of the farming community in addition to being a monk. It is prohibited by law to erect any buildings near the banks of tanks. This was so from the time of our ancient kings. The British when they were here followed that too. We thought that a democratic government elected after independence would also follow this.

We created public opinion against this wrongful erection. We wanted the hotel project stopped. What did the government do? They provided Police protection to them, down graded public opinion, denigrated us and allowed the project to go through.

What I started off in Kandalama reflects the real situation in this country in the name of democracy. It is a dictatorship. Democracy is only by name. I realised that there is no ruling party that will listen to the voice of the people as early as in 1991.

SL: Do you regret launching that protest?

Ven IS: It is like this. What is it that a government cannot do? President Premadasa could only not make a man, a woman. That was the power. So, to erect a hotel is no big deal. That took place under the approval of President Premadasa. Therefore, it showed that a government can do anything in

this country. I have realised that.

SL: You are once more in focus for the second time when you opposed the existence of a building said to be a mosque within the confines of land belonging to the Dambulla temple. Will you have to backtrack on this protest too, in the future?

Ven IS: No. We learnt a lesson once. We learnt that there is no democracy in this land. Therefore, if anyone rules oppressively and against democracy, we will without fear of life, oppose such action.

SL: How do you think you should oppose a regime that is not democratic?

Ven IS: We showed that recently.

SL: By resorting to violence?

Ven IS: Yes. That is partially true. We started peacefully. But people's feelings when aroused cannot be controlled. Look at it nationally and internationally. What did extremist persons like Bin Laden do? They have shed blood to propagate Islam. That is the truth.

Our people have built their hopes and dreams around Buddhist culture. They are patient. But here that patience was set aside a little. I do not see it as violence.

SL: Buddhist teachings promote patience. But you lent leadership to a section of Buddhists to practice the opposite. Why?

Ven IS: No. I do not accept that. It is the government that did such a thing. There was a plan made 30 years ago to protect the temple and the land surrounding it. By not implementing that plan it was the government that pushed the people. If you say the people wanted me to do so, it is correct. For that too the government must take responsibility.

SL: Most of the people who came for that protest were not people from Dambulla. Some charge that you brought people from other areas?

Ven IS: Who says so? Anyone can say anything. There is an ancient saying that when one is hungry even a monitor lizard becomes an iguana (a kabaragoya becomes a thalagoya). Therefore whatever anyone says I will not accept such charge.

SL: When I met you on the 30th of last month at the Dambulla temple, you said the people of Dambulla though from different religious persuasions lived amicably. What happened to that? Why was this protest held in such haste?

Ven IS: Who says it was in haste? That is what the media has concocted. We have over a period of time informed the President and the Minister in charge. But they were silent. When the working class ask for higher wages by filling out a form for that purpose, does it happen? No. They have to strike. That is our country. The super democracy you talk of will not work in this country. If one were to win any rights in this country, it could be only through protests. That's the truth. No one can say that it's a lie. The people of this country have resorted to protests to win their rights. We live in a country where even a letter written to a department goes without acknowledgement. Therefore the people have to resort to these kind of things.

SL: You say that this protest was not done in haste and that it is justified. The Buddhists have a limit to their patience. The government made them impatient, and the government is responsible for it. Then you say how Bin Laden acted violently to spread Islam. Do you

then believe that blood should be shed in the name of religion?

Ven IS: Yes, what you say is true and the government must take responsibility. But on the 20th there was no blood shed.

SL: Yes, but on the 20th you said publicly, ‘today we came with the Buddhist flag in hand. But the next time it would be different’. So, the next time if it progresses to religious disharmony and bloodshed, would you take responsibility?

Ven IS: The responsibility for that should be taken by the inactive ruling class of this country. The Muslim leaders of their government are spreading falsehoods about this mosque. They must know that the Prime Minister has made a decision on this. The Prime Minister is the second citizen in this country. He is also the Minister of Buddhist Affairs. Therefore, he has expressed the government’s view. So, can others who have now aligned with the government or even the cabinet minister who is representing Dambulla go against that?

The government minister Janaka Bandara Tennekoone says that the mosque will not be removed. The prime Minister says it will be removed. Minister Rauf Hakeem says it will remain. This shows that the government is divided. It also shows that there are people within this government who are bigger than the Prime Minister. How can that be? What has happened to collective responsibility within the cabinet and the government? Therefore we urge the President to take a decision against these in-disciplined political braggarts.

SL: When you speak of collective responsibility of the Cabinet, I would like to remind you that in Sri Lanka we have a multi religious, multi cultural and multi ethnic society.

Ven IS: What nonsense. You are speaking of a nonsensical theory. This country has fourteen million buddhists. How many muslims are there? For example in Thailand, the majority are Buddhists. In Myanmar too Buddhists are in the majority. Catholics are a majority at the Vatican. Therefore, we say that the Vatican is a Catholic State. Similarly in the middle east many countries have a Muslim majority. Therefore we call them Islamic States.

SL: That is not what I meant. When a society consists of multi religious people practicing different faiths, should they not have equal rights?

Ven IS: Are you trying to wrest away our Buddhist rights? We have respected all. What we have here is none of that. It is about protecting the Buddhist legacy against the wresting of it. There is no need for talking nonsense here. We are fighting to save the 2300 year old Buddhist heritage that is ours! They in turn are trying to wrest away our heritage. Therefore it would be good for all to understand that reality. I am vocal to protect that right and not to wrest away someone else’s right or property. It is the Islamists who are trying something else here. That cannot be allowed. We never went to Iraq or the middle east to wrest the rights of Islamists? This is robbery. You tell the whole country of this position clearly.

SL: So whilst fighting to protect one’s right you violate another’s right?

Ven IS: Are you trying to trample the rights of the Buddhists?

SL: No. They say that the Mosque was there from 1962.

Ven IS: I will speak to you as a person possessing a third eye. I speak of what is happening globally. I am comparing what happens globally. Globally, Islam is on the rise. Some so called Sinhalese lend a hand (*gotta allanawa*) to them. I ask you also not to do so.

SL: Would you say there is Muslim fundamentalism growing across the world? As against Buddhist fundamentalism growing here?

Ven IS: There is no such thing. Others may have such intentions. I cannot condone nor certify that. I am not like that.

The Rangiri Dambulla Viharaya has a history of 2300 years and is a highly venerated Viharaya. Even UNESCO has named it as a historical site in the world. That has been done because the Buddhists protected it. Now, Islamists (*Thambis*) are trying to creep into this. For those islamists (*Thambis*) and those who are propping them (*Gotta Allana Aya*) this may be good. But I say it is because of the Buddhists who protected this Dambulla Viharaya that the villages around this site came into being. Not because of a church or mosque. We have a history. What history does the muslims have with Dambulla? They can do anything in their regions. I will not speak of history here. But, I am a monk who has studied history and archaeology for my degree. I have studied the history of Sri Lanka well.

The Muslims came to Sri Lanka by sail boats to trade in groceries. Only males came. Some of them settled down permanently in countries like Sri Lanka, India and the Maldives.

During the reign of King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe there was a saying 'let us just have a bit of land to look after,' by them. Having come like visitors they robbed the Sinhala and Tamil women. They fooled our Sinhala and Tamil women and married them. Now this purdah that the Muslims wear to cover their faces? It's a plan by those men who came to rob women. They used it in every country. It has now become a religious practice. It's however not a real religious practice. It's a caddish ploy to rob women. If I am to say in proper Sinhala (*Sudda Sinhalaenma Kiyanaawa nam , oka thamai mata kiyanna thiyennay.*) That is all what I have to say about it.

SL: As a person who believes in globalisation do you accept the theory of a purist race?

Ven IS: You are perfectly right. I do accept globalisation. Similarly I believe that there is a Sinhala race without mixed blood. I do believe that I am such a person myself. So, if anyone says that there is no pure race, like you, if one speaks of reason, I think they are of mixed blood. I mean there must be some kind of mix. They must have a name like Thambi Mudiyansele in their birth certificate.

SL: Buddhist sermons are based on equality. But in Sri Lanka the clergy has split into different sects. Do you believe in the theory of sects?

Ven IS: I do not accept the need for sects. But even during the time of Buddha there were varying groups of monks. But Buddha did not prevent that. During Lord Buddha's first sermon monk Punna did not attend. Those monks who participated wanted monk Punna to accept that sermon. The monk answered, 'I have heard Buddha's sermons before. I accept them. You accept it too'. Three months after Buddha achieved enlightenment, there were groups with varying views. These groups were there from that time and progressed thereon to date.

SL: The sects in Sri Lanka are based on caste. Is the caste system in line with Buddha's teachings?

Ven IS: I do not endorse that. I do not accept the sects based on a caste system at all.

SL: You belong to the Siyam Sect. You propagated another group called the Rangiri Dambulla Sect. What was the basis for that?

Ven IS: To tell the truth I followed the principal you spoke of. Buddha from birth did not accept a caste system. We based it on that presumption and rejected the caste system and opened the doors

to anyone from any background or any sect to be ordained.

SL: But on the 23rd when a discussion was held at the Rangiri Dambulla Viharaya the Asgiriya Chief Prelate who is from the Siyam Sect participated?

Ven IS: Yes. He is our Chief Priest. But other monks attended as well.

SL: What is the quarrel between you and Minister Janaka Bandara Tennekoon?

Ven IS: He first entered parliament as an MP in 1993 or 1994. Prior to that he was a policeman. His father was T. B. Tennekoon. A very humble, and good Buddhist. Janaka Bandara got his votes because of his father. On an election platform with tears in his eyes he said what his father had told him from his death bed, "My dear son, being a policeman wouldn't do. Please go to Dambulla and start from where I stopped". The people were fooled and voted for him.

The first thing he did after becoming an MP was to open a tavern in Dambulla town. The people protested by closing down shops, hoisting black flags and going in a procession. Janaka used his thugs and attacked the protesters. They pulled down buddhist flags and trampled them. The police did nothing. Why? Because he was also in the police. I complained about this to the then President Chandrika. She closed the tavern immediately. We had problems with each other from then. As at now he is angry with me as a monk who went above him.

SL: Are you also angry with him?

Ven IS: Oh what anger do I have? I must have a preference vote to get angry. I was never a friend of his. Before I complained to President Chandrika I spoke to him on the phone and asked, "you said that you would start your politics from where your father stopped. Is this where your father stopped?". He replied, "I will act according to the wishes of the people". I asked, 'now Dambulla is self sufficient, only a place to have a tot is needed. Is this what the people want?'. He got angry and slammed the phone down. From there we worked to preserve the buddhist legacy. He was angry at that and has tried to take revenge since then. It's only a dream.

SL: The people in Dambulla accuse you of giving away land belonging to the temple over their heads to others by charging LKR 100,000 for it.

Ven IS: This is not something I take for myself. The lands belonging to the Dambulla Viharaya is governed by the Buddhist Temporalities Act. The Buddhist Commissioner has a system to grant land. According to that a charge is made to register. These lands cannot be sold to anyone. If the lessee does not need it then it must revert back to the temple. People do not follow that but sell it to others. For all of such acts we charge. They must pay 30% to the temple. It's not to me. We issue a receipt. The government audits them. Whilst you charge the Dambulla temple could you as a media person check on the lands belonging to the Dalada Maligawa too and how much is charged?"

SL: The buddhist temporalities Act is not divine? Why cannot it be amended to allow people to benefit?

Ven IS: It's a law. Do you say that all laws should be amended to suit the people? That Act is there to preserve and safeguard temple lands.

SL: The populations grows day by day. But land does not. Shouldn't those people have right to land?

Ven IS: You speak on the basis of human needs. I need to ask you a question. The government

means, the people. Can the people enter any government land by force? Please answer me.

SL: Since you ask me I will answer. I do not think that the government means the people. The government is separate and the people are separate. But the government has created a view that the government is the people. Unfortunately the people have accepted that.

Ven IS: Right. You are absolutely right. If that is so, can the people enter a land belonging to the government? They cannot.

SL: Cannot that be changed?

Ven IS: That is called a wanting of a super human rights and a super democracy. But the reality is not that.

SL: You said before that this protest was based on the needs of people. Do you think you would be precipitating the buddhists to go beyond their tolerance levels and are you not provoking them?

Ven IS: I reject that.

SL: You are a dominating person?

Ven IS: Yes. I am a dominating person. I accept that with all humility. Without being so these temples cannot be improved.

SL: There is a big difference between the laity and clergy. There are differences of opinion between the laity which results in fights, quarrels etc. It's the clergy that act as a buffer to settle these disputes. As a leading buddhist monk you say " Yes, I am dominating". How then can you bring the laity towards reconciliation?

Ven IS: I do not know how you describe a dominant person. I describe it as follows, i. e.: There can be only one officer in overall charge of an army. If everyone gives orders can one fight a war? Similarly a country cannot be developed if one were to bow down to everyone.

SL: I described dominance as an attribute which brings others under a person's total control.

Ven IS: That does not concern me. Remember one thing. I am also a media person. I also have a media organisation. I know a great deal about the media. When you question me as a media person I too answer as a media person. Please remember that you have boundaries as a media person.

SL: But I am speaking to Inamaluwe Sumangala Chief priest and the line of the interview was what I felt was necessary to ask after talking to you. I feel that there is not much difference between you and a lay person.

Ven IS: Make a decision based on your mental capacity. Do not try to teach me the difference between a lay person and clergy. What you said was the worst insult one could make to me. Do not try to be too smart lady. You (*thamusay*) can record if you want. Do not waste my time.

P.S.

* The Sunday Leader:

<http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2012/05/06/a-monk-on-the-rampage/>