

Research Article

Sacred Divides: Religious Pluralism & Minority Rights in Sri Lanka

Dr. Rohil Oberoi ^{1*}, Dr. Kanwalpreet Kaur¹

¹Department of Political Science, DAV College, Sector 10, Chandigarh, India.

*Email: rohil1991@gmail.com

Citation: Oberoi, R., & Kaur, K. (2025). Sacred Divides: Religious Pluralism & Minority Rights in Sri Lanka. *International Social Research Nexus (ISRN)*, 1(2), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.63539/isrn.2025009>

Received: February 7, 2025
Accepted: May 22, 2025
Published: June 5, 2025

Copyright © 2025 The Author (s).
Published by Scholar Cave.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Abstract

Religious pluralism refers to the acceptance and coexistence of various religions in a single society. Pluralism facilitates learning and cooperation among various religions without serving to repress the others. Sri Lanka is one of the most religiously diverse countries, which has suffered greatly trying to accommodate pluralism and minority rights. Although the island is democratic, there has been an escalation of violence against these communities due to deep-rooted ethno-religious conflict. The formation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist movements has created an atmosphere of violence and intolerance, destroying mosques, churches, businesses, and other properties. Such violence can be interpreted because of increasing economic competition, fears of an expanding Muslim and Christian population, and deeply rooted anti-Muslim sentiment as well as conversion myths. The government's perceived reluctance to take decisive action against perpetrators of violence has hindered reconciliation efforts, leaving minority groups feeling vulnerable and marginalized. Hate speech against minorities and anti-Muslim sentiment rhetoric have proliferated, particularly using internet technologies by nationalist groups, creating an atmosphere where religious minorities are often scapegoated. The objective of the study is to examine the challenges faced by minority religious communities in Sri Lanka, focusing on instances of violence against Christians and Muslims and the denial of religious rights that impact their ability to practice their religious faith. The findings show that the position of Muslims and Christians in Sri Lanka remains fragile in these trying times. The basic human rights of these communities are routinely disregarded as they try to negotiate a web of religious and social strife.

Keywords

Religious Pluralism, Minorities in Sri Lanka, Religious Attacks, Sinhala-Buddhist Identity, Civil War.

1. Introduction

Societies that support religious pluralism often experience enhanced human rights protections and a stronger adherence to democratic principles. The literature on religious pluralism examines the response to the vast array of religious beliefs, practices, and traditions observed both historically and in contemporary society. 'Pluralism' can signify anything from acknowledging religious diversity to advocating for a philosophical or theological approach characterized by humility regarding one's faith and promoting respectful dialogue and mutual understanding among different traditions ([Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2024](#)). Immanuel Kant's philosophy describes a rational religion grounded in moral capacity rather than specific traditions, suggesting that multiple religions may embody the true essence of religion if they promote morality ([Kant, 2009](#)). Friedrich Schleiermacher extends this by emphasizing religion as a matter of intuitive feeling, which necessitates diverse religious forms to represent the infinite ([Schleiermacher, 1996](#)). G.W.F. Hegel, on the other

hand, sees religious traditions as integral to the self-manifestation of the concept of religion and its object, although he maintains a hierarchical view with Christianity at the pinnacle (Hegel, 2007). William James focuses on individual religious experiences, proposing a pluralistic stance where no single religion monopolizes genuine divine experience (James, 2002). Pluralists, however, emphasize humility and openness, suggesting that no single belief system is definitively more justified than others, acknowledging the equal epistemological footing of conflicting beliefs.

The debates in England and the United States highlight different approaches to religious pluralism. In England, there is an ongoing discussion about "*embryonic multi-faithism*," where established churches could include multiple faiths, rather than pushing for complete secularism. In the U.S., the focus is on whether religious arguments should be allowed in public discourse and constitutional matters, with many advocating for a "*wall of separation*" to maintain neutrality. Bader's (1999) critique of the standard liberal approach to state-religion separation emphasizes the need for a more pragmatic and inclusive model that recognizes the positive roles religions can play in democratic societies. Moving beyond rigid secularism to embrace a form of pluralism that can address real-world inequalities and foster a more vibrant civic democracy. This approach calls for a balance between respecting religious diversity and maintaining democratic principles, challenging the assumption that complete separation is necessary or desirable for achieving freedom, equality, and tolerance (Bader, 1999). Democratic principles, such as freedom of religion and equal rights, provide a framework for ensuring that individuals of different faiths can coexist peacefully and contribute to a pluralistic society. As societies become more globalized, democratic institutions are increasingly tasked with fostering environments where diverse religious traditions can thrive, thus promoting social harmony and inclusion (Bhargava, 2005 & Berger, 2015).

2. Literature Review

For religious pluralism to exist, freedom of religion must be present. Religious diversity can only occur in an environment where people can exercise their faiths. The island nation of Sri Lanka, which has a predominantly Buddhist population, has witnessed tensions and conflicts involving various religious communities, including Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The tension between maintaining a pluralistic society and addressing the dominant Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist sentiment has raised critical questions about the effectiveness and sincerity of Sri Lanka's commitment to religious pluralism. Sri Lanka's religious landscape is characterized by complex pluralism and tensions between majority and minority groups. The Sinhalese Buddhist majority's commitment to a unitary state conflicts with the Tamil minority's aspirations for self-determination (Edrisinha, 2005). This has led to embedded majoritarianism and minority marginalization, though some efforts toward covenantal pluralism persists (Devotta, 2020).

The 1947 Soulbury Constitution of Sri Lanka included provisions designed to safeguard the interests of diverse ethnic and religious communities (Udagama, 2013). Article 29 of this constitution safeguards the rights and freedoms of ethno-religious communities, reflecting its secular nature. However, the introduction of the 1972 Republic Constitution marked a shift away from this secular approach. The 1972 Constitution, which prioritized Buddhism, had a severe impact on religious freedom, adding to the greater feeling of dissatisfaction among minority communities (Udagama, 2013). Since independence, Sinhala-Buddhist political elites have used an exclusionary Sinhala-Buddhist identity for political mobilization. A key example is Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's 1956 proclamation of Sinhalese as the sole official language through the Sinhala Only Act. This Act privileged the Sinhala community while excluding linguistic minorities, asserting monopolistic political rights, and contributing to the subordination of other ethno-religious groups and indigenous communities. This nationalist ideology suggests that other communities in Sri Lanka exist only with the tolerance of the Sinhalese Buddhists (Gajaweera, 2022). Sinhala Buddhist hegemony has shown no signs of relenting in its distrust of and attack on other religious groups (Jayasuriya, 2023). Multi-religious spaces like Sri Pada and Kataragama serve as sites of negotiation, where religious identities are redefined and reshaped in the post-war context. These spaces reflect a complex interplay of discourses, histories, and cultural interpretations. Geopolitical influences and the intermingling of religious cultures, ethnicities, and places further complicate the island's religious heritage. Understanding Sri Lanka's religious pluralism requires moving beyond classical anthropological theories to engage with contemporary postmodern and ontological perspectives (Sanmugeswaran, 2021). Religious pluralism is necessary to build a society in Sri Lanka that respects, values, and acknowledges its diversity and allows various religious communities to live in harmony.

2.1. Paradoxes of Pluralism in Sri Lanka

The diverse population of Sri Lanka is composed of several ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups and ethnic communities. According to the 2012 census, the Sinhalese account for 74.9% of the population and are predominantly Buddhist or members of the minority Christian community. Tamils make up approximately 15.3% of the population and are mostly Hindu, with others practicing Christian religions. The Muslim group is the third largest ethnic group, making up about 9.2% of the population. Buddhism is Sri Lanka's most popular religion, with 70.2% of the population practicing it, followed by Hindus (12.6%), Muslims (9.7%), and Christians (7.4%). According to the census, most Muslims are Sunnis,

while most Christians are Roman Catholics. There are a few Baha'is, Shia (Bohra community), Sufis, Ahmadis, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Pentecostals, and Evangelicals ([Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN, 2019](#)). The ancient chronicle *Mahavamsa* portrays Sri Lanka as a land designated by Lord Buddha for the preservation and propagation of Buddhism, and served as an inspiration for post-independence ethno-religious political narratives. Theravada Buddhism: known as *Dhammadeepa* (the island where the teachings of the Buddha are upheld and safeguarded) and *Sinhadeepa* (the island of the Sinhalese) in Sri Lanka. By manipulating this mytho-historical interpretation, Buddhist monks and other Sinhalese leaders have spread the ideology of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, which justifies their ethno-centric politics of minority subjugation and majority dominance ([DeVotta, 2007](#)).

The longstanding civil war in Sri Lanka promoted religious nationalism, with radical Buddhist groups emerging nationwide. These groups have been used by previous governments to control religious minorities. Under the Rajapaksa government, fears of their resurgence increased, particularly targeting the Muslim minority due to concerns about Islamic radicalization. Since 2013, there has been more violence against Muslims, and it is getting worse. People who attack Muslims or spread hate often do not get punished. This rising hostility started with the 2013 anti-halal campaign led by Sinhala Buddhist nationalist groups. They succeeded in ending halal food certification, which identifies food as permissible for Muslims according to Islamic teachings. This campaign resulted in attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned businesses. The discrimination has progressed from increasing mob attacks that go unpunished to government policies that openly target Muslims. These policies include the forced cremation of Muslim COVID-19 victims and proposed bans on the niqab (face veil) and madrasas (religious schools) ([Amnesty International, 2021](#)).

Christians also face frequent attacks by local groups, often led by Buddhist monks. These attacks involved the deliberate murder of clergy members, acts of physical assault, and damage to property and sites of worship. As per the findings of the 2016 report of the Minority Rights Group International, "*The primary perpetrators of the violations against Christians are the State actors having either administrative or police powers, as the sixty percent of the State actor interventions were negative, ranging from religious discrimination, misapplication of the law and failure to uphold the law denying rights of victims and acting in ways that exceed their authority.*" The other major perpetrators include the religious leaders, social or political movements by the religious nationalist groups, unidentified persons or mobs, and the villagers etc. This is mainly due to the growing number of the majority religious nationalist groups in the political & social sphere of the country, which has deeply influenced the minority politics of Sri Lanka ([Minority Rights Group International, 2016](#)). According to the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), there were 136 attacks on places of worship for Christians.

The frequency of the incidents increased in 2013 and 2014, with 103 and 111 incidents reported, respectively. The number of attacks on Christians was highest in 2019. A notable incident was the Easter Sunday attacks, which included a series of coordinated bombs on churches and hotels, killing over 250 people and injuring hundreds more. Following this, the Muslim community faced increased backlash, attacks, and prejudice because of distrust and blame directed at Muslims due to the attackers' affiliation with militant Islamist groups. In November 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa became the president of Sri Lanka. His victory was viewed by ethno-religious nationalist Sinhala-Buddhist parties such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Sinhala Ravaya as an important achievement in protecting the Sinhala race from perceived threats from Muslim and Tamil extremist groups. These organizations saw Rajapaksa's administration as a mandate to protect Sinhala-Buddhist identity and counter minority influences ([NCEASL, 2020](#)).

In terms of Hindus in Sri Lanka during the civil war, many Tamil Hindus experienced violence and displacement ([NCEASL, 2019](#)). Post-war, the Hindu community continues to deal with issues of marginalization and cultural erosion, with some Hindu temples and practices coming under pressure from dominant religious groups. Between 1983 and 1990, the Department of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs reported the demolition of 1,479 temples in the northeast provinces ([Mazumdar, 2017](#)). The Naguleswaram temple, dedicated to the Hindu God Shiva in the Northern province, was bombed by the Sri Lankan Air Force on October 16, 1990, causing extensive damage to the temple complex. Two days later, another bomb exploded at the same place, killing up to 180 people who were attending a religious ceremony ([Mazumdar, 2017](#)). Hindu temples have been demolished either as part of development projects or because they are in areas designated as Buddhist sacred zones ([Ramachandran, 2012](#)). Despite a court order issued in May 2019 prohibiting Buddhists from using the temple land again, Gnanasara Thero, a Buddhist monk and BBS leader, and his followers cremated a Buddhist monk's body near the Pillaiyar temple in September 2019. Thero was arrested for this crime but was soon released by the former president and became a Parliament member in 2020 ([Ranawana, 2020](#); [US Department of State, 2020](#)). President Rajapaksa's regime formed a task force in June 2020 to protect the eastern province's Buddhist heritage and raised the possibility of further appropriation of Hindu temples ([Baumgart, 2020](#); [Hindu American Foundation, 2024](#)).

Government actions to protect Buddhist heritage and the Buddhist religion show prioritizing one religious group's interests over others. Therefore, revealing a gap between the ideal of pluralism and the reality of intergroup relations in Sri Lanka.

2.2. Impact of Colonial Rule on Religious Diversity

Historically, diverse religious groups in Sri Lanka coexisted for centuries. Key religious sites in Sri Lanka, including the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Adam's Peak, and the Kataragama Sacred Site, exemplify inter-religious coexistence and syncretism. These sites are recognized as "complex religious fields" where Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians interact, worship together, and perform shared rituals. For example, the Temple of the Tooth houses deities worshipped by multiple faiths, various religions revere Adam's Peak as a sacred site, and the Kataragama Temple Complex attracts devotees from all major religions (Silva et al., 2016). Muslims first arrived in Sri Lanka as traders from the Arab world, establishing a presence well before the colonial era. According to historical records, including those by Lorna Dewaraja, these Muslim traders were welcomed by the local rulers due to their economic contributions. They maintained a peaceful relationship with the Sinhalese population. This amicable interaction is exemplified by the fact that Muslim traders were granted religious freedom and integrated into the local society without attempts to convert the indigenous population. Historical accounts suggest that during the 10th century, Muslims played a significant role in defending Sri Lankan settlements against external invasions, further solidifying their place in Sri Lankan society (Razak & Ushama, 2022). On the other hand, Hindus arrived in Sri Lanka through both migration and trade, with early settlers contributing to the island's cultural and religious tapestry. The Hindu community, primarily Tamil, settled in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. Historical records highlight their integral role in the local economy and cultural life, including the construction of temples and the practice of Hindu rituals. The arrival of Tamil Hindus was part of a broader pattern of migration and trade, with Tamil merchants and settlers contributing to the island's economic and social fabric (Claveyrolas et al., 2018).

Sri Lanka has many ethnic groups, religions, and languages reflecting its historical interactions with busy maritime routes and its colonial past under European powers. During the Portuguese era (1506-1650), aggressive efforts to convert the local population to Roman Catholicism destroyed Buddhist and Hindu places of worship. This period saw the forced conversion of local rulers and the general population, contributing to a communal memory of religious oppression and rebellion against colonial powers (Abeyasinghe, 1995; De Silva, 1981). In 1658, the Dutch East India Company took over some parts of Sri Lanka from the Portuguese. Their approach to religion was somewhat different, as they allowed a degree of religious freedom, although they continued to promote Protestantism. The British established schools and missionary institutions that promoted Christianity, particularly through Anglican and Methodist missions. These institutions often competed with existing religious and cultural traditions, leading to increased tensions (Strathern, 2007). The colonial period also saw the rise of Christian missionary activities, which further influenced the island's religious dynamics.

Sri Lanka's religious map continually changed after the country gained its independence in 1948. Many different religions, as they interacted with ethno-religious nationalism which developed during the post-colonial era, could no longer coexist peacefully. The Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist ideology has been a source of tension and conflict for all the minorities, who have sought greater autonomy and recognition. The ideology places a strong emphasis on preserving and promoting Buddhist values and Sinhalese cultural practices. It often involves the integration of Buddhist principles into public policy and the education system.

In the Sri Lankan context, identity alone does not suffice to provoke violence; rather, underlying socio-economic inequalities and unresolved political grievances play a central role in polarization and radical actions. The protracted civil conflict and subsequent tensions reveal that attributing radicalization solely to religion oversimplifies the issue. Instead, these dynamics must be understood within a broader framework of national reconciliation that takes into account historical injustices, ethnic marginalization, and regional disparities. Revisiting the root causes of conflict beyond religious identity is essential for building lasting peace and social cohesion in Sri Lanka (Imtiyaz & Saleem, 2024).

2.3. Legal and Institutional Framework

Sri Lanka has had a long-standing history in which legal measures were enacted to ensure the safety of religion and religious beliefs, starting with penal laws put into place during British rule, through the constitution of 1978, and including more recent legislative actions. *Article 10 of the Constitution ensures the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, granting individuals the right to determine and practice their religion without limitations. Article 12 ensures equality, prohibiting discrimination based on race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth, or similar grounds. It also states that no one should face restrictions accessing places of worship of their religion. Article 14(1)(e) People have the right to practice and teach their religion, alone or with others, publicly or privately. However, this right can be limited by laws for reasons like national security, public order, health, morality, or safety (Internews, 2020). Article 9 gives Buddhism the highest importance and requires the state to protect and promote it, while also guaranteeing the rights of other religions.*

In the international context, Sri Lanka has ratified several international treaties recognizing freedom of religion, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). *Article 20(2) of the ICCPR forbids promoting national, racial, or religious hatred that encourages discrimination, hostility, or violence.* The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) *Section 2(1)(h) criminalizes any act that incites violence, discord, or hostility between religious groups, making it punishable by law* (Minority Rights Group International, 2024). As a signatory, Sri Lanka is obligated to protect religious freedom and ensure it functions as a pluralist democracy.

The Penal Code of Sri Lanka also includes specific provisions addressing offenses related to religion as well as hate speech, as detailed in Table 1 below. Sri Lanka's legal system includes laws against hate speech that harm religious feelings or incite communal tension. The Penal Code lists several related offenses (See Table 1).

Table 1. Specific Provisions in the Penal Code Relating to Hate Speech

Section	Description
290	Harming or desecrating a place of worship to offend the religion of any group.
290A	Actions involving places of worship aimed at insulting the religion of any group.
291	Disrupting a religious gathering.
291A	Speaking words with the intent to intentionally hurt religious sentiments.
291B	Actions that are meant to hurt people's religious feelings by insulting their religion or beliefs.

Source: Minority Rights Group International

Despite these safeguards, religious minorities in Sri Lanka continue to face extreme violence, which has been discussed in the next section.

3. Methodology

The article examines challenges encountered by minority religious communities in Sri Lanka in exercising and promoting their religious beliefs and practices. The study highlights instances of violence against Christian and Muslim minorities, as well as the denial of their religious rights within Sri Lanka's Buddhist-majority society. It aims to give some meaningful ideas that can help promote religious pluralism and tolerance in Sri Lanka.

The study relies on secondary data sources only, including books, academic articles, Government and Non-Governmental Organization Reports, Newspaper Articles, etc. The study adopts a qualitative methodology using a case study framework, drawing on data from pertinent literature and media sources. It incorporates publications and reports from prestigious research organizations like the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Amnesty International, the International Crisis Group, Verité Research, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Sri Lanka), The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), and Minority Rights Group International, etc. These sources provided valuable insights into the socio-political dynamics and human rights concerns in Sri Lanka. The research also relied upon information from media outlets, including special reports from news channels across the world, to capture the contemporary discourse surrounding religious pluralism and minority rights. However, the analysis is also constrained by potential biases in the selected sources, as perspectives may vary among organizations and media outlets. One of the limitations of this research is the lack of direct engagement with the affected communities through interviews or field observations. The study primarily relies on secondary sources and document analysis, which may not fully capture the nuanced perspectives and lived experiences of those directly involved. Therefore, this study highly relied on academic articles published in various reputed journals as well as some Newspaper articles and NGO reports.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Incidents of Religious Intolerance or Conflict

After independence, Buddhist nationalists viewed Christianity, especially evangelical denominations, as a threat to Buddhism and Sinhala culture. This led to increased attacks on religious minorities, particularly Protestant Christians, in the 1980s. Movements like SUCCESS and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) further fuelled this animosity by accusing evangelical Christians of proselytization. The JHU, as a political party, pushed for a Buddhist nation and laws against religious conversion, resulting in numerous attacks on clergy and the destruction of property etc. Hate campaigns later targeted the Muslim community, with significant events like the anti-Muslim riots in Aluthgama in 2014 and campaigns against halal products and face coverings.

According to [Gunatilleke \(2015\)](#), religious violence in Sri Lanka takes two forms. The first type of violence is called "chronic violence." It includes things like hate speech, threats, and minor acts of violence. The second type is characterized by occasional events of high-intensity violence, including physical attacks, significant property destruction, and breakdowns of law and order. Both types apply to the Muslim community as well as Christians.

4.1.1. Incidents of Violence Against Muslims

After the civil war ended in 2009, there was a lot more attention on the Muslim minority. The BBS, led by monk Galabod Aththe Gnanasara, framed Muslims as a threat to Sinhalese Buddhist identity, using rhetoric around "social separatism" and "extremist Muslims" to justify their actions. The BBS's large public rallies and aggressive social media campaigns legitimized hate speech and the daily harassment of Muslims. Their actions and narratives significantly contributed to the rise of anti-Muslim violence. The 2019 Easter Sunday bombings by Islamist extremists significantly escalated anti-Muslim sentiment. Following the attacks, many Muslims were detained without trial, based solely on suspicion by the police. The government did not act on information they had about the attacks, and the media blamed Muslims for the violence. This made the Muslim community feel even more isolated ([Hussain, 2021](#)). [Ali \(2025\)](#) argues that the radicalization of Buddhism, driven by the ideology of Sinhala-Buddhism, has intensified social tensions and strained relations between Buddhists and Muslims. This strain has, in turn, contributed to the radicalization of segments within the Muslim community. A prominent example is the emergence of the National Thowheed Jama'ath (NTJ) (Islamist jihadist militant group), which arose as a reaction to anti-Muslim violence, illustrating how Islamic radicalization can be provoked by religious politicization and systemic injustices faced by Muslims in Sri Lanka. The religious extremism deepens social and political divisions, threatens, and violence against minorities in multi-ethnic societies. [Table 2](#) explains how minority Muslims are suffering in Sri Lanka.

Table 2. Violence Against Muslims in Sri Lanka from 2009 to 2024

Year	Location	Incident	Impact
2009	Beruwala, Kalutara District	Clashes between Tawheed and Tariqa groups at the Rahuman Masjid Buhari Mosque.	Deaths, injuries, and damage to the mosque.
2011	Anuradhapura Town	A mob led by Buddhist monks destroyed a 300-year-old Muslim shrine.	Shrine destroyed.
2012	Dambulla, Matale District	Vandalism of the Masjidul Kairiya Mosque by a large group led by a Buddhist monk.	Disrupted prayers and damaged religious texts.
2012	Pavvakodichchenai, Batticaloa District	Burning of the Mohideen Jumma Mosque, suspected involvement of TMVP cadres.	The mosque burned.
2012	Kohilawatte, Wellampitiya, Colombo District	Attack on the Mohideen Jumma Mosque.	Damaged sound system and injuries.
2013	Kandy Town, Kandy District	Threatening graffiti on the Meera Makkam mosque's wall.	Hate speech and intimidation of Muslims.
2017	Gintota, Southern Province	Violent clashes between Sinhalese and Muslim communities were sparked by a road accident.	Damaged houses, shops, and vehicles, dozens were injured, and families were displaced.
2018	Ampara, Eastern Province	A mob attack on Muslim-owned businesses, homes, and a mosque was incited by rumors of food sterilization.	Extensive property damage and heightened communal tensions.
2018	Digana/Teldeniya, Kandy District	Anti-Muslim riots followed the death of a Sinhalese man assaulted by four Muslim youths.	Vandalized and burned mosques, businesses, and homes, one death, multiple injuries.
2019	Kurunegala/Minuwangoda, North Western and Western Provinces	Anti-Muslim riots followed the Easter Sunday bombings by Islamist extremists.	Extensive property damage, several deaths, and many Muslims fled their homes.

2021	Colombo	The government announces plans to prohibit the burqa.	Minister of Public Security Sarath Weerasekara describes the burqa as a symbol of religious extremism.
2021	Colombo	The cabinet approves a ban on full-face coverings.	Legislation to ban face veils was approved in the interest of national security.
2022	Ratnapura	The entrance arch of Dafthar Jailani Mosque in Kuragala was torn down.	Since 2010, Buddhists have been attempting to remove the entrance to the mosque, and it has now been destroyed.
2023	Matale	Dispute over Muslim school land	The land dispute has persisted for decades. The Muslim school and the community, however, are vehemently against any such encroachment.
2023	Ratnapura	A shop owned by a Muslim near the Dafthar Jailani Mosque in Balangoda was destroyed.	Property destroyed, Discouraged Sinhalese people from purchasing goods from Muslim shops.
2024	Colombo	The withheld exam results of 70 Muslim women from Zahira College occurred at Zahira College, Colombo. Girls wore religious head coverings, claiming without evidence that they could have concealed Bluetooth earpieces to aid them during the exam.	This action, based on unsubstantiated claims, can be seen as a form of targeted discrimination and a violation of their religious freedom.

Source: Centre for Policy Alternatives (2013) & The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL), 2023 & Verité Research & USCIRF Report, 2025

4.1.2. Incidents of Violence Against Christians

For decades, there has been hostility towards Christians, especially evangelical Christians. Sri Lanka has witnessed a troubling history of violence against Christians, marked by several significant incidents of aggression and vandalism. Major events include the 2009 attacks on various churches, such as the vandalism of the Vineyard Community Church in Kurunegala, which faced desecration and theft, and the burning of the Assemblies of God Church in Puttalam. The situation worsened in 2010 when officials demolished churches like the Calvary Christian Church in Rajagiriya despite being authorized, reflecting both local and official hostility.

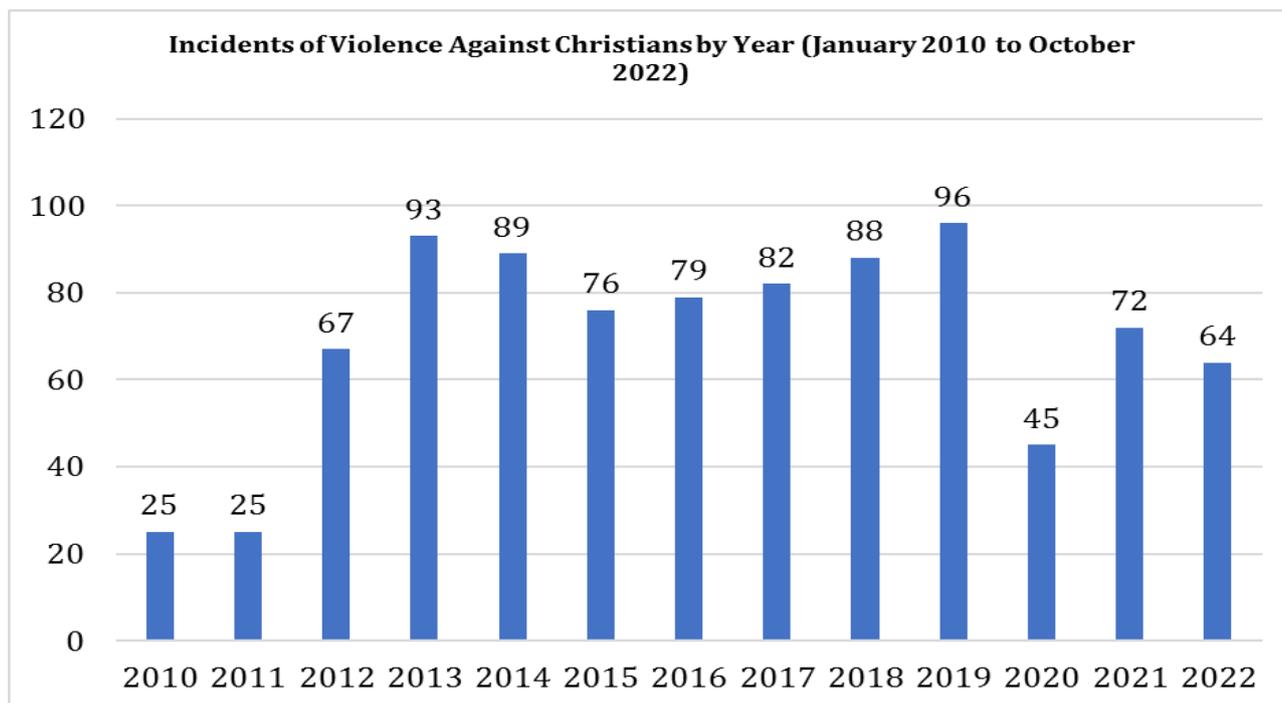
In subsequent years, violence persisted, with incidents such as the 2011 attack on the Prayer Tower Church in Marawila, where human excrement was used to desecrate the premises, and the 2012 disruptions in Puttalam, where church properties were damaged and services disrupted by mobs, including Buddhist monks. The violence extended into the 2010s with repeated attacks on churches like the St. Thomas Church in Kandy and the Good Shepherd Church in Badulla, where religious artifacts were destroyed and congregants threatened. In January 2013, a mob of around 200 people, including Buddhist monks, attacked the Apostolic Church in Nikaweratiya, causing significant damage and threatening the pastor. Later that year, in May, the Good Shepherd Church in Badulla was targeted by 50 people, including monks, leading to vandalism and property damage (CPA, 2013).

In 2014, the Hope Church in Panadura faced a similar attack by a group of 60, led by monks, who damaged property and threatened congregants. By August 2014, the Calvary Christian Church in Anuradhapura was vandalized by unidentified assailants, disrupting services. In 2015, both St. Anthony's Church in Jaffna and St. Thomas Church in Kandy were attacked, with significant damage and threats made against clergy. The Evangelical Church in Matara suffered an attack in June 2016, involving 50 people and monks, who disrupted services and assaulted members. The following year, the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Galle was vandalized by 30 people, including monks, who stole religious artefacts. The

Bethel Church in Colombo was heavily damaged in July 2018 by a mob of around 70 people. The Vineyard Community Church in Kurunegala was again attacked in January 2019, disrupting services.

The Holy Cross Church in Batticaloa was vandalized in May 2020 by an unidentified group. In 2021, the Grace Church in Vavuniya was attacked by a mob, including monks, leading to property destruction and threats. In June 2022, the Life Church in Colombo was assaulted by around 50 people, resulting in property damage and physical assault on members. These incidents reflect ongoing tensions and violence against Christian communities in Sri Lanka (NCEAL, 2022). These are just a few examples of the violence experienced by Christians in Sri Lanka; numerous other incidents have also occurred. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka Report 2022 analysed a year-by-year comparison of the total number of incidents for each year, covering the period from January 2010 to December 2021, to October 2022 (Figure- 1).

Figure 1: Incidents of Violence Against Christians by Year (January 2010 to October 2022)



Source: NCEASL & Verité Research, 2022

In 2023, NCEASL documented 43 cases of anti-Christian intimidation and violence. These incidents included threats directed at pastors and their congregations, interruptions of worship services, acts of discrimination, and assaults on churches. This marks a decrease from the cases reported in 2022 (Persecution.org, 2024).

4.2. Responses to Mitigate Violence

Religious minorities are actively responding to violence and discrimination against religious freedom through various interfaith coexistence and reconciliation programs. Organizations like Muslim Aid and the Inter-Religious Council of Sri Lanka have been pivotal in uplifting interfaith cooperation since the civil war. The Center for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (CPBR), established in 2002, has been a leader in these initiatives through its flagship Interfaith Dialogue Program. These centers serve as neutral spaces where religious leaders and community members collaboratively discuss and plan initiatives to promote reconciliation and peacebuilding at local, regional, and national levels.

Sarvodaya Shanthisena, in partnership with the United Religions Initiative (URI), has been implementing interfaith initiatives since 2000. URI is a global community committed to promoting enduring interfaith cooperation, ending religiously motivated violence, and creating cultures of peace, justice, and healing. The National Peace Council (NPC) plays a significant role in involving religious leaders to tackle inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts at the community level (Internews, 2020). Remarkably, the Religious Liberty Commission of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka plays an important role in advocating for religious freedom, providing legal assistance, educating Christians about civil liberties, and raising awareness internationally about human rights violations in Sri Lanka. Individuals and groups also

engage in international lobbying and advocacy campaigns to address religious liberties and human rights violations in Sri Lanka.

4.3. Solutions for Establishing Religious Pluralism

The research on the religious freedom of minorities in Sri Lanka enabled us to acquire a comprehensive understanding of their situation on the island. Both Muslims and Christians, including Hindus, face challenges in propagating their religions; they live in continual fear of exercising their religious faith. As a result, human rights scholars cannot justify viewing Sri Lanka as a democracy that values diversity. Following that discussion, the authors have developed a few ideas that can assist Sri Lanka in establishing religious pluralism, in which all religions are granted respect, equal opportunity, and safety in the exercise of their beliefs. However, all religions have an equal obligation to uphold peace and refrain from encouraging forcible conversions that lead to the suspension of followers of the Buddhist faith and further lead to violent attacks.

Establishing religious Pluralism in Sri Lanka, where violence against minorities is mitigated, requires concerted efforts from political leaders, state officials, religious leaders, and the broader community. Political leaders and state officials have a key role in embracing a pluralistic society by ensuring that all ethnic, racial, religious, and social groups have an equal voice, regardless of their numbers. This includes maintaining and developing their traditional cultures and special interests within the framework of common citizenship. The state must always act with justice and equity, serving all people fairly and without bias. This involves not only fair and unbiased governance but also the provision of state services such as police protection, healthcare, and education without discrimination. Ensuring equity in the distribution of resources and services is essential for building trust and cooperation among different communities. Moreover, Religious leaders must play a determining role in embedding the concept of pluralism within the larger community. To effectively do this, they need to be trained in the principles of pluralism, enabling them to share their learning through the lens of social cohesion and religious coexistence. Institutional responses to atrocities committed against religious minorities must be strengthened, especially in the judicial system. To protect religious minorities' rights and promote a more inclusive society to ensure religious freedom for everyone, the law should be applied fairly to all religions. Constant monitoring by international human rights communities for violations of minority rights on the island is also necessary to ensure the accountability of the Sri Lankan government.

Religious pluralism is essential in Sri Lanka's multi-religious society, where Buddhism is the majority faith but several other religions, such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, are also practiced. It promotes peaceful coexistence by encouraging mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding among different religious communities. Pluralism helps prevent communal tensions and develop a spirit of unity and inclusivity. By recognizing and protecting the rights of all religious groups, it strengthens the democratic fabric of the nation. In a diverse society like Sri Lanka, religious pluralism is key to maintaining social harmony and ensuring that all citizens feel equally valued and respected.

5. Conclusion

Sri Lanka's history of intercommunal tensions, especially those affecting religious minorities, highlights the urgent need for a rigorous, rights-based approach to understanding and addressing these challenges. This study offers an overview of the challenges faced by religious minorities, but violence against Hindus has not been covered much, which can be a topic for future research. Future research can undertake primary field studies and examine detailed case studies of religious violence to provide deeper, context-specific insights into the lived realities of affected communities. The role of the Sri Lankan government in mitigating religious violence and establishing peace among communities remains an important area for continued inquiry.

Establishing religious pluralism in countries with strong ethno-religious tensions, such as Sri Lanka, is difficult due to deeply rooted fears and perceived existential threats from minority communities for Sinhala Buddhists. Because Sinhala-Buddhists regard the growing Muslim population and Christian proselytism as threats to their cultural and economic domination, while the LTTE's separatist mission was seen as endangering their territorial control. Similarly, Tamil-Hindus, feeling threatened by the spread of other religions, including Christianity, have increasingly embraced Tamil-Hinduism as a dominant ideology. These conflicting perceptions and fears create an environment where inter-religious dialogue and coexistence are difficult to achieve. The established identities and rivalries make it challenging to build a shared sense of pluralism, as each group struggles to protect its own perceived space and identity against what is viewed as encroachment by others. Sri Lankan society should practice religious toleration, defined as enduring something disagreeable without resorting to coercion, which is key to managing diversity. It is not indifference or mere acceptance but a

conscious decision to respect and coexist with differing beliefs and practices. Civil society, religious leaders, and the international community should have a collective commitment to uphold the principles of equality, justice, and human dignity for all its citizens, regardless of their faith. Government policies and initiatives aimed at reconciliation and communal harmony must be closely examined for their effectiveness and inclusivity. Promoting pluralism requires active engagement from all stakeholders, ensuring that ethno-religious minorities are treated as equal citizens within the nation's socio-political framework.

From a policy perspective, this study highlights the need to address any constitutional and structural biases that may perpetuate exclusion or discrimination. It also stresses the importance of creating inclusive, multi-religious public spaces and promoting equal citizenship to counteract the divisive tendencies of religious nationalism and majoritarian ideologies. By focusing on these areas, both scholars and policymakers can contribute to a more just, cohesive, and pluralistic Sri Lanka.

Declarations

Author Contributions

RO: Study design, methodology, and study tools development, data analysis, and article preparation. KK: Study supervision, data analysis, proofreading & grammar correction and references. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

No funding was received for this research.

Acknowledgments

The author wants to acknowledge the insightful inputs provided by Prof. Kuldeep Singh, Former Professor of Political Science, at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar.

Conflict of Interest

The authors stated that they have no conflicts of interest related to this article's research, writing, or publishing.

References

- Abeyasinghe, T. (1995). *Religious coexistence and conflict in Sri Lanka: Historical perspectives*. University of Colombo Press.
- Ali, A. (2025). Religious radicalization in Sri Lanka: The interaction between Buddhist and Islamic radicalization and its impact on social life. *Subhasita: Journal of Buddhist and Religious Studies*, 3(1), 49-66. <https://doi.org/10.53417/jsb.149>
- Aliff, S. A. (2015). Post-war conflict in Sri Lanka: Violence against Sri Lankan Muslims and Buddhist hegemony. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 59, 109-125. <https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.59.109>
- Amnesty International. (2021, October 27). Sri Lanka: Authorities must end violence and discrimination against Muslims. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/10/sri-lanka-authorities-must-end-violence-and-discrimination-against-muslims/>
- Bader, V. (1999). Religious pluralism: Secularism or priority for democracy? *Political Theory*, 27(5), 597-633. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591799027005001>
- Baumgart, P. (2020, July 30). Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections will shape its political future likely for the worse. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/sri-lankas-parliamentary-elections-will-shape-its-political-future-likely-for-the-worse/>
- Berger, P. L. (2015). *The desecularization of the world: Resurgent religion and world politics*. Eerdmans.
- Bhargava, R. (2005). Theoretical perspectives on religious pluralism. In D. A. Smith & C. J. D. L. Lee (Eds.), *Globalization and religion* (57-72). Routledge.
- C. R. de Silva. (1995). *The Portuguese and the Sinhalese: A historical perspective*. Lanka Book Publishers.

- Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2013). *Attacks on religious places*. <https://sangam.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Attacks-on-Religious-Places-CPA-March-2013.pdf>
- Claveyrolas, M., Goreau-Ponceaud, A., Madavan, D., Meyer, E., & Trouillet, P.-Y. (2018). Hindus and others: A Sri Lankan perspective (Introduction). *The South Asianist*, 6, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.13169/southasianistudieduc.6.1.0001>
- CPA. (2013). *Attacks on places of religious worship in post-war Sri Lanka*. <https://www.cpalanka.org/attacks-on-places-of-religious-worship-in-post-war-sri-lanka/>
- De Silva, K. M. (1981). *A history of Sri Lanka*. University of California Press.
- Devotta, N. (2020). Promoting covenantal pluralism amidst embedded majoritarianism in Sri Lanka. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 18, 49–62.
- Dvotta, N. (2007). *Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology: Implications for politics and conflict resolution in Sri Lanka*. East-West Center.
- Edrisinha, R. (2005). Multinational federalism and minority rights in Sri Lanka. In W. Kymlicka & B. He (Eds.), *Multiculturalism in Asia* (pp. 244). Oxford University Press.
- Gajaweera, N. (2022, May 19). Sri Lanka's dual crisis: Ethnic conflict and the debt economy. *Center for Religion and Civic Culture*. <https://crcc.usc.edu/sri-lankas-dual-crisis-ethnic-conflict-the-debt-economy>
- Gunasekera, D. (1954). *The Rajavaliya: A chronicle of the Portuguese period*. Colombo Publications.
- Gunatilleke, G. (2015). *The chronic and the acute: Post-war religious violence in Sri Lanka*. International Center for Ethnic Studies and EQUITAS-International Center for Human Rights Studies.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (2007). *Lectures on the philosophy of religion* (P. C. Hodgson, Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Hindu American Foundation. (2024). *Sri Lanka: Human rights report*. <https://www.hinduamerican.org/projects/human-rights-report/sri-lanka>
- Hussain, N. (2021, April 12). What is behind the anti-Muslim measures in Sri Lanka? *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/4/12/what-is-behind-the-anti-muslim-measures-in-sri-lanka>
- Imtiyaz, A. R. M., & Saleem-Mohamed, A. (2024). Islamic Faith as an Ethnic Identity Marker: Overview of Sri Lanka Muslim Identity Formation, Politicization, and Violence. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241230482>
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2024). *Religious pluralism*. <https://iep.utm.edu/rel-plur/>
- International Crisis Group. (2022). *Sri Lanka: Resisting the politics of religious identity*. Retrieved February 7, 2025, from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/sri-lanka/234-sri-lanka-resisting-politics-religious-identity>
- Internews. (2020). *Sri Lanka handbook on religious freedom: English 2020*. Sulochana Peiris.
- James, W. (2002). *The varieties of religious experience*. Routledge.
- Jayasuriya, D. (2023). Sri Lanka: recent crises in a multi-religious society. *The Round Table*, 112(5), 508–515. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2023.2268925>
- Kant, I. (2009). *Religion within the bounds of bare reason* (W. S. Pluhar, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company.
- Mazumdar, J. (2017, December 13). The sorry state of Hindu shrines in the Lankan land. *Swarajya*. <https://swarajyamag.com/magazine/sorry-state-of-hindu-shrines-in-the-lankan-land>
- Minority Rights Group International. (2024). *Confronting intolerance: Continued violations against religious minorities in Sri Lanka*. <https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/mrg-rep-srilan-dec16.pdf>
- National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka. (2020). *Prejudice and patronage: An analysis of incidents of violence against Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in Sri Lanka, September 2019–September 2020*. https://www.nceasl.org/files/ugd/0f8498_da455213b85945a18134e8f60c40e738.pdf
- NCEASL. (2019). Sri Lanka: The 2019 religious freedom landscape: Written statement submitted to the Human Rights Council at its 40th session (25 February – 22 March 2019), under Item 4: Human rights situations that require the Council's attention. <https://un.worldeaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HRC40-Sri-Lanka.pdf>
- NCEASL. (2020). *Prejudice and patronage: An analysis of incidents of violence against Christians, Muslims, and Hindus in Sri Lanka, September 2019–September 2020*. https://www.nceasl.org/files/ugd/0f8498_da455213b85945a18134e8f60c40e738.pdf
- NCEASL & Verité Research. (2025). *Religious violence against Christians: Disruptions and distractions, November 2021–October 2022*. <https://www.veriteresearch.org/publication/religious-violence-against-christiansdisruptions-and-distractions/>
- NCEASL. (2024). *Sri Lanka trend analysis of violence against Christians*. <https://d3lwycy8zkggea.cloudfront.net/1717748801/sri-lanka-trend-analysis-of-violence-against-christians.pdf>
- NCEASL & Verité Research. (2022). *Religious violence against Christians: Disruptions and distractions*. <https://www.veriteresearch.org/publication/religious-violence-against-christiansdisruptions-and-distractions/>
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2019, August). Preliminary findings of the country visit to Sri Lanka by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2019/08/preliminary-findings-country-visit-sri-lanka-special-rapporteur-freedom-religion-or>

- Persecution.org. (2024, July 3). USCIRF releases a report on religious freedom in Sri Lanka. *International Christian Concern*. Retrieved February 7, 2025, from <https://www.persecution.org/2024/07/03/uscirf-releases-report-on-religious-freedom-in-sri-lanka/>
- Ramachandran, S. (2012, May 1). Sri Lankan monks join the rampaging mob. *Colombo Telegraph*.
- Ranawana, A. (2020, August 8). Gnanasara Thero was likely to win the Buddhist monks' tussle over the national list seat. *EconomyNext*.
- Razak, F. A., & Ushama, T. (2022). Buddhist-Muslim religious coexistence in Sri Lanka: A historical analysis. *Al-Itqān: Journal of Islamic Sciences and Comparative Studies*, 6(1), 87–109. <https://doi.org/10.31436/al-itqan.v6i1.121>
- Sanmugeswaran, P. (2021). Essay 1: Negotiating with innovative multi-religious spaces, new religious pluralism, and geo-religious powers in post-war Sri Lanka. *Multi-religiosity in contemporary Sri Lanka*.
- Schleiermacher, F. (1996). *On religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers* (R. Crouter, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Strathern, A. (2007). *Kingship and Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Sri Lanka: Portuguese Imperialism in a Buddhist Land*. Cambridge University Press. assets.cambridge.org
- Taylor, C. (1998). The politics of recognition. In A. Gutmann (Ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition* (pp. 25–73). Princeton University Press.
- U.S. Department of State. (2020). *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sri Lanka*. Office of International Religious Freedom. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sri-lanka/>
- Udagama, D. (2013). Constitutional and legal framework for the protection of minority rights in Sri Lanka: A critical analysis. *International Journal of Human Rights*, 17(1), 72–87.
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2025). *Sri Lanka 2025 USCIRF Annual Report*. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/202504/Sri%20Lanka%202025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf>
- Verité Research. (2022). *Patterns and risks of religious violence against Christians*. <https://www.veriteresearch.org/publication/patterns-and-risks-of-religious-violence-against-christians/>