



#MINORMATTERS



UNDERSTANDING PRESS COVERAGE ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

PERIOD COVERED : MARCH 2019

INTRODUCTION

Ethno-religious violence has been a growing problem in post-war Sri Lanka. Events in Mawanella (2001),¹ Gintota (2017),² Aluthgama (2014)³ and most recently in Digana (2018)⁴ demonstrate the extent and frequency of this type of violence.

This report is the fourth in a series of reports prepared by Verité Research (VR) for Minor Matters. These reports examine how the print media reports on religious freedom in Sri Lanka. They aim to analyse the frequency and tonality of coverage in various newspapers in English, Sinhala and Tamil to provide both quantitative and qualitative insights.

The press coverage is assessed by observing press articles in terms of their sentiment on religious freedom, i.e. supporting, neutral or opposing. This sentiment analysis is based on an assessment of two components: a) news grading, in which the substance of the news article/content is analysed, and b) view grading, in which the tonality of the coverage, pictures, and any other additional cues used to position sentiment regarding the news item, are analysed.

The present report also qualitatively analyses articles related to religious freedom within the context of broader themes such as physical violence towards people and property; inflammatory speech; court cases, laws and regulations pertaining to religious freedom; religious inequality and discrimination; and other related reporting relevant to religious freedom. Newspaper summaries that have a bearing on religious freedom are listed in chronological order at the end of the report.

¹ G.H. Peiris, *A reappraisal of evidence and claims. Emerging Buddhist – Muslim rivalry in Sri Lanka?* The Island (2017). Accessed 11 December 2018 http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=167737.

² Dharisha Bastians, *Gintota and the shadows of extremism*. Daily FT (2017). Accessed 11 December 2018 <http://www.ft.lk/opinion/Gintota-and-the-shadows-of-extremism/14-643843>.

³ Dharisha Bastians, *Death toll rises to 4 from Aluthgama riot..* Daily FT (2014). Accessed 11 December 2018 <http://www.ft.lk/article/308988/Death-toll-rises-to-4-from-Aluthgama-riots>.

⁴ *Digana turns divisive* Daily FT (2018). Accessed 11 December 2018 <http://www.ft.lk/top-story/Digana-turns-divisive-/26-650661>.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, religious freedom can be understood to comprise:

- The freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice;⁵
- The freedom not to be discriminated against or to suffer any disability on the grounds of religion;⁶
- The freedom not to be subject to any restriction or condition with regard to access to places of public worship of one's own religion;⁷ and
- The freedom to be entitled to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching.⁸

Press reports on religious freedom that appeared during the month of February 2019 were monitored. The following 13 daily and weekend newspapers in the two local languages—Sinhala, Tamil—and English were examined (see table below).

English Newspapers	Sinhala Newspapers	Tamil Newspapers
Sunday Observer/ Daily News	Lankadeepa/Sunday Lankadeepa	Virakesari
Daily Mirror	Divaina/Sunday Divaina	Thinakaran
	Dinamina/Silumina	Uthayan
	Anidda	

The above newspapers were selected based on readership data in the National Demographic and Media Survey produced by Kantar LMRB for the year 2017. *Lankadeepa* and *Virakesari* have the highest readership of the daily Sinhala and Tamil newspapers respectively. *Divaina* has the second highest readership of the daily Sinhala newspapers. *Sunday Observer* and *Daily News* have the highest readership of the weekend and daily English newspapers respectively. *Daily Mirror* has the second highest readership of the daily English newspapers.

Anidda was selected, despite the absence of its readership data, as its content generally differs from coverage in the mainstream press, and therefore can be considered as providing alternative insights into events. Likewise, *Uthayan*, a Jaffna-based publication, was selected, despite the absence of its readership data, as it is a regional publication. As state-owned newspapers were included for both the English and Sinhala samples, *Thinakaran* was selected to represent a state-owned Tamil newspaper to maintain consistency, despite it having relatively low readership.

⁵ Article 10 of the Sri Lanka Constitution.

⁶ Article 12 (2) and article 27 (6) of the Sri Lanka Constitution. ⁷ Article 12 (3) of the Sri Lanka Constitution.

⁸ Article 14 (1) (e) of the Sri Lanka Constitution.



In these newspapers, articles that **had a bearing on religious freedom** were selected for assessment of the tonality of their reporting. These articles included:⁹

- Articles that referred to instances of physical violence that were religiously motivated, or targeted religious communities/figures or sites;
- Articles that referred to or contained speech prompting physical violence or threatening remarks targeted at religious communities, leaders or institutions;
- Articles that discussed court cases, laws or regulations pertaining to religious freedom.

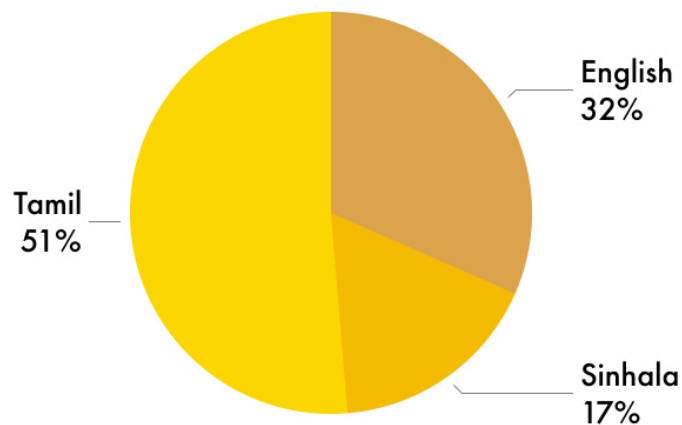
⁹ N.B. the aforementioned list is only illustrative and not exhaustive.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

NUMBER OF ARTICLES CARRIED IN PRESS

English | Sinhala | Tamil

March 2019



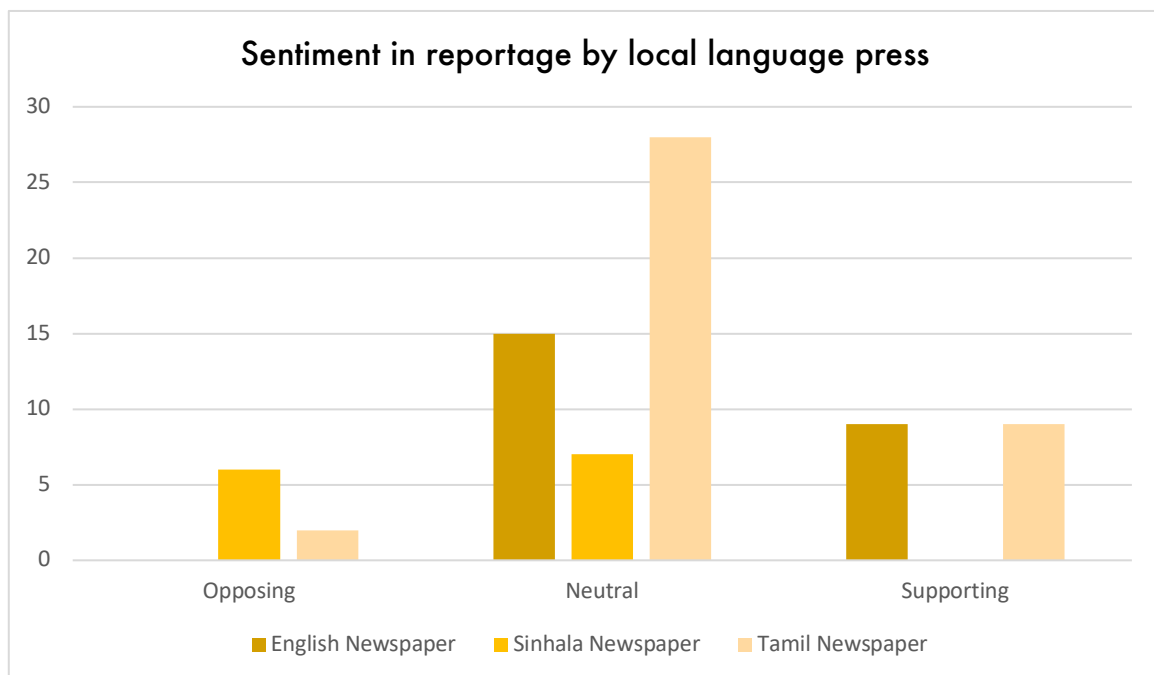
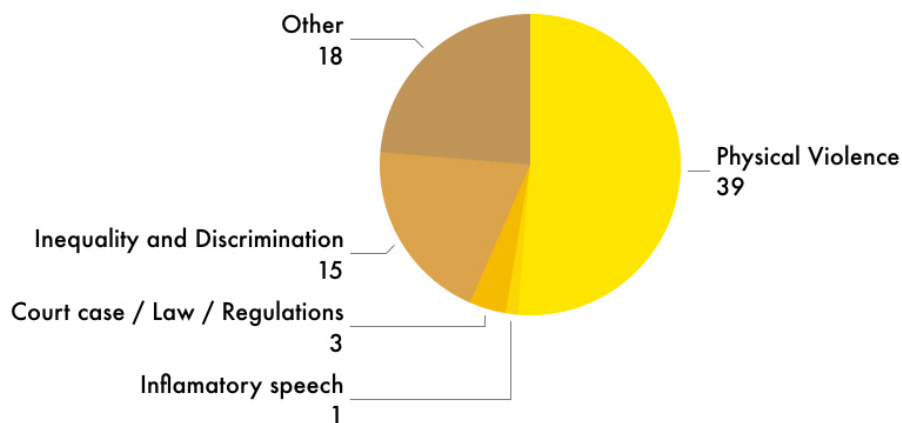
For the month of March 2019, a total of 76 articles relating to religious freedom were carried in the monitored English, Sinhala and Tamil newspapers. Of this total, 51 per cent (39 articles) were carried in the Tamil newspapers. Meanwhile, English and Sinhala newspapers accounted for 32 per cent (24 articles) and 17 per cent (13 articles) of the coverage respectively.

Religious freedom was discussed under the following five themes:

1. Physical violence;
2. Inflammatory speech;
3. Court cases/law/regulations;
4. Inequality and discrimination; and
5. Other related reporting.

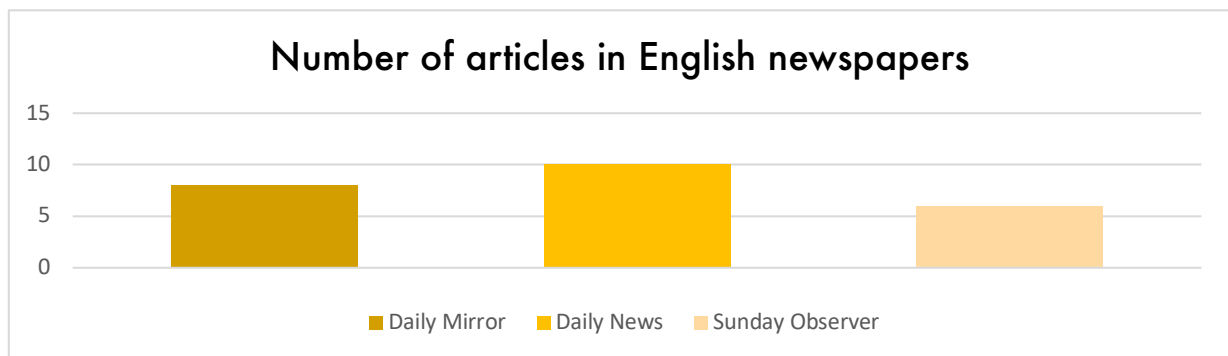
NUMBER OF ARTICLES PERTAINING TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM BY THEME

March 2019



- Of the 24 articles in the English newspapers, 9 supported religious freedom, while 15 were neutral.
- Of the 13 articles in the Sinhala newspapers, 7 were neutral while 6 opposed religious freedom.
- Of the 39 articles in the Tamil newspapers, 9 supported religious freedom, while 28 were neutral and 2 opposed religious freedom.

Coverage in English Newspapers



English Newspapers	No. of Articles	Reportage		
		Supporting	Neutral	Opposing
Daily News	10	2	8	-
Daily Mirror	8	3	5	-
Sunday Observer	6	4	2	-
Total	24	9	15	

- The English newspapers carried 24 articles that had a bearing on religious freedom. Of these, 9 supported religious freedom, while the remaining 15 were neutral.
- The 9 supporting articles covered the following press reports:
 - An article in *Daily Mirror* reported that during a visit made to the Malwatta Temple, Minister of Housing, Construction and Cultural Affairs Sajith Premadasa had an exchange with Mahanayake of the Malwatta Chapter Ven. Thibbotuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala Thera. The Thera stated that the historic temples and ancient buildings should be conserved and protected from vandals causing damage to them. In response, Minister of Housing and Construction Sajith Premadasa stated that the Archaeological Ordinance would soon be amended to provide adequate protection to the ancient temples and archaeological sites under the Deputy Inspector General.¹⁰
 - Articles in the *Daily News* and *Daily Mirror* reported on the first ever Buddhist Congress in the North. The congress was to be held on March 22 at Vavuniya Sri Bodhi Dhakshinarama Temple premises. The article reports that Governor of the Northern Province Dr. Suren Raghavan has undertaken this initiative to pave the way for improved understanding, reconciliation, and peaceful co- existence between all communities.

¹⁰ *Daily Mirror*, March 4, p. A7.



The governor stated that the initiative would also help to strengthen religious amity among all sections of society.¹¹

- An opinion article in *Sunday Observer* article recounts the violence that occurred during March 2018 in Digana, Kandy. The article features statements made by victims of the riots. The writer reports on Samsudeen, a shoe merchant, whose house and shop front were burned down. The fire also claimed the life of his youngest son Abdul Basith. However, Samsudeen remains optimistic that religious tensions can be minimised and only the minority approve of violence. The article also features the story of Chief Incumbent of the Gomagoda Temple Kahagala Dhmmmananda Thera, who sheltered Muslim families in his temple.¹²
- In an opinion article in *Sunday Observer*, the writer recounts the violence that occurred at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15 March 2019. The writer draws comparisons between the New Zealand shooting and identity-based violence in Sri Lanka—ranging from Black July in 1983 to more recent events in Aluthgama and Digana.¹³ The author reports that it is the ‘same paranoia of threatened ethnic community extinction’ that leads to ‘ethnic retaliation to ostensibly fend off such imagined threats’. Even as the country recovers from its civil war, ‘organisations [and religious figures] that propagate ethnic paranoia...are sponsored by politicians and even politically powerful bureaucrats at the very heart of the Republic’. Stating that such rhetoric is utilised for political expedience, the author is extremely critical of all those in the public sphere who preach this ‘ethnic supremacy’. In light of the worldwide condemnatory response to the Christchurch killer, the author questions how the international community would (or should) view Sri Lanka and its politics of ethnic resentment.¹⁴
- An opinion article in *Daily Mirror* examines the rise of intolerance as racial and religious violence flares up worldwide. In his concluding remarks, the writer states that ‘history testifies that pogroms of the Black July type or the Aluthgama riots are never out of the picture’. He urges moderates to rise up and demand that leaders do not play nationalist and racist cards as an expedient means of gaining or remaining in political power.¹⁵

¹¹ *Daily News*, March 4, p. 1, 6; *Daily Mirror*, March 16, p. 1, 6.

¹² *Sunday Observer*, March 10, p. 4.

¹³ ‘Black July’ in 1983 refers to the mass-scale mob violence the Tamils of Sri Lanka were subject to during the fourth week of July in 1983. For a more detailed explanation of the events that unfolded during this period of violence please see <http://www.dailymirror.lk/dbs-jeyaraj-column/Black-July-Thirty-fifth-Anniversary-of-Anti-Tamil-Violence/192-153018>.

¹⁴ *Sunday Observer*, March 17, p. 8.

¹⁵ *Daily Mirror*, March 20, p. A8.



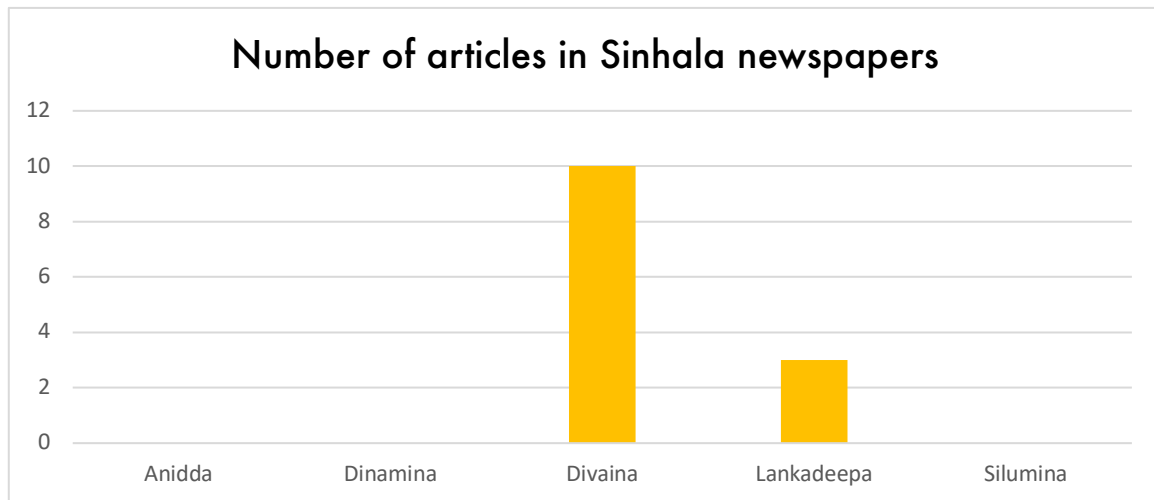
- An editorial in *Daily News* observes that the more militant members of the Bhikku community are often seen ‘whipping up racist sentiments which are quite opposed to the Buddha’s teaching of love and compassion towards all beings’. The editorial notes that the politicisation of Buddhist monks has led to ‘mayhem [such as that which was] unleashed in Aluthgama [in 2014]’. In this context, the editorial insisted that monks should stay away from politics.¹⁶
- An opinion article in *Sunday Observer* details the vandalism of a new trilingual signboard at Sri Pada. The article notes that ‘tussles over places of worship or of significance have become common in recent times with various groups claiming ownership over another leading to unnecessary tension among communities’. The piece quotes Ven. Dhammananda Thera, who states that ‘as a country with a troubled past, shared places of worship such as Kataragama and Sri Pada continue to be important spaces’. He believes that these ‘troublemakers should be starved of the oxygen of publicity’.¹⁷
- An opinion article in *Sunday Observer* discussed the recent furore over the alleged deforestation in Wilpattu National Park. The article quotes the Chief Bhikkhu of the Northern and Eastern Provinces Ven. Siyambalagaswewa Wimalasara Thera, who suggests there could be ‘wicked efforts to spread racism by discussing the deforestation of Wilpattu’. He states that Minister of Industry & Commerce, Resettlement of Protracted Displaced Persons, Co-operative Development and Vocational Training & Skills Development Rishad Bathiudeen is not racist and is in fact ‘the only politician who supports the 14 active Buddhist temples in Vavuniya’. Wimalasara Thera further states that even ‘Sinhala colonies such as Marichchukaddy were re-established after the war by clearing forest area’. As such, he sees current complaints as politically motivated.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Daily News*, March 29, p. 10.

¹⁷ *Sunday Observer*, March 24, p. 17, 18.

¹⁸ *Sunday Observer*, March 31, p. 6.

Coverage in Sinhala Newspapers



Sinhala Newspapers	No. of Articles	Reportage		
		Supporting	Neutral	Opposing
Anidda	-	-	-	-
Dinamina	-	-	-	-
Divaina	10	-	5	5
Lankadeepa	3	-	2	1
Silumina	-	-	-	-
Total	13	-	7	6

The Sinhala press featured 13 articles that had a bearing on religious freedom. Of these, 7 were neutral on religious freedom, while 5 opposed it.

Featuring 10 of the 13 articles, *Divaina* had the highest coverage of issues related to religious freedom compared to the other newspapers.

The 6 opposing articles included the following:

- An editorial in *Divaina* refuted the claims made by an LTTE-supporting diaspora called “pearl” based in US (which is alleged to be a constituent party of Tamil diaspora), that the Northeast part of Sri Lanka has been subject to Sinhalisation and Buddhistisation. The editorial stated that the intention of the Tamil diaspora and ‘deceitful peace activists’ was to ‘chase away’ the Sinhalese from the Northeast under the guise of reconciliation. The editorial further stated that the ‘Tamil diaspora caters to the needs of a miniscule group of people as opposed to that of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka’. It is also stated that the Sinhalese have always acted with patience despite numerous spurious claims made by the Tamil diaspora.¹⁹

¹⁹ *Divaina*, March 17, p. 4.



- Articles featured in *Divaina* and *Lankadeepa* discussed the suspension of the resolution passed by the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha to erect a new trilingual name board at Sri Pada. The resolution passed requested the use of the term *Shivanoli Padam* in Tamil, while retaining the Sinhala terminology *Gautama Sri Padasthana* on the name board. The article in *Divaina* cited ancient folklore to fortify the argument that Sri Pada is universally accepted as a site of Buddhist heritage and that it has never been identified as *Shivanoli Padam*. Further, the article in *Lankadeepa* stated that Sri Pada does not have a history dating back to Hinduism. The writer further added that cultural heritages of the country should not be allowed to be used as heritages that depict the plurality of cultures.²⁰
- An editorial in *Divaina* recounts the violence that occurred at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand and drew comparisons between those attacks and extremist attacks in Sri Lanka. The editorial states that ‘extremism’ is the reason behind the attacks that occurred in Sri Lanka. It further stated that the ‘mental phobia of extremism’ has spread across the North and South, especially after the incidents of the vandalisation of Buddha statues in Mawanella, the extremist attack in Dharga Nagar and the riots in Digana. Notably, the article did not appropriate the extremism to any one ethno-religious group, however all examples of attacks cited were communal clashes between Muslims and Sinhala- Buddhists.²¹
- An article in *Divaina* reported on the destruction of a Buddha statue and the assault of an individual residing in the Alahitiyawa temple, Pahamuna. The attack was reported to have been carried out by a Muslim individual. The article narrates the incident as an instance of Muslim extremism.²²
- An article in *Divaina* reported that foreign Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) at the 40th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) stated that Northeast parts of Sri Lanka, including Trincomalee and Pulmoddai, have been subject to Buddhisation. NGOs are often perceived as foreign funded bodies, which are reported to be conspiring with foreign elements against the sovereignty and unity of Sri Lanka. The term ‘NGO mob’, which is used in some sections of the Sinhala press, reveals suspicion with which the NGOs are associated.²³

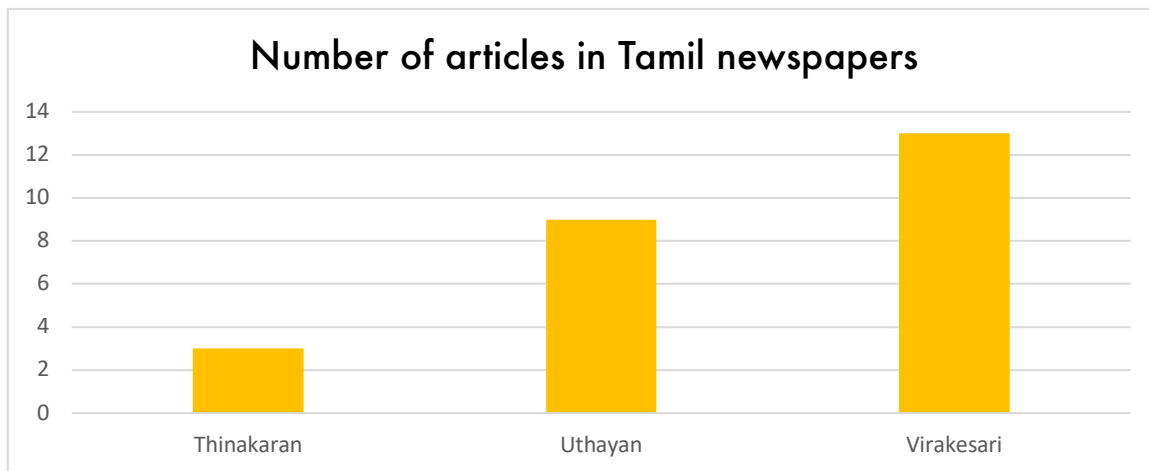
²⁰ *Divaina*, March 17, p. 4; *Lankadeepa*, March 17, p. 8.

²¹ *Divaina*, March 18, p. 8.

²² *Divaina*, March 28, p. 7.

²³ This idea has been explored by Verité Research in its weekly publication *The Media Analysis*. See for example, Verité Research, *The Media Analysis*, Vol.4 Issue No.43 (10 to 16 November 2014).

Coverage in Tamil Newspapers



Tamil Newspapers	No. of Articles	Reportage		
		Supporting	Neutral	Opposing
Thinakaran	3	2	1	-
Uthayan	15	1	12	2
Virakesari	21	6	15	-
Total	39	9	28	2

There were 39 articles relating to religious freedom in the Tamil press. Of these, 9 supported religious freedom, 28 were neutral on it and 2 opposed it.

The 9 supporting articles all covered the following:

- In light of the vandalism of the arch in the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar, several voices in the press urged religious leaders to ensure religious freedom, tolerance and understanding between groups. Press reports alleged that the vandalism was carried out by Catholics in the area. However, voices in support of religious freedom urged religious leaders and authorities to work towards establishing peace and to refrain from indulging in activities that create tensions between Hindus and Catholics. Additionally, statements made by Catholic voices in the press pointed out that Catholicism preaches love and respect towards others, adding that the life and teachings of Jesus also conveyed the same.²⁴

²⁴ *Thinakaran*, March 5, p. 1; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 1; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 2; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 2; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 4; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 18; *Virakesari*, March 6, p. 14; *Virakesari*, March 6, p. 14; *Uthayan*, March 10, p. 12.



In comparison, the 2 opposing articles covered the following issues:

- In relation to the vandalism that took place at the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar, and two articles in *Uthayan*, created reporting on behalf of the Hindus, apportioned blame to a group of Catholics in the area for the unrest created. One of the articles questioned why Catholics had not removed Buddhist temples that have been built illegally. These articles further emphasise the space for prejudice in interpreting ethno-religious incidents in the press.²⁵

²⁵ *Uthayan*, March 4, p. 1; *Uthayan*, March 4, p. 1.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The articles monitored during the month of March 2019 can be categorised under five overarching themes pertaining to religious freedom. These themes are: *physical violence towards people and/or property; inflammatory speech; court cases, laws and regulations pertaining to religious freedom; religious inequality and discrimination; and other related reporting.*

This section aims to identify and understand press sentiment in reporting on events/issues related to the overarching themes. These events/issues are selected on the basis of coverage in editorials, opinion articles, feature articles, and statements made by political/non-political actors and groups. The two events/issues that were selected for the analysis received the most coverage in Sinhala and/or Tamil and/or English print media in the monitoring period. These two issues/events were: 1) the vandalism of an arch at the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar; and 2) a dispute over the Tamil name used on the Sri Pada name board.

The first event was categorised under the theme of *physical violence towards people and/or property*. The second event was categorised under the theme of *religious inequality and discrimination*, which includes any form of discrimination on religious grounds.

Coverage of issues/events under the other three themes, i.e. *inflammatory speech; court cases, laws and regulations pertaining to religious freedom; and other related reporting*, was low, and therefore did not qualify for in-depth qualitative analysis in this report.

Overarching Theme	Event
Physical violence	(1) Vandalisation of an arch belonging to the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar.
Inequality and Discrimination	((2) Dispute over the Tamil name used on the Sri Pada name board.

Physical violence towards people and/or property

Vandalisation of an arch in the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar

This theme covers religiously motivated violence or attempted violence perpetrated against a person and/or property. Reporting under this theme appeared in relation to one incident that took place during the month of March: the vandalisation of an arch in the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar.

Coverage of the incident dominated Tamil press reportage in the month of March 2019. However, similar coverage was absent in both the Sinhala and English press. The following analysis will aim to explain the Tamil press sentiment on the incident.

Thiruketheeswaram is an ancient temple situated in Manthottamam, in the Mannar district. It is one of the five ancient holy Eeswarams (temples) dedicated to Lord Siva in Sri Lanka and is thus a revered place of Hindu worship. The incident in discussion involved an act of vandalism carried out on a temple arch, which was built for the Maha Shivaratri day celebrated by the Hindus. Notably, the arch was reported to be constructed opposite the St. Lourdes Church in Manthai, Mannar.

This act of vandalism drew unanimous condemnation in the Tamil press.²⁶ Voices in the Tamil press apportioned blame for carrying out the vandalism to Catholics residing in the area.²⁷ This framing was advanced by the Mayor of Jaffna Emmanuel Arnold; and news reports on the incident. **In effect, the predominant narrative framed the Hindus as aggrieved victims of sub-national majoritarianism.**

The dominance of this narrative may be explained by two factors: (1) the religious identity of the locality (i.e., Mannar), and (2) the inherent bias in press reporting.

(1) Religious identity of the locality

The Mannar district comprises of different ethnic and religious groups. The majority of these ethno-religious groups are inclusive of Tamils, with 80.4 percent of its population being Tamil.²⁸ The Tamil population can be further divided into Roman Catholics (52.6 percent) and Hindus (24.1 percent).²⁹ Accordingly, in terms of Mannar's religious identity, the Hindus are a minority community, while the Catholics are the religious majority. Reports has shown that the population distribution of these different religious communities tends to enable inter-religious tensions.³⁰

²⁶ *Thinakaran*, March 5, p. 1; *Thinakaran*, March 5, p. 1; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 1; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 2; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 14; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 18; *Virakesari*, March 6, p. 14.

²⁷ *Thinakaran*, March 5, p. 1; *Thinakaran*, March 5, p. 1; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 2; *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 14; *Virakesari*, March 6, p. 14; *Virakesari*, March 7, p. 22; *Uthayam*, March 4, p. 1; *Uthayan*, March 10, p. 12.

²⁸ <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Abstract2016/CHAP2/2.12.pdf>.

²⁹ <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Abstract2016/CHAP2/2.15.pdf>.

³⁰ Nadine Vanniasinkam, Kasun Pathiraja, Mohamed Faslan and Dinushka Jayawickreme, *Inter-religious conflict in four districts of Sri Lanka* (2018), Accessed on 9 April 2019 <https://equitas.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Inter-religious-Conflict-in-4-district-of-Sri-Lanka-FIN.pdf>.

For example, the Tamil-Hindus, who reside in the Mannar district, have in the past made complaints of encroachment on Hindu lands by Catholics.³¹ Moreover, press reports revealed that the arch, which was vandalised, was built only upon permission granted by then Bishop of Mannar, Rt. Rev. Rayappu Joseph. Accordingly, population statistics and reportage can be seen to fuel characterisation of the Catholics as perpetrators of the violence. In this context, Tamil press reporting can be seen to interpret the act of vandalism as an example of sub- national Catholic majoritarianism exerted over the Hindus in Mannar.

(2) Inherent biasness in press reporting

As evidenced in previous reports, Tamil press coverage on articles that have a bearing on religious freedom often indicates an underlying sympathetic tendency towards the Tamil-Hindu ethno-religious group.³² This tendency may be reflected in the widespread portrayal of the Catholics as the antagonists in the reportage related to religious freedom. Only a limited number of articles avoided clearly identifying the religious identity of the vandals as Catholics.³³ Further, reportage that condemned the act of vandalism used language associated with sympathy, such as ‘shameful’, ‘an act of madness’ and ‘saddened’.³⁴

Overall, the Tamil press appealed to ‘victim-perpetrator’ dichotomy. This dichotomy was explored in last month’s report in relation to reported national-scale Sinhala- Buddhist majoritarianism imposed on Hindus.³⁵ However, in this instance, this ‘victim- perpetrator’ lens can be seen to be applied to an incident of sub-national Catholic majoritarianism. Here, the perpetrator has changed from the national majority community to a district majority community which is being Catholic, while the victim remains the Tamil-Hindu community.

³¹ Dharisha Bastians, *Mannar’s holy wars* (2013). Accessed on 9 April, 2019
<http://www.ft.lk/article/191728/Mannar-s-holy-wars>.

³² Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom: October – December 2018*, p. 23.

³³ Virakesari, March 2, p. 1; Thinakaran, March 5, p. 1; Virakesari, March 5, p. 1.

³⁴ Thinakaran, March 5, p. 1; Virakesari, March 5, p. 1; Uthayan, March 4, p. 1; Virakesari, March 5, p. 2; Virakesari, March 5, p. 18; Uthayan, March 4, p. 1; Virakesari, March 6, p. 9.

³⁵ Verité Research, *Understanding Press Coverage on Religious Freedom: February 2019*, p. 16.

Inequality and discrimination

Dispute over the Tamil name used on the Sri Pada name board

This theme covers instances of any form of discrimination on religious grounds.

During the month of March 2019, reportage emerged on a dispute over the installation of a new, trilingual Sri Pada (Adam's Peak) name board that reflected the Tamil-Hindu name associated with the holy site: Shiva Padam.³⁶ ³⁷ Earlier in the month of March, the implementation of a resolution passed by the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha to install a name board naming Adam's Peak also as Shiva Padam was suspended by the Commissioner of Local Government, Central Province on the instructions of Governor of the Central Province Maitree Gunaratne.³⁸ However, upon immediate reversal of the suspension, the Pradeshiya Sabha had decided to erect the trilingual name board inclusive of the Tamil-Hindu name.³⁹ Subsequently, the name board was defaced by a group of individuals reportedly connected to Dan Priyasad and the Mahason Balakaya.⁴⁰ ⁴¹

In the past, reported discriminatory activities related to the renaming of locations have typically featured the 'Sinhalaisation' of names in minority-dominated areas—for instance, the change to the name of the Semmalai Neeraviyadi Hindu Temple in Mullaitivu to 'Ganagadevi Devalayam'.⁴² However, this incident featured an instance of a Tamil-Hindu name being assigned to a site that is considered by Sinhala-Buddhists to be a Buddhist site of religious worship. In past reporting on issues of renaming sites, notions of who the 'aggrieved' and the 'antagonists' are have differed based on the local language of the press. Similarly, in this instance, press sentiment on the installation of a the nameboard with the Tamil-Hindu name associated with Adam's Peak differed based on the selected local language press.

The predominant Sinhala press narrative appealed to majority-minority relations. In particular, the narrative interpreted the incident as an instance in which a minority group is attempting to drive its expansion into Sinhala-Buddhist religious spaces.

³⁶ Adam's Peak is revered as an important multi-religious site by different religious communities in Sri Lanka as it is said to carry the footprint of their respective religious leaders. For more detailed description of the importance of Adam's Peak please see

http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=18117.

³⁷ Also referred to as 'Sivanolipatha Malai', 'Sivanoli Padam', and 'Shiva Koli Pada Malai' in Sinhala press reporting.

³⁸ *Daily Mirror*, March 9, p. A3.

³⁹ *Divaina*, March 17, p. 4.

⁴⁰ *Daily News*, March 21, p. 13; *Sunday Observer*, March 24, p. 17, 18.

⁴¹ Dan Priyasad of the Mahason Balakaya Facebook group was an active 'anti-Muslim' campaigner during the Digana-Kandy racial riots in March 2018. He was also arrested in 2016 for publicly inciting hate speech against Muslims. Notably, the Mahason Balakaya group is characterised in press reporting for being a 'radical, extremist Sinhala-Buddhist' group. For further information please see the following articles <https://roar.media/english/life/in-the-know/the-digana-kandy-racial-riots-what-you-need-to-know/>; <http://www.ft.lk/article/580594/Police-arrest-Thawheed-Jamath-Secretary-as-hate-speech-religious-tensions-simmer-again> and <http://www.ft.lk/front-page/Police-say-85-arrested-after-violence/44-650938>.

⁴² *Virakesari*, November 18, p. 10; *Thinakaran*, November 19, p. 14.

Against this backdrop, Sinhala-Buddhist press voices can be seen to be reasserting their majority status by supporting the restriction on renaming a ‘Buddhist’ site.⁴³

Voices across the Sinhala press refuted claims of Hindu ownership or connection with Adam’s Peak. For instance, an article in *Divaina* stated that ‘Sri Pada was never identified as Shivanoli Padam’.⁴⁴ Further, an article in *Lankadeepa* reported that ‘Sri Pada does not have a history dating back to Hinduism and cultural heritages of the country should not be allowed to be used as heritages that depict a plurality of cultures.’⁴⁵ In making such arguments, these voices can be seen to be legitimising the removal of the new trilingual name board with the Tamil-Hindu name. Some voices went further to accommodate the decision of the Commissioner of Local Government of the Central Province to block the resolution to install the new trilingual board. These commentators can be seen to be supporting the restriction on democratic freedoms in the name of maintaining peace and order. For instance, the press accepted the governor’s reason for suspending the resolution to change the name board, i.e., ‘to prevent future ethnic conflicts’.⁴⁶

The predominant narrative presented by the Sinhala press may be explained in terms of what can be described as a ‘host-guest’ mindset held by the majority group. Within this mindset or attitude, the majority Sinhala-Buddhists perceive themselves to be the primary citizens or ‘hosts’ of the nation, while viewing minorities groups as ‘guests’.⁴⁷ Such a mindset may justify the importance of protecting the interests of the hosts from guests that are seen to be overly assertive or imposing—even if the methods of doing so are acknowledged to be ill fitting.

By contrast, the English press framed the action of the defacement of the board and the blocking of the resolution supporting the instalment of a new one as an exertion of ‘intolerant Sinhala-Buddhist’ extremism on a multi-religious place of worship.⁴⁸ Accordingly, the English press characterised the action as a demonstration of the power and control of Sinhala nationalist groups over ethno-religious minorities.

Notably, the Tamil press featured only one news report relating to the incident.⁴⁹ The marginal reporting on the resolution can be explained by the prominence given by newspapers to coverage on the vandalism of the arch belonging to the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar (discussed above).

⁴³ Vanniasinkam, Pathiraja, Faslan and Jayawickreme, *op. cit.* p. 15. ⁴⁴ *Divaina*, March 17, p. 4.

⁴⁵ *Lankadeepa*, March 17, p. 8.

⁴⁶ *Divaina*, March 8, p. 4.

⁴⁷ This idea has previously been explored by Verité Research in its weekly publication *The Media Analysis*. For example, refer Verité Research, *The Media Analysis*, Vol.4 #16 (21 – 27 April, 2014).

⁴⁸ *Sunday Observer*, March 24, p. 17, 18.

⁴⁹ *Thinakara*, March 12, p. 7.

CONCLUSION

This study was based on media coverage produced during the month of March 2019 in all three languages on issues related to religious freedom. The analysis in the study considered 76 articles dealing with religious freedom under five overarching themes. The events/issues that were qualitatively analysed in this report related to two out of these five themes: *physical violence towards people and/or property* and *religious inequality and discrimination*. These articles were chosen for analysis based on the high degree of traction that they received in the English and/or Tamil and/or Sinhala press. These articles were analysed by taking into account the sentiment contained therein. Sentiment was identified through content, perspective and tone of reporting. A qualitative analysis of the reported content led to two key findings:

(1) The Tamil press viewed the act of vandalism, allegedly perpetrated by the Catholics, on the arch belonging to the Thiruketheeswaram Hindu temple in Mannar in the context of an instance of sub-national majoritarianism. In this context, the Tamil press reportage appealed to a 'victim-perpetrator' dichotomy, which portrayed Hindus as aggrieved victims defending themselves from a sub-national majoritarianism advanced by the Catholics.

(2) The Sinhala press sentiment on the dispute over the installation of the Sri Pada (Adam's Peak) name board appealed to a majority-minority relationship. The predominant narrative presented by the Sinhala press may be explained in terms of what can be described as a 'host-guest' mindset held by the majority group. Within this mindset or attitude, the majority Sinhala-Buddhists perceive themselves to be the primary citizens or 'hosts' of the nation, while viewing minorities groups as 'guests'. This mindset may be seen as the foundation on which the press accepted the suspension of the resolution to change the name board. By contrast, the English press framed the incident as an exertion of 'intolerant Sinhala-Buddhist' extremism on a multi-religious place of worship.

RELATED REPORTING

Shivalingam of Thirukoneswaram temple vandalised – The Shivalingam of the historically significant Thirukoneswaram temple in Trincomalee was damaged by unidentified persons on 28 February. The incident took place days before the Maha Shivaratri day, commemorated by the Hindus on 4 March.⁵⁰

Mayor does not have the power to instruct the removal of a place of worship – Lawyer Arthika Muttulingam says – Arthika Muttulingam, the lawyer appearing on behalf of respondent Divisional Secretary of Kalmunai North T.J. Athisayaraj, informed the court that Mayor A.M. Raheeb had no authority to file a case calling for the removal of a place of worship that was built within the premises of the Kalmunai Divisional Secretariat. Muttulingam pointed out that according to the Urban Development Authority Act, only the commissioner of the urban development authority could file a case and not the mayor. Accordingly, Additional Magistrate Fayaz Razak had instructed the respondents to file the circular related to this to court on 11 March.⁵¹

Traffic case that sparked Aluthgama riots ends in acquittal (by Anurangi Singh) – Three young men accused of having assaulted a bhikkhu and his driver were acquitted in court. The actions of the men were reported to have led to a hate-filled Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) rally on the border of a Muslim majority settlement in Aluthgama, which in turn ‘sparked vicious violence against Muslim-owned shops and businesses’. The three young men were acquitted due to contradictions in the evidence against them. Defence lawyer M.M Zuhair, told the *Sunday Observer* that the alleged assault never occurred – the parties had only settled their differences – but false rumours of an assault on a bhikkhu spread on social media, allowing a ‘personal argument to cultivate into a national issue’.⁵²

Need to conserve historic temples, buildings of archaeological importance – Mahanayake Thera (by J.A.L. Jayasinghe) – During a visit made to the Malwatta Temple, Minister of Housing, Construction and Cultural Affairs Sajith Premadasa had an exchange with Mahanayake of the Malwatta Chapter Ven. Thibbotuwawe Sri Siddhartha Sumangala Thera. The Thera stated that the historic temples and ancient buildings should be conserved and protected from vandals causing damage to them. In response, Minister Sajith Premadasa stated that the Archaeological Ordinance would soon be amended to provide adequate protection to the ancient temples and archaeological sites under the Deputy Inspector General.⁵³

Hindu priests exit the Mannar multi-religious forum – Hindu priests have said they will no longer be part of the multi-religious forum in Mannar as a form of protest against the vandalism carried out on the Thiruketheeswaram temple arch in Mannar.

⁵⁰ *Virakesari*, March 2, p. 1.

⁵¹ *Virakesari*, March 2, p. 8.

⁵² *Sunday Observer*, March 3, p. 10. ⁵³ *Daily Mirror*, March 4, p. A7.

They said that they were saddened by the incident, especially considering the incident had occurred just before the Maha Shivarathri day.⁵⁴

Why don't Catholics remove Buddhist temples built illegally? - Hindus question – The Hindus in Mannar have questioned as to why the Catholics do not remove Buddhist temples that are built illegally. The question has been asked in context of the vandalism on the Thiruketheeswaram temple arch in Mannar reportedly by a group of Catholics, which resulted in unrest in the area.⁵⁵

Arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple damaged by Catholics – The arch built by the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Manthai, Mannar for the Maha Shivarathri day celebrations was vandalised by a group of Catholics. The incident was carried out by a group of people, who had arrived at the premises from outside the area along with a few residents.⁵⁶

Don't allow construction of the arch till Shivarathri concludes – Mannar Vicar General Victor Sosai requests police – Vicar General of the Mannar Diocese Victor Sosai stated that they had requested the police not to allow the construction of a permanent arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar until the conclusion of the Maha Shivarathri festival. The news states that the arch was damaged by Catholics and that had caused discontent among the Hindus in the area.⁵⁷

First Buddhist congress in North – The first ever Buddhist congress in the North will be held on March 22 at the Sri Bodhi Dhakshinarama Temple premises in Vavuniya. The Buddhist congress organisers expect to see the participation of at least 50 leading Buddhist clergy at the congress. Steps would also be taken to renovate and reconstruct Buddhist temples and provide protection to Buddhist sites of historical importance. The article reports that Governor of the Northern Province Dr. Suren Raghavan had undertaken this initiative to pave the way for improved understanding, reconciliation, and peaceful co-existence between all communities. The governor stated that the initiative would also help to strengthen religious amity among all sections of society.⁵⁸

It is important for Muslims to establish their identity – emphasises Muslim Religious Cultural Minister Haleem – Minister of Postal Services and Muslim Religious Affairs M.H.A. Haleem stated that Muslim mosques, Quran mathrasaas, and Arabic schools must be registered for the future benefit of the Muslims. He pointed out that in the current state of affairs it was important for Muslims to establish their identity. He pointed out that there were instances in the past where Muslims and Muslim worship places were under attack. Considering these attacks, he stated that it was important for these places to be registered and the identities of Muslims to be protected.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ *Uthayan*, March 4, p. 1.

⁵⁵ *Uthayan*, March 4, p. 1.

⁵⁶ *Uthayan*, March 4, p. 1.

⁵⁷ *Uthayam*, March 4, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Daily News*, March 4, p. 1, 6.

⁵⁹ *Virakesari*, March 4, p. 14.

Mannar magistrate orders to reinstate arch – Mannar Vicar General refutes reports – Minister of National Integration, Official Languages, Social Progress and Hindu Religious Affairs Mano Ganesan vehemently condemned the incident where the arch of the Mannar Thiruketheeswaram temple was damaged by religious extremists. The incident occurred days before the Maha Shivaratri day commemorated by the Hindus. The arch was reportedly constructed opposite the St. Lourdes Church in Manthai. He stated that the incident and the acts that followed the incident brought shame for the Tamils. He said he condemned the religious leaders who led the violence in the area. He also urged the religious leaders and authorities to ensure peace in the area.⁶⁰

Jaffna Vicar General condemns; expresses shock and sadness – Vicar General of the Jaffna Diocese Rev. Fr. P.J. Jebaratnam condemned the vandalism on the temple arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple, in Mannar, calling it ‘a shameful act’. It was reported in the media that the act was carried out by Catholics. Rev. Fr. P.J. Jebaratnam stated that Catholicism preaches love and respect towards others, adding that the life and teachings of Jesus also conveyed the same.⁶¹

Permission granted to temporarily set up the temple arch; case postponed to 8 March – Mannar Additional Magistrate had ordered the damaged temple arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar to be temporarily set up. The order was given when the case pertaining to the vandalism of the arch was taken up.⁶²

Thiruketheeswaram temple arch damaged: Shame for Tamils! – Minister of National Integration, Official Languages, Social Progress and Hindu Religious Affairs Mano Ganesan vehemently condemned the incident where the arch of the Mannar Thiruketheeswaram temple was damaged by religious extremists. The incident occurred days before the Maha Shivaratri day commemorated by the Hindus. The arch was reportedly constructed opposite the St. Lourdes Church in Manthai. He stated that the incident and the acts that followed the incident brought shame for the Tamils. He said he condemned the religious leaders who led the violence in the area. He also urged the religious leaders and authorities to ensure peace in the area.⁶³

What happened at Thiruketheeswaram? – Mannar Vicar General’s residence issues statement – In a statement made by Vicar General of the Mannar Diocese Victor Sosai stated that a meeting was held between a priest of the St. Lourdes Church and the temple priest. During this meeting the parties had agreed on a temporary arch to be set up by the Ketheeswaram temple authorities opposite the St. Lourdes Church, instead of a permanent structure on 2 March. However, a group of people who had arrived at the premises had removed the temporary structure and started setting up a permanent structure using concrete. The article reported that the residents had calmly told the individuals of their concerns, but those who were setting up the structure had retorted, creating a tensed situation.

⁶⁰ *Thinakaran*, March 5, p. 1.

⁶¹ *Thinakaran*, March 5, p.1.

⁶² *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 1.

⁶³ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 1.

The vicar general stated that there was no structure damaged, adding that only the concrete and iron rods that were placed for the permanent structure were removed.⁶⁴

Built the temporary arch with the permission of Bishop Rayappu Joseph – Secretary of the Ketheeswaram temple Ramakrishnan explains – Secretary of the Administrative Council of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar S.S. Ramakrishnan stated that the decision to construct a permanent arch was taken as the temporary arch, which was built four years ago, was damaged and not in good condition. He stated that four years ago when they attempted to build the temporary arch there was opposition by some individuals. He pointed out that eventually it was the then Bishop of Mannar Rt. Rev. Rayappu Joseph who permitted the temple authorities to build the structure.⁶⁵

Jaffna Vicar General says damage to temple arch was saddening (by M. Keethan) – Vicar General of the Jaffna Diocese Rev. Fr. P.J. Jebaratnam condemned the vandalism on the temple arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar, calling it ‘a shameful act’. It was reported in the media that the act was carried out by Catholics. He had stated that Catholicism preaches love and respect towards others, adding that the life and teachings of Jesus also conveyed the same.⁶⁶

We cannot reach any solution through violence – Charles Nirmalanathan MP reiterates – Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MP Charles Nirmalanathan urged the people to refrain from acts that trigger religious violence, as it would not lead to any solution. He made this statement pertaining to the unrest in Mannar following the alleged damage to the temple arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple. He also urged both parties to meet, discuss the issue and solve the tensions between both religious groups.⁶⁷

Acts which provoke religious violence should be avoided – The editorial discusses the importance of religious freedom, religious tolerance and understanding between religious groups in light of the incidents of vandalism in Thirukoneswaram temple in Trincomalee and Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar a few days before the Maha Shivarathri day.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 2.

⁶⁵ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 2.

⁶⁶ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 2.

⁶⁸ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 4.

Digana incident which tarnished harmony – The article revisits the Digana unrest in March last year and explains how the incident had hampered harmony between the Sinhalese and Muslims in the country.⁶⁹

Attempts to disrupt harmony of Hindu-Catholics – Mannar Catholic Union condemns – The Mannar Catholic Union issuing a statement on the vandalism of the Ketheeswaram temple arch said the incident was triggered by certain individuals, who wanted to disrupt harmony between Hindus and Catholics in the area. The statement pointed out that there was a case at the Colombo Appeal Court over the properties of the Manthai church, which includes the premises where the arch was built temporarily. The statement also said that certain individuals had attempted to build a permanent structure in the premises before the verdict was given, which had created a tense situation in the area.⁷⁰

Damaging of the Ketheeswaram temple arch is saddening – Head of Batticaloa Hindu Charity Forum condemns – Head of the Batticaloa Hindu Charity Forum Sivasri A.K. Lihitharaja Kurukkal condemned the act of vandalism carried out on the Ketheeswaram temple arch in Mannar that was built for the Maha Shivarathri day. He stated that the incident had raised concerns among people who stood for humanity. He called upon all parties to exercise patience, compromise and forget and forgive bitter experiences.⁷¹

Buddhism & Christianity: Reflections on a forgotten history (by Uditha Devapriya) – In this feature piece, the author provides a cursory account of the politics and political violence surrounding Christianity's schism. The author discusses various sects of Christianity that arose during this time. Finally, the writer speaks of missionaries that came to Sri Lanka in the aftermath of British colonisation in 1796. The article is part one of a two-part series of articles.⁷²

Highest recognition for Hindus; gratitude extended to Eastern Province governor

– Ampara Hindu Philanthropy Forum extended its gratitude to Governor of the Eastern Province Dr. M.L.A.M. Hizbullah for instructing the Secretary of the Eastern Province Education Ministry to declare 5 March as school holiday in view of the Maha Shivarathri festival celebrated by the Hindus. The governor instructed the Secretary of the Eastern Province Education Ministry to declare the Maha Shivarathri day as holiday and to conduct school activities of this day on a separate day. In a letter to the governor, the forum stated that they had in the past requested previous governors and chief ministers to declare this day as a holiday, however their requests were not heeded. The forum added that the governor had taken this decision on his own and that no requests were made to him by the forum on this regard.⁷³

⁶⁹ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 4.

⁷⁰ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 14.

⁷¹ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 18.

⁷² *Daily Mirror*, March 5, p. A12. ⁷³ *Virakesari*, March 5, p. 20.



Vandalism of the Thiruketheeswaram temple arch, an act of madness – Anandasangaree (by P. Akinthan) – Secretary-General to the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) V. Anandasangaree said the act of vandalism on the arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar was ‘an act of madness’. He pointed out that such acts only disrupt harmony among the people. He also said the Thiruketheeswaram temple was among the five *Eeswarams* (five abodes of Lord Shiva) in Sri Lanka and therefore had historic and religious importance.⁷⁴

Cooperation for steps towards peace needed without giving way for separation – MP Mavai Senathirajah (by M. Newton) – Illankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK) MP Mavai Senathirajah urged people to work towards establishing peace and not to indulge in activities that create tensions between Hindus and Catholics. He made this statement with regard to the act of vandalism on the Ketheeswaram temple arch in Mannar. While condemning the act, he urged the Catholic and Hindu religious leaders of the area to work together to ensure peace and harmony.⁷⁵

Humanity beyond religion is needed – Consortium of General Institutions – The Consortium of General Institutions stated that religions should be practiced in line with traditional values. It stated that practicing a religion depends on the persons’ willingness and choice. He further pointed out it should not harm another religion. The consortium made this statement with regard to vandalism carried out on the arch of the Ketheeswaram in Mannar.⁷⁶

Religious differences and humanity (by Manikkavasagam) – The article discussed the incident of vandalism in Mannar ahead of the Maha Shivarathri day in the context of the 40th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR) sessions, in Geneva, in March. The article pointed out that during the war the Tamils were united in terms of demanding for rights and in their calls to the government for their concerns to be addressed. However, differences have now arisen that have created gaps between various religious communities within the Tamil people.⁷⁷

Our future politics will be affected due to religious differences – Jaffna Mayor – Mayor of Jaffna Emmanuel Arnold in a statement said the incident in Mannar were caused by Catholics, who had arrived from outside and a few residents. He pointed out that such acts would create religious differences, which would hamper the future of Tamil politics.⁷⁸

The Governor suspended the change to the name of the Sripadasthanaya (by Lasitha Duminda) – Governor of the Central Province Maithree Gunaratne suspended the decision to change the name board of the entrance of Sripadasthanaya to Sivapadam on 7 March. Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha had passed a resolution to implement the

⁷⁴ *Virakesari*, March 6, p. 9.

⁷⁵ *Virakesari*, March 6, p. 14.

⁷⁶ *Virakesari*, March 6, p. 14.

⁷⁷ *Virakesari*, March 6, p. 20.

⁷⁸ *Virakesari*, March 7, p. 22.

installation of a name board at the entrance, changing it from Sripadasthana to Sivapadam. In this context, the governor had ordered the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha through the Commissioner of the Local Government of the Central Province to suspend the implementation of the resolution on account of being 'arbitrary'. He also stated that he would prevent any future ethnic conflicts in the Central Province. Furthermore, he stated that government institutions should take measures to prevent ethnic conflicts.⁷⁹

Installing name board at Sri Padastana suspended (by J.A.L. Jayasinghe) – The implementation of a resolution passed by the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha to install a name board naming Sri Padastana also as Shiva Padam was suspended by the Commissioner of Local Government, Central Province on the instructions of Governor of the Central Province Maithree Gunaratne. The Governor has said that names of historic places of religious worship should not be changed in any manner.⁸⁰

Digana: Ground zero one year on (by Rajitha Jagoda Arachchi) – This article recounts the violence that occurred in March 2018 in Digana, Kandy. After a 'quarrel on the road' a person was killed by 'four Muslim youths', which caused 'riots in the Digana area lead by racist mobs who wanted to burn the properties of Muslims'. One such property was owned by Samsudeen, a shoe merchant, whose house and shop front were burned down. The fire also claimed the life of his youngest son Abdul Basith. However, the writer reports that Samsudeen remains optimistic that religious tensions can be minimised and only the minority approve of violence. Despite government promises of Rs. 3 million to repair his shop, he received only Rs. 150,000 as compensation. He had to rely on his mosque for financial support. The reporter also visited the spouse of Kumarasinghe, who died after being beaten by four Muslim youths, which led to the Digana riots. His spouse bears no animosity towards Muslims as a group, and says it was 'outsiders' who came and instigated the riots.

The article also featured the story of the Chief Incumbent of the Gomagoda Temple Kahagala Dhammananda Thera, who sheltered Muslim families in his temple. He stated that many Sinhalese people in his village had called him and asked how they too could protect Muslims.⁸¹

Is religious tolerance facing defeat in Mannar? (by Sudo Swami) – The article discussed the recent incident where the temple arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar was vandalised and the unrest which followed between Catholics and Hindus in the area. The article discussed the importance of religious tolerance and urged all parties to work together without creating division. The article also discussed the instances where contradicting statements were made by various groups pertaining to the incident, which created more confusion among the people and aggravated the situation.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Divaina*, March 8, p. 4.

⁸⁰ *Daily Mirror*, March 9, p. A3.

⁸¹ *Sunday Observer*, March 10, p. 4.

⁸² *Uthayan*, March 10, p. 12.



Buddhist temples in Mawanella to receive facelift (by Lahiru Fernando and Rohan C. Prematilake) – 71 Buddhist temples in the Mawanella Divisional Secretariat Division are to be renovated at the cost of Rs.50 million, under the patronage of Minister of Highways and Road Development and Petroleum Resources Development Kabir Hashim. President Maithripala Sirisena initiated the project based on a concept of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.⁸⁴

Nasleem, who was against the extremists that vandalised the Buddha statues, had been shot; police investigations through CCTV (by Chaminda Silva, U.R. Jayantha Senanayake) – H.R.M. Nasleem of Mawanella, who worked in collaboration with the police against the extremists that vandalised the Buddhist statues in Mawanella, had been shot. He was 37 years old. It was revealed that two individuals, who came in a motorcycle, had entered his house and shot him while he was asleep. The individuals who had shot him had fled the place after the shooting. Nasleem was also the president of the Unagama mosque. He worked cooperatively with the people from different ethnicities. He also held different positions in different social organisations. Further investigations were initiated following the advice of Superintendent of Police (SP) Chamika P. Wickramasinghe, under the supervision of Officer in Charge (OIC) of Mawanella police M.D. Nilanga and Officer in Charge (OIC) of the Crime Division Manjula Piyatissa.⁸⁵

“The issue was solved without disrespecting Sri Pada” – Chairperson of the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha (by Samanthi Weerasekara) – Chairperson of the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha G. Sembalawalli stated that the name board, which includes the Sinhala, Tamil, and English names of Sri Pada, was erected near the staircase, above the bridge of Nallathanniya on the Sri Pada-Hatton road without disrespecting Sri Pada. She stated that even though she is a Hindu she respects Buddhist philosophy. Furthermore, she stated that Hindu people refer Sri Pada as ‘Sivanolipatha Malai’. She further stated that the Road Development Authority (RDA) had erected name boards as ‘Sivanolipatha Malai’ in the past too. Accordingly, the decision to continue to exhibit the name board as ‘Sivanolipatha Malai’ was taken. She stated that some journalists and some websites had given wrong interpretations regarding the exhibition of the name boards and she refuted them stating that they are false. Sembalawalli stated that she would inform the chief monk of the Sripadasthanaya temple regarding the objections over the alternations in the name board and would follow his advice.⁸⁶

⁸³ *Uthayan*, March 11, p. 11.

⁸⁴ *Daily News*, March 11, p. 10.

⁸⁵ *Divaina*, March 11, p. 1.

⁸⁶ *Divaina*, March 11, p. 2.

Coordinating Secretary of Minister Kabir Hashim shot (by Srinath Prasanna Jayasuriya and Pradeep Kumara) – Mawanella police stated that Mohammed Nasleem, who is a coordinating secretary of the Minister of Highways & Road Development and Petroleum Resources Development Kabir Hashim, had been shot by two assassins. The assassins had forcefully entered his residence. He was later taken to the Kandy teaching hospital in critical condition. CCTV recordings from two adjoining houses showed that the suspects fled in a motorcycle. Further, the police revealed that the suspects had entered from a back door and shot Nasleem. The police stated that Nasleem supported the police in its investigations into the vandalism of the Buddha statues in Mawanella and other social care activities irrespective of ethnicities.⁸⁷

Buddhism and Christianity: Triumph and defeat (by Uditha Devapriya) – In this feature piece the author continues his look at Christianity. The author documents the relative decline of Buddhism and then the Buddhist revival. The author argued that the Buddhist revival transformed the religion from a largely monastic body to a mostly secular movement. The use of the printing press to disseminate material was an essential part of this revival. This article is part two of a two-part series of articles.⁸⁸

Strive to understand the *Dhamma* – Anunayake Thera (by Indika Polkotuwa) – Anunayake Thera spoke at the historic Purana Divurum Bodhimalu Viharaya in Ampitiya, to mark the unveiling of a 12-cubit gilded Buddha statue. Most Ven. Napana Pemasiri Mahanayake Thera and Most Ven. Wendaruwe Upali Thera unveiled the statue, while President Sirisena unveiled the memorial plaque. The statue was funded by Manulath Nandana, Viharadhipati Ven. Kolabisse Tilakasiri Thera and Governor of the North Central Province Sarath Ekanayake also spoke. Parliamentarians S.B. Dissanayake and Dilum Amunugama were present as well.⁸⁹

The name board for Adam’s peak in three languages – The stone name board for Adam’s peak, placed along the Hatton, Nallathanni entrance has been written in three languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English. The name is written as ‘Sripadhastanaya’ in Sinhala, ‘Sivanolipadhamalai’ in Tamil and ‘Siripadhaya’ in English. The peak has been known as ‘Sivanolipadhamalai’ in Tamil for centuries. The new name board was declared open by Chairman of the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha.⁹⁰

Sri Lankan Muslims’ links with India (by P.K. Balachandran) – The author writes about Sri Lankan Muslims and their relationship with India. He argues that the link has weakened as the ‘home of their religion’ is Saudi Arabia, which allegedly serves as the ‘mainspring of their culture’. The author recounts the history of Muslims in Sri Lanka at length. The writer further discusses language and performing arts and their Arab and Indian influences. The author argues that the Portuguese and Dutch rule was a ‘nightmare’ for Muslims, who did not enjoy freedom again until the British rule.⁹¹

⁸⁷ *Lankadeepa*, March 11, p. 1, 6.

⁸⁸ *Daily Mirror*, March 12, p. A12.

⁸⁹ *Daily News*, March 12, p. 3.

⁹⁰ *Thinakaran*, March 12, p. 7.

⁹¹ *Daily Mirror*, March 13, p. A12.

“Thripitakabhivandana Week” declared (by Ishara Mudugamuwa) – The government has declared “Thripitakabhivandana Week” from 16-23 March as they hope to see Theravada Tripitaka declared as a World Heritage. Religious activities will be held in schools and Dhamma schools. The sacred relics of the Buddha will also be exhibited in five temples. Rs.33 million will be spent on construction of Dhamma school buildings at 226 temples. The cabinet of ministers had approved a proposal made by the president to request the United Nations to declare the Tripitaka as a World Heritage.⁹²

World Focus on Tripitaka (by Sugeeswara Senadhira) – The Tripikatabhivandana week from 16-23 March will culminate in a grandiose event at Mahamaluwa of the scared Daladamaligawa in Kandy. On 23 March the official announcement of the submission of the application to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) will be made. Sri Lanka, together with several other Theravada Buddhist countries will issue a joint application. The Theravada Tripitaka was introduced by Arahat Mahinda in the Pali language and was brought forward by word of mouth for generations before finally being transcribed on Ola leaves in the first century at Aluviharaya in Matale. These volumes are considered the foundational source of the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition. During the Tritakabhivandana Week all Buddhist viharas, schools, Sunday schools and state institutions will line up to conduct special programmes with the participation of all citizens. It has been reported that religious activities will be held throughout the week.⁹³

Why weren’t the perpetrators who damaged the Thiruketheeswaram temple arch arrested? – All Ceylon Hindu Congress – The All Ceylon Hindu Congress questioned as to why the perpetrators behind the vandalism of the arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar not arrested despite the availability of photographic evidence. The congress alleged that the police had failed to arrest the perpetrators despite a court order instructing them to make the arrests.⁹⁴

Case against Neeravippiddy temple authorities stating they damaged artefacts – The police have filed a case accusing the administration of the Mullaithivu Neeraviyadi Pillayar temple authorities of damaging artefacts while attempting to lay a foundation stone. The case was filed by the police following an unrest within the temple premises on 14 January. The unrest was triggered when a group of individuals led by a monk had disrupted Hindu devotees from indulging in Thai Pongal worship activities within the temple. The police had filed a case stating that the temple administration had damaged the artefacts during the altercation which ensued.⁹⁵

⁹² *Daily News*, March 15, p. 1, 6.

⁹³ *Daily News*, March 15, p. <http://www.dailynews.lk/2019/03/15/features/180362/world-focus- tripitaka>.

⁹⁴ *Uthayan*, March 15, p. 13.

⁹⁵ *Uthayan*, March 16, p. 14.



First ever Buddhist conference in the North on 29 March (by Romesh Madusanka) – Northern Province Governor Suresh Raghavan said steps were being taken to hold the first ever Buddhist conference in the North on 29 March. He said the conference will be held at the Sri Bodhi Dakshinaramaya Temple in Vavuniya, with over 100 Buddhist monks from the North and South attending. The governor said the main purpose of the conference was to devise a programme to promote coexistence among Buddhists in the North and to improve the places of Buddhist worship there.⁹⁶

Countrywide programmes to mark 'Tripitakabhivandana Week' begins – The 'Tripitakabhivandana week' has been declared starting today, 16 March, to 23 March to mark the initiation of the process to declare the Theravada Tripitaka, a sacred scripture of Buddhists, a World Heritage. The Theravada Tripitaka was declared a National Heritage of Sri Lanka by President Sirisena on 05 January 2019. The Presidential Secretariat, Ministry of Buddha Sasana, Ministry of Housing, Construction and Cultural Affairs, in collaboration with other ministries, have organised religious programmes to mark the week. 17 March will see the implementation of a programme to construct Sunday Dhamma School in 226 temples. Religious events will be organised on the following days.⁹⁷

Christchurch and our own national experience – In this opinion piece, the writer recounts the violence that occurred at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15 March 2019. The reporter draws comparisons between what happened in New Zealand and identity-based violence in Sri Lanka, from Black July to more recent events in Aluthgama and Digana. It is the 'same paranoia of threatened ethnic community extinction', writes the author, that leads to 'ethnic retaliation to ostensibly fend off such imagined threats'. Even as the country reels from its civil war, 'organisations [and religious figures] that propagate ethnic paranoia...are sponsored by politicians and even politically powerful bureaucrats at the very heart of the Republic'. Such rhetoric is utilised for its political expedience, and the author is extremely critical of all those in the public sphere who preach this 'ethnic supremacy'. In light of the worldwide condemnatory response to the Christchurch killer, the author questions how the international community would (or should) view Sri Lanka and its politics of ethnic resentment.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ *Uthayan*, March 16, p. 14.

⁹⁶ *Daily Mirror*, March 16, p. 1, 6.

⁹⁷ *Daily News*, March 16, p. 2.

⁹⁸ *Sunday Observer*, March 17, p. 8.

Vellalar Tamilisation or Sinhalisation? – This editorial mentions an LTTE-supporting diaspora organisation called “pearl” based in US (which is alleged to be a constituent party of the Tamil diaspora) that had lodged a complaint at the United Nations Human Rights Council. They had claimed that the North-East parts of Sri Lanka have been subject to Sinhalisation and Buddhistisation. It further emphasises that the organisation is of the firm belief that not only the North and East parts of the country but the whole country is being subject to Sinhalisation and Buddhistisation. The editorial states that the claim by the editor is based on substantiated factors as opposed to distorted historical facts. Further, the editorial states that the intention of the Tamil diaspora and deceitful peace activists is to chase away the Sinhalese from the North-East under the guise of reconciliation. Moreover, the editorial stated that the Tamil diaspora caters to the needs of a miniscule group of people as opposed to that of Tamil people in Sri Lanka. It is also reported that the Sinhalese had always acted in patience despite numerous spurious claims by the Tamil diaspora.⁹⁹

Sri Pada becomes Sivanoli Padam (by Senewiruwana, Mathugama) – Recently, Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha (PS) had taken steps to erect a new name board in the place where the Maskeliya route to Sri Pada begins. The Chairman of the PS stated that they took this step subsequent to a resolution passed in the PS requesting to use the term ‘Sivanoli Padam’ in Tamil description, while keeping the Sinhala terminology Gautama Sri Padasthana in the name board. However, it is reported that the secretary to the governor of the Central Province (on the advice of the governor) ordered to suspend the change that was brought anew to the name in Tamil. Subsequently, the order was immediately reversed, and the name board was erected. The article further cites ancient folklore, which stated that Lord Buddha embedded his footprint in the summit of the Samanala mountain on the invitation of Lord Saman during Lord Buddha’s third visit to Sri Lanka. According to Mahawamsa Teekawa, the embedding of the footprint of the Lord Buddha connotes that he (the Lord Buddha) visited Sri Lanka thrice and chose the island to establish the Buddha Sasana. However, Sri Pada became a place of pilgrimage with the involvement of the kings. After King Seethawaka Rajasinghe embraced Hinduism, Sri Pada was taken over by the *Aritta Kivendu*. Subsequently, King Vimaladharmasuriya took it over from the followers of Aritta Kivendu. Later, Sri Pada (which lacked a guardianship / custody for 171 years) was handed over to Ven. Weliwita Saranankara Thera. The post of the chief priest was handed over to the Sabaragamuwa Sangha generation. King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe bestowed Sri Pada to the Sangha. Though King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe was a Tamil Nayakkar king, he acknowledged Sri Pada as a Buddhist heritage site. The letters and *sannasas* (official documents conferring authority) sent by the British to the bhikkus, who acted as guardians of the Sri Pada in the aftermath of the 1815 Kandyan Convention, revealed that the British too accepted Sri Pada as a Buddhist heritage site. Even today the guardianship of Sri Pada is held by the bhikkus. The article further mentions that Sri Pada was never identified as ‘Sivanoli Padam’.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ *Divaina*, March 17, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ *Divaina*, March 17, p. 4.



Individuals who opposed Buddha had shot Nasleem and they are still free (by Samanthi Weerasekara) – H.R.M. Nasleem of Mawanella, who worked in collaboration with the police against the extremists that vandalised the Buddhist statues in Mawanella, had been shot. He was 37 years old. It was revealed that two individuals, who came in a motorcycle, had entered his house and shot him while he was asleep. The individuals who had shot him had fled the place after the shooting. Nasleem was also the president of the Unagama mosque. He worked cooperatively with the people from different ethnicities. He also held different positions in different social organisations. Further investigations were initiated following the advice of Superintendent of Police (SP) Chamika P. Wickramasinghe, under the supervision of Officer in Charge (OIC) of Mawanella police M.D. Nilanga and Officer in Charge (OIC) of the Crime Division Manjula Piyatissa.¹⁰¹

Arrest the army officers who were accused of war crimes – UNHR Chief urges 47 countries (by Keerthi Warnakulasuriya) – Several members from the European countries participated in the 40th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). The writer notes that Mariyadasan Bosco was one of the members and described him to be a ‘crook’. The writer mentions that he attends the sessions of the UNHRC every year accompanied by Tamil youths and makes them give statements that they witnessed war crimes in Sri Lanka. Bosco, in collaboration with 70 African organisations, urged the UNHRC to take Sri Lanka before the International Criminal Court on the basis that the armed forces in Sri Lanka had committed war crimes. The article also mentions of foreign non-governmental organisations that made statements at the UNHRC claiming that Trincomalee and Pulmoddai were subject to Buddhistisation.¹⁰²

Was there a Tamil term for Sri Pada? – Prof. Raj Somadeva of the Postgraduate Institute of the University of Kelaniya (by Dhanu Wijeratne) – A statement was made that the name of Sri Pada had changed. This change in name was subsequent to the decision taken by the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha to change it to ‘Siva Koli Pada Malai’. Dan Priyasad stated that a protest was held against the decision of the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha for establishing the new name board (inclusive of the name change) and expressed his intention to hold discussions with the Minister of Buddha Sasana regarding the new name board. Chairperson of the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha stated that even though there were several names for Sri Pada in the past, Tamil people associate it as Shiva Koli Pada Malai. She also stated that this step was taken after the permission of the chief monk of Sri Pada. However, according to Prof. Raj Somadeva, Sri Pada derived its name after the arrival of Lord Buddha and Sri Pada does not have a history dating back to Hinduism. Further the writer opines that cultural heritages of the country should not be allowed to be used as heritages that depict a plurality of cultures.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ *Divaina*, March 17, p. 11.

¹⁰² *Divaina*, March 17, p. 23.

¹⁰³ *Lankadeepa*, March 17, p. 8.

Shameful attack against humanity – 49 died due a shooting that took place in two mosques in Christ Church New Zealand. The article expresses that the Christ Church shooting is the deadliest attack in New Zealand history. The editorial stated that this is an attack against the supreme right of democracy and humanity. It also stated that there was an extremist attack on the Bangladesh cricket team and noted that the Sri Lankan cricket team also faced a similar attack. The editorial noted that extremism is behind these attacks and it is the only aim of the extremists. It further stated that the mental phobia of extremism spreads across the North and the South after the incidents of vandalism of the Buddha statues in Mawanella, the Darga Nagar attack and the Digana incident.¹⁰⁴

President pledges to protect Buddhist philosophy – "The Tripitakabhivandana Week was declared to create a Buddhist revival in the country, as well as to provide knowledge of the Theravada Tripitaka to the younger generation," said President Maithripala Sirisena. He was speaking at a religious ceremony to unveil the stone statue of the Buddha, which was erected at the Selgiri Temple in Newakada, Udubaddawa in Kuliyaipitiya, on Sunday. President Sirisena emphasised that as the president as well as a Buddhist, he will fulfil his responsibilities towards protecting the Buddhist philosophy for the benefit of future generations.¹⁰⁵

As racial, religious intolerance raise their ugly head... (by Sanjeewa Fernando) – This lengthy article looks at the rise of intolerance as racial and religious violence flares worldwide. The article ends with a section entitled 'Lessons for Sri Lanka' reproduced below; What do these lessons hold for a country like Sri Lanka, who have emerged a decade ago from a civil war based on ethnicity? Have we been able to reconcile the warring ethnic groups and reach racial harmony? The unrest that is seething in the North in terms of the grievances of the Tamils as well as tension between sections of the Muslim populace and the Sinhalese smoulder under our society. It has the potential to erupt at any moment, even on the slightest of sparks, as incidents in Digana reveal. A general aversion towards ethnic minorities has coalesced into definite political and ideological groupings, including mainstream political parties. Therefore, the rise of the far right is a reality that is unmistakable even domestically; the next national elections which are to be held in the near future will see the racial sentiments of the majority finding vent through candidates who openly brandish nationalist if not openly racist sentiments. The silence of the moderates, the liberals and the seeming defeatism of internationalism seem to give an unfettered freedom for these proponents of racial and religious bigotry to take upper hand. Racial and religious hatred in Sri Lanka do not erupt in lone gunman or assailant form that it does in US or Europe or as in this case, New Zealand. Yet as history testifies, pogroms of the Black July type or the Aluthgama riots is never out of the picture. It is time for moderates to rise up and demand that leaders do not play nationalist and racist cards as an expedient means of gaining or remaining in political power.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Divaina, March 18, p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Daily News, March 20, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ Daily Mirror, March 20, p. A8.



Local government body refuses to abide by presidential directives – The Valvetithurai Local Government (LG) body refused to observe the ‘Tripitaka Vandhana’ week as instructed by the president. The week is to be observed from 16 to 23 March. However, the Valvetithurai LG body had decided to refrain from observing it as a mark of protest against forced Buddhistisation and Sinhalisation in the North. They pointed out that several villages had been taken over and Buddhist statues were being built in these villages.¹⁰⁷

Protests against defacing of Sri Pada name board (by Gamini Bandara Illanganthilake) – A heated situation was created yesterday when estate employees and residents in Nallathanni protested against the defacing of the English and Tamil language names on the name board of the Sri Padaasthanaya at Adam's Peak on Tuesday. The protesters demanded that the authorities punish those responsible for the crime. Superintendent of Police (SP) Ravindra Ambepitiya, who arrived at the site with police officers, held a discussion with the protesters. The SP said that an investigation has been initiated into the issue, and that CCTV camera footage in the area would be examined for the purpose.¹⁰⁸

Some individuals had painted black in the name board of Nallathanniya at the entrance of Sri Pada - Several individuals were protesting - Police mediates and settles the situation (by Gamini Bandara) – A tense situation occurred near the entrance of the Sri Pada, Nallathanniya due to a protest held on 20 March. Several estate workers protested against the defaced English and Tamil name boards, which was placed at the entrance of Sri Pada on Tuesday night (19 March). The Tamil name ‘Sivanoli Padamalai’ and the English term for ‘Sri Pada’ was painted in black. The protestors stated that the law should be implemented against the perpetrators, who vandalised the name boards. Superintendent of the Police stated that national peace should be affirmed.¹⁰⁹

Another temple in Mannar vandalised – The Amman statue of the Vellankulam Amman temple in Mannar was vandalised and thrown on to the road. The temple was located within the Manthai West Divisional Secretariat. The incident comes days after the damaging of the temple arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar, just before the Maha Shivarathri day.¹¹⁰

It is illegal to grab lands of the Hindus – Deputy Leader of the All Ceylon Hindu Congress, Prof. Aaru Thirumurugan condemned moves by authorities to take over lands belonging to the Hindus in Nakuleswaram in Keerimalai, Jaffna. The Keerimalai town is of religious importance for the Hindus. Thirumurugan stated that attempts were being made to take over such lands and convert the religious place into a tourist hot spot. He pointed out that these lands, along the Kankesanthurai road, were within the high security zone and were not handed over to their original owners, therefore it was unfair to use these lands to convert the area as a tourist destination.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ *Uthayan*, March 20, p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ *Daily News*, March 21, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ *Divaina*, March 21, p. 14.

¹¹⁰ *Uthayan*, March 23, p. 1.

¹¹¹ *Uthayan*, March 23, p. 11.

No Tripitaka week in Valikamam West where there are no Buddhists – The Valikamam West Pradeshiya Sabha decided not to observe the Tripitaka week as directed by the president, stating that there was no need for it as there were no Buddhists in the area. The decision to refrain from observing the week was taken on 15 March. Thereby, no events or functions pertaining to the Tripitaka week will be held in the Valikamam West Pradeshiya Sabha during the period. The president had directed all government bodies in the island to observe Tripitaka week from 16 to 23 March.¹¹²

Govt will strive to protect Buddha Sasana – President – President Maithripala Sirisena ensured that the government will strive to nurture and protect the Buddha Sasana in keeping with the constitution of the country. The president was speaking at the Tripitakabhivandana national event to submit a request letter to UNESCO representatives seeking World Heritage recognition for the Tripitaka, at the Temple of the Tooth Relic premises yesterday. The article goes on to describes the president's speech in detail.¹¹³

The black mark on Sri Pada: Intolerant Sinhala Buddhist extremists vandalise centuries-old multireligious place of worship (by Maneshka Borham) – This article details the vandalism of a new trilingual signboard at Sri Pada. Dan Priyasad and Mahason Balakaya protested the new board.

"After two weeks of threats to destroy or deface the board by the groups and individuals connected to the duo on social media, it appears that finally someone among them or an individual influenced by their sentiments had followed through". Meanwhile, the police commenced an inquiry into the incident and are hoping to nab the suspects through CCTV footage of the site. Governor of the Central Province Maithri Gunaratne put his foot down too. Claiming he will not tolerate acts that may incite racism, the governor directed the police to nab the suspects whose intention was to cause racial discord among the people through this dastardly act. The articles notes that 'tussles over places of worship or of significance have become common in recent times, with various groups claiming ownership over another, leading to unnecessary tension among communities'. The piece quotes Ven. Dhammananda Thera, who stated, 'as a country with a troubled past, shared places of worship such as Kataragama and Sri Pada continue to be important spaces'. He believes these troublemakers should be starved of the oxygen of publicity.¹¹⁴

¹¹² *Uthayan*, March 24, p. 5.

¹¹³ *Sunday Observer*, March 24, p. 1, 3.

¹¹⁴ *Sunday Observer*, March 24, p. 17, 18.

Govt. will protect, nurture Buddhism – President (by Lahiru Fernando, Thilak Senanayake and Dinuli Francisco) – President Maithripala Sirisena on Saturday said he and his government are committed to protecting and nurturing the Buddhhasasana as per the country's constitution. The president was speaking at the Tripitakabhivandana national event to submit a request letter to UNESCO representatives seeking World Heritage recognition of the Tripitaka, at the Maha Maluwa (Great Terrace) of the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy on Saturday. The president handed over the proposal to the UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Sri Lanka Hanaa Singer on this occasion. The article further recounts the words of Sajith Premadasa, who was present at the ceremony, "It is a noble deed done by the president. When we look at the past, many kings ruled with the guidance of Thripitakaya. In the same manner, President Maithripala Sirisena is a leader who is a devout Buddhist".¹¹⁵

An ancient stupa in Puliyankulama was destroyed using a bulldozer: four suspects remanded (by Sithum Chathuranga) – Vavuniya Magistrate Thashmin Fawuzan ordered the remand of the suspects, who were arrested for digging an ancient temple in Puliyankulama, Vauniya to get a casket of gems, until 5 April. The four accused were Kandasamy Gnanakumar of Thalawakele, Murugaiah Sivakumar of Trincomalee, Kandasamy Mohandas of Batticaloa and Selliah Mahendran of Nedunkerni. The accused were arrested on a tip-off the police received on 22 March. Police had found a head of a Buddha statue, a marble buddha statue, a part of the ancient dagoba dug and many other pieces of archaeological value in possession of the suspects. The ancient ruins were destroyed using a bulldozer.¹¹⁶

Thiruketheeswaram arch vandalism: Ten suspects including priest released on bail – Ten suspects, including a priest and three women, who were arrested following the vandalism of the arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar, were released on bail by the Mannar Magistrate's court on 24 March.¹¹⁷

Request to Mannar Hindu Priests to consider decision to step down from the multi-religious forum – The multi-religious forum in Mannar requested the Mannar Hindu priests of the forum to reconsider their decision to step down from the forum. The Hindu priests had announced that they would step down from the forum following the incident where the arch of the Thiruketheeswaram temple was vandalised just before the Maha Shivarathri day.¹¹⁸

Protest against vandalising the Thiruketheeswaram temple arch in Mannar – A protest will be held in Mannar against the act of vandalism on the arch of the Tiruketheeswaram temple early March this year. The protest will see the participation of several persons including Hindu priests of the area.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ *Daily News*, March 25, p. 1, 8.

¹¹⁶ *Lankadeepa*, March 25, p. 2.

¹¹⁷ *Virakesari*, March 25, p. 10.

¹¹⁸ *Uthayan*, March 25, p. 12.

¹¹⁹ *Uthayan*, March 27, p. 11.

Hindu priests step down from the multi-religious forum to be held in Mannar – Hindu priests in Mannar expressed that they will no longer be part of the multi-religious forum to be held in Mannar as form of a protest against the vandalism carried out on the Thiruketheeswaram temple arch. They expressed that they were saddened by the incident, especially considering the incident had occurred just before the Maha Shivarathri day.¹²⁰

A Muslim individual who destroyed a Buddha statue by smashing it into the floor was caught (by A.M. Dayananda) – An incident involving the destruction of a Buddha statue had occurred within the Katupotha Police Division. The suspect had fled the scene by assaulting an individual who was residing in the Alahitiyawa temple in Pahamuna. The individual had heard a noise at night and inquired about it. The Buddha statue was placed in an additional room. The incident occurred on 26 March at night. The villagers of the area had caught the suspect and handed over to the Narmmala police division. The Narmmala police division handed over the suspect to the Katupotha police division. Further investigations are being carried out by the Katupotha police.¹²¹

First ever Buddhist Convention in Vavuniya today (by Romesh Madushanka) – The Northern Provincial Governor's Office announced that arrangements have been made to hold the Northern Province Buddhist Convention today (29 March) at the Sri Bodhi Dhakshinarama Temple in Vavuniya. This convention is scheduled to be held under the patronage of the Chief Sanghanayaka of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, Chairman of the Vavuniya District 'Sasanarakshaka Balamandalaya' Ven. Siyambalagaswewa Wimalasara Thera, and the leadership of Minister of Buddha Sasana Gamini Jayawickrama Perera and Governor of the Northern Province Suren Raghavan.¹²²

A timely observation – President Maithripala Sirisena bemoaned the conduct of certain members of the Bhikku community, whom he said brought dishonour to the Sangha and the country at large. Speaking at a temple event, the president said that while the majority of the country's 33,000 strong Bhikku community conducted themselves with honour and dignity, the actions of a few left much to be desired. The editorial goes on to agree with Sirisena's observations, noting that "the more militant among them are often seen whipping up racist sentiment, which is quite opposed to the Buddha's teaching of love and compassion towards all beings." The piece notes the politicisation of Buddhist monks; "the political involvement of our Buddhist monks has its origins in the 1956 revolution, where the Sangha formed one of the five forces that brought S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike to power. Since then, Bhikkus have occupied a prominent place in the country's political landscape and have been used by crafty politicians to their advantage. Outfits like the Bodu Bala Sena are the spin-offs of this phenomenon." The piece notes the violence of certain BBS monks, and the "mayhem unleashed in Aluthgama." Instead monks should stay away from politics.¹²³

¹²⁰ *Uthayan*, March 27, p. 1.

¹²¹ *Divaina*, March 28, p. 7.

¹²² *Daily Mirror*, March 29, p. A4.

¹²³ *Daily News*, March 29, p. 10.

Protest against vandalising Thiruketheeswaram temple arch in Mannar –A peaceful protest was held in Mannar against the act of vandalism on the arch of the Tiruketheeswaram temple early March. The protest saw the participation of several persons including Hindu priests of the area. The protestors also handed over a petition to Mannar Government Agent C.A. Mohanraj during this protest.¹²⁴

Wilpattu not deforested by resettlement: Vicious efforts to spread racism (by Maneshka Borham and Rajitha Jagoda Arachchi) – This article discusses the recent furore over alleged deforestation in Wilpattu National Park. After setting the scene, the article quotes Chief Bhikkhu of the Northern and Eastern Provinces Ven. Siyambalagaswewa Wimalasara Thera, who suggested there could be "wicked efforts to spread racism by discussing the deforestation of Wilpattu." He stated that Minister of Industry and Commerce, Resettlement of Protracted Displaced Persons, Co-operative Development and Vocational Training and Skills Development Rishad Bathiudeen is not racist and is in fact "the only politician who supports the 14 active Buddhist temples in Vavuniya." Wimalasara Thera stated that even "Sinhala colonies such as Marichchukaddy were re-established after the war by clearing forest area." He sees current complaints as politically motivated.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ *Virakesari*, March 29, p. 23.

¹²⁵ *Sunday Observer*, March 31, p 6.