

It was difficult to know whether to be more shocked by the story the headline told, or the language in which it was expressed. A crucial element of the headline was a mistake - that was certain - but it was the mistake of someone with advanced, rather than basic, English. There had, as the verb implied, been a violation: a small temple on Sri Lanka's southern coast had been invaded by thugs in the middle of the night, and its murals had been smashed with hammers and metal poles. Perhaps the headline writer had been searching for the word "desecrated" - but what he had ended up with was "Giniwella Purana Vihara murals raped by thugs." Not for the first time since my arrival I became conscious of the deep lines of anger running - like veins - beneath the chaotic beauty of Sri Lanka's surface. The festering wounds of the civil war were just one of the causes of the underlying fury: there were other more subtle resentments that it was initially difficult for an outsider to comprehend. The island's huge array of visual seductions made it tempting to ignore the tensions - at the point when I stumbled on the story, I was sitting on a vertiginous roof terrace above Galle watching a blushing pink sun slip demurely behind endless green coconut palms. At intervals, white minarets poked their way above the vast vista of foliage, while distant sounds of Buddhist chanting and the Muslim call to prayer seemed to indicate that this seventeenth century city was one of the few places in Sri Lanka where different faiths could cohabit peacefully.

It was eight months before the tsunami was to smash such memories to pieces, and dwarf the destructive efforts of the vandals' matchstick metal poles. After reading the article, my immediate concern was to go and investigate what exactly had happened at the temple. I had more than a passing interest in the newspaper piece, because it involved some Dutch artists whom I had met at a remote turtle preservation centre on the south coast near Tangalle. By night I had gone out onto the beach with them and witnessed a curiously moving sight as - under a sky bruised by the light of the full moon - a green turtle had emerged from the swell of the ocean and hauled herself up the beach to lay her eggs. By day, over a breakfast of miniature bananas and papaya squeezed with fresh lime, the artists told me how their group had been commissioned to redecorate a Buddhist temple by combining classical Sri Lankan images with Renaissance-style depictions of the human form.

When the project began, it had been three and a half centuries since the Dutch had invaded Sri Lanka to wrest control of the best

cinnamon in the world, and therefore dominate the highly profitable spice trade. They were not the only invaders to be drawn to the island by the scent of spices and profit - their occupation was sandwiched between the Portuguese period 1505 - 1658, and British rule 1796 - 1948. Yet in 2004, on the familiar tourist routes - from the capital Colombo and down the south west coast - those days of imperialism seemed either forgotten or forgiven, not least because Western tourists, even before the tsunami, were an important source of income in an economy dominated by the services sector. For the first week my experiences with Sri Lanka's dominant Sinhalese population had been universally positive, even when I went through the military checkpoints, so I was a little taken aback when one of the Dutch couples, Bart and Noel, confided that they had come to the remote turtle sanctuary to escape the capital during the election, because they were worried that nationalist sentiment meant that they or their home might be attacked.

Was this just a problem in the capital, where security guards stood to attention everywhere as deterrents to the threat of election-related violence? Or was the problem more widespread? Certainly when Noel was talking about the temple project she did not seem concerned about her relationship with the Buddhist monks or the local villagers who had been working with her. There was no sense that within the fortnight I would be reading this crudely worded headline that told how all their work over the last six months had been ruined. True, I had heard stories of Buddhist hostility towards other cultures. Before the trip, I had read reports on the internet about monks burning Christian churches down, and launching vicious attacks on clergymen and church workers. Yet these seemed like isolated incidents, and cut a strong contrast with the welcome I had received at sacred shrines where silver monkeys leapt, fought, and waited for food that might be left over from offerings that worshippers had brought for the Buddha.

At 9.30, the morning after the article appeared, a driver turned up to take me and my husband Bill to Colombo. The chaotic mixture of nonchalant oxen, suicidal tuk-tuk drivers, vast bullying buses driving down the centre of the road, and constantly horn-blasting cars meant it would have been madness for any Westerners to try and drive themselves. It was going to take him most of the day to drive us up the coast, so he was perfectly happy when I suggested a brief detour to see the temple. Within forty-five minutes we were crossing a tiny local railway line, and making our way up a rocky road flanked by hibiscus bushes and palm trees. On previous

occasions, when we had abandoned the main road and gone through small villages, families had rushed out and either tried to sell us food and drink, or calmly surveyed us as part of that day's entertainment. Here there was no such friendliness: dagger-sharp glances came from the shadows of walls and trees, and those who did approach the van started talking angrily in rapid Sinhalese to the driver.

"What are they saying?" I asked as he looked back at us nervously.

"They are saying that the monk here is mad, and they don't like what's been happening in the temple."

"What has been happening?"

"It's the Western art. They don't like it. They think the dress is too revealing."

I looked outside the van at the hostile faces. Was it possible that these were the "thugs" who had committed the vandalism? Would I as a European be seen to be complicit with what they hated so much? Had I made a huge mistake in coming here?

There was no time for hesitation. The road was far too narrow to execute anything resembling a U-turn, so the decision was already made for us.

"Drive on to the temple," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"We've come this far, we might as well find out what's going on."

Burning curiosity gave way to a feeling of ice in the stomach. This was not improved by the scene which greeted me as we rolled into a large deserted courtyard. A small house stood on one side, next to a lagoon, and beyond that stairs led up to an area with two temples, and a large domed dagoba containing Buddhist relics. Outside the house stood one of Sri Lanka's omnipresent mongrels, sandy, saggy-teated, and surrounded by hapless pups. She growled at me as I got out of the van, and started snapping at Bill's legs.

As the driver chased the dog away, an old monk with a huge belly, and diseased spotted skin emerged from the house. Those few teeth he had left had turned brown as a result of chewing betel quid - a mixture of fresh betel leaf, areca nut, slaked lime, and tobacco. He grinned when he saw us, revealing the full extent of his dental discolouration, and beckoned to us to follow him into the house. Silently reckoning that there were three of us to his extremely ancient one, we did as he bade us, and were given a brief guided tour of his study.

It was obvious that the monk prided himself as a scholar, as he got out various yellowing manuscripts and talked to us about their significance. At any other time this might have been fascinating, but we were keenly aware that we had to be in Colombo by late afternoon - as well as being wary of the hostility of the villagers outside. After twenty minutes I cut short the lecture by asking if we could see the temple straight away. In response, the monk removed a large key from his desk drawer and led me out of the house and up the steps. Outside the temple was undamaged. He opened the door, and we all looked around cautiously before stepping inside. Although there was no-one there, the feeling of violence lingered. Lights came on to reveal the full impact of the metal poles which had decapitated many figures on the murals including one that clearly depicted the monk himself.

A Sinhalese journalist arrived while I investigated and the conversation between him and the driver confirmed my suspicions that the villagers were responsible. Although some had worked on the project, they had become increasingly unhappy with the Westernisation of scenes which depicted the arrival in Sri Lanka of Buddha's sacred tooth - the country's most important relic - and a branch of the Bo-Tree where Buddha received enlightenment. To my eyes, although the pictures were obviously sensual, their use of perspective and portrayal of human anatomy evoked - even if they didn't reach the standard of - old Renaissance masters such as Michelangelo. For the last six months the project had been widely publicised and celebrated as an important event in Buddhist art. So what had created the shift in mood that led to this vicious assault?

The full implications of the attack have become more dangerously evident over the last year, but the warning signs were there from the moment my plane landed at Colombo airport. I arrived in Sri Lanka three days before the elections, the third the country had held in four years. The ruling Prime Minister was the charismatic Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party, who had been a central figure in achieving a ceasefire with the Tamil Tigers in 2002, and had also made significant moves to promote foreign investment. With film-star good looks, an optimistic relationship with the Tamils and a record of achieving an economic upturn Wickremesinghe seemed like the obvious choice to move the country further along from the troubled years of civil war.

However, his formidable opponent was President Chandrika Kumaratunga of the United People's Freedom Alliance, who was elected in 1994, and whose mother had been the world's first woman prime minister. Even those who disagree with her arch-nationalist policies could not fail to respect Kumaratunga's courage. She has persisted in a political career despite the fact that her father was assassinated by a Buddhist monk when he was prime minister, and her matinee-idol-turned-politician husband was gunned down by political opponents. She started her presidency by launching a bid for peace with the Tamil Tigers. Yet she has repeatedly failed in negotiations with them, and has borne a cruel physical reminder of this since 1999 when she lost her right eye in an assassination attempt by a female Tamil suicide bomber. At the end of 2003, Kumaratunga - then in her second presidential term - protested that Wickremesinghe's minority government was being too lenient in peace talks with the Tamils, and seized three government ministries, including defence. Despite the fact that the UNP had a working parliamentary majority, it was thrown off balance by the president's manoeuvres, and in February 2004 she dissolved parliament for an April election. Why did this connect with what had happened to the temple? Because a significant part of her campaign fed into a rising tide of nationalism within the Buddhist Sinhalese majority. As well as being suspicious that too much had been given up to placate the Tamils, certain voters were also rebelling against four and a half centuries of religious and economic imperialism.

In those first days of travel in Sri Lanka, the majority of people I talked to were firm supporters of Wickremesinghe. Typical among their number was Sarath, an engaging entrepreneur whose eternal Cheshire Cat grin could not disguise his relentless ambition and perfectionism. On the surface he only seemed to run a tiny hotel on Hikkaduwa Beach in the south, but within one day of staying there, I was joking that he was in fact the driving force behind Sri Lanka. Whether you wanted to learn how to make a green curry, visit a silk factory, or book rooms at one of the country's most difficult-to-get-into hotels, if you mentioned it to Sarath it was organised within minutes.

Not only Sarath, but all his staff were voting for Wickremesinghe, so I told him about how I and my husband had been able to experience the politician's charisma first hand just as we were leaving the hermetically-sealed glamour of our first stop in Sri

Lanka - the Ceylon Continental Hotel in Colombo. There was no one else around except for security guards, and a couple of other departing hotel guests, so we were astonished when a large SUV rolled up, and an extremely relaxed-looking Prime Minister got out for a meeting there. As he smiled at us, Bill had joked to me that he hoped we weren't about to be caught up in security incident, but we both felt that we had seen a man who was, at the very least, hopeful that he was just about to win the election. Everything we had read and talked about with the Sri Lankans had backed this view up.

However, the key to Wickremesinghe's forthcoming downfall lay in landscapes that I was to explore over the next two weeks - the agricultural areas where water buffaloes lugubriously ploughed paddy fields, and the steep terraces where poorly paid Tamil women in bright sarongs picked tea. For the casual tourist there was no doubt that these were scenes full of charm, but there was much unhappiness among such rural communities that the Prime Minister's sweeping economic reforms had so far only succeeded in making them poorer. A brief, unplanned visit, to a Tamil worker's house (because I needed the loo) revealed cramped conditions similar to those in a South African township. Although Sri Lanka's business and professional classes were extremely content with the way that Wickremesinghe was conducting the peace process, Kumaratunga seized on rural labourers' economic resentment and whipped it up with nationalism into a powerful political cocktail. On April 3rd, it was announced that her Freedom Alliance coalition, which included a prominent communist party, had successfully driven Wickremesinghe from power.

Yet Kumaratunga failed to win an overall majority, and this brought into play a curious new political party which also espoused strident nationalism. Buddhist monks had entered Sri Lankan politics for the first time in the 2004 election, and despite being a small party, ended up with 6% of the vote and nine seats in parliament. Known as the Jathika Hela Urumaya, their campaign was to establish a Buddhist Religious State in Sri Lanka. Although the monks subsequently declined to join the government coalition, they agreed to support it from the outside, thus becoming key power brokers in an increasingly divided parliament. Before describing the sinister aspects of the monks' political agenda, it would be irresponsible not to emphasise the positive contributions of Buddhism to Sri Lankan life and culture throughout

the country. In central Sri Lanka I spent a day in Polonnaruwa, a medieval capital with well-preserved ruins of temples and dagobas as well as a vast and hydraulically sophisticated irrigation network which outranked anything in Britain during the same era. I also visited the Dambulla cave temples and was dazzled by statues representing different stages in Buddha's story - not least in a cave where fifty sculpted figures of the Buddha loomed serenely against intricate wall paintings. On top of this, eleven days after the election, Bill and I celebrated Sri Lankan New Year by visiting Buddhist temples. Throughout the festival we were greeted with welcoming smiles by Sinhalese families who had come to make offerings of food and gifts - there was no point at which we were made to feel threatened or unwelcome.

But that uncomfortable morning at the desecrated Buddhist temple provided a much more significant clue than I appreciated about a rising surge of militant Buddhism. Although initially the attack was condemned by the Sri Lankan authorities, within days the Sri Lankan Minister of Cultural Affairs was pronouncing that the real act of vandalism was the Dutch artists' decoration of the temple. It made no difference that they had merely taken on the job because a local artist had turned the opportunity down. A few weeks later, a senior monk organised a party of villagers to organise a more thorough destruction of the remaining murals.

Both in the year before and since I visited the temple, other anti-Western sentiment has manifested itself in violent attacks by Buddhists on churches. It has been estimated that over that two-year period there have been more than 170 assaults. At parliamentary level, an Act for the Protection of Religious Freedom has stirred up significant controversy, since it makes it a crime to try and convert a Buddhist to another religion. This could pose a particular problem to Western charities which have flown in to help Sri Lankans following the tsunami, because - as some newspapers are already alleging - the aid they are providing is being seen as a bribe for the Sinhalese to convert to Christianity.

The reported attacks are as remarkable for their sadistic inventiveness as their quantity. At the start of last year, the Calvary Church in Wattegedara, 20kms away from the capital, Colombo, was attacked at midnight by a mob wielding bicycle chains, and attempting to cut the telephone wires. A few days later, another night-time mob, dressed in black and white, smashed the sacred

statues in a Catholic church and set the Bibles on fire. In Anuradhapura, one of the island's top tourist destinations, men hurled buckets of excrement and engine oil around the church, and set off fire crackers in an - ultimately - failed attempt to burn it down. A worker for Christian Solidarity Worldwide has told of a particularly vicious incident where a pastor's family was attacked, his wife beaten, and all their furniture, books, and documents burned. As a humiliating coup de grace, the attackers then took a sword and cut off the pastor's wife's hair.

Such discoveries clash painfully with my enduring memories of Sri Lankans as determined, hospitable people, in love with their history and with the landscape around them. When the tsunami's fatal waves swept away people, livelihoods and whole towns I - like so many around the world - was gripped by an unfathomable despair. Yet the unavoidable problems is that though Sri Lanka has the sympathy of the world, its veins of anger seem even closer to the surface, and it will take an extraordinary politician to tap that restless energy to the island's advantage. It would be a tragedy if Buddhism - so long perceived as a religion of peace - pushed the island from its violent past into an even more violent future.