

OPINION

Archaeology sparks new conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese

Jeremy Page
The Times

RECENT visitors to Kilinochchi, the former capital of the Tamil Tigers, had noticed something unusual — there was a single, new building standing among the bombed-out ruins of the abandoned city in northern Sri Lanka.

It was a whitewashed Buddhist shrine, strewn with flowers. “We thought it strange because there was no one there except soldiers — the civilians had all fled,” one of the visitors said.

Officers told them that the shrine had been damaged by the Tigers and renovated by the army — recruited largely from the Sinhalese Buddhist majority — after the rebels’ defeat a year ago next month. “It’s an ancient site,” Major-General Prasad Samarasinghe, the chief military spokesman, told The Times.

Many Tamil archaeologists, historians and politicians disagree. They say that the area had been populated for centuries by the ethnic Tamil minority, which is mostly Hindu. “There was nothing there at all,” Karthigesu Sivathamby, a retired professor of Tamil history and literature at the University of Jaffna, said.

The true origins of the site may never be known without independent analysis — which is impossible while the army restricts access to the area. Many Tamil community leaders fear that the shrine is part of a plan to “rediscover” Buddhist sites and settle thousands of Sinhalese across the north to undermine the Tamils’ claim to an ethnic homeland.

They also worry that such efforts will accelerate if the ruling coalition, led by President Rajapaksa, the country’s ethnic Sinhalese leader, wins a two-thirds majority in parliamentary elections due on Thursday.

“The Government is putting up new Buddhist shrines and building permanent housing for soldiers,” Suresh Premachandran, an MP from the Tamil National Alliance, said. “They are trying to colonise the area, to show it belongs to the Sinhalese.”

He said that the army was building housing for 40,000 soldiers and their families in the north, even before it has finished resettling 300,000 Tamils who were held in internment camps after the war.

The army says that it does have that many troops there but denies settling their families and says it is simply renovating old military camps — and occasionally renovating Buddhist and Hindu shrines.

“We’re just trying to protect the people and make sure the [Tigers] don’t come back,” General Samarasinghe said.

So begins a new chapter in a dispute that began with the birth of archaeology in Sri Lanka, under the British in the 19th century, and that grew into a civil war that lasted 26 years and killed 100,000 people.

When the British took control of the country in 1815, they were unsure of its ancient history but soon embraced the legend of the Mahavamsa — a text written by Buddhist monks in about AD500.

It suggests that the Sinhalese are descended from Prince Vijaya, an Aryan prince exiled from northern India in about 500BC, and that Tamils did not migrate from southern India until 200 years later.

That theory — still taught in schools — underpins the Sinhalese chauvinism that ultimately drove the Tigers to launch their armed struggle for an independent homeland in 1983.

In fact, archaeologists had discredited that after independence by excavating settlements in the north that dated from long before 500BC and showed similarities to sites in southern India — suggesting a much earlier migration.

When the conflict began, they were forced to suspend excavations and many Tamil archaeologists fled into exile overseas.

Since the end of the war, archaeology in the north has resumed — and with it the debate over the country’s ancient history.

“For three decades we haven’t been able to do anything in the north,” Senarath Dissanayake, the head of the Government’s Archaeology Department, said.

“Now we can find out about how ancient people lived here — their culture, economy, social background, living conditions and religion.”

He said that his department had identified 60 old sites in the north in the last year — and six completely new ones, dated between 300BC and AD1000.

Some Tamil academics question why the new sites are all from a period when Sinhalese Buddhist culture is thought to have flourished. Others want more Tamil archaeologists involved, as well as foreign experts or the UN, to ensure that the work is objective.

“The archaeological department is the handmaiden of the Government,” said one prominent Tamil scholar, who declined to be identified for fear of reprisals.

“The concern is that they’re going to identify these sites as Sinhalese, build lots of Buddhist shrines and tell Sinhalese people this is their lost land.”

The Government announced last month that 300,000 local and foreign tourists had visited the northern province since the war ended — and officials say that the vast majority were Sinhalese from the south.

Government archaeologists deny identifying sites on ethnic or religious grounds.

“The emphasis from the President is that there should be a balancing of Buddhist and non-Buddhist sites,” said Sudarshan Seneviratne, the head of the Central Cultural Fund, which finances archaeology. “He’s a smart politician. He knows how to cater to all communities.”

Mr Seneviratne accepted, nonetheless, that there were “parochial” forces who wanted to use archaeology for political purposes.

Principal among them on the Sinhalese side is the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Buddhist monks’ party that is part of the ruling coalition, and has a powerful influence on Mr Rajapaksa.

Its clout was illustrated last month when the Government refused a visa to Akon, a Senegalese-American R&B singer who had been due to perform in Colombo this month.

Activists had protested over the video for Sexy Bitch, a song that showed bikini-clad women dancing around a pool, with a Buddha statue in the background. The protesters said that the Sri Lankan Constitution obliges the state to “give Buddhism the foremost place” and “protect and foster” the religion.

The JHU invoked the same argument in December when it presented 29 demands to Mr Rajapaksa, including one for him



Buddhist ruins are being ‘discovered’ on traditionally Tamil lands

to rebuild dozens of Buddhist sites in the north. His response has never been made public but the JHU — which is led by a passionate amateur archaeologist — claims that the President concurred.

“He agreed to take immediate steps to restore Buddhist sites in the north,” Udaya Gammanpila, a senior JHU member, said. “He said the army and the archaeological department were already working on it.”

Even if that is untrue, the JHU can directly influence archaeology because Champika Ranawaka, its chief ideologue, is Environment Minister and his approval is required to excavate and protect sites.

Foreign archaeologists famil-

iar with Sri Lanka say that the country — which is approximately 70 per cent Sinhalese and 20 per cent Tamil — needs to move past the ethnic issue.

“That debate will never be answered by archaeology,” Robin Coningham, a professor of archaeology at Durham University, said.

Tamil scholars say that that may not be possible with the JHU in government and the army empowered to rebuild Buddhist shrines on contentious sites.

“Archaeology has always been political in Sri Lanka,” said one Tamil historian overseas, who also did not want to be identified for fear of endangering relatives in Sri Lanka. “It’s no different today.”

Archaeology: a response

Peram Kana

EVER heard of ‘archaeology’ being the first priority in a conquered territory? If you have not heard of such a practice, then you don’t know the Sri Lankan state.

Sinhalese and Eelam Tamils are two siblings whose very ethnic formation and territorial identity took place on the island as a result of more than two millennia of history, which no one, not even hard-core Sinhala-Buddhist historians, could deny.

What happened in a paranoid way immediately after the war was a sudden inrush of a number of Sinhala ‘archaeologists’ to the North and East, exploring ‘opportunities.’

A Sinhala Buddhist monk was appointed as the curator of the Jaffna museum. This monk, exploring the peninsula with the help of the army, announced the ‘discovery’ of potential sites within weeks of his manoeuvres.

The aim of their feverish archaeology is to build Sinhala-Buddhist stupas in the heart of the Tamil homeland, paving the way for islands of Sinhala-Buddhist colonies protected by the military. Establishing these colonies will go hand in hand with ‘development’ projects aiming to open the conquered territory to the conquerors and, eventually, to change of demography so that Tamils can never fight for their national rights on the island.

Temporally and spiritually

such actions are heritage genocide: to make Eelam Tamils feel that their homeland doesn’t belong to them, that they are historically inferior ‘intruders’, that they have no claims for their nationalism and that as long as they exist as Tamils they cannot be equals with the Sinhalese.

What is the point now in engaging in one-sided ‘archaeology’ rather than coming out with political formulas to resolve the national question, if the intention is not genocide?

The Colombo government using archaeology and heritage as tools for its genocide is nothing new to Eelam Tamils. Such use of archaeology for political and ideological ends has been a decades’ long process.