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**Chapter 4:  Kūragala: Religious and Ethnic Communities in a Contested Sacred Heritage Site, Sri Lanka**

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> "*The cave . . . is entirely natural . . . [A] narrow passage leads out on to the meditation "ledge", a niche in the sheer side of the cliff, some 6 foot by 4 foot with an overhanging roof of rock. Here seated beneath a huge mass that towers fifty feet above on the edge of a 600-foot precipice, a hermit can find solitude indeed and food for contemplation in the unbroken ocean of trees spread out below him . . . Earthly considerations lose their importance before the uncomplicated immensity of the colossal landscape and the fatality of the sheer abyss.*"
> (Bassett 1934: 54-5)

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Using historical analysis and primary data, this chapter will examine the communal religious and ethnic tensions that have arisen in the context of conservation, preservation and continual use of archaeological heritage in Sri Lanka. This chapter focusses on one contested, mismanaged, religiously articulated and politically controversial sacred space - Kūragala. In the contestation, both contemporary Buddhists and Muslims, and those of the twentieth century, have been involved. This sacred space, contested on the grounds of ethnic and religious differentiation, has significant implications for the conservation of archaeological heritage in Sri Lanka as well as in sustaining its religious and ethno-political harmony.

## 4.2 KŪRAGALA TODAY

Kūragala, whose name is derived from the Sinhala word for 'hollow rock', is an ancient site that can be associated with Buddhism in terms of its origins. According to the Department of Archaeology, Government of Sri Lanka, the site can be dated back to the second century BCE (Collins 1932: 167) due to the presence of early Brāhmī inscriptions. Archaeological excavations have also confirmed earlier, prehistoric occupation at the site in 2013 and field survey recorded "prehistoric quartz" scattered on the surface of the northern slope of the hillock in 2014 (Somadeva 2015: 5-6). Already in 1932, Collins (1932: 168) had identified the importance of Kūragala as a archaeological site by maintaining "if properly explored, would yield other remains of interest."

Fig 1: Plan of the archaeological site of Kuragala
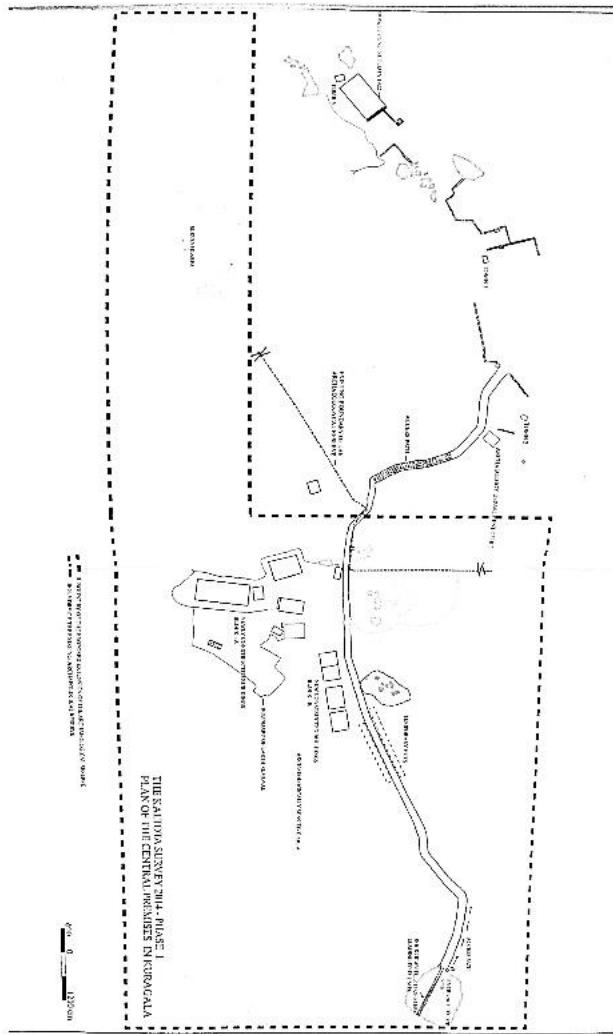
While the archaeological and historic site comprises a rock shelter, the name 'Kūragala' is used here broadly to reference the entire area. Located in Ratnapura District in Sri Lanka's Sabaragamuva Province, the rock shelter is on the edge of the Balangoḍa Plateau, some 23 kilometers east of the town of Balangoḍa. Its nearest village, Thanjantenna, is 1.5 kilometres away and about 400 metres above sea level. Both Muslims and Buddhists live in the village and it has a Buddhist temple.

Kūragala is an important sacred site, both historically and religiously, and two contemporary religious communities, Buddhist and Muslim, treasure their access. The significance of Kūragala for Buddhists is because of its location on the ancient pilgrimage route from the south of the island to Śrī Pāda (Adam's Peak). Additional archaeological evidence of Buddhist affiliation  the site's five early Brāhmī inscriptions which date to the third century BCE (Paranavitana 1970: 59), drip-ledged caves and remains of a *stūpa*. The significance of Kūragala for Muslims derives from its link with Muḥyīuddīn 'Abdul Qādir al-Gīlānī (1077–1166 CE), a Sufi mystic from Persia, who is believed to have visited.

The approach road from the village was repaired and resurfaced in 2013 during a major reorganization of the site and ends in the valley in a car park. From here, pilgrims walk up the hill. There is a beautiful staircase carved into the rock, resembling rock-cut staircases in other ancient Buddhist complexes, such as Mihintale and Anurādhapura. Its 'unusual' feature is that access to the steps, recently inscribed with

Muslim names, is through a large white entrance arch with green minarets on either side. This flamboyant arch, with Islamic motifs, was constructed in 1982 (Aboosally 2002: 64). Some local residents identify this new construction as a "Muslim Torana", (Figure 2) the latter being a specific religious emphasis and designation usually associated with Buddhist sites.

Fig 2: The Muslim 'Torana' beside the rock-cut steps to Kuragala

After climbing the steps to a plateau, the way turns downwards through a line of shops on either side. The plateau also hosts several buildings, including offices and quarters for the employees of Daftar Gīlānī or 'Jungle Rock Cave Gīlānī'. There are temporary constructions in this area used during the annual Kanturi, or Kandoori, festival as well as a temporary police post.

These new buildings were relocated here following the reorganization of the site in 2013. Before that, poorly constructed and unplanned buildings covered much of the area around the mosque. The remodeling, under the supervision of the Defense Secretary, was a government response to growing communal and religious tensions over competing claims to the site from the two communities. Specifically, it followed demands for immediate action from activist groups, such as the Bodu Bala Sena (The Army of Buddhist Power) and the Sinhala Ravaya (The Sinhala Roar), and the Jatika Hela Urumaya (National Sinhala Heritage), a political party who only fielded Buddhist monks in the 2004 elections.

In terms of legal jurisdiction, it would have been better if the Director-General of Archaeology had stepped in to take conciliatory measures to manage the emerging crises rather than the Defense Secretary. In the event, the Defense Secretary had discussions with the mosque trustees, resulting in the relocations. This intervention also enabled the Department of Archaeology to conduct exploratory excavations which discovered a prehistoric skeleton, as well as Professor Somadeva's survey (2015).

Prior to 2013, the sacred site and the entire valley was dotted with buildings such as shops, kitchens, rest rooms and living spaces. This was in contrast to Kūragala's setting, a scenic place with the aesthetics and atmosphere of an ancient forest cave monastery, offering splendid views of the plains stretching all the way to the borders of Monarāgala District and the east coast beyond. The view of the ancient temple at Budugala, close to Kūragala, and the surrounding paddy fields is breathtaking. To the south, on a clear day, one can see Hambantota and the new Mattala Airport. Kūragala contains abundantly rich features of a religious sanctuary of bygone era, still ideal for contemplation and meditation practice

## 4.3 DAFTAR GĪLĀNĪ

To reach the site of the mosque, the Daftar Gīlānī, one still has to traverse the plateau, ascend another rocky hill and descend into a valley. There, at the entrance to the valley, is a large concrete signboard, erected by the Department of Archaeology in 1972, with the following trilingual (Sinhala, Tamil and English) text: "Kūragala Archaeological Reserve. Remains of an Ancient Buddhist Monastery, circa 2 Century B.C." (Figure 3). The board does not mention the 'Daftar Gīlānī' or any other Muslim designation within the site. The archaeological reserve covers four acres and the signboard informs people that they are entering an ancient sacred Buddhist site.

Fig 3: The Department of Archaeology's signboard at Kuragala

When one goes down the steps, passing into the valley, the first feature encountered is a Muslim tomb near the bottom. Another second tomb is visible about 100 metres along the path to the mosque. They are the first of the five tombs within the site and appear to belong to a more recent period, as pilgrims, mystics or patrons were interred there once the Kūragala pilgrimage became popular among Sri Lankan Muslims in the second quarter of the twentieth century. To the visitor, the tombs give

the impression that this ancient archaeological site has now been fully taken up by Muslims of the twentieth century and one could argue that this has occurred without little regard for the cultural heritage, history, archaeology or monuments of Kuragala. The Daftar Gīlānī mosque itself is located on the rock outcrop close to a rock shelter to the south. This outcrop is called Hiṭuvangala, or 'standing rock' in Sinhala, but in Tamil it is known as the *Kappal Malai* or 'ship mountain'. To the southwest is a peak called *jin malai* or 'spirit mountain' in Tamil, with a further five rock shelters, widely believed to have been used for meditation by Buddhist monks as well as Sufi mystics.

To the east is the peak with the rock shelter called Kūragala, or in Tamil *curankam malai* or 'cave mountain', in which the Persian Sufi mystic Muḥyīuddīn 'Abdul Qādir al-Gīlānī spent time on his way to Śrī Pāda. It is alleged that this rock shelter contains a secret passageway to a building located in the plains far below. The peak also houses a half-built *stūpa* in an ancient style, which was repaired in the early 1970s by the Department of Archaeology, leading to controversy.

This historical and archaeological site of Buddhist origin becomes vibrant annually during the Kanturi festival of the Sri Lankan and Indian Muslim community. This festival emerged to commemorate the death of Gīlānī. Large crowds of Muslims of various persuasions gather at Kūragala and this tranquil location, suddenly becomes crowded with pilgrims.

## 4.4 THE BURIED HISTORICITY OF KŪRAGALA

The 2013 remodelling was not the first recorded intervention at the site as have there have been several earlier engagements between Muslim politicians, including Aboosally, Sinhala leaders, including the late President R. Premadasa (1924-1993) and concerned Buddhist monks and lay people in the area to reach conciliatory measures with regard to the use of the sacred site.

With greater time-depth, I have been able to research a sample of official British reports to help understand the nature of the growth in Muslim pilgrimage to Kūragala. In contrast to other years, and after the 1915 Sinhala-Muslim riots, the *Ceylon Administration Report for 1919* (CAR) contains a relatively lengthy section on pilgrimages in Sabaragamuva Province. After giving a detailed account of the most prominent to Śrī Pāda, the last three lines of report recorded new and emerging pilgrimage sites: "Some of the less important pilgrimages are the Kūragala Muhammadan Pilgrimage, Alutnuwara Dewale Perahera Festival, and Boltumbe Dewale Perahera Festival" (CAR 1919: I2). The *Report* then added a remark indicating the growing significance of those pilgrimages for people who live in the region, as well as outside it: "These, too, attract people from several parts of the Island" (ibid.).

In later years, the *Ceylon Administration Reports* described the Kūragala pilgrimage with different terminologies and qualifying adjectives. Under the heading of "Pilgrimages", the 1922 report described the Kūragala pilgrimage as "minor" and qualifying the dominant religion of the pilgrims as Islam: "There were other minor festivals at Alutnuwera, Boltumbe, and Kūragala in Meda Korale is frequented by Muhammadans" (CAR 1922: I3). We do not hear in these reports, or in most of the literature on Kūragala, whether the pilgrims who were 'Muhammadans' of a Sufi - oriented religious persuasion or whether they were predominantly followers of the Qādiriyyat order that can be traced to Baghdad and Tamil Nadu as demonstrated by Schomburg (2003). The *Ceylon Administration Report for 1923* also included Kūragala

under the theme of pilgrimage and stated: "There were other minor festivals at Alutnuwera, Boltumbe, and Kūragala (Muhammadan)" (CAR 1923: I2).

Using just one brief sentence, the *Report* for 1927 recorded Kūragala under the heading of pilgrimage. The *Report* first discussed pilgrimage to Śrī Pāda and Maha Saman Dewale as usual and then it recorded a growing religious phenomenon in Sabaragamuva Province. Unlike previous reports, it qualified the "frequented" pilgrims by using the plural noun "Muslims" as opposed to previous citations of "Muhammadan" or "Muhammadans": "Kūragala in Meda Korale is frequented by Muslims" (CAR 1927: I5). This change of the British position of word choice of 'Muslim' against 'Muhammadan' may have resulted from the recommendation of the Government appointed committee in 1924. Writing in 1932, Collins stated: "Kūragala is a great place of Muslim pilgrimage, though other religionists also claim it" (1932: 168). *Ceylon Administration Report*s published after the Independence in 1948 focused more on history, archaeology, monuments, prehistoric civilization and the rediscovered Buddhist features of Kūragala found in the jungle as opposed to British colonial government reports which offered sketchy ethnographic and administrative details of the pilgrimage, numbers, geographical orientations and ethnicity of frequent pilgrims.

For example, after a field visit of the Archaeological Survey Department to explore the archaeological monuments at Kūragala, the *Sri Lanka Administration Report* for 1968–69 (SLAR) recorded in Sinhala (my translation): "This area that contains Brāhmī inscriptions with drip-ledged caves has now turned into a mosque of Muslim devotees. There are modern constructions of several buildings at the site (SLAR 1968-9: G31). This archaeological report does three important things; firstly, it highlights the historical, archaeological and religious value of the monuments and visible remains at Kūragala; secondly, it notes encroachment, deliberate and illegal occupation and significant religious transformations, such as the construction of the mosque, above older layers of historical monuments by a later religious group whose use of the site, practices there, and lifestyles and beliefs are different from those who inhabited those places and areas in previous centuries. Finally, it illustrates the dangers that historical and archaeological monuments face when new constructions are built on the top of historical sites without proper planning, permissions and consultations, particularly where little systematic archaeology has been conducted and few reports and assessments are available.

## 4.5 EXPLORATION AND CONSERVATION

Building on this earlier exploration, The *Register of Ancient Monuments*, (RAM) published by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, records three archaeological sites in the broader geographical area that we today identify as Kūragala (1972: 701–703). These are Galṭänyāya (125/4; 54/2), Kūragala (26/4; 55/2) and (iii) Budugala (27/4; 56/2). The first two are located in the village of Thanjantenna and the last in the adjoining village of Budugala. Explaining the archaeological importance of the first, and hinting at the necessity of preservation of the site, the *Register* states:

"[T]he remains of an ancient monastery in an area of about 5 acres surrounded by a prakara [parapet] of stone . . . Balustrade stones, stone steps and other remains of ancient structures partly buried can be noticed at the site. The remains of an ancient dagoba [*stūpa*] are also at the site. This site which is very close to the Kūragala and Budugala sites may have found one unit with other sites" (RAM 1972: 701).

From this observation, it is clear that what we take today 'very' narrowly as Kūragala cannot be isolated from its wider geographical, religious and archeological contexts.

The *Register* described Kūragala in the following words:

"On a craggy site . . . is the ancient Buddhist monastic site of Kūragala. At the site are several drip-ledged caves. Some of which contain Brahmi inscriptions of the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. On one of the rock hummocks here are the remains of a brick built dagoba [*stūpa*]" (p. 702).

From the accounts of Galṭānyāya and Kūragala, it is clear the remains of a brick stupa is a common feature of both. This fact is relevant as recent accusations have been levelled at the Department of Archaeology by a number of observers, including Aboosally (2002), that it had begun to build a new *stūpa* on "the rock hummocks". This, I would argue, a misrepresentation of the situation. Rather, the Department of Archaeology has undertaken the conservation of the existing remains of an old *stūpa*. This interpretation is supported by the notice issued by the Archaeological Commissioner on 13 September 1972 stating:

"Kuragala Archaeological Conservation. The Archaeological Department in pursuance of its policy of conserving ancient monuments is taking steps to start conservation work on the ancient ruins at the above site situated within its Reserves. It is not the intention of the Department to construct a New Dagoba [*stūpa*] here. The Muslims who have been using Kuragala as a place of worship will not be affected by this conservation work".

With reference to the adjoining site, Budugala, the *Register* stated:

"At this site are the remains of some double platformed buildings. In a cave here is a Brahmi inscription. Inside a cave of little depth is an ancient lavatory. Steps have been provided on the rock to give access to the dagoba which was on a large boulder at the site" (RAM 1972: 703).

The site at Budugala shares many historical, archaeological and religious features with Galṭānyāya and Kūragala. These combined reports confirm that all three sites form an almost contiguous belt around the hill that we now loosely call Kūragala.

## 4.6 CONTESTED HISTORY OF KŪRAGALA

Accounts of Muslim claims to the historical site of Kūragala arise from the last few years of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Ignoring the presence of the early Brāhmī inscriptions of the second century BCE at the Hiṭuvangala shelter, British officials affirmed Kūragala as a 'Mohammedan shrine' in the government printed maps of 1901 and 1928, reinforcing Muslim claims to Kūragala. Continuing narratives of Muslim claims to Kūragala and the perception of Kūragala as a 'Mohammedan shrine' were significantly substantiated and reinforced in 1922 after the 1915 Sinhala-Muslim Riots with the construction of a new mosque on the site of an ancient Buddhist rock shelter with Brāhmī inscriptions.

Writing in 1932, Collins stated a contestation among Muslims in Kūragala: "The two Caves are occupied by one 'Ali Mustán, an Indian Muslim, who came to the place several years, and now lives there as a guide and friend of pilgrims, though his right to do so is strenuously resisted by the Muslim authorities of Balan-goda (1932: 167). Then Collins went to tell an early version of the current name used by Muslims: "The special place of pilgrimage now is on the second cliff known as Dastar Séláni . . . There was no devotees in these caves when I was

there, but it is not unusual for Muslim pilgrims . . . to stay here for three months . . . There was, however, one delightful gentleman from Lahore in one of the lower caves" (Collins 1932: 168).

The mosque constructed at Hiṭuvangala is known among Muslims today as the Daftar Gīlānī (or Daftar Jīlānī, Daftar Jailani, Dafther Jailany). This identification, made of Hindi, Persian and Arabic, is used both for the mosque as well as for the wider sacred area. This usage for ancient Kūragala can be contested as a case of intentional 'Islamization' of the site and a deliberate and systematic attempt to 'replace' traditional Sinhala names. Perhaps one could argue this as an indication of an 'intention to replace' the Buddhist origins of the site. It is not yet certain when Muslims first began to use the name 'Daftar Gīlānī' replacing the traditional name Kūragala. Perhaps later than 1898 as, during British Rule, the name 'Kooragala', a spelling variation, was used by the Government Agent in his letter to Muslims in Balangoḍa on 23 April 1898. What is certain is that neither the British officials in the nineteenth century, nor Muslims of Balangoḍa at that time, referred to the 'Daftar Gīlānī' or other versions of that name until 1930s.

Muḥyīuddīn 'Abdul Qādir al-Gīlānī (1077–1166 CE) was a Sufi mystic. He was born in Gīlān, a town in the region of Persia near the Caspian Sea. Gīlānī carried out intensive study in the Islamic sciences for many years in Baghdad. It is said that Gīlānī left Baghdad to commit himself to pursuance of ascetic disciplines. In an extensive period of training, it is believed Gīlānī may have travelled to Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. When he returned to Baghdad in his early forties, he took up further mystical training. Through teaching, preaching and administration, Gīlānī earned a reputation for greater piety and mystical achievements and received the appellation of Muḥyīuddīn or 'Reviver of Islam'. He died and was buried in Baghdad and his children and disciples established the Qādiriyyat order (Schomburg 2003: 21).

There is an important popular narrative circulating among Muslims that reinforces Muslim claim to Kūragala, which records that Gīlānī spent twelve years meditating at the site (Aboosally 2002; McGilvray 2017: 274). There is neither archaeological nor historical evidence to substantiate this claim; nevertheless, it suggests a historical precedence of Muslim right to the ancient site as a place of worship before the later nineteenth century resurgence of the site and the construction of the mosque at the shelter in 1922 (Aboosally 2002: 59; McGilvray 2017: 275).

The mosque at Kūragala became a locus of veneration for Gīlānī in the twentieth century. Referring to the mosque, and its close link with Gīlānī, Schomburg wrote:

"The Daftar Jailāni site in the south-central highlands of Sri Lanka presents
special features both because of its Sri Lankan location and because of its
isolated mountain jungle situation. The saint [Gīlānī] is supposed to have rested
and meditated here on his pilgrimage to Adam's Peak, the mountaintop site
Muslims revere as the spot where Prophet Adam came to earth. Daftar Jailāni
("Cave of Gīlānī") is so named because of the cliff-edge cave at this site, where
the saint meditated; his barakat [spiritual energy] is attested by the miraculous
light said to glimmer in the deep recesses of the cave".
(2003: 28–29).

There were a number of legal battles among Muslims themselves concerning the affairs of the mosque as early as 1922 (Police Court Case No. 22494 of 1922). However, it was only in the late 1960s that Buddhists got involved significantly in religiously and politically motivated activities at the site. Legal battles followed in such involvements, including a case in which the Government filed a lawsuit against a mendicant, Trinco Bawa, for constructing a building in defiance of the *Antiquities Ordinance* (Aboosally 2002: 84).

The twenty-first century has witnessed increased tension in the area, as well as in Sri Lanka more widely, on the issue of legitimacy of a Muslim group controlling the affairs of ancient Buddhist Kūragala. The Bodu Bala Sēnā and Sinhala Rāvaya pressed the Rajapaksa Government to address the issue and resolve potential threats it may have for peace and harmony. As a result of the pressure, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the Defense Secretary, visited the site in April 2013 and ordered all 'illegal' structures, such as the shops and resting places that had grown around the immediate vicinity of mosque, to be relocated (McGilvray 2016: 69). As a result, many facilities, including the police station, shops, and pilgrim resthouses were been relocated along the road leading to the sacred premises.

## 4.7 CONCLUSION

This case study has shown the significant dangers facing monuments and archaeological sites in Sri Lanka and elsewhere from rapid development and encroachment. While economic, political, ethnic and religious explanations for illegal intrusions may be provided, these actions damage heritage and present the very real risk of depriving the narration of an 'untold' story of a monument for future generations. Surely, new constructions on archaeological sites without proper assessments are unacceptable in the twenty-first century. In this light, it can be argued that relatively new constructions on the top of earlier sites can be revisited for excavation and exploration and can be shifted to different locations if they continue to pose dangers by irreversibly damaging cultural heritage. It should also be recognized that this is not just the case of the more recent Muslim monuments built at Kuragala but can also be applied to the case of new Buddhist monuments above ancient Buddhist sites, such as the new constructions within 60 metres of the Sri Mahabodhi in Anuradhapura.

This chapter has also examined how two contemporary Sri Lankan religious and ethnic communities, Buddhist and Muslim, have been contesting each other's claim for the sacred ground at Kūragala on the basis of legends, memorials, archaeological monuments, inscriptions, colonial records and legal and historical documents. In the process, issues arising in the conservation and preservation of archaeological heritage of Sri Lanka have been discussed. From the early twentieth century onwards, Kūragala has become an intensely disputed sacred site. In the imagination of cultural heritage of Buddhists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the visible 'Islamization' of Kūragala, including renaming and new building constructions on an archaeological site has aroused strong emotions and been intensely questioned. This, of course, also has political ramifications and affects harmonious and functional relationships both locally and more widely in Sri Lanka. Legal issues, including the implementation of *The Antiquities Ordinance No. 9 of 1940* that regulates governing of archaeologically protected sites, have been used to remove illegally constructed shops and recent buildings from the archaeological site. Religious and ethnic tensions that informed the contestation of the sacred space of Kūragala have been briefly touched upon with the intention of exploring them further in the future.

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