



உலகத் தமிழர் பேரவை
Global Tamil Forum



Start of a National Conversation: A Sri Lanka, where every citizen can live peacefully with dignity, trust, and no fear or suspicion, enjoying equal rights

A dialogue between people, for the people of Sri Lanka – initiated by Sangha for Better Sri Lanka and Global Tamil Forum

Sangha for Better Sri Lanka (senior Buddhist monks from different Nikayas) and members of the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) are humbled to be at the forefront to launch this national conversation between people, for the people of Sri Lanka. We have been engaging nearly for a year with the intention of promoting understanding and peace among all the different communities in Sri Lanka. The preliminary structured engagement in Nagarkot (Nepal) in April 2023 helped us see each other's point of view and jointly create a framework to start this national conversation. We arrived at the 'Himalaya Declaration' (of the above title) to guide the continuation of this important first of its kind initiative in Sri Lanka and the Diaspora communities.

Today marks the official start of a national conversation within Sri Lanka. We call on every citizen of Sri Lanka not only to join us in this national conversation, but also to start your own conversations with each other. We are committed to making this vision a reality together with you. We have every confidence that the silent majority in all communities (Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim) will rise to their civic duty and turn this national conversation into a genuine national movement. The prize at stake is a new dawn where every citizen can live peacefully with dignity, trust, and no fear or suspicion, enjoying equal rights.

Background to the engagement

Sri Lanka is a country with tremendous potential. That has been the case throughout its history. The country's significance always outweighed its size and small population. Nearly seventy-five years ago the newly independent Sri Lanka had many attributes to become a peaceful and prosperous democracy. It was viewed that Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) would provide a blueprint for success for many countries emerging from centuries of colonization. However, many countries, particularly those with different nationalities and religions, found this transition difficult, and Sri Lanka was no exception. In fact, the constitutional and developmental trajectory Sri Lanka eventually led to it being declared state bankruptcy in 2022. The impact of this on the neediest and low-income household in all communities is there for everyone to see.

Politically motivated violence and counter violence – whether driven by social and economic considerations or due to ethnic, linguistic and religious differences – became the defining characteristics of Sri Lanka. The most impactful episode was the ethnic conflict and the resulting civil war which lasted nearly thirty years. Its direct human cost was staggering – more than one hundred thousand deaths, tens of thousands of disappearances, and millions displaced, which created a new 'Tamil Diaspora' phenomenon. While these losses were not limited to any one community, the proportional impact on the Tamil community was many folds higher.

Equally damaging is the indirect impact caused by the violence. Emergency rule for decades, excessive militarization, lack of respect for human rights and freedoms, torture and deaths in custody, and endemic corruption – all led to a political class that was self-serving and lacked empathy and capacity for addressing people's problems, including the long-festering ethnic and religious conflicts. Peoples' trust

in the political and governance systems hit rock bottom. Under such conditions, finding the country in a deep economic crisis is not surprising.

Nevertheless, the new awakening these appalling conditions have led to, and new initiatives some concerned citizens have embarked upon, are silver linings to the dark clouds. One such earnest approach has been initiated by a few important Buddhist monks from the “Sangha for Better Sri Lanka” and the GTF personnel to promote understanding and peace among all the different communities in Sri Lanka.

Nagarkot Dialogue

These discussions revealed the existence of commonalities between the parties – *a shared vision for a better Sri Lanka for all its peoples* – despite the apparent perception that both were extreme antagonists with unbridgeable differences. It was clear that ‘lack of understanding and the fear of the other’ were fundamental factors in undermining the ethnic and religious harmony in the country.

The Sinhala Buddhist community feared about preserving their historic and unique identity and pride of place in the (only) country they inhabit from the many forces they view as antagonistic, which include minority communities and the Tamil diaspora. On the other hand, the emotions and politics of Tamil people were always driven by a mirroring fear - losing their defining identity and viable existence in areas they have been inhabiting for long periods of history through calculated state measures.

There are serious negative perceptions among the Tamil people about Buddhist monks, who are viewed as a major factor in the continuation of ethnic conflict and suffering, but this view does not give weightage to the noble roles played by Sri Lankan Buddhist monks over centuries, including promoting the welfare of their communities. Likewise, the common perception among the majority community is that the economically successful and influential Tamil Diaspora is bent on destroying Sri Lanka, while not realizing or acknowledging the displacement, and the physical and emotional hardships they encounter in their adopted countries – all caused by the conditions they faced in the country of their birth.

One may find that these differing perceptions and fears are not always rationally based. It is also a fact that many political leaders and some religious dignitaries and others with vested interests have always, and will continue to seek to exploit these fears with self-serving motives. Hence, we wanted to reach out to you, for the people of Sri Lanka, to start this national conversation. Nagarkot conversation needs to be repeated between communities all across Sri Lanka and in the Diaspora. Such a process requires a guiding document that a vast amount of people from all communities can identify with. The ‘Himalaya Declaration’ arrived at Nagarkot is an important outcome of our journey together.

Himalaya Declaration

The ‘Himalaya Declaration’ is a pragmatic document that articulates a new and progressive vision for Sri Lanka, without being overly wedded to ideological fundamentals pertaining to any particular community. The declaration consists of six statements which are presented in full:

Preserving and promoting the pluralistic character of the country where no community feels threatened about losing its identity and pride of place.

Overcoming the economic crisis, selecting an appropriate development model which encourages local production, facilitating involvement and investment from overseas Sri Lankans and others, ensuring the country is in a growth trajectory and making Sri Lanka firmly a middle-income country.

Arriving at a new constitution that guarantees individual and collective rights and promotes equality and equal citizenship among all peoples, ensures accountable institutions and guarantees adequate devolution of powers to the provinces, and until such time focus on the faithful implementation of

provisions of sharing of powers in the existing constitution.

Devolving power in a united and undivided country, accepting the religious, cultural, and other identities of people and respecting those identities, and working towards establishing trust between ethnic groups and religious groups.

Envision a Sri Lanka that is reconciled and committed to learning from its past and creating measures including accountability to ensure that such suffering never occur again.

Complying with bilateral and multilateral treaties and international obligations, taking steps to follow independent and dynamic foreign policy, and ensuring the country takes its pride of place among the democratic, peaceful, and prosperous nations of the world.

Next steps

Both, the Buddhist monks and GTF are conscious that we are groups of people that represent the views of certain sections of the communities of Sri Lanka, not every citizen or group. At the same time, we know that the path we are taking is a righteous one. It is a bold, first ever joint initiative of this kind in the history of Sri Lanka since independence. Promoting inter-religious understanding and harmony in Sri Lanka and in the Diaspora is the basis in which peace and stability can be built for the better future for all.

While our present focus is on different religious communities and religious leaders with a view to establishing inter-religious working groups in all twenty-five districts, many of the outcomes articulated in the 'Himalaya Declaration' will be possible only through relevant political processes. Hence, we have informed all key political parties and stakeholders of Sri Lanka of this initiative and asked them rise to meet this challenge. But the people of Sri Lanka and Diaspora communities have an important part in making the political processes count.

We are also actively engaging with the governments of the countries that are home to Diaspora communities and India. Our lived experience in these countries where diversity is celebrated and viewed as a strength, and our professional and personal experiences, make it possible for many in the Diaspora to contribute to economic, social, and cultural developments in Sri Lanka.

We are truly inspired of the recognition of our joint ambition, and blessings for start of this national conversation by senior leaders and prelates from all major religions including the venerable Mahanayakas, the President and leaders of different political parties, and civil society organisations that work to promote inter-religious understanding, harmony, peace and reconciliation, and equality and prosperity to all peoples of Sri Lanka.

The journey that we start today will be a long and hard one, but it will facilitate the creation of accountable institutions of governance and a conducive environment for resolution of longstanding ethnic grievances and economic malice. The success achieved from this national conversation have the potential to profoundly transform Sri Lanka with direct economic, developmental and quality of life benefits for ordinary citizens, while restoring its image as a progressive and respected country in the international community.

The Nagarkot Dialogue continues in Sri Lanka this week, and the Himalaya Declaration is now a public document. Turning the national conversation we have started this week into national movement where every Sri Lankan citizen can live peacefully with dignity, trust, and no fear or suspicion, enjoying equal rights rests with us all – the people of Sri Lanka.