



Child safeguarding challenges in faith-based institutional settings

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- Content warning:
 - Theravada Buddhism and sexual and other forms of abuse
- Disclaimer:
 - Use of publicly available images of young monks and public events





The case of
Buddhist
monastery in
Sri Lanka

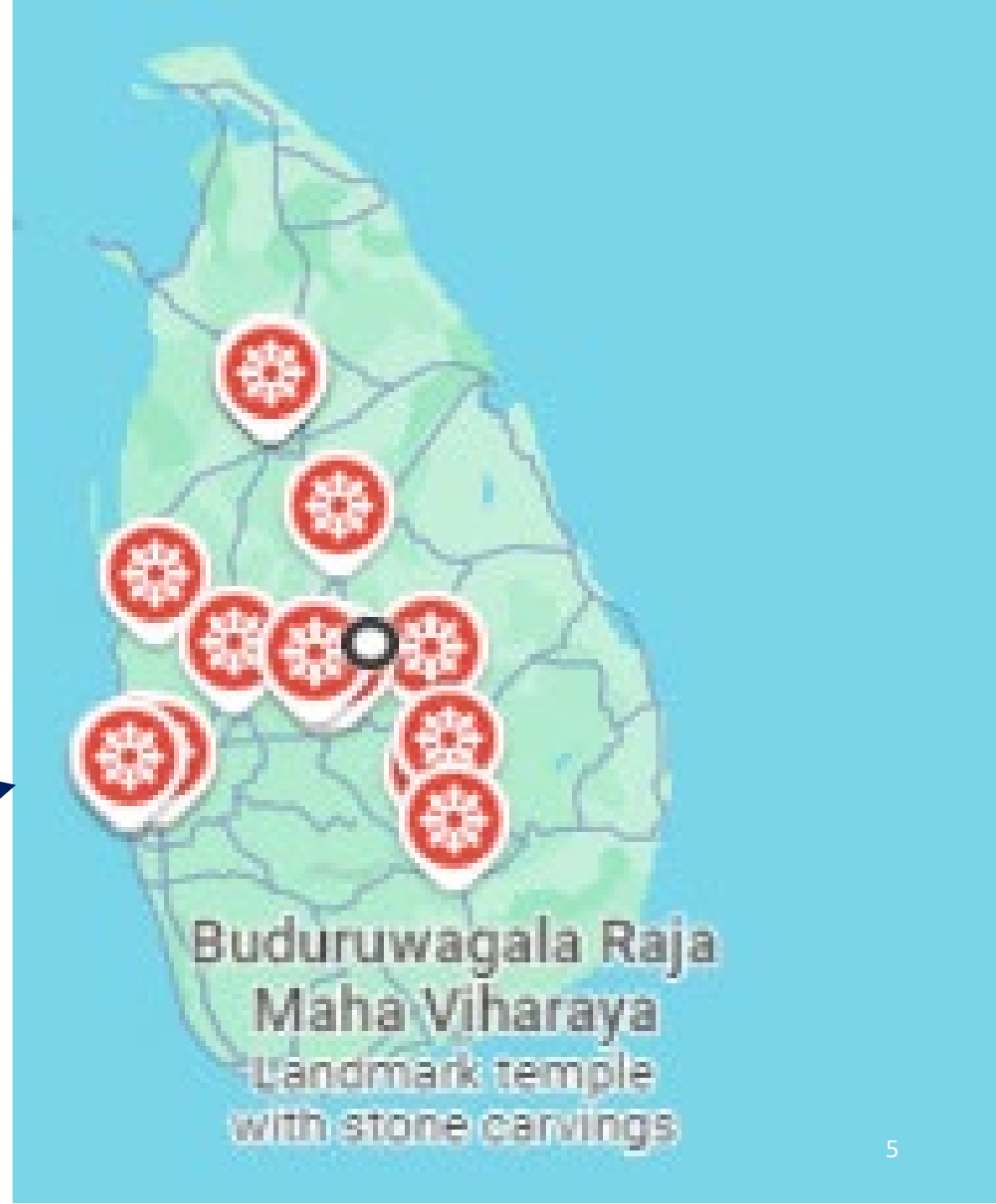
Background



- Buddhist monastery is a 2500-year-old institution with a contemporary socio-political influence.
- It can be viewed as the moral arbiter of the Sri Lankan society, similar to Irish Catholic Church which played similar role during early years of Irish nation-building.

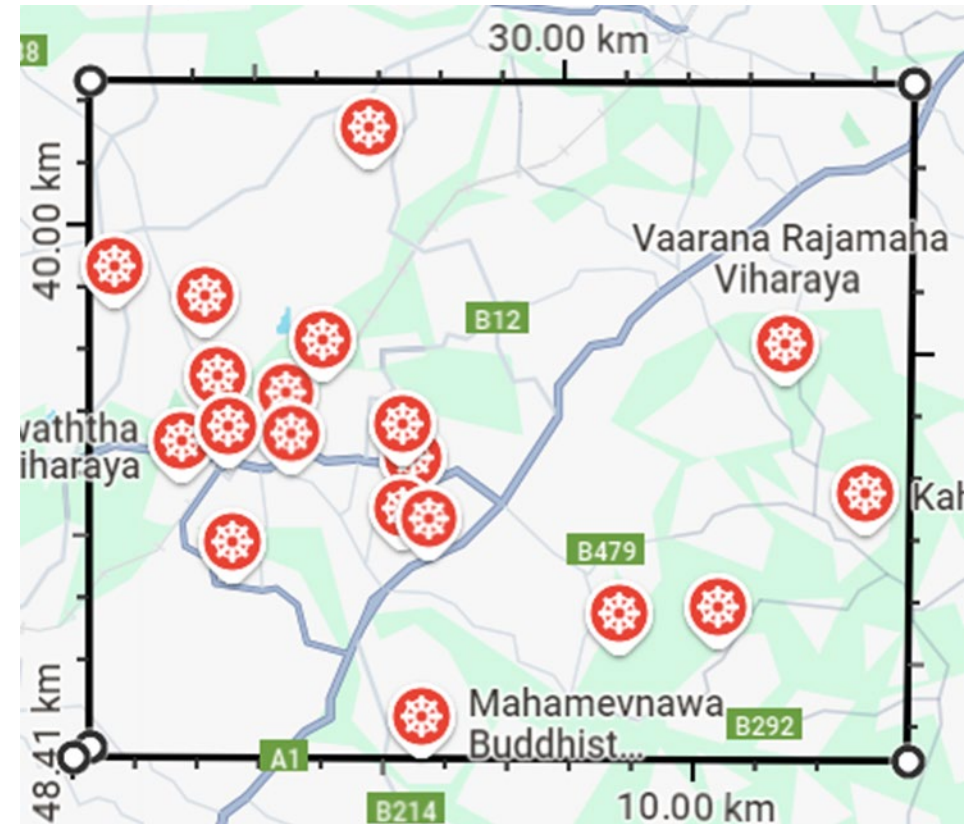
Background

- 12000 monasteries scattered in an island of the size of Tasmania.



Background (cont.)

- One or two monasteries in almost every village, accommodating 3-6 monks in each.





The institution

Sri Lankan Buddhist monastery is similar to the organisational structure of the Church of England.

It is a decentralised organisation in which regional senior monks or abbots of individual monasteries hold significant autonomy over administrative affairs.

Abbots decide when and who they want to ordain as their successors.

State-Religion relationship

- The article 9 of the constitution
- The ongoing fused relationship between the state and the Buddhist establishment



Child ordination

- Children from low-income families in rural areas are targeted for continued supply of monks to run these monasteries.



Problems with child ordination

- Disrobing is as common as ordination
- Stigma around disrobing





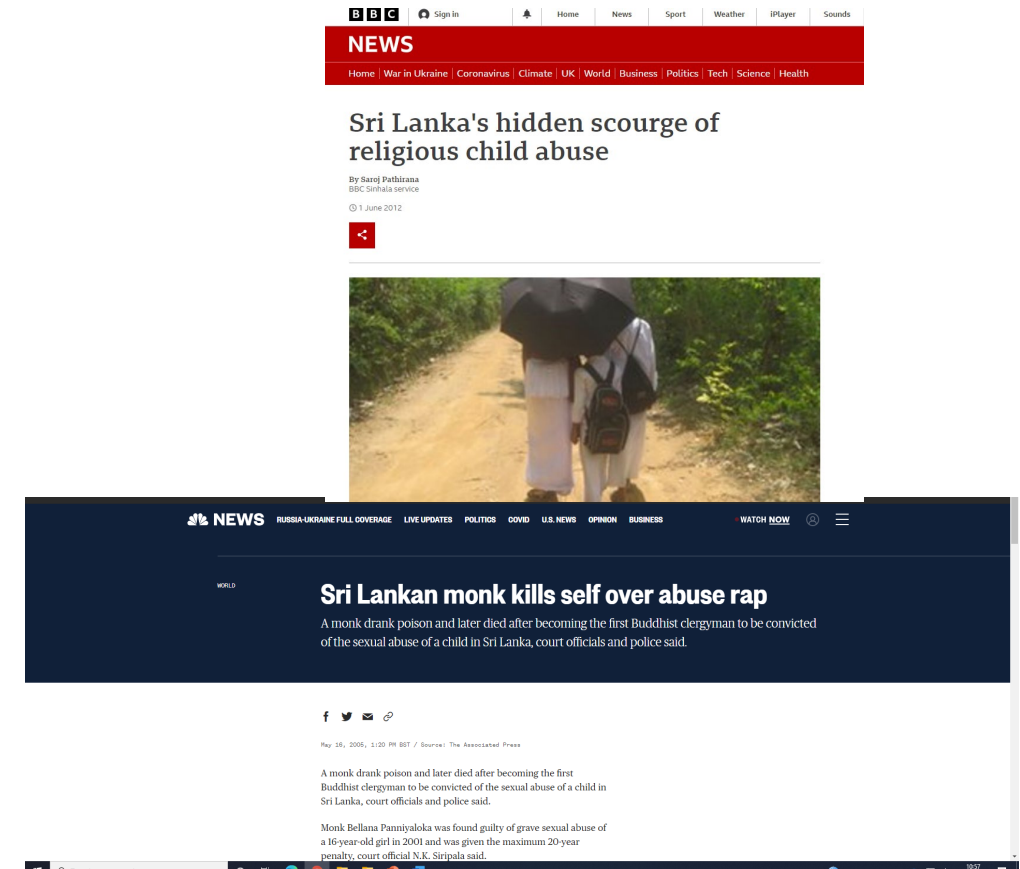
Child's rights discourse

- Sri Lanka is a signatory to the United Nation's Convention on the rights of child (UNCRC)
- Sri Lanka has set up ministerial and administrative entities: The Ministry of Women and Children's affairs, The National Child Protection Authority
- But children in monasteries remain outside of this policy orbit



Lack of oversight and research

- Buddhist monasteries are not overseen by a safeguarding body in the same way daycare centres and children's homes are.



Risks factors

- Poverty continues be a risk factor for institutionalisation of children.
- Faith-based organisations such as the Buddhist monastery tend to absorb the children who should otherwise be looked after by the state.
- Schemes that transfer the responsibility of care from the state to religious establishment under a religious pretext.
- Sacrificing a child to a monastery tends to provide a glorified religious cover for the shame of poverty and inability to feed one's own child.



Safeguarding Laxity

- The decision-making process around sending a child to a monastery informal and arbitrary.
- There is no safeguarding review or oversight.
- It is a transaction between adults, based on trust and mutual interest, with little or no input from the child.



Pipeline of victims

- Victims of abuse in faith-based settings tend:
 - To be more difficult to detect,
 - To struggle to disclose abuse,
 - To be shamed and silenced.
- This is often due to fear of retribution, grooming, normalisation of abuse, and culture of silence



Hidden lives

- Victims of abuse in faith-based settings spend longer time than others in finding support which normally begins with disclosure.
- Their lived experience is not yet fully understood and that may delay raising awareness on the need for immediate action on safeguarding in faith-based settings.
- For example, lack of evidence on the extent and nature of abuse in non-Christian faith-based settings in the UK.

Pipeline of victims: a case closer to home

- In 2012, the 65 year-old abbot of the Themes Buddhist Vihara in South London was jailed for seven years for a sexual assault he perpetrated about three decades ago. The girl's father was a patron of the temple and suppressed the truth to protect his family and temple's reputation. After her father died, the victim pressed charges against the perpetrator.
- The abbot was added to the sex offender registry and permanently barred from working with children.

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- Abbot of the Melbourne Buddhist vihara in Australia is on trial for alleged sexual abuse he committed between 1994-2002. Six victims who are now in their 30s alleged the abbot of these crimes.

Institutions have power

- Institutions have reputational interests that are mutually sustained by other institutions with similar interests, and faith-based organisations are no exceptions.
- As admitted by faith leaders, reputational damage control is their first priority when allegations of abuse are raised against them.
- Use of "discourse of denial, dismissal, deflection and minimisation" appears to be a common tactic (IICSA, 2022)

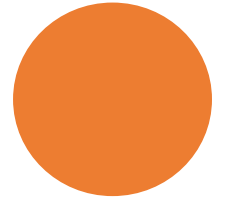


A unique safeguarding challenge

- They generally command respect from general public which is usually divided when safeguarding concerns are raised,
- Victims are often confused about abuse experience due to religious mixed messages,
- Fully institutionalised members (clergy) with a semi-permeable social boundaries.
- Deployment of historical narratives to control the discourse when challenged.
- Use of religious practice/concepts to conceal or silence victims.
- Resistance to change/defending 'tradition'.

Residential faith-based institutions

- Incremental boundary violations by adult men.
- Grooming sexual misconduct and normalising sexual abuse.
- Residential faith-based institutions as "architecture of containment".





QUESTIONS



COMMENTS



FEEDBACK