

Relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Sri Lanka: A Bibliographical Survey

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Abstract: *Sri Lanka is a diverse country, and home to many religions, ethnicities and languages, all community members lived in peace and harmony with good social integration with one another. Each community practised and preserved its own religious and cultural life. There were historical records of ethnic relation and ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka. The relationship between the Sinhalese (Buddhists) and the Muslims developed over a period of thousand years, that is, from the time of Sri Lanka's first known contacts with Islamic world onward. Sinhalese and Muslims have interacted with one another culturally, politically, economically, and sometimes militarily for the above centuries. However, in post-war context of Sri Lanka, a series of tense situations has been observed in the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslim communities. On the above backdrop, therefore, this study reviews the existing literature on the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Sri Lanka from the early Arab-Muslim settlements onward.*

Keywords: *relationship, Sinhalese, Muslims, history*

I. Introduction

As a small state with pluralistic in nation, Sri Lanka has been one of the cherished historically. Not only the natural gifts of sceneries and resources, but also the ethno-cultural pluralism brought fragrance to Sri Lanka. There were historical records of ethnic relation and ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka. It is a diverse country, and home to many religions, ethnicities and languages. The Sinhalese are the main ethnic group of Sri Lanka, constituting 74.9% of the population; among them Sinhala- Buddhists are 70.19%. They speak Sinhala an Indo-Aryan language. The Tamils are the second major ethnic group in Sri Lanka, constituting 15.37% of the population including Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils and among them Hindus are 12.61%. Tamils live predominantly in the north-eastern part of the island. The Muslims in Sri Lanka constitute 9.7% of the country's population (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012), live everywhere in the country; in some regions, there are more Muslims than the Buddhists. They belong to three different ethno-social backgrounds: the Sri Lankan Moors, the Indian Moors and the Malays. The others include the Memons and the Bohras (Imtiyaz, 2012) . The Muslims are a multilingual ethnic and religious group and currently, speak Tamil language, a Dravidian language spoken predominantly by Tamil people of the Indian subcontinent.

The relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims has been tightly linked socially and culturally from the early period of Muslims arrival in Sri Lanka. The Arab Muslim traders and local Muslims contributed immensely during the regime of Sinhalese leaders to protect and to expand their reigns. During the 19th and the 20th century, many Muslim leaders and scholars toiled hard for the independence of Sri Lanka from colonial ruler (Farook, 2014). They safeguarded the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country irrespective of ethnic, religious and lingual differences. After independence too, the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims was so strong that they shared and cared with mutual respect and understanding. The Muslims have been identified as a community of peace loving and maintaining societal and ethnic harmonious relations with the neighbours who they live together. Further, politically too, the Muslims have been maintaining a very good relationship with the Sinhalese rulers (Haris, 2010). This cordial relationship with Sinhalese and their rulers made the Muslims as one of the privileged communities in Sri Lanka. On the above backdrop, therefore, this paper reviews the existing literature on the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Sri Lanka from the early Arab-Muslim settlements onward.

II. Relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims

A number of research works have been conducted in the past in order to understand the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Sri Lanka from the historical period onward. A book was written by well known scholar in Sri Lanka, Lona Dewaraja in 1994, and entitled 'The Muslims of Sri Lanka - One Thousand Years of Ethnic Harmony 900-1915.' This is a field work and an extensive research. The purpose of this research is to identify the cordial relationship between the Sinhalese-majority community and the Muslim-minority which was the theme of this work. As overall result of this research, she explains that the wholesome relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims developed over a period of thousand years, that is, from the time of Sri Lanka's first known contacts with Islamic world, approximately in the eighth and ninth centuries and ninth centuries till the beginnings of the British rule. It could be seen a gradual evolution of mutually beneficial relationship between the migrant Muslim traders and the agricultural Sinhalese from 900 to 1500 A.D. During this period which laid the foundation for racial and religious amity, economically and politically the Muslims were assets to the Sinhala kings, who in turn provided protection and gave the permission for the merchants to settle down in the Sinhala Kingdoms. The supports given by the Muslims to Sinhala Kings of Kotte (1412-1597) and Sitawaka (1521-1594) to check the European assault and recessions suffered by the Muslims at the hands of the Christian powers. The author furthermore describes that the process of structural assimilation of the Muslims into the Kandyan body politic. According to her, this process differs from cultural assimilation where the migrant culture is totally submerged in the host culture and the Muslims remained a distinct and cohesive group in the kandyan Kingdom (1521-1817), devoutly adhering to Islam and to all its cultural attributes, but were as group assimilation into Kandyan people. She says that, in Sri Lanka the Muslims did not undergo a shocking experience such as in Burma, Thailand and China and they were able to maintain a subtle balance between the two contradictory forces thus preserving unbroken record of peaceful co-existence with their neighbours. This process of structural assimilation which took place without any erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of the Muslims is perhaps unique in minority-majority relations. Furthermore, the researcher analyses the causes of 1915 outbreak between the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims. She argues that although the superficial reason was religious provocation, it was not a disagreement between Islam and Buddhism. In this point of view, it was a reflection of the political and economic tension caused by the rapid socio economic changes after 1815 and the consequent de-stabilisation of a traditional society, disrupting its components that for centuries had been harmoniously welded into a well integrated system. She explains together, about the mother tongue (Tamil) of the Muslims and she said that it is a controversial argument. The Muslims' mother tongue is Tamil even did not maintain a better relationship with Tamil community; this is because of Tamil language was widely used in maritime commerce in the Indian Ocean.

Assif Hussain (2013) studied on 'the unbreakable bond why Sinhalese-Muslim relations have stood the test of time'. He explains in this paper, the unbreakable relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims for several thousand years through major inter-twined factors that are intermarriage, conversions, hereditary house names, and Sinhala language. These integrated factors never gave space to break the relationship among these communities. He describes extensively that the Arabs freely intermarried with the daughters of the land, thus giving rise to the present-day Muslim community and such intermarriages seems to have lasted for several centuries and has even continued to the present day. Sinhalese blood might have also entered the Muslims by way of conversions which seem to have even taken place during the days of Portuguese colonization. Further, he adds that the Muslims of old had a habit to purchase children of other communities (especially from Sinhalese) from their parents so that they could be brought up as Muslims. These children were assimilated into the Muslim community, so that it was possible that they too contributed a significant infusion of Sinhalese blood to the Sri Lankan Muslim community. And this would also suggest that there are Muslims whose Sinhalese ancestry has been acquired not only through the maternal line as seen earlier, but also in the paternal line. According to his finding, many Muslims of the Kandyan districts had had definite hereditary patronymics of the Vasagama type found among the Sinhalese as interacting factor. Furthermore, he identifies that most of the Muslims are bi- or trilingual and speak languages depending on their geographical locations. This language skill coupled with their wide disbursement throughout the island has given them a unique interaction with the majority Sinhalese.

Ruvaiz Haniffa (2010) studied on 'the Sri Lankan Muslim minority: a bridge to harmony. This paper is to find the issues faced by the Muslims in the history of a multi cultural environment in Sri Lanka when they having relationship with the majority community. So it attempts to analyse the present status and future challenges and opportunities. He points out that Sri Lankan Muslims have two types of future challenges, one within the community, another, challenges of living in culturally, ethnically and linguistically in a diverse environment. Also he attempts to find out that how the Muslims have been rendered as bridge to harmony amongst the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Tamils along the path of history. He suggests some recommendations to overcome these challenges, especially, how the Muslims should make the plan to behave in diverse society. He advises that the Muslims must be conscious and contribute in a positive manner to the overall evolution of Sri

Lanka as a nation and the Muslims have to be seemed as mediators in order to create a cohesive Sri Lanka where all could live with their dignity and exhaustive rights knowing that through they are diverse, they are united as Sri Lankans.

A book was written by Victor Ivan (1997) 'Muslim Thesamum Ethirkalamum' in Tamil (Muslim Nation and its Future), first of all he extensively explains in this book the history of Muslims in Sri Lanka and their political relations with the majority Sinhalese and the Tamils. As a reputed journalist, Ivan clearly describes the evils prevailed in the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims. Also he discusses the cleavages in Muslim-Tamil relationship from the post-independent era. Despite the Tamils and the Muslims speaking the same language -Tamil and sharing number of cultural practices, the Muslims have never been maintaining a cordial relationship with the Tamil society since British colonial rule. He further describes that the ethnic conflict and counter violence of the Liberation Tigers Tamil Elam's (LTTE), especially, ethnic cleansing of Muslims in the North and the unjustified killing of the Muslims in the Eastern province have caused further division between both communities. Further, he records the persecuting events of the LTTE on Muslims, in the cause of ethnic conflict in the north-eastern part of Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the Muslims have been discriminated and targeted 1900s onward by the majority Sinhalese, including 1915 violent incidents. He records the hundreds of discriminative events against the Muslims by the majority Sinhalese. In spite of this situation prevailed, deliberately the Muslims have been enjoining their hands with the majority Sinhalese yet and he points out that this is an unhealthy way the Muslims have selected to accomplish their future targets. Actually, he is a critic of Muslim relation with the Sinhalese while emphasising the importance of maintaining relations with the Tamil community, in spite of both Tamils and Muslims mutual misunderstanding and grievances. The author Ivan therefore urges that the Muslim and Tamil communities should join hands in order to achieve the minority rights, especially, the rights of self determination that would be formed separate territory of their own. Finally, he proposes two separate administrative authorities in order to accommodate the problems of minority communities, one in the Northern Province for the Tamils and the other in the Eastern Province for the Muslims.

A book written by Kumari Jayawardena on ethnic and class conflicts in Sri Lanka, published in 1986, a slightly revised collection of fifteen articles that appeared in the 'Lanka Guardian' between March 1984 and February 1985. The overall aim of these articles is to understand the nature of conflicts between ethnic groups in Sri Lanka and of the ideologies that sustain and nurture such conflicts in the context of the last 100 years of colonial and post-colonial rule and to explain the evolution of Sinhala - Buddhists consciousness that had originally arisen as a base for the struggle for national independence. In last 100 years which have included many long periods of ethnic harmony during which various classes composed of many ethnicities acted together in the pursuit of their class interest, disregarding or ignoring their ethnic affiliations. She describes that this consciousness was at one stage directed against the colonial power but unfortunately it also contained elements of Sinhala chauvinism that adversely affected other ethnic groups. The growth of class consciousness to the point where it overcame ethnicity, and the subsequent growth of ethnic consciousness to the point where class distinctions have almost become irrelevant and when Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people of all classes are seemed to be in mutually antagonistic ethnic blocs. This study eventually has been done with the hope of guiding to understand the historic background and realities of ethnic conflict in the context of economic and ideological change in Sri Lanka during last 100 years.

A book was written by Mohammad Sameem in 1998 entitled 'Oru sirupanmai Samukathithin Pirachchinakal-IV' (Problems of a Minority Community-IV) widely describes the issues of Muslims in Sri Lanka in post-independence history. He points out that the Muslims were discriminated and marginalized since independence by antagonistic behaviour of the majority Sinhala-Buddhist community in some fields such as university education, government employments and so on. There were a few attempts that have been taken to spread the misinterpretation about the Muslims and their political leaders among the Sinhala-Buddhists through issuing hand bills in 1990s. He is of view that, it was doubtful that the Muslims would have to face again a communal riots as present as held in 1915 in Sri Lanka. Further, he explains that the issues of Muslims in Sri Lanka are inter-twined with other minorities, especially with Tamils. The major root course of this discrimination against the minorities has been economic disparities. The all governments which have been governing in post-independent are implementing the policies affecting the minorities.

Two years ago, Ismath Ramzy, (2012) has expounded the level of co-existence among the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Sri Lanka. Specially, this study examines the contributions of Buddhist Thera Ven. Walpolarahula towards the co-existence in Sri Lanka among the ethnic groups, particularly the Sinhalese and the Muslims in the perspective of Muslim. He describes that Ven. Rahula Thera has motivated the Bhikkus against the mainstream politics that eventually led to anti-minority consciousness among the Sinhalese and he contributed to the pluralistic co-existence and communal harmony through the discourses and effective writings; also he condemned the attitude of Sinhalese aristocracies who supported the British. The researcher points out

that Ven. Rahula actively took part in interfaith dialogue and free education campaign in the interest of promoting pluralistic co-existence and showed his genuine mission for peace and harmony.

Another study was conducted by Riza Yehiya in 2013 on 'asymmetric relationship of Sinhalese-Muslim bond in Sri Lanka'. He gives details of the prevalence of relationship link between the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Sri Lanka from ancient time onward, through the historical events. He explains that the relationship between these societies ever tied, but some external pressure such as imperialism, colonialism, extremism, and inner politics somewhat succeeded in dividing these two communities relationship in whole history of Sri Lanka. He discusses that following the decolonization, the post-colonial political leadership inspired with western thought and mindset, trained and nurtured in the western colonial philosophy and morals ruled the country no better than the western colonial masters. He says that deplorably in the history of Sri Lanka, the religious difference was exploited by the British colonialists and their affiliates to put a block in the tested Sinhalese-Muslim relationship as a scheme of divide and rule. Furthermore, he describes that a few politicians use religion as a tool to conceal their bankruptcy and draw their energy from the religious and cultural dynamism of the people to re-launch and re-brand them. He expresses the Muslims' view point of post-war outburst against Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka that this effort constituted by a segment of the Sinhala society is not indigenous but an alien or foreign stirring by a third force that wants to attack the asymmetrical power balance that buttress the Buddhism and Sri Lanka.

In 2010, Mohamed Haris has done his doctoral thesis on Buddhists' perception of Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka. It is discussed in this study that the perceptions of Buddhists (Sinhalese) on Muslims of Sri Lanka and Islam. He talks about here that the Sinhalese and the Muslims lived for more than thousand years in peaceful co-existence and ethnic harmony. Analysis and results of this field study shows that until recent years all the communities were living in a peaceful and harmonious environment. This peaceful co-existent was targeted by some external and internal powers. The divide and rule policy of British colonial government has affected the relations between the Sinhalese and the other communities, especially Muslims who have lived in harmony with Sinhalese for more than 10 centuries. Aftermath of independence, the Sri Lankan people were divided into two main groups - majority and minority- by the colonial British government and constitutionally major changes were made such as language policy, university admission policy, and land colonization. The emergence of ethnically -and religiously- based political parties also played a major role in shaping the perception of each community towards others. A small section of each community became communal minded and looked at others with suspicion. The Muslim community is no exception with regard to this phenomenon. Anyhow the results of this study discusses that the majority of the Sinhalese still have a favourable opinion on Islam and Muslims of Sri Lanka and they are interested to interact with the Muslims. It is noteworthy that 73% of them had interests to learn Islam. But a small group of Sinhalese, especially intellectuals, have negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Slaughtering of animals, the way Islam spread, business dealings of Muslim, the ways Muslims demand their rights, the rights of the women in Islam, and the isolated nature of the Muslim community are some of key issues on which Buddhists have negative opinions. The reason for the negative perceptions are many, such as the ill-treatment and un-Islamic behaviour of some Muslim business men who came from South India, opportunistic politics of Muslims, the un-Islamic lifestyle of some of the Muslims, misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Islam, a religiously-based political party and its approaches and demand, Muslims' attitude and mentality towards non-Muslims as these are some key facts seen from the Muslim side. Lack of interaction, communication gaps, extreme thought of some Sinhalese intellectuals like Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), politicised Buddhism, and Sinhala- Buddhist nationalist ideologies are some obstacles to mutual understanding and mutual respects. The important finding here is that the religion has not been the main factor behind the conflict between Muslims and Sinhala-Buddhists.

III. Conclusion

In recent past years, numerous studies have been conducted on the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims of Sri Lanka from maritime period to the present time. The history of Sri Lanka, in historical and modern periods, provides us abundant proofs of peaceful cohabitation between the Sinhala and the Muslim communities regardless of all their religious and cultural differences. Political and trade relationships were so strong. Both communities showed their collaboration and cohabitation in a commendable manner. But In 1915 there was a dispute in the relationship between these two communities. Except this incident, there were no more records in the history, of any rupture between these two communities until the end of war (1983-2009) which was between the Sri Lankan government forces and the Liberation Tigers Tamil Elam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka.

A few authors express their opinion based on their studies that the Sinhalese-Muslim riots in 1915, was the result of the policy of divide and rule and communal politics which the British initiated from 1976 onward (Dewaraja, 1994). Through this statement it could be assumed that there were some outside influences interfered on the relationship between these two communities. Kumari Jayawardana (1986) traces a different argument that the evolution of Sinhala-Buddhists consciousness that had originally arisen as a base for the struggle for national

independence, this consciousness was at one stage directed against the colonial power but unfortunately it also contained elements of Sinhala chauvinism that adversely affected other ethnic groups. Therefore, in her point of view, this is an accidentally held event in the history. Another opinion that these riots was not directed against all the Muslims but more specifically a section of the Muslim community who lived in coastal area of Sri Lanka, migrated from Malabar, India. They engaged in trade competition with the low country Sinhalese (Haris, 2010). Therefore it cannot be assumed that the 1915 riots was a breakdown of the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslim community as a whole. Evidently, around 1930 there was communal harmony between the Sinhalese and the Muslims at least at people's level in Sri Lanka (Farook, 2014). Also, the majority of the Sinhalese are having favourable opinion on Islam and Muslims and they are interested to interact with the Muslims even in recent past years (Haris, 2010).

At the same time, the following argument too articulates the strengthening of the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims. Although the Tamils and the Muslims speaking the same language -Tamil and sharing number of cultural practices, the Muslims have never been maintaining a better relationship with Tamil society since British colonial rule. This was because of G.G. Ponnampalam's assertion that the Muslims were Tamils by race on basis of their spoken language as well as on account of certain customs to marriage. But the representation of the Muslims disproved this Ponnampalam's statement in 1907 (Hussein, 2009). Once again he demanded the equal representation of the political power, known as fifty-fifty at the doorstep of independence. At that time the Muslims stood fully behind the Sinhalese majority community. In 1990s the Liberation Tigers Tamil Elam (LTTE) unleashed counter violence against the Muslims; especially, ethnic cleansing of Muslims in the North and the unjustified killing of the Muslims in the Eastern province. This situation has caused further division between both the Tamils and Muslims communities. Therefore, the Muslim community turned as whole into Sinhalese side until maintaining a cordial relationship with them from the early period onward, even though the somewhat evils prevailed in the relationship with the Sinhalese (Victor, 1997). Supporting the 'Sinhala only' Bill of S.W.R.D. Bandaranayka and avoiding the G.G. Ponnampalam's fifty-fifty demand, as an action of against the Tamils, were better examples which were taken by the Muslim political leaders in those days. Although how many attempts made by the Sinhalese to liberate themselves from the Muslims in terms of the relationship, the Muslims have been chasing behind them to keep up a better relationship with them since early settlements onward.

In the mean time, aftermath of war in Sri Lanka in 2011 onward, a series of tense situations has been observed on the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslim communities. This has started suddenly when some Buddhist nationalist groups posed questions on ethnic and religious features of Muslim community. Apart from the discord observed in the political and economical scenarios, the impact is significantly felt in the social relations between the two ethno-religious groups. The rights of the Muslims pertaining to religious obligations have been immensely questioned through provocations by some Buddhist nationalist groups. These groups are advocating the establishment of a pure Buddhist raj in Sri Lanka. At their recent rallies, the most prominent Buddhist new hard-liner groups have used coarse, derogatory language to undermine and question the Muslims and their religion-Islam and spread misperception about the Muslims among majority Buddhist community in Sri Lanka (Farook, 2014). There has been number of incidents recorded attacking the Muslim's religious worship places which imposed challenges in practicing religio-cultural identity, customs and fundamentals. In this regard, in the recent past, the Muslims have been facing number of challenges in terms of anti-Halal agitations, anti-Hijab agitations, destroying worship places and refusing to call for prayers loudly, anti-slaughtering movements, anti-Shariah agitations and so on (Imtiyaz et al, 2015). Further, these groups are propagating and advising the Buddhists to reduce or avoid the economic and social interactions with the Muslim Community.

These incidents created a suspicious and tense situation and the feeling of marginalization among the Muslims, especially those are living in the Sinhalese majority areas in the country. Further, these incidents contributed to the clashes of opinions and misunderstanding, thus widening the gap of healthy relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Sri Lanka. Although, Muslims are seen as having remained largely loyal to the state during the 30-years of ethnic conflict and civil war and even thereafter, however, they are now expressing the fear of religious marginalization which increased uncertainty of their co-existence and long-term cordial relationship with other major ethno-religious groups, especially with the Sinhalese (Yehiya, 2013). All these incidents pose a question that to which extend the new re-emergence of the religious- based hegemonic nationalism and extreme anti-Muslims sentiments have impacted on the relationship between the Sinhalese and the Muslims who have been maintaining historic and cordial relations in Sri Lanka, which emphasizes an extensive academic investigation in the process of post-war ethnic and religious reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

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