

## Second minority in Sri Lanka: Genesis and current crisis



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### ABSTRACT

The genesis of Muslims in Sri Lanka has hotly been contested in recent times with certain hardline elements question their existence, patriotism, and contribution toward the development of the country. Although much has been written about a tiny minority Muslims in Sri Lanka, their genesis with concrete evidence is still a contentious issue of academic discourses. As such, this article examines the genesis of Sri Lankan Muslims from a historical perspective with available evidence. As this is a descriptive essay, data for the essay were collected from existing literature relevant to the theme, journal articles, research reports, newspaper reports, website articles, and so on. The essay shows various dimensions of Sri Lankan Muslims such as their refugee situation, religious education, secular education, special laws and courts for Muslims, matrilineal social organization, food and eating habits of Muslims, Muslim self-identity struggle, English education, Islamic Tamil and various school of thoughts concerning Muslims in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, the essay also highlights that Sri Lankan Muslims have recently come under tremendous pressure as they are faced with a number of challenges confronting them from various segments of politically motivated elements. Thus, it is highly recommended that the state and law enforcement agencies should treat all citizens of the country equally, regardless of ethnic and religious differences, and ensure that the country espouses pluralism and meritocracy as its ideals.

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### 1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is a home of plural communities such as Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims and others as major ethnic groups. Most of the Sinhalese are Buddhists in terms of religion with 70.1% of population, while the Tamils are followers of Hinduism constituting 12.58% of the population. The Muslims, the second largest ethnic minority, are followers of Islam with 9.66% of population. The Christianity, the fourth major religion of the country, is being followed by 7.62% of the population (DCS, 2012). Muslims live dispersed in small communities throughout the country with significant concentration in the Eastern, North Central and Western Province and they have been constituted as the most peaceful community in the island so far. Neither have they organized themselves for armed insurrection or destruction nor have they posed any

religious or ethnic threat to the diverse fabric of Sri Lanka. Instead, they coexisted and integrated well with other communities. The identity of ethnic groups in the country is defined based on their language, territory, history, religion and culture. Muslim identity in the country has been largely contested purely because of their shared culture and language with the Tamils/Hindus. Nevertheless, scholars argue that the Muslim identity is constituted based on religion- Islam (Nuhman, 2007).

Sri Lanka has only recently come out of the civil war that ravaged the country for over three decades, resulting in the death of over 100,000 people, mostly from the minorities, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands more internally and externally (Imtiyaz and Iqbal, 2011). Hence, Sri Lanka has been in the popular discourse and debate among scholars. Chauvinistic political ideologies and discriminatory policies formulated in favor of the majority community, by various governments, have been attributed to the lack of understanding between the majority and minority ethnic groups, and the ensuing protracted war in the country. As such, Uyangoda (2007) noted "group discrimination, limited access to public resources, and cultural or ethnic marginalization were indeed the key

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components of minority experience that eventually produced the ethnic conflict and the demand for autonomy”.

The war has left a shadow of misunderstanding and hatred among major ethnic groups living in the country. However, the end of civil war in May 2009 presented a golden opportunity to curb misunderstanding, discrimination, hatred and so on among ethnic groups and restore peace and reconciliation in the country. Unfortunately, what it transpired afterwards was otherwise with hard-line nationalistic elements targeting the minorities, especially the Muslims in the post war scenario. This saw an upsurge of attacks against Muslims in various places beginning from Aluthgama to Digana in the Central Province causing enormous damages (Lastnamel, 2018). The perpetrators targeted the genesis of Muslims and their contribution to the country, their dietary practices, Muslim attires, places of worship, and cattle slaughter, etc.

More importantly, the hard-line elements hurl venom upon the genesis of Muslims arguing that they came here as merchants and that they have nothing to do with freedom struggle or socio-economic prosperity of the country. This argument is largely naïve and flawed. Although Muslims came here as traders, they contributed immensely to the socio-economic and political aspects of the country. While much has been written about the origin of Sri Lankan Muslims and their socio-economic and political contribution in the country, little scholarly articles have shed light on the genesis of Muslims in the country with concrete evidence dealing with different dimensions. As such, scholarly article of this nature dealing with genesis of Muslims in light of different dimensions is long overdue. Against this backdrop, the objective of this article is to examine the genesis of Sri Lankan Muslims from a historical perspective with available evidence in light of different dimensions. This would be of great significance to counter the malicious propaganda spurred by hard-line elements against Muslims in the country.

## 2. Materials and methods

This study is mainly descriptive and interpretive in nature and relies solely on secondary materials such as academic journals, newspapers, research reports, and online archives. These sources have recorded the discourses on the genesis of Sri Lankan Muslims and various other dimensions. Moreover, the origin of Muslims in the country recorded in the historical narratives and literature is critically examined in this paper in the form of direct quotations, quotation of others, summaries and author’s interpretation, all of which help support the arguments developed in. By and large, descriptive method has been adopted throughout the article and no analytical tools were used to analyse the findings. Therefore, the reliability and validity of data obtained from secondary sources is mainly theoretical.

## 3. Genesis of Sri Lankan Muslims

Sri Lanka, as the country has been named since 1972, is historically known to Muslims in other parts of the world through Islamic scholarly literature. The name “Lanka” is possibly related to *larang* (Sachau, 2002), the name for cloves which were imported to India from a country called Langa. Other pre-modern Islamic authors described the island by other names including Jazirath al Yakut and Silan. (Burton, 1962; Kiribamune, 1986; Shukri, 1986).

During the early years of the contact between Sri Lanka and Islam, the island was a link in the shipping routes connecting several Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea islands, the Coromandel and Malabar coasts of southern India, and ports further east. Islam seems to have become known in the island as a consequence of the visits of traders, pilgrims, and perhaps adventure travelers. They arrived there from lands which had come under the influence of Islam during its hey-day, before the beginning of the domination of the Indian Ocean by various European colonial powers (Shukri, 1986).

Adam’s Peak “sacred to all of the island’s main faiths” from ancient times, was one of the attractions of the island to Muslims from many parts of the world in the past (McNeill and Marilyn, 1973; Hussein, 2011). Many Muslims of Sri Lanka believe even now that their island was the place where Adam, the primordial father of the human species, landed when he descended to this world from paradise. This belief about the island was apparently rather common among Muslims globally in ancient times. It is mentioned in a footnote referring to verse 36 of Surah al-Baqarah in Sale’s (2010) 18th century “translation” of the Qur’aan (Sale, 2010). The note is based on Western travel literature which was possibly derived from Muslim beliefs that Westerners encountered in their travels before the 1700s. Ahmad Arabi Pasha (1841-1911), the Egyptian “Islamic Resistor” (Samaraweera, 1986) of European colonialism, who was exiled in Sri Lanka for about 20 years, and played a significant role in the development of a new Islamic consciousness among Sri Lankan Muslims, is reported to have said that he chose Sri Lanka to be exiled in because of the belief about Adams Peak that he was familiar with.

Exact dates for the earliest Muslim settlements in the island are not known. They may have begun as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. the first Hijri century. Lithic inscriptions in Arabic, indicating the presence of Muslims in the island from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, are mentioned in some publications, Kiribamune (1986). The Muslim population in the island at that time could not have been large.

In the census of 2012, nearly 2 million people, amounting to more than 9 per cent of the total population of island of Sri Lanka have been counted as Muslims. 70% of the population are counted as Buddhist, almost 13% Hindu, and more than 7% Christian (DCS, 2012). The increase in the population of the country and of Muslims, during the past century, is indicated in Table 1. About a third of the

Muslim population lives in Amparai, Trincomalee, and Batticaloa districts in the east. Concentrations of Muslims of smaller sizes are also reported for urbanized centers in the southwest (Colombo, Kalutara) and in the central highlands (Kandy, Matale).

Puttalam in the western coast has seen an increase in the Muslim population in 2012 as it has been the domicile of tens of thousands of Muslim refugees since the 1990s. These people used to live in the north, north-central and northwestern areas of the island, and were forcefully evicted from their homes during a civil war that raged in the country for nearly thirty years until May of 2009. The decrease of the Muslim population in the Mannar district, to the north of Puttalam, from the figures reported for 1981, is also possibly a consequence of this war.

Even though the official census groups the whole Muslim population into only two categories "Moor" and "Malay" Sri Lankan Muslims claim multiple ethnicities with historical origins in Sri Lanka (Singhala as well as Tamil speaking), East Africa, India (northern and southern), the Middle East (Arab and Persian), and Indonesia (Hussein, 2011; McGilvray, 1998; MICH, 1970). A history of mixed marriages of Muslims of diverse nationalities who arrived in the island at various times, with local people as well as among each other is assumed. Some conversions into the Islamic faith, unrelated to marriage relationships may have also taken place. The history of the Muslims in Sri Lanka has to be viewed against the background of the increase in the human population in the island.

The year 1948 marked the end of more than 400 years of colonial rule in the country. Since then various conflicts including a long lasting one between the Sinhalese and Tamil peoples have tested the new nation-state. The Sinhalese-Tamil conflict escalated into a terrible war which ended only a few years ago. Of this post-war situation it is now said that "the war has ended but the conflict goes on".

### 3.1. Refugee situation

During the hostilities some populations of Muslims were targets of massacres and ethnocide (ICG, 2007; McGilvray and Raheem, 2007). An organized effort to bring attention to the situation of more than 70,000 internally displaced Muslims still languishing in temporary residences as a consequence of the war, began only in 2011, more than twenty years after their refugee situation was created. Readings of other histories of Muslims and Islam in the country present less onerous prospects including for the refugee population.

### 3.2. Religious education

Educational institutions specializing in the teaching of Qur`anic Arabic and Islam as distinct from schools and other systems which provide a

more general education in other fields, have existed in the country for a long time. Such Qur`aan and Arabic schools are known as "madrasas" in local Muslim speech. Histories of the revival of madrasa institutions for adults who would become teachers of elementary level madrasas have become available recently (Nuhman, 2007). Although Nuhman (2007) did not discuss it, the philanthropy of the well-to-do in the community has been a major factor in the establishment and maintenance of private schools in this separate educational track.

These Islamic schools provide education in Islamic norms for everyday behaviors, including formal worshipping practices. Some who wish to pursue such a course of studies go to advanced institutions in other countries. The 20th century modernization of facilities for world-wide travel has made it possible for such would-be Islam teachers to go to Egypt, Iran, Malaysia, Yemen, and other countries for further Islamic education. The returnees from international Islamic educational institutions sometimes start their own madrasa locally with new curricula, and ideas. Additionally, branches of international Islamic universities are now functioning in Colombo.

### 3.3. Secular education

In another track of educational progress, movements for establishing Muslim led modern educational institutions, similar to schools attended by all others in the country came about during the late 19th century (Nuhman, 2007; Samaraweera, 1986). This struggle has continued over the years and no one would now deny that the efforts of the 19th century modernizers have yielded good fruit. Beginning in the mid-20th century, after the country became independent, the Muslim political leadership has been successful in seeking and acquiring separate slots and spaces set apart for Muslims in government run educational and broadcasting services and institutions (Nuhman, 2007). Now Government funded elementary and secondary level educational facilities are widely available in all Muslim residential areas. Instruction is provided in Sinhalese and Tamil. Muslim teachers have replaced others who used to be the teachers of Muslims in the past. There are separate Muslim teacher training facilities and Colleges of Education. One of several, new post-secondary level educational institutions cater exclusively to Muslims.

### 3.4. Special laws and courts

Sri Lanka has had separate Muslim laws governing the administration of mosque properties and Muslim charities since the late 1930s; and laws for the official registration of marriages, and Quazi courts for the adjudication of marital and child custody disputes from 1806 (Nuhman, 2007; McGilvray, 2008). Since 1988 new laws to regulate banks following Islamic banking systems have come into effect.

**Table 1:** Sri Lanka Muslim population figures for the most recent and some previous census years (DCS, 2012; McGilvray and Raheem, 2007)

Census Year	Total Population	Muslim Population
2012	20,263,723	1,967,227
1981	14,846,700	1,121,715
1953	8,097,900	541,500
1921	4,497,900	302,500
1891	3,007,800	212,200

### 3.5. Matrilineal social organization

Matrilineal kinship and marriage ideologies and practices have been a feature of the social organization of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. This has been studied in detail by McGilvray (2008). This system defined by ideologies of descent in the female line and post-marital residence in the home, or home compound, of the wife is seemingly very different from kinship and marriage practices which are associated with the Middle East, and other Muslim regions of south Asia. Muslims matrilineal patterns are also known from Kerala, the Minangkabau peoples of Indonesia and Malaysia, and Tamil Nadu. Issues of Islamic laws are not a main focus of McGilvray (2008) studies of the system in a part of Eastern Sri Lanka. How the local Muslims interpret the Islamic legalities in their reported continuation of historical local practices and their Islamic theorization of it are questions for further research and discussion by Islamologists. Islamic laws have been found to be applicable in a wide variety of family structures including the widespread modern form of the nuclear family.

### 3.6. Food and eating practices

Most everyday meals among the Muslims are similar to foods consumed by other Sri Lankans in regard to ingredients and methods of preparation. Rice is prepared in a variety of ways and typically served with a number of "curries" i.e., vegetables or meats seasoned with curry powder. Sri Lankan curry powder is quite spicy and may include black pepper, cardamom, chili, cloves, cumin, coriander, fennel, ginger, and turmeric. Cured and powdered tuna, locally known as dried fish, pickled lime, mango and other fruits maybe included for additional taste. Coconut oil and ghee are used, the former more widely. Resourceful culinary artists may sometimes create new dishes through "research and experiment" (Noordeen, 1958). Muslims have a reputation among non-Muslims for serving tasty food.

Eating with the fingers is the norm. *Group meal* - where two or more guests eat from one large round plate, while seated on the floor - used to be a common style of serving food in ceremonial banquets (Hussein, 2011). Muslim food is typically non-vegetarian. The association of Muslims with beef eating has been a difference and sometimes a cause for conflict with some Hindu and Buddhist interests. Recent news reports indicate that it has

become a symbol of a widespread anti-Muslim campaign.

### 3.7. Muslim self-identity struggles

Research and discussions of the development of the group self-identity of the Muslims in the country as a community, among other communities following other faiths such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism in "the context of Sri Lanka's plural society" (Samaraweera, 1986) began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, about a hundred years after the British took control of the course of the history of Sri Lanka and her peoples, a few Muslims started acquiring a modern education in English. This would open avenues for them to enter government service, the 'independent professions', as well as the literary and scientific cities of knowledge available in English. Some of the English educated played leadership roles in progressive changes in the life and history of the community during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were able to negotiate directly with the government on behalf of the Muslims (Nuhman, 2007).

McGilvray (1998), McGilvray and Raheem (2007), and Nuhman (2007) have dealt with various circumstances of later times within which Muslims continued to seek, construct, and assert a distinct Muslim self-identity in the country. After the 1950s these struggles involved the participation of larger numbers of peoples. The necessity to deal directly with British colonial higher-ups was not present any more. Instead the Muslims had to deal with the new rulers of the country who were mostly Sinhalese in background.

Another significant change from the 1890s was the gradual change in the self-consciousness of the Muslims of the eastern areas who live in a contiguous territorial belt. In education and other sectors they were perceived as being underprivileged. This situation is said to have changed by the 1980s. Previously they were mostly represented in Parliament by individuals with regional roots in the south and west. Now more and more easterners entered Parliament and held important positions in the government of the country.

A struggle to have a political party led by representatives from the east was launched and was initially successful. However all Muslims in the country particularly in the south and central areas did not agree with the need to have a separate Muslim political party. After the demise of the founder, the new Muslim Congress has had difficulties in keeping all of its different constituencies and their spokespersons together under one umbrella (McGilvray and Raheem, 2007).

### 3.8. English education

English education has continued to be pursued by those who had the means and the grit. The establishment and growth of private "international" schools in which English is taught intensively is a

highly visible phenomenon of the Sri Lankan urban scene in recent times. Since the 1980s increasing numbers of English knowing Sri Lankan Muslims of various levels of competence have migrated to English speaking countries where their children are growing up in English speaking environments. They are a very small fraction of the inheritors of the Sri Lankan Muslim tradition and history. Nevertheless it is notable that in these new environments, Sri Lankan Muslim English has become a means by which its carriers have developed new Islamic bonds with other Muslims who have immigrated to these countries from various other countries and cultures, as well as with local English speaking converts. This new Islamic use of English was not and could not have been foreseen by the Muslims of Sri Lanka, India, and other countries who resisted education in English during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fearing that such an education would lead Muslims away from Islam.

Within Sri Lanka also adaptation to, negotiating with, and selecting from modernistic trends in aesthetics and ideology, and from modern technological advances and materialist progress continues. These changes are very much a part of the present day society and economy in Sri Lanka and have entered the consciousness and life styles of Muslims through educational advances acquired in English, Singhala, and Tamil.

### 3.9. Islamic Tamil

Nuhman (2012) provides an overview of the development of Islamic Tamil poetic literature and changes in its characteristic themes after the 1950s. The development of this literature and its uses in critical and aesthetic studies is an aid in the development of the study of Islam in Tamil. The study of Islamic Tamil literature as a new field in Tamil studies was pioneered by Uwise (1996) and other Sri Lankan Muslims during the late 1940s. Universities in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu - the latter home to a larger number of Tamil speaking Muslims - have encouraged the study of this additional type of Tamil.

### 3.10. Schools of thought

Authors of books in the traditional schools of thought wrote their texts following the teachings of "the pioneer scholastics, al-Ash`ari and al-Maturdi, the Shafii jurist an-Nawawi, and Sufi theorists like al-Ghazzaali and Ibn "Arabi" (Mackeen, 1963). According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr's global survey of this type of traditional Islamic instruction (Nasr, 1987), the teaching of the Islamic laws sciences in it was combined with the teaching of topics in Islamic philosophy. Philosophies of being, of the human body and its purification and training in worship, cosmology, ontology, and psychology were combined with Islamic law topics into a system. In Sri Lanka as elsewhere, newer modernist schools of Islamic thought, which have become more influential during the latter part of the 20th century, have sought to

replace the older ways of a more holistic system of instruction.

Whether traditionalist or modernist, the larger quantity of instructional materials adopted in Sri Lanka have been from Sunni sources. However, the successes of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and its propaganda activities have had the effect of the introduction of Shi'i instructional resources, including schools as another alternative in Sri Lanka. This new development is in addition to traditional Shi'i communities who have been in the country, at least since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among the earlier Shi'i communities are two communities of Ismaa'iliis, one described as Dawoodi Borah and a smaller community of Nizari Khoja. The Shi'ia are small in number, and have their separate community and educational activities (Moosajee, 1986).

## 4. Conclusion

It is clear now that Muslims arrived in the Island as traders, pilgrims and other adventurers during 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Century. From the time of their arrival in the country, they established themselves as a minority adopting their unique religious practices, while enormously contributing to socio-economic and political dimension of the country. Most importantly, they co-existed with other ethnic groups in the country for centuries.

Historically, in Sri Lanka, most Muslims "have adhered to their beliefs in a way that is tolerant of different strands in Islam and of other faiths". However, evidence suggests that this moderate and tolerant approach to religious difference is beginning to change. Various new religious movements, whose growing influence is in part related to the influx of new non-traditional "ideas from other parts of the Islamic world" have been reported. Schwartz and Irfan (2012) included a description of one case of severe intra-Muslim conflict.

Recent news reports and online discussions indicate a new situation of uncertainty and fear for the Muslims due to rising widespread anti-Islamic propaganda campaign. This is something new in the experience of the Muslims in the country. It is too early to say how the Muslim population and the government will proceed toward ensuring safety and security of the Muslims and other citizens of the country in the future.

During the early decades of the history of post-colonial and independent Sri Lanka, the Muslims believed that there was no problem for their position as minorities in the country. This assumption does not seem to be valid anymore. Recent narratives in literature and popular media report troublesome events from 2012 and 2018 suggest that Muslims and their institutions have been targeted. Thus, there is a need for Muslims to re-asses earlier assumptions of "harmony" and "good will politics", given the scale of violence perpetrated against Muslims in different parts of Sri Lanka. Their existence and survival have been questioned and challenged; their loyalty has seriously been questioned; there have been

challenges posed by hardline elements whether Muslims have really contributed to the socio-economic and political sectors in the country. The persistence malicious propaganda against Muslims resulted in violence in various parts of the country from Aluthgama to Digana in recent times. This has heralded a serious threat to the long-term existence of Muslims in the country and caused a recipe for disaster on the coexistence of Muslims with other ethnic groups in the country. Therefore, it is critically important for the Muslims to re-asses their strategy to live as a minority group in plural community in Sri Lanka. Most importantly, it is crucial for the government to ensure that all ethnic groups, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or class or caste, are treated equally and law and order applied fairly without any discrimination.

### Compliance with ethical standards

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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