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Abstract

In the changing economy of Sri Lanka and in its environment of political conflict, the situation of Muslims in the country, who are not a party to the ethno-nationalistic war, is worsening by the day. The politics of Muslims in the Eastern Province is a story of conflict within a conflict. In this province, Kattankudy, which has the largest Muslim settlement in the region, is one hundred percent Muslim and religiously conservative. These Muslims are also economically enterprising. However, an internally divisive Islamist factionalism and an externally constricting ethno-economic nationalism are converging to cripple the very survival of this urban community. The government appears to have become a dishonest broker in the middle, playing a double game to marginalise the Muslim community in order to appease a splinter Tamil group.

Introduction

With the onset of 2009, the Sri Lankan ethnic war has crossed its twenty-fifth year of destruction, death and mayhem. The total death toll in this senseless war is anyone's guess, but the figure 70,000 is a conservative guesstimate by the international media. The economic cost of this war will run into billions of rupees if not dollars. To the outside world, this war is seen as a clash between two ethnic communities, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, and the fact that there is a third community, the Muslims, who have become the meat in the sandwich and is battling to survive particularly in the Tamil dominated areas of the north and east is yet to be told. What follows is a microscopic study of a
strategic Muslim township, Kattankudy, in Eastern Sri Lanka, historically known for its Islamic conservatism and commercial acumen. This township is now caught between a rising religious factionalism on the one hand and Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic nationalisms on the other, in which the sinister political drama that is currently being staged between the ruling government and the so-called Tamil liberationists is threatening to jeopardise the very survival of this township.

**Kattankudy: Its Location, Demography, History, and Economy**

Kattankudy is a one hundred percent Muslim populated township in Sri Lanka located along its eastern coastline, about 530 kilometres away from the capital city, Colombo. This township is surrounded by the Bay of Bengal to the east, the Batticaloa lagoon to the west, and by two large Tamil settlements, one in the south, Araiyampathy, and the other in the north, Kallady, which lies adjacent to the provincial town of Batticaloa, a heavily Tamil dominated municipality. Demographically, Kattankudy is the most densely populated town in Sri Lanka with 40,298 people and 10,691 families, according to the 2003 census, crowded within an area of 6.5 square kilometres. This population density of nearly 6,200 square kilometres is more than double the average of 3,043 for the whole country. However, according to some leading local residents of this township, the total population currently stands at nearly 50,000, which makes the density even more cramped.¹

On the history of Muslim settlement in Kattankudy a research undertaken in 2005 by an academic from the Eastern University of Sri Lanka cites two references, one by a previous local leader, S. O. Kanagaratnam, who wrote in the early twentieth century that the Muslims had lived in Kattankudy from the eighth century onwards; and the other, a burial stone excavated in the township with an engraved date 896 corroborating Kanagaratnam's contention.² However, the number of Muslims in Kattankudy must have received a big boost in the seventeenth century when the Buddhist King Senarath of Kandy signed a Peace Treaty with the Portuguese in 1617, following which the 4,000
Muslim traders seeking asylum from Kotte and Sitawaka territories that were under Portuguese occupation, settled along the eastern coast of his kingdom. By the beginning of the twentieth century the population of Kattankudy had reached 9,420, according to the 1901 census. Between 1901 and 2003, almost within a century, the population has more than quadrupled in number due almost entirely to Muslim fertility.

Economically, the Muslims of Kattankudy are noted for their commercial acumen. In the early days however, they were mostly a community of pedlars, retailers, weavers and farmers. As pedlars and retailers they were so ubiquitous that an old local adage compared them with the crow, a bird native to Sri Lanka and found all over the Subcontinent. As weavers, their finished products along with those manufactured by their weaving compatriots from neighbouring Araiyampathy, found ready markets in other parts of the country in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For instance, in the year 1867 alone the total value of cloth woven and distributed by these weavers was estimated at 5,000 pounds sterling, according to an old local newspaper, a substantial sum at that time. The weaving skill of Kattankudy Muslims, which almost disappeared in the face of cheap textile imports during the British colonial era and until the end of the 1950s, received fresh fillip in the 1960s and 1970s when the Socialist regime of the Bandaranaikeas opted for an import substitution economic policy. However, this rekindled enthusiasm was short lived and soon evaporated with the ushering in of the open economy in the 1980s and globalization thereafter.

With savings accrued from peddling, retailing and weaving during the colonial regime the Muslims of Kattankudy invested their surplus in acquiring real estate in the form of paddy lands and coconut plantations in far away places like Kalmunai, Nintavur, Sammanturai, and Akkaraipattu in the south and Paduvankarai, Unnichchai, and Karadiyanaru beyond the Batticaloa lagoon in the west. Of these investors, a few became owner cultivators while many remained as absentee landlords leasing their fields and estates to tenants of the local area. The ownership of these lands was passed on from
generation to generation partly through inheritance and partly through matrimonial gifts. However, absentee landlordism became untenable with the introduction of the Paddy Lands Bill and other measures of land reform under the Bandaranaike governments. Consequently, the relationship between the owners and tenants became so tenuous and litigious that the absentee landlords of Kattankudy had no choice but to sell much of their paddy fields and estates to their former tenants in the south.

The lands beyond the lagoon, on the other hand, although they were in the heart of the Tamil territory, yet, because of their close proximity to Kattankudy, remained with the original owners. These lands were retained and cultivated under various tenancy arrangements often employing Tamils as farm labourers. However, after 1983, with the outbreak of ethnic violence, the Tamil Tigers and their supporters have taken over these lands forcibly and, according to the fact sheet produced by the Federation of Muslim Mosques and Institutions of Kattankudy, a total of 6,463 acres of paddy land, all belonging to the owners of Kattankudy, are now in the hands of Tamil occupiers.5 According to another source, the Muslim Information Centre, a total of 63,000 acres of Muslim land has been lost in the Eastern province as a result of violence perpetrated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since 1990.6 The LTTE leadership is said to be offering to buy back these lands from the legal owners at a price that was current more than 50 years ago.

Crumbling Economic Opportunities

With the loss of agricultural lands and disappearance of the weaving industry economic opportunities have become extremely restricted for the Muslims of this township. Retail business is turning out to be the only economic refuge for employment and revenue to a majority of its residents. Even in this sector the prospects look increasingly hazardous and fragile. Until recently, the retail business establishments of these Muslims were located mostly outside of Kattankudy. Towns such as Passara,
Badulla, Bandarawela, Welimada, Moneragala, and Tangalla, and numerous other centres in the Sinhalese districts had attracted significant number of Kattankudy businessmen who opened up shops selling goods of all kinds from textiles to groceries, hardware and cooked food. Closer to home their shops were found in the regional towns of Batticaloa, Eravur and Valaichenai catering mostly to clientele from the Tamil community. An unfortunate aspect of their business is that very few of these businessmen ever settled in those towns permanently with their families. They rarely bought property or built their houses in these towns but remained largely as birds of passage sojourning to earn money while leaving their families at home in Kattankudy. This arrangement worked well as long as there was peace in the country and economic competition remained clean. While the ethnic war and widespread violence ruined the former an aggressive form of economic nationalism among the majority Sinhalese especially after the 1970s put an end to the latter.

Economic nationalism among the Sinhalese took an anti-Muslim virulence after the seventies. This is not a new phenomenon in any case because, already during the closing years of the nineteenth century Buddhist leaders like Anagarika Dharmapala called for open resistance against the spread of Muslim businesses in the Sinhalese country. The racial violence of 1915 directed against the Muslim community was the first of its kind in Sri Lanka and was the direct outcome of this agitation. The Muslims were thriving then under an open colonial economy and the open economy after 1977 has created opportunities again for Muslim entrepreneurship to flourish, provided economic competition remains free and clean. But the rise of Sinhalese ultra-nationalism under the banner of the Sinhala Urumaya Party (SUP) launched in 2000 and its more militant offshoot the Jatika Hela Urumaya (JHU) or the National Heritage Party launched four years later by the Buddhist monks, has sent dangerous signals to the operation of a free market and clean competition. Behind their proclaimed “aim to … restore to the Sinhala people their lost right to live in any part of the country and to carry on a livelihood … (and) to bring back to the Sinhalese justice, equal treatment and their rightful place …”, is the hidden agenda of Sinhala monopolisation of the country's economy. Organised boycott of Muslim shops by the Sinhalese is a clear indication of this objective. The anti-Muslim sentiments
advocated by these ultra-nationalists have ended up in frequent but sporadic anti-Muslim riots resulting in mosques being vandalised, houses and shops set alight and looted. The Mawanella riots of 2002 were the most serious of them. There had been loss of lives too. On the whole, trading and commerce by Muslims in the Sinhalese districts has become too risky and less profitable. The businessmen from Kattankudy saw the writing on the wall and slowly started winding up their businesses and shifted towards home. A few enterprising ones however took their businesses to the capital city Colombo and are thriving amidst insecurity. A dwindling number of Kattankudy merchants are still remaining in the Sinhalese districts against many odds. At the same time, Tamil violence against Muslims in Batticaloa, Eravur, and Valaichenai towns also has driven Kattankudy businessmen homebound. Anonymous leaflets are being circulated in Batticaloa calling for Tamil boycott of Muslim shops. Because of all these developments Kattankudy traders are forced to relocate their businesses inside their home town. Currently, according to the academic study referred to earlier, there are a total of 1,017 business establishments of all sizes and types that are cramped inside Kattankudy, all competing for the limited spending power of a restricted local market.9

Employment in the public sector and private companies are other sources of income that could compensate for loss of revenue from agriculture, industries and commerce. A long neglect of secular education by these Muslims and ethnic discrimination in public sector employment has restricted the benefits from these avenues also. Kattankudy Muslims are historically known for their religious conservatism which has developed into a wave of fanatical Islamic-Puritanism in recent years. This will be elaborated later. However, this entrenched religious conservatism which put more emphasis on acquiring spiritual knowledge indoctrinated by the traditional madrasas than in attending public schools and studying secular subjects has kept away many Muslim youth of this township from competing for jobs in the public and professional sectors. The only profession that was open to them in the public sector until very recently was teaching and that too was because of a state policy of operating separate schools for Muslim children with separate calendar and syllabi to be taught by Muslim teachers. Some aspects of this state sponsored Muslim schools within the framework of a
In 2003, there were 18 such schools in Kattankudy with 319 teachers and 8,924 students. It was only as late as in 1960 that Kattankudy was able to send its first student to the then one and only university in the country, the University of Ceylon, and after the 1970s, partly because of a new educational awakening among the Muslim community in general and partly because of a standardisation of university entrance examination and quota scheme introduced by the government to give more opportunities for students from rural areas to receive tertiary education, the parents in Kattankudy also showed a keen interest in educating their children. As a result, by 2003 this township had produced 25 medical doctors, 11 engineers and 144 arts and commerce graduates. Among the last group, the majority seems to be women, a surprising development in the context of Kattankudy's religious conservatism. Although this shows an improvement, yet, when compared with other Muslim towns with smaller population the proportionality is too low.

Employment opportunities in the oil rich Middle East after the 1970s provided another avenue of earning income. Hundreds of young men and women from Kattankudy flocked to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. More than 1,300 men and women worked in the Middle East in the year 2000 and by 2003 that number had declined to less than 1,000. Because of their inferior skills a majority of the men are employed in low paid jobs like manual labouring and transporting, and in the case of women they are all employed as house maids. Yet, this is a very unreliable source of employment, which is aggressively competitive, financially risky, and socially disruptive.

In summary, the economic opportunities open to the Muslims of Kattankudy are very limited, and, as a result, retail trading has become the main source of employment and income. Against this economic backdrop the ethnic convulsion that is currently rocking the political and social stability of Eastern Province and the sinister political agendas of the rivalling parties in the conflict have placed the
survival of Kattankudy itself delicately poised. At the same time, a rising wave of Islamic factionalism in this town is paralysing the internal peace of this community.

**Rise of Islamist Factionalism**

Historically, Kattankudy is reputed for its religious conservatism placed on an equal footing with some orthodox Muslim communities in Tamil Nadu, such as those Muslims in Kayalpatnam, Karaikkal, and Keelakkarai. A historical study of the paternal genealogy of many families in Kattankudy may well trace their origins to Tamil Nadu. The housing structures, the lifestyle of the women, cuisines and eating habits, and a host of marriage customs and traditions of the people have a lot in common with the Muslim communities of Tamil Nadu.

Until the end of the 1970s and 1980s the *maraikkayars* or trustees and managers of the two largest mosques in this town, Meerapalli and Meththaipalli, had strict control over the religious affairs of the community and until the 1960s they even meted out *hudud* punishments for certain crimes like adultery committed by Muslims. A large number of the *ulema* of Kattankudy before 1960 were also the products of the famous Islamic religious college, Baqihat-al-Salihat in Tamil Nadu. Yet, the Islam that was practiced by the people was a syncretised mixture of the Shafii school of thought and Sufi practices. Among the latter, the Prophet's birthday celebrations and saint worship were practised and different *tarikas* existed to propagate the teachings of Sufi leaders; while the rules governing the five pillars of Islam, namely, *shahada*, *salat*, *sawm*, *zakat*, and *hajj*, were all derived from the Shafii school of thought.

Since the latter half of the 1950s, however, the influence of Maulana Ilyas' *Tabligh Jamaat*, an Islamic missionary movement from India, started gaining momentum. Missionary foot soldiers roamed the streets inviting Muslims to go to the mosque and regularise their prayers and other
religious duties. *Ulema* from India arrived regularly in Kattankudy to train their local counterparts in *tabligh* activities. As a result, the number of mosques and *madrasas* multiplied, mosque attendance increased and religious practices attracted even the young. According to one count, there are more than forty mosques, thirty *madrasas* and four Arabic colleges in Kattankudy and their number is set to increase even further. Yet, the *tablighis* were a passive group of missionaries who did not resort to any force or violence in propagating their views among the people.

After the 1970s however, the religious fervour of this place received a fresh fillip with the migration of Muslim workers to the Middle East, especially to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-returnees brought in with them a strand of Wahhabi thought and practices, which is the ruling philosophy of Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism is a brand of Islamism with a strict dogma on monotheism. In fact, the members of this movement do not call themselves Wahhabis but *muwahhidun*, literally meaning the unifiers, thereby referring to those who insist on the unification of the worship of Allah. They reject Sufism and all rituals and teachings associated with it. They simply categorise Sufism as *bid'ah* or innovation that has crept into Islam and marred its purity. The way the religious police or *mutawwa* in Saudi Arabia operate with a cane in hand to enforce “Islamic discipline” among the masses has inculcated the idea that force is necessary to establish a puritanical Islamic society. In Kattankudy also Wahhabi Islamist influence is on the ascendance. With the Middle Eastern *hijab* and *thobe* increasingly becoming a part of the female and male attire respectively, and rapidly replacing the traditional sari-veil and the sarong, with frequent *fatwas* from a new crop of inexperienced and young *imams* condemning music, films, and other means of aesthetic and social enjoyment, and with an increasing use of Arabic terminology in the spoken Tamil dialect of the elite there are clear indications that the local culture is undergoing a transformation towards Arabization. In fact this is a general phenomenon that can be observed in many parts of the Muslim world, and is often misconstrued by many as Islamic revivalism.
Another element that had added to this rising orthodoxy is the teaching and activities of a very small but articulate group of ulema who have had their education in the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt. This institution is well known for its Islamic orthodoxy. The way the administrative and academic hierarchy of Al-Azhar has treated those intellectuals who dared to express views contrary to those of the establishment has sent shock waves throughout the world of academia. The most notorious case was that of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, an academic from Al-Azhar, who had to flee his country because of his publications on textual analysis of the Quran that was not acceptable to the establishment which condemned him as an apostate. Such intolerance for plural views is a general characteristic of religious-educational institutions such as Al-Azhar, Zituna in Tunisia and Qarawiyin in Morocco that uphold orthodoxy.15 The products of these institutions like the ones who are now active in Kattankudy add to further the rising passion of puritanical Islam. It was in this environment of passionate orthodoxy that the Sufi views of two other ulema unleashed a wave of death and destruction in Kattankudy in December 2006.16

Moulvi Abdul Rauf, a native of Kattankudy and the son of a prominent alim, and M. S. Abdul Payilvan, the president of All Island Tharikathul Mufliheen of Maruthamunai village, about thirty kilometres to the south of Kattankudy, were two preachers who believe in the religious legitimacy of Sufism and many of its practices. Rauf has a long history of religious controversy in Kattankudy, but the Payilvan's influence came much later and particularly during and after the 1990s. In fact Sufi ideas and the influence of Sufi sects or tarikas had been prevalent among the people of the town long before Rauf or Payilvan came onto the scene. At that time there was no open and violent ostracism of these ideas and their advocates although there were occasional outbursts against them in the sermons of the main stream ulema. But the violence that occurred in 2006 after the death of Payilvan which ended in the killing of a number of his followers, the destruction of their houses and property, and the fatwa of apostasy against them were some thing new and mark the culmination of a puritanic trend that was growing since the late 1970s.17 While the Wahhabi driven Islamism is on the rise in Kattankudy, religious factionalism has also crept into the politics of the area and is ripping apart the internal peace
and tranquillity of the locality. To the government in Colombo and the Tamil separatist fighters this is of course an unexpected bonanza.

**Political Representation**

Kattankudy has a chequered history of parliamentary representation in post-independence Sri Lanka. This township belongs to the Batticaloa electorate which was a single member constituency under the Soulbury Constitution that came into effect just before independence in 1948. In the first parliamentary elections of 1947 under the Westminster model a Muslim was fortunate to be elected as the representative from Batticaloa, because the Tamil votes were split among four other contestants, all of whom were Tamils. This was a bitter lesson to the Tamil community, and in the next two elections of 1952 and 1956 they carefully avoided the past error and put forward only one nominee and won the seat on both occasions in a straight contest with Muslim voters.18 There were sporadic episodes of Tamil–Muslim violence during these elections and the Kattankudy Muslims complained to the government of their lack of voice in the parliament. A new delimitation commission was appointed and, as a result, Batticaloa became a multi-member constituency electing two representatives, thereby giving a fair chance to both communities. To add to the Muslim strength, Eravur, another Muslim town to the north of Batticaloa, which was previously a part of the Kalkuda electorate, was included. Consequently, in the 1960 March and July elections and in the 1965 general elections, Muslims were able to secure representation; but, in 1970, when two Muslims contested from two different parties, they both lost and two Tamils secured victory.19 After that, in the 1977 elections, even though two Muslims contested, because the Tamil votes got split among three of their candidates, one Tamil and one Muslim were able to win the contest.20 Throughout its recent political history the Batticaloa electorate has always been fought less on the basis of party policies and more on grounds of ethnic division and strength.21
This electoral system and the Westminster model of parliamentary representation changed radically with the implementation of the Jayawardenena constitution in 1978. For the first time in the history of Muslim politics in Sri Lanka, the Muslims, at least those who lived in the Eastern Province, saw an opportunity to increase their parliamentary strength by forming their own political party. The Tamil–Muslim racial riots of April 1985 provided the immediate cause and a year later, in 1986, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) under the leadership of M. H. M. Ashraf was formally registered as a political party. The Muslims of Kattankudy supported this move wholeheartedly.22

Although the SLMC fielded candidates in every election that was held after 1978, both at the national and provincial levels, the strength of the party basically lies in the Eastern Province; and the Tamils, especially the LTTE, viewed the rise of SLMC as a direct challenge to its political dominance in that province. The current disunity within the SLMC after the tragic demise of its founding leader, and the rise of a breakaway group from the LTTE in the Eastern Province have not changed this direct confrontation between the two communities in the East. Kattankudy is in the forefront of this confrontation.

A Sinister Political Trap

In the political and military struggle for a separate Tamil state, Eelam, the Muslims are a problem to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for two important reasons. Firstly, the presence of pockets of Muslim villages and towns in the Jaffna and Mannar districts in the north and Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Ampara districts in the east, weakens the Tigers' claim of Tamil territorial contiguity stretching from Jaffna in the north to Pottuvil in the east; and secondly, the historical disclaim of the Muslims that they are not ethnically Tamils but Moors—an appellation bestowed by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and grabbed with great enthusiasm by local Muslim leaders in the nineteenth century for reasons of pragmatic politics—is also hollowing the much touted uni-ethnic density of the aspired Eelam.23 The fact that the Muslims, like the Tamils, are also victims of Sinhalese colonisation and chauvinism and consequently the efforts by the LTTE
leadership to convince the Muslims to fight against this danger by joining hands with them only had limited success at the beginning, and that too evaporated as the ethnic struggle became aggressively violent.24

From the LTTE point of view therefore, it was perhaps the search for a permanent solution to this Muslim menace that made them embark on a mission of ethnic cleansing to get rid of the Muslims from Tamil areas. The first phase of this mission started in Kattankudy in August 1990 when LTTE gunmen opened fire on some 300 worshippers inside the Meera Jumma mosque, which killed about 123 Muslims.25 Eight days later a similar massacre was let loose in Eravur, another Muslim town about 15 kilometres to the north of Kattankudy.26 These killings and other brutalities by the LTTE failed to force out the Muslims from their villages and towns, but succeeded in removing even the little sympathy that the Muslims had towards the Tamil cause. The culmination of the cleansing mission however took place in the north when nearly 75,000 Muslims from Jaffna and Mannar were given just two-hour notice to leave their homes and properties in October 1990.27 The victims were allowed to take with them just 150 rupees in cash, which was less than two US dollars.

A contiguous Tamil territory by merging the Northern and Eastern provinces is vital to the creation of a sizeable and viable Tamil Eelam. This contiguity and viability is ruined partly by state aided Sinhalese colonization in the Trincomalee District, which makes a possible merger between the north and east territorially impossible, and partly by the presence of Muslim pockets along the eastern coastline, among which the heavily populated Kattankudy, right in the heart of the Batticaloa District is a great bulwark.

The Sri Lankan government's fight against Tamil separatism has succeeded at least on one front. Whether by design or fortuity it has weakened the disciplined unity of the LTTE. The 2004
breakaway group, Tamileela Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), under the leadership of Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan alias Colonel Karuna, has now joined forces with the government and is in direct confrontation with the north-based parent body under Velupillai Prabakaran. Both, Karuna and TMVP's new leader Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan alias Pillayan, are natives of the Eastern Province and their factional supporters are also from the same region. This split, like the factions in Kattankudy, is a God send to the Colombo government, and it has determined to utilise this division to keep away the Eastern Province from falling again into the hands of the LTTE. This political strategy however, does not seem to augur well with the Muslims of this province and especially with those in Kattankudy. The results of the Provincial Council elections held in May 2008, the betrayal of the government in breaking its promise to Muslims, and the Tamil–Muslim violence that ensued has made it clear that the Muslims in Kattankudy are entering a new phase of ethnic convulsion and political turmoil.

The TMVP, in spite of its split with the LTTE, still describes itself as Viduthalaip Pulikal or Liberation Tigers. The similarity in nomenclature raises a number of questions in relation to TMVP's commitment to peace. Firstly, if it is a liberation force what and how are they trying to liberate, and from whom? Secondly, if, as the government says, the LTTE fighters have been driven out of the Eastern Province, and if TMVP is working for peace, then, why are its cadres carrying weapons? If they are in alliance with the government surely then the government forces should be able to provide TMVP the necessary protection it needs. The fact of the matter is that TMVP is still a militant force that has not given up its long term objective of liberating the Eastern Province from Sinhalese colonisation and Muslim concentration. Col. Harihahan predicts that, “If TMVP establishes itself in the corridors of power life could become difficult for Muslims”. The way things are unfolding in the Eastern Province gives credibility to his prediction.
The government's policy in the Eastern Province is predicated on two important premises. Firstly, in order to win the war against the LTTE, the breakaway group TMVP must be rewarded for its support to the government; and secondly, Sinhalese colonisation of the province should continue unhindered in order to make the Tamil and Muslim communities permanent minorities in the long run. To take the second premise first, the population of the Eastern Province is currently distributed fairly evenly among the three ethnic groups, Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims. But the Sinhalese, led by the far right JHU, are determined to increase their strength at any cost. Through a deliberate scheme of state aided Sinhalese colonisation in the Trincomalee District since the 1950s, the population pattern of this district has been transformed radically. In 1946, for example, the population of this district had 44.1% Tamils, 30.6% Muslims and 20.7% Sinhalese; but in 1981, the Tamils were reduced to 36.4%, Muslims changed a little to 29.2%, while the Sinhalese percentage increased to 36.4, mainly at the expense of the Tamils, as depicted in Figure 1 below. Attempts are currently under way to reduce the Muslim strength even further.

Figure 1. Ethnic Composition of Trincomalee District.
According to the International Crisis Group (ICG) “the government has declared that 600 acres around the harbour will be designated a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), which gives it sweeping powers to acquire land for investment and avoids any need for local consultation. The Trincomalee SEZ would include Muslim-dominated areas, such as Mutur, an area already traumatised by the fighting in 2006”. There is also a similar move in the Ampara District where hereditary Muslim lands are under constant threat from Sinhalese intruders. A recent statement by President Rajapakse that 7% of Muslims are holding 23% of land in this district is an ominous sign of the impending danger of losing Muslim ownership. In Pottuvil at the southern end of the Eastern Province where Muslims are dominant, Sinhalese colonisation is nibbling away at Muslim lands. Muslim lands are also being taken away under the pretext of archaeological surveys of ancient Buddhist sites. ICG writes, “In Pottuvil local Muslims are also concerned about attempts to claim that the archaeological site of an ancient Buddhist temple should be expanded as a new Buddhist religious site, taking over lands used by Muslim residents”.

If lands in Trincomalee, Ampara and Pottuvil are taken away by the Sinhalese and if Muslims remain predominant in towns such as Kalmunai, Nintavur, Sammanturai, Akkaraipattu and Maruthamunai, all of which are closer to Ampara than to Baticaloa, where is the Tamil dominant area for TMVP to reign supreme? Obviously, it is the area that lies between Trincomalee and Maruthamunai; but, the Tamil contiguity of this stretch is spoiled by the heavy presence of Muslims in Kattankudy and Eravur. Of the two it is Kattankudy that is problematic to any domineering Tamil group. The government realises this and is prepared to sacrifice the Muslim pawn to check mate the Tamil king in the political chess board. According to Jeyaraj it appears that even JHU is supportive of this move. This became very clear at the end of the Eastern Provincial Council elections in May 2008, when the President was alleged to have broken his promise to Hizbulla, the Muslim candidate from the President's United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), that Hizbulla would be appointed as the Chief Minister were the Muslims to elect the most number of councillors. At the end of the elections, of the 35 elected councillors, 18 were Muslims of whom eight were from UPFA. Only ten of the councillors were
Tamils of whom only six came from TMVP. Yet, Pillayan was appointed as the Chief Minister to appease the TMVP and the Tamils. Tamil–Muslim violence broke out immediately, a few people from both sides were killed and Muslim traders of Kattankudy were beaten up in Batticaloa town. Although Hizbulla was later given a super-ministry as compensation, the message was clear to the Muslims: in a confrontation between the Muslims and the TMVP, the government will side with the latter.

In the meantime the TMVP cadres were also reported harassing the Muslims who live in border villages adjoining Tamil areas such as, Kankeyanodai, Palamunai, Ollikkulam, and Sikaram. Because of this harassment several Muslims were compelled to sell their houses and property to Tamils and move into Kattankudy. Kattankudy which is already densely populated is fast becoming a refuge for ejected Muslims from border villages. Territorially squeezed by the Indian Ocean in the east and a lagoon in the west, ethnically trapped between two large Tamil settlements one in the north and the other in the south and economically constricted to retail trading and low-paid employment this township is unable to expand to accommodate any new comers. The political scenario of this mullah-merchant conservative urban complex is increasingly becoming analogous to the Gaza Strip in Palestine. How to avoid a potential intifada will be the greatest challenge to the government in Colombo in the near future.

**Conclusion**

Since the onset of the ethnic war in Sri Lanka, the Muslim community has paid a heavy price simply because it decided to take a neutral stand. The story of this tragedy has not been told in full to the outside world. Kattankudy, the most densely populated Muslim township in the country, is caught up in this war partly because of the township's sheer geographic location in the Eastern Province and partly because of its economic expertise in trade and commerce. With crumbling economic opportunities amidst rising ethno-economic nationalism amongst the majority Sinhalese, internal peace in the township received further setback from the religious side due to the rise of a militant...
Islamist ideology imported from abroad. Political opportunism in the meantime has made the Muslims of Kattankudy a potential sacrificial lamb at the altar of short sighted compromises between the government and the Tamils.

Notes

1. According to these residents, the census failed to count the thousands of Muslims who are working in the Middle East. Their assertion gains strength when viewed against a fact sheet produced by the Federation of Muslim Mosques and Institutions of Kattankudy, which was submitted as a report to the University Teachers for Human Rights, Jaffna (UTHRJ) in 1991. This sheet put the population figure at 40,000 twelve years before the census. A copy of the fact sheet is available with the author.

2. S. Ponniah, “Kattankudy Nakarap Parvai” (Kattankudy City Profile), an unpublished manuscript, Eastern University of Sri Lanka, 2005, pp. 2–3.


4. The Examiner, 9 May 1868.

5. The fact sheet was produced by the Federation of Muslim Mosques and Institutions of Kattankudy and was submitted as a report to the University Teachers for Human Rights, Jaffna (UTHRJ) in 1991. A copy of the fact sheet is available with the author.


8. Available online


11. S. Ponniah, “Kattankudy”, op. cit., pp. 34–35. The Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs also publishes statistics on Muslim schools but they are not updated regularly.


16. See online http://www.southasianmedia.net/index_story.cfm?id=419657&category=Frontend&C
ountry=SRI%20LANKA


18. R. B. Kadirgamar, a Tamil, won against A. Sinna Lebbe, a Muslim, in 1952; and C. Rajadurai, a Tamil, won against the same Muslim in 1956. For the election results see, *Ceylon Daily News*, 22 September 1947 and 13 April 1956.

19. For details, see Ameer Ali, “Politics of Survival”, *op. cit.*, Appendix 1.


22. The author was present at the preparatory meeting held in Batticaloa town almost two years before the registration of SLMC. Almost all leading figures from Kattankudy were present at the meeting and spoke in favour of forming an independent Muslim political party. The author's was the only minority voice that spoke against this move.


28. With the support of Karun'a breakaway faction, the government has been able to defeat militarily the LTTE forces in the Eastern Province.


31. These statistics are provided in “Appendix II: Colonisation & Demographic Changes in The Trincomalee District and Its Effects on the Tamil Speaking People”, UTHRJ Report 11.


