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Muslims in Harmony and Conflict in Plural Sri Lanka: An Historical Summary from a Religio-Economic and Political Perspective

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Abstract: Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka have a history of more than a millennium. During this long period their economic and religious experience had been one of fluctuating fortunes beginning with harmony and prosperity under Buddhist monarchs to repression and misery under Western colonialists. Economic freedom under native rulers, mercantilist restrictions under the Portuguese and Dutch and open economy under the British brought alternative episodes of economic affluence and depression to Muslims. After independence however, under a democratic polity the community adopted a pragmatic approach to the new situation which allowed Muslims and Islam to enjoy once again decades of peaceful coexistence and relative prosperity, until political and economic circumstances of the country changed dramatically to create an environment of anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic phobia. What follows is a historical narration of these vicissitude retold from a religio-economic and political perspective.

Introduction

The Muslim community in Sri Lanka has a history of at least thirteen centuries. From a tiny group of adventurous merchants, travellers and pilgrims settled mainly along the western coasts of the island around the eighth century they have grown into a significant minority of one million and nine hundred thousand or little over nine per cent of the total population in 2011 census. Over this long stretch of history the community has experienced alternative periods of peaceful coexistence and protracted convulsions caused by factors from within and outside Sri Lanka. The community’s religious and economic fortunes have fluctuated accordingly. This essay summarises the different facets of this fluctuation from the earliest days of Muslim arrival when they were accepted by the hosts as an invaluable resource to a socially stratified and semi-open economy, to the present day, when they are, in the view of ultra-nationalists, looked down upon as aliens, fanatics and parasites in an open economy. It is a story of swinging fortunes of an enterprising people retold from the perspective of political economy.
Arrival and Settlement

Even though the Arabs and Persians were frequenting the shores of Serendib (Sri Lanka as known to ancient Arabs) for trading purposes long before Islam was born in the seventh century, as Muslims their arrival is dated back to a century later and by that time the island was the home of three ethnic groups, Sinhalese, the majority of whom were Buddhists, Tamils who were overwhelmingly Hindu by faith, and indigenous Veddas who were animistic in religious belief. By the eighth century therefore, Sri Lanka was already a plural society. It was not only plural in social and cultural make up but also was open in economic design. Although Hindu caste restrictions determined an individual’s choice of economic vocation there were no state imposed restrictions to trade either domestically or externally. Trade, like now was then also a “lucrative profession”. However, being a fundamentally agrarian economy with a culture that did not provide pride of place to merchants and traders commercial skills especially in the area of overseas trade were at an underdeveloped stage in medieval Sri Lanka. A resource rich country was handicapped by the relative absence of an indigenous merchant class to maximize its economic potential. The advent of Muslim merchants and their settlements along the coastal districts went a long way in bridging this lacuna.

It was through these merchants that spices, timber, elephants, pearls and precious stones of the island found their way to the Middle East and from there to Europe. In the thirteenth century for example, King Bhuvanekabahu I sought an agreement with the Sultan of Egypt “to supply him with cinnamon, precious stones, and elephants”. In order to maintain a long term diplomatic and trade link with Muslim Middle East local kings had gone to extraordinary length to ingratiate themselves with the ruling caliphs and sultans. For example, according to one Arabic source, Futuh al-Buldan by the historian Al-Baladhuri (d.892), when Iraq was under the Umayyad Governorship of Hajjaj ibn Yusuf the king of Jeziratul Yaqut or Island of Rubies, as the island was sometimes named by the Arabs “because of the beauty of the faces of its women”, repatriated the orphaned daughters of some Muslim merchants who died in the island. (Whether these daughters were born to Arab wives and accompanied their fathers or born to wives that these merchants married in Sri Lanka is not known.) The vessels that carried this human cargo were captured by some Indian pirates near present day Karachi which triggered an Arab invasion of India in 710-712. Thus, in their desire for closer commercial links with the rising Muslim empire the rulers of Sri Lanka were more than accommodative to the immigrant Muslim traders.

With Muslims came the religion of Islam and the Qur’an followed not the flag but the weights and measures of traders. The new faith that was hardly two hundred years old and which captured the hearts and minds of a vast majority of Arabs and North Africans, was a religion that promoted trade as a noble profession and in course of time trade became Islam’s most representative profession. As long as the Arabs ruled over the sea lanes Arabic as a consequence became the lingua franca of international traders. It was the Muslim
traders more than Muslim soldiers who were the chief propagators of Islam at least in most parts of Asia and Africa. Medieval Sri Lanka was a classic example of this development. Once the local rulers decided to welcome the Muslim merchants and allowed them to settle in the country they could not prevent Islam from being practised. As long as it did not hurt the “religious susceptibilities of the majority of the people among whom they lived” Islam, according to Paranavitana, was permitted to exist.

By the tenth century however, Islam had begun to win converts in Sri Lanka and there arose a need for teachers to impart religious knowledge to the new entrants. A gravestone discovered in Colombo originally by a Dutch official in 1787 and said to have been rediscovered in 1827 by the then Chief Justice Alexander Johnston bears an Arabic inscription in Kufic script which talks about a religious teacher by the name of Khalid Ibn Abu Bakaya who was dispatched by the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad around the year 940 AD to instruct the Muslims in Colombo on Islamic beliefs. Bakaya died in Colombo in 948 AD. “After his death the Caliph of Baghdad sent some learned persons to Colombo for the express purpose of engraving an inscription on his tombstone.” Following the arrival of ‘learned persons’ mosque constructions must also have begun around Colombo. Buddhist compassion and economic interests coalesced to convince the rulers that accommodating the Muslims as permanent residents and their religion an additional faith in the kingdom would be of long term benefit. That conviction must have been one of the reasons why some monarchs went to the extent of not only allowing Muslim merchants to settle their trade disputes in accordance with their own laws in front of Muslim priests but also to admit a few leading members of the Muslim community into the royal court. Citing the twelfth century Arab geographer and cartographer Muhammad Al-Idrisi (1099-1165) Dewarajah shows that in a sixteen-member royal council there were four Muslims, four Christians and four Jews. Also, in the in the fourteenth century when Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/9) the Moroccan traveller from Tangiers went to the court of the Tamil King Arya Chakravarti the latter demonstrated his ability to understanding some Persian, which makes one wonder how intimate would have been the contacts between Muslim merchants and royalty.

Winning the favour of monarchs and gaining access to royal courts however, did not automatically translate into capturing the hearts and minds of the subjects. Writing in the nineteenth century, James Emerson Tennent, a brilliant British civil servant, observed that the “southern Singhalese” refused to have any intercourse with strangers and more so with those who were not of their religion. This means that the nascent Muslim community must have lived almost in coastal enclaves as parallel societies. For a merchant community such exclusion from the main stream might not have mattered had the community’s commercial interests were to confine only to wholesale and foreign trade, but more profit could be earned by engaging in retail trade also. Entry to the retail sector would be difficult without direct contact with domestic customers. The Muslim merchants had to become acceptable to the Buddhist and Hindu masses rather than to the ruling elite only. Positive
developments towards that direction began when a new group of Muslims arrived after the tenth century. These visitors were not necessarily traders but wandering sufis or Muslim mystics whose interests were not in material acquisition but in heavenly rewards earned through love and remembrance of Allah, the Creator.

Saint worship is a core element of sufism. According to Ibn Al-Arabi (1165-1240), the most venerated sufi of Andalus in Spain, all prophets including Adam were saints and the saints “by ascesis and ... possession of inner knowledge (ma’rifa) could attain to the position of being mirrors in which the Light of God was reflected”. The religious legend surrounding the footprints on top of the Adams Peak or Samanalakanda (butter-fly-mountain) in the Ratnapura District thus became a focal point of attraction and drew a host of Muslim sufis, pilgrims and travellers from the tenth century onwards. In Muslim tradition Allah cast Adam and Eve from paradise and when they tumbled to earth the man landed on the peak of the mountain, leaving an impress of his foot in the solid rock. The earliest reference to a visit by a sufi to the island is found in the Rehla or travels of Ibn Batuta who mentions the name of a Shykh Abdulla Ibn Khafifi (d. 983 AD) from Iran. Local traditions refer to a number of such visitors. The famous shrine of Daftar Jailani near Balangoda in the Ratnapura District is said to be the spot where Muhiyuddin Abdul Qadir Jilani (1077/8-1166) of Baghdad, a sufi and head of the Qadiriya sect, had meditated for over a decade. Later in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Sayyid Jalaluddin Bukhari (1199-1291) of the Suhrawardiyya sufi order and Ali Hamadhani (1314-1384) of Kubrawiyya order, were said to have wandered through the island.

The impact that these mystics had on the spiritual landscape of Sri Lanka at that time cannot be underestimated. Although Islam had fundamental theological differences with Buddhism the attitudes, outward appearance, and the overall charisma of a sufi had several similarities with those of a Buddhist monk. For example, a Buddhist monk renounces the worldly life and aspires to attain nirvana or salvation. Likewise to a sufi’s renunciation of this world is the first stage of his zuhd (asceticism) or fana (destruction of ego), though salvation to him is not a state of nirvana but direct communication with the Haqq (Reality). To the monk poverty is a fact. He owns but three robes, a waist cloth, a cowl, a razor, a water-strainer and a needle. To this list may be added a parasol, a pair of sandals, few books and for the writer, his desk equipment. He fasts, practices celibacy, meditates and lives in a monastery. To a sufi also outward poverty is a necessary station in his path to Reality and the coarse mat on which the mystic slept often constituted his only worldly possession, though the khirqa (the patched garment) he wore and the tasbih (rosary) he carried could be two additions to his possessions. Like a monk a sufi also fasted, some even practiced celibacy, meditated and lived in their khanqahs or zawiyas (sufi centres). Buddhist monks in the villages also often functioned as healers of diseases and chastisers of the devil, in which respect the sufis also carried a similar image. The amulets, the charmed water and the oil which the sufis distributed to the sick and their meditations on behalf of sufferers were believed to carry healing properties and comforting powers. Above all, a sufi is “by
nature tolerant, seeing as he does, truth in all religions, which for him, appears as the outward manifestations only of a single and essentially inexpressible truth."19 All this implies that in the eyes of the ordinary Buddhists the sufis appeared as peaceful and charismatic personalities who like their own priests had renounced the world and were wandering through the country in search of the ‘Reality’. It was in this manner that the sufis won respectability that spilled over into creating a positive image of the Muslim community as a whole and paved the way for the penetration of Muslim traders into the interior and capture the retail sector of Sri Lanka’s economy.

The cordiality extended towards Muslim merchants by the kings and the initial reluctance but delayed acceptance of the new arrivals by the ordinary folk meant not only the opening of doors to further immigration from the Middle Eastern quarter but also opportunity for other Muslims, notably from neighbouring India, to enter Sri Lanka. The rising influence of Muslims in the Vijayanagara Empire of South India in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as a consequence the passing of the Hindu share of Indo-Ceylon trade into Muslim hands, and the friendly relations that the King of Jaffna, Arya Chakkravarti, cultivated with the Muslim rulers of Madurai, all resulted in the arrival and settlement of Tamil and Malayalam speaking Muslims in the north of the country20. It was during this period that the Sri Lankan Muslim community underwent an ethnic transformation. K. M. de Silva, the foremost historian of the country records that “as a result of intermarriage between them and the local population, they became Indo-Arab in ‘ethnic’ character rather than purely Arab.”21 And, in course of time in the words of another leading historian, Lorna Dewaraja, “... a group of itinerant traders, initially foreign in race, religion and culture became an indispensable and integral part of the Sri Lankan society.”22 Thus, from the time of their arrival until the advent of the Portuguese in 1505 the Muslims in Sri Lanka were living prosperously and in unparalleled harmony in an atmosphere of socio-cultural pluralism and open economy. In that harmonious environment the size of the community also increased which made Tennent in the middle of nineteenth century to hypothesise in reverse that “but for this timely appearance of a Christian power in the island, Ceylon, instead of being a possession of the British Crown, might at the present day have been a Mohamedan kingdom under the rule of some Arabian adventurer.”23 Writing in the second half of the twentieth century G. C. Mendis, a local historian, also shared to a lesser extent the same view.24

**Mercantilism and Muslim Misery**

From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries mercantilism reigned supreme over European economic domain. Conquest and colonization with trade monopolies and discriminatory economic regimes promised prosperity to the conquerors and misery to the conquered. In Sri Lanka European mercantilism colluded with religious bigotry to spell disaster to a thriving Muslim community. The conquest of the island’s maritime districts by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and by the Dutch in the seventeenth severely disrupted if nor totally removed many a lucrative trading opportunities of the Muslims. To
the Portuguese, as their historian Fernão De Queyroz titled his book, the conquest of Sri Lanka was a “temporal and spiritual” venture. Their attitude towards the Muslims was well captured by Lopo Soarez de Albergaria, the Governor of Portuguese India, when he addressed the soldiers before they set sail to Sri Lanka in 1516. “I quite understand”, he said, “the pain our arrival will give to the Moors; but as the sword which you see in my hand is one which I have often seen stained with their blood, I do not consider it a novelty to soak in Mohametan blood the sword which I vow to die, since our conquests in general are more against them than against the heathen, who are excused by their ignorance, while the Moors are condemned by their malice.” The butchery of Muslims in Matara along the southern coast in 1643, the burning of mosques in Colombo, and the expulsion of around four thousands of Muslims from the Portuguese territory meant a period of fear and insecurity to the followers of Islam. Even though the personal greed of Portuguese officials and general administrative corruption created some avenues for a sagacious Muslim trader to make risky profits the overall political and economic situation in the occupied territories proved to be too hazardous for Muslims to survive in tranquillity.

The Portuguese rule however, resulted in another historic development as far as ethnicity and religiosity of Muslims were concerned. Ethnically, the Muslim community which was Arab to start with was transformed into Indo-Arab by the end of the fifteenth century owing to the influx of an Indian element, and after the sixteenth century it once again changed its ethnicity to Moor, thanks to the Portuguese who bestowed this Latin derived epithet “indiscriminately upon the Arabs and their descendants, whom on the sixteenth century, they found established as traders in every port on the Asian and African coast.” Religiously, the Portuguese mastery over the Indian Ocean cut off a vital link with Arabia by making it extremely difficult if not impossible not only for any Islamic religious scholar or mystic to come to Sri Lanka from that quarter but also for any Muslim from Sri Lanka to undertake the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca. Considering the role that this fifth pillar of Islam played in seventeenth century Indonesia enabling those Muslims to withstand the state backed missionary onslaught of Christianity, its disruption in Sri Lanka in the sixteenth century meant a heavy blow to the spiritual nourishment of local Muslims. Being cut off from the Middle East and also from neighbouring sub-continent which supplied religious teachers and functionaries Islam in the Portuguese territories was isolated from the Muslim world and faced an alarming existential threat. While official encouragement of incendiariism destroyed the mosques and made prayers in congregation difficult for Muslims naval restrictions imposed on Hajj pilgrimage jeopardised any chance of spiritual replenishment from outside. It is against this twin set of adversities that one should see the genesis of a “Ceylon Moor” community as distinct from its religious counterpart either in Arabia or India. In short, the Portuguese became the unwitting fathers of a “Ceylon Moor” ethnic identity.

The change of rule from Portuguese to Dutch did not bring any relief to Muslim misery. According to Van Sanden, a writer of Dutch descent, the new regime opened “one of the
darkest chapters in the history of the Ceylon Moors.”31 The Dutch policy was “to restrict both the economic power and the religious propaganda of the Muslims in an effort to see to it that they … (did) not expand beyond their existing confines and convert more Sinhalese to their faith”32. Accordingly, Governor Rycloff Van Goens instructed the administration officer in Matara that he “must not permit the Moors to perform any religious rites, nor tolerate their priests either within or outside the gravets. He must guard against their entering the country from the outside, and deliver up for punishment anyone who should be caught doing so contrary to orders, with a view to setting an example to others.”33 More instructions were issued to the Dissava of Jaffnapatam to the effect that all “Muhammadan superstitions must be rooted out in this country as far as possible”34, and hence “the Moor and Muhammadan subjects of the company receive less favour than the Christians and heathens.”35 In short, the Dutch administration desired “to gradually exterminate this impudent class of people”36, and with them their religion.

However, in the matter of Muslim religious laws there was a positive change during the latter half of the Dutch rule which enabled the Muslim community to establish a Muslim court of justice that must have been abolished by the Portuguese; because Governor Iman Willem Falk (1765-1785) found there were no persons qualified in the in Muslim laws in the island. He therefore reported the Matter to Batavia and became instrumental in drafting a short code of Muslim laws by the best informed and most learned of the Muslim priests within the Dutch territory37. This code was later declared “to be perfectly applicable” and was “ordered … to be considered law by all the Dutch courts of justice”38. In addition to the code of laws the Dutch also appointed Muslims as headmen to administer Muslim affairs, and even employed Muslims as valuers of gems and other articles of commerce. All this suggests that there was a considerable change of attitude towards Muslims between the beginning and end of the Dutch regime. Despite this change the Muslims under the Dutch did not regain the freedom and prosperity that they enjoyed before the arrival of the Portuguese. Mercantilist restrictions and religious discrimination compelled at least a section of the Muslims to seek an escape route. Once again it was the Buddhist monarchs who came to their rescue.

**Indigenization of Moors**

The oppression and eventual expulsion of Muslims from the Portuguese territories led many of the victims to move into the interior of the country and seek refuge in the independent Kandyan Kingdom. King Senerath (1604-1635), a Buddhist monarch accommodated the Muslim refugees and settled them along the eastern coasts of Kottiyar and Batticaloa. Even under the Dutch administration waves of Muslims migrated to the Kandyan territory in search of a better life. This exodus marked the beginning of a process of indigenization of Muslims in Sri Lanka. Those Muslims who remained in the Dutch territories and those who migrated to the interior realised that they had to diversify their skills into other occupations in line with the mainstream Sinhalese and Tamils. In the socially stratified feudal Kandyan
Kingdom, it was the happy combination of Buddhist compassion, strategic needs of the state and above all an acute demand for additional manpower to increase economic output and productivity that created a win-win situation for the ruling regime and Muslims. While the permanent presence of a Muslim community became an economic and strategic advantage to the Kandyan state the protection the monarch accorded to Muslims promised the latter peace, security and prosperity.

From being a specialised community of merchants and traders living in parallel societies the Muslim community after the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was increasingly becoming indigenized and integrated if not assimilated. They diversified their skills and spread into various other occupations such as paddy cultivation, fishing, transport, weaving, tailoring, hair dressing, dairy farming and even providing services to Buddhist temples. An important aspect of this indigenization and integration was the “considerable syncretism in religious practice and a significant degree of ‘ethnic’ boundary-crossing.” Dewaraja’s observation regarding the Muslims in this regard is worth noting: “From a trading community with tenuous affiliations to the host culture, they developed paradoxically into a group which while remaining devoutly Islamic, had a place in the most intimate and innermost recesses of Kandyan life; in the administration of the Dalada Maligava which enshrined the palladium of Buddhist royalty; in the pomp and ceremony of the viharas and devales and in the day to day functioning of the monasteries which were the hub of the spiritual and cultural life of the village.” Whether the Muslims “remained devoutly Islamic” in spite of the developments she describes is debatable. Yet, her claim that this display of Buddhist and Muslim inter-social and inter-cultural accommodation was “unique” cannot be disputed. That accommodation found its place in state administration also. Muslims were enlisted as royal security guards and into the local army; their leaders were admitted to the state bureaucracy and became even diplomatic envoys; their mendicants were granted special privileges, if Robert Knox, the British captive in Kandy for nineteen years, is to be believed, to demand “a Ponnam” from “every Free-holder… (a)nd if the house be shut … to break it open, and to take out of goods to the value of it.”

It was this parallel process of indigenization of the Muslims on the one hand and inclusiveness of the Kandyan feudal regime on the other in combination with the occupational diversification of Muslims that led at the end to the ubiquity of Muslim settlements. Today the Muslims are present in every province and in every district of the country, the political implications of which will be discussed later in this narrative. In short, the migration of Muslims from the coastal to the interior regions of Sri Lanka after the sixteenth century allowed them to continue the harmony and prosperity they enjoyed before it was violently disrupted by the Portuguese and Dutch intrusion.

**Muslims under the British**

The arrival of the British in 1796 and the subjugation of the entire country in 1815 under British rule marked a turning point in the fortunes of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. An
open market economy built on the edifice of an export-dependent plantation industry not only welcomed unrestricted inflow of foreign capital, foreign labour, and foreign entrepreneurship but also provided opportunities to the rise and growth of a local petty bourgeoisie which included a significant Muslim element. Three notable developments that emerged during this period played a deterministic role in shaping the future of the Muslim community. Firstly, the official image of the Moors underwent a radical change from negative to positive under the British. To the crusader Portuguese and mercantilist Dutch the Moors represented both an infidel and interloper combined. In their view therefore, the Moors had to be eliminated totally and if that was not possible at least their movements and activities had to be circumscribed strictly. In contrast, the British found in the Moors a community of enterprising, active, hardworking, dynamic, and business minded people who were in the British view the polar opposite of the sloppy, indolent and unenterprising majority Sinhalese. The Moors were therefore viewed with favour as a class of beneficial economic functionaries in an emerging commercial economy. For instance, long before the development of roads and railways in the nineteenth century it was the Muslim pedlars and tavalam or bullocks-driven caravan traders who were ubiquitously present and who functioned as the irreplaceable middlemen between the village suppliers and their consumer counterparts. These middlemen functionaries continued with their middlemen services even after the advent of modern roads and railways. The only difference then and now was that instead of being travelling salesmen they became settled shop-keepers permanently residing in their own town and village business premises. While trade and commerce once again became the most preferred profession of the Muslims it also earned the entire Muslim community the popular sobriquet, ‘business community’.

The second development was the increasing influx of Indian Muslims into Sri Lanka from the middle of the nineteenth century. Officially dubbed as ‘Indian Moors’ these Muslims were ‘birds of passage’ whose chief motive was to earn as much profit and wealth as possible before departing to their own country. Without any commitment toward the native population the Shylockian methods of Indian Moor business competition not only created resentment amongst impoverished local villagers but also was frowned upon by their Sri Lankan Moor brethren because the Indians took away many businesses that were traditionally dominated by the latter. The Indian Moors became the main target of attack when first recorded Sinhalese-Muslim racial riots broke out in Sri Lanka in 1915. The grudge that the local Moors had against their Indian brethren was eloquently expressed several decades later in 1948 when Razik Fareed, a then member of the Senate, spoke, “we, the Ceylon Moors have suffered most in the past for want of a Citizenship Bill. We ... have been treated very badly by certain people, under the guise of Muslim brotherhood. We have, very unfortunately, played ourselves into the hands of other people.” What is notable here is the fact that while the name Moor which was a disparaging epithet bestowed by the Portuguese has now been embraced with pride as the sole ethnic identity of local Muslims. Razik’s passionate insistence in separating the Ceylon Moor identity from
the Indian half showed his total compliance with the British colonial categorization of the two groups.

The third development was the Indianization of Islam in Sri Lanka a phenomenon resulted since the Portuguese domination over the Indian Ocean after the fifteenth century. As noted earlier, Islam originally came to Sri Lanka along with the Arabs from the Middle East. However, as the number of Arab and Persian traders and pilgrims frequenting the island declined it was the Muslim sufis and imams from India and especially from South India which replenished the drying Arab-Persian Islamic channel. The Islam that came through the Indian channel was mostly ritualistic and syncretic adulterated by the religious and cultural environment of South-India. Even sufism in South India was influenced by the Hidu Bakti movement. Of the sufis who came from the subcontinent the famous Nagore saint Sheikh Hamid Nagore Meeran Saibo (1532-1600) is said to have accompanied Seyyad Shihabuddin Oliyullah and whereas the former returned to his motherland the latter is said to have died in the island and the Meeramakkam mosque at Kandy in the central hills is believed to have been built on his burial spot. In the nineteenth century the South Indian Muslim merchants who came to Sri Lanka were accompanied by Tamil and Malayalam speaking imams, religious teachers and sufis. These merchants built several mosques and religious schools all over the island and numerous students who graduated from these schools later went to the famous madrasa in Vellore, Baqiyat al-Salihat for advanced religious studies. Islamic religious knowledge flowed not directly through the Arabic channel, which the local Muslims except a very few could not understand at all, but through an Arabic transliterated Tamil channel named Arabic-Tamil. In short, after the fifteenth century and right until the 1970s it was India and not the Middle East that that predominantly influenced the religious beliefs and practices of Sri Lankan Muslims. However, with an officially endorsed positive image, with greater economic freedom, and with a South-Indian variety of syncretic Islam the Muslim community in Sri Lanka grew in number (228,000 or 5.6% of total population in 1901) and lived as a protected business community although in cultural isolation with an acquired Moor ethnic identity. This harmony received an adverse shock in 1915.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of a Buddhist revivalist movement as a precursor “to the growth of national consciousness and the recovery of national pride.” This revivalism which initially took an anti-Christian stance eventually, with the support of a rising Sinhalese petty bourgeoisie, developed into a xenophobic movement and targeted the Indian Moor businessmen who were present not only in the urban areas but also in the villages of the interior. The ritualistic and fundamentalist Islam the Indians propagated provoked an incident in 1915 where in the town of Gampola in the Central Province a traditional Buddhist procession accompanied by drums and music was prevented from passing in front of a mosque. This incident added to the simmering economic grievances and triggered the anti-Muslim riots of that year in which the Muslim community suffered considerable losses in property and life. With this episode more than a millennium of peaceful coexistence between the Sinhalese and Muslims came to an end.
Politics of Pragmatism

If there was any lesson that the 1915 riots taught the Sri Lankan Muslim community it was the unassailable fact that in an independent Sri Lanka the future of Muslim survival and harmonious existence depended not in opposing but in aligning with the Sinhalese elite. This became the metanarrative underlying what came to be described as politics of pragmatism of the Muslim community after 1948. The growth of divisive ethnic politics from the nineteen-fifties opened ample opportunities for Muslim leaders to translate in practical terms the efficacy of this narrative. The ethnic rivalry between the two major communities - the Sinhalese and the Tamils - political divisions within the majority Sinhalese, and the electoral ubiquity of Muslim voters supplied the means to achieve that end.

The Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic chasm that continued to widen from the 1950s leading eventually to a twenty-five year civil war that ended only after the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 made Muslim support crucial to Sinhalese dominated governments in Colombo. From the point of view of the government winning the support of local Muslims would, on the one hand, strengthen its hands at international level to counter any accusation of minority intolerance; and on the other, would prevent the northern and eastern province Muslims who make more than one-third of the total Muslim population from falling into the Tamil camp; and that would mean hollowing the Tamil claim of a contiguous Tamil territory stretching from Jaffna in the north to Pottuvil in the east. From the point of view of the Muslim elite the bitter division between the two major national political parties namely, the United National party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP) combined with the strategic strength of Muslim votes in a number of electoral constituencies provided a golden opportunity for political bargaining. Practically in every Sinhalese dominated parliament and in every ministerial cabinet since 1947, and whether the ruling party or parties were of rightist, centrist or leftist hue Muslims did win adequate representation, sometimes more than adequately, both in the House of Representatives as well as in the cabinet. The benefits that accrued to the community from this Sinhalese-Muslim political marriage of convenience were considerable especially in the fields of education and culture. The gains in education were so notable in quantity especially by way of an increased number of Muslim public schools and Muslim teacher training colleges, all operating on a religiously drawn calendar, Muslim teachers and Muslim school inspectors and directors, that they virtually transformed the popular image of the community from one of ‘business’ to one of ‘teachers’. On the cultural side, the instruction of Arabic and Islamic studies in Muslim public schools, allocation of exclusive hours for broadcasting and telecasting Muslim programs over national broadcasting and television services, special public holidays to mark Islamic festivals, extended hours of lunch-break for Muslim public servants on Fridays to attend the noon prayer and so on were unique privileges granted to Muslims of Sri Lanka. In short, after independence and until the end of the 1970s through sheer politics of pragmatism the Muslim leaders without forming a political party of their
own were able to shepherd their flock peacefully and profitably in an environment of emerging ethnic tensions. This cosy atmosphere could not last long.

**Dirigisme and anti-Muslim violence**

To the greater part of the 1970s when the SLFP-United Left Front coalition was in power (1970-1977) dirigisme ruled the economy. Nationalisation of the strategic sectors of the economy, restrictions on private ownership of properties and state control over even small businesses thwarted private enterprise and limited economic freedom. The Muslim community that thrived on freedom to trade and private economic initiatives obviously did not view the new economic policies with favour. In a state regulated economy Muslim businessmen were finding it particularly hard to obtain import-export licences, quotas and other facilities to conduct their own commercial ventures. The government controlled media gave maximum publicity to arrests, trials and convictions of merchants, businessmen and bureaucrats if they happened to be Muslims. Even in the implementation of the Land Reform Bills of 1972 and 1975 Muslim land owners and proprietors were treated particularly harshly by government agencies. In short, the coalition’s ideological drive to create a socialist economy and the adverse publicity given to the maleficence of a few Muslim businessmen and landed proprietors tarnished the public image of the so called ‘business community’.

While on the one hand the socialist policies and programs of the SLFP-ULF Coalition adversely and rather disproportionately impacted the economic interests of Muslims the power and influence of the Muslim minister of education, Badiuddin Mahmud a founder member of the SLFP, created on the other considerable tensions within the cabinet which spilled over into a malicious anti-Badi campaign in the public. In the view of one historian the ministry of education under Mahmud “became at once a political base and a fountain of patronage, to be used to strengthen the ties between his community and the party to which he belonged.” In fact his ministry virtually functioned as the employment exchange for Muslims. Posters and graffiti bearing anti-Muslim slogans appeared in various corners of the country after 1975. As a result of these developments there was a series of anti-Muslim violent incidents in various parts of the country culminating in the Puttalam riots of 1976. Researchers have recorded a total of 30 anti-Muslim violent incidents between 1976 and 2003.

The change of government in 1977 from SLFP to UNP under J.R. Jayewardena, the end of the socialist economic experiment, and the transformation of the Tamil issue from a peaceful, gradualist and parliamentary struggle under the conservative Federal Party leadership to a violent, radical and separatist conflict in the hands of a militant LTTE leadership arrested the spread of Muslim resentment somewhat, because once again Muslim support emerged crucial to the government’s preoccupation to fight against the LTTE.

**Open Economy and Anti-Muslim violence on a Different Front**


The Jayewardena government heralded the era of open economy and a so called dharmista (righteous) society. The new economic policy was a boon to private entrepreneurs and businessmen, and once again the commercial traits of the Muslims were reinvigorated. The new president dreamed of transforming Sari Lanka into another Singapore with unfettered freedom for the market forces, foreign investment and profit motive. Unfortunately however, the ethnic issue took a turn to the worse and the Muslim community faced problems from a different front. Tamil violence against the Sinhalese, state assets and security forces became much more frequent and vicious after 1977, which provoked the July 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom. With that the scene was set for a new bloody phase in Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic confrontation. The LTTE led by a group of impatient Tamil youth, resorted to armed struggle not just to win back Tamil rights under a unitary or federal constitution but to achieve an independent Tamil state altogether called Tamil Eelam. In the civil war that ensued Muslims were caught in the cross fire. While one section of the community that lived in the Sinhalese districts fell under the protection of the Sinhalese army and security forces the other section, more than one-third, was trapped in the north and east and faced LTTE wrath. Because the Muslims refused to apportion their allegiance between the two rival camps those living in the north and east were suspected by the LTTE as fifth column and were constantly terrorized culminating in the eviction overnight of nearly seventy-five thousand Muslims from the north. Hundreds more were killed by the LTTE in the east. In one incident one hundred and twenty-three Muslims in Kattankudy, an urban settlement six kilometres to the south of Batticaloa in the Eastern Province, were massacred in August 3 1990 while they were at the evening prayers in a mosque. According to one source nearly 45,000 acres of paddy lands belonging to Muslims of the Eastern Province were forcibly taken over by the LTTE in one year alone, and the damage done to Muslim businesses in just two of the towns, Valaichenai and Mutur, in the same province was estimated to be closer to one billion rupees. In short, to the Muslims who lived in the Tamil districts the civil war years were a period of abject fear and unbearable horror. While the majority of Muslims in the east suffered, a minority who had the means migrated to the Sinhalese districts, especially to the capital Colombo.

The anti-Muslim violence unleashed by the LTTE, the insouciance of Muslim parliamentarians in Colombo on the plight of their eastern brethren, and the new but complicated system of proportional representation introduced by the Jayewardena constitution of 1978 convinced a group of Muslim activists and political aspirants in the Eastern Province that without a separate political party for the Muslims the community’s survival in the country was in danger. The idea of such a party, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC), was mooted in 1981, was registered in 1986 and stood for parliamentary elections in 1989 under the leadership of M.H. M. Ashraff who was killed in 2000 in a helicopter crash believed to have been engineered by the LTTE. With the formation of this SLMC on an ethnic and religious platform the Muslims inevitably entered the fray of organized ethnic politics, the curse of modern Sri Lanka.
Muslims under SLMC

The establishment of the SLMC though preceded LTTE sponsored anti-Muslim violence certainly aggravated its intensity afterwards and did not bring, contrary to what its leaders and theoreticians trumpeted, any substantial changes to Muslim fortunes in the country. The political strategy of SLMC hinged on two objectives; to mobilise the majority of Muslim votes under its wing and to render support to any single party or coalition of parties aspiring to form a government on the basis of written agreement with specific demands benefiting Muslims. The first opportunity for such a political bargain arose after the general elections of 1994 when the two rivalling national parties, UNP and the Peoples’ Alliance (PA) did not win sufficient number of seats to form a government on their own. SLMC with its seven member bloc emerged as a formidable force in determining the final outcome. To its support the PA government under Chandrika Kumaratunga rewarded the SLMC leader Ashraff by appointing him as the Minister of Ports Development, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. Like the Ministry of Education under the SLFP-ULF coalition this ministry under PA-SLMC coalition also became a “fountain of patronage” and source of employment at least for the Muslims of Sri Lanka’s southeast.

The strategy of collective bargaining openly advocated by the SLMC went against the main tenor of the hitherto accepted politics of pragmatism where Muslim supporters of ruling parties struck an unwritten code of compromise in the interest of mutual benefit. The new departure created problems to the community on two fronts. On the one hand, while the LTTE looked upon the SLMC as the sole embodiment of Muslim resistance to its cause of Tamil Eelam sections of Sinhalese nationalists on the other viewed Ashraff’s avowed bargaining tactics and identity politics as threat to Sinhalese political dominance. While the LTTE went on a rampage against Muslims in the north and east anti-Muslim sentiments were whipped up some leading Buddhist monks in the rest of the country.

Buddhist Militancy and anti-Muslim Violence

After little over a quarter of a century of senseless mayhem the end of the civil war in 2009 no doubt brought a huge sigh of relief to everyone in the country. However, contrary to grand expectations of peace, harmony and prosperity to all the post-war years have produced paramilitary groups and militant movements with fascist tendencies that threaten to deny peace any chance to pay dividend. Triumphantism and euphoria rather than humility and magnanimity have coalesced to create an ultranationalist Buddhist faction, Bodhu Bala Sena (BBS), which is the foster child of another Buddhist chauvinist party Jatika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which in turn is one of the coalition members of the ruling United Peoples’ Freedom Alliance (UPFA) regime. BBS has a simplistic solution to solve the country’s problems and that is Buddhisization of the country, its economy and society. “Buddhisization of the “multiethnic, multireligious, multicultural, multilingual Sri Lanka ... is not an opinion to be debated, but a fact to be faced”, says the Sinhalese human rights activist Seneviratne. BBS’s manifesto echoes that of 969, an extremist organization in
Myanmar that is bent on ethnically cleansing the country of its 4 per cent Muslims\textsuperscript{64}. On the economic front BBS and JHU have not questioned the macroeconomic neo-liberal paradigm but have challenged the legitimacy of successful entrepreneurs were they happen to be members of ethnic minorities. In a nutshell, the ideology of BBS and JHU could be paraphrased as follows: Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country, Buddhism and Buddhist values are paramount, and minorities should either live as subordinate subjects or leave the country. According to this philosophy Muslims obviously are aliens and belong to Arabia, a sentiment expressed earlier by nationalist Buddhists on the eve of 1915 riots\textsuperscript{65}.

With the Tamil warriors militarily confronted and vanquished and their political wing marginalised Buddhist militancy has turned its attention towards the Muslims. Their alleged grievances against the Muslim community are both religious and economic. On the religious side the proliferation of mosques with foreign funds and presence of Muslim shrines in the country, calling for prayer over loudspeakers, slaughtering of cattle for sale and consumption, halal certification of food products and preaching of Islamic religious extremism are prominent issues\textsuperscript{66}. On the economic front the export of Sinhalese female labour to the Middle East particularly as house maids, the emergence of Muslims as successful businessmen and entrepreneurs, Muslim possession of property in urban areas and a disproportionate increase in Muslim population (from 7.42 per cent to 9.23 per cent between 1989 estimate and 2011 census as against from 73.92 per cent to 74.88 per cent for Sinhalese for the same period) seem to be the major problems. Harping on these issues BBS has escalated its anti-Muslim propaganda and caused a series of violent incidents involving destruction of mosques and shrines, molesting Muslim women for wearing their cultural attire and throwing pig heads inside mosque premises. Independent observers have recorded a total of one hundred and three anti-Muslim violent incidents between January and March of 2013 alone\textsuperscript{67}.

Surprisingly the government has not taken any serious step so far to bring these incidents to a halt and rein in the anti-Muslim campaign of BBS. In the face of this escalating rage the powerlessness demonstrated by Muslim parliamentarians who are also like JHU a coalition partner of the regime has disappointed the Muslim population who have so far not reacted to any of BBS provocations. The BBS-JHU-UPFA nexus has all the signs of leading Sri Lanka towards an unattainable mono-religious and mono-cultural totalitarian society. To the Muslims of course their cherished strategy of politics of pragmatism appears to have come to an end\textsuperscript{68}.

**Conclusion**

From pre-colonial Serendib to colonial Ceylon and to post-colonial Sri Lanka the Muslim community has experienced vicissitudes of harmony and conflict. More than a millennium of peace and tranquillity enjoyed under the rule of Buddhist monarchs the community endured a period of oppression under the Portuguese and Dutch colonial masters before relishing a period of relative respectability and freedom under the British. The oppression
under the Portuguese and Dutch ultimately proved a blessing in disguise because it induced
the Muslims to integrate with the Buddhist community and become indigenized. Although
the 1915 riots was an unexpected shock to this healthy development the years following the
mayhem healed the wounds and after Sri Lanka became independent an era of pragmatic
politics allowed the Muslims to taste once again a period of harmony and prosperity. The
open economy ushered in after 1977 with its neo-liberal macroeconomic policies and an
outbreak of triumphalism after the defeat of the LTTE have created economic envy and
religious phobia against the community. Plural Sri Lanka is bordering on the verge of
descent, divisions and disharmony. A detailed diagnosis of this change is beyond the scope
of this summary.

Notes:

10. Lorna Dewaraja, op.cit., p. 28.


27. P.E. Pieris, in his *Ceylon and the Portuguese 1605-1658* Tellipalai, Ceylon: 1920 aptly captures this weakness: “The lust for gold which overwhelmed the Portuguese officers gave the Moormen his opportunity, for they found in him just the instrument that they needed. The Moor was an excellent man of business and was never at a loss to discover where his interests lay; when a Moorman collected six hundred *amunams* of areca in one season for the benefit of the General, how was it to be expected that the latter should bring himself to enforce the order of the expulsion of so useful a class?”, p. 226.

28. The name Arab actually included almost all Muslims who came from the Middle East and North Africa including Persians and Abyssinians.


33. *Instructions from Governor and Council of India to the Governor of Ceylon 1656-1665*, translated by Sophia Peters, Colombo, 1908, p. 64.


38. Ibid.
49. See note 44.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
56. M.S.M. Anas et al, *op.cit*.
60. See note 50.
62. See note 50.
64. Meghal Perera, “Taking old friends too seriously: Sri Lanka, Burma and Buddhist extremism”,
65. Ameer Ali, see note 44.
66. From “a near verbatim Translation of the Bodhu Bala Sena’s 10 point Manifesto proclaimed publicly at the Maharagama Rally”,
67. xa.yimg.com/kq/.../hate+incidents+against+Muslims+Jan-July... 2-13 pdf (reprieved 16 September 2013).

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