

Socio-Cultural Issues and the Relationships between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi lingual country comprising four of the world's major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Buddhists are the predominant ethnic group, constituting three quarters of the total population, while Muslims make up the second largest minority in the country. There are a wealth of records in history that prove the cordial relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in the past. However, the aftermath of civil war (1983-2009) caused tension to brew between these two communities. This is because of hate campaigns undertaken by a number of Buddhist Nationalist Groups (BNGs) through instigation of Buddhist nationalism among Buddhists adherents. These groups have been actively protesting against the Muslim socio-cultural practices and behaviours, such as the issuing of *halal* certification on consumer goods, slaughtering of cattle, conducting of prayer services, maintaining worship places, Muslim women's hijabs and niqabs and so on with disseminating misunderstandings about them with derogatory speeches among the public. Given the above backdrop, this study attempts to identify the outstanding quality of historical relationship between Buddhists and Muslims as well as its nature in post-war context. Also, this study tries to explore the views in regard to the hate campaigns and the impacts of it on the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims with identifying major interrupting factors to the relationship. In order to achieve the above objectives of the study, in total 1219 questionnaires were distributed among Sri Lankan Buddhists and Muslims in 14 Buddhist majority districts and also 28 individuals were interviewed. Analysis and results of this study reveal that 50% of the Buddhists maintain a moderate approach neither opposing nor supporting on the recent protests against the Muslims by the BNGs. Besides, the recent attempts instigated by the BNGs have not impacted the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in any way and especially in the case of Muslims, even though the Buddhists had attacked some of them, they are still hopeful of reviving their once harmonious relationship with Buddhists as better as maintained throughout the history. However, these hate campaigns could be expected potentially ruin their already harmonious relationship, turning it into a conflicting relationship instead. The finding of this research is essential to the policy makers to effectively design the corrective measure to increase inter-religious understandings and peaceful co-existence among the societies in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Anti-Muslim campaigns, community relationship, Buddhists, Muslims, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Burgher ethnic groups have been living in Sri Lanka for decades. Majority of the Sinhalese group profess Buddhism, while a small number profess Christianity. Majority of the Tamil group follow Hinduism, while some other follows Christianity. Muslims in Sri Lanka are called “Sri Lankan Moors” and “Sri Lankan Muslims”. They have been merely called Sri Lankan Muslims in contemporary Sri Lanka, and there is no other name indicating their race or ethnicity or community type except for the name “Muslim”. Muslims live all over the Island of Sri Lanka, and they are the majority in Ampara and Trincomalee districts. About 60% of the Muslims live in Buddhist majority regions of Sri Lanka, and at the same time, they are experts in the Sinhala language as well. This position has given an opportunity for most of the Muslims to socialize with the majority community, Buddhists. Among the Burghers, majority of them profess Christianity and they belong to the European race. Most Buddhists live in different parts of the Island except for the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. The important point to be noted here is that in these areas, different ethnic groups live together, including some Sinhala-Buddhists who speak Tamil language, while Sinhala language is the mother tongue of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka. The mother tongue of most Burghers is Sinhala while some other Burghers speak English. The mother tongue of Muslims and Tamils is the Tamil language. Although Arabs are the ancestors of Muslims, they, nonetheless, speak Tamil as their mother tongue in Sri Lanka. Historically, Sri Lanka has had trade relations with the Arabian Peninsular. However, during the colonial period (1505-1948), the arrival of Arabs to Sri Lanka was blocked by the Portuguese and Dutch. Later on, the connection of the Sri Lankan Muslims was developed with the South Indian people, who speak the Tamil language. As a result of the connection with the south Indian people, Muslims of Sri Lanka, adopted the Tamil language as their mother tongue [1]. Although the mother tongue of the Sri Lankan Muslims is the Tamil language, the community relationship of Sri Lankan Muslims with Tamils is slighter as compared to the Buddhist community [2]. This nature further strengthened, soon after the LTTE’s unjustifiable agitations against the Muslims of Sri Lanka in 1990s.

Historically, the cordial relationships between Buddhists and Muslims have been established for more than 10centuries. The Sinhalese kings and Buddhist public, have driven more support to the Muslims rather than to other communities. The Muslims were rescued by the Sinhalese Kings and the Buddhist public during times of crisis. The Muslims of Sri Lanka lived peacefully and respectfully, with the Sinhalese Kings and the Buddhist public during that time. Once, if the Muslims were given a chance to decide whether to support Buddhists or Tamils, they preferred to support Buddhists. Later on, the relationship was sympathetically maintained between the respective communities. However, in 1915, some Buddhist extremist groups began initiating conflicts against the Muslims. Evidently, this attack was against a group of Muslims that was due to the business rivalries, because during that time, the Muslims of the area established some massive trade stores in the metropolitan areas. This Muslim

group was called; the Indian Coast Moors, against whom the attacks were carried out by the Buddhist extremist groups [3]. Therefore, it is difficult to come to a conclusion on whether the attack was against the Muslims as a whole and has nothing to do with religion at all, because it appears to be business rivalries. There are also arguments as to that whether this was the first unrest between the Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka. However, it cannot be denied that the Buddhists' attack in the past century was conceived as a foundation to the Buddhist Nationalism movement in the current unrest to have a heavy unrest and misunderstanding about Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka. Even after that period (1915), Buddhist-Muslim relationship was properly maintained [4]. Whenever it is necessary, the Muslims of Sri Lanka used to extend their support towards the Buddhists in Sri Lanka reciprocally; the Buddhists also acknowledged and apprehended the need of Muslims and helped them as well. This situation went on and continued to exist up until 2010.

The dispute started between Buddhists and Tamils (LTTE) of Sri Lanka in 1983, was brought to a settlement by the Government of Sri Lanka in 2009. Followed by this victory, all ethnic groups of Sri Lanka expected that; in future; all members of the society may develop the prevalence of peace, social harmony and coexistence in Sri Lanka. In contrast, various types of issues started to happen. A number of Buddhist extremist groups started to celebrate the above victory indicating as a great success of Buddhists in Sri Lanka. In other words, some of the Buddhists were boosted and ran through by their achievements and they used their name of religion to bring together the rest of the Buddhists as well as spread hatred against second minority-Muslims including their religion-Islam. These groups also obtained the support of the Sri Lankan Government (2009- 2014) to advance these activities. They started signing the name of their religion Buddhism and elected some of them as their representatives and leaders. They started propagating the idealism of Sinhala-Buddhist Racism among the people of the Sri Lankan Buddhists. This situation has supported the Buddhists to consider the minorities as their enemies and to create an illusion that the minorities are terribly growing since recent past years in Sri Lanka. Upon the end of the issues of the LTTE, the strength of Tamil community, consequently, declined. Inadvertently, the attention of the Buddhists turned towards the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka instead. They proclaimed that the Muslim population and its religion are growing rapidly to the extent that it becomes a threat to the Buddhists. At the same time, the Buddhist Nationalist Groups (BNGs) such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Sinhala Rawaya (SR) and Rawana Balaya (RB) also, as an organisation, stimulated propagation against Muslims of Sri Lanka, which was in steady progress due to the strength in number of the Buddhist population in Sri Lanka and the Buddhist religion. Further, the BNGs made comparisons of the growth of Muslims in contrast to the declination of the status of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka as a threat to the existence of Buddhists as a dominant group. They substantiated these propagations with researches on the population growth of Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka. They condemned the Muslims for suspiciously converting Sri Lanka into a Muslim country; building mosques for religious purposes and converting Buddhists into Muslims. They also criticized the

behaviour of the Muslim ladies of wearing *hijab*, *niqab* and *burqa* with the aim of insulting the religion of Islam, and criticized slaughtering of cattle as a disliked activity for the Buddhists. In addition, they condemned the establishment of the Madrasa (religious teaching centers) located in some regions of the country, spread misconceptions that Islam supports extremism and terrorism and disseminate lies about Islam and Muslims to the general public. Ultimately, they declared that this country belongs solely to Buddhists, whereas Muslims and Tamils are immigrant inhabitants. Some Buddhists propagate that the Muslims should go to Arabia and Tamils should go to Tamil Nadu (India). Both religions were being threatened to be persecuted by the BNGs. There are misconceptions about Islam and Muslims which have been spread in Sri Lanka by the BNGs. They initiated hate campaigns by, among other things, issuing handbills and conducting press conferences in mass media to spread misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims. Furthermore, the hate campaigns of the BNGs then move towards attacking the *halal* certification for consumer products. They attacked some mosques in Sri Lanka, which have been in use for decades and tried to justify the demolition of the Muslim Sacred mosques by arguing that the Mosques were located on Buddhist sacred lands. The BNGs also tried to damage some other worship places in some other areas in Sri Lanka as well and contented that these places belonged to the Buddhists. They criticized the growth of the Muslim population in Sri Lanka and the rhetoric gender nature of the Muslim males and females. The Muslim employers of Sri Lanka were being accused of sexually harassing their female Buddhist employees in trade stores. The BNGs got together and united with the Buddhist public to engage in a mob to set fire on Muslim-owned trade stores, especially in Aluthgama and Beruwela areas of Sri Lanka¹¹. Finally, the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka were instigated by the BNGs to hold prejudiced view towards the Muslims in recent years in Sri Lanka.

However, some other Buddhists sympathize with the Muslims of Sri Lanka during the time of campaigns and criticized the attacks of the BNGs' against them. Therefore, in current Sri Lanka, it has emerged a confusing nature regarding the campaigns of the BNGs against the Muslims, whether the Buddhists as a whole have been carrying out these protests or whether they have got any plan to give up the relationship with Muslims, henceforth, in the future. The present scenario of the Buddhist-Muslim relationship in Sri Lanka has been realized by the researcher and has seen as gap, which requires an academic investigation and a comprehensive research. Therefore, this research attempts to identify the outstanding quality of historical relationship between Buddhists and Muslims as well as its nature

¹¹ An ethnic riots massively erupted in Aluthgama, Dharga Town, Valipanna and Beruwela towns located in the South of Sri Lanka on 15 June 2014. The area has a large Muslim population that lived alongside a larger Sinhalese-Buddhist community. The incident that reportedly triggered the riots was an altercation between a Buddhist monk and three Muslims from the area. Following the incident, a large rally was organised to condemn the alleged attack on the Buddhist monk. The BBS participated in this rally and Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero, the General Secretary of the BBS, made racist and inflammatory remarks against Muslims at the rally. His remarks provoked mobs to attack Muslim-owned businesses and homes in the surrounding areas. During the riots that followed, four persons including three Muslims were killed and over a hundred Muslim homes and businesses were destroyed.

in post-war context. Also, this study tries to explore the views in regard to recent campaigns and the impacts of it on the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to achieve the above objectives, the primary and secondary data were being obtained and methodologically, this research is a part quantitative and a part qualitative in nature. Also the data were being collected with questionnaires and are analyzed with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and a semi structured interviews were being conducted as well with analysed by coding manually, in order to further confirm the findings of the questionnaires. It is notable mentioning that the process of analysis has not been presented in detail in this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Under this topic it is described the views of the respondents after the analysis of questionnaires and the interviews. Analysis was done under four main sub topics such as historical relationship, views on recent hate campaign, impacts of recent tension on community relationship and post-tension community relationship.

Historical Relationship

As indicated earlier, the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims has been in existence for a very long time in Sri Lanka. This relationship continued for more than 1000 years, and there has not been any available information about conflicts that happened between Buddhists and Muslims [5]. It is an important fact to acknowledge that they actually support each other, share and care for each other on social and cultural occasions, move closely with neighbours, happily enjoy friendship among each other, are the aspects in which Buddhists and Muslims adhere to deeply. Apart from this, the Muslims of Sri Lanka are identified with Buddhist family names called “Vasagama” [6]. This is also an important aspect that tightens the association of family set up. In this manner, the Buddhist-Muslim inter-marriage or mix marriage in which maintains the relationship of the two religions would still prevail. Some examples found through the field work and the Media further proved this. In particular, the researcher has observed that in the area of Kandy, Sri Lanka; there is a Buddhist lady married to a Muslim man that lives together happily while also maintaining a better link with her extended family. Although, the woman professes Islam after marriage, these families are not separated on the basis of religious difference (Buddhist-Muslim)¹² [7].

Further, it is pertinent to mention here that, on the funerals of the Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, they visit each other, irrespective of their religious differences and express their condolences

¹² For further information regarding the subject see (Razick et al. 2015).

with pity. Recently, when an elder Buddhist passed away, a Muslim team lifted the funeral casket till the burial ground with full sympathy. Besides this, toddling adopted Buddhist children of Islam; held in past years, these practices show that the Buddhists and Muslims are all Sri Lankan citizens living in a united and joyous society [8]. These are the special features that prevailed between these two communities for centuries, and the researcher significantly proved that this practice is still in fact prevalent currently.

Views on Recent Hate Campaign

In this study, the Buddhists and Muslims were asked about their views on the hate campaigns of the BNGs held in Sri Lanka. In other words, they were asked to express their feeling regarding the unrest in Sri Lanka. It was observed at the field work that a sizable Buddhists was reluctant to agree on whether the attacks against Muslims have been initiated by the entire Buddhist community in Sri Lanka. And some other Buddhists accepted that the BNGs are considered as a third party, so there is no stake in a conventional relationship between the Buddhist and Muslims in Sri Lanka. 25% of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka expressly accepted the fact that the BNGs actually do not represent the Buddhist community at large and they actually do not follow the Buddhists philosophy accurately. About 50% of the Buddhists do not disclose their point of views on the campaigns of the BNGs and they are unable to come to a conclusion on the recent activities of the BNGs against Muslims of Sri Lanka. Also, they were reluctant to express their sentiments regarding whether or not these hate campaigns have tarnished the image of Buddhists and their religion as a whole, and hurdled the peaceful co-existence they had with Muslims. This scenario exposes the cooperative mentality and moods of the Buddhists in terms of non-betrayal of the BNGs as they belong to the Buddhist race. Nonetheless, an important point to consider is that about more than 80% of the Buddhists accept the fact that Muslims have been attacked by the BNGs in recent past years and also do not recognize nor agree with these campaigns. Furthermore, these attacks could not be seen as an effort with the full support of the Buddhist Community. Also, about 70% of the Buddhist opined that these attacks do not want to be seen as a clash or a big issue between Buddhists and Muslims¹³ [9]. Also, the significant number of Buddhists attempted to clarify the misunderstandings of Muslim religious practices and true nature of the Islamic teachings. The result of the research clearly shows that the recent campaigns of the BNGs could not be a major disturbing factor to distort the everlasting relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka.

When the Muslims of Sri Lanka were asked to express their opinion on the hate campaigns of the BNGs, in fact, the Muslims as a whole looked to expose the current tension are instigated by a segment of monkhood and laymen. The Muslims feel that these groups should not be acknowledged as part of the Buddhist community, since they commit atrocious acts against Muslims and these groups

¹³ For further details see (Razick, A.S. et al. 2016).

worked hard to stop social interaction between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka, through instigation of Buddhists' minds through hate campaigns with the name of Buddhism and Sinhalese-Buddhists racism. In addition to this, the Muslims are apprehensive and stressed as they can no longer survive in Sri Lanka as a result of these campaigns as they have been treated badly, and their religious activities have been falsely interpreted by the Sri Lankan mass media and negatively propagated by the rallies of the BNGs¹⁴ [10]. Besides that, the Muslims point out that these hate campaigns are definitely hurdles to a peaceful co-existence between the communities, especially among the Buddhists and Muslims. Remarkably, even with the attacks of the BNGs' against them, the Muslims still have intention to clear the misunderstandings that have spread among the Buddhist community, through effortless initiatives to provide explanations in breaking misconceptions.

Impacts of Recent Tension on Community Relationship

When the Buddhists were asked to express their opinion regarding the impact of the hate campaigns on the Buddhist-Muslim relationship in Sri Lanka, their reply was that the campaigns were launched to disturb the Buddhist-Muslim relationship, although no damage to the Buddhist-Muslim relationship has been caused yet. In other words, although the BNGs have expressed hatred about the Muslims and Islam, the majority population of Sri Lanka have not misunderstood Muslims and Islam, thus portraying the failure of the campaigns in achieving its objective to spread hatred about Islam and Muslims among the Buddhist majority community. The majority Buddhists expressed their point of view that they are not going to accept and put forward a wrong impression and misconceptions about Islam and Muslims spread by the so called BNGs. Even though these wrong ideas about Islam and Muslims have been spread, the traditional and everlasting relationship between Muslims and Buddhists has not changed¹⁵ [11]. Eventually, they feel that it is neither a Buddhist-Muslim clash nor is it a matter of excitement that is why, the majority of the Buddhist community do not hate Islam and Muslims. Therefore, it is evidently clear that the BNG's campaigns and their negative role play have not changed the positive mind set of the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka. In other words, the good opinion and perception about the Islam and Muslims have continued to persist and maintain in Sri Lanka for the better association and friendship between Buddhist and Muslim.

When the impacts of the recent campaigns on Buddhist-Muslim relationship were analysed from the Muslim point of view, most of the Muslims do not express anger or hatred towards the Buddhists of Sri Lanka, even with all these atrocities that they have caused. However, they do feel distress over the wrong perception and misconception about them, because of the sudden and unexpected nature of the attacks by the BNGs. The Muslims do not look towards Buddhists in general

¹⁴ For further details see (Long, A.S. et al. 2017).

¹⁵ For further explanation please refer (Long, A.S. et al. 2016)

as racists even after the hate campaigns against them. However, according to their opinion, these campaigns could gain enough power to destroy the traditional relationship with the Buddhists and could also cause harm and create greater conflicts between the Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka. Although, both the Buddhists and Muslims have not given credence to the recent undermining attempts undertaken by the BNGs, there is still probability that the Buddhists could be turned against Muslims or vice versa, due to the provocations from one community to the other, in present Sri Lanka.

Post-Tension Community Relationship

This research has found further results of contemporary nature of the Buddhist-Muslim relationship in Sri Lanka following the recent attacks by the BNGs against Muslims. For this purpose, 14 items were used between the Buddhists, primarily, in which 7 were used for exploring the views on the aspects of the Muslim socio-culture. During the time of the hate campaign, the aspects of Muslim socio-culture propagated by the BNGs to the public are the key threats towards Buddhists and their religion in Sri Lanka. In fact, the relationship of Buddhists with Muslims in Sri Lanka has not changed following the aftermath of the hate campaigns and the close contacts with neighbour Muslims, keeping the Muslims as their friends, participating in cultural events and the continuous business connections with Muslims are the daily traditional connections, which continues to exist. This situation is an evident indication that the hate campaigns of the BNGs did not put any major negative impact on the majority Buddhist population of Sri Lanka. Whether the Muslim socio-cultural aspects, as negatively propagated by the BNGs, are threats, are considered as hurdles in the Buddhist-Muslim relations or not. As a response, they indicate one aspect which is the slaughtering of cattle, which according to them, causes harm to mankind as per the Buddhist philosophy. Muslims cannot stop to slaughter cattle, which may have some negative impact on the Muslim-Buddhist relationship in Sri Lanka. Apart from this, one of the Muslim socio-cultural aspects that the habits of wearing hijabs by Muslim women and this *hijab* system earns some disadvantages to the Muslim women in the surroundings where the Buddhist live in majority according to Buddhists' point of view, which also has the tendency to break the line of continuous positive relationship in Sri Lanka. Apart from the slaughtering of cattle and wearing *hijab*, there are some other aspects of Muslim socio-culture such *ashalal* Certification, Muslim trade stores, Muslim settlements on sacred lands and origin of Muslims in Sri Lanka, that were taken to propagate against Muslims of Sri Lanka. But the majority of the Buddhists are of the opinion that these Muslim practices are not seen as threats to the Buddhists and Buddhism in Sri Lanka¹⁶ [12,13]. The majority of the Buddhists believe that these aspects of Islam and Muslims do not cause harm and are not aspects to prevent or disconnect the Muslim traditional relationship with the Buddhist.

¹⁶ For further information see (Razick, A.S. et al. 2016) and (Long, A.S. et al. 2017).

Aftermath of the recent unrest, when the Muslims were asked about the relationship with Buddhists, they responded that they have been living normally without changing their connections with Buddhists. They have accepted the fact that there are a few aspects of socio-culture which are not acceptable by the Buddhists. Nonetheless, the Muslim-Buddhist relationship continues to be maintained by most of the people in Sri Lanka. Mainly, the slaughtering of cattle and wearing *hijabs* by Muslim ladies are some of the practices of Muslims, which the Buddhists do not like and reject. The dissatisfactions caused to Buddhists by the Muslim religious activities should be tolerated by the majority Buddhist of Sri Lanka, in order to maintain a more loving and prosperous community relationship. For this purpose, Muslims of Sri Lanka are in need of Shariah guidelines which should be adopted in the current context of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the aspects of cattle slaughtering, ladies hijabs, which were identified as hindrances by the Buddhists, should also be taken into account for discussion through organizing dialogs among Buddhists and Islamic leaders in Sri Lanka. Such initiatives will strengthen the Muslim-Buddhist relationship and help societies to have a good understanding and relationship in future, for the benefit of all the communities at large.

CONCLUSION

The results found that 50% of the Buddhists have maintained a moderate approach on the recent protests against Muslims in Sri Lanka. Another 25% of the Buddhists have severely supported to these hate campaigns against Muslims. So, the BNGs have somewhat succeeded in their efforts to convince a group of Buddhists in Sri Lanka through these hate campaigns which were organized by the name of Buddhism religious nationalism and Sinhalese-Buddhists racism to collect the Buddhists together against Muslims. The seeding of a wrong perception about Islam and Muslims in Sri Lanka have rooted in the Buddhists' minds and created a suspicious nature on Muslim stereotyping.

On the other hand, the recent hate campaigns have not impacted the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka and the Muslims are still hopeful of reviving their once harmonious relationship with Buddhists as better as maintained throughout the history. Therefore, the long harmonious coexistence between Buddhists and Muslims and the hate campaign recently has proven a time-tested relationship that deserves to be reinstated. So these findings are important and useful for policy makers in Sri Lanka, especially, the public opinion on the hate campaigns is important for it has a silent impact on the peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Also, these results are useful and would be an extensive literature for future researches in respective area of study.

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