

## **Preserving Minority Identities in the Process of Building Nationalism; A study based on Beruwala**

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### **Abstract**

Beruwala is an area in Kalutara District in Western Province, Sri Lanka. According to folklore, it is the most ancient settlement of the Muslim community on the island. This study mainly focuses on how Muslims are maintaining unity in diversity in this particular area. As the methodology of this study, the historical data was firstly collected about how Muslim settlements were first localized in Beruwala. Secondly, this study pays attention to how the Muslim community in Beruwala shapes their identity as Sri Lankans while protecting their cultural values as Muslims. In the practice of nationalism, it is evident that usually, minority communities are shaping their identities with the dissolution of their cultural values but Beruwala is one of the most prominent examples to show how the national identity is created without compromising their cultural values. This type of unity in diversity can appear with special conditions. Finally, this study will discuss the current position of Beruwala Muslim culture with recent political movements.

Keywords - Cultural values, Identity, Muslims, Nationalism

### **Introduction**

Beruwala is one of the busiest towns in the western coastal area. This town can be identified as a commercial hub. The etymology of the name of Beruwala is derived from the Sinhalese word for the place where the sail is lowered. There are two Sinhala words, ‘be’ (lowered) and ‘ruwala’ (a sail). When Arab merchants were sailing, they had seen this land and then stopped their vessels. This story discovers the etymology of the word. According to the folklores, Beruwala is the first Muslim settlement in Sri Lanka. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a course of Arab trade, Beruwala was established as an area with Muslim settlements. Somali Sheikh, Yusuf Bin Ahmed al-Kwneyn who was a famous scholar and traveler converted the people of Sri Lanka and the Maldives into Muslims during that period. There is another story about the colonization of Beruwala. In 22<sup>nd</sup> Hijra’s year (604 A.D.) Sultan Badruddin, Shalā Ud-din, and Mohammed sailed from Yemen and Badrudin’s son Samsudin disembarked from Mannar. Mohammed’s son Shadrudin sailed more towards the south and disembarked from Beruwala

and then he colonized this land (Shukri, 1986, p. 345). However, after this colonization, this land continuously propagated Muslim political power and also commercial hegemony.

History has clear evidence about the Muslim community and the above mentioned political and commercial hegemony of Muslims in this particular territory in late medieval times. After the declaration of the Kurunegala Kingdom, unstable conditions in western and south-western Sri Lanka could be identified. This situation could be recognized far more clearly when the capital of the kingdom was shifted to Gampola. Around 1348 A.D., John De Marignolli on his way back from China stopped his vessel at the “harbor of Seyllan called Pervilis”. When he anchored his ship Muslims robbed and detained his property for four months and also Coya Jaan who was the chieftain of Muslims conducted the journey to see the “Kota in Seyllan”. Ananda Kulasuriya assumes that this harbor named as Perivils must probably be Beruwala (Kulasuriya, 1976, p. 150). According to Marignolli’s report of his journey, the power Muslims had in the coastal area can be identified.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Kotte became the political capital of Sri Lanka. In this epoch, Beruwala was again mentioned in historical texts. *Girā Sandesha* and *Kokila Sandesha* are the famous epistles in Kotte which detect the culture and power of Muslims in Beruwala. Through the 104<sup>th</sup> poem in *Girā Sandesha*, the above-mentioned status of Muslims in Beruwala can be identified. This poem cites “*Ran pan sawan yon liya randanā nimala*” which means Muslim women are wearing golden earrings and also it mentions the beauty of Muslim women in Beruwala. Also, this poem cites gold and gem stalls and banderoles near the sea in Beruwala (Girā Sandesha, 2009, p. 65). Before westerners came to Sri Lanka, Muslims handled the trade commerce of the Indian Ocean and they have selected Beruwala as one of the main points of their trade (De. Silva, 1986, p.152). In the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D., Western imperialists came to the East and consolidated economic and religious power through the control of colonies. Especially when the Portuguese came to the East, they collected many things from eastern countries. At that time Beruwala harbor and Muslims acted the main role in the export economy in Sri Lanka (Siriweera, 1994, p.138). Fernao de Queyroz who was a famous Portuguese writer mentioned in his book that Beruwala was a Muslim territory and he used the term ‘Barbari’ to identify Beruwala (Queyroz, 1939, p.742). The term ‘Bar’ means ‘country’ in the Arabic language so Queyroz noted Beruwala as a ‘Muslim country’. It is very important evidence to prove the major power of Muslims since the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D in Beruwala.

From time to time Muslims became the majority of the Beruwala area and they spread their culture as well as shaping some cultural things in alignment with other communities in this area. Kechchimale mosque is the oldest religious building of Muslims and the interesting point is that other religious groups also worship it. Masjid Al Abrar, which is one of the oldest mosques in Sri Lanka is also situated in Beruwala. The famous Buddhist temples including Galapāta Vihāraya and Kande Vihāraya are also situated in Beruwala. Yunāni medicine practice is the most famous hygiene practice in this area, not only among Muslims but other communities also take Yunāni medicine.

When focusing attention on the current situation of Beruwala, now it is a town with a Muslim majority. According to the demographic data, 94.10% of Muslims live in this area and 06.85% of Sinhalese, 0.50% of Sri Lankan Tamils, 0.17% of Indian Tamils, and 0.05% of other communities reside here. Tamil, Arabic, and Sinhala languages are spoken around and the specialty is that people of Beruwala can communicate their necessities in both Tamil and Sinhala languages.

Gem and Gold industry, fishery and other commercial practices are the main subsistent patterns in Beruwala since ancient times. Commercial practices are mainly controlled by Muslims and the main buyers are Sinhalese and Tamils around the Beruwala area. According to this, commercial practices had automatically constructed the cultural harmony between Muslims and other communities around Beruwala. People can identify that the community in Beruwala celebrates several cultural ceremonies not only related to Islam but also Buddhism and Hinduism. The majority of Muslims in Beruwala live in the structure of Sri Lankan culture but the specialty is that they protect their cultural and religious values well and hand-over them to their younger generations as well. Usually, the truth in Sri Lanka is that when the Sri Lankan national identity is constructed, it plays actually '*Sinhalization*' rather than '*Sri Lankanization*'. In the same way, Muslims also tend to align themselves with a global Islamic identity rather than integrating into the Sri Lankan culture. According to this matter, Sri Lanka has huge problems in the long run. The fact is that the majority community bears the largest portion for constructing the national identity but it is also responsible for the demolition of the cultural values of minority groups. Eventually, this will create cultural conflicts between the majority and the minority. So, this study will analyze how to make the national identity while protecting minority's rights and also on the pre-conditions which can be utilized for the protection of cultural values of minority clans with special reference to the Beruwala.

## Method

In this research, the researcher mainly used two methods to collect the data. A literature survey was done as the first step of this study. Primary and secondary literature sources were used to identify the history and gradual development of Beruwala area. As a person belonging to this space, the researcher did a field-based participatory study to recognize the recent social and cultural situation of the area and participated in several cultural events during the past few years to get a deep understanding of this landscape. Finally, the collected data were analyzed with the understanding of the concept of Nationalism and made some hypotheses about preserving minority identities in the process of building Nationalism based in Beruwala.

## Discussion

Places are not disconnected, they always preserve connections with other places but every place has its own uniqueness. The above-mentioned uniqueness has emerged with the accompaniment of the diversity of other places. Without diversity, uniqueness does not appear. This is the main concept of unity in diversity concerning the ‘place’ concept and without understanding this reality, one particular identity cannot be created to connect the different communities. Making connections with different communities can be identified as the process of nationalism. Nationalism can be defined as the practical politics of nation-making. Beruwala is one of the prominent models to analyze the uniqueness surrounded by a lot of diversities as earlier mentioned. This part of the content will discuss what is meant by the unity in diversity of Beruwala and how it contributes to building the Sri Lankan identity without compromising their cultural values.

Firstly, it is necessary to understand what national identity is. Nationalism is a modern phenomenon which aims to develop a sense of belonging for people in a particular country. When constructing nationalism, it uses some elements to bring about unity among different ethnic groups such as national dress, national anthem, national flag, etc. All the ethnic groups have their own culture and history but in the practice of the nation-making process, all ethnic groups cannot be identified or represented in equilibrium. This leads to huge problems in the future. When analyzing the problems related to nationalism in Sri Lanka, clearly these types of problems can be identified and they play a major role in creating conflicts within the majority and minority communities. In Sri Lanka the majority community is Sinhalese and there are many numerical minority groups with this majority. They highly contribute to preserving the Sri Lankan economy but these minority communities are discriminated by the majority within

the Sri Lankan context. In Beruwala, a different situation of nationalism-related activities can be seen. They live within the construction of national ideology but since the early time, they have not lost their cultural values. It is evident that the Beruwala Muslim community has shaped their identities to some extent to live with each other, but their cultural values have not been affected.

Language is the most important fact to make reconciliation between majority and minority communities. Miscommunication is one of the main causes of creating conflicts. As previously mentioned, Muslims are the majority of Beruwala and Sinhalese, Tamils, and other communities are the minorities in this particular area but there is no language barrier as people usually can communicate with others in both Sinhala and Tamil languages. Muslims are famous as merchants in Beruwala but mostly their buyers are from other communities. So, Muslims can speak Sinhala and automatically other minority groups can speak Tamil because when they live together, they normally adapt to another language as a result of everyday usage. Language may play a major role in creating conflicts, but in the Beruwala area, no conflicts had arisen concerning language issues. In day to day life, people around Beruwala use all three languages as a practice. This trend can be identified in government offices, hospitals, schools, and public places. This rendering ability is not compromising the culture because they are usually bilingual so they preserve their culture through their language and they are knowledgeable about other's cultures through other languages. This rendering ability is one of the most useful factors in constructing reconciliation.

Annually Muslims celebrate Ramadan and Prophet's birthday as their main religious events in Beruwala. They also participate in other cultural events in Sri Lanka. Beruwala town is surrounded by Buddhists and Hindus so they celebrate Vesak, Poson, Sinhala and Hindu New Year, etc. When someone visits Beruwala during the above-mentioned festival seasons many cultural events created by Muslims can be seen. Usually every year during Vesak and Poson seasons, Muslims in Beruwala organize alms giving events (*Dansel*), *Thoran*, and other cultural events. Most Buddhist people in Kalutara and adjoining areas attend these ceremonies in Beruwala. This type of cultural harmony can be seen in Beruwala so it is a major sign of integrity. Usually, these cultural events are very colorful so they can be used as a practice of integration.

As earlier mentioned Kechchimale mosque is an ideal example of Sri Lankan cultural harmony. Muslims believe that this mosque is the first Muslim settlement in Sri Lanka and

another fact is that Sinhalese and Tamils also attend to worship here. Inside the mosque, the traditional Islamic culture appears but other people normally adapt to the Islamic beliefs such as before males attend the prayers, they clean their parts of the body as Muslims, females cover their hair as Muslim women. This picture is really beautiful to see as Sri Lankans because other communities accept Muslim values and they too practice them. Muslims also attend some ceremonies in Buddhist temples such as Perahera and sometimes they are the main sponsors of Buddhist ceremonies. These trends do not demolish any community's values. These trends are useful to make the Nationalism.

The fishery is one of the main subsistent patterns in Beruwala and most people attend it. There are different types of fisheries and there is an admixture within all communities around Beruwala. While they are fishing, they practice their own beliefs for self-defence. While the fishers are fishing from the net they sing Sinhala folk songs and shout to venture with a different language. So this ancient subsistent pattern accommodates the integration.

This cultural harmony can be utilized to make the Sri Lankan identity because 'sharing' is one of the main things in making the national ideology. This type of thing does not alter or affect their inherent cultural values. Food culture, dresses, and sports also are some of the common inter-ethnic usages in this area. Beruwala Muslim people highly preserve their cultural values like other Muslims in Sri Lanka but the specialty is that these people make and maintain cultural harmony with other communities. Another important characteristic is that marginalization cannot be seen in this area because there are no language, economic, political, or cultural barriers within the majority and minority. The majority of Muslims are taking the responsibility for caring and sharing with minority communities.

The last few years can be named as a period where extremist movements occurred from different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. This type of extremism affects the above discussed cultural harmony and it proves that some unexpected incidents can make conflicts within majorities and minorities.

## **Conclusion**

Conflicts between majority and minority groups are one of the major issues around the world. In post-colonial Sri Lanka, numerous issues related to the majority and minorities can be seen. The fact is that when a minority community lives with the majority community, automatically they shape some of their identities. If the identity of minorities is shaped, it will demolish their special cultural values. This process leads to the creation of huge conflicts

afterwards. When creating nationalism or reconciliation within the minority and majority, people have to use some methods to preserve their cultural values and identities. Beruwala can be used as a prominent example for constructing nationalism along with protecting the values of minorities. According to the study, it is evident that some requirements for creating the above-mentioned scenario are economic strength, political stability, and cordial interaction with other communities, and the state of education. When someone fulfills the above requirements, nobody can intercede easily to make conflicts but extremism can be involved in different aspects. When constructing one identity within different groups, all groups will have to sacrifice even a smaller amount of their practices because some cultural practices are not strictly allowed in some other communities but there is no issue in practising the things only within one particular group which are not accepted by other communities. The main policy is that we have to protect our values but we cannot demolish other's values as well. Until people understand this reality nobody can make reconciliation within communities. Policymakers can use Beruwala as a model to create better reconciliation among communities while protecting all their cultural values without compromising their ethnic identity.

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