A Critical Review of the Misconceptions and Reconciliation between the Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnoreligious country, whose constitution has given freedom to manifest one's own religious beliefs and promote peaceful co-existence. Research has shown that there has been polarization between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and the minority Muslim ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka in the recent past. The objective of this study is to identify the reasons for blaming the "other" in the context of the two ethno-religious groups in the study and propose remedies. The study adopted a descriptive and interpretive paradigm within qualitative approach. Data were drawn from secondary sources to critically examine the phenomenon under study. In contextualizing the concepts of "self" and "other" in the context of "blaming the other", the "self" needs to be open to accept the "otherness". This study found the causes and consequences of the misconceptions that have been targeted against the Muslim ethno- religious group that acts as barriers to the Buddhist- Muslim relationship in Sri Lanka. Placing the Muslims to take the "other" position, the shift in attitudes, perceptions and behaviour of the Sinhalese Buddhists', "self" is not due to their own judgement or internal reasoning but due to the misconceptions and irrationalities constructed by the social influence and social media. Though the Muslims' reconstruction of their ethno- religious identity is due to cultural dimensions and their urge to reform their ethno-religious group, they are questioned for radicalization. The transformation of Muslim women's attire from "saree" to "abaya" has posed a threat to the mainstream society. However, whether the attire is the "saree" or "Abaya", it is an alien acculturation. To have unity in diversity, inter-religious education and inter-faith dialogue between followers of the two religions, Buddhism and Islam need to be promoted as both religions command engagement with the "other" on the basis of peace, tolerance and non-violence, regardless of the differences that may exist. Understanding the fundamental unity of the human kind and their ethno-religious and cultural plurality as the two sides of the same coin, they need to engage with and understand one another as a "Sri Lankan".

Keywords: Sinhalese Buddhists, Muslims, misconceptions, "other", inter-faith dialogue, Sri Lankans.

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is a multireligious, multi ethnic and multilingual country. The Sinhalese are the major ethnic group with a population of 74.9%, among whom the Sinhala Buddhists constitute 70. 19%. (Razick, Long & Salleh, 2015). According to the Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka in 2012, Muslims constitute 9.7 percent of the total population in Sri Lanka (Imtiyaz, 2021) and are the second largest minority. In this pluralistic country, every citizen is given freedom to manifest his/her own *religious beliefs* as freedom of religion is a protected right under Chapter II, Article 9 of the constitution of Sri Lanka. Article 9 of the constitution states:

The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly, it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring to all religions the rights granted by Articles 10 and 14(1)(e).

Accordingly, Articles 10 and 14(1)(e) state:

Every person is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice." and "Every citizen is entitled to the freedom, either by himself or in association with others, and either in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice or teaching.

The constitution of Sri Lanka gives provision to recognize and promote peaceful coexistence by giving ethno- religious freedom, but what has emerged in the recent past is the polarization between the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and the minority Muslim ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka, which had led to conflicts as a result of religious extremism entering the ideological domain at all levels. Although time has passed, there is yet to see mechanisms for resolution and reconciliation as there is a sense of fear, internal struggles and the culture of blaming others.

After the violent three-decade civil war between the LTTE and the state military forces was brought to an end in 2009, there emerged another form of civic tension influenced by the nationalistic forces among the Sinhalese Buddhists, whose hegemonic status and actions were targeted at the Muslims (Imtiyaz, 2019). This led to unrest in the country, eventually resulting in the formation of resentment and oppression among the Muslims. This phenomenon was taken as an opportunity and was nurtured by a group of people, whose influence reinforced vengeance in the minds of a very few extremists among the Muslim minority, leading to the terrific Easter Sunday suicidal attack in 2019. The goodwill and peaceful relationship that existed between the Sinhalese Buddhists and the Muslims transformed in to a polar opposite

situation, where each ethnic group was seen as the opponent of the other. The Muslims who were marginalized and oppressed were resentful about the continuing dominance of institutionalized violence. The consequences of this unfortunate situation brought the religion Islam and the Muslim community under scrutiny for their advancement in their personal, social, religious, economic, and political life. The Muslims have not yet been able to acquire and reclaim their lost image. Whatsoever, they have been able to earn prejudice instead of psychological support from the Sinhalese Buddhists. This phenomenon has led to many social, cultural and political issues. The advancement of technology and interconnecting tools can create positive connectivity among people, however, these were also seen to play their adverse roles. Hence, ethnic groups of different religious and cultural backgrounds are seen to be segregated. As a result, the minority face prejudice and exclusion in the pluralistic society of the democratic state of Sri Lanka. It is a sorry state that this trend is seen even at the grassroot level where the villagers are divided on ethnic and racial lines. The authorities concerned are still unable to understand, address and fulfil the diverse needs and grievances of the minority in Sri Lanka.

Considering what transpired after the Easter Sunday attack, there is a need for a social transformation process that requires disempowering those who instigate violent thoughts and actions on the basis that every citizen has the same freedom and rights to be respected and recognized as a Sri Lankan irrespective of their ethnoreligious identity. Several studies have researched and analyzed the interreligious relations and conflicts from different perspectives (Imtiaz, 2021; 2019; Razick, Fowsar & Mihlar, 2020). However, there is an unseen side that is yet to be researched.

Hence, this study seeks to identify the reasons for blaming the "other" in the context of two ethnoreligious groups, the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and minority Muslims and propose remedies to address them in the Sri Lankan context.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive and interpretive paradigm within qualitative approach. As the study is based on the review of literature, data were drawn from secondary sources to critically examine the phenomenon under study. By exploring the meaning associated with the actions, experiences, and perceptions of the subjects related to the phenomena through the extant literature, a subjective understanding of the issues can be generated in order to propose remedial actions.

3. Results and Discussion

The review of literature shows that ethnoreligious plurality is neither respected nor safeguarded by the followers of each religion due to the attitude of "otherness", subsequently producing new ethnoreligious prejudice and hatred among the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and minority Muslims. This stereotype aspect is a construct that has emerged and developed by putting the "self" before the others which makes one to devalue the other. The construction of negative attitude towards the other is discussed under the self/ other dichotomy, the misconceptions of Muslims' identity construction based on Islamic Faith and finally proposes remedial actions to counter the negative stereotypes.

3.1 The reasons for blaming the "other" in the context of Sri Lanka

The root causes and consequences of the "otherness" attitude is clearly explained by seeing the concept of "self" against the "other" followed by a discussion on blaming the individual group for the anti-social and violent acts rather than collectively blaming the whole ethno- religious group. Finally, the role played by media in constructing and reinforcing the stereo types is discussed under the section.

3.1.1 The dichotomy of "self" and "other" as the misconception tool

Religion and ethnicity are inextricable in the formation of the identity of a Sri Lankan "Self". According to Al-Saidi (2014), the concepts of "self" and "other" as binary opposites has been originated by Frantz Fanon based on the idea of the "other" in post- colonial studies. The "other" concept means "not me, he is the other". The concept of the "Self" requires the existence of the constitutive "other" as the counterpart entity required for defining the "Self". This study attempts to postulate this dichotomy in the context of "blaming the other", which has intensified the misconceptions of the Muslims and the Sinhalese Buddhists. In recognizing the "self" identity of any individual, the inner conscience makes him/her to think and act in the way his/her respective religion solicits (Kurucan & Erol, 2012), which comes from a mindset that does not pave way to understand and respect the "other". This position tempts them to be reluctant to understand the true nature of the "other" religion and religious practices. The ego of the "self" tempts to control the "others'" true thoughts and feelings as they do not align with the thoughts and feelings of the "self". Hence the "self" needs to be open to accept the "otherness". The deeper or more inward the "self" goes into his/her own religion, the more he/she will be led to a "reject" state. Razick et al., (2020) has identified the Muslims to take

the "other" position, where the Muslims as a minority face prejudice and exclusion within the pluralistic society.

3.1.2   Blame the individuals and not the collective ethno-religious group

The Easter bomb attack in Sri Lanka paved way and further confirmed the Sri Lankan Muslims' position to have been transformed in to a violent "other", in which the Muslims are subjected to discrimination based on their ethno- religious practices. The Muslims' "other" identity and prosperity were targeted and they were confronted with organized violence at the hands of the conceptualized "self" that is attached to the Sinhalese-Buddhist extremists who are ideologically committed to establish complete Sinhalese dominance over the entire island (Imtiyaz, 2021). It is noteworthy of mentioning that it was not the mass Sinhalese Buddhists who fall into this domain but a fragment of this ethnic group, the so called "Sinhalese Buddhist extremists". As cited in Long et al. (2016), "Muslims in Sri Lanka have had a peaceful history of co-existence with other ethnic groups for centuries and have always been trustworthy and supportive of the rulers" (Ismail, 2016; Naleemi, 2013; Dewaraja, 1994).

The actions and response to the Easter Sunday attack and reprisals against the Muslims together with their religious practices show that they hold the Muslim ethno- religious group collectively responsible for the actions of the individual group members who had done the attack. This act of collectively blaming the entire ethnoreligious group instead of the individual group justifies "vicarious retribution" against any group member to exact revenge (Lickel et. al, 2006 cited in Bruneau et al., 2017).

3.1.3   The constructive / destructive role of Social Media

Although the majority Sinhalese Buddhists have been in good ties with the minorities founded on peaceful co-existence, mutual understanding and mutual respect, in the recent past, there has been a shift in their attitudes and perceptions of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. This shift has been supported by research, which states that "the ordinary man is influenced by rumors, misunderstanding, religious and economic factors, and was not helped by the media as well" (Razick et al., 2020). Taking the "self" position, the shift in attitudes, perception and behavior is not only due to their own judgement or internal reasoning but also due to the misconceptions and irrationalities constructed by the social network influence. The emergence of "facebook", "WhatsApp", "twitter" and other social networks have provided an easily accessible platform to propagate opinions, which may mislead many people, who may in turn "forward and share" the views with others without any scrutiny. This clearly shows that social

media and social network have a strong influence on constructing misconceptions, prejudice and posting fabricated news. The negative images portrayed by the media reinforce the constructed opinions, misconceptions, and the attitudinal shift of people through the inner motive of attaining their personal agendas. As a result, anti-Muslim sentiments are nurtured and expressed by the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalistic forces (Long et al., 2016).

3.2 Misconceptions of Muslims' identity construction based on Islamic Faith:

The reason for the construction of stereotypes by the majority Sinhalese Buddhists is based on negatively evaluated judgements about the shift of Muslims' identity from their ethnocultural aspect to ethno- religious one. The reasons and consequences of this shift is presented under the cultural dimensions, their linguistic identity, the Muslim women's attire, and mushrooming of Islamic faith schools. The discussion in this section will explain the reasons for the Muslims' need to search and reinforce the newly gained collective ethnoreligious identity.

3.2.1 The cultural Dimensions

History shows that there has been a process of acculturation among the Sri Lankan Muslim minority as they have been assimilating the values and practices of the culture in their geographical origin. With globalization, there is a fear among the Muslim ethno-religious groups whether the western culture would penetrate in to their social fabric, influencing the growth and development of the children. This cultural dimension may be harmful to their ethno- religious practices and identity. Hence, there is a greater obligation of the society and parents to give the children an environment that facilitates the children to acquire religious, moral, and ethical values. In recognizing this cultural dimension, it can be seen that the Muslims in Sri Lanka, over the last few decades have been establishing and affirming their identity based on their Islamic faith to claim the distinctiveness of their ethno- religious dimension.

3.2.2 No ownership of a language

In tracing the historical evidence, the Sri Lankan Muslims do not own a language and this makes them acculturate to the language of the other ethnic groups. The Muslims in Sri Lanka speak Tamil, Sinhalese or English depending on their geographical origin and residential location, and this has been reiterated in the extant literature (Mahroof, 1995). The Muslims of the North and East speak Tamil and assimilate the culture of the Hindus to a lesser extent,

showing the close acculturation prevalent there and most of the Southern Muslims study in Sinhala medium and use either Tamil or Sinhala as the home language. Therefore, the Muslims in the South show their Sinhala culture affinities. With the emergence of English medium instruction, the common mass have been able to be exposed to English and some of them use English as the home language. Apart from the Muslim elites who use English as the home language and claim their socio-economic status, the emergence of a strata of English-speaking Muslims can be seen in urban areas where the western fashion and culture can be a threat to children growing up in these environments. Language is considered a cultural marker of any group of people to establish their uniqueness, however, Sri Lankan Muslims do not have a language of their own. As stated by a Muslim Scholar, the group 'Muslim' "denotes a religious denomination and not an ethnic [one]…not necessarily an ethno-cultural one, but an ethnoreligious one" (Shukri, 1989: iv cited in Imtiyaz, 2021). Hence, the Muslims' plight has urged them to actively construct and claim a distinct ethnic group identity based on their ethnoreligious distinctiveness and this has played a defining role in shaping their opinions, values, attire and lifestyle.

The reconstruction of the identity of an ethnic group is reinforced by the constructivist theory which views ethnic or religious identities as a product of human actions and choices, arguing that they are constructed and transmitted, not genetically inherited from the past (Imtiyaz, 2021; Shatara, 2020). According to Stone (1995, cited in Imtiyaz, 2021), Max Weber was one of the theorists who stressed the social origin of ethnic identity. The emergence of the ethno-religious lifestyle of the Muslims has been assumed to be a threat to the majority placing the Muslims in the "other" position. With the increase in institutionalized discrimination felt by the minority, there arose an internal struggle to define their identity as Muslims and as Sri Lankans.

3.2.3 The transformation from saree to abaya

The transformation of Muslim women's clothing is questioned for radicalization. Way back in the 80's, Muslim women wore shalwars, half sarees or traditional sarees, where they covered their head with the saree itself or used a shawl. This "Mokkadu" (headcover) identity kept the Muslims separated from the Tamils' attire, as saree is an acculturation of the Tamils' attire. In seeking a distinctive ethno- religious identity, "hijab" was used to cover the head. With the different schools of thought and the connectivity with the Middle East, Abayas, the attire of them started to be introduced as the accepted modern attire in Sri Lanka. In an attempt to shift

towards modernity, the women shifted towards "Abaya and hijab". The "Abaya" fulfills the religious requirements of a Muslim woman's attire in being long, loose, and covering the entire body. Hence, this became an attire of convenience for both the elite and the common mass. The "black" colour replaced coloured Abayas bringing about uniformity and uniqueness as a marker of an ethno- religious group. While the Muslim elites rolled to fashion black and coloured Abayas, the choice of the common mass was "black" for humility, simplicity, convenience, comfort and affordability. Irrespective of the colour, abaya started becoming the attire of the Muslims' in Sri Lanka. This posed a threat to the minority and was a serious concern for the majority. Although the Muslims' choice of the Abaya was to seek an ethno-religious identity as a Sri Lankan Muslim, this   was critiqued, ridiculed, and questioned for being a penetration of the Middle Eastern culture, symbolizing radicalization. As a matter of fact, saree is an acculturation of the Indians while Abaya is an acculturation of the Middle East. Whether it is the saree or Abaya, the Muslim women's attire is an alien acculturation and this is a bitter truth to be accepted by the Sinhalese Buddhists. In the Islamic perspective, Abaya is the accepted dress code to give an ethno- religious identity to the Muslims in Sri Lanka.

3.2.4 Proliferation of Islamic faith schools.

In a pluralistic society, the needs of every individual have to be recognized and respected without identifying the ethnicity or culture to which this individual belongs (Shatara, 2020). The Muslim minorities face many unique challenges and getting quality education is one such unseen challenge in Sri Lanka.

Although the Sri Lankan government provides free education to all Sri Lankans, private schools and Islamic schools still attract Muslim students as they accommodate most of the students who fail to get admission to state schools. (Imtiyaz, 2021) With the intention of giving quality moral and ethical education to their children, most Muslim parents opt for government schools for quality education and a conducive environment for the moral development of their children. Research shows that there are around 5,000 children who fail to get admission into government schools in the Colombo suburbs due to the competition that exists in getting admission to reputed schools (Amarasinghe, 2019 cited in Imtiyaz, 2021). When Muslim students, especially in urban areas fail to get admission to state schools, they seek private Islamic schools where students are able to thrive and feel safe (Ajuwan & Bradshaw,2009 cited in Shatara, 2020). While affordable parents send their children to international schools, economically disadvantaged parents send to "Mathrasa". According to Imtiyaz (2021), "local

Mathrasas often target economically weaker sections of Muslims" (p.9). Apart from this reason, some parents prefer their children to be given religious education rather than secular or both secular and religious education in a Mathrasa. In this way, a sizeable number of students have the option of going to Mathrasas or end up receiving education in the nearest government school which may not have been their choice. Some parents strive hard to educate their children in international schools, but when the school fee soars beyond their affordability, quite a lot of them end up as dropouts who later find a job, engage in business or go abroad.

Mathrasa education is one of the concerns of non- Muslims, perhaps may be due to its nontransparency and unawareness of their outcomes. Mathrasa education is not what evolved in the recent past, but it had its inception during colonial times to accommodate the elite muslims' aspirations to pursue basic Arabic education (Imtiyaz, 2021). Both the terms "Mathrasa" and "Quran school" are used interchangeably for institutions that are set up across the country to teach the Quran and Islamic values. The students who attend schools in urban and remote areas attend Quran school (othappalli) before going to school and in the evening after coming from school. Besides, the Sunday schools, also called "Ahathiya" is another option for students to get Islamic education.

Mathrasa is the Arabic term for a school in English and they function as full- time schools with residential facilities. While the dominant language of instruction in school is Tamil, the focus of Mathrasa education is to teach Arabic Language and Islamic principles (Gafoordeen et al., 2013, cited in Imtiyaz, 2021). As Mathrasas promote Islamic education, they are society oriented and mostly supported by the affluent Muslims of the region. With a view of expanding spiritual and religious education, mathrasas started mushrooming across the country. Each mathrasa functions differently, which impacts its resources, curriculum quality, and effectiveness (Imtiyaz, 2021). According to the author, most of the mathrasas have an integrated curriculum between religious education and secular general education that creates pathways to higher education. Nevertheless, this may not be the same in all Mathrasas. The image of Mathrasas have posed a threat to the mainstream society and the intensity of this misconception has been made right by the Easter Bomb attack. Had the authorities concerned intervened, and regulated the functioning of these mathrasas, there would not have been a collective blame on the Muslim ethno- religious group. Besides, its quality would have been improved. When there is state intervention, there will be transparency and awareness of the intended outcomes of such Muslim religious education institutions.

3.3 Countering the negative stereotypes

When the constructed negative stereotypes are overlooked or unresolved, it may be nurtured leading to unforeseen extents, eventually to a state of resistance to change. Hence tolerance and understanding of the ethno-religious "other" needs to be fostered by countering the negative stereotypes. This section discusses the significance of peaceful co-existence through inter religious understanding and inter-religious education.

3.3.1 Religion and co-existence: Universal dimensions

Islam is a religion of peace, tolerance, brotherhood, and nonviolence and it propagates peace, patience and acceptance of other faith (Ashimi, 2020). In a similar vein, Buddhism is also known for its principles of peace and non-violence (Orjuela, 2019). According to Ashimi (2020),

"Islam means peace acquired by humans by submitting their will to the will of Allah. In the most serious note, one of God's names and attribute is al -salam (The Most Peaceful), which means peaceful co-existence and harmonious living are essential values that Islam urges Muslims to enjoy particularly with people of other faiths and religions" (p.1).

Islam also recognizes the other religions that were established before the Holy Quran's revelation and as the seal of the revealed religions, Islam emphasizes the importance of peaceful coexistence, and tolerance with other faiths; for the sake of humanity, love and affection (ibid). The author reiterates the concept of peaceful co-existence relating to the multiple dimensions such as "peace with Allah, peace with society, and peace with all of mankind irrespective of caste, creed and religion". Further, "Islam guides people to the path of nonviolence and tolerance and shows the path of righteousness and piety" (p.232).

According to Kurucan & Erol (2012), the following verses of the Holy Quran require Muslims to engage in a positive manner with their fellow human beings from different cultural and religious groups:

"People, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware" (Quran, 49:13).

We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race

to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about. (Quran, 5:48)

In a similar vein, the religion Buddhism also preaches peace, tolerance and nonviolence. The five precepts in Buddhism constitutes the basic code of ethics to be followed and respected by the Buddhists. Likewise, the concept of "Ahimsa" means 'not to injure', which is a primary virtue in Buddhism (Borchert, 2014). In addition, a theoretical view in Buddhist philosophy is the "paticcasamuppada" or Dependent Origination, which implies the Buddhist Causal Theory of peaceful co-existence (Ilangakoon, 2019). The author explains this theory in simpler form that no entity in this world is independent as everything is interdependent and exists with others. Moreover, the author discusses how phenomena like religion and nationality are also interdependent and this mutual existence in the social order is in accordance with this causal theory.

In considering the Sri Lankans, they are diverse in their religion, culture, practices, beliefs, and values, emotional feelings, thoughts, actions, moralities and so forth. This element of diversity has become the main threat to the peaceful environment and co-existence among different ethno- religious groups in Sri Lanka. The digital revolution, rational thinking advancements, and the "self" ego make every individual to perceive and respond to different dimensions differently. However, the uniqueness that exists and binds each other are "mutual understanding and respect", "peace" and "humanity". This ideology will help one to respect and keep his /her own identity while accepting diversity.

3.3.2 Transparency through interfaith dialogue

To have unity in diversity, there is a need for transparency as nonawareness of the diverse components in each religion can create suspicion in the other. Interfaith dialogue can be used as a tool to mutually understand and respect the other. Ashimi (2020) defines inter-faith dialogue as "a platform or a sort of forum where people of different religions or faiths will come together in order to attain a mutual reciprocal understanding of their respective religions for the sake of humanity, respect and peaceful co-existent of religion" (p.234).

According to Kurucan & Erol (2021), dialogue between followers of different faiths gives them the opportunity to talk to and listen to each other, getting to know and learning to understand the 'other'. It is also stated that a great deal of the tension and distrust that sometimes exists between different ethnoreligious groups is based on misunderstanding and can be successfully reduced or eliminated through inter-faith dialogue to bring about peaceful co-existence. When

there is dialogue between two individuals who follow two different faiths, each one can enhance each other's understanding of one another. By contextualizing each other's self within the other who is different, each one can see one's own beliefs, values and identity more clearly. By exploring further, each one not only sees what is distinctive in one's own identity but also learns to appreciate what is distinctive about the other. In this way, one's religious identity will not be threatening to the other.

By mutually understanding one another and respecting one another's diversity, stereotypes can be challenged, misconceptions can be made right, and prejudice can be taken off. When understanding of the beliefs and values of others are gained, this may in turn correct the distorted image of one's perceptions of the other.

The Holy Quran explicitly states that the fundamental oneness of all human beings and their ethnic and linguistic plurality together enable all to engage with and understand one another. Ashimi (2020) explores the interreligious dialogue in the Holy Quran as follows:

In fact, it is important to know that the closest word for dialogue in the Quran is Yuhawir (Quran 18:34, 18:37, 58:1), which denotes a conversation between two individuals or groups of people. For instance: "His companion asked him during an argument (Yuhawiru [argument, conversation]): Do you deny Him Who created you…..". (Quran 18:37).

These verses from the Holy Quran encourage Muslims to engage with non- Muslims in interfaith dialogue. When Muslims are motivated to engage in dialogue with the aim of promoting mutual understanding, eliminating inter-group tensions and securing peace, this encourages people of other faiths also to do so.

As cited in the encyclopedia from Wikipedia, Dr. K Sri Dhammananda, stated that:

"Buddhism is a religion which teaches people to 'live and let live'. In the history of the world, there is no evidence to show that Buddhists have interfered or done any damage to any other religion in any part of the world for the purpose of introducing their religion. Buddhists do not regard the existence of other religions as a hindrance to worldly progress and peace".

The discussion shows that the ethnoreligious conflicts, misconceptions and stereotypes can be resolved through dialogues. Likewise, inter-religious education can also foster mutual understanding among different religious groups.

3.3.3 Inter religious Education in the national Curriculum

Including Interreligious education as curriculum content in the religious studies of the Sri Lankan curriculum plays an important role in shedding the differences that exists and helps to remove the misconceptions that have already been inculcated in the minds of the growing children. Interreligious education is intertwined with attitudinal changes, tolerance and understanding of the religious other. Both prejudice and hatred are constructs that arise either from the observation of the acts of the close associates or from social influences that they may be exposed during their process of socialization. This can be acquired through their parents, siblings, peers, kith & kin, school and social network including mass media. When ethnoreligious prejudice and hatred start growing within children, it will be fossilized and eventually be difficult to change. Hence, it is pertinent to include inter religious education in the curriculum of religious studies in the Sri Lankan curriculum.

All Sri Lankans, irrespective of their ethnic and religious differences need to restore a constructive positive interaction among them. In the context of this study, both Muslims and Sinhalese Buddhists must explore each other's faith and religion with respect and in an attempt and to understand one another to promote peaceful coexistence and ethno- religious harmony through social cohesion and reconciliation

4. Conclusion

The two religions Buddhism and Islam command engagement with the "other" on the basis of peace, kindness, tolerance, and nonviolence, regardless of the differences that may exist. Understanding the fundamental unity of the human kind and their ethnic, cultural and religious plurality as the two sides of the same coin, both ethno- religious groups need to engage with and understand one another as a "Sri Lankan". There is a need for the "self" to refresh and reflect his/ her own conscience to confirm whether the "self" accepts and understands the true spirits of the "other's" faith. By removing the egocentric dimension of the "self" identity of an individual, the misconceptions prevalent among the followers of different ethno- religious groups can be shed, eventually leading to a peaceful homeland for all Sri Lankans. More importantly, the dichotomy of the Sinhalese Buddhists' and Muslims' relations can be restored and sustained in the pluralistic society of Sri Lanka.

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