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# EASTERN MUSLIMS OF SRI LANKA

## Developing an Identity Consciousness

*Aboobacker Rameez and Mohamed Anifa Mohamed Fowsar*

### Introduction

The narrative of Islam in Sri Lanka is one of cultural, economic, and geographical diversity, which has contributed to developing a heterogeneous Muslim community with diverse interests and political aspirations at local levels (McGilvray and Raheem 2007). Numerically, Muslims are the second largest religious ethnic minority on the island, accounting for more than 9% of Sri Lanka's total population (Mihlar 2019). The other main minorities are Tamils, Burghers, and Malays (Mohan 1987). The Muslim community is scattered throughout the country, and no district has Muslims constituting more than 50% of its total population. Due to this fact and their historical claims to a different identity, the ethnic identity of the community has evolved in opposition to the Sinhalese nor Tamil identity formation, leading to an 'anomalous position in Sri Lankan ethno-nationalist identity politics' (McGilvray and Raheem 2007: 1). This is even though the vast majority of the Muslim community speak Tamil but reject their linguistic identity in favour of religious identity of Islam as their ethnic marker (Nuhman 2007).

Although there has been much debate about the origins of Sri Lankan Muslims, most of them view themselves as descendants of Arabs or Moors (Asad 1993).[1] Due to the fact Islam came to Sri Lanka, through Arab merchants, the concepts of faith and ethnicity have become fused over time, ascribing a racial homogeneity to a community perceived as the 'Sri Lankan Muslim'. This perception, however, is not reflective of other ethnic communities within the Muslim community. For example, Malays were brought to Sri Lanka from Java by the Dutch. Additionally, a fair amount of Indian Muslims migrated from Tamil Nadu, India and settled in Sri Lanka for trade purposes, alongside small communities of the Memon and Bohra Ismailis, all of whom have contributed to the heterogeneity of the Muslim community (McGilvray 2008, 2011a).[2] Thus, Sri Lankan Muslims are a distinctive socio-cultural ethnic community.

Although there has been much published on Sri Lankan Muslims, we expand their contents and in-depth focus from a new perspective, in particular highlighting the critical division between Southern Muslims and Eastern Muslims (Azeez 1956; Phadnis 1979; de Silva 1986; Ali 1997; Knoerzer 1998; McGilvray 1998; Nuhman 2007; Imtiyaz and Hoole 2011; McGilvray 2011a; Imtiyaz 2012; Saleem 2019, 2020a; Imtiyaz and Saleem 2022). We contend that existing literature on Sri Lankan Muslims has avoided focusing on the two distinctive groups, Southern Muslims and Eastern Muslims, in favour of the broader category of 'Sri Lankan Muslims'. In effect, the Muslim community has been


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treated as a homogeneous entity, which does a disservice to understanding the lived experience of the communities living across the country (Saleem 2019). Much more focus has been aligned with the socio-political interests of Sri Lankan Muslims within Sinhala nationalism, which has also contributed to such avoidance of intra-group identity consciousness among Sri Lankan Muslims.

Ismail (1995) argues that the division and scattered residence of Sri Lankan Muslims into the South and East disturbs the unity of Sri Lankan Muslims in general and the construction of Sri Lankan Muslims nationhood in particular. Consequently, scholars have made little effort to focus on these divisions and separations among Sri Lankan Muslims. Even the few studies that have appeared on Eastern Muslims have attempted to bring out some of their distinctive features, but failed to highlight the distinctiveness between Southern and Eastern Muslims and have ignored the consciousness of Eastern Muslim identity (McGilvray 2003, 2008; Ismail, Abdullah and Fazil 2005; Imtiyaz 2009; Hussein 2011; Klem 2011).

However, Qadri Ismail's (1995) interventions have laid a foundation to extensively study this neglected area within Sri Lankan Muslim scholarship. As he argues, Muslim social formation consisted of two distinct groups, Southern and Eastern Muslims. Southern Muslims refer to Muslims living in other Provinces of Sri Lanka except for the Eastern Province, and Eastern Muslims refer to Muslims living in the Eastern Province. Thus it is not only a geographical differentiation, but socio-cultural and political reasons also contribute to such differences. Southern Muslim political elites and middle and upper-class men expressed Muslim social formation in their own way. They tended to identify themselves as a peaceful trading community descended from the Arabs, opposed the Tamil link to the Muslims dating back to medieval times, and traditionally maintained cordial relations with the Sinhalese. Eastern Muslims have tended to maintain good relations with Tamils too. Representations of Muslims were also gendered and classed (Ismail 1995; Haniffa 2016). They tended to exclude other segments of the society, including Eastern Muslims, who did not see themselves as traders in the Sri Lankan Muslim identity formation (Ismail 1995).

Thus, the intra-groups dimension of Sri Lankan Muslim identity is a crucial aspect to be studied to better understand their identity formation. This paper explores how Eastern Muslims' socio-cultural and political life differs from Southern Muslims. By living with Tamil communities, Tamil cultural traits have been infused into the life of Eastern Muslims. For example, they distinguish themselves from other Muslims in the country by adopting matrilineal practices inherited from the Tamil community (McGilvray 1989; Ruwanpura 2006; Imtiyaz and Hoole 2011). With the intensification of ethnic conflict in the 1980s and 1990s, they have also become more attentive to their separate identity (McGilvray and Raheem 2007). In more recent times, the emergence of religious and cultural revivals among Eastern Muslims has also affected the identity consciousness of the wider Sri Lankan Muslim identity and those outside of the community. For example, the targeting, vilification, and stigmatization of Muslims which become widespread, especially after the 2019 Easter Sunday Attacks, has often been attributed as a reaction against the conservatism and religious orthodoxy of Eastern Muslims (Saleem 2019). Hence, we highlight the importance of re-visiting Eastern Muslims' socio-cultural and political dynamics, but we also argue that understanding Sri Lankan Muslim identity cannot be done without an in-depth study of Eastern Muslims.

## The History of the Sri Lankan Muslim Identity

### *Genesis of Identity*

The Portuguese were the first to call the Sri Lankan Muslims, 'Moors', to denote Arab descent as well as refer to the religious identity of Sri Lankan Muslims (Imtiyaz 2009; McGilvray 2011b).

However, it would be under British colonial rule that a separate Muslim identity was established as the Muslim elites of that time recognized an opportunity to gain political representation as a distinct ethnic group in the legislature based on their religious convictions. In the early 20th century, as the British proposed a system of communal representation, the elite sought to distinguish the Sri Lankan Muslim identity along political lines (Ismail 1995; Imtiyaz and Saleem 2022). In 1889, when the Tamil representatives at the legislature, including Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, sought to include the Muslims within the identity of 'Tamil-speaking' people, there was immediate pushback from Muslim representatives. Ramanathan argued that the Sri Lankan Muslims were not a separate identity group from the Tamils but were ethnically and linguistically Tamil who believed in another religion (Ramanathan 1888; Ali 1997). Consequently, he believed a separate representation of Sri Lankan Muslims in the legislature was unnecessary. However, a Muslim scholar, I.L.M. Abdul Azeez, disagreed with Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan's suppositions, rejected giving the Tamil identity to Tamil-speaking Muslims and instead argued that the Muslims had a different faith and culture and spoke a dialectic of Tamil (Azeez 1956; Saleem 2020a). The British rulers granted the first Sri Lankan Muslim representation in the legislature, significantly weakening Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan's attempt to give a Tamil identity to Sri Lankan Muslims.

A separate representation of Sri Lankan Muslims in the legislature was also tantamount to recognizing the religious identity of Sri Lankan Muslims. As Azeez (1956) argues, the distinctiveness of the Muslims' identity as separate from the Tamils was also due to the religious distinctiveness of Islam. Thus, the Islamic religious faith played an essential role in the struggle for Sri Lankan Muslim political representation (Imtiyaz and Saleem 2022). With the shaping of the Sri Lankan Muslim identity from this time, political leaders were involved in initiating several legislations that incorporated Muslim religious traditions, including the marriage and divorce act, and education reforms.

### *Language, Religion, and Culture*

Like ethnicity, language was also a crucial factor that contributed to the identity formation of an ethnic community (Nuhman 2016). In the Sri Lankan context, the language difference between Sinhalese and Tamils significantly influenced their distinct identity formation. However, in the case of Sri Lankan Muslims, religion also took precedence over the language factor (Ali 2004). Although Sri Lankan Muslims are native speakers of Tamil, most Sri Lankan Muslims living outside the Northern-Eastern Provinces also use the Sinhala language extensively. Additionally, Muslim elites in the metropolitan areas, including Colombo, use English daily – partly denoting class cleavages that cut across all ethnic communities in the country. In that sense, linguistic-based identity has not traditionally been applied to the Sri Lankan Muslim community (Nuhman 2007). Thus, instead of a linguistic platform, Sri Lankan Muslim elites were more concerned with religious and cultural elements to define their identity (Imtiyaz and Hoole 2011). As the Ramanathan-Azeez debates of 1889 show, the Muslim political elites of that time were committed to forming a separate Sri Lankan Muslim identity based on their Islamic religious and cultural values above their linguistic affiliations with Tamils (Hussein 2011).Moreover, the debates highlighted that Muslim political elites emphasized the linguistic differences caused in pronunciation as a way of further distinguishing itself from Tamils (Nuhman 2007).

As Klem (2011) pointed out, the cultural values associated with religion were and remain a significant drive for developing a unique identity among Sri Lankan Muslims. However, some cultural identity trends have also emerged among Sri Lankan Muslims, due to mixed marriages.

According to Imtiyaz and Hoole (2011), Sri Lankan Muslim men have married Tamil women as well as Sinhalese women and vice versa, thus indicating a meshing of cultural values over time.

Furthermore, the Madrasa education system, which is used as an instrument to teach Islamic religious values, Arabic language to the younger generation and produced a massive amount of Islamic preachers, has also played a vital role in forming the Sri Lankan Muslim identity. As Imtiyaz (2021) argues, during the British colonial rule, the Muslim elite used the Madrasa education system as a tool to bring about a renaissance of Islamic knowledge in the community. The intensified Madrasa education system has also dramatically affected the contemporary social dynamics of Sri Lankan Muslims, especially as 'Local Madrasas often target economically weaker sections of Muslims, who are very proud of their Arab culture and the Middle Eastern background' (Imtiyaz 2021: 9). Thus, a section of the Muslim community who have learnt their Islamic values through Madrasa education try to follow it as their way of life. They show a deep commitment to the values learnt, especially with regard to dress code and the distinctness between different Islamic ideological thinking and the intra- and inter-group conflicts. In a way, the idea of distinguishing Muslims from other religious and ethnic groups is a consequence of Madrasa education in Sri Lanka (Imtiyaz 2021).

Nonetheless, distinctions between Eastern Muslims also persist. With the onset of the Iran revolution and the oil crisis of the 1970s, there was a revival of global Islamic propagation support from the Middle East. With a greater influence from the Middle East coming in the form of migrant workers and financial support for mosques and Madrasas, this helped to boost the Madrasa education system. This in turn contributed to the growth of many religious-based intra-group divisions and the development of a more conservative identity (Imtiyaz 2021). Such intra-religious groups include Tablighi Jamaat, Jamaat-e-Islami, Tawheed Jamaat, Sufis, etc.[3] Some of these groups have promoted a more austere and conservative interpretation of Islamic religious practices in terms of ritual practices, dress code, and relations with others. In some parts of the East (and other parts of the country), these ideological differences have led to clashes between different groups, especially those influenced by Saudi Arabia and those belonging to Sufi or more 'traditional' spiritual sects (Imtiyaz and Hoole 2011).

### *A Separate Political Identity*

In the first four decades since Sri Lanka's independence, the Muslim political elites succeeded in forging pragmatic, self-interested, and flexible alliances with the two main Sinhalese majority political parties, United National Party and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (Mohan 1987; Ameerdeen 2006; Imtiyaz 2012). They gained political benefits for the community by supporting the majority government, even though some of this would be to the detriment of minorities. For example, in 1956, Sir Razik Fareed, a prominent Muslim political elite at that time, supported the Sinhala Only Bill, which later was capitalized on by Muslim politicians to establish Muslim schools to promote Muslim education and the appointment of Muslim teachers to teach Arabic and Islam, as a reward for their support (Ameerdeen 2006). Thus, the political elite of that time fulfilled Sri Lankan Muslims' socio-economic and political interests to some extent in exchange for being a part of the successive ruling governments. Although anti-Muslim incidents erupted in Tamil and Sinhala majority areas throughout this period, these did not receive much broader community concerns and were dismissed as localized community problems (Ameerdeen 2006).

With the outbreak of the civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the early 1980s, the Sri Lankan government tried to prevent Muslims' support for the Tamil nationalists' agenda by focusing on the security of the community (McGilvray and Raheem 2011).

During this period, conflicts between Tamils and Muslims had intensified in the Eastern region, with Tamil militants targeting Muslims and their places of worship throughout the Eastern Provinces, including the massacre of more than 1,000 Muslim civilians from Kattankudy, Eravur, and other Muslim areas (Ameerdeen 2006; Hasbullah and Korf 2009). As a result, Muslim security was highly uncertain, which led the government of the day to recruit Home Guards to work with military forces to mitigate the violence that had flared up in Eastern Province. The frustrated Muslim youths mostly joined Home Guards to ensure the safety and security of their community, but the government tactically used Home Guards against the Tamils in response to the LTTE brutalities. This led to a decline in trust between the Tamils and the Muslims reinforcing the cycle of violence committed by the LTTE against the Muslims (Haniffa 2016).

As a result of this decline, Eastern Muslims actively sought out political efforts to establish a Muslim political identity with the sole aim of preserving the security of the Muslims in the East (Knoerzer 1998). Thus, a separate Muslim political party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), was established with a broad popular support base in the East, marking a shift in Sri Lankan Muslim identity discourses. It was in stark contrast to the political elites' tendencies of the South, who were members of national parties, contested elections under those symbols and were not interested in forming a separate Muslim political party.

## Placing Eastern Muslims: Socio-cultural Dimension and Political Dynamics

The Eastern Province is important for the country's stability in terms of its geography, society, culture, and natural resources. The Eastern Province, consisting of three districts, namely Ampara, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee, occupies an important place in the political geography of the Sri Lankan Muslim community. One-third of Sri Lanka's total Muslim population lives in the Eastern Province, and two-thirds of Muslims live outside the Eastern Province (Jameel 2011). In the Eastern Province, Ampara and Trincomalee are Muslim majority districts, and a significant number of Muslims also live in the Batticaloa district. In the Trincomalee district, Kinniya and Muttur areas are mostly populated by Muslims. Trincomalee town also has a significant Muslim population. In Batticaloa district, Kattankudy, Ottamavadi, Valaichenai, and Eravur are Muslim majority areas. In the Ampara district, Muslims are concentrated in the coastal areas from Maruthamunai to Pottuvil. It has an ethnically heterogeneous social structure where the three main ethnicities of the country, namely Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslims, live as per the country's diversified nature (Jameel 2011). It includes large amounts of agricultural land and marine resources, such as the natural harbour of Trincomalee and tourist sites. The East was also integral to the Tamil nationalists' claim for the so-called Tamil Ealam state, and it was a strategic part of the final phase of Sri Lanka's civil war where the government forces first defeated the LTTE in 2008 (Klem 2011).

The East has also been seen once as a symbol of the Tamil-Muslim socio-political combination and later the Tamil-Muslim rift (Ismail et al 2005). Nonetheless Eastern Muslims through the conflict years attempted to cordial relations with the Sinhala ethnocratic state and nationalist forces, thereby safeguarding their economic interests and seeking protection for themselves against threats from other dominant ethnic communities.

Eastern Muslims' customs, traditions, culture, and politics are unique among the Sri Lankan Muslim community as their way of life has been entangled with Tamils. Language is a significant part of this intertwining for Eastern Muslims; in particular, Tamil is the common vernacular. However, despite this, McGilvray and Raheem (2011) note that Eastern Muslims have not assimilated themselves into the Tamil identity while still identifying themselves as Tamil-speaking

people. Moreover, as they argue, both ethnic groups also have matrimonial and residential bonds but share trading, agricultural activities, and working places (McGilvray 1989; Ruwanpura 2006).

### *Socio-cultural Dimension*

McGilvray and Raheem (2011) point out that Southern Muslims were entrepreneurs and gem traders, thereby giving the impression that trade has been identified as the main livelihood of Sri Lankan Muslims. However, Muslims living in the East have a variety of trades, including rural farmers, fishermen, and petty traders (Nuhman 2007).

Since Muslims are scattered throughout the country, their way of life has been influenced by their non-Muslim neighbours. Hence, Tamil cultural influence was seen in the lifestyle of Eastern Muslims, and Sinhalese Buddhist cultural influence was seen in the lifestyle of Southern Muslims (Samaraweera 1986). Thus there is no commonality across the country regarding the way of life of Muslims, and the community is divided based on class, lifestyle, and regional differences.

This fragmentation also meant that there was a vacuum of national leadership for all Muslims in the early 20th century, which meant that this was dominated by a male, bourgeois, commercial Muslim elite centred in the South (Ismail 1995). According to Nuhman (2004), it was not until the 1930s that Eastern Muslims became interested in seeking a strong ethnic identity, despite there being no socio-political context in which they could pursue such aspirations. Due to the variety of largely agricultural trade that they pursued, Eastern Muslims were not integrated into the modern education system, and there was no educated ‘middle class’ among them at that time. Modern educational revivalism emerged among the Southern Muslims at the end of the 19th century, and thus Southern Muslim elites were seen as pioneers of the educational revival among Sri Lankan Muslims. However, Eastern Muslims were not notably inducted into this new system of education. No schools were established to bring about the revival of education among Eastern Muslims until the 1950s (Samaraweera 1986).

For a variety of reasons, Islamic faith rituals and traditions have historically played an important role in forming a sense of identity among Eastern Muslims forming the backbone of the distinctiveness of Eastern Muslims and developing a set of unique cultural values associated with Islamic beliefs. Despite the closeness of the Tamil cultural influence, Eastern Muslims have refused to accept cultural notions that were seen to be contrary to Islamic principles. Moreover, mosques and Islamic revival movements have consistently warned Eastern Muslims from the dangers of such cultural assimilation (McGilvray 2008). This has resulted, for example, in the areas of Kattankudy, Eravur, and Oddamavadi in the Batticaloa district in increasing the trend in wearing long robes covering the whole body of Muslim women as opposed to the convention of wearing the traditional sari of the Tamil community or the custom of veiling their heads as in the past or among Muslim women in other areas of Eastern Province (Imtiyaz and Hoole 2011). While the latter practice is much less common in other parts of the East, the principle is about developing a Muslim identity by assimilating certain cultural practices of countries, including the Middle East, as a way of showing distinctness (Imtiyaz and Saleem 2022). This distinctness of identity was further exacerbated during the conflict, where a Muslim ‘religious’ identity was developed to distinguish the Muslim Tamil speakers from the Tamil community, as a sense of security and safety (Nuhman 2007).

The religious focus among Eastern Muslims became more intense with the emergence of Islamic movements emerging from the late 1970s and supported in principle by a global upsurge of the propagation of Islam from the Middle East (Saleem 2019). Thus, different Islamic ideologies have influenced Eastern Muslims’ way of life. In particular, the activities of the group Tablighi Jamaat

have dramatically increased in the East in order to enable Muslims to become fully involved in Islamic theological activities. As such, the Tablighi Jamaat is still active in the Muslim-majority regions in the Eastern Province (Klem 2011). In contrast, Sufi Muslims live in areas including Akkaraipattu, Kalmunai, and Kattankudy (Faslan and Vanniasinkam 2015). Moreover, the Jamaat-e-Islami and Tawheed Jamaat groups are also active in these areas (Faslan and Vanniasinkam 2015). The different ideological approaches professed by these movements have led to tensions between those who profess Sufi/spiritual adherence which has been seen as one of the earliest traditions of Islam in Sri Lanka and the more recent ones, influenced by places like Saudi Arabia, which profess a more austere and hard-line adherence that is at odds with the Sufi practices. This has led, in the most extreme cases, to violent clashes between members of different groups (Faslan and Vanniasinkam 2015). In addition, since a lot of Eastern Muslims are also employed in the Middle East, this has influenced the development of the religious and cultural identities of communities (Imtiyaz and Saleem 2022).

### *Political Dynamics*

In the post-independence period, Eastern Muslim political elites initially collaborated with Tamil mainstream politics (Imtiyaz and Saleem 2022). In the first parliamentary election post-independence, four representatives were elected on behalf of Eastern Muslims (Ameerdeen 2006). The Southern Muslim political elites also contested elections in the Eastern Province. However, during this time, concerns about Tamil nationalism and Sinhala language policy surfaced. When the Sinhala Only Act was passed in 1956, Southern and Eastern Muslims held opposing views. In the South, there was strong support for the Sinhala Only Act, but in the East, there was strong antagonism towards the act. As a result, Eastern Muslims feared Southern Muslims would abandon the Tamil language and claim a separate class from Eastern Muslims (McGilvray and Raheem 2007). These tensions highlighted the linguistic differences between Southern Muslims and Eastern Muslims. When Sinhala was made the official language, the Southern Muslims began to accept Sinhala as the language of education, administration, and business. In contrast, Eastern Muslims never gave up using the Tamil language in their entire mainstream activities, and they continued to adhere to the Tamil language and tradition.

Despite this affinity, clashes between the Tamils and Muslims in the East gradually emerged in terms of political representation, land, economy, administration, and political power in the post-independence context (Nuhman 2007). The rivalry created suspicion between the two communities in the Eastern Province, subsequently leading to the outbreak of violence between Tamils and Muslims in the 1950s and 1960s, which exacerbated the polarization between the two communities and created the impetus to pursue divergent political paths (Ismail et al 2005; Nuhman 2007). As Imtiyaz and Saleem (2022) point out, Eastern Muslims were also hard hit by the post-independence colonization schemes of the Sri Lankan government. The government's resettlement plans brought about changes in the demographic composition of Eastern Muslims and marginalized them in the irrigation and distribution of agricultural land.

During the 1980s, with the uprising of Tamil militants, including the LTTE in the East, the security of Eastern Muslims was also called into question by Tamil militants with their activities against Muslims intensifying to weaken the socio-economic and political strength of Eastern Muslims. Tamil militants killed Muslim home guards, civil servants, and parliamentarians, while Muslims who lived in border villages were also under attack. Many Muslims who had earlier joined the Tamil armed movements, including the LTTE, abandoned them due to their actions against Eastern Muslims. Muslims were also compelled to flee their homes with the

intensification of Tamil militants' atrocities. There were bombings targeting Muslim areas, and subsequent attacks were launched on the Eastern Muslims' worship places. Even after the signing of the Indo-Lanka Accord in 1987, Eastern Muslims had to face various catastrophes (Ameerdeen 2006).

After the Indo-Lanka Accord, the LTTE started the second phase of the Eelam struggle, intensifying attacks against the Muslims in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Consequently, in 1989, 41 Muslim police officers were killed by Tamil militants, and several Muslims were kidnapped and murdered. In the late 1990s, 75 Muslims from the East who returned to the country after fulfilling their holy pilgrimage in Makkah were massacred by the LTTE in the Kurukal Madam in the Batticaloa district (Ameerdeen 2006). Meanwhile, within two hours, more than 90,000 people from the North were forcibly evicted from their habitations by the LTTE. Around 123 Muslims were shot dead while offering prayers in mosques in Kattankudy in the East (Ameerdeen 2006). A similar number of Muslims were massacred in Eravur. The LTTE also carried out massacres of Muslims in Sainthamaruthu, Akkaraipattu, and other Muslim regions throughout the East (Ameerdeen 2006).

The LTTE frequently targeted the Muslims' economic establishments and cultural and religious symbols. Extortion was taken from Muslim traders, and a large amount of Muslim land was confiscated in the East. All these acts were designed to weaken the Muslims politically and economically (Ameerdeen 2006). Neither the Sri Lankan government nor the Southern Muslim political elite could ensure the security of Eastern Muslims. Consequently, the Eastern Muslim political elite believed their concerns were being overlooked and felt the Southern Muslim politicians did not give more attention to the grievances of Eastern Muslims (Imtiyaz and Saleem 2022).

As Haniffa (2016) argues that 'Muslim minority politics in the country as a whole became Eastern-centric with the escalation of the conflict. In the 1980s, the security concerns of the northern and Eastern Muslims became more urgent; however, the political elite of the South was quite inept at recognizing these concerns or addressing them' (2016: 200). This renewed a sense of a separate identity among Eastern Muslims who realized that a lack of a solid political foundation to articulate their political identity was tremendous, and they saw the need for a determined political leadership to advance their socio-economic and political interests. In this context, the idea of establishing a separate political party was propagated to give a new political identity to Eastern Muslims, and thus, the SLMC was born. The party's founder, M.H.M. Ashraff, had initially been involved with Tamil National Politics, but when he saw that such Tamil parties were not able to meet the socio-economic, political, and security goals of Muslims, he founded the SLMC. He believed that Eastern Muslims could secure their security and gain political advantage through his party. He also saw it as a way of ensuring that Muslim youth would not join the LTTE and thereby risk breaking up the county (Ameerdeen 2006). A considerable proportion of Eastern Muslims thus gave him the popular mandate that was required to address this political identity issue. The party grew in a short period to gain opposition status in the North-East Provincial Council established in 1988 (Knoerzer 1998). The party recognized the realities and heightened the sense of a national Muslim ethnic identity to defeat the Muslim political leaders who had joined the national parties. The party's leader successfully used Islamic principles as party slogans, took a stand against LTTE, and mobilized Muslim youth politically, using mosques as a base for his political efforts (Imtiyaz 2007). Thus, as Imtiyaz (2009) claims, the SLMC emerged as the most significant political force in the Eastern Province. Its campaign appealed to many politically marginalized Eastern Muslims, sowing the seeds of Muslim nationalism with anti-Tamil nationalism. By 1994, the SLMC had joined the Sinhala governments.

## Post-war Complexities

After the war's end in 2009, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism resurfaced in the country, making anti-Islamic rhetoric as the main agenda of Sinhala-Buddhist extremist forces. Activities that undermine Muslims' religious and cultural values were carried out by Sinhala-Buddhist extremist forces (Farook 2009). There have also been attacks targeting Muslim places of worship and businesses. It is notable that Muslim areas in the South (in 2014) and Central Provinces (in 2018) have been largely attacked by Sinhala-Buddhist extremist forces causing casualties and economic loss to Muslims (Fowsar, Rameez and Rameez 2020). The pretext of these attacks has been the questions of Muslim cultural issues, including Muslim women's clothing, slaughtering animals for food, and halal recognition. In 2018, Anti-Muslim extremist forces also rioted in the urban area of Ampara in the Eastern Province (Fowsar et al 2020). While this post-war trend has largely affected Muslims living outside the North and East, the link is drawn with the conservative/extreme manifestations of identity coming from places in the East, such as Kattankudy (Faslan and Vanniasinkam 2015).

The rise of anti-Muslim violence and the reticence of the state to act against perpetrators have subsequently led to the development of extremist ideologies among some Muslim youth, particularly in the East. With the rise in ISIS-related influences and past memories and trauma of youth developed from the LTTE brutalities against Muslims in the late 1980s and at the beginning of 1990s, young people on the whole have become more vulnerable to these issues trying to mobilize themselves against these negative forces. It eventually resulted in the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019 (Saleem 2019), where a young Muslim extremist preacher from Kattankudy led the suicide group, and a few other suicide bombers were also from the East. The region hence is also host to different Islamic ideologies and where variations are more prevalent.

Following the Easter Sunday attacks, Sri Lankan Muslims were viewed with suspicion, and the government also imposed bans on Islamic religious and charity organizations and restricted Muslims' cultural and religious activities. Sinhala-Buddhist extremists also spread anti-Muslim sentiment for political reasons, and many Muslim youths were imprisoned without solid evidence. Thus, the Easter Sunday suicide attacks became a historical stain posing massive challenges to the Sri Lankan Muslim identity (Saleem 2019). The attacks significantly affected Eastern Muslims and negatively impacted their socio-political dynamics, as many of those who led the attacks and those involved in the attack were from the East. After this catastrophic incident, there is a growing concern to make reformations in various matters, including Islamic ideology, Madrasa education, dress code, and curricula of Islamic textbooks.

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, the effect of anti-Muslim Politics was witnessed with regard to the cremation of COVID-19 burials. Despite all medical and scientific evidence proving that burial was permissible, the government refused to recognize Muslims' (and Christians') religious and cultural rights. At one point, rumours were also spread that Muslims were responsible for the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Saleem 2020a).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have shown that any discussion on the Sri Lankan Muslim identity cannot treat the community as homogeneous, with the need to be more focused on the intra-group/intersectional ties of geographical perspectives. While there is a lot that has been discussed around Southern Muslims, one cannot ignore the identity discussions of Eastern Muslims. As we outline, the Muslims in the Eastern Province have played and will continue to play pivotal roles in not only the development of the Sri Lankan Muslim identity but, in general, are key catalysts to ensuring

that there is a link with the rest of the country. After all, if the Muslims had sided with the LTTE in the 1980s, the conflict would have taken a different turn (Saleem 2020b).

We discuss that as far as Eastern Muslims are concerned, the unique socio-cultural traits and political dynamics intertwined with Islamic religious beliefs play a critical role in developing a consciousness of identity that has evolved to the wider community. The common socio-cultural-political interests shared by Eastern Muslims have also given them solid political activism and the ability to form separate political movements. Although Eastern Muslims are small compared to the country's total Muslim population, they have the platform to create an identity for the Sri Lankan Muslim community through territorial-political enrichment. In the present context, where religious and cultural violence against Muslims has intensified, there is a serious discussion needed of the Muslim identity. The Eastern Muslims' political leaders and civil society have a role to play despite their impact being eroded in recent times. Against this academic discussion, future studies need to unpack this influence in all aspects of Sri Lankan Muslim political life.

## Notes

1 Moor is a derogatory term used by the Portuguese to refer to Arabs. They competed with the Portuguese in faith and trade. However, this term was used based on religion (Imtiyaz and Hoole 2011).

2 Memons are Muslim entrepreneurs and humanitarians that originated in the region and settled in India in the 19th century and later migrated to many countries, including Sri Lanka. Bohra's main branch was in Yemen and is known as the Dawood Bohra sect, which is a small but unique community influenced by Yemeni, Egyptian, African, and Indian cultures (Saleem 2019).

3 These are various Islamic movements. Tablighi Jamaat movement originated in India in the mid-19th century and strengthens the Islamic faith and engages Muslims in spiritual activities; while Jamaat-e-Islami is based in Pakistan and seeks to establish Islamic political leadership and focuses on reformations (Saleem 2019). In contrast, McGilvray and Raheem (2007) make the linkages to Tawheed Jamaat and Sufis to religious threads: the former is an organization incorporating Wahhabi and Salafi thought influenced by the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia, while Sufis are a movement that represents a more 'traditional' Islamic thought and practice supporting shrines worship and following the guidance of Sufi teachers.

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