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# ROLE OF EDUCATION IN FORMING THE CULTURAL IDENTITY

A CASE STUDY ON  
SRI LANKAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY



**Indika Karunathilake**



**ROLE OF EDUCATION IN  
FORMING THE CULTURAL  
IDENTITY**

**A CASE STUDY ON SRI LANKAN MUSLIM  
COMMUNITY**

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**ISBN 978-955-703-046-3**

*Published by*  
Department of Medical Education  
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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to all the innocent victims who lost their lives during Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019.



## FOREWORD

As we march along with lot of struggles and difficulties we experienced from the past, for an economical and infra structure growth, the country has been drastically set back to a dark era by the re-emergence of terrorism.

This is the high time to revisit our basics of ethics and patriotism to find out the root cause of this calamity. It is of paramount importance that our educational system has to be scrutinized thoroughly to eliminate the fundamentalism and any form of radical or extremism which recruits the cadres for racism and terrorism.

Being an educationist for years, I see a paradigm shift in the Islamic religious education after the late seventies, which has been absorbed into our system without any filtering process. This intolerant form of radicalism is observed not only in Sri Lanka but also in many other countries as well.

I appreciate Prof. Dr Indika Karunathilake has shown his caliber and true intrinsic feeling for the unity of the nation. His work shows his rendered effort towards learning the cultural and religious background of the Muslims of this country and how it is delivered to the society via the current educational system.

His commendable recommendations are the need of the hour to build the prosperity among the multi ethnic culture of our motherland which will ensure coexistence.

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## **PREFACE**

The tragic situation created by a misguided group of extremists on Easter Sunday 2019 is likely to permanently etched in the Sri Lankan psyche. This book came about as a response to this unfortunate situation, from which all of us as Sri Lankans struggling to recover. My responsibilities as an educationist motivated me to explore the role of education in preventing such situations in the future.

Content of the book is arranged into five chapters, with an introductory chapter providing an overview.

The purpose of the book is to discuss the role of education in forming the Sri Lankan cultural identity. This book gives an analysis on possible reasons that lead to this situation with practical suggestions for a way forward.

This task was completed within a short time of less than three months, along with a rapid review of a vast amount of literature, interviews and informal discussions to gather information on this topic. This book is based on a series of articles written by me for the Sunday Morning Newspaper. Considering the national importance of this topic, the articles were compiled as a book for better reference.

I would like to acknowledge the support, resources and encouragement given by my colleagues, friends and family in accomplishing this task.

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# **Role of Education in forming the Sri Lankan Cultural Identity**

The current tragic situation in Sri Lanka has powerfully and emphatically highlighted the need for us to unite, think and act as Sri Lankans. It has also shown the dangerous consequences of segregation and extremism.

Education plays a vital role in forming the identity of the Sri Lankan nation. Having a consistent and progressive education system is vital in preventing the infiltration of extremist views. The education system should provide room for acquisition of different skills, cultivate creativity and innovative thinking. Such skills would never have been achieved without the freedom for critical thinking.

## **History of Education in Sri Lanka**

Education in Sri Lanka has a history of over 2500 years. Buddhism brought a renaissance of art, language and culture. Since then an education system evolved based around the Buddhist temples and pirivenas (monastic colleges). During the colonial period Christian missionary organizations became active in education. The Buddhist Theosophical Society later added to

the educational landscape of the country. By 1940s Dr. C. W. W. Kannangara proposed the concept of free education from kindergarten to university with establishment of central schools, change in the medium of education to national languages, as well as student welfare measures (Jaufer, 2017 & Ministry of Education, 2011).

A formal system of government schools commenced after the recommendations of the Colebrook Commission in 1836. It started with the establishment of the Royal College in Colombo and led to the formation of several single gender schools. Some of these schools were affiliated to the Anglican Church. These included St. Thomas' College in Mount Lavinia and Trinity College in Kandy.



*Royal College, Colombo, established in 1835, remains an example of inclusiveness and integration in education*

In 1938 the free education policy was implemented. Then Minister of Education, late Hon. Dr. C.W.W. Kannangara, was the pioneer of this initiative. Through this process the government established Madhya Maha Vidyalayas to provide education to all, in either Sinhala or Tamil medium (Ministry of Education, 2011).

At present, there are an estimated 10,194 government schools in Sri Lanka. Government and private schools fall under the purview of the Ministry of Education. Non-government schools include private schools, offer the local syllabus as well as the British system and international schools, prepare students for UK examinations (Selvanayagam, 2012). Madarasa Islamic schools have existed in Sri Lanka for several decades, where the preferred modality of teaching and learning has remained predominantly prescriptive and proscriptive rather than discursive and analytical. The scholars that madrasas produce, the Ulema are considered prestigious among ordinary Muslims and they are the chief communicators to transmit Islamic knowledge (Ali, 2019).

## **What is the Sri Lankan Cultural Identity?**

The culture of Sri Lanka mixes modern elements with traditional aspects and is known for its regional diversity. Sri Lankan culture has been predominantly influenced by the heritage of Theravada Buddhism and Sinhala language. South Indian cultural influences are pronounced in the North and East of the country. The history of colonial occupation has also left an impact on Sri Lanka's identity, with Portuguese, Dutch, and British elements having intermingled with various traditional aspects of Sri Lankan culture. Islamic culture has also influenced certain aspects of Sri Lankan culture. This rich culture and diversity calls for inclusiveness and integration as opposed to exclusivity and segregation. Many positive examples of integration can be found within the Sri Lankan Christian community.

## **Religious Influence on Schools**

The Buddhist Theosophical Society established Buddhist schools to foster Sinhala students with an English education and inculcate Buddhist values. Most of these schools were established in the capitals of the major provinces of Sri Lanka. The first of these were Ananda College, Colombo and Dharmaraja College, Kandy, followed by other well-known schools in Galle, Kurunegala, Kandy and Colombo. Sri Lanka

also has many Catholic schools, such as St. Peter's College, St. Joseph's College and St. Bridget's Convent, Colombo. Richmond College, Galle, Jaffna Central College and Wesley College, Colombo were established by the Methodist Church. Zahira College, Colombo is considered to be the oldest Muslim school. All of these schools are now within the mainstream education system of Sri Lanka and accept inclusiveness and integration. There are 749 Muslim schools and 205 madarasas, which teach Islamic education in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Education, 2011).



*Zahira College, Colombo, established in 1892, the oldest Muslim school in Sri Lanka*

## **The Influence on Language**

During the British colonial period, Christian Missionaries opened English medium schools in the major cities throughout the country. The privileged among the Sinhalese and Tamils were largely absorbed into that system since English had become

essential for upward social mobility under the colonial rule. Rural and underprivileged Sinhala and Tamil communities continued to be disadvantaged. However, the Muslims resisted education in the English medium for a long time and continued to follow their traditional system of religious education (Nuhman, 2013). This led to a situation where the progress of the Muslims in secondary and higher education was not satisfactory. Even at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, university level education was uncommon among Muslims. However, the situation gradually improved from 1930 onwards due to the steps taken at the national level by the government to promote education in the country. The positive steps taken by the Muslim political and intellectual leadership drastically increased the number of the school going Muslim students and it became the fashion for the upper class Muslims of urban areas to send their children to English medium schools.

In 1945, the national languages, Sinhala or Tamil were made the medium of education in all primary schools. One interesting fact to note is that the Muslims, who previously rejected English education, now insisted that English should continue as their medium of education as it was essential for their progress (Nuhman, 2013). Currently the medium of instruction of all government schools is either Sinhala or Tamil with the exception

of some English Medium classes. Students from all ethnicities and religions attend these schools.

### **Positive Examples of Integration**

There are many positive examples of integration from all communities and ethnicities in Sri Lanka. Way back in 1959, the highly respected Muslim intellectual A.M.A. Azeez, correctly identified this need, “The counsel of wisdom as well as safety is for the Muslims to have complete identity of interests with the other communities in the matter of language (Azeez, 1969). The Muslims must therefore adapt themselves to this transition; the alternative involves a swift and sure penalty – isolation and consequent denial of their rightful place in the country.”



*Dr.A.M.A. Azeez (1911-1973) the Muslim leader who called for the need for integration with Sri Lankan culture*

National leaders such as C.W.W. Kannangara, W. Dahanayake, T.B. Jayah and Badiuddin Mahmud pushed for a swabhasha policy. The Hindu Board of Education went one step further when they decided to introduce Sinhala as a compulsory subject in all their schools (Jayatilaka, 2011). The true nationalists of the time believed that bilingualism would be an ideal force for national unity. Albeit being a delayed decision, Sinhala or Tamil as the second language is now compulsory in government schools.

## **Issues with Segregation**

Sadly and unfortunately, there is a tendency towards segregation as well. Many religious schools have recently sprung up, with concerns regarding the impact on childhood education. While some religious schools are evening or weekend schools, there are others which function as mainstream schools from Grade 6 onwards (e.g. Madrasas) (Department of Muslim Religious & Cultural Affairs, 2014). The evening schools have progressively younger children following religious education, sometimes from Grade 1 upwards. The curricula of these religious schools are diverse and have not been approved by the Ministry of Education.

The pertinent questions arising in society are; what is the importance for children to have a religious education at such a young age, and what are the objectives of such religious education? If they teach good habits such as “Don’t steal”, “Help the poor and needy”, “Don’t hurt anyone” then yes, it is necessary. However, it is not acceptable if children are being taught segregation and an exclusionary identity in those institutions from a young age. Arabic as a language may be required for Muslim clergy. But the question arises as to what degree it is necessary for the common Muslim in Sri Lanka? Arabic can be a tool to recite the Qur’an and pray. The

understanding and interpretation of the language is not essential for practice. Incorrect and different scholarly interpretations have resulted in confusion and divisions of many religious groups and sects. These different teachings could confuse and hinder the healthy development of the child. It is time to rethink how much of religious education is needed for children!

## **History and the Evolution of Education for Sri Lankan Muslims**

Education plays a vital role in forming the unique Sri Lankan cultural identity and developing a Sri Lankan citizen who can live in harmony with all other Sri Lankans. Having a consistent and progressive education system is vital in preventing the infiltration of extremist views. The current tragic situation in Sri Lanka has revealed the dangerous consequences of segregation and extremism, and emphatically highlighted the need for us to unite as Sri Lankans. This chapter will draw on examples from the local Muslim community and their education system, highlighting its uniqueness in terms of integration and segregation.

## **Diverse and Heterogeneous Nature of the Sri Lankan Muslim Community**

In general, all communities in Sri Lanka are diverse and heterogeneous. The Sri Lankan Muslim community is a classic example of diversity. At one end of the spectrum, there are heroes who sacrificed their lives to safeguard the motherland, whereas a minority of misguided terrorists whose activities surfaced recently, occupy the other end.

This enigma can be partly explained by the heterogeneity of Sri Lankan Muslims, be it ethnically, genetically, linguistically, socio-economically and even in religious beliefs and practices.

Muslims have lived in Sri Lanka for over 1000 years. Persians and Arabs can be considered as the earliest Muslim traders in the Indian Ocean. For them, Sri Lanka was known as Serandib or Seylan. Some of those traders, who were possibly attracted by the beauty and riches of the island, the kind nature of its inhabitants and welcoming nature of its kings, decided to settle here. The existence of the Muslim traders of Peninsular India in the period from 1000 to 1500 A.D. are closely linked with the origin of most Muslim settlements that we see today in Sri Lanka (Ismail, 2015). Large numbers of those Indian Muslims settled in

coastal areas. Malays and Javanese came for trade and military services. These settlers got married to Sri Lankan women.



*Muslim jewelers in Galle in 1870's*

During the Portuguese era, many Muslims fled to the Kandyan Kingdom due to the hostile environment and forceful conversion to Christianity. King Senarath permitted some of them to settle along the East coast. Those who settled in the hill country married Sinhalese and those who settled in the East married Tamil women. Over generations, this phenomenon has led to a genetic composition almost similar to Sinhalese and Tamil (Ismail, 2015).

As the early settlers were traders, they adopted Tamil as their spoken language. During this period, Tamil was the medium of trade and commerce. Many Arabic words were introduced and Tamil began to be written in Arabic script, giving rise to what is

termed “Arabic-Tamil” and many literary works and recitals were composed in Arabic-Tamil. Today, Muslims in Eastern and North Western coastal areas use Tamil as their mother tongue, whereas over 50% of Southern Muslim students study in Sinhala. A significant number of children from the business community study in international schools and consider English as their first language.



*Typical early 20<sup>th</sup> century Moor gentlemen*

The Muslims who settled in the island as far back as the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, brought with them their religion Islam and the

Islamic way of life. However, as they inter-married with the local population over time, they adapted their way of life to suit local customs while maintaining Islamic traditions. Many customs have been adopted from the Tamil and Sinhala communities and these are prevalent today. The Muslims who migrated to the Hill country adopted the “ge” name like the Sinhala people. Marriage customs such as “Thali” (the necklace), the throne similar to the “Manavarai” of the Tamils / “Poruwa” of the Sinhalese, and the “Aalathi” ceremony to ward off evil eye, are all customs adopted from these communities. Thus, they established a characteristic way of life and a distinctive form of Islamic culture, which is unique to Sri Lanka (Ismail, 2015).

Contrary to popular belief, this heterogeneity of the Sri Lankan Muslim community is even more pronounced when it comes to religious practices.

Worldwide, there are two main sectors of Islam; Sunni and Shia. The majority of Sri Lankan Muslims belong to Sunni, with a Shia minority. Sri Lankan Shias are commonly known as the Borah community. Within Sunni itself exist no less than six different traditions. There are four main schools of jurisprudence, Shafi, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali. With regards to the basic beliefs of Islam, all four schools of thought are the same but with regard to jurisprudence there are a few differences of opinions.

These four schools of thoughts are called Madhhabs. These Madhhabs have evolved with time as opposed to the recent Wahabi/Salafi ideologies. In the schools of thoughts for the last 1200 years, it is not just one individual opinion. The opinions take changes according to new developments, for example with regards to medical advancements. The Wahabis follow Abdullah Ibn Wahhab an Najdi and his ideology.

Sri Lankan Muslims mainly follow, Shafi (very traditional form) and Hanafi (more tolerant) traditions. Both schools of thoughts are tolerant and follow Sufi traditions with regard to the spiritual aspects of Islam (Ismail, 2015). For legal matters they follow their respective schools of thoughts. Sufi tradition, which is followed by many Sri Lankan Muslims, is a combination of both Shafi and Hanafi. Its origins are from countries such as Egypt and Yemen. Most of the Indian Muslims who settled in Sri Lanka are followers of Sufism. Therefore, Sufism is influenced by South Asian customs and beliefs such as dances, music, meditation, alms giving and rituals. They follow adopted cultural versions of Arab Sufi traditions such as Sufi whirling Darweshes of Turkey, Qaseeda recitations of and Qawwali music of North India.

Sufism is considered the most tolerant tradition. The Dewatagaha Mosque is the main centre of Sufis. Salafi tradition based on

Wahhabism, has originated from Saudi Arabia and is thought to be the most fundamentalist. It is the complete opposite of the more tolerant Sufi tradition and is characterized by strict adherence to misinterpretations of Sharia law and its draconian punishments (Devapriya, 2019).



*The Dewatagaha mosque*

This heterogeneity and diversity is an ideal platform for integration with the larger Sri Lankan community. In fact, it has been the norm for many centuries (McGilvray, 1998).

## **Evolution of Education in the Sri Lankan Muslim Community**

Before the independence, the level of education of the Sri Lankan Muslim community was very low. This was due to a multitude of reasons including suppressive measures adopted by the Portuguese and the Dutch colonial rulers, initiation unwillingness of Muslims to enter English education and cultural reasons.

Over time, Muslim community leaders realized the importance of participation in the national system of education, which was imperative to the progress of the community. The birth of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a vast improvement in the education of the Muslim community (Azeez, 1946).

During the period 1900-1948, several major changes occurred in the political and economical conditions in Sri Lanka. A Muslim middle class slowly began to emerge. It brought into being a group of Muslims who preferred an English education without losing any of their traditions and values. Therefore, with the persuasion of community leaders like Siddilebbe, Wapichi Marikkar and Egyptian exile Orabi Pasha in Ceylon, Muslims began entering the main stream of education, which in course of time, with the evolvement of Muslim schools, also became the

vehicle of Islamic education besides general education. Siddilebbe wrote and published many textbooks on Arabic language and Islam to be used in these schools (Azeez, 1946).



*Sir Razik Fareed, a pioneer of education in Muslim community in Sri Lanka*

Many initiatives were taken under the pioneering guidance of Sir Razik Fareed and Dr. T.B. Jayah. A large number of government schools were opened in Muslim areas; increasing numbers of Muslims were appointed as teachers; training colleges were established for the teachers; instructions in the subjects of Arabic and Islamic were introduced, special textbooks for those subjects were produced. Dr. W. Dahanayake, Minister of Education of the S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake government and Dr. Badiudin

Mahmud, Minister of Education of the Srimavo Bandaranayake government were the promoters of Muslim and Islamic education through the school system (Jameel, 2015). The textbook which was used until 1980s is called “Shanthi Markkam” meaning peaceful path.

There have been some positive changes in mainstreaming in the curriculum in some of the Arabic colleges from the 1970s. They incorporated the school curriculum as a part of their teaching programme. They also prepared their students for the public examinations of G.C.E. (O/L) and (A/L) conducted by the Department of Examinations.

Opening the doors of education for Muslim Women was one of the most positive steps towards integration. A significant change that has taken place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century within the Muslim community is the attitude towards women. The change in attitude towards women’s education resulted in the interest taken in education in the 1930s. In 1936, The All Ceylon Muslim Educational Conference stressed the importance of female education as a step towards progress of the community. In 1943, Sir Razik Fareed asked the government to establish schools for Muslim girls (Ismail, 2015). Muslim Ladies college in Bambalapitiya is an example.

As a result of these positive developments, Muslim women were able to leave their traditional role of housewife and mother and become educated and empowered. The positive impact is visible today. At present there are many successful doctors, lawyers, academics and accountants. Some have found a place in administrative and public services while others are successful business entrepreneurs (Azeez, 1952 & Ismail, 2015).



*Education of females –a major positive development of the Muslim community*

### **Drift towards Segregation and Isolation**

Despite all the positive developments of the past, during the last 30 years, there has been a trend towards segregation and isolation. This includes a drift promoting a shift towards a Saudi Arabic cultural identity while moving away from the larger Sri Lankan community. The main reason for this was the invasion of extremist ideologies. Followers of Wahhabism, known as Thowhid Jamaths in Sri Lanka, are further divided into many

groups, with some following extremist ideologies, including fanaticism and extremism. Madrasa and Arabic under these groups have become the driving force of propagating extremist ideologies.

Muslims have co-existed in harmony with other communities in Sri Lanka for over 1000 years. The deviation towards segregation and extremist ideologies among certain sections of the Muslim community is only a recent phenomenon that has gradually developed over the last 30 years. It is not justifiable or rational to generalize the activities of this extremist minority to the whole Sri Lankan Muslim community. As shown by violent incidences that occurred in April 2019, elements with hidden agendas take advantage of the lack of clear understanding of the context.

It is important to understand how a section of the community has embraced extremist ideologies. Education is an important indicator of the social and cultural advancement of a community as a whole. It equips people to solve their problems and lead a better life. On the other hand, misdirected education can promote segregation, violence and extremism. This section will further discuss the role of education in radicalizing and de-radicalizing the youth.

However, the relationships are complex. The drift towards fundamental religious ideologies leading towards violence and terrorism, does not depend on social class and level of formal education. Religious motivation as a driver of violence, cuts across social classes. Religious violence is motivated by the desire to be rewarded in the afterlife. Research has found that having a standard of living above the poverty line was associated with suicide bombers in Palestine and Lebanon (Berrebi, 2007). Similar observations were made regarding the suicide bombers of Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka as well.

Education is generally considered to be one of the most important tools to reach young people and therefore can be used to address some of the “push and pull factors” that may drive young people towards violent extremism. Youth are often identified as the group that is most vulnerable to radicalization. There is mixed evidence on the role of Islamic schools in radicalization. As an example, Indonesian students with a background in Islamic education have been found to be less vulnerable to radicalization, while Pakistani students appear to be more susceptible. It is not only what is taught in the classroom but also how it is taught.

Therefore, it is important to understand the characteristics of Islamic religious schools in Sri Lanka and their impact on the Muslim community.

## **The Proliferation of Islamic Religious Schools in Sri Lanka**

The Madrasatul Bari, the first Arabic college in Sri Lanka was established in 1884 at Weligama in the Southern Province, in order to train Sri Lankan Muslims in traditional Islamic scholarship (even this Madrasa has now come under extremist groups). Following this, several Arabic colleges were established in Galle (1892), Kinniya (1899), Maharagama (1931) and Matara (1915) and hundreds of Ulama were produced by these colleges. They were trained for preaching Islam among the Muslims. All of these madrasas were established by the Sufis and followed the Shafi school of thought for legal matters and Ashari school of thought for the basic beliefs of Islam and Sufi way of life of non attachment.

After independence, Arabic colleges mushroomed in Sri Lanka. A little more than 100 colleges were established from 1950 to 2000. Currently in Sri Lanka, there are 1669 Islam Madrasa schools and 317 Arabic schools registered under the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs (Wickramasinghe,

2019). Most of these Arabic schools are located in Ampara, Puttalam, Trincomalee, Kandy, Colombo and Batticaloa Districts.

Apart from these schools there are 277 Muslim Sunday schools, also known as “Ahadhiyyah schools”. The Ahadhiyyah Schools Movement was started way back in December 1951 by Marhoom M.H. Abdul Aziz. These schools are regulated under the guidance of the All Island Ahadhiyyah School Federation in Sri Lanka.

Madrasas in Sri Lanka too are a heterogeneous group, ranging from evening to full time schools and managed by diverse sectors within the Muslim community. Therefore, all Madrasas cannot be generalized as propagating extreme ideology. However, there are several common factors that make them an ideal breeding ground for extremist ideologies (Azeez, 1949).

### **Factors Facilitating Segregation**

Most Madrasas still teach subjects based on a curriculum designed in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Siddilebbe, a respected Muslim scholar seriously criticized the content and the methods of teaching of these schools as outdated. Modern developments of thought in the Islamic world are not

incorporated into their curriculum and they strictly adhere to the traditional interpretation of Islam of a particular school of their choice. A vast majority of these Madrasas exclude secular subjects introduced by the modern educational system.

The modality of teaching is predominantly prescriptive and proscriptive rather than exploratory. In this system, analytical thinking or reasoning has no place. This method of teaching and training creates a mytho-historical mind as opposed to a techno-scientific mind. This has led to a dichotomy between religious and modern education. Theologians continue to firmly maintain a dichotomy between modern and religious education.

This is probably not due to the historical evolution of education, for rational thinking and intellectualism are not new to Islam. Scientists such as Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna) who wrote the canon of medicine, Al Biruni, Ibn Haythem, Averroes and Ibn Arabi made major contributions towards the advancement of science during the medieval period. During this period, the Muslim world reached the peak of learning, making major strides in Medicine, Astronomy, Mathematics, Law, Philosophy and Literature.

## **How Serious is the Issue?**

There exist several different ideologies within Islam. However, the majority denounces violence and extremism. Researchers have identified several common characteristics of religious extremist groups, i.e.

- Do not believe in universal human rights – including for women and people of other faiths.
- Encourage segregation from the main community. (in the form of dress, language and customs)
- Strive to introduce and enforce sharia-law.
- Evidence of incitement to jihad or glorification of (suicide) terrorism.
- Evidence of financial support for jihad in Muslim-majority countries facing Islamist insurgencies.
- Participation in armed struggles in conflict zones.

In Sri Lanka, the more extremist Wahab interpretation is followed by Tawheed Jamath, Jamathe Islami, and Thableeq Jamath. Tawheed Jamath believes in the strict literal interpretation of the Quran. They are severely critical of practices and beliefs of traditional Sri Lankan Muslims. They give more importance to Sharia as a sacred and static doctrine of Islam. They do not take account of the fact that codes of conduct will

vary from time to time and place to place according to historical and social conditions (Gatt, 2019).

Extreme Islamic groups still argue that education means only religious education and secular education is un-Islamic. Most of the Ulama, who pass out from such extremist educational institutions have developed an antipathy towards new cultural changes.

Madrasas run by extremist groups hire foreign teachers who arrive without proper permission, to teach extreme ideologies. Even the religious books obtained with overseas funding, are based on misinterpretations of extreme violence.

Most of the students of full time Madrasas come from lower income families. It is easy to brainwash a largely uneducated younger generation in the Eastern province with the money and power available to extremist groups, who were not exposed to other parts of the country.

With all these inherent problems, lack of monitoring of such schools is a serious issue. The Ministry of Education claims that these Arabic Schools or Madrasa Schools are not established under the Ministry of Education and the ministry does not have any authority to monitor them (Al-Alawi & Schwartz, 2013).

## **Educational Interventions to Promote Religious Harmony**

### **Educational Reforms Required at the National Level**

The situation is far more complex and serious than we assume. There is no margin for error. As Sri Lankans, we must:

- Ensure an environment for the security forces to carry out their duty of taking action against any extremist or violent groups, regardless of their race or religion.
- Support peace-loving Muslims to eliminate extremists who are within the same community.
- Avoid any action that causes segregation and isolation of any community.
- Avoid hostilities of any type towards any community and actively oppose any such hostility.

The beautiful examples of harmony shown by all Sri Lankans, regardless of their ethnicities and religions provide a glimpse of hope about a unified Sri Lankan nation. However, there is a long way to go. The violence that resurfaced on Easter Sunday is a product of a particular ideology and mindset. An extremist mindset that has been systematically inculcated over 30 years will take time to change. Mainstream Muslim scholars, both

religious and academic representing different groups need to unite in order to bring a progressive Islamic religious education based on rationalist and traditionalist foundations. In achieving this, first we need to understand the barriers for reforms.

### **The Barriers for Reforms**

The spread of extremism that has taken place over time may be far more serious than we expect. If we assume that only 10% of the Sri Lankan Muslim community has been converted to extremist ideology, that gives us a number of 200,000. This religious fundamentalism should not be equated with the willingness to support, or even to engage in religiously motivated violence. However, given its strong relationship to out-group hostility, religious fundamentalism is very likely to provide a nourishing environment for violent radicalization. Experts such as Dr Alex P. Schmid argue that “even peaceful, apolitical, quietist Salafism can be served as an “antechamber” to terrorism, acting as a “conveyor belt” by facilitating socialization to violent extremism in the form of terrorism.” (Schmid, 2014).

Controlling powers of Muslim society prior to the Easter Sunday attacks favoured extremist ideologies at the expense of the peace-loving majority. Religious, social and state bodies that cater to Muslims were encroached and dominated by extremists. The

Department of Islamic Affairs, has given approval for 190 new, mainly Wahhabi mosques in 2015, 50 in 2016 and 80 in 2017, in addition to many hundreds of unregistered Wahhabi mosques. Also, some Muslim political leaders view Arabization and Wahhabism as tools of political legitimization. The so-called Sharia Universities are the product of that understanding. This tightening grasp of Wahhabism makes reforms exceedingly difficult.





*The religious harmony shown during Vesak 2019, was a ray of  
hope*

### **What Should be the Way Forward?**

Education can play a significant role in changing this mindset. The education system should foster a common Sri Lankan cultural identity and promote inclusiveness and integration. There should be both national level interventions as well as specific interventions aimed at reforming education of the Muslim community.

## **National Level Interventions**

The national education system needs to produce students with not only the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes appropriate for successful living, but also the respect and tolerance for other people and other cultures. Ours is a multicultural society, which has great opportunities for exchanging cultural knowledge and also necessitates the active engagement in collaborative interaction, instead of promoting a disparaging, insulting outlook and petty divisions and rivalries that we witness today in our society. The religious harmony that was recently observed during Vesak is a perfect example.

## **Religious Harmony through Education**

The school curriculum should promote religious harmony. Since childhood, Sri Lankans should be taught and trained to understand and respect all religions. Highlighting the similarities, as opposed to differences will empower school children to embrace a common national identity.

Even on a historical level it is interesting to note close links between Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. The similarities between Islam and Christianity, as mentioned by the Rev. Archbishop are well recognized. What is astonishing are the

similarities between Buddhism and Islam, two religions perceived as diagonally opposite.

The similarities are not only on basic principles of peace, love, compassion, generosity and equality, but in the deep understanding of life and universe as well.

The Buddha rejects the two extremes of life, in his teaching. Born a prince, Siddhartha enjoyed every physical comfort and pleasure. However, dissatisfied with the pursuit of fleeting pleasures, he set out in search of a deeper, more enduring truth. He entered a period of extreme ascetic practice, depriving himself of food and sleep, bringing himself to the verge of physical collapse. Sensing the futility of this path, however, he began meditating with the profound determination to realize the eternal truth. It was then, in his rejection of both self-mortification and self-indulgence, that he could find perfect harmony, the Nibbhana (Gombrich, 2006). The Al-Quran explains that the adherents of this sect should not seek either extremes of life. Buddha asserted that one should not believe anything on the basis that a wise man said it, or because it is generally believed, or is written, or said to be divine, or is believed by someone else, but that it should be believed only if ones judges it to be true. This finds similarity to Prophet

Mohammed's advocacy to the effect "Seek thy judgment in thy heart irrespective of what others say."

Prophet Mohammed uttered his famous saying: "I see that I cannot stop this, so if you have to fight, fight. But don't forget that from now on the burden of your deeds will be upon you and your religion will not be pure unless you become responsible for the burden of your deeds." This statement speaks of the law of karma in Islamic teaching (Akpinar & Berzin, 2003).

Finally, the concept of 'sunyata' in Buddhism finds a parallel theme in the "Sufi" concept of annihilation "Fana" of both physical and psychological aspects; the non-existence leading to endless bliss and cessation of suffering.

There are similarities and differences between all religions. The differences are probably due to the context and period of time when the religions began and how they have evolved and been interpreted over time. Inculcating the understanding that there are more similarities will help children to realize the futility of religious violence and extremism.

## **Capacity Building of Teachers, Students and Parents**

Teachers are the most crucial and valuable resource within the education system. They must be motivated, dedicated and fully committed to the delivery of quality education and inculcating positive cultural competencies.

While teachers need to be given the tools and techniques to navigate seamlessly between the emotional and the intellectual dimension, children will need to be given a chance to take an active role in their community, giving them first-hand experience of the benefits of collaborating with others.

A key role needs to be taken by parents and they must acknowledge that their behaviors and incentives will influence the child's ability and willingness to be reflective, self-aware and mindful of others. The home environment should promote love, tolerance and peace.

Parents need to be aware of their children's behavioral changes and should examine them thoroughly in order to keep them away from extremism related activities. With regard to individual radicalization to jihadist terrorism, researchers have the following list of possible indicators:

- Visible changes in style of clothing and behaviour
- Break with their own family and turn to ‘new friends’
- Religion becomes an explanation for everything and is constantly referred to
- Others who do not follow strict religious practices are denounced as unbelievers “Thakfir”
- Participation in combat sports and survival training
- Fraud and other criminal activities against non-believers
- Participation in religious seminars of radical preachers
- Visit of extremist websites and videos
- Taking of language lessons followed by trips abroad
- Sudden change back to Western clothes, partying before the attack

### **Ensuring Opportunities for Better Education**

This is a real problem for many people, who find it difficult to secure admission to government schools, especially to grade one. A large number of Muslim parents send their children to English medium classes not only in urban areas like Colombo and Kandy but also in semi urban and rural areas like Mawanella, Kalmunai, Akkaraipattu Addalaichenai and Sammanthurai. International schools of very poor quality are mushrooming. Therefore, expanding educational opportunities for the Muslim community

is a must. A great issue for Muslims of Sri Lanka is the difficulty in gaining admission to popular national schools. The number of Muslim schools in many parts of Sri Lanka is few and the quality of education is also poor. This has become the reason for mushrooming of poor quality Muslim international schools.

## **Reforms Required in Muslim Religious Education**

The teaching of extremist ideologies has resulted in the creation of an extremist mindset among some youth in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Libya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and now in Sri Lanka. Currently there are calls for a reforming of Madrasa education and denying approval of the Sharia University. However, the issues here are much more complex and deep-rooted and superficial interventions will be insufficient in rectification (Wijedasa, 2019).

First we need to clearly understand how the teaching of Arabic and Islamic studies in Sri Lanka currently takes place.

## **A Glance through the Current Situation of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Sri Lanka**

### **1. Religious schools/seminaries, known as Madrasa(s) / Arabic colleges:**

They are many different types of institutions under this category. Until the 1970s, seminaries performed the task of graduating students who were known as Moulavis. The first of these seminaries was established in 1884 in Weligama. By the 1970s, there were approximately 20 such Madrasas all over Sri Lanka, which followed a uniform standard curriculum (Nidhami Syllabus). The traditional curricula of these seminaries/Madrasas included courses on comparative religions, social sciences, history and political science in addition to mathematics and geography. This curriculum was considered equivalent to a Bachelor's degree at Al-Azhar University in Cairo.

Some of these seminaries, such as the “Naleemiah” in Beruwala, called themselves "Jamiah" in Arabic, which means university instead of a Madrasa or seminary. However, these institutions do not have the facilities or required standards for a university. Essentially, all of them fall under the category of Madrasa.

Their graduates possessed a significant level of understanding and ability to guide, teach and advise on matters related to Islam and Arabic. There was conformity in their approach to understanding and preaching about Islam, with essence of moderation, tolerance and respect for other cultures and religions. This resulted in a very constructive and exemplary peaceful co-existence of Muslims with their fellow Sri Lankans. For over a hundred years now, the seminaries were successful in inculcating in the hearts and minds of Muslims, a perception of Islam as a tolerant way of life that stands for respect and appreciation of all other religions (Department of Muslim Religious & Cultural Affairs, 2014).



*Naleemiah institute for Islamic studies in Beruwala*

Unfortunately, with the growing influence of extremist movements, the seminaries have started abandoning the traditional system and adopting the Wahhabi approach (Wijedasa, 2019).

## **2. Sunday schools: (Ahadiyya equivalent of Daham Pasala)**

These schools utilize the weekly Sunday holiday to give Muslim students instructions about their religion and have played a very positive role in educating young Muslims. However, during recent years, these schools too have been subjected to the influence of extremist ideology.

## **3. Public schools working under the aegis of the Ministry of Education:**

The course on "Islamic religion" used to be taught in these schools through books unanimously approved of by Muslim scholars and representing true Islam. But in recent years the books being used in public schools have been revised and replaced with new books with subtle inclusion of extremist ideologies. These textbooks consider extremists like Abdullah Ibn Wahhab and the likes as heroes and revivers of Islam.

#### **4. Departments of Arabic language and Islamic studies in public universities:**

These departments were expected to contribute to the development of Arabic language and Islamic studies. However, Muslim intellectuals such as Professor M.A. Nuhman and Professor M.S.M. Anes have questioned the quality and standards of these departments (Nuhman, 2013 & Anes, 2015).

#### **5. Maktab or Quran Schools:**

Recently introduced by the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU) with the purpose of regulating and improving Qur'an teaching for Muslim children. They are replacing the existing evening madrasas conducted by the traditional Mowlavis.

#### **6. Branches of international Islamic universities:**

These institutions are funded by Middle Eastern countries. Most of these branches do not have UGC approval. The proposed Shariah University in Batticaloa is another such controversial venture (Gunaratna, 2019).



*At the centre of controversy-The proposed Shariah University in Batticaloa*

Over time, extremist groups have succeeded in gaining control in all these different types of institutions. There are several reasons that have led to this phenomenon.

1. The financial and political power available with extremist groups.
2. Increasing number of students joining Middle Eastern universities that promote Wahhabi ideology. These universities have attracted numbers of Muslim youth around the world on very generous scholarships. Graduates are in turn supposed to return to their countries of origin and propagate Wahhabi doctrine and establish

seminaries. They are paid a monthly salary and donations as well.

3. Uncontrolled establishment of seminaries. The number registered with the Ministry of Islamic Religious Affairs, has reached over hundred with many more remaining unregistered.
4. Most of the graduates from these seminaries (researchers have estimated that more than a thousand students graduate per year) are unemployed. The funds and resources available with extremist groups easily attract these graduates.
5. Most of the students who attend full time religious schools are from an underprivileged background with a low level of basic education.

Emergence of these radically oriented movements have led to theological disunity, violent disputes within the Muslim community and proliferation of extremist attitudes. This naturally led to exclusivism becoming the norm. Tolerance, respect for the others and co-existence become synonymous with infidelity (Beech, 2019).

This deep rooted and complex issue needs to be addressed in a comprehensive and holistic manner.

### **Need of a National Level Dialog within the Muslim Community**

As an immediate measure, all Islamic educational institutes/schools must come under the purview of the Education Ministry, as it is vital that they be monitored by an independent government regulatory system. In this context, the textbooks published by the Muslim Cultural Affairs Ministry, and also school textbooks produced by the Education Ministry should be revised.

Intellectuals within the Muslim community need to define religious education. They need to agree on and remove any section that would lead to misinterpretation and violence (Sourjah, 2019). As for a start, the Muslim community needs to define the characteristics of a “Sri Lankan Muslim”. For example, international researchers have suggested 6 criteria of traditional non-extremist Muslims.

1. Promote and practice democracy within its own structures
2. Reject violence in pursuit of religious goals

3. Condemn terrorism
4. Advocate equal rights for women
5. Accept pluralism of interpretations within Islam



*Indian Muslims pay tribute to the victims of the Sri Lankan terror attacks, in New Delhi*

## **Legislations and Policies**

The proposed reforms in Islamic education in Sri Lanka should be carried out in a comprehensive manner. This endeavor should be part of a comprehensive reform and restructure of Arabic and Islamic studies in Sri Lanka. Currently several institutions are operating under the names of Madrasah, Kulliyah and Jami'ah, and should be all covered under the Act. It must take into

consideration all institutions including universities that are involved in Arabic and Islamic studies/Islamic culture programmes in Sri Lanka (Wijedasa, 2019).

Reforms should be under the responsibility of an independent high-level academic committee. The members of this committee should be highly qualified (e.g. PhD or Master's Degree holders) with sound knowledge and experience in religious sciences and university education, and have an appropriate background on the seminary system locally and on the status of Islamic studies internationally. The committee should be completely free from any political influence.

This committee should study the current situation of seminaries and their curricula, and determine the vision and objectives, trying to develop the new curriculum in accordance with the nature and requirements of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. Some pertinent questions are;

1. What is the vision, mission and objectives?
2. What kind of graduates do we want to produce?
3. How many institutions or colleges do we require?
4. How will the management of these institutions be carried out?

5. What should we do with the huge number of existing seminaries?
6. What should be a candidate's admission requirements?
7. What is expected of his/her graduation?
8. What would the academic qualification of the graduate equate with?
9. Who would execute and implement the restructured system?
10. How would lecturers and teachers be selected?

### **Meaningfully Integrate Modernity with Tradition**

Modern education is the only tool for the progress and upward social mobility of the Muslim community. The early Muslims who followed this path laid the foundation and paved the way for modern science. Unfortunately, the extremist approach closed the doors for independent scientific thinking and made Islam ritualistic, undermining the spiritual dynamics of Islam in the name of Sharia.

The Muslim community, which had remained united for centuries and in complete harmony with itself and its neighbours started splitting in the name of religion itself. Local Muslim culture was replaced in many of its aspects. Those who were lured into extremist ideology distanced themselves from the fact

that they were Sri Lankans and living in a country that respected them as citizens and treated them equally with all ethnic and religious communities.

The current situation demands elimination of extremist ideologies and a return to the culture, practices and education of peace-loving Muslims who co-existed in Sri Lanka over a thousand years. This can only be achieved through a coordinated, comprehensive and honest effort of all Sri Lankans regardless of their ethnicity and religion. Education plays a key role here.

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### **Printed by:**

Softwave Printing and Packaging  
Sri Sambuddhathva Jayanthi Mawatha  
Colombo 5  
Sri Lanka

**ISBN 978-955-703-046-3**