

**GENDERED
ASSUMPTIONS**
- AND -
**WOMEN'S LIVED
EXPERIENCES:**

*Interrogating 'Violent Extremism'
and political violence from
the standpoint of women*

SRI LANKA CASE STUDY



Women and Media Collective
Established 1984

**The Marriage of State
Structure with Divisive
Identitarian Politics:
Layers of Resistance and
Sites of Struggle in Sri Lanka**

by **SARALA EMMANUEL**

The Marriage of State Structure with Divisive Identitarian Politics:
Layers of Resistance and Sites of Struggle in Sri Lanka
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INTRODUCTION

AS THIS RESEARCH REPORT WAS BEING WRITTEN, two chilling events took place in the East. The first was a protest in a girl's school in February 2022, Sri Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College in the Trincomalee District, where young girls in their school uniforms and their parents protested against the reappointment of a Muslim teacher in the school. This was an ongoing conflict which had started in 2018, when the teachers and parents of students objected to some teachers coming to school in abaya.¹ Veteran Trincomalee parliamentarian and leader of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) R. Sampanthan had also urged education authorities to resolve the matter in a way that “respects the traditional dress code followed in the [said] school” and ensure “no community introduces new ways of dressing.”²

In June 2022, when two adult women, one Indian and one Sri Lankan, were arrested based on a complaint by the father of the Sri Lankan woman, for desiring to get married to one another. The Sri Lankan woman, aged 19, was from a Muslim village. The news went “viral” on Tamil language social media. Even though the Akkaraipattu Magistrate, M.H.M Hamsa, released the Indian woman, the Sri Lankan adult woman was sent to a safe house with her one-and-a-half-year-old child, under the custody of Probation Services.³ According to a news report, this was for the “safety” of the woman.⁴

This research report captures women's experiences in negotiating patriarchal, heteronormative, racist practices in their everyday lives. The Muslim teacher who was violently denied from taking on her work in a government school, because she wore an abaya, to the two women who were violently separated through the use of legal processes, are among the case studies in this report that highlight diverse experiences of women in Sri Lanka. Often, family structures, state institutions, political actors, and even the law are intertwined and execute oppressive, restrictive, and often violent actions upon women's lives.

1. Rameez, along with three other teachers, initially filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) on May 21, 2018, stating that they had been prohibited from wearing the abaya by the school's management committee which is headed by the principal. On February 2, 2019, the HRCSL, following an investigation into the complaint, recommended that the complainants be allowed to wear the dress of their choice (in this case, the abaya) to resume their duties and to continue their work without hindrance or harassment. However, allegations are levelled at the school for not implementing this HRCSL recommendation. Although three of the initial complainants have now accepted transfers elsewhere, Rameez decided to file a writ application at the Court of Appeal in 2021, requesting the school to implement the HRCSL recommendation. The case was called up for support in November 2021. Rameez was asked to report to duty on February 2, through a letter sent to her by the Education Ministry, which is when this incident occurred. <https://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/75943>; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/fear-of-the-abaya/article61827761.ece>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/7/14/hindu-group-protests-against-muslim-teachers-wearing-abaya>

2. Ibid.

3. Probation and Child Care Services only have jurisdiction to handle cases related to children. However, this woman was handed over to the probation services by the courts stating this was for the wellbeing of her child.

4. <https://www.themorning.lk/indo-sl-lesbian-couple-seeking-matrimony-released/>; <https://www.sundaytimes.lk/220626/news/indo-lanka-lesbian-love-couple-held-487294.html>; https://ibctamil.com/article/indian-women-release-court-sri-lanka-1656375047?itm_source=parsely-api

The research aims to develop new grounded knowledge on violent extremism from a gender perspective with a purpose to shift the narrative away from one of “counter-terrorism” to that of the lived experiences of women and their communities, to contribute to developing local pathways for change. Towards this end, the objective of the research was to highlight violent extremism and its gendered dimensions, particularly from the perspective of young women. From the insights derived from this, we hope to develop policy directives for national and international intervention and to strengthen women’s leadership locally with particular reference to young women.

In the inception workshop for this research project, we decided not to use terms such as “violent extremism” for many reasons. First, this term emerged from global discourses of counter-terrorism and had not emerged out of the local realities of the research sites. The term did not even exist in local languages. Even though we did not directly use such terms, women interviewed for this research, reflected on different aspects of “violent extremism” as it was broadly understood. These reflections were based on the one hand, on their own experiences of bodily integrity, sexuality, sexual control, motherhood, sexual/domestic violence, autonomy and choice; as well as what they had come across through media and public discourses. All those interviewed identified moments in their lives when they had faced violence, oppression, and patriarchal control; and for some women these moments epitomized “violent extremism” and for others they made sense of these moments as everyday patriarchy.

The tentative framing we used was exploring women’s everyday negotiations within contemporary political violence, capturing gendered experiences and focusing on specific actors including the state, media institutions, legal authorities, education institutions, armed militant groups, religious reformist groups, and decision-makers within the home. This research report, therefore, captures women’s experiences following the Easter attacks in April 2019 and the violence unleashed on Muslim communities thereafter, in different parts of Sri Lanka.

Multiple studies have documented the increase in anti-minority sentiment, fuelled by rising Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and extremism in the aftermath of the war that ended in 2009.⁵ There has been a number of attacks on minority places of worship including Hindu, Christian, and Islamic sites. Intimidation, surveillance, legal restrictions, and hate speech against minority religions and large-scale religious riots against the Muslim community have been commonplace for more than a decade.⁶ In most documented cases there has been state involvement, overtly or covertly, in instances of violence. This has taken the form of inaction when Muslims have called the police for protection during anti-Muslim riots and of Sinhala senior government officials posting anti-Muslim messages on their Facebook accounts.⁷

5. Jayantha de Almeida Guneratne, Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena, Radika Guneratne (2013), *Not This Good Earth: The Right to Land, Displaced Persons and the Law in Sri Lanka*, Law and Society Trust; Verite Research and NCEASL (2020), *Prejudice and Patronage: An Analysis of Incidents of Violence Against Christians, Muslims and Hindus in Sri Lanka*, Minormatters; Verite Research (2021), *Inaction and Impunity: Incidents of Religious Violence Targeting Christians, Muslims and Hindus*, NCEASL; Gehan Gunetilleke, (2018), *The Constitutional Practice of Ethno-religious Violence in Sri Lanka*, *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 13; Gehan Gunetilleke (2018), *The Chronic and Entrenched: Ethno-religious Violence in Sri Lanka*, *Equitas and ICES*, p.70.

6. Guneratne et al., 2013 quoted in Samuel (2021).

7. Ria Samuel (2021); Ambika Satkunanathan (2021).

The powerful emergence of “Sinhala-Buddhist militant groups” such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), Ravana Balaya, and Mahason Balakaya has fuelled hate speech, intimidation, and violence particularly against the Muslim community.⁸ Gunetilleke (2021) identifies the cross fertilization of ideas among militant Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka and Myanmar as shaping the majoritarian ideology in Sri Lanka. For example, in October 2014, BBS and 969, a militant group from Myanmar, signed a memorandum of understanding, following the visit from the 969 leader U Wirathu to Colombo. Gunetilleke (2021), also highlights the influence of Chinese counter-terrorism strategies, particularly in relation to “re-education camps” for the Uighur community, which showed similarities in the Prevention of Terrorism (de-radicalisation from holding violent extremist religious ideology) Regulation No. 1 of 2021, introduced by the Sri Lankan government⁹ in the aftermath of the Easter attacks in 2019.

Key mainstream Buddhist institutions in Sri Lanka encouraged violence against Muslim communities using extremist arguments that are in effect about attacking women’s bodily integrity as a way of “protecting the race.” One such sermon was given by chief prelate of the Asgiriya Chapter of Buddhism Warakagoda Sri Gnanarathana on June 15, 2019 and reported in the media a few days later. As per media reports, the chief prelate called for a boycott of all Muslim-owned businesses, claiming that they were working to “sterilise” the Sinhala population. He said:

Don’t buy from those shops. The young people who ate from those shops, I think, will not be able to have/lose their children. You should know this. Don’t eat or drink from Muslim shops. Traitors who have destroyed this country shouldn’t be allowed to live in peace. I won’t tell you to stone them to death, but that’s what should be done.¹⁰

Women’s everyday experiences in Sri Lanka, must be placed in the broader context of systemic prejudice in the laws and policies of the state. This prejudice which primarily targets minorities in Sri Lanka has a history which spans several decades. These laws have had a wide range of impacts, including discrimination based on religion and ethnic identities, targeting of terror laws, land dispossession, control of women’s dress and bodies, and discriminatory health regulations in the COVID-19 response of the state.

In 1956, the SWRD Bandaranaike coalition came into power with the rhetoric of victimization of Buddhists and the need for a stronger Buddhist nation. Bandaranaike commissioned a report by the Buddhist Commission which was called “Betrayal of Buddhism.” By 1972, Article Six of the Constitution gave Buddhism the “foremost place” in the Constitution. Buddhist nationalism became strong in the political sphere. In 2004 and 2008 there were attempts to introduce anti-conversion laws in response to allegations of unethical conversions. In 2008, the Ministry of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs issued a circular demanding that all new constructions of places of worship should obtain approval from the said Ministry. This led to state authorities cracking down on Christian churches and Mosques (Samuel, 2021).

8. Gunetilleke (2021).

9. Prevention of Terrorism (De-radicalisation from holding violent extremist religious ideology) Regulation No. 1, of 2021 – Gazette Extraordinary No. 2218/68 of March 12, 2021.

10. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/sri-lanka-finance-minister-protests-anti-muslim-remarks-of-top-buddhist-monk>

Draconian laws such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act has been used disproportionately against the Tamil minority and after the Easter attacks, against the Muslim minority. The PTA has also been used as a weapon to intimidate, threaten, and stifle dissent, media freedom, and civil society activities, especially in the Tamil majority North as well as the East of the country, including in the guise of countering terrorism financing (Fonseka, 2021; Satkunanathan, 2021).¹¹

Gunetilleke (2021) has noted that even the ICCPR Act of 2007 has only been used against religious and ethnic minorities and against those who have had dissenting views. Furthermore, not a single individual who has incited violence against minority communities has been convicted under the Act.

In terms of the Judiciary, quoting a study by Verite Research,¹² Samuel (2021) further notes that there is a bias against minority religious freedoms, including failure to expand and promote religious freedoms as well as seeing any attempt to propagate religion in Sri Lanka as a threat to the socio-cultural dominance of Buddhism, for example by denying three Christian organisations to be registered.

According to the People's Land Commission Report (2021), in terms of land dispossession, often forest and wildlife conservation regulations as well as archaeological conservation laws have been used, particularly targeting minority communities.

"The sudden and arbitrary demarcation of privately-owned lands as forest land for wildlife conservation or archaeological sites in different parts of the country becomes ethnically charged when the lands are acquired only from minority communities. Privileging a discourse of environmental protection or archaeological conservation based on ethnicity often results in the dispossession of minority communities. Such cases were brought to the notice of the Commission in areas like Mullaitivu where the minority Muslims were deprived of their land. Similar complaints were brought by communities in Wilpattu and in Trincomalee. In Kokuthoduwai (Mullaitivu) a Tamil community that was displaced during the war found that upon their return in 2012, their agricultural lands had been designated as a hazardous area due to mines. These lands were subsequently acquired by the Forest Department. When the Forest Department relinquished ownership of 25 acres of this land they were then transferred to a Sinhalese person. This particular Tamil community's ability to contest this situation has been limited due to the loss of documents of ownership (even at the AGA office) due to the war and the tsunami."

Using the Town and Country Planning Ordinance and the Urban Development Authority Law, areas of land are declared as sacred even though neither of the laws define what is "sacred." In some cases, areas of land are declared as archaeological reserves or protected monuments under the Antiquities Act. However, these acts are rarely used to protect histories of minorities. In the post-war context, the military worked along with the Urban Development Authority (UDA) to alienate minority communities from their land (Secretariat for Muslims, 2015). One of the recent examples of this is

11. <https://colombogazette.com/2021/10/27/us-congress-human-rights-commission-discusses-sri-lankas-pta/>

12. https://books.google.lk/books/about/Judicial_Responses_to_Religious_Freedom.html?id=elkmtAEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

in 2021, in Kurundumalai, Mulaitheevu where Vidura Wickremanayaka, Sri Lanka's state minister for "national heritage," accompanied by army soldiers and archaeology department officers, led an event at Kurunthoormalai in which a new Buddha statue was placed and consecrated at the site of the Athi Aiyandar temple. This was done in spite of a court order halting any activities on the ancient site.¹³

In the COVID-19 context, on April 11, 2020, The Minister of Health and Indigenous Medical Services issued the Regulation 61A under the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance of 1897 that the corpse of a person who has died or is suspected to have died of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) shall be cremated (Gunetilleke, 2020).

Apart from the above, there have been legal regulations that have directly targeted women. A week after the Easter attacks, new emergency regulations were passed. Regulation 32A provided: "No person shall wear in any public place any garment, clothing or such other material concealing the full face which will in any manner cause any hindrance to the identification of a person." Consequently women wearing the Niqab were harassed and prohibited from entry to public buildings and public transport.

At the inception workshop for this research project, the research teams shared their own contexts and experiences in Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka. Some of the key reflections noted that within the women's movement and in feminist discourse there are different understandings of how to deal with "violent extremism" and "counter-terrorism" and its underlying politics. Women are often prevented from taking action when counter-terrorism strategies are employed against them and their communities. The space for women's autonomous work is restricted. In the context of Asia, where patriarchy severely constrains women's behaviour, there is a special need to have a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics and compulsions. For this, there is a need to understand violent extremism from the perspective of women's lived experiences in local contexts.

There are strong feminist articulations that women's bodies, honour, and sexuality are the ground on which socio-economic and political battles are acted out.¹⁴ The war years in Sri Lanka were no exception in this regard.¹⁵ This research is based on this body of literature, which highlights that women's experiences, everyday negotiations and interactions – in homes, on the street, at

13. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-minister-leads-buddhist-landgrab-tamil-temple>

14. Lata Mani, Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India, *Cultural Critique*, No. 7, 1987, pp. 119–56. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354153>, Accessed October 7, 2022; Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998), *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, Kali for Women, New Delhi; Urvashi Butalia (1998); *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Penguin Books India

15. Malathi de Alwis (2002), The Changing Role of Women in Sri Lankan Society, *Social Research*, Vol. 69, No. 3, 2002, pp. 675–91. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971569>, Accessed October 7, 2022; S. Maunaguru, (1995), Gendering Tamil Nationalism: The Construction of 'Woman' in Projects of Protest and Control, in Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (eds) *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka*, Social Scientists Association, Colombo; N. De Mel (2001), *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka*, Kali for Women New Delhi; Sarala Emmanuel (2006), *Dealing with women's militancy: an analysis of feminist discourses from Sri Lanka*, Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre (SPARC), Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo in collaboration with Berghof Foundation for Peace Studies, Colombo; Ambika Satkunanathan, (2012), *Whose Nation? Power, Agency, Gender and Tamil Nationalism*, in Asanka Welikala (ed) *Sri Lankan Republic at 40: Reflections on Constitutional History, Theory and Practice*, Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo, <http://constitutionalreforms.org/the-sri-lankan-republic-at-40/>

workplaces, in political spaces, during wars and violence – are all related to the control of sexuality and reproduction including economic reproduction.

Following from this, below are the overarching questions of this project

How have young women experienced and navigated the forces of violent extremism in their lives, personally and in relation to marriage, family, community, and nation?

The specific questions further guiding the research

What are the pathways in which violent extremism developed and spread? What are its means and milestones at the national and local levels? How are they linked to previous or existing conflicts?

What are young women's perceptions of violent extremism, and what do they consider are its drivers? What is the impact of violent extremism on their lives, including how they have borne its effects? What are their sources of vulnerability and strength, including the social movements they have accessed?

How have young women participated in, resisted, or mobilized against violent extremism? Are there inter-generational and cross-sectional connections and/or disconnects that influence their sense of options?

In what ways has the state empowered and/or disempowered these women who are dealing with violent extremism in their daily lives?

In this research, the case studies are anchored in the Easter attacks and its aftermath to ensure interviews are rooted in a particular timeframe. However, we explore life stories before and after this time period.

On April 21, 2019, Easter Sunday, there were explosions in three churches and three hotels which killed 290 persons and injured more than 500. The churches attacked were St. Anthony's at Kochchikade in Colombo, St Sebastian's at Katuwapitiya in Negombo and the Zion Church in Batticaloa. These attacks were organized and carried out by two small groups called National Thawheedh Jamaath and Jaamiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (Gunasingham, 2019). Eight men and one woman detonated bombs killing themselves and others. Global discourse and national media discourse focused on how these were close family networks.¹⁶ The locations we chose for the field work of this research – Negombo, Batticaloa and Kurunegala – were reeling from the impact of the violence and the attacks against Muslims that followed.

16. Anbarasan Ethirajan, Sri Lanka attacks: The family networks behind the bombings, BBC, May 11, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48218907>; Gunasingham, A. (2019). Sri Lanka Attacks: An Analysis of the Aftermath. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, 11(6), 8–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26662255T>

Methodology

The local-level empirical research consisted of the selection of three geographical sites and a collection of life stories of women from each site. The three research sites – Negombo in the Western Province, Batticaloa in the Eastern Province and Kurunegala in the North-Western Province – were chosen to capture a diversity of women’s experiences. All interviews have as their background one or more of the following: the impact of Sinhala Buddhist extremist mobilizations, war histories of both women from army families and women who were former militants, history of JVP¹⁷ violence, history of Tamil-Muslim conflicts, and the direct impact of the Easter attacks and its aftermath. Another important consideration in choosing field sites was the presence of trusted local women’s groups with in-depth knowledge of the local context who can organize and be part of the research process. This is crucial as the broader political context was extremely volatile and there was overbearing suspicion and tensions in the local context.

Even though work on the Sri Lanka case studies continued during the COVID-19 crisis, fieldwork was often disrupted. It was with great risk and care that the team carried out the fieldwork. Due to many months of lockdowns the field work was delayed several times in 2021.

One of the key objectives of the research was to work with community-level women leaders, as research assistants. We hoped to build critical insights and networks across locations as part of this research, in order to create sustained connections across historically divided communities. We worked with two young researchers in Batticaloa and Negombo who were also activists. They were later part of the “young researchers’ workshop” (described below).

Women from different communities in each location were interviewed by the research team. Some had lost friends in the Easter attacks. Others had faced direct violence in the aftermath, while some had been part of racist propaganda and violence. The objective was to capture different class and caste experiences. Women who were interviewed were involved in different kinds of work such as sex work, fishing, business, teaching, politics, social activism and religious work. The women who were interviewed were selected based on criteria developed in the inception workshop involving the full research teams from Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka. With the experienced suggestions of community-based women activists, 1. Women who had directly witnessed or experienced violence, and who responded and intervened to support victims, in the post-Easter attacks, 2. Women who were part of groups and discourses which were anti-Muslim and perpetuating hate speech, 3. Women who can provide specific experiences of marginalization based on class, work, ethnic identity and gender, 4. Women who were from different generations were selected.

In total 50 people were interviewed, either individually or as focus groups in the three locations. The interviews followed a loose structure, a story-telling intimate format, and included questions that explored women’s life stories. This methodology was important to build trust with the women interviewed and to broach sensitive conversations as explained in the ethical considerations section

17. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People’s Liberation Front), a Marxist-Leninist Communist Party and a former armed resistance group.

below. Fifteen interviews were carried out in Negombo, twenty-one in Kurunegala, and fourteen in Batticaloa. Some of the interviews were with key stakeholders who knew the historical socio-economic context of the area, were civil society actors and knew the history of movements of resistance and/or response during the violence. We also conducted interviews to gain a sense of the broader socio-political and economic backgrounds of the districts. The interviews were then juxtaposed with secondary literature including publications, media reports, and social media content.

The interviews with women in Negombo were completed over zoom with the local researcher Kumari, sometimes meeting the interviewees in person. The interviews were conducted in a manner that captures the inter-generational changes in terms of identities/women's experiences as well as diverse cultural and social norms based on ethnic identities. We specifically explored how women's experiences changed after the Easter attacks as one of the churches that were attacked was in Negombo.

In Kurunegala, in the North-Western (Wayamba) Province, the interviews were conducted in person through a field visit and several in-depth case studies with women from Muslim and Sinhala Buddhist communities were carried out. There was widespread communal violence against the Muslim communities in the Wayamba Province where Kurunegala is situated.

The research team also held focus group discussions with activists – men and women separately – to explore the historical narratives around how diverse communities had co-existed, focusing on social, cultural as well as economic power struggles and changes.

The interviews in the Batticaloa district, in the Eastern Province, where also a church had been attacked, were conducted in person with a young research assistant. Along with this, some of the interviews were conducted over zoom. Batticaloa, situated in the East of Sri Lanka, also held long histories of war and communal violence and the interviews captured these as experienced by women as well.

Ethical considerations

From the very outset, it was clear that the research process was going to be extremely sensitive. There was a clear need to build trust to have honest conversations. Therefore, as mentioned above, we identified local activists to be research assistants and worked through networks established by long-standing women's organisations.

As the research progressed, we documented many other ethical issues faced by the field researchers. As a result, we decided to have a workshop with the young researchers from both Indonesia and Sri Lanka, to be able to share their experiences of doing research in divided communities. The workshop was conducted online over two sessions across multiple languages of Bahasa, Tamil, Sinhala and English. In small groups, researchers discussed strategies for access, lessons on building trust, and support needed when ethical challenges come up.

Researchers shared their challenges in “othering” those who they interviewed, in other words, going into interviews not considering their own positionality. Others shared the challenges of being seen as part of the oppressor community. Sometimes, the stories were heard for the first time and researchers were left with guilt as the violence and oppression happened in the name of one’s own religion/ethnicity. They spoke of the importance of recognizing one’s own positionality in the field.¹⁸ When there was very little everyday interaction across divided communities, it became hard to do this kind of research. Sometimes when movements were banned from functioning it was difficult to connect with women. Also, using words such as extremism or terrorism was unhelpful and made women defensive, thus making it harder for researchers to build trust. Researchers spoke of their experiences of sharing food and slowly building friendships as important when carrying out sensitive research. Food, often a fraught terrain where hatred and distrust are expressed, became a way to establish trust for our researchers. Some researchers had to listen to friends who spoke of their involvement in movements which held opposing views to that of the researcher herself. They had to practice how to listen empathetically and with a critical mind.

Sometimes, researchers met women who were part of movements with racist ideologies, and couldn’t reveal the whole truth about the objective of the research. In two of the highly sensitive cases in Sri Lanka, one in Kurunegala and another in Batticaloa, we could not publicly reveal that we were conducting this research. It was only possible to access the women involved, through community-based women activists who already had a relationship with them. In Batticaloa, when meeting some of the Tamil women, Sameera, our researcher who is of the Islamic faith and visibly looks so, could not come. This would have added tension to the interviews and severely impacted them. Just her presence in the village would have been observed and questioned. As this became an insurmountable ethical challenge for the research, the information gathered from these two visits has not been directly used in the research report.

The learnings with regard to ethical challenges while doing research for this report, in itself yielded profound lessons on the subject matter of this work. The existing mistrust and the hindrances to open and free conversations across communities experienced by the researchers is a microcosm of the realities in these places. These realities in turn are a stark indicator of the impact of contemporary political violence or what may be called “violent extremism” on these places and people.

18. A. Appadurai (1988), Introduction: Place and voice in anthropological theory. *Cultural Anthropology*, 3(1), 16-20; Richa Nagar (2014), Reflexivity, Positionality, and Languages of Collaboration in Feminist Fieldwork, in *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms across Scholarship and Activism*, University of Illinois Press.

CASE STUDY

BATTICALOA

This section is drawn from interviews with five Muslim women born in the 1970/80s, one Muslim woman born in the 1950s, and one Tamil woman who was a former militant and a child soldier in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). We also interviewed different actors who were involved in the incident of a young Tamil woman who decided to convert to Islam. All names used in this section have been changed apart from instances where the person has been already named in public media, or it has been taken from published material.

Through this incident we hoped to understand how a young woman tried to navigate family, community, and institutions of the law/religion to assert her will. We also learnt that this process failed her. As the quote below illustrates, identity formations continued to be dynamic processes, and had specific impacts on women's lives.

“Islamic consciousness is now closely linked to our identity. Arabic has become our language that we must learn.”

The consolidation of identity categories such as Sinhala, Tamil, and Moor took place primarily during the British colonial rule, with processes such as the census as well as the political representative structures in the colonial and post-colonial state.¹⁹ Therefore, the post-colonial nation state of Sri Lanka emerged with tensions between the majority Sinhala Buddhist political powers and the minority political aspirations of the Tamils and the Muslims. Tamil nationalist aspirations and later armed struggle were rooted in the Hindu revivalist constructions of Arumuga Navalar in the 1950s and 1960s. These aspirations are very much connected to the love of the Tamil language and cultural consciousness.²⁰

Meanwhile, in 1949, as the new nation was being imagined, close to half-a-million Indian-origin Tamils who had been working in the tea plantations for more than a century in Sri Lanka were disenfranchised and denied citizenship rights.²¹ This decision was taken by elites across all ethnicities, motivated by a desire to hold on to power in the emergent nation and oppose any prospect of working-class mobilisation in Sri Lanka.²² In the subsequent struggle for predominance in the power balance, the initial alliances between the elites of different ethnicities disintegrated when found to be no longer feasible. There were several attempts at negotiating political autonomy and devolution of power to the Northern and Eastern regions of the island which were predominantly populated by Tamil and Muslim communities.²³ However, these political negotiations failed. One of the major development programmes that affected the minority communities involved the massive state land colonization schemes in the 1950s through which landless persons, who were predominantly Sinhala, were given plots of land and thus settled in the North and East.²⁴ This, along with the passing of the Sinhala Only Act (Official Language Act) in 1956, which made Sinhala the official language of the state,²⁵ has come to be identified as among the root causes for the growth of several Tamil armed political movements in Sri Lanka. They were diverse but broadly demanded self-determination, including in the form of the separate state of Tamil Eelam.²⁶

In terms of land rights and administrative control, both the Tamil and Muslim communities of the East were marginalized. For example, the massive state colonization schemes mentioned above, prioritized giving land and settling Sinhala landless persons over Muslims and Tamils who were landless, who were already living in the region. The Batticaloa district, which had a predominantly Tamil and Muslim population, was carved into two, and a new district, Ampara, was formed in 1961. This, along with the Gal Oya colonization scheme, which was in the Ampara District, changed the population demographics of the East and created a new Sinhala-dominated district. This consolidated state power within Sinhala governance structures.²⁷

19. Nira Wickramasinghe (2006).

20. Ambika Satkunanathan (2012).

21. Rajan Hoole, et al. (1990).

22. Ibid.

23. <http://archive.pov.org/nomoretears/timeline/>; <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/tamils/>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origins_of_the_Sri_Lankan_civil_war

24. Rajan Hoole, UTHR(J), Sri Lanka's Colonization Experience: Development or Disaster, <https://uthr.org/Rajan/colonisation.htm>

25. <https://www.himalmag.com/a-tale-of-two-languages/>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12004081>; <https://www.columbia-telegraph.com/index.php/sinhala-only-its-effects-on-ceylons-legal-tradition/>

26. Emmanuel & Gowthaman (Forthcoming 2022).

27. Macgilvray & Raheem (2007).

Muslims in Sri Lanka, being 9% of the population, were frequently caught between the power struggles of the Majority Sinhala Buddhist and the larger minority of the Tamils. MacGilvray and Raheem (2007) document the political history of post-independence Sri Lanka, where Muslim politicians chose to go with coalition politics with the mainstream Sinhala nationalist political parties, rather than ally with the Federal Party, which was Tamil nationalist. For example, the Muslim politicians, who were mostly from the South, opposed proposals for power sharing by the Tamil political parties, with the District Councils in the 1960s and the District Development Councils in the 1980s and several of the Muslim politicians voted in favour of the Sinhala Only National Language Bill in 1956.

With the loss of faith in Tamil political parties to be able to deliver to the aspirations of Tamils, Tamil youth formed several armed groups by the late 1970s. As Satkunanathan (2012) notes

Following the 1983 pogrom against Tamils and the Sixth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution, which outlawed the advocacy of secession, the ascendancy of the militancy could not be stemmed. The forfeiture of parliamentary seats by Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) MPs who refused to take the new oath of allegiance to the Sri Lankan state under the Sixth Amendment resulted in the militant brand of Tamil nationalism taking control of the struggle for the rights of the community. The rise in violence and the stepping up of terror tactics by the state also led to increased use of violence by the armed groups, and the movements became subordinated to the compulsions of Tamil Resistance in the face of increasing state repression. (p. 622)

One such group was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Over the war years, the LTTE became one of the most powerful militant groups as they violently eliminated most of the other Tamil militant groups.²⁸ Since the 1980s, there were some nine attempts at negotiating a political settlement.²⁹ One of the most significant processes was the Indo-Lanka Peace Agreement signed in 1987 with the mediation of Rajiv Gandhi, the then Indian Prime Minister. However, despite bringing in place some form of provincial administration with limited powers, this not only failed to prevent violence, but also resulted in the further exacerbation of the war with the intervention of the Indian Peace Keeping Force.³⁰ None of the agreements negotiated was successful in ending the war.

During the war, particularly in the mid-1980s and 1990s, Muslim communities particularly in the North and East were affected by violence and atrocities including massacres and mass eviction from the North. The East has seen Tamil-Muslims riots starting from 1985. Muslim areas were bombed by the Indian Peace Keeping Forces³¹ from 1987-90. The LTTE attacked mosques in Kattankudi and Eravur in 1990 and people from 33 Muslim villages were displaced during this period. Muslims have also been implicated in communal violence, massacres and killings as home guards³² trained by the state military outfits.³³

28. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/demons-in-paradise-a-spine-chilling-testimony-to-rebel-violence-in-sri-lanka/articleshow/59825098.cms>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/witness/2018/1/31/demons-in-paradise-memories-of-sri-lankas-civil-war>

29. Mathivathana Paramanathan (2007), Peace Negotiations of Sri Lankan Conflict in 2000-2006: The Ceasefire Agreement Facilitated by Norway is at Stake. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:4488/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

30. Rajan Hoole et al. (1990), <https://uthr.org/BP/volume1/Chapter8.htm>

31. The Indian Peace Keeping Forces were deployed in Sri Lanka following the signing of the Indo - Lanka Accord by Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India and J R Jayewardene, President of Sri Lanka in 1987.

32. Village men trained by the security forces to gather intelligence and act as guards to protect villages from militant attacks.

33. (Haniiffa (2016); Macgilvray & Raheem (2007)).

While Tamil political leaders were articulating self-determination, Muslim political leaders chose to work from within the Sinhala-dominated power structures. Muslims were seen as the good minority by the state as they did not challenge the Sinhala majority state through armed struggle. The Southern Muslim leaders did not relate to the experiences of the Muslims in the North and East. This led to the emergence of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress in the 1980s, based in the East and formed under the leadership of M.H.M. Ashraff. The party was formed on the basis of a collective religious identity to counter the threat of Tamil chauvinism in the North and East.³⁴

The political power struggle between the Tamils and Muslims also played out in education institutions. The 1970s saw the establishment of a separate government Muslim schooling system, training of Muslim teachers, and the appointment of Muslim staff as education officers on a proportional quota by the then Education Minister Dr Badiuddin Mahmud. Subjects of Islam and Arabic language were introduced in mainstream education, and the hijab as the uniform for Muslim girls was introduced in 1982.³⁵

However, the political tensions only got worse as the war continued. Through the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord and the establishment of the North-East Provincial Council, the Tamil-dominated council eliminated Muslims from the Police force, halted the appointment of volunteer teachers on the ethnic ratio quota, and failed to hold the referendum on the merger of the North and East Provincial Councils.³⁶

34. Haniffa (2015); Mihlar (2019); Macgilvray & Raheem (2007).

35. MacGilvray & Raheem (2007).

36. Ibid.

Gendered discourses on identity

Gendered roles of women as mothers, for instance, were an integral part of the nationalist discourses of the Tamil mobilisations and the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan state. The 1980s, saw the call to mothers to give their sons for heroic nationalist projects of the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese.³⁷ As Maunaguru (1995) notes, “The state, political and religious organisations praised the military men as heroes, and their mothers as heroic women who sacrificed their children for the nation.” As Serena Tennakoon observes: “Male military heroes and their supporting cast of mothers and admiring wives and lovers are invoked to condone the insanity of organized male violence.”³⁸ By the 2000s, a quarter of Sinhala men in the age group of 18–30 were directly employed by the military in the Eastern Province. Furthermore, Sinhala and Muslim men were recruited as home guard units since the 1980s.³⁹

Similarly, the LTTE held strong views about the role of women in protecting Tamil culture. Through the 1980s all the way to the 2000s, at different times when women were more present in public economic and political life, there were statements/handbills laying out dress codes and behaviour codes for Tamil women. During the war years, Tamil women who travelled to Colombo were attacked. In one such instance, the official newspaper of the LTTE, Eelanathan, carried an unsigned letter titled “The Degeneration of Tamil Women in Colombo” stating that they were being physically handled by male soldiers at checkpoints and that they are losing their morals by becoming friends with Sinhala and Muslim communities. The letter demanded that young women who returned from Colombo should be punished. Similarly, in the post-tsunami context, women who were employed in non-governmental organizations were attacked for interacting with and having or assumed to be having sexual contact or any physical contact with men.⁴⁰

The liberalization of the economy in 1977, combined with global changes in the Islamic world following the Iranian revolution in 1978–79, and the resultant greater global connectivity of Islamic revivalist movements, along with the escalation of the war in Sri Lanka, affected the Sri Lankan Muslim communities. Since the opening up of the economy in the 1980s there was a powerful process of Wahabi/Salafi purification against the established Sufi order. The most serious incidents related to this were between 2006–2007 in Kattankudi where there was shooting, damaging of property, burning of religious texts, and desecrating the burial site of a prominent Sufi leader. In 2005, A Sufi religious leader, Rauf Maulavi, was formally excommunicated by the *ulama* for transgressing the boundary of Islamic thought. These actions were spearheaded by a newly emerging Islamic reform movement, known under the umbrella term Tawhid Jamaat. The relationship of Muslims with their religion began to become more visible and expanded to cover many more areas of their lives. This was visible in rapid changes in dress codes of women and men; the emergence of new madrasas, financial and social institutions; sharia compliance leading to demand for more halal products; and Islamic banking and finance which created a new market and industry. This Islamic “purification project” impacted local cultural practices such as wedding, puberty and funeral rituals.⁴¹

37. Maunaguru (1995).

38. Ibid.

39. Spencer et al. (2015).

40. Maunaguru (1995); S. Maunaguru & M. Weaver (2016)

41. Mihlar (2019); Spencer et al. (2015).

In the East of Sri Lanka, 25% of the population is Muslim; however, in terms of settlements, they occupy only 2% of the land.⁴² According to the census data of 2012, the majority population was, therefore, Sri Lankan Tamils (380,930), with Indian Tamils being 2078, Sri Lankan Moors 133,854, Sinhalese 6797, and Burgher 2814.⁴³ Within Kattankudi, a town populated by Muslims, Tawhid mosques were located in the poorer sections where there was more pressure on housing facilities and where many migrant families lived. This area is known as the new Kattankudi. In Kattankudi labour migration to West Asia is often by men. In these communities, in the 1980s, the younger generation was educated often in madrasas rather than the government schools.⁴⁴ Thus, there was a fundamental generational shift in educational backgrounds among the people of Kattankudi.

In terms of the everyday experiences of women, Haniffa (2016), argues that the public political negotiations of Muslims as a “second minority,” enabled the formulation of a masculinity within the private realm that was “hyper-proficient and hyper-authoritative.” Meanwhile, the Islamic piety and reformist movement, since the 1980s, institutionalized “Islamic dress practices” and segregated male and female spaces. The Mosque Federation had the authority to dictate women’s dress codes and proper conduct for women, thus restricting women’s access to public spaces and policing their clothes.

1960s and 1970s: Women’s histories shared through the interviews

With free education in vernacular languages and investment in schools, many girls started accessing education in the 1950s and 1960s. The first women lawyers, teachers, and principals start emerging in Batticaloa, in both Muslim and Tamil communities, in the 1960s. Girls who were accessing schools from different communities, had space for making friends and interacting with one another. In university classrooms and hostels, women from diverse backgrounds lived and studied together. Women’s worlds were being broadened with education even as all women had to wear sari to university.

As a Tamil woman activist of an older generation reflected, her childhood home was in a community with Muslim, Tamil, and Sinhala households. She lived near the Batticaloa market with two Hindu kovils, a Buddhist temple, and two mosques in the neighbourhood. One of the mosques was an Auliya Mosque – a Sufi shrine. Her mother would get dates blessed by the Maulavi at the Auliya mosque when the children were sick as she believed that this would make them well. She remembered a woman – Muththamma – who used to visit her mother, who was Muslim. Muththamma was a common name for Tamil and Muslim women at the time. Common names, shared faith practices, and mutual visits were common across communities at that time.

Simultaneously, there were strong political debates about Tamil nationalism at the time. An older Tamil woman who was interviewed for this research, remembers her father, who was a teacher, being an ardent supporter of C. Rajadurai⁴⁵ who was the Mayor of Batticaloa and a Member of

42. Spencer et al. (2015).

43. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/abstract2021/CHAP2/2.11>

44. Firthous et al. (2021); Spencer et al. (2015)

45. Chelliah Rajadurai (born 27 July 1927) is a Sri Lankan Tamil politician and former government minister, Member of Parliament and Mayor of Batticaloa. Rajadurai was born on July 27, 1927.[1] Rajadurai was a journalist and a member of the editorial staff of the Su-

Parliament through the Federal Party in the 1960s and who had a strong political platform on Tamil nationalism. However, these political debates do not seem to have had a largely altering effect on the everyday relations and interactions at the household level.⁴⁶ She further noted that even during this time, there were conflicts in the border areas of Ariyampathy and Kattankudi over the boundary stones of the two villages.

Our interviews yielded information on how significant historical events had a profound impact on the lives of “ordinary women.” The Sirima–Shastri pact of 1964⁴⁷ which, for instance, left its mark on the life of Hameetha Umma. Her father was an Indian “Tamil Muslim” from Ramanathapuram district in present-day Tamilnadu. Even though he had married and had been living in Sri Lanka for many years, he was forcibly repatriated. Hameetha Umma’s mother went from one government office to another appealing for his return, but to no avail. “They were married for 4 years. They took him from the house and deported him. So my mother became my whole life. My mother, my sister, and myself made our life.”

Matrilineal systems of property were common in the East.⁴⁸ The groom came to the bride’s house after marriage.⁴⁹ Hameetha Umma’s mother had a house and land which she had got from her mother as her dowry. Her mother worked hard to raise them. She wove mats, made and sold string hoppers, sold cashews, wove coconut branches, and pounded flour.

Growing up, Hameetha Umma and her sister went to the nearby primary school. She used to go to school in the clothes they wore at home. She remembers a teacher who was a Tamil woman from Kallar (a town some hours away from her village), who stayed in their village so she could work in the school and even made social visits to her home in the evenings. However, Hameetha Umma and others had to go to the Kattankudi town (around 10 kilometres away) for higher education. As it was assumed that male members of the family had to take them to school, in the absence of such men, their education was stopped.

Thus, in terms of women’s negotiation of the public sphere during the decades of the 1960s and 70s, education played a crucial role and remained a complex and layered experience for women of that generation. Major historical shifts in policy during this time in the country often profoundly impacted a whole generation of women.

tantiran weekly newspaper.[2] Rajadurai stood as the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi’s (Federal Party) candidate for Batticaloa at the 1956 parliamentary election. He won the election and entered Parliament.[3] He was re-elected at the March 1960, July 1960, 1965 and 1970 parliamentary elections.[4][5][6][7] He was the Tamil United Liberation Front candidate in Batticaloa at the 1977 parliamentary election and was re-elected. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._Rajadurai

46. These reflections were expressed in the interview with an older generation Tamil woman in her sixties for this research.

47. The Sirima–Shastri Pact or Srimavo–Shastri Pact (also known as the Indo–Ceylon Agreement and Bandaranaike–Shastri Pact) was an agreement signed between Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, and Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Prime Minister of India, on October 30, 1964. Officially, it was known as Agreement on Persons of Indian Origin in Ceylon. It was a significant agreement in determining the status and future of people of Indian origin in Ceylon <https://web.archive.org/web/20150128112857/http://pact.lk/29-october-1964/>; More than 500,000 plantation workers were repatriated to India, many against their will (Hoole et al., 1990).

48. Sitralega Maunaguru & Sarala Emmanuel (2010), in Penkalin Nilam: A study on Women’s Land Rights in the Post-Tsunami Resettlement Process in Batticaloa, Suriya Women’s Development Centre, Batticaloa.

49. Abdul Raheem Jeslim, Kaaththankudiyin Varalaarum Panpaadam: Mathath Thooimaivaathathin Pinpulam, Kumaran Publishers, Colombo/Chennai 2020; Firthous, A., Emmanuel, S., & Arasu, P. (2021). Of Continuing Injustices and Continuing Conversations: Women’s Collective Support Across Ethnicities in Batticaloa in Shreen Abdul Saroor (Ed.), Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka: Repression, Resistance and Reform, Alliance for Minorities.

Women's negotiations of the ritual space at the interstices of the public and private: Hameetha Umma's story

As was common at that time, in the community, a relative proposed Hameetha Umma's marriage and both families agreed. She was 18 years old and her husband was 21. A *koorapetti*, a container made of palm leaf, was taken as an offering by the women and some men from her house to the groom's house. This included *supari*, *maskat*, *kolukottai*,⁵⁰ other sweets, and bananas. Hameetha Umma got land and house as her dowry. A *thali*⁵¹ was put on her. She got a blue silk Manipuri sari⁵² in the *koorapetti* that they gave her. She wore a sari for her wedding and it was registered by the Maulavi. As her father was not there her older brother was *vali*.⁵³ As the *marathondi*⁵⁴ was put on the bride, she was bathed in coconut milk, they counted the number of coconut fruits in a coconut flower bunch to see how many children she would have. Seven mats were laid out for them, and each day one mat was removed. His relatives came and checked the mats to see if sexual intercourse had taken place. After seven days they went to his house for a few days.

Hameetha Umma, as shown earlier, is from a working-class background. It is of note then that she had all her children in hospital. She preferred to go the Ariyampathy Hospital in the nearby Tamil village rather than the Kattankudi hospital. She said that the Ariyampathy Hospital had women nurses and doctors and they spoke to her kindly. By contrast, in the Kattankudi Hospital, it was a male doctor, which made her uncomfortable. Apart from this she also said, "Kattankudy is wealthy. They don't treat us that well as we are not wealthy."

Hameetha Umma recalled how women were kept in a separate room inside the house after childbirth. She was bathed in water mixed with medicinal plants. An object made of iron was kept near her hand to deter spirits and avoid infections. Specific foods were not allowed for the mother. She was only given rice five days after childbirth. This was to ensure the uterus returned to its place and it was believed that scraping coconut would hinder that process and thus this activity was disallowed for women during this time. Men were not allowed into that space. Men were told that it was *theetu* (impure or polluting) to be near a woman who has just given birth as it was believed that it will reduce their fertility. Men were allowed only after 40 days.

Even as these practices were based on superstitions which may or may not be laced with some traditional knowledge about biological practices with some scientific basis, they allowed the new mother to rest.

50. Sweets prepared for festivals.

51. The *thali*, a neck ornament that serves as a symbol of marriage for women, usually worn by those of the Hindu faith, and sometimes by those of the Christian faith in Tamil and other south Asian language-based cultures.

52. An expensive silk sari of a particular design which comes from India.

53. Guardian

54. Red decorations on the palms and hands of the bride drawn with extract from the leaves of the Marathondi tree.

Growing up, marriage and childbearing practices in Hameetha Umma's life included a diversity of cultural, ritual, and religious practices that were woven into each other. Many of these practices were common in the East among the Tamil and Muslim communities. Within these cultural and ritual practices, she also explained how women negotiated patriarchy, sexuality, and their bodily autonomy. As she laughingly said, "Women can't be like livestock, some mothers-in-law close the door and don't allow the men to come inside. In my time men having two or three marriages was common and women also didn't know that there were previous marriages. It was like a game for men, marrying young girls."

The violence, political economy and changes in the meanings/practice of "Islam" in the 1980s and 90s in Batticaloa

The 1980s and 1990s saw brutal violence in Batticaloa, with killings and massacres that affected Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhala communities. There were many Tamil militant groups functioning in the East. The demand of the Tamil armed groups was for a separate Tamil nation state of Eelam. Simultaneously, Muslim politicians were writing and speaking in public about the marginalized position of the Muslims in the North and East. It was during this time that the Indian Peace Keeping Forces were also present in the East. In 1990, Muslim families in Batticaloa town, especially around the Batticaloa market, were forced to leave due to violent attacks by the LTTE. They were displaced and were finally resettled in Kattankudi, a small town 9 kilometres from Batticaloa, and in other parts of the country.

One of our interviewees, Fathima who lives in Kattankudi, recalled how there were many child births at home, as Muslim women were scared to travel through Tamil areas to reach the hospital. Her mother died at home during childbirth when Fathima was a child. Her school became an army camp and she didn't go to school for two years. Fathima's father was pulled out of a train and shot by the LTTE. Hameetha Umma's mother and 10-year-old son were shot by the LTTE in 1990 as well. Hameetha Umma's whole family was displaced for many years. Another interviewee Kathija recalled how her father was hiding Tamils in his office, to protect them from the Muslim mobs who were trying to kill them in revenge.

Hameetha Umma's experience of being displaced was heart breaking. She mentioned that the Muslims of Kattankudi were not happy with the displaced communities. The influx of a large number of people led to land prices going up. This led to the newcomers being seen as a problem by the older residents. As a result, Hameetha Umma could not get her daughters into a school for three years in Kattankudi. It was only after she returned to the Ollikulam village that they were able to go to school. She was diligent about her daughters having an education. She speaks of that as follows:

I made sure my daughters were educated. We have to make our daughters strong to face the world. Women should not live dependent on anyone, should not be dependent on men. Women should have their own income. When men treat us unfairly how would we face the world? Even if they leave us, let them go! We can feed ourselves, otherwise women are like slaves.

The 1980s also saw the opening up of the economy and many women started to leave to Middle Eastern countries for work. These newly emerging economic pathways went hand in hand with the spread of versions of Islam among Sri Lankan migrant workers. Mihlar (2019) notes that in the camps where male workers were living in Middle Eastern countries, there were indoctrination programmes where preachers conducted sermons about “true” Islam.⁵⁵ The political economy of the 1980s needs to be understood in the interstices of multiple simultaneous processes. First, the experience of the war and violence in the context of the political demand for a Tamil Eelam without Muslims as made clear by the forced eviction and violence against Muslim communities. Second, the greater access to the Middle East and an affiliation to an Islamic identity that enforces a singular version of Islam which leaves no room for diversities across time and place. Women as a result of this began to aspire to a global dress code as a way of finding global meaning to their Islamic identity in the context of feeling increasingly marginalized in their own land. The 1980s saw the emergence of Arabic Colleges which Muslim women were accessing. As Kamina, one of our interviewees reflected, the intention of these Arabic Colleges was to create *Salihah* – a good Muslim woman who respected her husband, birthed children and raised them. Women who were accessing public education, irrespective of the intentions behind such education, were becoming mobile and independent. Yet another moment which increased aid from and resultant influence of particular ideologies with regards to Islam was in the post-tsunami context. According to Kathija, who lived in Ottamavadi, in the Batticaloa District, at that time, apart from building houses and infrastructure, Saudi Arabia was also directing funds to madrasas.

According to Kathija, who was a young child at the time, around 1983/84 Iranian religious leaders arrived in Ottamavadi. Kathija remembers the introduction of the hijab in her school. Her sister first started to wear the hijab when she was in grade 7, when she was around 12–13 years old. Haniffa (2015) also notes how the practice of women and girls wearing the hijab became institutionalized, with the state distributing materials to make hijabs through the school system in the 1980s.⁵⁶

Sameera, our researcher who grew up in Ollikulam, near Kattankudi remembered the Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge government distributing school materials where girls wore hijab and boys wore long white trousers from primary school onwards. Aneesa et al., (2021) also noted how men went on scholarships to be educated in international madrasas in the 1980s.⁵⁷ Before this time there were only two madrasas in Kattankudi, of which only one was for women. These madrasas were mostly following the version of Islamic education that emerged from South Asian Islamic schools. Women were particularly taught how to be good housewives and raise their children within Islamic principles. The new madrasas provided religious education along with secular education. So this system produced an Alim, a religious scholar, who was also a lawyer or an engineer. These were seen as professional institutions.⁵⁸

Both Kamina and Kathija struggled as children with the new ways of being that was demanded of them by their families and communities. Kamina recalled how she loved to wear frocks. However, she was punished every day at the madrasa for not wearing pajamas worn with the shalvar kamiz. She

55. Farah Mihlar (2019).

56. Farzana Haniffa (2015).

57. Aneesa et al. (2021).

58. Ibid; Mihlar (2019) notes that a new professional class emerged who found the rationalist, modern, literal interpretations of Islam attractive with debates and discussions about what is true Islam.

was given the explanation that the Quran being a sacred, “pure,” religious text, could not be placed on the bare legs of girls as that would sully the book. Kathija and her friends were also forced to wear the hijab at home. . In contrast to this narrative Fathima chose to wear the abaya after her A/L examination. This was a decision that she took based on her relationship to her faith. She also stated that it gave her the freedom to access educational institutions on her own in Kattankudi as well as Colombo. She travelled alone and even rode a bike. She used to wear the face cover which gave her anonymity and people didn’t constantly demand to know where she was going.

Kathija observed changes in certain cultural practices, especially those practised by women. There used to be practices such as that of making and sharing *Baraath Roti* in the neighbourhood before the start of the Ramzan or Nombu fasting began. She also spoke of the practice of Kathama, where a family remembers the 7th, 14th and 100th day of a person since their death. On these days the Maulvi from the nearby mosque came home and read the Quran. Many women also practised Nethi Kadan or making wishes at the Auliya Sikarams, which were the Sufi shrines. They gave food when such wishes were duly fulfilled. With the influence of the Thowheed groups during this period, these practices were stopped as they were declared to be wrong in this rendition of Islam. Kathija remembers her own mother stopping these practices. People in general, but women in particular, had a lot faith in these practices and rituals. Around 2003/4, an Auliya Sikaram in Thoppigala was damaged by a Thowheed group. It was mostly women who used to go to these places. Stopping these practices then shrunk the opportunities for women to travel and be with one another.

It is in this context that M.C.M. Zaharan, the person who was an integral part of executing the Easter Sunday bomb attacks, emerged as a prominent young leader in 2013/14 in Kattankudi. He too started a purification discourse attacking Sufi religious leaders. In his vision he articulated a space for women and their rights, but strictly within the framework of family. He granted space for women’s Islamic education. He called dowry *haram* and pressured men to return the dowry they had received upon marriage. Women who became his followers along with their husbands gave away gold and stopped wearing gold altogether. The women, who were part of his group, were not permitted to work in spaces where there were other men. Zaharan and members of his group attacked a girl’s school on social media for organizing a dance programme for 10-year-old, year 5 students. In his interpretation of “pure Islam” all dancing and singing was *haram* or against Islam and sinful. He publicly shamed and criticized girls who were participating in sports and musical programmes. Members of Zaharan’s group also started attacking women activists and lawyers on social media who were part of the national campaign to reform the Muslim Marriages and Divorce Act.⁵⁹

On the whole, a picture emerges from our interviewees of interconnected factors of political economy, conflict and religious ideologies together making for a space that both provided women with opportunities/mobility even as it shrunk them. Experiences of marginalization for the Muslim community as a whole had become more concrete during these decades. This fed into further calcification of ideologies that propagated a version of Islam that was singular, expressly oppressive towards women, and violently dominant. While all such domination may not have taken the shape of literal physical violence that would affect life and limb, these ideas made a fertile ground for the emergence of a leader such as Zahran who held ideologies that justified violent means for political ends. It was such ideology that was then executed during the bomb blasts on Easter Sunday in 2019.

59. Aneesa et al. (2021).

Rihana AKA Krishnakumar Gowrydevi

This case study was compiled through interviews with community-based women activists from both Kattankudi and Kaluwankerni. Visits were made to the home of Rihana⁶⁰ and also the home where she lived for nine days in Kattankudi. Social media posts were compiled, and a short interview was conducted with a local journalist in Eravur.

Rihana had just turned 18 when she decided to leave her home in Kaluwankerni and go to Kattankudi, the Muslim town about half an hour from her village. This was January 2019, before the Easter Sunday bombings. In Kattankudi, she was taken to stay with a Muslim woman and her two children (it was not clear by whom), where she lived for nine days. According to social media sources, on the pretext of going for classes, she was taken to Kattankudi by one of the teachers on the 29th of December 2018, to study the Quran.⁶¹ Later, after returning home, she went missing on January 3, 2019. Her parents had reported a missing person at the Eravur police station. Later, she sent them a photo of herself wearing a hijab and informed them that she wanted to study the Quran and that they should not search for her.⁶²

After she left, there were big protests organized, which mobilized the family and the village as a whole. These protests were led by Tamil politicians and included slogans that demanded that religious conversions should be stopped if coexistence is to continue. Two Muslim teachers were accused by the mobs of protesters for her abduction and conversion. A protest on January 8, 2019 called for the removal of Muslim teachers, who were allegedly converting Tamil students to Islam. The Development Society of the Kaluvankerni Vivekananda Vidyalayam, villagers, as well as former TNA parliamentarian P. Ariyanenthan and local Pradeshiya Sabha members (local council members) had organized the protest. According to news reports, there were hundreds of people who joined the protest.⁶³ Velupillai Krishnakumar, Gowrydevi/Rihana's father, told the media that the teachers who were of Islamic faith in the school had confused his daughter and set in place steps for her to convert. He implored the Islamic religious leaders to take action and return his daughter back to him. A petition containing the demands to transfer the Muslim teachers was handed over to the director of the Kalkudah Zonal Education Department, Mr. Thinakaran Ravi.⁶⁴

According to Fahima, when Rihana came to Fahima's house, she was firm in her choice of leaving home and converting. At the same time, as she was a young girl who had never left home before, she also cried everyday as she missed her home and family. Fahima told us of how Rihana told

60. We will call her Rihana as this was her preferred name.

61. <https://yarl.com/forum3/topic/222431-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%A3%E0%AE%B5%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AF%88-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF-%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%B8%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B2%E0%AE%BE%0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%81-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF-%E0%AE%86%E0%AE%9A%E0%AE%B-F%E0%AE%B0%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%B3%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B4%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AA%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D/>;

62. Ibid; this section is also based on materials shared by a local journalist in Eravur.

63. http://www.battinews.com/2019/01/blog-post_12.html?m=1; <https://jaffnazone.com/news/7862#>;

64. Ibid

her that she used to be called Sonahaththi, a derogatory term for Muslims, while growing up in her village. She was even told a story that her actual parents were Muslims and had died. Fahima and another woman in the area Rifa took Rihana to the Eravur Police station. Hundreds of people had gathered outside. Videos and photographs were taken of Rihana and the women who accompanied her. They tried to cover their faces. Once they entered the police station, the women were separated. Fahima and Rifa saw Rihana looking at them. She was getting increasingly agitated about how people were talking to them and scolding them. After being separated from the two women at the police station, Rihana was sent to the hospital.

While she was in the hospital, Rifa tried to visit her, but couldn't talk to her. She went to the ward at the mental health unit where Rihana was, pretending to see another patient. They made eye contact with each other but couldn't speak to each other. The two women had no contact with her after that except for one phone call in the latter part of 2019 where she had said a marriage is being arranged for her and that she might be sent away to India. She had said that if this happened, she will kill herself.

Just as she said she would, Rihana committed suicide on March 18, 2020, at her home.

According to Fahima, she had chosen her name, Rihana. It is not clear who brought Rihana to Fahima's home. It is, however common practice for women who are in some crisis and in need of a safe place to stay for a few days, to be placed by the Mosque Federation in Fahima's home. As a woman living alone with her children, she was perceived as a person who could provide this service and she was happy to. Rihana, too came to her home in this way. When she was staying with her Fahima fed Rihana, just as she fed her own daughters.

As tensions escalated around this incident, inter-faith groups in Batticaloa stepped in. Fahima is an active member of these inter faith groups. She tried to return Rihana's laptop and other belonging through the inter-faith group. They met in town at the office of a church-based NGO. Rihana's parents came without her. Fahima's daughter had sent a letter hidden in her things to Rihana. Rihana later told them on the phone that her parents had shown her the letter and then torn it before she could read it.

When the research team visited her village, women leaders from the village women's groups said that Rihana grew up in an extremely poor household. Her father was a *poosari*, the traditional temple priest in a small Sivan temple which was in the same compound as their house. When we visited her home, her parents said that she was named Gowrydevi as she was born after many years of not having children and her mother had worn a Gowry Kaapu, a ritual thread worn by women while making wishes, for many years. Rihana was believed to have been born as a result of this and was thus called Gowrydevi. According to her mother, Gowrydevi had been engaging in Islamic practices for over four years before her death. She had been observing the Ramzan fasting or *nombu*. She wore pajamas and long sleeved tops. She had stopped wearing a *pottu*, the marker of Hindu faith in Sri Lanka worn on women's foreheads.

Since Rihana's suicide, her mother has had another child. The family now believe that this child is Gowrydevi returning to them in another form, as per the Hindu faith systems. Her father has also constructed a monument for her in the cemetery, presumably with support from the community without which he may not have been able to afford such a thing. He said that he goes there regularly. In a sense this monument exists as a possible space to propagate ethnic tensions between the two communities by harking back to the story of Rihana and blaming her suicide on the Muslim community rather than the complex set of factors that left a young woman feel an abject lack of power which pushed her to end her own life.

In summary, Rihana left home to convert to Islam in January 2019. This incident created outrage within the Tamil community, particularly over social media. There were protests within the village. Rihana was brought home to her parents against her wishes, within the same month. Interfaith groups, predominantly of men, participated in mediating the return of Rihana to her parents without much concern for Rihana's wishes. That was not a priority and was not worth considering in a context where, if tensions escalated further, it could lead to physical violence. Once Rihana was "returned," the tensions in the public sphere faded away as the patriarchal order had been restored. This restoration of order, being the default for people, especially men, of both communities, was enough to end the tension.

A few months after this incident, in April 2019, the Easter bombings happened. During investigations into the Easter bombings, another young woman's story became prominent. This was the story of Pulasthini/Sara. Sara, born as Pulasthini, a Tamil Hindu, left home after she married Hastun, a Muslim man, in August 2015. The story however gained attention in the media only after the Easter bombings. Hastun, who was earlier a member of Sri Lanka Towheed Jamaat had later joined National Towheed Jamaat. He was the suicide bomber at the Katuwapitiya Church in Negombo. The security forces never found Sara. It is alleged that she left the country.⁶⁵ Sara and Rihana got connected in public discourse even among women's groups. Any space that Rihana might have had to speak about her choices vanished after April 2019 and discourses in the media such as this, where she was connected to choices made by others such as Sara, were very different from her own. Any space for this complexity and nuance was lost in the din that followed the Easter bombings.

While compiling the information for this case study some key questions arose for us: How terrible would it have been for Rihana to choose to commit suicide? The decision would have been made even harder as the act of suicide is a sin according to the tenets of Islam, the faith she chose against all odds. There also remains the nagging question of whether she did indeed commit suicide or was killed. Below are translations of some of the comments on the social media posts about Rihana's case.⁶⁶

65. <https://island.lk/saras-mother-tells-pcol-zahrans-wife-must-be-aware-where-my-daughter-is-easter-sunday-carnage-probe/>

66. <https://yarl.com/forum3/topic/222431-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%A3%E0%AE%B5%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AF%88-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF-%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%B8%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B2%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%81-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF-%E0%AE%86%E0%AE%9A%E0%AE%B-F%E0%AE%B0%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%B3%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B4%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AA%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D/>

No, No, to Muslim Teachers who convert.

Muslim society, don't impose your religion on us.

Stop conversion to Islam in our area.

Don't increase ethnic conversion and encourage ethnic conflict.

Mathaveri – obsessed with religion. These people should be sent out of the country.

East is theirs (Muslims). They are very strong now.

Tamil Eelam will become Islamic land.

Cowards – in things like this, Muslims come together. Governor also Muslim, Provincial Education Director also Muslim – Manzoor.

Wake up Tamila against Muslim conversion!

Where are all the Tamil nationalists? Tamil inam(race) is struggling to survive.

Tamils are like old kanji.

Sumanthiran should bring Gnanasara out. Because he is inside (jail) Muslims are behaving like this.

A boundary has been crossed.

To that teacher, religion is like your underwear, you should wear it inside, not impose it on others. Wear your own underwear.

Conversion is like sexual bribery – poor people in the East, given money to change religion. This is to change the demographic of the East.

Religious conversion is a business (mathaveri). Going house to house to convert. Christians and Muslims.

Jihadi boys who use girls as sex slaves...

There is also a conspiracy to make them fall in love – make women fall in love to convert?

An analysis of the social media response to this incident highlights the following: First, the fragility of the relations between the Tamils and the Muslims was palpable. For this relationship to remain peaceful, separations and boundaries must be carefully maintained. Even though certain relationships, particularly of trade, are “allowed,” religious conversion and inter religious/inter-ethnic relationships and marriage are seen as a major breach of boundaries.

Second, in the East, these tensions are also a reflection of the struggles for political and administrative power. References to Tamil Eelam now becoming a Muslim land in many social media posts clearly exposes the long history of battles for real and imaginary homelands of the Tamils, which explicitly excludes any coexistence with Muslims. There is an insistent call for Tamils to wake up and act against such incidents which are portrayed as a “threat” to the existence of the Tamil community.

These calls even suggest aligning with Sinhala racist Buddhist monks such as Gnanasara who has, for long, dehumanized Tamils, in order to “control” the Muslims.

Third, the sexualized discourse of the “threat of the Muslims” becomes very palpable in this incident. Love, used interchangeably with marriage, is seen as weapon and a strategy that is deliberately used for conversions. Conversion, in turn, is equated to sexual slavery where women who fall in love with Muslim men are perceived as becoming sexual slaves to the Jihadi Muslim boys. The Muslim school teacher is told, for instance, to wear his religion like his underwear, inside.⁶⁷ Given the nature of this discourse, it isn’t surprising that Rihana/Gowrydevi was sent to the hospital to check if there had been any sexual activity while also assessing her mental health status. She was discharged soon after she received a clean chit on both counts medically.

The element that is lost in all this noise is the fact that Rihana actually converted because of her faith. From multiple accounts it becomes quite clear that she was firm on this count in both the police station and the hospital. However, her individual choice is made irrelevant in the Tamil imagination and discourse around ethnic and community identity. One Tamil woman from the same village illustrates this reality with the following statement: “In our village, 28 women (Tamil) have converted to Islam. Some people said at the time, **let her be, if it’s her choice, let her be.** But can we just wait, **can we let this one also go?**”⁶⁸ (Emphasis added)

67. Social media comments on the post - <https://yarl.com/forum3/topic/222431-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%A3%E0%AE%B5%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AF%88-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%9F%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF-%E0%AE%87%E0%AE%B8%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B2%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%A4%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%81-%E0%AE%AE%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF-%E0%AE%86%E0%A E%9A%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B0%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%AF%E0%AE%B0%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%B3%E0%AE%BE%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B4%E0%AE%95%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%95%E0%AE%BF%E0%AE%B2%E0%AF%8D-%E0%AE%AA%E0%AE%A4%E0%AE%B1%E0%AF%8D%E0%AE%B1%E0%AE%AE%E0%AF%8D/>

68. Women leader from same village as Rihana, informal conversations.

Life of a former militant woman of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Vijaya

As elaborated by Satkunanathan⁶⁹ women were part of several Tamil armed groups and youth movements in the 1970s and 1980s. By the time Vijaya joined the LTTE in 1994, there were well established organized structures for military and civilians within the LTTE. Thamilini, the head of the women's wing, which was a political division of the organisation, writes in her autobiography *Orukoorvalin Nizhalil* (2016, published after her death in 2015), "I joined with the dream of fighting for the freedom of the Tamil people."⁷⁰ However, Vijaya's motivations were quite different.

Vijaya was the eldest in a family of five children. Her father was a fisherman and an alcoholic. He was extremely violent at home. When she got her first period at age 12, was when she started worrying about her safety. Her mother was going to leave for the Middle East as she couldn't bear the violence anymore. Vijaya faced terrible physical, emotional and possibly sexual violence at the hands of her father. She said several times "My father treated me so badly... I have a daughter and I don't want her to be affected by her father like I was. I am still affected by that." Her father also began to arrange a marriage for her. During this same time, another boy had become interested in her and was harassing her on her way to school. Later she heard that he had joined another armed group. This made her even more scared for her safety as it was well-known that girls were kidnapped and forcibly married by men from armed groups. She said, "He could have done something to me."

Surrounded by danger on all sides, her only route for escape was to join the LTTE. She had two uncles who were already leaders in the movement. She saw them as heroes. One day, Vijaya and two of her friends, left their village to join the movement. They were 14 years old. They had to walk through the forest for hours. These forest areas were full of army units and if they had been caught it would have not ended well for them. They spent a night in a house where an old woman had been kind to them. The next day, they reached the training camp.

After three months of intensive training, they were ready to be sent to the North. The journey North, again through forests, lagoons, marsh areas and the sea took many weeks. They were attacked by helicopters while they were making the journey by foot and the leader who was in charge of her group died in that attack. Vijaya was sent to the frontlines soon after. All of them were young fighters like her and were from the East.

One of the experiences she spoke of was about her unit being surrounded by the army. While some of them, including Vijaya escaped, those who didn't, about 20 women cadre, bit the cyanide capsule on their necks so that they wouldn't be taken alive. Later when they went to get the bodies, they had been terribly mutilated. Committing suicide to avoid capture by the army was part of the

69. Ambika Satkunanathan (2022), *Women's agency and gendered impact of violence in Sri Lanka: Tamil nationalism and violence*, Women and Media Collective.

70. Ibid.

training within the militant movement. For women like Vijaya, it was also to do with avoiding sexual violence and torture at the hands of the military.

Within a year of joining the movement, Vijaya was injured in an attack. Her leg was amputated at an LTTE hospital. She was bedridden for three months and then started using crutches. After her injury she was moved to the communications and reporting unit and later to the political unit where she worked closely with Thamilini. During her time at the political unit, she remembered the ceasefire agreement being negotiated. She recalls feeling extremely hopeful that the war may end soon. However, key leaders had been targeted and killed during this time and the talks failed. Following this, in 2004, the cadre from the East were sent home on leave. During this time the LTTE eastern faction split from the northern faction. Vijaya could not get back to her unit. She was taken and jailed by the eastern faction for over two months. Her memories of being captive involves that of some leaders in the East who were terribly violent and killed their own. Later she was released to come back home. As she was under constant surveillance in those years, she got married hurriedly. Many other women who had been fighters married quickly as a way to ensure their safety from state surveillance.

However, her marriage too was extremely violent. Her husband was drinking heavily and assaulting her regularly. She had asked him to leave the house many times, but he hadn't. The house was in his name as she was living in government housing given after the tsunami. All state houses given as rehabilitation were in the man's name as the head of household even though traditionally there exists a system of matriliney within land ownership among most communities, across religion and ethnicity, in the East.

Vijaya's motivations for being a member of an armed struggle was very personal. She joined as a child soldier at the age of 14 as the LTTE had an institutional strategy of recruiting children to be trained as militants. Within a year or two she was injured and had a leg amputated. She holds within her memories of fellow women soldiers committing suicide and their bodies being mutilated by the Sri Lankan military. She also holds memories of fighters within the LTTE, torturing and killing each other as the splits emerged within the movement. Her passing remark about most frontline fighters at that time being young and from the East, like herself, alluded to possible regional and class disparities within the movement.

As a young child, Vijaya's body was being abused, controlled and claimed by different men in her village, including her father. Given the context of war, men with weapons could abduct, rape and "marry" any woman or girl. For young girls like Vijaya, joining the LTTE was the only escape. It gave her and women like her a sense of control and empowerment. Meanwhile, in the war, women cadre were trained to bite the cyanide capsule to avoid capture and possible sexual violence. Even when she returned home, her safety from the state military and the surveillance apparatus was to marry a man who, in turn, also unleashed violence upon her.

Her narrative shows clearly that the LTTE had no impact in her village or home space, in terms of intervening in domestic and sexual violence. This could partly be because her village was in an army-controlled area. However, as Satkunanathan (2012) states, even though the LTTE had a punitive stand on violence against women in the Vanni (North), leaders like Thamalini were also slow to accept that this was an all-pervasive issue in Tamil society. We don't have reliable evidence on whether the LTTE did or did not take a strong stand against domestic and sexual violence in the areas where they exercised state-like control. Nevertheless, Vijaya expressed a feeling that women were safe and had freedom under the LTTE regime. Similar discourses are found in Thamalini's book where she says "Thalaivar (The leader) had given us full equality and there is absolutely no problem related to gender in the Vanni."⁷¹

In conclusion, Vijaya's story illustrates how women and girls navigated patriarchy and violence in their lives in the context of war. In terms of women's experiences within the movement, Satkunanathan (2012) and Maunaguru (1995) noted that even though the LTTE was puritanical and controlling in terms of sexuality, the movement provided an alternative patriarchy for women like Vijaya. She moved from being a victim of patriarchal violence as a girl, in her home and village, to becoming a fighter and a leader in a war, and back to being a victim of violence in her marriage. Today, Vijaya stands tall with self-respect and dignity as she plays a leadership role in groups working for the rights of persons living with disabilities in Batticaloa. Her identity as a former fighter contributes to that respect she commands in the public sphere, even as her private sphere, both due to marriage and state surveillance, remain sites of violence.

Batticaloa Case Study Conclusion: Women's resistance and actions for change

Kathija and Kamina, who were interviewed for this research, engage in public discourse through social media. They have been accused of being kattikudukaraakkal or "traitor" by their own community for highlighting social issues from within the community in the larger public sphere. They are also living with the constant fear of being co-opted by the Islamophobic lobby or by the state security apparatus for their critique of their community.⁷² Nabeela Iqbal writes about the challenges of having a public profile on social media. From facing cyber bullying, to being "cancelled" by those from her own community. The process is like walking on a tightrope.⁷³

Aneesa Firthous spoke of holding on to and strengthening collective women's spaces across ethnic identities in the aftermath of the Easter bombings.⁷⁴ These spaces became crucial for women to connect across fraught lines, build trust, and take over public space as a collective voice against extremism and violence. Batticaloa has a history of such women's spaces which continue even today.

71. Satkunanathan (2012).

72. Interview with Kamina, a Muslim woman in her forties.

73. Iqbal (2021)

74. Firthous (2021)

According to Kamina, extremism can be observed by looking at how a particular community (ethnicity or religion) treats those who question norms of their own society and/or choose to live outside of such norms. Often these norms are gendered and are to do with control of sexuality and is tied to the honour of the family and the community.

Kamina shared three stories of her school friends, who ran away from home as they wanted to marry non-Muslims. In one case, the family publicly denounced their daughter. In another, the family kidnapped their own daughter twice to stop her from marrying a Tamil man. These women then have had to give up family ties, community support, access to land/property and have had to live ostracized lives. In one situation, the man was transferred to Eravur as he was a school teacher. She could not live with him in her own home town of Eravur. They met only during the weekends in Batticaloa town.

In the story of Rihana, her choice of converting to Islam was seen as dishonouring her family and the whole Tamil community. There were built up fears about Tamil women converting and marrying Muslims in her community, through hearsay and on social media. The only way that honour could be restored was when she was returned to her family with the involvement of the police and religious leaders who were men, of both communities.

Even though Vijaya joined the LTTE to avoid violence, including possible sexual violence in the home and her community, she also spoke of her friends in the movement biting on the cyanide capsule to avoid being captured by the Sri Lankan Army. She too had to marry to be seen as respectable within the community and to be safe from the military surveillance apparatus.

For Kamina, the test for extremism is how a particular community responds to those who are from the LGBTQI community; those who are non-believers; or to women who challenge social norms. She herself was targeted for speaking about sex workers in a BBC interview and had to leave her home. She remains afraid to return to her village to date.

Meanwhile, Hameetha Umma who is from an older generation than all these women discussed above says, "There is no connection between Islam and how you dress. Just because you wear a pardah doesn't mean you are a follower of Islam. It is all a performance. I follow the Islam my mother taught me."

It is in the context of this complex terrain of women's negotiations with violence and patriarchy in the every day, that feminist spaces were being created since the early 1990s. Here, space was made for women to question and challenge patriarchal control in their own homes, cultures, and religions. The older generation of Tamil women activists stopped wearing a pottu, their symbol of Tamilness, to protest the forcible eviction of Muslims by the LTTE in 1990. Some have not worn a pottu ever since. Yumuna Ibrahim who was from Jaffna had been displaced to Colombo when the LTTE forcibly expelled all the Muslims from the North within 48 hours. It was in Colombo, in the displacement camps, that she started working together with Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhala women and brought together Muslim and Tamil women to talk about their experiences of war and violence

in the “refugee camps.” Yumuna herself faced a lot of challenges for being an unmarried Muslim woman who didn’t cover her head and was often called un-Islamic. She was one of the people involved in setting up the Suriya Women’s Development Centre, a feminist space, in 1993.⁷⁵

Drawing from these feminist histories of resistance to war and violence discussed above and other histories of building movements against domestic violence, along with the post-tsunami response from women’s rights activists, in 2014 the Tamil Muslim Sinhala Sisters (TMS) Group was created. TMS is a space for women from different ethnic and religious communities to come together. It was directly in the aftermath of the violence in Aluthgama in the South of Sri Lanka. Many Muslim businesses and properties were destroyed and people killed following the violence instigated by Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero, the general secretary of the Sinhala Buddhist fascist organisation, the Bodu Bala Sena. The monk spoke at a large rally in Aluthgama and called for retaliation against members of the Muslim community for allegedly attacking a Buddhist monk in the area (Haniffa et al., 2014, quoted in Gunetilake 2021). This rhetoric moved into communities in the East and fed the existing communal tensions. TMS was a response in Batticaloa to this escalating tension.

In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, in the evening of April 21, 2019, several women activists including Aneesa, met in the house of a Tamil activist. They collectively decided to issue a statement condemning the Easter attacks and also categorically dismissing the anti-terror discourses as those that invariably translate into human rights violations. The statement noted that

Whatever our ethnic identities might be, we can all understand and deeply empathize with the devastated hearts of all those who have lost their children, brothers, sisters and parents. We know the history of the blood that has flowed in the East coast since the 1980s. Because of this long-standing experience, we have no reason to invest our faith in anti-terror laws that propagate violence and repression as a solution to such brutality. We strongly believe that the lasting solution to such hatred are our fundamental human relationships and support that has withstood the brutalities of war for decades. It is all our responsibility to work together to make sure that there is no room for the re-emergence of ethnic conflict, disruptions to everyday life, and loss of peace and harmony in the East. WCDM, April 23, 2019.⁷⁶

Following this the TMS group quietly visited homes where people had died or were injured in the attacks and held small collective memorials. The space was used by members to openly express as well as challenge prejudices and fears among the group and reinforce trust. Tamil women were living in homes and communities where anti-Muslim rhetoric and feelings were strong. They chose to come to TMS as a way of regaining some sanity by sitting, eating, and sharing their thoughts and feelings together. Some of the women from the group also started visiting homes where the men were taken away under the Prevention of Terrorism Act following the bombings. Ninety-eight men from Kattankudi have been arrested under the PTA in the post-Easter bombings period.⁷⁷ TMS

75. Maunaguru, & Weaver. (2016).

76. The Women’s Coalition for Disaster Management is an independent feminist network in Batticaloa working collectively since 2005. It comprises of community-based women’s organisations and individual feminist activists as well.

77. At least 2,299 people had been arrested since the Easter Sunday bombings, according to the police. While most were later re-

members focused on supporting the women with practical aspects such as prison visits, getting access to medicines, getting schoolbooks and help to access the Human Rights Commission.⁷⁸ As such a space was already created and sustained before the bombings when the bombs happened, it became a trusted space to have difficult conversations and heal together across communities. On August 10, 2019, a group of women across communities met to remember the death of a young woman in the bombing of the Zion Church in Batticaloa. Her mother and sisters were there along with Muslim and Tamil women from the locality. Such a space was very rare in Batticaloa during those troubled months and still is at most times.

The picture that emerges from Batticaloa in terms of women's negotiations in everyday life makes it amply clear that violence of different kinds is all pervasive. This may take the form of imposing codes of conduct on all persons, especially women and literal physical, sexual violence unleashed upon women's bodies. In this dance between all that is allowed and disallowed an individual person's choices, agency, thoughts, feelings and lives are seen as secondary if not irrelevant. These affected persons are primarily women given that they are accorded an oppressed position within patriarchy that cuts across all the different communities.

At the same time, women have constantly found ways to survive, resist and even thrive. They have ensured the survival of their children through myriad moments and processes of violence. They have stood by one another in times of duress within their communities. In, what is perhaps the most inspiring aspect of women's resistance, they have connected to each other as women across communities even during times when the tensions between such groups have been heightened. This process of standing together during times of tension has become, and will continue to be a profound act of peace. This peace is not simple and is indeed very fragile and complicated. Nevertheless, women have tended to this peace over many years in the Batticaloa area and this has provided them a space of solace in these many years of conflict and war.

leased on bail, over 500 remained in custody. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/03/sri-lanka-muslims-face-threats-attacks>; https://thesouthasiacollective.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/PTA_Terrorising-Sri-Lanka-for-42-years-English.pdf
78. Firthous (2021).

CASE STUDY

NEGOMBO

What follows is a broader socio-political and cultural history of Negombo. It has been collated based on a diversity of sources. While some information is from existing research papers, reports, and online sources, other details are from interviews with key informants and information collected through focus group discussions. This description is not one that strictly follows scholarly conventions of evidence-based provenance. It is presented here for the rich tapestry of facts, memories, perceptions and opinions that the diverse people from Negombo are able to provide for us.

Background

The city of Negombo is situated in the Negombo Municipal Council Area of Gampaha District in the Western Province on the west coast of Sri Lanka. It is located 35 km from Colombo and 7 km from the Katunayake Bandaranaike International Airport, which is also home to the Free Trade Zone.¹ It is bounded to the North by the Maha Oya river, South by the Diya Honda Ela lake, East by the Roma Ela lake and the West by the lagoon and the Indian Ocean.² Negombo has a coastline of 22.5 kilometres. The Negombo lagoon, which provides livelihoods to many fisher communities, is spread over 3328 hectares.³

The total area of the Negombo Municipal Council is 2800 hectares consisting of 39 Grama Niladhari Divisions, the smallest local governance units, which in turn fall within the boundary of the Negombo Divisional Secretariat.⁴ Negombo was declared an Urban Development Area under the Urban Development Authority Law through two gazettes in November 1997 and 2001. The first significant urban development intervention of Negombo city was initiated in 2001 after declaring Negombo as a growth centre governed by three major local government authorities. The first Development Plan for a 20-year period for the Negombo Municipal Council was initiated by the Urban Development Authority in 2004. Thus, in the last 20 years, Negombo has been actively developed as an urban centre by the state which has meant monumental changes for the people who live there. According to the Department of Census and Statistics 2012,⁵ the Negombo divisional secretariat division consists of 82.2% Sinhalese, 7.7% Tamils, 9.7% Muslims. The Muslims includes Moors and Malays while the remaining small percentage are Burghers, Indian Tamils, and other small communities. More than 90% of the population of Negombo are Catholic and/or Christian.⁶ About 30% to 40% of the housing falls into the category of urban poor housing by virtue of families in those houses receiving state support for those below the poverty line known as Samurdhi.⁷ In terms of economic activities, 45% of the economy is based on fisheries, 35% on tourism, and 20% on commerce and other services. Negombo supplies 16% of the nation's fish, 80% of this being marine fish, and 20% lagoon fish. Negombo is also known for shrimp and prawn cultivation.

1. The Free Trade Zone or Export Processing Zone in Katunayake was demarcated in 1978 and is governed by the Board of Investment. In order to attract foreign investment, the government provides a number of incentives, including duty-free import and exports, preferential tax, double taxation relief and up to 100% foreign ownership. The Katunayake FTZ houses over one hundred multinational industries, predominantly in the garment and clothing industry. From its inception, the FTZ the workforce was predominantly young female migrants from rural villages, mainly from economically and socially marginalised groups. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katunayake>

2. Negombo Development Plan 2019 -2023, Gampaha District Office, Urban Development Authority, August 2019.

3. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polawak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda kedraya, Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo.

4. Negombo Development Plan 2019 -2023, Gampaha District Office, Urban Development Authority, August 2019

5. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/pophousat/cph2011/pages/activities/Reports/District/Gampaha.pdf>

6. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/pophousat/cph2011/pages/activities/Reports/District/Gampaha/A4.pdf>

7. City Profile Negombo Municipal Council (2002), UNDP / UN-Habitat - Sustainable Cities Programme (SCP) Sustainable Colombo Core Area Project (SCCP II)

Methodology

For this study we interviewed the following women: two younger Muslim women in their twenties, one Sinhala Catholic younger woman in her thirties, one older Sinhala woman from a Catholic background in her fifties, an older Muslim woman in her fifties and an older Catholic nun in her sixties, who was an activist involved in the response to the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks in Negombo. Names have been changed in instances where names have been used, to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were broad-ranging and involved life-story narratives, with a focus on the period before and after the Easter Sunday bombings which took place in Negombo as well. We conducted a focus group discussion with Catholic Sinhala women activists to understand their responses during this time. The following narrative draws on these discussions, to describe the impact on women's lives and analyze how women negotiated family, community, and the nation state during this time. The narrative also describes the resistance and responses of women during this time of heightened tensions and violence.

Histories

Negombo has a rich record of local histories. This research refers to two such records – one, an article written by Amathur Raheem, a resident of Negombo who used to regularly contribute to the local newspaper *Meepuravesiyo*, and the other, a book written by Peter Kaniyut Perera, documenting 40 years of the *Janavaboda Kendraya* (introduced below). Women activists who were part of the larger network of the *Janavaboda Kendraya* and Ms. Raheem's daughter were interviewed for this research. Therefore, these documented local histories added richness to the place, context, and people, who were interviewed.

Folklore narratives say that Negombo was named *Meevathagomuva* because when the queen *Vihara Maha Devi* was pregnant with Prince *Gemunu*, she had a craving for bee's honey. People in her kingdom found a huge beehive on an abandoned boat in this area. This place was then named *Meegomuva*, which means beehive. Other folktales say that in *Ravana's* time it was called *Nigumbheela* which means a pure waterbody. This water body was said to be near *Kamachchodai*. *Kamachchi*, who was *Ravana's* younger sister, lived close to the water body, and hence the place got its name, *Kamachchodai* meaning *Kamachchi* stream. During the *Seethavaka Rajasinghe* reign (from 1581 to 1592), Negombo had the largest harbour on the island.⁸

In the 7th and 8th centuries, Negombo had large cinnamon plantations. There were many traders who came to the island during this time and many Arab traders settled around Negombo. Arab traders were involved in the trade of spices such as cinnamon, cloves, vanilla, and pepper as well as pearls and red stones. There are also histories of Arab sailors settling for some time of the year in Negombo during the monsoons. They would dock their sail ships in the harbour and settle further inland near the lagoons or the *Maha Oya* river. The Arab sailors had a large ship repairing

8. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), *Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polawak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda kedraya, Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo*;

industry. They also introduced technologies for preserving meat using spices. Malayali Muslim and Tamil workers from the port of Cochin in present-day Kerala on the south-west coast of peninsular India came to work in the ship repairing industry. Many of these workers settled in an area nearby called Kammalthurai. They were skilled workers who could make a boat out of a single tree bark.⁹ During the Dutch colonial period in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Hamilton Canal that extended from Colombo to Puttalam along the west coast was built to enhance trade. With the introduction of coconut and coffee plantations in the 19th century during British colonial rule, other migrant populations were settled in Negombo. The railway lines to Negombo were built in 1907, enabling the growth of a vibrant market around the railway station.¹⁰

Catholicism was introduced in Negombo by the Portuguese in the 16th century. It was based on the caste system which was the dominant system of social organizing in this area. The church used caste as a way of reaching out to the population and encouraging conversions and also for organizing the church hierarchy. Sometimes different castes had different churches that were separate but close to each other. If the congregation was mixed caste, then each caste had different lay leaders and different *novenas* (special mass) during the church feast. It remains very rare to have priests who hail from oppressed castes in the churches of Negombo. As a result of this relationship between the Roman Catholic church and caste, most Catholics in Negombo are of the *karava* or fisher caste.¹¹ Within the karavas there were subdivisions with *vasagama* names (surnames) of Warnakulasuriya, Mihindakulasuriya, and Kurukulasuriya.¹² Oral narratives that have been passed down generations in the area show that these names can be traced back to ancient warriors. These tales of lore are expressed spatially in each sub-caste of a specific name being settled in specific areas: the Mihindikulasuriyas in Duva, Warnakulasuriyas in Mahaveethiya and the Kurukulasuriyas in the Vallaveethiya area. To date, tensions and conflicts between these sub-groups continue, sometimes coming to head at sea.¹³

In Negombo town, Vellaveethiya and Munnakaraya are where the Tamil-speaking fisher communities live. Even though they have spoken Tamil for generations they strongly feel that they were Sinhala. As a result, the school in the area, which used to be Tamil medium, became Sinhala medium in the 1980s, coinciding with the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 (discussed below) and the commencement of the war in the North and East of Sri Lanka.¹⁴ There is an area called Fernandopullai where Tamil-speaking people live. Their origins are said to be from the Southern Indian peninsula and the community is referred to as Cochchi. These communities speak Sinhala now but their ancestors were Tamil-speaking. They also are visibly different as they are tall with light-coloured eyes and red skin. They were traditionally engaged in the toddy tapping occupation, seen within the

9. Amathur Raheem, May 16 2020, <https://www.meeepura.com/%E0%B6%86%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%8F%E0%B6%B6%E0%B7%92%E0%B7%80%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%94%E0%B6%B1%E0%B7%8A-%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%93%E0%B6%9C%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%94%E0%B7%80%E0%B7%9A-%E0%B7%83%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%A7%E0%B7%92-2/>

10. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), *Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo*

11. Ibid

12. R. L. Stirrat (1982), *Caste Conundrums: Views of Caste in a Sinhalese Catholic Fishing Village* in Dennis Mcgilvrey (ed) *Caste Ideology and Interaction*, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology 9, Cambridge University Press <https://books.google.lk/books?id=n-8AAAA-IAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=true>

13. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), *Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo*

14. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

caste system as being inferior.¹⁵ In Pitipana and Duva there are Sinhala-speaking Catholic fisher communities.¹⁶ Some of the leadership of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka come from Negombo. For example, Bishop Nicholas Marcus Fernando was from Munnakaraya, in Negombo, as was Cardinal Thomas Cooray.¹⁷

During the war years from 1983 onwards till 2009, Tamils from fisher communities who were displaced from the North and East often came to Negombo. These communities did not have much acceptance due to the structures of caste-based discrimination.¹⁸ The women from these communities were involved in the fishing industry. However, due to changes in the traditional trade arrangements as well as the increase of wage labour from surrounding villages, women were gradually pushed out of the industry.¹⁹ ²⁰ Younger generations from these communities, particularly women, now find work in the garment factories in the Free Trade Zone which is nearby.²¹

The Paravars, also known as the Bharathas, were seafarers and pearl divers who later became traders and philanthropists. They initially settled down on the coast of Mannar in the north-west of Sri Lanka where many of their descendants remain. In the villages of Ettukal in Negombo and Vankali in Mannar, 99% of the residents are Catholic Bharathas with exclusive places of worship and burial grounds.²²

Telugu-speaking communities also lived along the seashore on Alles Road in Vellaveethiya in Negombo. These communities were extremely poor and lived in temporary slum dwellings made of cardboard and plastic. There were around 20 families who were traditionally snake charmers and palm readers. Even when representatives from the community approached government services, they were driven away. They did not have any access to schooling or health. These communities were affected during the Tsunami disaster of 2004 and lost their homes. They faced discrimination even in the displacement camps. They later moved to resettlement areas in Kochchikade where they got some housing assistance from Catholic organisations.²³

Historically, Muslim communities lived in Negombo town, in areas such as Lazarus Street, Mosque Road, Abeysinghe Pura/St Anthony's Road, Poruthota, Kamochodai and Kochikadai. There are 14 mosques affiliated with Sunni Islam (the most prominent is called Loku Palliya – Big Mosque) and one Ahmediya Mosque (locally called Podi Palliya – Small Mosque) in these areas. The Ahmediya²⁴ areas are Praja Seva Road and Finco Road.²⁵

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. The wholesale fish markets (Iellama) in Duva are owned by the fisheries cooperative, the Duva Catholic church, and the fisheries society. Another big fish market is given on a tender basis by the Wellaveediya Catholic church.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. <https://thuppahis.com/2020/03/17/the-bharathas-of-sri-lanka-roots-and-rites/>

23. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo; FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group Negombo.

24. Ahmediyya is an Islamic revival movement that originated in nineteenth-century British India and has since spread across the globe. Ahmadis are widely stigmatized (by Wahhabi groups in particular) and sometimes persecuted; Ahmediyya's claim that its founder was the Muslim messiah is deemed heretical (Klem 2011).

25. Interview with Sinhala male social activist 2.

One male Sinhala social activist in the area narrated the presence of Muslims in the area through these images:

In the 1960s and 1970s Muslim girls came to school in bullock carts covered with curtains. There has always been a fear in Sinhala communities about Muslims. The general perception was that they are very organized and even violent to outsiders. They had their own youth wings and mosque committees. There was a fear about the burqa. The generally held view was that Muslims were dirty, like dogs. There were areas where Sinhala communities were living, which gradually became mixed with Muslims buying land, for example in Abeyasinghapura. There were also instances of violence between the Podi Palliya and Loku Palliya areas. A friend, Rasheed, from Podi Palliya, was killed by people from the Loku Palliya. Loku Palliya people also beat up some Sinhala boys for hitting a Muslim girl. Culturally there was nothing in common between the Sinhalese and Muslims in Negombo. Sinhala and Tamil people married often, but marriage with Muslims was very rare. In Negombo's political history there have only been a few powerful Muslim politicians for example, Halaldeen, Sari Raheem, and Nasmiya (UNP/SLMC).²⁶

By the 1980s, there was greater mobility for young women across communities. Everyone had to use public transport and faced similar experiences of sexual harassment. Schools became spaces where girls from different communities could mingle and become friends. There were more opportunities for friendship among women.²⁷ There were many women leaders from all communities in various people's movements. For example, in the Kadolkale housing struggle,²⁸ 10 Muslim women were fully involved.²⁹ However, Muslim women had to, and still have to negotiate their involvement in public life every day. Sometimes the phone is answered by a man in the house even when it's a call related to the woman's work outside. Muslim women do not speak to the media and rarely speak on public platforms.³⁰ In the post-Easter attacks context, Muslim women withdrew even more from public activism.³¹

26. Interview with Sinhala male social activist 1.

27. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

28. In 1979, on Paradise Road, there was fire on Christmas day and 77 homes were destroyed. With the mobilization of these families through the Janavaboda Kendraya, many others who were landless in Negombo joined the movement for housing rights. Through continuous collective actions, the housing rights movement met the then Prime Minister R Premadasa in 1983, and he agreed to release 77 acres of acquired state land in Kadol Kale. 225 families were given 7 perches each in the first phase, 155 families were given 5 perches each in the second phase, and 325 families were given 5 perches each in the 3rd phase (Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo;FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

29. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

30. Ibid

31. Ibid

The impact of the 1983 Riots in Negombo

The government had started a Sinhalization project by establishing Sinhala colonies in the Tamil areas of Negombo from the 1950s.³² During the 1977 and 1983 anti-Tamil riots, many Tamil businesses and homes were destroyed in Negombo. Before the riots, most businesses in central town were owned by Tamils and Sinhala business people. However, as Tamil businesses were sold and they left Negombo, they were bought by Muslims. As a result of this process, the central business area of Negombo town is now mostly owned by Muslims. This is very visible as, during Friday prayers, the whole business area is closed.³³

One narrative of the 1977 riot goes as follows:

K. Suntheralingam was carrying on a textile shop in Green Street, Negombo, in a building which contained 4 Tamil shops. His stock was worth Rs. 90,000. On 19th August, his shop was attacked at 6.30 p.m. by a Sinhalese mob, and he ran away. On the 20th he found that his shop had been looted and smashed up. He stated that about 10 or 12 Tamil shops in Negombo suffered in the same way.³⁴

Similarly, when the violence erupted in 1983, many Tamils were killed and Tamil-owned shops were burned in the area. As reported in a newspaper article in the *London Times*, on August 2, 1983, A British tourist who was in the area at that time said:

Last Wednesday a taxi driver took us into Negombo... and the whole town was smouldering. All the Tamil property in the centre of the town had been burnt down. The cigarette factory had gone up in smoke together with a cinema and a garage. There was smoke everywhere and the whole area was a burnt-out mess. There was no sign of any Tamil anywhere. We were told that Tamils were being grabbed off buses by groups of people wielding iron bars. We also saw young Sinhalese stopping cars to siphon out the petrol so they could use it to start fires.³⁵

Simultaneously, during the 1983 riots, migrant fisher communities from Duva and Pitipana who were in Kokilai and Nayaru in the North at that time, were attacked by Tamil militants. They were perceived as being Sinhala and thus attacked. Some fishermen were killed while many lost their boats and other livelihood-related equipment. When they returned to Negombo, the Janavaboda Kendraya provided refuge and relief to these families. Those who were affected by the violence had so much hatred against the Tamils.³⁶

The present-day Tamil community in Negombo town are wealthy and hails primarily from the business community in Jaffna, some having moved during the war years. This community does not have much involvement in public community work or in working collectively with others in Negombo.³⁷

32. Sivathamby (1987).

33. Interview with Tamil male Catholic social activist and journalist.

34. Report of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into the Incidents which took place between 13th August and 15th September, 1977; Session Paper No VII – 1980.

35. Tamil Nation. Indictment against Sri Lanka. Black July 1983: the Charge is Genocide. <https://tamilnation.org/indictment/genocide83/gen04.htm>

36. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo.

37. Interview with Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

Segregations in Areas of Residence and Schools

Even though Negombo is known to be a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious town, there are segregations in terms of areas of residence which in turn leads to segregation in schooling. Negombo can be spatially marked along ethnic and caste lines. This is directly reflected in the composition of schools.

Christian schools in Negombo have very few Muslim students. The Wijeyaratnam Hindu Central College is a Tamil-medium Hindu co-educational school, while the Harishchandra National College is a co-ed Buddhist school, and Al Hilal Central College is a Tamil-medium Muslim school.³⁸ Both Tamil-speaking and Muslim communities have often chosen to access education and speak in Sinhala. There is a perception that this provides a way of ensuring safety and access to a better life.³⁹ Furthermore, if one were to go to a school of a different religion from one's own, it was compulsory to study the religion of the school. That was seen as a burden.⁴⁰ Apart from this, internal conflicts exist, like the Ahmadiyas being discriminated against within the Muslim community. In one of the interviews, the interviewee said that even though he was a highly qualified principal he was never appointed to a Muslim school because he was Ahmadiyya, but was given a Tamil-medium Catholic primary school.⁴¹ Within the school system, schools such as Maris Stella College (boys), Ave Maria Convent, St Peters College (co-ed) and St Mary's College (Catholic boys' school) used to also have the Tamil medium. However, those sections have been closed during the 1980s and the schools function in the Sinhala medium.⁴²

The Welihena Roman Catholic Tamil School had both Sinhala and Tamil children. There were several attempts to close it down stating that there were not enough children in the school. This school had around 300 children and it was the school where children affected by the war or were under the custody of the court system, were placed.⁴³ In order to close it down, grade 1 admissions were stopped for five years. Teachers who opposed the closure were transferred.⁴⁴

On the whole, the mapping of ethnic divisions upon spatial segregation in Negombo and its lasting effect on school composition is not a factor to be ignored. The segregation of schools along religious, ethnic, and language lines makes for a structural separation of communities from childhood. This is a system that is least conducive to peaceful coexistence in what is an intrinsically mixed and hybrid area. Instead, it keeps in place structures that can be used for long- and short-term deep hatred, vengeance and violence amongst communities, despite their shared histories within the vibrant terrain of Negombo.

38. Wijeyaratnam Hindu Central College and Al Hilal Central Collage function in the Tamil medium

39. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist also a former school principal.

40. Case study interview young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

41. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist, also a former school principal.

42. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

43. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist also a former school principal.

44. Ibid.

Girls Negotiating the Segregated School System

The focus on girls' education spanned across generations in the households of the young Muslim women we spoke to. Sometimes it was connected to mothers becoming heads of households due to the death of a husband or divorce. At the same time, schools became the spaces where rules on sexuality were imposed and strict segregation was maintained. As one young Muslim woman said,

I went to a Muslim girls' international school in Colombo. There were lines drawn. We couldn't be seen with a boy, even a boy from the school service van could not walk with us. After we got our first period we couldn't sing in front of men, even our own parents. Even in sports – netball or sports meets – older girls couldn't participate as the fathers would be in the audience.⁴⁵

Schools that had students from different communities were more accommodating in some ways and social control got enforced in other ways. As one young Muslim woman said, only the Methodist school allowed Muslim girls to wear a trouser and a shawl to cover their heads. Muslim girls also did sports like javelin, high jump, and track. Muslim girls usually wore long tights while participating in public sports events. They would wear a head scarf and long sleeves while going to these events. Other children participated in these sports in track pants and t-shirts alone.⁴⁶

However, even in these spaces, where there was some space for Muslim girls institutionally, their own community members, particularly women, ensured that particular values were adhered to. One story was shared by a young Muslim woman about the walk to school. She came to school that morning wearing the school t-shirt and jeans. However, when she got there, a female Muslim teacher and other Muslim parents insisted that she wear long sleeves and a scarf. Even though she argued back with her teacher, she had to finally give in and change. She was told that she had shamed the whole community. Later, her prefect's badge was taken away from her for arguing with the teacher. Ostracizing of this student who was in the Methodist school was led by a Muslim teacher. It became so unbearable that she stopped going to school. The institution did not intervene in this case. The bullying by the teacher only stopped after the student's father threatened legal action against the principal. The student said: "No one said anything about what that teacher did to me. Finally, I had to wear the scarf for the walk. It is not healthy for a school child to be judged by what you wear and don't wear."⁴⁷

The experience of being policed in schools and the complex dynamics in this process across different ethnicities makes the impact of inter-ethnic fear, hatred, and violence upon all communities involved among themselves amply clear. Women and girls invariably bear the brunt of the shrinking spaces for personal expression, freedom, and dignity. This curbing of space is done both by people of their own community as well as others. If familial support is available, like in the case of the student above, the young women are able to fight for their space to some degree. For most young women there is no familial support either, thus leaving them in this crossfire between different communities which leads to the rigidifying of social norms, a process that is enacted upon their bodies, spaces, and lives.

45. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

History of Social Movements and People's Participation in the Public Sphere In Negombo

Negombo is also home to a range of social movements, within and across the different communities that live in this area. This is a crucial part of its history, especially when considering the context and historical background of the responses that followed the Easter Sunday attacks in Negombo. A few crucial strands within this history are discussed below.

Janavaboda Kendraya

According to the book *Aluth Ahasak Aluth Polovak* (Perera, 2020), which documents the 40-year journey of the Janavaboda Kendraya, in 1979, there was a fire in Paradise Street where fisher communities lived. All the homes were burned down. Subsequently, seventy houses were rebuilt by the Fisheries Ministry, leaving out six families who still needed housing. Along with these six families, other landless and homeless groups joined the struggle for housing rights from Munnakaraya, Kamchchodai, Vallaveethiya, and Thillanthuva in Negombo. This later became a broad-based people's movement for housing and land rights.

This book documents how in the 1980s, caste conflicts continued in the areas where they worked. In the Athgala housing project, for instance, 100 very poor landless families were to be resettled. This project faced opposition from surrounding villages as the landless families were *Maalukarayo* (a derogatory way of saying fisherfolk) of the fisher caste. The people of the surrounding villages declared that they did not want "that culture" in their area. They took issue with the fact that the fisherfolk were not Sinhala Buddhist. Local Buddhist priests also joined the opposition protests. Eventually, the housing rights groups had to give in to the opposition and look for alternative land. Janavaboda Kendraya has been in existence for more than 40 years, and still functions as an important space for social and political activism in Negombo.

Meepuravesiyo

Meepuravesiyo is a community newspaper started in the year 2001. When this newspaper came on the scene, there were already a few local newspapers such as *Aaranchi* which was published in the 1980s. These newspapers carried stories on workers' labour issues from Katunayake, issues around urbanization, citizens' rights, media's role, public health and corruption issues. The basis for coverage in the local newspapers was the understanding that the development of a city requires the active involvement of local citizens. These newspapers largely believed that local histories and contributions of diverse communities should be valued and highlighted.⁴⁸ These newspapers have now also gone online on sites such as *Wayamba Today* and *Negombo Today*.⁴⁹

48. Interview with Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

49. <http://www.wayambatoday.com/>; <https://www.negombotoday.lk/>

Given this history, it is not surprising that Meepuravesiyo did a lot of work to challenge and correct false news at the local level following the Easter attacks. They reported on the impact of the discrimination and racism against Muslim women following the Easter attacks. Women were confined to their houses and those among them who wore hijab faced a lot of problems in public, particularly when accessing the Negombo Hospital. It is important to note here that 25% of the readership of Meepuravesiyo are women.⁵⁰

Left and Trade Union Organizing

Apart from this, there is a vibrant history of left political parties in Negombo since the 1970s, specifically the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP),⁵¹ There were strong protests organized by the NSSP against the 1979 constitution which laid the foundation for the neoliberal economy in Sri Lanka. They also protested against the Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1978. Brito Fernando and Leena Fernando were key political activists within the NSSP in Negombo.

In the 1980s, there were solidarity committees formed in support of the General Strike.⁵² Various existing groups working towards social change printed and pasted posters in public spaces in support of the General Strike. However, some of leaders who were involved in the strike said, "No Muslims joined with us."⁵³

Theatre, Cultural Work and Social Change

Negombo is culturally rich in terms of theatre and film. The Minerva Theatre Group based in Negombo was involved in the early film industry in Sri Lanka. Theatre was also an integral part of the Catholic church during church feasts and easter performances. Tamils and Sinhalese were involved in the film industry and in these theatre groups. Street theatre groups from Negombo were performing in war-torn border villages as well. These productions were in both Sinhala and Tamil languages. One such street play was about a dead body found on the border between a Sinhala and Tamil village. Both villages say the body does not belong to them. Then a doctor initiates a dialogue about the human body and how it does not have an ethnic identity but is only human.⁵⁴ As art is often a marker of the vibrancy of a particular time and place, Negombo, from the 1970s onwards, remained a culturally and politically vibrant space.

50. Interview with Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

51. The Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya is a Trotskyist political party in Sri Lanka founded in 1977.

52. The general strike of 1980 involved nearly 100,000 state and private sector employees jointly staging pickets, demonstrations, protests, and meetings opposite their workplaces thus crippling the Government's administrative functions and daily services. However, due to brutal state crackdowns, 40,356 public and private sector employees lost their jobs for the first time in the history of Sri Lanka. The strike was due to the rising prices and the working class demanded a monthly wage increase of Rs. 300 (Rs. 10 per day) and an allowance of Rs. 5 every rising cost-of-living index. <https://www.ft.lk/article/555660/How-the-1980-general-strike-was-smashed>

53. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 1.

54. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo.

Community-based protest movements

Negombo is also home to movements with socialist ideology and those involved in land struggles. These movements have been directed against the Catholic church. For example, there was a practice of the fishing harbour giving money to the church as a tax. These movements mobilized the fishing communities to stop this tax.⁵⁵

In the post-war context, there were several protests by the fishing communities against the sea plane project⁵⁶ that would have created havoc in the coastal ecosystem and livelihoods. Fisher communities confronted armed military personnel who were sent to stop the protests. The fisher communities kept insisting on protecting the lagoons and their livelihoods.

Ms K. A. Raheem, a retired school principal, has been an active voice in community-level development processes in Negombo. In 2014, she wrote in the local newspaper, *Meepuravesiyo*, putting on record the need for numerous community support programmes for the Periyamulla area. This included the need for a maternity health clinic, drinking water, better drainage, playground, local markets etc. These were fundamental needs which had not been included in the massive development project planned for Negombo.⁵⁷

Women's involvement in evangelical Christian movements

Women played a vital role in doing the house-to-house visits to persuade people with regards to religious conversion on behalf of evangelical churches. One such group was Muratamba who were working in Colombo and Negombo. There were also popular "healing services" through these churches and women accessed them extensively. Often the leadership in these services was held by women.⁵⁸

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of these healing services happened online with a wider reach. In 2006, Athuraeliya Rathana Thero of the Jathika Hela Urumaya brought a private member's bill to parliament on anti-conversion, primarily attacking evangelical churches⁵⁹. The Catholic church also supported the Thero in this. Meanwhile in Negombo, local radio channels such as Seth FM have regular prayer and healing services listened to largely by women. After the Easter Attacks, this radio channel started propagating false news such as one where they claimed there was a bomb in a vehicle near the airport. These messages were slipped in between the prayer services thus creating panic among their broad base of listeners⁶⁰.

55. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), *Aluth Ahasak*, Aluth Polowak: 40 years journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo; Interview male Sinhala social activist 2.

56. Ibid.

57. <http://www.meepura.com/%e0%b6%b8%e0%b6%b8-%e0%b6%af%e0%b6%b1%e0%b7%8a%e0%b6%b1%e0%b7%8f-%e0%b6%ad%e0%b6%bb%e0%b6%b8%e0%b6%a7-%e0%b6%b4%e0%b7%99%e0%b6%bb%e0%b7%92%e0%b6%ba%e0%b6%b8%e0%b7%94%e0%b6%bd%e0%b7%8a%e0%b6%bd-2/>

58. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

59. <http://archives.dailynews.lk/2006/04/07/pol01.asp>;

60. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

In this manner, Negombo has a long history of people's participation in the public sphere, including women. Individual and collective voices and movements putting forth needs of the people and speaking up against unfair practices were prevalent. All sources of power, be it the church or the state, have been challenged at different points in history by the people of Negombo. This process continued and coexisted along with the diversity, conflict, and tension between different groups of people in Negombo.

Easter attacks and its aftermath in Negombo⁶¹

Nine suicide bombers detonated their devices in six locations around the country on Easter Sunday 2019 and reports of the explosions first came in at about 08:45 a.m. on the 21st of April. Three blasts were at churches: in the Kochchikade district of Colombo; in Negombo, to the north of the capital; and in the eastern city of Batticaloa. The churches were packed with worshippers celebrating Easter.⁶² After the easter bombings, Muslims were attacked all over the country. Following the bomb blasts, the Ahmadiya Muslim refugee community who were residing in Negombo also got attacked in retaliation.⁶³

In Negombo, at the Katuwapitiya Church, 149 people died and many more were injured in this bomb blast.⁶⁴ A year later, there were many stories, including of a man who slept at the cemetery as he lost his entire family in the bomb blast. The church had to find new land to bury the large number that were dead. Since some bodies could not be found, the church made crosses for the empty graves⁶⁵.

Soon after the Easter attacks, a strong presence of Ravana Balaya and Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Buddhist fascist groups, was discernible among those aligning with the church. Ravana Balaya kept making public statements like "Refugees are like the Rohingya who are destroying Buddhism like in Myanmar, by marrying our people."⁶⁶

Anti-Muslim violence took place in Daluwakotuwa and Ulupotha within Negombo. These are areas where Nimal Lanza and Dayan Lanza⁶⁷ are very powerful.⁶⁸ They have been implicated in instigating the violence. In Nattandiya⁶⁹ Muslims were being arrested as suspects by the police.⁷⁰ The police were also extorting money in return for not arresting people. Meepuravesiyo, in line with its

61. The incidents documented in this section are from the interviews and FGDs done for this research for more information on the attacks in the Aftermath of the Easter attacks see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ASA3748632021ENGLISH.pdf>

62. BBC, April 21, 2020. Sri Lanka Attack; Easter Sunday Bombing marked one year on. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52357200>>

63. 134 Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

64. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/8/11/after-the-easter-massacre-sri-lanka-nun-heals-religious-tension>;

65. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

66. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

67. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 1.

68. Nimal Lanza and his brother Dayan Lanza are politicians from the Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna and Sri Lanka Freedom Party from the Gampaha District where Negombo is situated. Nimal Lanza has been a Member of Parliament since 2015 and has held several ministerial posts. Dayan Lanza was appointed the Mayor of Negombo in 2018.

69. In the North Western Province, adjoining the Western Province where Negombo is situated.

70. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.

long-standing practice of local reporting, reported on this.⁷¹ Meanwhile lawyers of the Provincial Bar Association in Marawila had publicly stated that they would refuse to appear for any Muslims arrested following the Easter attacks.⁷² The Human Rights Commission issued a statement on this asking for clarification from the Bar Association President.^{73 74}

A veeduru kade, a glass shop near the St Sebastian Church was broken after the bomb blast. It was owned by Muslims.⁷⁵ Fareeda from Vallaveediya who used to cook and supply food at the hospital was stopped after the bomb blasts.⁷⁶ Many Muslim women who used to make lunch parcels couldn't sell their packets any longer. Rumours were rampant that Muslim women were putting medicines that made men sterile in the food.⁷⁷ In the focus group discussion with Sinhala women activists one person said that the commonly held discourse was:

The Muslim population was increasing, they were having more and more children, and the other populations were decreasing, because they were putting something in the food.⁷⁸

Some young Muslim people came with water bottles in a lorry to give to the survivors of the bomb blast immediately after. Non-Muslim youth in Katuwapitiya stopped the lorry and asked the driver to drink one full water bottle, then another and another. Eventually they were asked to leave saying, "We don't want your water bottles."⁷⁹

In Poruthota, also in Negombo, a dispute between an auto driver and another person escalated into a mob attack on the nearby Muslims shops.⁸⁰ There was a march of Sinhala businessmen and politicians in the Negombo town soon after the Easter attacks shouting Thambi elavamu – Awake, Brother!⁸¹ There were stories circulating that people were throwing eggs at those who entered "No Limit," a Muslim owned large clothing store chain.⁸² In some areas Sinhala people protested about the morning prayers and the police asked the mosque to turn off the loudspeakers.⁸³ The Catholic church priest in Periyamulla said in his sermons, "Don't sell land to *thoppikarayo* (Muslims)."⁸⁴ The chicken shops owned by Muslims in the area were closed down. A Sinhala caterer who brought chicken from a Muslim supplier was boycotted by Sinhalese saying he was supporting Muslims. Finally, a Sinhala man opened a chicken shop.⁸⁵

71. Interview with Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

72. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/racist-lawyers-refuse-to-appear-on-behalf-of-muslim-arrestees-sri-lankas-human-rights-commission-again-urges-basl-to-take-action/>

73. Marawila is a town in the Puttalam District in the North-Western Province which adjoins the Western Province where Negombo is situated.

74. <https://www.hrsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/HRCSL-Letter-to-Bar-Association-of-Sri-Lanka.pdf>

75. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

76. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) with women activists' group Negombo.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

79. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

80. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 2.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Cap-wearing men.

85. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 1.

In Minuwangoda, three motor bikes were set on fire and 20-50 houses in five Muslim areas were attacked. As this happened after curfew was declared, it was less likely that people came from outside. Thus, this violence was perpetrated by people of that area on their neighbours. In this area the one mosque there was also attacked.⁸⁶

One Muslim woman and her child were asked to leave their rented home. They had to walk long distances looking for a place to rent. The child was thirsty and no shop on the way would give them water. They walked all the way to Fathimawatta, a Muslim area, before they could get water.⁸⁷ Many Muslim children were pulled out of pre-schools by parents due to fear.⁸⁸

All the food stalls that remained open late at night in Periyamulla and served the long-distance buses had to close down. The rumours of the sterilization tablets in Muslim food shops had spread and buses didn't stop there anymore.⁸⁹

Three to four weeks after the bomb blast, a head of a pig was hung in front of a pharmacy owned by a Muslim family 1.5 kilometres from the Katuwapitiya church where the blasts occurred.⁹⁰

Impact on the Ahmadiyya Refugees

There were close to 1200 refugees living in Negombo. Many of them have been living there for several years. On the 23rd of April house owners asked the refugees to leave immediately. Shops stopped letting them in or selling to them. Three-wheelers refused to take them.⁹¹ Following this, they had to be moved by the state to different places. In each place, communities protested against them being brought there.⁹² Most of them were living in the Negombo Police Station, and then were moved to the Pasyala Ahmadiyya Mosque, then to the Sarvodaya women's centre in Panadura, and back to the Negombo Al Hilal Muslim School and finally the Vavuniya Poonthottam camp, which was set up to house internally displaced people of the war in Sri Lanka.⁹³ Even Muslims living in Negombo didn't want to help the refugees. They said they themselves were afraid couldn't protect them. While this may be true, it is also relevant that the Ahmadiyyas are generally discriminated against within the Muslim community. In Negombo, the Muslims hailing from the Loku Palliya and the local divisions between different areas further exacerbated the discrimination.⁹⁴ An international organization working on refugee issues, ZOA, had to move office as there were protests against them by the people in the area.⁹⁵

86. Interview with male Ahmadiya journalist, also a former school principal.

87. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo

88. Ibid.

89. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

90. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist also a former school principal.

91. Interview with male Tamil Catholic social activist and journalist.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. For more information on these attacks see <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-refugees-threatened-attacked>; <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/pakistani-refugee-murdered-negombo>; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/scared-muslim-refugees-in-negombo-flee-homes/article26950518.ece>

On the whole, the Ahmadiyyas, being Muslim and the most vulnerable among them as a persecuted refugee community, became the target of the non-Muslim perception of all Muslims being responsible for the brutal killings on Easter Sunday.

Women's responses after the Easter Sunday attack

In Duva, a low-income fishing community in Negombo, women had internalized the fear and prejudice against Muslims. A Sinhala Catholic woman in Negombo said, "I had gone for the night service, I got to know in the morning about the bomb blast. I had had a dream of a church fallen and people injured and blood everywhere. So, it was very disturbing for me to hear the news the next day."⁹⁶

She further stated that, "They are planning to finish all the Sinhala Catholics. We heard there were swords in the mosques. We heard there could be poison in the food and water. We heard the schools will be attacked next. COVID might be their plan too. Why did it come so suddenly?" When we asked her how she knew all this, she said her husband read the newspapers and then told her what was written in them.⁹⁷ Surani, who hails from the fishing community, gave us background on the women's position in her community. Women were largely involved in fish processing. Women of earlier generations used to go fishing with the men. Even though those of the fishing community had relatives in the North, in Kohilai and Mulaitheevu, they identify themselves as Sinhala. Her life was full of uncertainties as the houses in her village had got washed away due to the construction of the Port City.⁹⁸ Now she lives without a house or toilet.

We used to live near the sea and in 2019 our houses got washed away because of the sand dredging and other activities connected to the setting up of the Port City. We were promised alternative housing but haven't received it. We were living in tents and temporary shelters without electricity, toilets, or running water. I have two teenage daughters aged 18 and 15. We really suffered for a long time. It was only due to local media attention that we finally managed to get a piece of land.⁹⁹

About the day of the bomb blasts and after she said,

Our children were very scared for long after. They had heard that there were swords and that they will be cut to pieces. We had to drop them at school and pick them up for weeks after. They were really scared to go about alone. The children's school is a Catholic school. There are no Muslims. If there were Muslims it won't be attacked, no? It's always the children and their future that is affected. I am scared for my children's future. There is no future in fishing. The place where we live, Duva, will be washed away soon. The Port City has affected all of us. Because of these bomb blasts and Covid, children's education is getting affected. They will have to struggle to get jobs.¹⁰⁰

96. Interview with Sinhala Catholic woman in her forties.

97. Ibid.

98. The Colombo International Financial City (Port City) is a special economic zone and International Financial Centre located in Colombo, Sri Lanka, which is currently under construction on reclaimed land adjacent to the Galle Face Green.

99. Ibid.

100. Interview with Sinhala Catholic woman in her forties.

When asked directly, she said she didn't know what extremism meant. However, her reality consists of her everyday challenges of economic struggle, the injustice meted out to her community by large development projects, the resultant destruction of traditional livelihoods, and the struggle to educate her children and ensure a good life for them in the midst of it all. These challenges could easily be collapsed into and diverted into fear and hatred towards the entire Muslim community. Neela is a social activist who works in 15 Grama Niladhari divisions in Wellaveethiya, Kudapaluwa and Munnakkaraya with community groups working on housing and land rights. These groups have members of all ethnic communities as members. She related numerous stories which provide for a rich tapestry of women's responses at the local level to the bomb blasts and its aftermath. In Kamachchodai women protected the mosque and made sure that their Muslim sisters were not asked to leave their community-level groups.¹⁰¹ In areas such as Fathimawatte and Daluwakotuwa women couldn't continue their home-based food production businesses. Muslims who were living on rent were asked to leave by the house owners. Sometimes the women's groups were able to negotiate with the house owners to not evict the Muslim families. Muslims were also afraid to keep coming to community meetings and so women leaders of the other communities visited them in their homes to convince them to come. In spite of such efforts Muslim women were unable to take part in joint inter-community activities or public events.¹⁰²

Local activists like Ruvani continued to talk in public through the local media about the need to provide solidarity and support between different communities in Negombo.¹⁰³ Sister Renu with other nuns started to visit and support the refugees as she found that there was enough support for the victims of the bomb blast but not enough for the refugees who were also victims of this violence. She cited her religious calling as the reason for her actions. She wanted to support those who were most vulnerable, and in this instance, she felt it was the Ahmadiya refugees. When she went to buy provisions for the refugees she was asked, "Are you not ashamed to help those who attacked us?" Even the police asked her, "Do you trust them?"¹⁰⁴

In families where there were mixed marriages, tensions increased after the easter attack. Women in these households were not allowed to go out. There was constant surveillance from within the community about where they were going and who they were meeting.¹⁰⁵

A public event was organized by the Al Hilaal Central College, which included a band and students going in a procession through the streets. This event was stopped and the reason given was that it was not safe for Muslims to be seen in such celebratory public events. However, the actual reason for the cancellation was that the girl students were also supposed to be included in the public procession and the leaders in the community wanted to stop that from happening.¹⁰⁶

101. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group Negombo.

102. Ibid.

103. Ibid.

104. Interview with Sinhala Catholic nun in her seventies.

105. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group Negombo.

106. Ibid.

As external threats to the Muslim community as a whole increased, the patriarchal control of women and girls' mobility and freedom from within the community also increased. This reality coexisted with the women's unwavering attempts to support one another, in this case especially across communities during this fragile and tense time in Negombo.

Civil society responses in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks

Even the longstanding activist networks fell apart in the post-Easter attacks context. A senior social activist reflected, "We had come together to raise our voices against the war in the North and East. This time though people felt that they were attacked – "apitane gahuve" This time, it was not about violence that happened in a distant place anymore."¹⁰⁷ There was constant reportage in the mainstream media of swords in mosques which created a lot of fear and led to the widespread perception that mosques were breeding grounds for "terrorists." For all those living in Negombo, this violence was personal and real. The initial response from these groups was to donate blood and help the wounded. Very quickly, they had identified two sets of victims of this brutal attack – the victims of the bomb blasts themselves and the Ahmadiyya refugees who bore the brunt of anti-Muslim violence that ensued soon after.¹⁰⁸

There were active women leaders in environmental struggles in Rathmalgama in the nearby Puttalam district. These leaders were Muslim women who had negotiated patriarchal controls in their own homes and faced challenges from the mosque leadership. They were strong leaders who got water to their village within 40 days through a massive signature campaign where they collected 680 signatures by going door to door. These movements had fought and won battles against garbage dumping, salt companies, and cement factories in the Puttalam district. The young men who were active in these movements suddenly came to be viewed as a threat and were asked to regularly report to the police station.¹⁰⁹

In spite of intense fear and the circular nature of the relationship between fear and possibility of violence, the existence of certain structures helped to negotiate the reality, reduce the fear, and maintain some order. The Cardinal, local Bishops and the larger structure of the church intervened and urged the people to uphold peace and non-violence. Similarly, those responsible within the mosque structures could talk to those within the church about ways to keep the peace. Civil society structures could organize and work towards building trust between communities. This is a special feature of Negombo and its long, complicated and vibrant history of coexistence of multiple communities.¹¹⁰

Members of civil society organisations worked with the police to ensure protection and response to mob violence. There were meetings with the Deputy Inspector General at the Wayamba Police about identifying places where violence might occur and deploying police there for protection. They

107. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 2.

108. Ibid.

109. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group Negombo.

110. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 3.

also contacted ministers such as Ruwan Wijewardene, State Minister of Defence and non-cabinet Minister of Mass Media at that time, to ask for increased protection from the air force and army. In spite of this, there were some incidents of stone throwing. These, however, were stopped before escalating into more serious violence.¹¹¹

On Tuesday, April 23, 2019, when the mass burials were due to happen, civil society groups worked with mosque committees to have banners displayed of condolences and prayers. Some Catholic priests even participated in the Kamachchodai mosque prayer service. However, their own church officials followed them, threatened them, and enquired about who gave them the permission to attend the Muslim prayer.¹¹²

Nevertheless, these efforts at maintaining peace helped to prevent violence until April 30, 2019 in Negombo. In the night, news spread that a local politician, Lanza, had organized a gang, attacked several Muslim houses and damaged 30 three-wheelers in Palangathurai and Daluwakotuwa.¹¹³ On the 21st of May, civil society groups organized a public rally in Negombo calling for peace and humanity, where more than 300 people participated.¹¹⁴ This was the same time that Athuraliye Rathana Thero was carrying out an *upavasaya* (a fast) in front of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy asking for the removal of the three Muslim politicians from Parliament. The slogan for the public rally was coined by a woman activist – “Yesterday, today, tomorrow, we stand for humanity.” Needless to say, many women from different community groups were part of this public rally.¹¹⁵

Media complicity

One of the interviewees who was Muslim principal of a school in Katuwapitiya was also the local correspondent for Sirasa, a National Sinhala language private TV channel and Veerakesari, a national Tamil language newspaper. Once the news came out that people of the Islamic faith had executed the attack, he became suspect in spite of his excellent credentials. Even though he is a known local journalist who has been reporting from Negombo for the past 21 years, he was harassed by the police and not allowed to enter certain spaces in spite of his press ID. Other journalists did not stand with him. Mainstream media stopped reporting on the attacks on Muslim homes. In Poruthota he heard news of two dogs’ heads and remains of cows being hung in front of Muslim shops. In Palawathura three-wheelers were burnt. Fifty motor cycles were damaged in Dalupotha and houses were looted in Periyamulla. None of these incidents we reported. Even though there were estimates taken of the damages by the Grama Adhikari and by the mosque, no compensation has been given.¹¹⁶ The media in Negombo and otherwise turned complicit in covering up the extent to which Muslims were attacked in the aftermath of the bombings. Thus, the media became complicit in the hatred towards Muslims that turned violent at this time. Lack of media coverage made it close to impossible for Muslims affected by the violence to ask for justice or compensation.

111. Ibid.

112. Interview with male Sinhala social activist 2.

113. Ibid.

114. Ibid.

115. Ibid.

116. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist, also a former school principal.

Forced cremations of those who died (or allegedly died) due to COVID-19

Even as tensions and anti-Muslim sentiments continued to prevail in Negombo, the COVID pandemic brought the whole world to its knees. In 2020, the Sri Lankan government decided to forcibly cremate all those who died from COVID-19 citing scientific reasons related to the spread of the disease. Even though such reasons were debunked locally in Sri Lanka and internationally, the government proceeded with this action. The forced cremation of family members was heart breaking for Muslims as it was a gross violation of their religious principles.¹¹⁷ The first Muslim person who was cremated after this rule was enacted, was from Negombo. He was cremated in the night to avoid any attention. Even a silent vigil that was organized in the area against the cremations was cancelled due to political pressure. For non-Muslims it was not clear why this rule was so hurtful to Muslims. Bogus science and alleged logic were forefronted even when there was more than enough information from reliable sources such as the Human Rights Commission and the World Health Organization which could easily allay any doubts or fears with regards to the dangers of burying those who died of COVID. One woman in our focus group discussion summarized this lack of logic and irrational fear with these words: “lighting can travel through sand, so maybe corona can too.”¹¹⁸

Muslim young women’s everyday negotiations in the aftermath of the Easter attacks

Even though those interviewed stated that the people of Negombo have long histories of cohabiting and having neighbourly relations, the aftermath of the easter attacks made it abundantly clear that these relationships were extremely fragile. Acts of ostracism and racism between communities were sometimes direct and at other times through being silent when others were saying racist things or engaging in hateful actions.

One young woman said, “Our family was the only ones going to the funerals (of those known to them who were killed in the bomb blast). It was very uncomfortable what people were saying. My father was called to the police. Many other Muslims were also there. Our home was checked twice. It was only because we spoke Sinhala that the military was o.k. with us when they came to check the house.”¹¹⁹

Another young Muslim woman noted that “The school did not ask my parents to volunteer with checking the bags in the school.”¹²⁰ Another young woman observed that “No matter which kind of Muslim we are, others see everyone as the same.” One woman said that “School teachers, gym friends, tuition teachers, were attacking Muslims. There were anti-Muslim posts on my FB page.”

117. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-covid-19-forced-cremation-muslims-discriminatory>

118. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists’ group Negombo.

119. Ibid.

120. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

Another person shared the story of a child who was stopped from entering the tuition class as she was wearing a head scarf. The security guard was shouting at her while other parents watched without speaking up. It was only after the teacher came and told the security guard not to behave this way, that the child was allowed in.¹²¹ Suddenly everyday practices that were totally normalized became sites of danger. One young Muslim woman said, “We are afraid to share cooked food with neighbours and friends. We only share fruits from the trees.”¹²² The Muslim women also began to get exhausted by this social onslaught in their everyday life. As one woman put it, “sometimes I tried to convince my friends and sometimes I just couldn’t”. In spite of all of this, one young woman shared a small act which gives hope as follows: “Our small group of friends decided not to post or share hateful messages.”¹²³

In everyday intimate spaces across ethnic and religious identities, a young Muslim woman had to negotiate these dynamics. These young women were asked repeatedly, “Why do you have swords in the mosques?” Many relationships between young women across ethnicities did not survive these bitter fights. This will come to bear on an entire generation of women in Negombo who may now grow up without any or too many friends across different ethnicities/religions.¹²⁴

Young women negotiating changing social norms and controls within Muslim communities

Similar to the reality of most girls in Sri Lanka, who negotiate sexual harassment and patriarchy every day, Muslim girls too learned how to “behave” in public in their own communities as well as other public spaces such as buses and markets. Below are a few statements from Muslim and non-Muslim girls with regards to social norms that they need to adhere to:

My father says adjust according to the situation – even to go out of the house to the shop I wear a scarf.¹²⁵

The abaya is comfortable. It is for security. My umbrella and my abaya are my weapons against sexual harassment on the bus. I travelled alone for work.¹²⁶

To get my driving license I had to find a lady teacher because otherwise people would start talking. There is so much pressure.¹²⁷

Catholic parents also did not easily allow girls to be out in public spaces alone. And very strict about marriage outside the religion.¹²⁸

121. Ibid.

122. Interview with young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

123. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

124. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

125. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

126. Interview with young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

127. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

128. Interview Sinhala woman journalist of the Meepuravesiyo in her thirties.

As the last statement illustrates, another enormous pressure all women have to negotiate is that of marriage. Marrying outside one's own ethnic community and religion is disallowed and looked down upon in most communities in Sri Lanka. Women reflect on this reality of their struggle with the institution of marriage as follows:

Opportunities given to Sri Lankan women are already less. When extremism comes, even that is snatched away. I became afraid of Muslim men. What are they thinking? Whom can I trust? I knew what I didn't want. There was a huge pressure to marry. Every day relatives came with proposals. My only escape was to leave for my studies.¹²⁹

At the end of the day if kids are not sent for higher education and are married off at an early age, they should at least get maximum from their school days. My best friend from Kattankudi was married off at 16. Even privileged families give the girls in marriage at a very young age.¹³⁰

The women we interviewed also made observations about the changes in religious practices and dressing practice across generations in their own families. Sometimes the changes came with marriage and at other times due to the pressure of other women in the community. Sometimes it was also due to women's own personal changes in the understanding of their faith. The women identified class mobility and urbanization as factors that mediated their negotiation of their presence in the public sphere.¹³¹ Simultaneously, there is also the influence of global Islamic movements reaching their lives through elders in their families who are exposed to them.¹³²

My granny wore sari. My mother wore sari. She was an English teacher at Al Hilal. She started wearing abaya as all the other teachers were wearing abaya. She also went to Haj in 2005.¹³³

My grandmother was sad about me wearing abaya. She wanted me to wear sari as a teacher. She had saved two saris for me to wear for work. But I never wore sari.¹³⁴

We need to cover hair, legs, and breasts. Because it attracts attention. Posh Muslims wear denim jeans and blouses. Dancing and singing are discouraged, especially in public – so drawing is the only space for creativity. Earning from drawing is not discouraged or stigmatized. It is seen as being better than saying that I dance for a living.¹³⁵

Malays in Colombo had a different culture. Women wore short dresses, didn't cover the head or chest. They wore western-type clothes. My grandfather didn't like this. He has

129. Interview with young Muslim woman 1 in her twenties.

130. Ibid.

131. Interview with young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

132. Ibid.

133. Ibid.

134. Ibid.

135. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

studied Arabic and Islam and didn't like how his sisters and aunts were. He didn't want his daughters to be like that so he moved to Negombo. Even in my husband's family (he is from a Malay family) his mother and sisters all wear abaya. His older sister is married to a Nalimi.¹³⁶ They live in Canada. He is an Islamic scholar and on video he does classes for us. He speaks Tamil, Sinhala, and English. We have a family group and during COVID the Nalimi did bayaan.¹³⁷ All the children joined and they are encouraged to ask questions. My son asked why we have these different bending rituals for prayer. So the Nalimi sent a lot of readings for him.¹³⁸

For my son's school farewell, he said he didn't want to order pizza from Pizza Hut as its not halal. His friends said it was on the halal list, but my son was not sure and wanted to check the certification. The cake was from Fab. Muslim children didn't eat it because there is no halal certification. That is their personal wish.¹³⁹

Online as a space of engagement

One of the young Muslim women we interviewed was involved in the online world of gaming and Anime. She started an anime club in her higher education institution. She even led a public march of her institution for cosplay, a form of costumed re-enactment game that has a huge following across the world. Currently she works for a US company online. She says, "For Muslim girls who don't like to socialize they should follow online jobs, they can keep their dress codes while earning a good living. Sarah (her friend) is an illustrator but outside she is quite like a tortoise. She had so many restrictions from her family about where she could travel. But Sarah is fully involved in online design. She illustrates for Manga Comics. In the online social world, there are many Muslim girls socializing."¹⁴⁰ In a very specific way, this young woman found a space to express herself with anonymity and safety, all while also making a living in the online world. This very freedom, mobility, and dignity was disallowed to her in the real world.

136. Religious scholar.

137. Religious preaching.

138. Interview with young Muslim woman 2 in her twenties.

139. Ibid.

140. Interview with young Muslim woman 3 in her thirties.

Negombo Case Study Conclusion: Gendered experiences of autonomy, coexistence and marginalisation

The narrative about Negombo presented above is, in many ways, quintessentially Sri Lankan. It gives a picture of historical coexistences and hybridity of different ethnoreligious communities even as these relationships have always remained a mixture of relative peace and conflict. In the context of the impact of inter-ethnic tensions and conflict, young Muslim women have borne the brunt of the discrimination and verbal attacks in public spaces, including online spaces in the aftermath of the Easter bombings. The women of Negombo have undertaken negotiations within myriad spaces and relationships including neighbourhoods, schools, religious institutions, community organisations, media, civil society spaces etc. The dominance of groups such as Ravana Balaya and Bodu Bala Sena and the discriminatory rumours being spread against the Muslim community impacted women's everyday behaviour, livelihoods, and mutual relationships.

The state complicity and inaction with regards to the violence was apparent. The targeting of young Muslim men who were community leaders by asking them to report to the police station every day and the lack of effort to protect the Ahmadiyya refugees are but two examples. The national level imposition of cremations on Muslim communities also began with Negombo.

Along with the state, other institutions perpetuated fear and discrimination. Some church priests were spreading anti-Muslim rhetoric even as the role of the Cardinal in ensuring a stop to the violence in Negombo, was recognized by many as having saved many lives and keeping the peace. Schools, institutions that could have contributed positively to maintaining non-discriminatory practices, instead kept Muslim parents away from the new practices of checking school bags. Anyone who was responding to and supporting the Ahmadiyyas, even if they were Christian nuns, were treated with suspicion and anger. The refugees, meanwhile, faced homelessness and multifaceted discrimination and violence without any institutional support to turn to. In spite of local community media organisations such as *Meepuravesiyo* who consistently challenged false news and reported on all vulnerable communities, the mainstream national media and social media spread misinformation and hatred. In the context of the complicity of so many societally significant institutions, poorer working women who were interviewed for this study, directed their anguish about the future of their children, which was due to political and economic policies, towards hating the Muslim community even though they had been neighbours, albeit complicatedly, for generations.

CASE STUDY

KURUNEGALA

The historical background of Kurunegala that follows is based on scholarly literature, online sources, and the oral narratives of those interviewed for this research.

Background

Kurunegala city is the capital of the North-Western Province (NWP) of Sri Lanka. It is situated 116 km from the western urban centre of Colombo and 42 km from the central urban centre of Kandy. The Kurunegala District covers an area of 4816 square kms, which is 7% of the total area of Sri Lanka and 61% of the province. Of this, 4624 square kms is land and 192 square kms is water bodies.¹⁴¹ The population of Kurunegala district is 1,618,485 – the third largest population per district. The population is categorized by the Census Department as being 91% Sinhala, 1.11% Sri Lankan Tamil, 0.1% Indian Tamil, 7% Sri Lanka Moor, 0.07% Sri Lankan Malay, and 0.05% are Burgher.¹⁴² The North-Western Province ranks third in its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product of Sri Lanka at 10.7% of the total of which 5.6% is contribution from the service sector.¹⁴³ As of 2001, 27% of those employed in Kurunegala were in defence, public administration, education, health, and social work; 21% in mining and quarrying; 18% in manufacturing and construction; and 9% in agriculture.¹⁴⁴

With the economy opening up to the global market in the 1980s, women from all communities started to go abroad as migrant workers. Muslim women who returned invested in small businesses. Women also started working in garments and plastic factories set up during this time. There was also a lot of employment opportunities for women in the agencies that were sending more women to work in West Asia. With education, employment, and income, women began buying property and could even make the independent choice not to marry.¹⁴⁵ According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka statistics 2019, in terms of foreign migrant labour, Kurunegala has the highest women migrant workers and ranks sixth for male migrant workers in the country.¹⁴⁶

In terms of land use, 21.8% is coconut plantations and 18% paddy lands. These lands have been declared as mostly underutilized or non-productive by the Urban Development Authority. Of the employed population, 9% work in agriculture and forestry.¹⁴⁷ Villages such as Hammaliya were settlements which were created in the 1990s when land belonging to wealthy landowners was given to landless Sinhala and Muslim households.¹⁴⁸ There are 3,694 cottage- and large-scale industries. These industries employ 11,618 people in the Kurunegala local governance area.¹⁴⁹

Kurunegala has a history of large-scale mobilization of farmers against the water tax introduced in 1984. The tax applied to all water ways, even the small ones that supply water to paddy lands and each piece of land was taxed separately. Many women farmers joined this struggle. Farmers were arrested for not paying the tax. On court days there were massive crowds outside the courts.

141. <https://publications.iwmi.org/pdf/H041009.pdf>

142. <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Population/StaticalInformation/CPH2011/CensusPopulationHousing-PreliminaryReport>; <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/abstract2021/CHAP2/2.11>

143. https://www.uda.gov.lk/attachments/devplan_detailed/Development%20Plans%202019-2030/Kurunegala/English.pdf

144. <https://publications.iwmi.org/pdf/H041009.pdf>

145. Interview with Sinhala feminist activist in her fifties.

146. https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/sites/default/files/cbslweb_documents/statistics/otherpub/ess_2020_e1.pdf

147. <https://publications.iwmi.org/pdf/H041009.pdf>

148. According to Neela Akka the wealthy land owner passed away leaving no heirs. Following which the land was taken over by the state and distributed to landless families in the 1990s – Interview with Neela Akka,

149. https://www.uda.gov.lk/attachments/devplan_detailed/Development%20Plans%202019-2030/Kurunegala/English.pdf

Manouri Muttetuwagama, a well-known human rights lawyer in the 1980s, appeared on behalf of the farmers. In the 1980s, in the Reiththagoda Watte coconut estate, a worker was assaulted by the superintendent and when the workers went on strike to protest the incident, the management stopped paying their wages. The villages surrounding the plantation supported the workers by providing food.¹⁵⁰ There have been workers' struggles in the 1990s, demanding higher wages and labour rights in the graphite mines in Kahatagaha. These people's movements had a strong base in Deva Sarana.¹⁵¹

Kurunegala also has a history of syncretic religious sites such as Galebandara,¹⁵² named after a mythical Sinhala-Muslim prince who was turned into a local deity by god Kataragama or Muruga. Galebandara is said to have been assassinated by secret agents following orders of Buddhist monks and had turned into a demon after his assassination. This religious site is shared by both Buddhists and Muslims. On the site there are three separate sites of worship – the Mahadevalaya which is officiated by two Sinhala lay priests, the Ziaram officiated by two Muslim priests, and the shrine dedicated to the Muslim mother of Galebandara – Manamma.¹⁵³ The places of worship co-exist parallelly and do not share any practices with one another. However, devotees across Buddhist and Muslim communities visit this site asking for the blessing of the Sinhala-Muslim Galebandara deity. The site is visited predominantly by women with problems such as, not getting pregnant, conflicts with husbands, praying for the success in marriage proposals, safe delivery at childbirth etc. Unsurprisingly, in the current context, the Galebandara cult has come under attack by Islamic reformist groups who want the Ziaram shut down.¹⁵⁴

Overall, Kurunegala continues to play an important role in both the agriculture economy (including plantations and mines) as well as industries. With the opening up of the economy a significant population has also become migrant workers. While the district is majority Sinhala Buddhist it has a long-standing history, not just of a few syncretic spaces of worship but more importantly, people's struggles, involving a large number of women, for socio-economic rights that cut across ethno-religious communities.

150. FGD with Sinhala women social activists.

151. Deva Sarana was a Anglican church-based social transformation space which was built in 1957. Deva Sarana provided space for rural farmers and youth to meet and mobilize for their rights, including land rights, farmers rights and women's rights. Deva Sarana supported the All-Ceylon Farmers Federation, and the Progressive Women's Front during the time period 1980-2000 and published the newspaper "Goviya (farmer)". See Dewasaranaya. Living Dialogue Devasarana 30 years Alongside People (1957 -1987) https://dpul.princeton.edu/sae_sri_lanka_dissidents/catalog/4fa3dd22-d40b-431d-b92f-771b25974850; <https://srilankabrief.org/sevaka-yohan-devananda-a-memory-that-should-be-kept-alive-sunanda-deshapriya/>

152. (Silva, 2022).

153. Galebandara cult belongs to the category of Bandara cult in Sinhala Buddhism. For Muslims Galebandara is an Awliya, a category of saints in the Sufi tradition. The Bandara deities are typically believed to be reincarnations of important local notables who made a significant impact, either positive or negative. In the Sufi faith, saints too were powerful human beings who became saints following their death due to exceptional good deeds they did while living...The main Galebandara shrine is located at the foothill of the Ethugala rock located in the middle of Kurunegala town. There are two hereditary Sinhala priests, one from the Goigama caste and the other from the drummer caste, who conduct affairs of this shrine...There is another Galebandara shrine conducted by Muslim priests who also claim that they are hereditary custodians of the Muslim shrine. Having no land holdings of its own, the Muslim shrine depends entirely on contributions by those who visit the shrine to secure blessings or any other services. This is a Ziaram (Sufi pilgrimage site with the tomb of a saint) containing the elevated tomb of Galebandara Awlia (Silva et al., 2016 p.16).

154. Ibid.

Methodology

This case study is based on a focus group discussion with Sinhala Buddhist women and interviews with two older generation Sinhala women in their fifties and sixties, two older generation Muslim women, one young Sinhala woman in her twenties, one young Muslim woman in her twenties, a Sinhala Catholic nun who has been working on social cohesion in Kurunegala in her twenties and a Sinhala sex worker in her forties.

Tamils in Kurunegala

A caste group known as the Chettiars who live in Kurunegala as traders were historically part of the Kandy, Dambadeniya, and Yapahuwa kingdoms¹⁵⁵. They are Tamil-speaking people. The Chettiars owned oil mills, coconut plantations and were also local money lenders. The areas where they lived were named Hettiyapola and Hettiyawatte. A historical ambalama, a travellers' rest house, was built by the Chettiars in Pussella in 1924. There is a locality called Demaladeniya which means "Tamil field," but there are no Tamils living there now.¹⁵⁶

Sekaraliyawatte is a Tamil village with about 250 people from about 50 families. They work in rubber plantations belonging to the powerful and well-endowed Buddhist temple, the Gangaramaya Temple. Close to 30 women have left from this village as migrant workers. With their earnings they have bought some land and built small homes for themselves. These are a few very poor communities which are acknowledged even by the state structure; the local primary school provides a meal for the children.¹⁵⁷

Wilgoda Road is an area that is made up of extremely poor families that live in line houses – a form of housing found in plantations and in settlements of the urban poor in Sri Lanka. They mostly work as sanitation workers for the Urban Council.¹⁵⁸ Most of them work as contract labour and are not permanent staff. There is no development of public infrastructure in this area. Very few children go to the Wayamba Royal and Maliyadewa Boys' School which are good quality schools located nearby. Instead, they go to the Hindu Vidyalaya on Wilgoda Road, which is not endowed with nearly as many resources as the other schools. This area consists not just of Tamil-speaking people but also people from oppressed castes. The area is also fraught with other social issues such as drug use.

These are just a few examples of the various socio-economic groups and special locations where a diversity of Tamil-speaking people, who are a minority in Kurunegala, live. There are also Tamil communities working in some of the coconut plantations (discussed below). The differences among the different Tamils are also considerable as illustrated above.

155. Interview with Tamil male social activist.

156. Ibid.

157. Focus Group Discussion Sinhala women activists.

158. Tudor Silva et al., (2009) describes similar caste-based discriminations in relation to urban sweepers and sanitary workers in Mahayawa Kandy, naming it as urban untouchability.

Communal violence against Tamils and Muslims

Kurunegala saw communal violence in 1977/78 when Tamil workers in the coconut plantations were attacked in their line houses. Following these riots, many Tamils were packed into lorries and taken away. Kandy Garments, a factory in Malkaduwawa owned by a Tamil, was burned down. So were cinema halls owned by Jaffna Tamils. This violence led to the setting up of refugee camps for Tamils in Kurunegala where there were more than 400 people.¹⁵⁹ The shops that were looted and burned were later taken over by Sinhala traders who set up their own businesses there.

The Sansoni Commission, which was appointed by the then President J.R. Jayewardene on November 9, 1977 to inquire into the communal violence in 1977, describes this violence as follows:

Kurunegala Town

(5) About 2 miles from Dambulla is a village called Ibbankatuwa. Some 50 Tamil families, who earlier worked on up-country estates, cultivated about 300 acres there. Close to it, a colony of Sinhalese had sprung up in connection with the Mahaveli Development Scheme. Witness V. Kandasamy stated that on the night of 17th August, the Tamil houses were all set on fire and the occupants ran into the jungle colony. When the Tamils returned to their homes on the 18th when an armed crowd attacked them. One Sunderarajah was cut on his hand and later died, leaving 2 young children; one Poopalan was stabbed by a man called Wije, and fell dead after running up to the witness V. Kandasamy; one Suppiah was clubbed and cut and he died on the spot. The witness also spoke to 3 cases of rape. His sister-in-law Seetha Letchumi was raped by Wije; a girl named Desy was raped by 5 men; and yet another girl Mariamma was also raped. The witness also spoke to having seen the bodies of 2 other Tamils, whom he knew, in the Dambulla hospital mortuary. These 50 families have since left Ibbankatuwa, and many of them have gone to Kilinochchi where they work as casual labourers. Senior State Counsel informed me that 6 suspects were on bail in M.C., Dambulla, Case No. 7924, in respect of the deaths of the 3 persons mentioned above, and the connected papers have been forwarded to the Director of Public Prosecutions.¹⁶⁰

In 1976, there was anti-Muslim violence in Puttalam and Anamaduwa districts adjoining Kurunegala District. Due to this violence, some Muslims moved to the Kurunegala District.¹⁶¹ Large populations of Sinhala labourers migrated to Puttalam to work in the Cement Corporation factory and the Ceylon Transport Board bus depot. Some families had also been settled under the Land Reform Act 1978. Over time, they outnumbered the Muslims. The tensions were based on economic factors, such as Sinhala traders coming into establish shops in the business centres in the Puttalam town, and rice hoarding due to food scarcity. Based on an accusation that Muslim *nattamis* (goods loaders and cart pushers) were stealing rice from Sinhala women who were transporting rice (illegally), the bus stand was moved to a Sinhala area (Palavi) of the town. With such rising tension, violence

159. v Report 1977.

160. Ibid.

161. FGD with Sinhala woman social activists.

broke out with many Muslims being shot and injured and property destroyed.¹⁶² One of our interviewees who is a Sinhala woman, describes the violence as follows:

I remember seeing smoke and shops were attacked in our village too. All of them had left their homes and were hiding in the forests. Houses were broken. Meherubanu was my friend and classmate, they were hiding in the rice mill and the rice mill was set on fire. Her hands and feet got burned running out of the rice mill. Our village people hid them and looked after them and helped them to come back home.¹⁶³

Kurunegala was also affected by Janata Vimukthi Peramuna insurrection in the late 1980s and the consequent violent crackdown by the then government.¹⁶⁴ Between 1988 and 1992 a notorious detention camp was operated in Wehera in Kurunegala. Thousands were held and hundreds were tortured, subjected to enforced disappearance, and became victims of extra judicial killings. This camp was run by Major General Janaka Perera who was later given a position of Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Australia in 2001.¹⁶⁵ One account of this violence from the Consultation Task Force report from 2016 goes as follows:

Actually, we do not know who asked our father to come (he never returned). We don't know if it was the Army, we don't know if it was to take revenge, we don't know if it was the JVP. I pray that we would never see another such a bheeshanaya period.¹⁶⁶(CTF 2016: 126)

In the 1990s, there was a mass displacement of 75,000 Muslims from the North enforced by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Most of them settled in Puttalam and gradually, Muslim households moved to Kurunegala District as well, also leading to an increase in the Muslim population in the district. After this, the pressure on other communities to not sell land to Muslims became strong. Nevertheless, the increase in population made the Muslims in this area an electoral constituency. They became significant in local government and at the provincial level. Political parties then had to take this into consideration and begin working with the community, including fielding Muslim candidates.¹⁶⁷

Wayamba Jayagrahanaya¹⁶⁸ in Kurunegala

Wayamba Jayagrahanaya is a Sinhala Buddhist organisation set up in the 1990s. Their main demand is for Sri Lanka to be a Sinhala Buddhist country. They were instrumental in building a huge Buddha statue on a rock overlooking Kurunegala town with the support of the Sinhala traders' associations. The intention behind this choice of location was so that the shadow of the statue would fall over the town. Wayamba Jayagrahanaya also worked towards consolidating economic

162. Nagaraj & Haniffa (2017) <https://ices.lk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICES-Toward-Recoverig-Histories-Book-WEB-3-with-references.pdf>

163. FGD with Sinhala women social activists.

164. Interview with Sinhala feminist activist in her fifties.

165. <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?artid=6105&catid=13>

166. Participant at a CTF Public Meeting in Kurunegala. Bheeshanaya (Terror) period refers to the late 1980s, when the JVP led an insurgency against the Sri Lankan state, which was violently squashed through the abducted torture, killing and enforced disappearance of thousands of people by state forces. This period also saw attacks and killings of politicians, other left leaders, businesspeople and military personnel by the JVP as well.

167. Interview with Sinhala feminist activist in her fifties.

168. Victory of the Wayamba Province

power in the hands of the Sinhalese and being a strong voice against Muslim businesses while also challenging the power of the Catholic church.¹⁶⁹ Following similar trajectories and goals of the Wayamba Jayagrahanaya, Dharmasinghe points to the emergence of several other monk-led organisations like the Sinhala Veera Vidhana (SVV) – the Order of the Sinhala Heroes – with the leadership of seven successful Sinhala-Buddhist middle- and upper-class businessmen in the mid 1990s.¹⁷⁰ She says,

It is also important to point out that the SVV's emergence accompanied the State's neoliberal economic policies that rapidly privatized state-owned industries. For instance, in the mid-1990s, there were certain attempts taken to privatize the Paddy Corporation that was established to buy paddy directly from farmers at a fixed price. The objective of its establishment was to save the farmer from losing his livelihood even if he/she doesn't make profit. There was resistance from farmers to the privatization. Amidst this political economic scenario, the SVV went to villages for instance, in Mahiyangana in the Uva Province and Polonnaruwa in the North-Central Province, with a plan to buy paddy directly from farmers (p. 6).

The impact of the war in Kurunegala was very marked. In 2019, there were 317,000 armed force personnel in Sri Lanka.¹⁷¹ Kurunegala has been one of the districts of very high recruitment. The monument built in Kurunegala dedicated to the war heroes of Kurunegala and Puttalam districts displays the names of about 4,135 persons from the tri-forces and the police.¹⁷² Military families from other places were also settled in Kurunegala with land grants, particular from the mid 1990s. These were often women who were widows of men in the armed forces, women married to soldiers who were living with disabilities etc. Kurunegala had the highest number of military widows – 28% – in the whole country.¹⁷³ Following the military victory against the LTTE under the leadership of the Mahinda Rajapaksa government in 2009, he chose Kurunegala as his electorate to stand for parliamentary elections in 2018.¹⁷⁴ This exemplifies the role of the people of Kurunegala within the armed forces as a common livelihood, which then contributed to a culture of nationalist fervour among the Sinhalese in the district.

Women's involvement in social movements

As mentioned earlier, many women farmers were part of struggles for farmers' rights from the 1970s onwards in Kurunegala. From 1995 onwards women, including Muslim women, got involved in politics and organized themselves into collectives. They worked for political parties. They began engaging as women across ethnic identities on common issues such as women's political partic-

169. Ibid.

170. Geethika Dharmasinghe (2022), Sovereignisation of the Sangha, Formations of the recent radical movement in Sri Lanka, Women and Media Collective unpublished paper.

171. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=LK>

172. <https://www.news.lk/news/political-current-affairs/item/20484-re-established-wayamba-war-heroes-monument-will-unveil-tomorrow>

173. <https://cejsrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/Sexual-Bribery-Of-Military-Widows-English.pdf>

174. The Economic Times, July 2015.

ipation and domestic violence.¹⁷⁵ In general, the presence of Muslim women in the public sphere within social movements has been low. However, oppression and aggression from other communities, has led Muslim women to come together and engage in collective action.¹⁷⁶

One such important woman in the history of Kurunegala is Ahamed Shamshad Begam. She was a poet who contributed to the Goviya newspaper – a left leaning farmers’ newspaper – published in Kurunegala in the 1980s. “Nageva lantha gnanakayyanien sarasi” she wrote in one of her poems – “Woman adorn yourself with knowledge” in response to the panchakalyaniya, which was what was traditionally valued as endowments for women. Panchakalyaniya included *dantha* (even, white teeth), *chavi* (healthy skin), *kesha* (long hair), *maansa* (a good figure) and *vayang* (youthful looks) and was about physical and external beauty alone.¹⁷⁷

Administrative segregation

One of the women in the FGD spoke about administrative segregation of communities on ethnic lines even though their everyday lives were intimately connected. “There is a mosque in front of my house. There are two other Muslim villages close by called Nallaachchiya and Harambewa. This is a mixed village. There is a Buddhist temple close by also. Even though we live close to each other these are different GS divisions,” she said.¹⁷⁸

A local woman politician described her electorate as follows: “There are 3,900 women in my electorate who are called vathu demala (plantation Tamils). They live and work in a coconut estate belonging to the military. They are extremely poor and really suffering. They live in line houses. Eight households don’t even have toilets.”¹⁷⁹ It is the administrative segregation that has led to this area not being granted any support for building up basic infrastructure. This segregation is built on foundations of colonial plantation-based spatial administrative arrangements. This foundation fits beautifully with present-day majoritarian ethnic and military interests within administrative organisation.

Segregation of schools

Just as with administration, school are also separated on ethno-religious grounds. Similar to the situation in Negombo, many of the larger schools in Kurunegala are also segregated by religion. The bigger Buddhist schools do not allow Muslim girls to wear trouser and shawl and insist that everyone wear the same uniform. These schools do not have Muslim teachers or prayer rooms. As one young Sinhala woman explained, there was name calling and ignoring of Muslim girls in the school.¹⁸⁰ Another young Muslim woman we interviewed stated that she was educated in a Buddhist school and studied Sinhala and Buddhist Civilization for her A/Ls as is came with her subjects of interest, which were classical violin and sitar.¹⁸¹

175. Interview with Sinhala feminist activist in her fifties.

176. Ibid.

177. Ibid.

178. Focus group discussion Sinhala woman social activist.

179. Focus Group discussion Sinhala woman local government member.

180. Interview with young Sinhala woman 1 in her twenties.

181. Interview with young Muslim woman in her twenties.

In the Hammaliya village, which is a settlement village from the 1990s, all the boys used to go to the same school. Leeka Akka, one of our interviewees, stated that her son's best friend was Muslim. His friendship changed since 2014/16 since the Podi Palliya, the small mosque, came to their village. His friend became more distant. The Podi Palliya propagated wahabi ideals which were different from the Islam his friend would have grown up with till then.¹⁸² Now, there are different schools for Sinhala and Muslim children now.

A young Sinhala woman shared her experiences of school. She mentioned that her school, Aswedduma Kanishta Vidyalya was a mixed school with many Muslim, Tamil, and Sinhala children. "In my class I was the only Sinhala child. The medium was in Sinhala but mostly the students were Muslim. They had the option of wearing the uniform of trousers and the shawl after they got their first period." She observed that she is struggling to hold on to those memories and relationships of trust with the current overpowering discourses of fear. "I have some connections with them (her school friends). But my (Sinhala) friends and relatives in the village tell me to not interact with them. I have a sekaya (doubt) in my mind. There were swords in the mosque and swords were found in the homes of the main people of the mosque."¹⁸³

Sometimes the segregation in schooling was enforced from within the household. Minna, an older Muslim woman who was one of our interviewees, said that as a child her father didn't want her to go to a Sinhala school because she will mix with and get influenced by other cultures. When she became a teacher, her first appointment was to a plantation school and her mother hid the letter from her. She didn't want her to take the position as she said, "Those people use alcohol, and you are far away from home. You shouldn't be mixing with other cultures." Minna ultimately had to fight to take her first posting as a teacher in a plantation sector school.

One of the young Sinhala women said that she had Muslim friends who went to the same school as her. She firmly believed that going to school together was essential to build trust and good relationships between divided communities.¹⁸⁴

Even though women may have some opportunity to make friends across ethnic lines, once school life ends, it is hard for most women to maintain any friendships. One of the young Sinhala women said, All my Muslim friends from schools are now married. I am 24, they married after their O/Ls and some before their O/Ls. I don't meet them, but we message sometimes. I live alone, I am working, I am not married. They are married and with families. So our situations have changed so much and so we don't hang out. I had many Muslim friends, but after the Easter attacks, we heard that they found swords in the local mosque in Aswedduma village, so Sinhala people got very afraid."¹⁸⁵

182. Son of elderly Sinhala woman activist who shared his experiences as we were talking to his mother.

183. Interview with young Sinhala woman 2 in her twenties.

184. Interview with young Sinhala woman 2 in her twenties.

185. Ibid.

Socio-economic fissures coloured by the lens of ethnicity: A sex worker's perspective

In many ways, sex workers being outside normative society by virtue of their profession, have a standpoint from which they can interact with and evolve perspectives on all sections of society across all social differences and hierarchies. Kusuma, a Sinhala woman, is one such sex worker. Her mother was among the women who left as a migrant worker when Kusuma was a child. Kusuma grew up with her relatives in conditions of poverty. She faced sexual violence and abuse as a child from her male relatives. When she tried to tell her aunt about it, she was blamed for enticing the men. Kusuma also escaped to the Middle East as a migrant work with falsified documents when she was 17 years old. She faced many more incidents of sexual violence in Saudi Arabia and returned to Sri Lanka pregnant. As an unmarried woman she and her baby were stigmatized by her family and her village. Her son was called *avajathika* (without an identity/nation). A local thug raped her when she was nine months pregnant on the road while people watched. The police did nothing. She said, "They tell the whole world that they are Buddhist, but Sinhala men raped me as a child in my own family. A Sinhala man raped me on the road. The Police are Sinhala. If they were really Buddhist, they shouldn't have done all this."¹⁸⁶

Now Kusuma is engaged in sex work to feed and educate her two children; and to pay her mother and older sister to look after the children while she works. Soldiers in the military are her clients. "Sometimes Sinhala clients say don't go with those men with cut cocks (circumcised penises). But they are not going to cover all my expenses, are they? Besides, Muslim and Tamil men are fair. They don't cheat me. Muslim men are not afraid to come to me unlike Sinhala men. Often their wives have gone as migrant workers. So they don't hide. Sinhala men often don't pay the agreed amount. They take me and then there are three or four men when there was supposed to be one. I have faced a lot of violence from them as well. Muslim men like to enjoy sex because their women are not free like me. Muslim women don't even remove their clothes during sex. So the men enjoy coming to me. But those same Muslim men will punish the Muslim women for doing sex work. I heard from a Muslim client that a Muslim sex worker was whipped in the mosque. I know a Muslim sex worker. She does the work secretly. She was abandoned by her husband with two children to care for. She has no other income. The mosque or anyone else didn't help her. On some days, when she has no income, I give her some money for food."

She continues, "I have a code of ethics in my work. Confidentiality is important. What is also important for me is fairness – paying me what was agreed on, being clean and kind. Humaneness is what is important, not ethnicity or caste or anything else. I have clients from all the communities." She further adds that in her area they are all poor. She says, "In the *watte* (low-income neighbourhood) where I live, there hasn't been any violence among the different communities. It is a very mixed area. My father remembers Muslims settling in our *watte* in the 1980s. Inter-marriage is also quite common."

186. Interview with a Sinhala sex worker in her fifties.

From the vantage point of Kusuma's life, existing divisions and ongoing conflict among different communities can be seen in a different, more complicated light. Furthermore, her unfaltering focus on ensuring economic means, fairness, and justice as her main priorities gives her a perspective that is not overwhelmingly coloured by her ethnic identity. Moreover, being mistreated by all communities, including her own, gives her the experience from which to see social identities for what they are – not a means of egalitarian belonging but a tool of ensuring power to some while reducing others to worthless lives that can be taken or disrupted without a second thought.

The aftermath of the Easter attacks in 2019¹⁸⁷

This section draws heavily on the findings of the fact-finding report on Kurunegala compiled by three teams comprising civil society actors, lawyers, and journalists, who visited the locations which were attacked in the aftermath of the Easter bombings. This fact-finding report was later handed over to the governor of the North-Western (Wayamba) Province. Other studies have also documented the incidents of attacks in Kurunegala in the aftermath of the Easter attacks, see for example, Gunatilleke (2021).¹⁸⁸

In May 2019, in Kuliypitya, Nikaweratiya, Panduwasnuwara, Hettipola, and Narammala, Muslim communities were attacked by local men. Properties were destroyed, homes were attacked, and mosques were vandalized. On the 12th of May, hundreds of young men had gathered in Kinyama after the false news of weapons being found in the Mosque. They proceeded to attack the Kinyama main mosque. Close to 2000 men then moved to the Podi Palliya in Kinyama. Witnesses noted that there were at least 10 policemen in the crowd who did nothing to stop the mobs. In the early hours of the 13th of May, in Puvakgahakadawala, mobs gathered around the local mosque and attacked the building. Witnesses said that they were men from the surrounding neighbourhood. They also stated that the Bodu Bala Sena, Mahason Balakaya and Sinha Le groups had been mobilizing people in the villages in the previous months. Two petrol bombs were thrown at the Madige Midiyawela Mosque and two Muslim-owned shops were also set on fire on the night of the 13th. Only six persons had been arrested by the Hettipola Police for the violence on the 12th of May in Kinyama. Even those six were moved by Minister Dayasiri Jayasekara to the Ingiriya Police Station from where they were later released on bail. Even though these attacks were done by neighbours, who all would have known each other, no other Sinhala persons intervened to stop the violence.¹⁸⁹

In the Hettipola area, the Buddhist temple demanded that Sinhala people should immediately stop working in Muslim establishments. This pressure was before the Easter attacks. They were told that if they continue to work in Muslim business establishments, they will not be allowed to take part in religious ceremonies at the temple.¹⁹⁰

187. This section draws heavily on the findings of the fact-finding report on Kurunegala compiled by three teams comprising civil society actors, lawyers and journalists, who visited the locations which were attacked in the aftermath of the Easter attacks.

Kurunegala Civil Samaja Ekamuthuwa, (2019), (Fact-finding report on Kurunegala), Deva Sarana, Ibbagamuwa.

188. Gehan Gunatilleke (2021); Meera Srinivasan (2019) "Mobs Attack Mosques Muslim Owned Shops and Homes in Sri Lankas Kurunegala District", <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/mobs-attack-mosques-muslim-owned-shops-and-homes-in-sri-lankas-kurunegala-district/article27119473.ece>

189. Fact Finding Report, Kurunegala, 2019.

190. Ibid.

The Madige Annukana village was attacked on the 13th of May. The mosque, 24 homes, 8 business establishments and many vehicles were damaged, looted, and set on fire by close to 300 men. Even though the police arrived at the location, they could not or did not control the mobs. Witnesses mentioned that there was a woman who came with the mobs and identified the Muslim houses to the mobs. Witnesses also stated that there was one person in Buddhist monastic robes who even hit a Muslim woman.¹⁹¹

In the focus group discussion with the Sinhala Buddhist women activists, some of whom were military war widows, they shared their reflections and everyday experiences following the Easter attacks. This included them negotiating strong anti-Muslim discourses and actions within their own families.

After the Zaharan incident, everyone became hateful about the Muslims. No one would go to their shops in Galgamuwa. Earlier, we used to share rides on motorbikes to the main road. After the Zaharan incident my child kept telling me don't get on their bikes.¹⁹²

My son will not go to Muslim shops, won't eat in a Muslim shop. He will never go. I have also reduced going.¹⁹³

At the Galgamuwa hospital, a woman who came to give birth was told to remove the abaya and come. Crowds were shouting. They said to not let those in abaya standing in line, into the hospital.¹⁹⁴

Alongside these events, yet another terrible story unfolded around Dr Segu Shihabdeen Mohamed Shafi, commonly referred to as Dr. Shafi. On the May 23, 2019, the Sinhala language national newspaper Divayina published a front-page article called "Sterilization of 4000 Sinhala Buddhist women after caesarean deliveries." The article further stated that he was a member of the National Towheed Jamaat, which had been named by then, as being responsible for the Easter attacks. Two days later he was arrested on money laundering charges. The police asked any women who had information to come forward.¹⁹⁵

Prof. Channa Jayasumane of the Rajarata University first started sharing the photo of Dr. Shafi along with the Divayina article.¹⁹⁶ Athureliye Rathana Thero, a powerful Buddhist monk and a Member of Parliament led protests, primarily with women, outside the Kurunegala hospital and the Kurunegala Magistrates Court.¹⁹⁷ In collaboration with the Deputy Inspector General of Kurunegala and the Superintendent of Police of the area, aided and abetted by the Kurunegala Magistrate's wife Weerabandara who was an anaesthetist at the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital, manufactured a forcible sterilization scandal that eventually drove the Muslim doctor and his family out of his home-town. An exhaustive CID investigation into the charges levelled against Dr Shafi found the

191. Ibid.

192. Focus group discussion with Sinhala Buddhist women activists.

193. Ibid.

194. Ibid.

195. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-doctor-insight-idUSKCN1T71HS>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/03/sri-lanka-muslims-face-threats-attacks>

196. Ibid.

197. <http://www.adaderana.lk/news/56743/protest-march-against-dr-shafi-creates-traffic-jam-in-kurunegala>

entire scandal to have been manufactured, a criminal conspiracy to persecute a Muslim surgeon and taint his family with links to terrorist groups in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday bombings. Evidence surfaced that proved that some of the women had been offered money to lodge complaints against Dr. Shafi. At least one of the female complainants was found to have been three months pregnant when she claimed Dr. Shafi had sterilized her without her permission. She has subsequently given birth.¹⁹⁸

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in July 2019 informed the Kurunegala Magistrate's Court that the investigation carried out so far had not proven that Dr. Shafi had blocked the fallopian tubes of mothers, amassed wealth in an illegal manner, or maintained links with a terrorist organisation. Later, the Court of Appeal ordered the Ministry of Health to pay his salary arrears and reinstate him. Dr. Shafi returned the money to the Ministry to buy essential medicines.¹⁹⁹

Karuna, one of our interviewees, has a child, who was four at that time, who was born with congenital disabilities. As the noise around Dr. Shafi grew with the heavy involvement of other professionals and Buddhist monks such as Rathana Thero, she thought that maybe he did something to her as no one else could explain to her how a healthy baby became like this after being born. The more women she had met the more she got convinced. Even in the regular clinic at the hospital for her son, she had met many other Sinhala Buddhist women with male children born like her son. They all started reaffirming each other's opinions that male Sinhala Buddhist children were being medically affected by Dr. Shafi. Her grief about her son got channelled into this mass mobilization and frenzy around Dr. Shafi. As a result, she and her husband went for all the meetings that were called at that time and later even filed a police complaint.

Women like Karuna, who is a teacher, easily believed and followed monks such as Rathana Thero and other local monks whom she knew and trusted. She also took as fact the words of Sinhala Buddhist doctors, such as the director of the Kurunegala Hospital who was making these allegations. One of her own family members, a local government council member also affirmed these false facts and resultant hatred. A year later, when it emerged that Dr. Shafi was not at fault, she felt that her emotions were used for a political agenda. No one, at the end of the day, cared about her hardships or her son's life anymore. She wasn't going to get answers to her medical questions which is what she actually sought by blaming of Dr. Shafi.

The attack on Dr. Shafi and the other attacks on the Muslim community epitomized the impact of the Easter attacks on the Muslims of Kurunegala. Their socio-economic place in Kurunegala society was shaken up, disrupted, and destroyed through violent means. These means were employed by neighbours upon those they have lived among for generations. The discourse that accompanied these attacks are largely gendered where the anxieties with regards to protecting one's community from the "other" is written on to women's bodies in rather literal terms.

198. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/gmoa-does-stunning-u-turn-on-kurunegala-hospital-director-weerabandara-who-led-persecution-against-dr-shafi/>

199. http://www.colombopage.com/archive_22A/Jun13_1655133834CH.php

Muslim women negotiating public space – within the labour force, culture, religion and marriage

As discussed earlier, Muslim women have always had to fight the uphill battle of ensuring a space for themselves, be it in the home, within their natal or marital families, in the workforce etc. This process got further complicated by the threat to the Muslim community from others.

Minna's mother went to the Middle East in 1982, her older sister dropped out of school to look after her siblings. Minna became a teacher. Minna was married into a family that lived by Thowheed principles of a much more conservative Islam than the one she was brought up with.

I never wore an abaya before marriage. I trained in beauty culture. My husband is a Maulavi and worked in a jewellery shop. After marriage my husband insisted that I cover. He also stopped me from working after my first child was born. The Sunni Thowheed are simple. They don't have big weddings. Women wear only black. They don't wear gold jewellery. So parents are happy to give their daughter in marriage to such families as they are religious and simple. As a result, we (Muslim women married into such families) live under two laws, the law of the country and the law that governs us according to our culture and religion. Either way, women cannot question the men.

Women's mobility was severely restricted in these families. Minna expresses this as follows:

Gethara avoth vitharai mahaththaya (He is your husband only when he is at home). Women can't ask where they go, what they did outside. I don't go outside even if a beggar comes, I send my son.

Women like Minna also find ways to make sense of and justify the practices that are being imposed upon them. She states, "Black is best because everyone can wear it. Everyone cannot afford the different colours."

Minna is of a generation that still remembers the coexistence of different forms of Islam. She remembers Sufis coming from house to house and singing when she was small. Singing is banned by more conservative renditions of Islam like the one practised in her husband's family. She noted that she doesn't see the singing Sufis anymore.

She observes the difference between her life and that of other women in her own community. Based on these differences she has made some decisions that emerge from her own current situation. She says,

My best friend's (who is Muslim) daughters who are 18 and 19 are now going to salons and wearing makeup and dressing differently. We are not allowed to show our feet, we have to cover our hair. But these girls are learning beauty culture. They don't even wear a shawl. I don't talk to my best friend anymore.²⁰⁰

200. Interview with older Muslim woman in her fifties.

Nushra, also a younger Muslims woman in Kurunegala hails from the same village as Abdul Cader Fathima Hadiya, who was married to Zaharan Hashim at the age of 14. Nushra said that Fathima Hadiya's family was part of the Thowheed Jamaat.

Nushra's family, on the contrary, was one of artists. Her father and brothers played music and sang. Her grandmother recited the Qaseedha (religious verse). She used to sing and play the violin too. She participated in the singing competitions on TV such as Sirasa Superstar and Derana Dream Star. She has a lot of friends online. Nushra rides a bike. She worked at the presidential secretariat for one year. After her marriage, her husband, also from a family similar to Minna's husband's, asked her to stop all of this. She tried to sing without him knowing but he found out and has now asked her to stop all of it. She lives on a three-acre piece of land and so she sings and plays the violin at home because no one can hear her. She is teaching her daughter music. After marriage she started wearing a black abaya, as she declared, "to not have attraction." She said that since the Easter attacks, there was a lot of harassment of Muslim women, even in the hospital. Even though she was very active on social media, after the Easter bombings she stopped responding to social media posts.²⁰¹

As is clear from Minna and Nushra's life, Muslim women are subject to intense control in their homes, especially from newer, more conservative iterations of Islam that have influenced younger generations of men and their families in Sri Lanka. In order to negotiate this reality, these young women engage in emotional and physical manoeuvres to retain their sense of self and autonomy in any way possible. In many instances this also involves finding ways to agree with the controls placed upon them and realign their social relationships accordingly as well. At other times it involves finding ways to flout these rules while trying to remain physically and emotionally safe. Nushra's daughter's relationship to music that Nushra is actively cultivating, then becomes our realm of hope for the future.

201. Interview with young Muslim woman in her twenties.

Sinhala women's perspectives within the broader discourses of hate

Just as Muslim women evolve a relationship with and negotiate the controls placed upon their personhood, so do the Sinhala women in Kurunegala. The following narrative will clarify further why it was possible for Karuna to easily believe that Dr. Shafi must have done something to her or her child. While carrying out the FGD with Sinhala women, upon being asked what they thought was extremism, they articulated the following thoughts:

Firstly, they recognised that there was international financial support, due to the centrality of oil extraction in the world economy, to spread what they viewed as Muslim extremism (anthavadaya) in Buddhist countries. Arguments that they perceived as being historically grounded were made that many Hindu and Buddhist places in South Asia have become Muslim (or is under the threat of becoming Muslim). They gave the examples of the ancient site of a university set up by the Buddhist King Ashoka – Thakshila – which is now in present-day Bangladesh. They gave the example of Muslims in Myanmar whom they viewed as a threat to that Buddhist nation.

Referring to the Islamic ritual journey of Haj to Mecca, they said:

Ape Budhuhamuduruvange siri patula (the blessed foot of our Lord Buddha) – one is in Makkama (Mecca), one is in Siripada. Why do Muslims go to Makkama? they go to keep their head on ape Buthunvaanse. I don't know where Makkama is. Makkama used to belong to Bharathaya. They have taken over our things. Even Siripada they were trying to Allana, athata ganna giya (take over). They said it was theirs. They worship our Buddha and then go and break our buddha statues. Globally, temples are being built in all countries because of this threat. This is why they are trying to destroy our things. This is extremism.

Secondly, different disconnected events were put together to build the argument that there was a real threat to Sinhala Buddhism and that all Muslims were dangerous. They said,

Many organisations in Muslim communities were responsible for conflict and violence. They broke Buddhist statue in Mawanella,²⁰² they were responsible for the conflict in Digana,²⁰³ then they attacked churches, and hotels. All these actions were by Muslim anthavaadi (extremists)...In Kurunegala about 3,000 swords were found. Why? Thanakola kappana genava kiwwuwa?" (The (Muslims) said they had swords to cut grass!)

202. Adding to the terrorism discourse following the Easter attacks, in 2021, 17 men were indicted under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for destruction of a Buddha statue in Mawanella in 2018. <https://www.newswire.lk/2021/04/20/indictments-filed-against-17-over-destruction-of-buddha-statues-in-mawanella/>

203. The Bodu Bala Sena was powerfully active in Kandy since 2013, agitating against Muslims. In the Digana Teldeniya area the Mahason Balakaya (Mahason means deamon of Sinhala mythology, Balakaya is force) was very active prior to the riots in 2018 (Fact-finding Report on the Anti-Muslim Violence in the Kandy District March 2018, Law and Society Trust, Colombo). At least two people were killed, mosques and shops attacked by mobs in Digana in March 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/07/sri-lanka-blocks-social-media-as-deadly-violence-continues-buddhist-temple-anti-muslim-riots-kandy>.

Thirdly, particular characteristics were attributed to Muslim communities, particularly Muslim men. When accidents happen – the whole village of Muslims come together and become really angry. They support the Muslims. I met with an accident and they were really threatening me, they didn't even consider that I was a woman! But if an accident happens in a Sinhala area people are neutral and try to find out what happened and who is at fault.

The position of Muslim women was understood as follows:

Muslim women don't have a sadness in their lives. They have food and they are wealthy and comfortable. They can't leave the house, that's all. They are not poor and suffering. Anyway, there is a change in Muslim women in recent times in Kurunegala. They are more educated; many are studying in international schools. Many ride scooter bikes and are also working. Now they don't want to cover also, they want to look like us!

The above narratives make it clear that conditions of socio-economic duress are read on to the manufactured hatred for Muslim, some of whom are well off. This in turn paves the way for having to evolve a cultural argument for islamophobia, which is found in the imagined threat to Sinhala Buddhist culture from an international, well-endowed Muslim community.

Gendered experiences of women and social control

The views expressed above take on a whole new magnitude when we observe how they play out within state and social spaces in everyday life. They often feed into community-level monitoring, surveillance, and social control. The local Civil Protection Committee, a community-based structure created during the war to enable surveillance, the Police and the CID worked together as instruments of surveillance and interrogation of a woman from Kattankudi who lived in Kurunegala. Her being from the same town as the Easter Sunday attackers immediately made her suspect. Along with this was the social pressure and control of Niluka, a Sinhala woman, who was ostracized by her own community for bringing a Muslim woman into the village.

In February a Muslim woman Rehana, came to our village. Her Sinhala friend Niluka who she met in the Middle East had helped her come to our village. She had married an American man while she was working in the Middle East. She was from Kattankudi. People had called 119 and we also went as the civil protection committee. We asked her why she came here and that she should register with the Grama Sevaka. We then wrote to the Kattankudi GS to verify her identity. The Kattankudi GS sent the letter in Tamil and we had no way to get it translated. She was getting things from abroad from her husband. She was also buying things for the children in the village like bicycles and books. Then the CID took her away. If anyone visited her, the police came. Now her husband has joined her and they are living together. She has bought land also. No one now talks with Niluka because she had brought a Muslim to our village. People don't even visit her for the New Year.²⁰⁴

204. Focus Group Discussion with Sinhala Buddhist women social activists.

Thus, the space for friendships and support across communities has not just shrunk but is also mostly non-existent. If such choices of relationships are made by a woman, then she is subject to intense control and ostracization, primarily from her own community.

Discourses around women's bodies and sexuality as part of conjuring inter-ethnic division and hatred

However, the fears about Muslims soon turn towards sexualized hate. This includes²⁰⁵

Fears about conversions of Sinhala women to Islam

"In a village close by, 180 Sinhala women have married Muslims and converted."

Fears of the abaya and what is "hidden" under it.

"Thopi mehema vahagena yanawa." (you hide/close yourself like this and move around).

Fears about sterilization pills in food from Muslim shops.

"In a food shop, how we are served and how Muslims are served, are different."

"If a friend sends food, I eat, but I don't eat in Muslim shops – it's not only fear but it's also kalakireema (being fed up). Why are they doing this? Why do they think like this?"

"My son eats at Mafas. He doesn't follow any of this. They think all these stories about the food in Vanthapeithi is full of lies. But there is a fear that this group will come again. Even in the media, this fear is kept alive, even the Cardinal expresses these fears. Because there is so much international support for groups like Zaharan. Our children might face a huge impact from these people in the future."

"As their population increases and increases, there are only a few Sinhala children, so what will happen to our children in the future? We study, go to university, find work, buy some land, build a house, buy a car and then have babies. So then, we have only one or two children. But they marry young and have many children early. So there is a fear that they will take over the country (*rata allagena, yatath kara gani*) Like in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Even in other countries they are in power. Once they take power in the future what will happen to our children?"

205. Ibid.

Fears of sterilization pills in underwear

“Bras and panties. An akka I know found hoonu bittara (gheko eggs), in the cup of her bra when she washed it. She was pregnant she has a child who was breast feeding. Its not a lie. After that I don't go to No Limit. Muslim women don't buy those bras. Also, the scooter seats we sit on it, the bike service place said don't put those seats because Muslims brought it. We don't know if they put some chemical in those seats for sterilization.”

Women's modes of internalising discourses listed above

The Sinhala women didn't see themselves as having extremist views. They explained these views as coming from fear. Another justification for these views was that it was coming from Jaathialaya – love for one's own race – and the strong belief that the Sinhala race was the majority and therefore their racist views expressed as fears, about other communities, were legitimate.

Women articulated ideas of the role of religion in a modern liberal nation state and society, within the bounds of the assumed majority and dominance of Sinhala Buddhist identity. They justified the enforced burials during the pandemic through this. One young Sinhala woman said,

Everyone knows that this is a Sinhala Buddhist country. Everyone respects that. We have to respect **other** cultures also. But we all have to follow the law and health guidelines. Even Catholics bury, I am a Catholic. We shouldn't give special exception to Muslims.

Simultaneously, there was a recognition of how these views and feelings are spread through Buddhist monks who are politically active and are working closely with politicians. Dharmasinghe (2022) exposes in detail how the monk-led groups/organizations, as well as certain lay groups/organizations that are numerically small such as the Sinhala Urumaya, Jathika Hela Urumaya, Bodu Bala Sena, Sihala Ravaya, Ravana Balakaya, Mahason Balakaya and Nava Sinhale have gained power in political and governance structures through electoral politics. He further notes that the monks' leadership of all the organizations can be traced to one common root, the Jathika Hela Urumaya, the first political party in Sri Lankan political history that enabled nine monks to enter Parliament in 2014.

Sinhala women in the FGD strongly felt that Zaharan's wife was *anthavadhi* (extremist):

Muslim kattiyage heti. (Muslims are like that) – what the husband says they don't question. We would have divorced if we didn't agree with what he was doing. Muslim women are not working, they don't have an income. They have food and comforts but cannot question the men. Also, they got so much money. Zaharan included his wife in all his planning. He put in place a future plan for several years to supports all his family members. This is anthavaadhaya extremism.

According to them, the LTTE was also anthavaathi. With some distance and the passing of time, and more importantly with having spaces to meet and listen to women in the North and East, the Sinhala Buddhist women had a complicated analysis of those who were part of the LTTE. They recognized that many people in the North and East had lost loved ones and property because of a few leaders who they identified as anthavaadhi. They recognized that many who were forced into these movements were therefore innocent. They explained that the boy who put medicine on the Tamil fighters injured during the fighting were not anthavaadhi.

According to some of the women, anthavaadhi meant listening only to what is said as religion as stated by the mosque. When you don't do your own research, find out what other religions are saying and don't question the palliya – the mosque – it is extremism. However, they didn't see themselves as anthavaadhi even though they too sought direction from what they perceived were religious principles and followed what the temple/monks state without question.

When the women were speaking there was an easy moving between the terms Koti²⁰⁶ – a Sinhala slang word meaning tiger that refers to the LTTE and other Tamil militants and Zaharan. They said – “Koti genalla themma” (the tigers were brought here) or “Koti gahanne kohitada” (where are the tigers going to attack?). The old fears and prejudices against the Tamils were stoked and connected with the fears against the Muslims.

Community-level responses to the violence

In Hammaliya, the Masjeethu Thakwa was attacked in May following the Easter attacks. This was called the Podi Palliya. More than 100 men had come on motor bikes and attacked the mosque but by the time the police came they had gone. The Podi Palliya used to provide free access to water to all the homes including Sinhala homes. Now this has stopped. The mob also set fire to the house of a Muslim family. Neela Akka's son and friends put the fire out. Neela Akka kept three Muslim families in her home for many days.²⁰⁷

Feminist organisations such as Women's Resource Centre (WRC) organised women in Bandaranayakapura and Malkaduwwa villages across diverse ethnic communities (Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala). Together they formed women's vigilance committees. Women leaders were trained on how to respond if violence arose in their communities. The WRC also had consultations with Muslim women and prepared a report on their gendered experiences in the aftermath of the Easter Attacks. One of the most important concerns that emerged in this report was language-based discrimination, particularly in accessing health services and in public health notifications in the COVID 19 context. Muslim women shared that they experienced difficulties and harassment in hospitals, government offices and by Public Health Inspectors during the pandemic as all government communication was in Sinhala making it inaccessible to them thus exposing them to harassment. This report led to a petition with 500 signatures which was handed over to the Governor of the Wayamba Province and other relevant state officials .

206. Koti (tiger) the derogatory slang used for Tamil militants of the LTTE.

207. Interview with Neela Akka Sinhala Buddhist woman in her seventies.

Women who were part of civil protection committees also mobilized in some villages to respond to possible threats of violence. One such member of a committee, a Sinhala person said, “We heard that there was going to be attacks. Muslims were also worried that their houses will be attacked again like in the 1970s. However, we were organized as civil protection committees and managed to diffuse the tensions.” She further informed us that “since the Digana incident (of attacks on Muslims) we have done several actions to build reconciliation. For example, the *thorana* (religious pandol) at the local temple was painted by young Muslim men. Women came into the temple wearing shawls in one *sanhinthiyawa* (reconciliation) programme. That day, all the food was made by Muslim women. Boys play volleyball together so that there are opportunities to meet.”²⁰⁸

In some areas, local politicians visited mosques in the local areas along with Buddhist monks to ask if there were any issues. Locally, religious leaders, local politicians and the police were vigilant to avoid violence.²⁰⁹

As one woman who was a military war widow remarked, “We also changed because we started travelling to the North and East and Puttalam after the war ended. We sat and listened to those women who shared their pain. These interactions really moved us. This helped us to focus on humanity and equality and respond during this crisis time as well.”²¹⁰

In terms of understanding these experiences from the standpoint of women’s lives the words of a Sinhala Buddhist feminist activist who was interviewed for this research become extremely important.

Fundamentalists have a constructed ideology that they follow. Radicals are changing and challenging hegemonic ideologies. However, in all these movements there is a *jathivadaya* (racism) and strong patriarchal elements. You never see a woman leader in these movements. Radical politics also protects patriarchy.

208. Focus Group Discussion Sinhala Buddhist Women social activists.

209. Ibid.

210. Ibid.

Kurunegala Case Study Conclusion: “Alu Ata Gini”²¹¹ (burning embers)

The Kurunegala case study illustrates the ways in which the state has empowered structures of discrimination and everyday violence against Muslim communities, particularly women. In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, many mosques, shops, and homes of Muslim communities were attacked by organized mobs that were instigated and supported by political actors. Sinhala women were told resolutely that the Sri Lankan state is Sinhala Buddhist. This discourse encouraged a love for the Sinhala race and the strong belief that it is superior to the Tamil and Muslim race (*jathiya*). Within this overarching context, the otherwise numerically small monk-led organisations in Kurunegala have gained credibility and political power. Most worryingly, such power has been garnered through democratic political processes.

Sinhala women expressed fear about attacks to the Sinhala Buddhist population which were highly sexualized – including *vanda pethi* (drugs to cause infertility) in food or tablets in underwear. The most tragic example of this was the women who came forward to make complaints against Dr. Shafi. In this case there was systemic complicity and deliberate actions by the health sector, police, and other law enforcement officials as well as the media. Together they manufactured “truth,” based entirely on false claims targeting doctor Shafi. For one of the Sinhala Buddhist women who made a complaint, the aligning of state systems, health professionals, the police and other agents of the law, whom she perceived as legitimate and “neutral,” along with powerful Buddhist monks and mainstream media, spouting these falsities about the doctor, made it easy for her to believe and go along with the relentless attack on Dr. Shafi. Simultaneously, the standpoint of a sex worker exposes everyday sexual violence from men in her own Sinhala community while identifying class and not ethnicity as the defining structure that mediated her experiences of violence as well as access to justice and dignity.

The impact of militarization in their everyday lives also became clear as they interchangeably spoke of *koti* (“tigers” – the derogatory slang used for LTTE militants) and Zaharan when describing their fears of attacks.

Both the Muslim and Tamil minority communities in Kurunegala have lived with a history of marginalization and communal violence, including numerous brutal gang rapes during anti-Tamil riots in 1977. However, there has also been a history of syncretic religious practices such as the worship of Galebandara Deiyyo. The impact of the war was felt both in terms of large numbers of men joining the military, as well as large populations of displaced Muslims from the North settling in Kurunegala.

Women’s everyday negotiations and interactions are strongly influenced by the ethnic segregation of state administrative structures and the religious segregation of schools. Additionally, young Muslim women have been negotiating access to education, work, and mobility in the context of

211. A phrase used by the Sinhala Buddhist women to describe Kurunegala in the Focus Group Discussion.

the growing influence of global conservative Islamic ideologies in their families and home spaces, along with institutionalized racism in accessing state services.

Young Sinhala women spoke of the importance of having friends from other communities, particularly through school systems that allowed for diversity of religious identities and ethnic identities. Community women's groups have continued to create spaces for collective trust building and other forms of collective action. This has taken the form of identifying common issues for women, such as exploitative migrant work and domestic violence about which they can work together. The rich history of rural mobilizing, class-based struggles and the existence of spaces of resistance to state violence gives a strong foundation for women to continue to resist structural violence and discrimination.

In conclusion, Kurunegala paints a picture simultaneously of seemingly unsurmountable segregation, division, difference and hatred between communities, along with efforts at coexistence or tolerance at least among women and in some instances, the labouring classes, to work together on common issues.

CONCLUSION

The Sri Lanka study explores how women experienced and navigated the forces of violent extremism in their lives in relation to the structures of marriage, family, community, and nation. Having delved deeper into three regions in Sri Lanka, a few broad conclusions can be discerned from the above narrative.

This study places women's everyday experiences within broader processes of state formation in Sri Lanka. Since independence, deliberate actions were taken to ensure that Sri Lanka became a Sinhala Buddhist nation, including giving this religion the foremost place in the constitution. Tamil minority communities faced discrimination in language rights and Plantation Tamils lost citizenship rights and went through several processes of repatriation. In this context, the gradually evolving imagination of Tamil nationalism (focused on the Tamil language and cultural consciousness) gained momentum and became demands for self-determination. This Tamil nation had no place for Tamil-speaking Muslims as it became clear in the forced eviction of Muslims by the LTTE from the north in 1990 and the Muslim-Tamil tensions that have continued since. This paper highlights the feminist scholarship that has explored the gendered impacts of this Tamil nationalism. It is within these broader political processes that we place Hameetha Umma's everyday life. She lived her life with the impact of losing her father who was of Indian origin, as he was forcibly repatriated back to India under the Sirima-Shastri pact.

Several laws that deliberately target minority ethnic and religious communities including the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act and other laws with regard to land, were used to alienate minority communities from their lands. In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, emergency regulations were passed directly affecting Muslim women who wore the niqab, as these laws prohibited clothing that concealed the full face. In the post-COVID-19 context, regulations that forced the cremations of loved ones, again impacted the religious rights of Muslim communities. All of these laws contribute to punitive and discriminatory measures against minorities both in terms of direct legal action as well as using the law to affirm the existing climate of hatred.

The three case studies highlighted the realities of spatial, administrative, and educational segregation based on religion and ethnicity. These structural factors have had an impact on the everyday lives of women and girls in profound ways.

In each location, we documented histories of violence by different actors including militant political movements, state-sanctioned mob violence and riots particularly against the minority Muslim and Tamil communities. In terms of the public political sphere, we documented state inaction when violence happened, including, for example, when the Ahmadiyya refugees were targeted in Negombo. Also, community members shared experiences where young Muslim men were asked to report to the police station every day as all Muslims were treated as suspect by state and society after the Easter attacks. In Kurunegala and Negombo there was involvement of monk-led political groups, including monks who were members of parliament, espousing hate speech propagating attacks

on Muslim businesses. Muslim men such as Dr. Shafi were targeted individually destroying his long-standing contribution to his community – both Sinhala and Muslim – and making it impossible for him and his family to live in their own home. Community structures such as civil defence committees, where some of the women interviewed were also active members, continued to play complicated roles. They are gate-keepers and the surveillance mechanism of the state who also execute militarized responses on behalf of the state. At other times, these same structures stepped in to prevent violence and initiate proactive measures to build trust within the communities.

These incidents are placed within the broader political economic changes that took place in each site, including struggles for power and control of markets and businesses, increasing populations of internally-displaced people and mass-scale labour migration to West Asia. This study also documents class-based experiences of many poor working-class people such as one Sinhala Catholic woman who lost her home in Negombo due to coastal erosion caused by the Port City in Colombo. She then channelled her anger about this into fear and hatred of the Muslim community in her neighbourhood.

For young women, educational spaces, including schools, tuition classes, and school-based online forums became where they directly experienced racism and discrimination. In the Batticaloa case study of Rihana, and with the teacher at the Sri Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College in Trincomalee, the school administration, teachers, parents, local Tamil media and Tamil politicians collectively mobilized to define and protect the “purity” of their ethnic identity and to stop the “polluting” of this identity through conversion or even exposure to the “other” religion, in this case, Islam.

Online spaces also were identified as forums where religious ideologies were shared, sometimes within family groups, and sometimes within large religious online services. This was particularly true in terms of some Christian evangelical movements. These spaces were predominantly populated by women. In the Batticaloa case study, we documented the racist comments within Tamil social media sites against Muslims, following the story of Rihana’s religious conversion coming into the news.

In the continuum of patriarchal controls, bodies and sexuality of all persons become an important site upon which power and violence are enacted. Muslim women negotiated controls upon their bodies and lives in complicated ways to ensure education, employment, mobility and relative freedom. One Malay Muslim woman described how her relatives were “western-type” in Colombo, her mother wore sari and she wore the abaya. However, she travelled, was educated, and earned an income with her “abaya and her umbrella as her weapons.” Thus, women exist in the interstices of these multiple layers of control and their negotiation of the same is far from simple. Young Muslim women have been negotiating access to education, work, and mobility in contexts where influences of global Islamic reformist ideologies had placed constraints on their choices. These ideologies and constraints were often practiced in the private realm in their families and home spaces. At the same time Muslim women had to engage in fraught negotiations in accessing public spaces of education, work and mobility due to institutionalized racism.

For all the women interviewed, their primary site of struggle was within the family and the institution of marriage. For Rihana, it was her struggle to choose her religious beliefs. For a Catholic Sinhala woman in Negombo, it was to choose not to marry. In Kurunegala, it was a young Muslim woman's struggle to sing and play music in public. For another Sinhala Buddhist woman, her attempt to be safe from sexual violence in the home was her fundamental negotiation. In the story of Rihana, her choice of converting to Islam was seen as dishonouring her family and the whole Tamil community. There were built up fears about Tamil women converting and marrying Muslims in the community she grew up in through hearsay and on social media. The only way that honour could be restored was when she was "returned" to her family with the involvement of the police and religious leaders who were men from both communities. These negotiations within the family and institution of marriage exist in a continuum and occur at an individual level while being amplified and affirmed by the collective. All these practices are snugly housed within a system that declares what a religion, community, identity etc. MUST entail and anything that goes beyond these norms is declared to be non-belonging.

Sinhala women, while they did not perceive themselves as having extremist views, expressed fear about sexualized attacks on the Sinhala Buddhist population – including by the inclusion of *vanda pethi* (infertility drugs) in food and through pills placed in underwear. The most tragic example of this was the women who came forward to make complaints against Dr. Shafi. In this case, there was systemic complicity and deliberate actions from the health sector, police, and law enforcement, as well as the media that came together to create a false truth targeting Dr. Shafi. For one of the Sinhala Buddhist women who made a complaint, the aligning of state systems that she perceived as "neutral", health professionals, the police, other agents of the law, powerful Buddhist monks and mainstream media, made it easy to believe and go along with the relentless attack on Dr. Shafi. The relationship between longstanding deep seated racism in the Sinhala community against Muslims and this consolidated propagation of racism by structures of power are intertwined with one another.

As the reflections of Vijaya from Batticaloa illustrate, she continued to negotiate patriarchal control and violence in her home, within the LTTE which she joined as a child soldier, and when she returned home and married an abusive man for her "security". Her body was constantly at risk of violence and abuse, by her father, by the military if she was caught and in her marriage that was to ensure her "security" and yet she faces daily violence by her husband. For the Sinhala Buddhist women in Kurunegala, some of whom were military widows, the LTTE and by extension, Vijaya, would be an "extremist," as she is part of what they see as an 'extremist movement'. However, Vijaya spoke of her membership in the LTTE with pride. The movement gave her a sense of identity and meaning in a life that was otherwise one where she held barely any agency. At the same time, she also has a critique of hierarchies within the movement among fellow militants based on class, region and gender. These multiple truths exist within her along with myriad complicated emotions. The rendition of her as a violent extremist leaves no room for such complexity. Interestingly, if space for such complexity was made possible, perhaps the Sinhala women who saw her as an 'extremist' may even observe some similarities between the complexities in their own lives and that of hers.

Women who were part of Zaharan's group found space and meaning for social action. Women's rights were articulated within the framework of the family. Dowry practices were prohibited and women who were part of his group stopped wearing ostentatious gold jewellery completely. Women were permitted to work in spaces where there were no men. Opportunities for Islamic education were made available for women. Through the institution of marriage, women and girls from extremely poor families were 'taken care of' and 'given protection'. Sinhala Buddhist women in Kurunegala, had mixed views about Zaharan's wife, who was from a village in Kurunegala. Some felt she was "extremist" as she knew all his plans and benefited from his wealth. Others felt, based on stereotypical generalization about Muslim society that, as she was within a Muslim marriage, she could not question her husband. We do not know the truth of Zahran's wife. But from what we are able to glean from this research, her reality – both her private realm and her political ideas – like the women we spoke to and heard of in Kattankudi, would have been more complicated.

Some of the women interviewed have engaged with the discourse around violent extremism and have tried to critically explore its meanings in gendered terms. According to Kamina, extremism can be observed by looking at how a particular community (ethnicity or religion) treats those who question the norms of their own society and/or chose to live outside of such norms. Often these norms are gendered and are to do with control of sexuality and is tied to the honour of the family and the community. She gave specific examples such as how a particular community responds to those who are from the LGBTQI community; or those who are non-believers; or to women who challenge social norms. A Sinhala Buddhist feminist activist reflected that fundamentalists have a constructed ideology that they follow. Meanwhile radicals, according to her, are changing and challenging hegemonic ideologies. However, in all these movements there is *jathivadaya* (racism) and strong patriarchal elements. She said, "you never see a woman leader in these movements. Radical politics also protect patriarchy."

In Kurunegala, in their everyday interactions, young Sinhala women spoke of the importance of having friends from other communities, particularly through school systems that allowed for a diversity of religious identities and ethnic identities. Community women's groups have continued to create spaces for collective trust- building and collective action. This has taken the form of identifying common issues for women, such as exploitative migrant work to work together on. The rich history of rural mobilizing, class-based struggles and the existence of spaces of resistance to state violence gives a strong foundation for women to continue to resist structural violence and discrimination.

The online space is an important one for women's expression. Young women were part of many social groups on WhatsApp and Facebook. In the aftermath of the Easter attacks, these spaces became hostile with friends and teachers posting and sharing hate speech. However, fantasy spaces of cosplay, anime and gaming provided freedom for expression and interactions for young women of a particular socio-economic class, even as they negotiated the patriarchal control of mobility and work options IRL (In Real Life).

The case studies documented histories of women's activism in the local settings. This included long-standing housing rights struggles in Negombo, farmers' struggles in Kurunegala, as well as women's rights movements and peace-building efforts in extremely divided and contested terrains. Neela Akka protected Muslim families in her neighbourhood, in her house, when the mosque in her village was attacked in the post-Easter attacks violence. The TMS group in Batticaloa continues to promote coexistence and nonviolence in Batticaloa. These small but significant spaces play a crucial role in shifting the public political discourses away from "violent extremism" towards a discourse of solidarity, justice, and rights. "Yesterday, today, tomorrow, we stand for humanity" a slogan written by a Catholic Sinhala woman activist was the overarching framing for some of the big public actions in Negombo in the aftermath of the Easter attacks.

Overall, a picture emerges of myriad ways in which ethnic/religious difference exists in a hardened way in different parts of Sri Lanka. These differences are strongly reaffirmed by structures such as administration and education that are segregated rather than being used as a means to build coexistence. The expression of these differences is often written upon the bodies of women, both by those within their own communities and by those of the "other." Simultaneously, all these sites have a history of hybridity, syncretism, or at least mutual coexistence. It is possible to trace the different processes within and beyond each community that has manufactured the discourse as well as current experiences of seemingly irreconcilable differences and resultant conflict that is viewed as inevitable. Women are consumers of this manufactured truth as it emerges from legitimate voices within state and society.

Thankfully, there are also histories of community-level mobilization for truth-telling, prevention of violence, peace-keeping, and enabling societies of coexistence. Women have been an integral part of this as those affiliated to religious organisations, teachers, social activists, or just individual young people who wish for a stable and peaceful life.

These parallel processes of division/conflict and peace-building/coexistence are all housed within a context of consistently increasing economic and political duress that affects all working poor across ethnicity/religions – differently but equally. Situations of war and conflict further exacerbate these economic stresses. Holding all these factors together are the multifaceted experiences of women's everyday lives.

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