THE MUSLIM MINORITY OF SRI LANKA : A STUDY OF THEIR ASSERTION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

*Dissertation Submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
award of the degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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INDIA
1996

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July 19 ,1996

CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled "THE MUSLIM MINORITY OF SRI LANKA: A STUDY OF THEIR ASSERTION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY" submitted by **Ms Zarin Ahmad** in partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy   has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university. This is her own work.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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PREFACE

In the multi-ethnic Sri Lankan society. Muslims form the third largest ethnic group (7.4 per cent). Unlike the Sinhalese (74 per cent) and the Sri Lankan Tamils (12.6 per cent) who are considered as indigenous people of the country. the origin of the Muslims is relatively a recent phenomenon in the island. The Muslims are a vulnerable community which has experienced pulls and pressures both from the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils. Their vulnerability has increased their desire to assert their identity as a separate ethnic group. In the process, they have gained greater importance in the society as well as the political processes in Sri Lanka.

The question that emerges here is why the Muslims minority has begun to assest its identity.

In this context certain specific objectives of the study are to:

1. analyse the internal divisions in the Muslim community by identifying the factors which contribute to such a division.

2. examine the steps undertaken by the Muslim political and religious elites to forge and stablise the Muslim identity.

3. highlight the impact of the intense ethnic conflict between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhalese on the ethnic consciousness of the Muslims and assertion of their distinct identity.

4. analyse the ways in which the Muslims seek to express and assert their distinct identity, and

5.   identify how far the Muslim identity has evolved to become stable.

Absence of a full length study on the Muslim identity assertion provided the impetus to this work. The community's historical antecedents in the island are dealt with in some of the studies (Lorna Dewaraja. 1990; Arasaratnam. 1964; Kamil Asad. 1993. Vasundhara Mohan. 1985; K.M. De Silva. 1973 and 1977; and Robert N. Kearney. 1967). Mahroofand Azeez (1986) have studied the 'ethnology' of the community. Hasbullah (1991) has analysed the dynamics of Muslim politics with reference to Indo-Lanka Accord. Islmaic laws in Sri Lanka have been studied by Mahroof (1995) and Jameel (1992). Samarasinghe and Davood (1984) have done an indepth analysis of the Muslims as a business community in transition. Qadri Ismail (1987) has dealt with the causes and consequences of the Tamil-Muslim riots of 1983. A study of the Malays has been undertaken by Mahroof (1990). An analysis of land settlement and its impact on Muslims has been done by S.A.M. Azhar Ahamed (1990). A.M.M. Shahabdeen (1990) has dealt with the Islamic revivalism in the international perspective and its impact on Sri Lankan Muslim community. The political profile of the Muslims in Sri Lanka has been dealt with by Phadnis (1979) and Shanta Henanayake (1995). Henanayake highlights the Muslims' political behaviour and affiliation in the context of electoral dynamics of the island. where two mainstream Sinhalese parties compete for power. The ethnic revivalism of the Muslims in terms of seeking a strong Islamic identity has been analysed by Ameer Ali (1984) K.M. deSilva (1988). and Christian Wagner (1992). Iftikhar H. Malik (1992). Victor C. De Munck

(1994), and Mohan (1987) have studied the pragmatic dilemma of the Muslims in the context of ethnic conflict in the island. The language pragmatism of the community has been analysed by V. Mohan (1979). Aspects like religion. economy and society have been analysed by Mohammed Mauroof (1988). Vasundhara Mohan (1987) has dealt exclusively with the identity crisis of the Muslims in Sri Lanka. Kettani (1987) has studied the role of Muslims as a religious minority in Sri Lanka. Qadri Ismail (1995) has undertaken an `identitarian discourse' of Lanka's Muslim minority. However, there is no full length study conducted on the Muslims' efforts to assert their identity as a separate ethnic group. The proposed study would try to fill the gap in the literature by analysing the causes behind the ethnic identity assertion of the Muslims and to the extent to which it has been stabilized.

The study puts forward three hypotheses:

1. Intense ethnic conflict between two groups makes other groups realize and assert their identity.

2. Islam has been the single most important factor in bringing about an ethnic identity and cohesion among the Muslims.

3. The greater the ethnic group's urge for a distinct identity, the stronger is their emphasis on historical, religious, social and linguistic differences vis-a-vis other groups.

The present study is divided into five chapters. While, trying to define the concepts of `ethnicity' and `identity', the first chapter attempts to evolve an analytical framework

on the factors which induce minorities to assert their ethnic identities. and the strategies and mechanism adopted by them in this regard.

The nature of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has been analyzed in the second chapter, by highlighting the historical. geographic. economic and political factors which create a cleavage in the community.

In the third chapter, an attempt has been made to examine the various steps adopted by the Muslim political and religious elites to evolve a strong Muslim identity. This is being done by referring to their attempt to popularise their identity in emphasising identity related symbols like Arabic learning. strict adherence to the `purdah' system, and so on.

The fourth chapter deals with the identity assertion of the Muslims vis-a-vis the Sinhalese and the Tamil identities in the political context. It elucidates their responses to various Tamil demands like linguistic and federal autonomy. fifty-fifty representation and more recently. the demand for the merger of Northern and Eastern provinces; and the peace processes initiatated by various governments to settle the ethnic conflict. A separate Provincial Council demand of the Muslims is analysed against the background of their relations with the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils in the ethnic conflictual framework, and how far this demand reflects the community's desire for its ethnic identity assertion is also examined.

While summing up the discussions, the last chapter examines the extent to which the Muslims have strengthened their identity as a separate ethnic group. It will also try to explore the chances of the emergence of a distinct Muslim nationalism to

compete with the Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms in the island.

As per the objectives of the study, a single-unit explanatory case study design has been adopted. A case-study is a research strategy that investigates contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context: when the boundaries between phenomeon and context are not clearly evident.

Data has been collected from primary a well as secondary sources. The former includes census data, election results and reports of Muslim organizations in Sri Lanka and the latter includes books and research papers on the Muslims of Sri Lanka in particular and the society and polity of Sri Lanka in general. The latter includes published material on the Muslims in particular: and the society and polity of Sri Lanka, in general. The relevant literature on theories of ethnicity and identity formation, and assertion in plural societies has been consulted. These have been tested in the light of empirical evidence. The qualitative method of data analysis has been adopted.

CHAPTER I

IDENTITY FORMATION AND ASSERTION OF MINORITIES: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Group formation in plural societies is a socio-cultural process. Three decades ago, social scientists held the view that continuous interaction between people of different cultures would bring about an end to cultural distinctions and consequently, the groups involved would disappear as an organized social entity. It was felt that mass media, schools, armed forces, religious missions and other socio-political institutions were all working towards this end. The idea even convinced the Marxists. Karl Marx had predicted the extinction of group differences on the premise that people would not continue to be a part of such archaic cultural groupings when they could be a part of the working class.[1] However, the events in the recent past have set a very different trend altogether. Even though certain smaller groups have faded away, a large number of them are strongly affirming themselves. The present era is thus marked by the formation and assertion of group identity.

The term identity is a very complex one involving a number of subjective, objective and behavioural realities. This chapter aims at providing a conceptual clarification of the term identity and its relational constructs.

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[1]   Eugeen E. Roosens, *Creating Ethnicity: The Process of Ethnogenesis*, Frontiers of Anthropology, Vol 5, [California: Sage Publications, 1989], p. 9.

Specifically, the main task in this theoretical exercise is to define identity; analyze how identities are formed; and explore the reasons behind identity formation and assertion. A plausible starting point could be a clarification of terms like 'minority' and 'ethnicity' which are closely related to the formation and assertion of identities in a plural society.

MINORITY

The problem of minorities came to the forefront after the World War I, when a number of new States were carved out of the central European empires and the majority communities found themselves turned into minorities overnight. The Germans in Poland and the Austrians in Czechoslovakia were the cases in hand. By the end of the World War II, the problem had reached Asia and Africa as well. There was a steady decline of monoethnic societies and an alarming increase in the number of minority groups in the world.[2]

It was at this time that scholars all over the world began to take an interest in defining and understanding the concept of minority. The lay person has often taken the term minority in its most literal sense, to mean a numerically small group of people living amidst a larger group. Though the numerical strength of a community is of considerable importance, such a definition of the term 'minority' is far from satisfactory. It suffers from two broad shortcomings. First, groups are not naturally or inevitably differentiated. People of different

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[2] O. Peacock, *Minority Politics in Sri Lanka: A Study of the Burghers*, [Jaipur: Arihant Publishers, 1989], pp. 1-28.

cultures, races, nationalities, regions or languages may live together for generations without actually differentiating themselves. Secondly, numbers may not always be important in defining a minority. Thus, Bantus of South Africa have been considered as a minority even with a population of 80 per cent. They have gained such a status owing to their subordinate position in the society.[3] The minority group is, therefore, not merely any racial, cultural, religious or linguistic group living within a larger society. The term carries with it a web of political and social implications.

In common social science parlance, a minority could be defined as a non-dominant group in society, which may possess and wish to preserve a separate ethnic, religious, cultural or linguistic tradition which is markedly different from the rest of the population. From this definition, certain basic components constituting a minority could be identified. Firstly, a minority is normally subordinate to the dominant group in society. Thus, inspite of their numerical weakness, the white population in South Africa, could not be considered a minority. Secondly, a minority must be a distinct social group. It must have specific rules of membership and prescribed guidelines of cultural behaviour. As such, it would be differentiated from the rest of the population. Thirdly, a minority group normally has relative lacking in terms of power and share in the society's rewards vis-a-vis other groups in society. Its involvement in the working of the institutions of the society is also minimal. Fourthly, a

3   Arnold M. Rose in David L. Sills (ed), *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. 10,MacMillan and Free Press, USA, 1968, pp. 365-70.

minority is not merely distinct from the rest of the population, but it is also considered to be different by the other groups in society. Last, but not the least, every minority community could be characterized on the basis of possession of an attitude of self-identification within the group and a sense of exclusion from other groups. People who form a minority in society find themselves tied up with a common past and future which leads to a sense of cohesiveness and group consciousness among themselves.[4]

It would be interesting to note in this connection that a minority need not be a traditional group with a history of group identification. It can arise as a result of changing economic or political situations which could have a far reaching social significance. Language or religious differences may not be considered important in a society for a long time. But a series of political developments may bring the issue into prominence. The followers of one group who are adversely affected by the change would emerge as a minority group in the changed social situation. The increasing prominence of a certain occupation in a society could also lead to such a situation. The case of the Marwaris in India could be cited as an instance. Till the late eighteenth century, they were one of the occupational castes operating as moneylenders and small merchants. They did not hold any special significance in the Indian

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[4]   Goetz (ed), *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 8, Chicago, 1987, p. 169.

social system. However, with the rise of capitalism in India, they created a niche for themselves and became a much feared, despised and envied minority.[5]

Research on minorities has so far been carried out at two levels: the ethnological and the sociological. The ethnologists normally look at the culture of a specific society. In this case, the society would be a minority group. The group is studied as a geographically separate entity. The customs, institutions and practices in the daily life of the group are studied under this approach. The sociologists, on the other hand, do not consider the specific behavioural and cultural traits of a minority. On the contrary, they concentrate on the relationship between majority and minority groups and how such cultural traits help in shaping the relationship. The relationship is sought to be understood in terms of general processes such as conflict, accommodation and assimilation.

ETHNICITY

Ethnicity is perhaps one of the most common words used in social science parlance in order to explain group formation in a plural society. However, the term is a very complex one involving a plethora of explanations. Before going into the theoretical and historical aspects, it would be pertinent to question the importance and utility of the term ethnicity. According to Glazer and Moynihan, the term ethnicity is increasingly being used to explain group conflict in the contemporary world. The single term has been applied to a

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[5]   Arnold M. Rose , n, 3, p.365.

variety of phenomena such as race relations in the United States, the conflict between the Anglophones and Francophones in Canada, the nationalities issue in the former Soviet Union, the Hindu-Muslim rivalry in India; the conflict between the Fleming and Walloon in Belgium, the status of Indians and 'mestizoes' in Peru, or the issue in South Africa. The question that arises is — how can a single term help in explaining these varied situations which would come under separate heads like racial, national, religious, linguistic or tribal. The explanation that Glazer and Moynihan have provided to explain this question, is based on the premise that ethnicity is a new social category which seeks to explain newer social realities.[6] Despite the fact that each of these issues arises in a distinct social setting with a unique set of demands, there is indeed some common ground in these instances of group assertiveness and conflict. There is no doubt that issue of such a nature did exist in the past. Yet, the sudden intensity increase with which people the world over have begun to express their distinctiveness cannot go unnoticed. Perhaps, these deeply felt human needs have always existed, but only recently they have been stressed by certain social and political developments and thus given rise to new common social circumstances the world over.

Furthermore, it could be pointed out that religious, linguistic, racial or tribal issues have always existed, but it is only in the recent past that 'interest' is pursued effectively by the newly emerging groups. The importance of

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[6] Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (ed), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975], p. 2.

religion, language or culture may not be denied in the present era. But the focus of the conflict has shifted. From an emphasis on culture, language or religion as such, it has shifted to an emphasis on the interests broadly defined by the members of the group. These issues have become a source of mobilization for the promotion of the group interests. However, it would be unfair to assume that the term ethnicity is just another name for procuring erstwhile interests. It involves more than interests. Ethnicity has become such an important concept in understanding social realities in the contemporary world, because it is able to combine interest with an affective tie.[7]

This bring us to the history of the term ethnicity. While the term ethnicity is a recent entrant in the vocabulary of social sciences, its roots go back to time immemorial. The term has been derived from the Greek word 'ethnos', which meant people or nation. It referred to a group, the key elements)f it were unity of a race descent and culture.[8]

In the modern era, the term was first introduced as late as 1953 by David Riesman. Riesman, a conservative sociologist of the time, had introduced the ?rm in the context of McCarthyism in the US academic world. According to .iesman, class antagonisms would be replaced by conflicts of a new kind where

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Ibid., p. 19.

For a detailed account, see Connor Walter, "The Politics of Ethnonationalism", *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol.27, No. 1, 1973, p. 2.-18.

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ethnic and parochial ties would decide the course of events.[9] Within a decade of his pioneering efforts, the United States was rocked by ethnic crisis of a severe nature. The event not only proved his formulations, but more importantly, it set the trend for social scientists to study the new phenomenon: ethnicity and ethnic conflicts.

Despite several studies on the subject of ethnicity, there has been little consensus among scholars. While reading the literature on ethnicity, one is struck by wide ranging conceptions on a single issue. Some view ethnic sentiments as primordial ties binding groups together, while others emphasize the instrumentalist perspective. The primordialists argue that every person carries with him certain attachments derived from place of birth, kinship, religion, language and social practices. These attachments are natural and provide a sound basis for an easy affinity with other people sharing the same background. The primordialist perspective is based on the premise that ethnicity properly defined would be understood and explained by such primordial loyalties and attachments. Some of the major exponents of this school of though are Clifford, Geertz[10], and Milton Gordon.[11] Opposed to this viewpoint is the instrumentalist perspective which has been advocated among others by Paul

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[9]   S.K. Chaube, "Ethnicity and Nationality: A Theoretical Prelude", *Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1986, pp. 18-27.

[10]   For details see Clifford Geentz, *The Interpretation of Culture* [New York: Basic Books, 1963], pp. 225-310.

[11]   For an analysis of Milton Gordon's views, see "Assimilation in America: Theory and Reality", *Daedalus*, Vol. 90, pp. 263-285.

Brass[12] and later Karmela Liebkind.[13] The instrumentalists have criticized the primordialists on the ground that by emphasizing too much on such 'non-rational' attachments, the primordialists tend to ignore reason. The mai contention of the instrumentalists is that ethnic sentiments are creations of interested leaders, of elite groups or of the political system itself. They see th study of ethnicity as the study of politically induced cultural change. It is th process by which elites and counter elites of the groups select certain aspects o the group's culture, attach new value and meaning to them and use them a symbols to mobilize the group. By mobilizing the group on the basis of sucl primordial loyalties, together, they try to defend their own interest and compet with other groups in society.

Other approaches to study ethnicity are those propagated by the the culturalists and situationalists. The cultural approach emphasizes the role of culture in shaping ethnicity.[14] They see ethnicity as essential and permanent The situational approach, advocated by writers like Nelson Kasfir, Crawford Young and Dan Rohen, views ethnicity not as a cause but as a consequence of change in the social and political arena.[15]

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12   For a detailed analysis see Paul Brass, *Ethnic Groups and the State*, [London: Croom Helm, 1985].

13   See Karmela Liebkind (ed), *New Identities in Europe* [Aldershot: Gower, 1989].

14   For a detailed study on the Cultural and Situational approaches see, David Brown, "Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on State and Society", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No.4, October, 1989, pp. 1-17.

15   Ibid., p. 2.

The Marxist perspective gives yet another dimension to the study of ethnicity. Advocates of this school see ethnicity in terms of a 'divide and rule', strategy by the dominant class groups. The dominant groups in society try to preserve or enhance their power by inhibiting the formation of class consciousness amongst the subordinate multi-cultural groups. The formation of such groups could hamper their own 'bourgeois' interests. The dominant class therefore, encourages ethnic formations to preserve its own class interests.[16]

The ethnic competition theory and the ethnic segregation model are off-shoots of their theoretical orientation. According to the ethnic competition theory, political mobilization of ethnic groups takes place when two or more ethnic groups compete in the same economic slot. Competition gets further enhanced when the groups are employed in the same occupation or profession. The ethnic segregation model, on the other hand, maintains that an ethnic group will get mobilized politically when it is segregated into low-status occupation. This would lead to greater solidarity. The Marxists with their emphasis on class differences have, however, predicted the extinction of ethnic groupings when one becomes a 'worker'.[17]

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[16]   For a detailed account on the Marxian Perspective, see C.D. Kering (ed), Marxism, Community, and Western Society—A comparative Encyclopaedia. [New York, 1973].

[17]   For a detailed analysis, see Juan Diez Medrano, "The Effects of Ethnic Segregation and Ethnic Competition on Political Mobilization in the Basque Country (1988), *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2, December, 1994, pp. 873-889.

Apart from these disparate theoretical orientations, different scholars have defined the term 'ethnicity' differently.[18] According to Naroll, an ethnic group consists of four key elements — [i] fundamental cultural values realized and shared in cultural forms; [ii] a field of communication and interaction; [iii] biological self-perpetuation; and [iv] a membership which identifies itself and is identified by others as constituting a distinct category. Milton Gordon with a very primordialist inclination, sees ethnicity as a sense of 'peoplehood' created by common race, religion, national origin, history or a combination of the above.[19] Theodorson and Theodorson have defined an ethnic group as one which enjoys a 'common cultural tradition and a sense of identity of being a sub-group within a larger society".[20]

According to Donald Horowitz, ethnicity is a principle characterized by people sharing institutions and practices and holding an ideology of descent.[21] Anthony D. Smith, on the other hand, calls it 'myth of origins and descent' which, according to him, is an organizing theory that people share. This sets the stage for the formation of 'ethnie'. An 'ethnie', according to him, is: "a named human population with a myth of common ancestry, stored memories

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[18] For a detailed account of the various definitions of ethnicity, see Nimmi Hutnik, *Ethnic Minority Identity* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1991], p. 49.

[19] Milton Godon, n. 11, p. 270.

[20] George, A. Theodorson and Schiller G. Theodorson, *A Modern Dictionary of Sociology*, New York: Thomas Crowell, 1969.

[21] Donald Horowitz, Ethnic Groups in Conflict [Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1985].

ana cultural elements, a link with historic territory or homeland, and a measure of solidarity".[22] Tumin follows a very limited and conventional usage by defining an ethnic group "as a social group which, within a larger social and cultural system, claims or is accorded a special status in terms of a complex of traits which it exhibits or is believed to exhibit".[23]

Any dimension on the definition of ethnicity would be incomplete without a reference to the pioneering work of Glazer and Moynihan.[24] According to them, an ethnic group is not necessarily a sub-group or a minority. They define an ethnic group as "any group of distinct cultural tradition or origin, even if it is the majority ethnic group within a nation the 'Staatvolk'." Thus, they refer to ethnicity as a property shared by acknowledged members of a community, possessing distinctive cultural features including a sense of common ancestry or history and pursuing a set of common interests.

The role of a common culture and ancestory was underplayed by the Fredrik Barth. He has shown the limitations of this approach by emphasizing the importance of 'ethnic boundaries'. Cultural features, according to Barth, may change overtime due to contact and interaction with other groups, yet the sense of separateness or distinctive identity often continues to persist. The case

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[22]   Anthony D. Smith, "The Ethnic Sources of Nationalism", *Survival*, Vol. 35, No.1, Spring 1993, p. 49.

[23]   Melvin Tumin in William L. Kolb and Julius Gorld (ed), *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* [New York: The Free Press Glencoe MacMillan, 1964].

[24]   See Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963 and 1970.

of the United States may be cited in this connection, where ethnic groups have become assimilated, yet retained their sense of identity. He, therefore, suggests that the focus be shifted from cultural factors exemplified by the group, to the process of persistence and maintenance of ethnic boundaries and 'confining dichotomization between members and outsiders'.[25] From these disparate strands of thought, one could formulate a definition for the purpose of the present enquiry. Ethnicity is the summation of impulses and motivation for status and recognition as a distinct social entity, which is often created by emphasizing on the past, and is directed towards the achievement of certain material goals in the future.

IDENTITY

Theories of identity start from the premise that every man is in some respects like all other men and like no other man. It is the second premise which sets the stage for identity formation. As Roosens puts it, every individual experiences a sense of belongingness to a social category and also feels determined by it in some way or the other.[26] According to Liebkind, "the content of a person's identity could be explained as a complex balance between the components of generality and individuality".[27] Identity has also been seen

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[25] Fredrik Barth (ed), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* [Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1969].

[26] Roosens, n.1, p.7.

[27] Karmela Liebkind, 'Conceptual Approaches to Ethnic Identity", *New Identities in Europe* [Aldershot: Gower, 1989], pp. 29-30.

as a part of the totality of one's self-construal which expresses the continuity between one's interpretation of the past and aspirations for the future.[28]

Group identity refers to the level of consciousness and awareness on the part of a group. It also involves a certain amount of articulation and emotions towards the characteristics which they share, and on which they differ from others. Benedict Anderson explains it in terms of an idea or an imagination. For such a formation to happen, the group itself should undergo a collective act of imagination so as to imagine the group as an actual entity.[29]

This brings us to the relationship between identity and reality. According to Ricouer, a person may be considered as a character in a plot. An individual as a character cannot be separated from his life experiences. But the plot allows for a recognition of events which provide the ground for the experience. Eventually, the plot shapes the identity of the person, such a narrative identity can take care of both permanence and change. Being at the same time both real and fictitious, it leaves room for both variations in the past as well as revisions in the future.[30]

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[28] Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*,[California: California University Press, 1986].

[29] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [London: Verso, 1983].

[30] See Craig Calhoun (ed), *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* [MASS: Blackwell Press, 1994].

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF IDENTITY

The fact that emerges from these explanations on identity is the psychological reality that underlies this concept. Some of the theories which have highlighted the psychological dimension of identity are Erikson's theory of identity; Lewin's dynamic field theory; Tajfel's theory of inter-group relations and Taylor and McKirnar's five stage model of relations between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.[31] According to Erikson, 'the conscious feelings of personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the perception of one's self sameness and continuity in time; the perception of the fact that others recognize this sameness and continuity. Erikson further points out that for an individual belonging to an ethnic minority, the issue is rooted in a deep-seated doubt of ethnic dignity. Erikson is strongly influenced by the assimilationist trend, so much so that he predicts the transcendence of such 'super identities' into a universal human identity.[32]

Lewin follows the assimilationist perspective, but to a lesser extent than Erikson. Apart from the psychological factor, he has emphasized the role of the social groups in shaping identity. Lewin points out that members of a majority group enjoy a space of free movement and multiple group memberships. But

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[31]   Hutnik, n. 18, pp. 35-59.

[32]   Hutnik, n. 18, p. 63.

those belonging to a minority are often faced with discrimination and prejudices and are deprived of this mental and physical space that their counterparts of the majority group may enjoy. Thus, a fundamental premise of Lewin's theory is that members of minority groups develop negative perceptions about their group. They are constantly in a state of turmoil and thus stand at the borderline between two groups. He may try to assimilate into the high-status majority group or just remain at the edge of society, as they are unable to identify with or be accepted by other groups. The third strategy that could be adopted indicates 'a certain level of dissociation from the majority group and a high level of identification with the minority group'.[33]

Henri Tajfel comes up with a very realistic and sensitive understanding of the issue. Individuals strive for a positive social identity, which is derived from membership in a group. A positive social identity is the outcome of favourable social comparisons made between the in-group and other social groups. Thus, each group tries to preserve and enhance its interests in such a way that it is able to form a positive identity.[34]

Taylor and McKirnar have drawn greatly from Tajfel's theory. In their analysis, they have highlighted the role of causal attribution and social

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[33]   Hutnik, n. 18, pp.35-59.

[34]   Henri Tajfel, The Social Psychology of Miniroties, London: Minority Rights Group Report, Vol. 38, 1979.

comparison as the two major psychological processes in understanding individual as well as group identity.[35]

THE SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF IDENTITY

Psychological factors do play an important role in shaping identity. This, however, does not in any way downplay the importance of the sociological element in explaining identity formation and expression of group identity. The sociological perspectives on ethnic minority identity are: theory of Anglo-Conformity; the 'Melting Pot' theory, and the theory of cultural pluralism. The theory of Anglo-Conformity is one of the earliest theories, originating in the seventeenth century America, at a time when the English settlers had successfully established themselves as the dominant group in the new world. Some of the earliest exponents of the theory are Henry Pratt Fairchild, Howard C. Hilly Elwood P Cubberly and Madison Grant who belonged to the first quarter of this century. The theory was later popularized by Pestiglone in the early eighties. The theory holds that in the interaction between a dominant group [a] and a subordinate group [b], the latter gets wholly incorporated into the former in such a way that there is no visible effect on the dominant culture.[36] It could be schematically presented as:

$$A \leftrightarrow B = A$$

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[35] Hutnik, n.18, p. 37.

[36] Glazer and Moynihan, n. 24,

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The melting pot theory is based on the premise that all ethnic groups would inevitably become assimilated, not into an Anglo-Saxon mould, but into a new identity, which they claimed would be purely American.[37] Thus, during the interaction of the dominant group [A] and the subordinate group [B], both get changed and the result is a homogenous amalgam of the two:

$$A \longleftrightarrow B = C$$

The theory of cultural pluralism was also a product of the same period. But it was slow in gaining acceptance and therefore came to the fore as late as the mid-1960s. Tracing its origin in John Dewey's notion of democratic pluralism, the idea achieved its theoretical zenith in the writings of Horace Kallen in 1925. The main thrust of the theory of cultural pluralism is coexistence and development of every group in society, irrespective of it being a majority or a minority.[38] Thus:

$$A \longleftrightarrow B = A + B$$

From the above discussion, identity can be defined as —

1. a consciously articulated stance or self categorization; and

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37   Milton Gordon, n. 11, p.270.

38   Glazer Moynihan, n. 24.

2. a framework of beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviour in terms of religious, linguistic, social and cultural distinctiveness to express the above.

XPRESSION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Ethnic identity can be expressed through symbols of ethnicity which is inifested superficially and temporarily. It can also be expressed in a militant d explicit manner by comprehensive commitment to the ethnic leader who ȝanizes inter-ethnic struggle. Identity is expressed through social, cultural and 'chological factors. Very often, all these factors jointly provide a medium of ɩression. Thus, ethnic identity, according to Roosens, would be expressed in ɩore deep rooted yet subtle manner, in terms of the dress-code. language, ural traits, either adopted or chosen.[39]

Anthony D. Smith has identified six different ways by which ethnic tities may be expressed in a polyethnic society.[40]

[i] Isolationism or Staying away from society as a whole; [ii] mmodation by adjusting and trying to participate in the social and political ɩf the society; [iii] communalism or an attempt at controlling certain affairs ɔiety where they form a majority; [iv] Autonomism in terms of cultural and cal autonomy; [v] separatism, expressing the right to self-determination,

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Roosens n.1, , p. 18

Anthony D. Smith, "The Ethnic Source of Nationalism", *Survival*,Vol. 35, No.1, Spring 1993, pp. 48-62.

and [vi] Irridantism or seeking reunification with other members of their community by recovery of lost or unredeemed territories in adjoining areas.

CRYSTALLIZATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

The crystallization of ethnic identity is a complex process, which occurs gradually over a period of time. Anthony Smith has discussed the formation of ethnic identity in terms of three stages: [i] The first stage involves vernacular mobilization or the rediscovery of independent customs, traditions, memories, symbols or language; [ii] the second stage involves cultural politicization of the vernacular heritage and [iii] the third stage involves ethnic purification on the return to the popular vernacular culture for political purposes as well as to preserve the culture against alien contamination.[41]

Paul Brass has formulated a two stage process of identity formation. First is the movement from ethnic category to ethnic community.[42] Depending on the context, the stage could register changes like the creation of a self conscious language community out of a group of unrelated speakers, rise of a religious community or excessive emphasis on certain specific cultural traits. The second stage involves the articulation and efforts for the acquisition of economic and political rights for the members of the group.

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[41]   Ibid., p.

[42]   Paul Brass (ed), *Ethnic Groups and the States* [Loneon: Croom Helm, 1985].

In this work, the formulation or crystallization of ethnic identity could be studied as a two-tiered process. In the beginning, the group is an ethnic category, i.e., a latent collectivity which dispensed heterogeneous and unaware of its distinct identity. The group at this stage is analogous to the Marxian 'class by itself'. Its members then develop the feeling that they share something in common which makes them distinct from all other groups. It is at this stage that the ethnic category is transformed into an ethnic community. In Marxist terminology the group could be termed as a 'class for itself'. Ethnic communities express their identity by emphasizing their distinctiveness in terms of a separate language, religion, real or fictitious history; dress code or other social and cultural traits.

CAUSES BEHIND IDENTITY ASSERTION

Identity formation is often studied in terms of the distinctiveness of a particular group in society. The tension between contrasts and similarities among groups in a plural society can also be a cause for identity formation. Inter-group and intra-group differences at the cultural and historical levels in all societies have existed every time. But, then, why is it that inter-ethnic cleavages and identity assertion occurs only in certain societies, between only at a certain point of time. Thus, cultural differences cannot be seen as the only factor for the formation and assertion of ethnic identity. According to Fredrik Barth, the affirmation or ignoring of ethnic identities is related in some way or

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the other to the defence of social or economic interests. [43] The theories of ethnic competition and ethnic segregation are offshoots of this basic contention. The ethnic segregation theory of Barth maintains that overlapping interests in the economic activities of groups lead to ethnic identification and assertion. On the contrary, the ethnic segregation model of Hechter is based on the hypothesis that identity assertion occurs when there is a possibility of blocked opportunities for upward mobility by an economically disadvantaged group. [44] Glazer and Moynihan are of the opinion that ethnic identity formation is fostered by the extent to which the minorities fail to achieve success due to the rules laid by the dominant sections in society. [45]

Paul Brass has identified elite competition as one of the major factors for identity formation or assertion. According to him, ethnic cleavages are most likely to develop "when the educational, technological and administrative requirements of an industrializing, centralizing State and the democratic demands of previously disadvantaged, mobilizing groups make it increasingly difficult to sustain a system of ethnic stratification or a particular regional or urban-rural distinction of economic resources and political power. New elites

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[43]   Juan Diez Medrano, n. 17, pp. 873-4.

[44]   Hechter, Group Formation and the Cultural Division of Labour, *American Jodurnal of Sociology*, Vol. 84, No.2, 1978, pp.293-317.

[45]   Glazer and Moynihan, n.6, p.11.

arise from the culturally distinct disadvantaged groups to compete for economic

and political opportunities controlled by the dominant group".[46]

Brass also draws from the relative-deprivation model of Ted Gurr[47],

which he described as the balance between condition of life which people feel

they deserve and the social conditions available to them.

In a recent study on ethnic conflict, Ted Gurr and Barbara Harff have

touched upon a very crucial factor that leads to identity assertion. This they

have termed as 'political environment'. By this, they mean the 'internal'

conditions prevalent in a particular society and the external environment at the

global level. The political environment at both ends helps in expediting the

process of identity assertion.[48]

Martin in a study in 1995 has emphasized the psychological dimension

of the subject. He feels that a group is latently aware of its identity and place in

society. But when there is a change in the socio-political set up which could

adversely affect their distinct identity or there is a threat to this effect, they

become begin to assert conscious of their distinct identity and begin to asset it

vociferously.[49]

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[46]   Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism : Theory and Comparison*, [New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991], p. 46.

[47]   For a detailed understanding of this model see, Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971].

[48]   Ted Gurr and Barbara Harff, Ethnic Conflict In World Politics. [Boulder/SanFrancisco/Oxford: Westview Press, 1994]

[49]   D.C. Martin, The Choices of Identity, Social Identities, Vol. 1,No.1, 1995.

FRAMEWORK FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

From the arguments developed above, one could construct an analytical framework for the present enquiry. The dependent variables or the object under study is identity assertion of a minority. There are a set of causal factors:

i. Fear of identity erosion

ii. Elite interests

iii. Feeling of social deprivation

iv. Political environment in terms of ethnic conflict between two or more groups in society

v. Socio-economic interests, and

vi. The external environment in terms of the ethnic identity assertion outside the country.

DIAGRAMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE FRAMEWORK

Fear of Identity Erosion

Elite Interests

Feeling of Social Deprivation		Emphasis on Socio-Cultural, Linguistic, Religious and Historical Factors		Ethnic Identity Assertion
Political Environment				

Socio-Economic Interests

External Environment
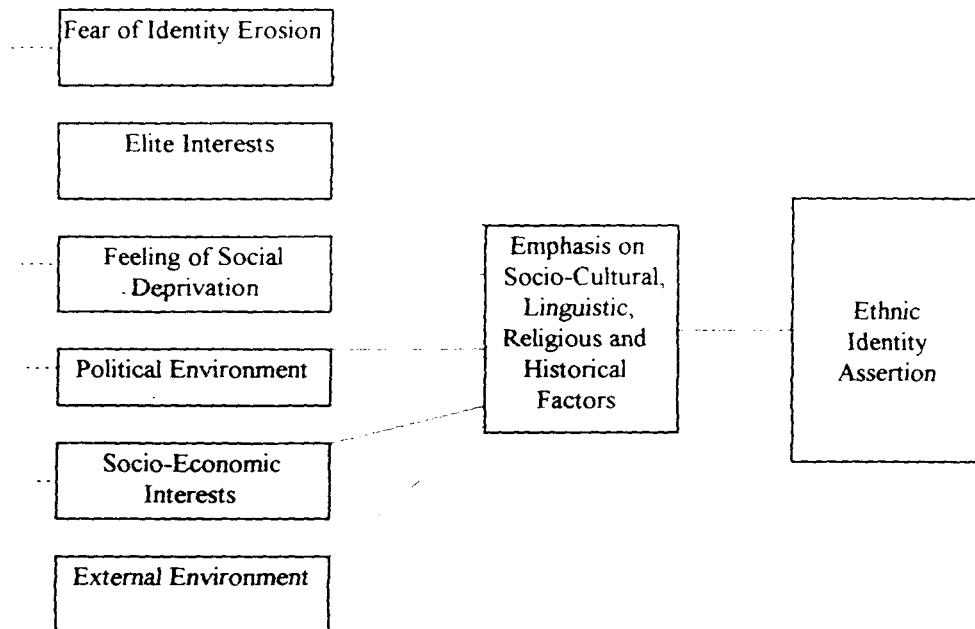
Each of these factors is linked to the dependent variable,.i.e. ethnic identity assertion among the independent variables also there is a unilinear connectiion between some pairs of factors. Firstly, the fear of identity erosion arises in an adverse political environment That is, if two or more groups are engaged in ethnic conflict, a third group may fear that its own identity will get eroded. When the State tries to resolve the conflict ignoring the interests of the third group. Secondly, the group may suffer from a feeling of relative deprivation if their socio-economic interests are not promoted by the dominant groupwhich enjoys power and authority.

Due to the above mentioned causes, the group may realize the need to assert its distinct identity. But in order to express them, the leadership tries to rekindle primordial loyalties among members of the group. This can be done by emphasizing their socio-cultural, historical, linguistic and religious similarities within the group and differences with other groups in society.

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA

Muslims form an integral part of the multi-ethnic Sri Lankan society.

They form a powerful minority in the country, with a population of about 7 per

cent. In recent years they have begun to assert their distinct identity adding

further tension in the already volatile society. The Muslim community appears

to be a homogenous group. But in actuality, they are internally divided along

historical, regional, cultural, economic and political lines. The task of this

chapter is to analyse the cleavages in the Muslim community and see how far it

has weakened the process of identity mobilization.

DIVERGENT HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

The Muslims have been in Sri Lanka since the seventh century, when

Islam becam a religion in the Arabian region.[1]   Since 1881, when the first

official census was conducted, the percentage of the Muslims in the country has

increased from 3.7 per cent to 7.4 per cent in1981.

TABLE 1 - MOOR AND MALAY POPULATION AT
THE VARIOUS CENSUSES SINCE 1946

	1946	1953	1963	1971	1981
Sri Lankan Moors	373.6 [5.6]	464.0 [5.7]	626.8 [5.9]	824.0 [6.5]	1056.9 [7.1]
Indian Moors	35.6 [0.5]	47.5 [0.6]	55.4 [0.5]	29.0 [0.2]	— —
Malay	22.5 [0.4]	25.4 [0.3]	33.4 [0.3]	43.0 [0.3]	43.4 [0.3]

Source: *Statistical Abstract 1985*, Department of Census and Statistics, p. 30

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[1]   Marina Azeez, "The Muslims of Sri Lanka" in Mahroof & Azeez (ed), **An Ethnololgical Survey of the Muslims of Sri Lanka** [Colombo: Sir Razik Fareed Foundation,1986], p. 3

The Mulsims can be divided into three distinct groups according to their historical antecedents. They are: the Sri Lankan Moors, the Indian Moors and the Malays. The Sri Lankan Moors trace their origin to the Middle East, the Indian Moors to the Indian subcontinent and the Malays to South East Asia. The term 'Moors' was first applied to the Arab Muslims and their descendants by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. It was derived from the Spanish word 'Moro' meaning the ancient inhabitants of Mauretiana [later Morocco].[2] The term gradually began to reflect more on religion rather than their place of origin. Thus, even the Indian Mulsims began to be known as Moors.[3] But the Malays, inspite of following the same faith, were considered as a separate group due to their historical origin and distinct culture and life style.

The Sri Lankan Moors constitute the largest group. They are descendents of the Arab settlers; the period of their arrival is not accurate. Historical memoirs trace the Arab connection of Sri Lanka to pre-Islamic times when trade was carried on by Arabi and Persian traders who operated between Hormuz [in the Persian Gulf] and the Indian ocean. With the spread of Islam in the 7th century A.D., trade increased rapidly and reached a peak in the 9th and 10th centuries.[4] By this time, the Arabs gained complete control over the East-

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2 Vasundhara Mohan, **Identity Crisis of Sri Lankan Muslims** [New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987], p.9.

3 M.N.M. Kamil Asad, **The Muslims of Sri Lanka Under the British Rule,** [New Delhi: Navrang Publishers, 1993], p. 129.

4 Marina Azeez, n.1., p 20.

West trade route i.e., between Europe and China. Since Sri Lanka lay directly on this route, the Arab traders began to settle down on the island. The Arabs regarded Sri Lanka not only as an important trading centre, but also as a place of religious significance. Adam's Peak became a place of annual pilgrimage for the Muslim since the 10th century.[5]

With the decline of the Caliphate in Baghdad in the thirteenth century, Arab trade in the area slackened. Their place in the region began to be taken over by the Indian Muslims in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Gradually, the Indian traders began taking over Sri Lankan trade and also settling down in the island. Among the Indian Moors were also those who had migrated from South India as plantation workers.[6]

The history of the Malays is somewhat abstruse. It is said that Malay soldiers formed a part of the forces of King Mahinda way back in the tenth century. Even earlier, there have been friendly relations between Sri Lankan kings and the Malay ruling classes. The Sinhalese king Sena I [833-853] had planned to escape to the Sirijana kingdom of Malaya when he had been replaced by the Padyas[7] The modern history of the Malays of Sri Lanka began in the seventeenth century by which time, the Malays and the Javanese had

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[5]   Ibid, p. 21.

[6]   Lorna Devaraja, "The Muslims in Sri Lanka 800-1815: A Historical Perspective" in Muslim Womens Research and Action Front,, **Challenge for Change: Profile of a Community** [Colombo: 1990], pp. 1-18.

[7]   M.M.M. Mahroof, "The Malays of Sri Lanka", **Asian Affairs**, Vol. XXI, No.1, February 1990, pp. 55-56.

embraced Islam and the Dutch were the undisputed power in South East Asia.

Whenever the Dutch East India Company feared rebellion from the indigenous

rulers, they were exiled to Sri Lanka. Thus, the first group of deportees arrived

on the Island in 1709 and again in 1723 forty four Javanese Princes and

retainers entered Sri Lanka as exiles. The last batch of Malays, who came to the

island as levies from Java, Sumatra, Malaysia and other Islands, were used by

the Dutch for garrisoning purposes. When the Dutch left Sri Lanka, some eight

hundred levies were left behind. They were later integrated into the British

army when the Malay Corps were formed by Lord North, the British Governor

in Sri Lanka. However, when financial constraints led to the dissolution of the

Malay Regiment [as it was renamed later] in 1873, most of the serving officers

opted for civilian jobs.[8]

Apart from the Sri Lankan Moors [93.16 per cent] the Indian Moors
[2.59 per cent] and the Malays [3.83 per cent], the Muslim community
comprises a number of smaller yet not entirely insignificant groups.

TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF SUB-GROUPS AMONG MUSLIMS

	POPULATION	PERCENTAGE
SRI LANKAN MOORS	1,056,972	93.16
INDIAN MOORS	29,.406	2.59
MALAYS	43,378	3.83
BOHRAS*	1,800	0.16
MEMONS*	3,000	0.26
TOTAL	1.134,556	100.00

**Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census on
Population and Housing**, 1981.
*Population figures of these two subgroups have been
obtained from Samarasinghe and Davood, n.22, p.7.

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[8]   Ibid., p.57.

They are the Memons and the Bohras, who constitute 0.26 per cent and 0.16 per cent respectively of the Muslim population. The Memons are traders who trace their origin to the western seaboard of India. They came to the Island in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. The Boharis are a class of Muslim merchants who came from Bombay Presidency around the same time. They are the only Muslim community in Sri Lanka who belong to the Shia sect of Islam.

DIFFERENT PATTERNS OF SETTLEMENT:

As it is already apparent from the historical background, the Muslims in Sri Lanka have settled down in different parts of the country depending upon the purpose that brought them to the Island. The Malays because of their military background, have settled down in the fort area and the Moors who came in as traders are more concentrated in the coastal areas. The Muslim population of Sri Lanka, however, is dispersed throughout the length and breadth of the Island with a heavy concentration in the Eastern Province, which accounts for 1/3rd of the total Muslim population.

TABLE 3

DISTRICTWISE DISTRIBUTION OF MUSLIM POPULATION

PROVINCE	DISTRICT	TOTAL POPULATION	MUSLIM POPULATION	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION
WESTERN PROVINCE	Colombo	1,698,322	1,68,956	9.95
	Kalutara	827,189	62781	7.59
	Gampaha	1,389,490	47850	3.99
CENTRAL PROVINCE	Kandy	1,126,296	1,25,296	0.15
	Matale	3,57,441	26,603	7.44
	Nuwara Eliya	522,219	15,791	3.02
SOUTHERN PROVINCE	Matara	6,44,231	1,6853	2.61
	Hambantota	4,24,102	9,333	2.20
	Galle	8,14,579	26,359,	3.23
NORTHERN PROVINCE	Jaffna	8,31,112	14,169	1.70
	Mannar	1,06,940	30,079	28.30
	Vavuniya	95,904	6,764	7.05
	Mullativu	77,189	3,816	4.92
EASTERN PROVINCE	Batticaloa	3,30,899	79,662	24.07
	Ampara	3,88,786	1,61,754	41.60
	Trincomalee	2,56,790	75,761	29.90
NORTH WESTERN PROVINCE	Karunegala	1,212,755	64,213	5.29
	Puttalam	4,93,344	50,246	10.18
NORTH CENTRAL PROVINCE	Amuradhapur	5,87,822	43,801	7.45
	aPollonaruwa	2,62,753	17,621	6.71
PROVINCE OF UVA	Badulla	6,42,893	28,759	4.47
	Moneragala	2,79,743	5,750	2.06
PROVINCE OF SABARAGAMUVA	Ratnapura	7,96,468	15,441	1.94
	Kegalle	6,82,411	36,548	5.35

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census on Population
and Housing, Colombo, 1981.

Figures indicate that there is no such district in Sri Lanka where the Muslims are not present. But it is only in five districts that they have a population of more than 10 per cent. They are Amparai [41.5], Trincomalee [29.9], Mannar [28.3], Batticaloa [23.9] and Kandy [11.2]. It is only in Amparai, where they happen to be in a majority with Sinhalese having a population of 37.8 per cent and the Tamils 20.04 per cent. However, in terms of absolute numbers, Colombo has the highest concentration of the Island's Muslims, with a population of 1,68956. They constitute 9.95 per cent of the district population. In the Eastern Province, the Muslims constitute 33 per cent

of the total population, with the Tamils forming a majority [42 per cent] and the Sinhalese are a minority [25 per cent].

The Muslim community presents a dispersed regional distribution with a sizeable concentration in a few areas. The reasons behind this pattern are historical as well as occupational. This is both an asset as well as a liability for the community.

LANGUAGE

The linguistic traditions of the Sri Lankan Muslims present a number of interesting features. They derive their religion from the Semitic Middle East, but their language comes from the Dravidian tradition. It also reflects their pragmatism. As adherents of Islam, they were very particular about the tenets of their religion and the commandments of their Holy Book. When they came to the island as traders, they had to make a practical choice on the language issue. They adopted Tamil as their lingua franca. It was perhaps due to their interaction with Tamil traders of South India and the importance of the language for pursuing maritime trade in South Asia that the Arab sections opted for Tamil.[9]

Some of the Muslim traders adopted Tamil as their language, more as a matter of convenience. They hardly developed a sense of affinity with the language. Due to their Arabic origin, their language also had an Arabic flavour.

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[9]   S. Arasarathanam, **Ceylon** [New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964].

They used a number of Arabic words and also Arabic phonemes and morphemes'.[10] However, even though the Muslims spoke 'Arabic Tamil', they did not really identify with the language. They did not agitate that education for the Muslims be imparted in that language. Badiuddin Mahmud had commented that the Mulims did not have a language of their own. Yet, as Minister of Education (1960-65), he enacted regulations allowing the children of the Muslim elite to get educated in English medium. To quote Ismail, "The Muslim social formation was not seen within Sri Lankan identitarian discourse as having its own language".[11]

The cleavage within the Mulsim community on the language issue could be further elucidated by their divergent views on the 'Sinhala only' policy of 1956. While Sir Razik Fareed spoke in favour of the policy, M.M. Mustafa, an M.P. of the Federal Party, opposed it. He claimed that the Muslims of the Eastern Province did not speak Arabic Tamil but the purest form of Tamil.[12] By and large, the Muslims of Sri Lanka are trilingual, i.e. they speak Tamil in the North-East and also in other parts of the country because the Quran had been translated into Tamil. Only recently it was translated into Sinhalese. But the Muslims of Colombo and the West Coast have found it feasible to adopt

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[10] Mohamed Mauroof, "Aspects of Religion, Economy and Society Among the Muslims of Ceylon", **Contributiions to Indian Sociology**, New Series, No.6, 1972, p. 68.

[11] Qadri Ismail, "Unmooring Identity: The Antimonies of Elite Muslims Self-Representation in Modern Sri Lanka", in **Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka**, [Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1995], p. 74.

[12] Ibid., p. 85-6.

Sinhalese. Besides, the Muslims also speak English. Some of them are even literate in Arabic.[13] The Malays still prefer to speak their indigenous language and till the nineteenth century they used their indigenous script called 'gundul'.[14]

DIVERSE CULTURAL PATTERNS:

The culture of the Sri Lankan Muslims represents a blend of Semitic Islam in a Dravidian and Aryan environment. This, however, does not mean that Muslims have a homogenous social and cultural tradition. Distinctions exist among them along regional, economic and occupational lines.

Muslim organizations in Sri Lanka have been working towards social and cultural upliftment of the community. Yet, these organizations are not unanimous amongst themselves. The All Ceylon Muslim League and the All Ceylon Moors' Association were established in the 1930s. These two separate groups emerged over the issue of adopting the name 'Moor' or 'Muslim'.[15]

Sri Lankan Muslims also reflect diverse religious traditions. Those following the Sufi tradition believe that Saints are sacared mediators and

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[13]   Vasundhara Mohan, "The Muslims of Sri Lanka", [New Delhi: Alekh Publishers, 1985]

[14]   M.M.M. Mahroof, "The Malays of Sri Lanka", Asian Affairs, Vol XXI, No 1, February 1990, pp. 55-65,

[15]   K.M. de Silva, n.15, p. 202-214.

intercessors between man and God. On the other hand, followers of the

Tablighi Jam'aat strongly oppose this indirect approach of reaching God.[16]

Regionally, there is a lot of difference between the Muslims of the

Eastern Province and those living in Colombo and the West Coast. The Eastern

Province Muslims are considered inferior to their West Coast counterparts.

Social relations between them do not exist. Under normal circumstances,

marriage between the East Coast and the West Coast Muslims is rare.[17]

Another distinguishing feature of the Muslims of the East Coast is their close

contact with the Mosque and influence of the priests.[18]

Cultural differences among Muslims exist along occupational lines as

well. The gem traders are culturally very different from an average peasant of

the Eastern Province or even a shopkeeper of the West Coast. It is their

enormous wealth, lavish lifestyles and strong craft and cultural traditions which

make the gem traders very different from other Muslims. The urban

entrepreneurs are again culturally different from the gem traders.For instance,

they wear the sarong and western style jacket and their women strictly adhere

to purdah.[19]

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[16]   Victor C. deMunck, "Sufi Reformist and Nationalist Models of Identity in the History of a
Muslim Village in Sri Lanka, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 23, No.2, July-
December 1984, pp.273-93.

[17]   Vasundhara Mohan, , n.2, p.115-6

[18]   K.M. De Silva, Sri Lanka's Muslim Minority" deSilvaeta (ed), **EthnicConflict in Buddhist
Societies: Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Bdurma** [Londonm: Pinter Publishers, 1988], p. 202-
214.

[19]   Mohamed Mahroof, n.10, p. 71.

Moors and Malays follow diverse cultural traditions. The South East Asian roots, military background and urban settlements of the Malays made their culture different from the rest of the community. Marriage and social relations are not common between Moors and Malays. Malays wear a traditional headgear 'Sonkok' or the Shortened cylindrical cap. Also the way in which they write their names is different . The Sri Lankan Moors and the Indian Moors usually have one name, and they prefix their fathers' and grandfathers' names as initials. The Malays have adopted the Roman style of three names. First, the classifier, second is the personal and third is the family name. They use "Tuan" or "Maac" or "Baba" as the classifier. The Malay women prefix 'Gnei' to their names.[20]

There is also a difference among Moor and Malay women regarding their adherence to the purdah shystem. The women of the Sri Lankan Moor and Indian Moors are modest in their dress and prefer to be secluded from men even in mixed gatherings. The Malay women are more westernised and permissive.[21] The Malays are also ahead of the Moors in the field of education and were the first to accept English education.

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[20]   Folr details see M.M.M. Mahroof n.7, p. 55-65.

[21]   Vasundhara Mohan, n.2, . p. 89.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

The Muslims of Sri Lanka have traditionally been considered as a trading community. This is a myth. The Muslim community presents a diverse occupational structure as the following table indicates. The employment structure of the

TABLE 4
EMPLOYMENT STRUCTURE AMONG MUSLIMS

	Muslim		All Communities	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
1. Services	179	41.7	100470	19.79
1.1 Working Proprietors and retail trades	[78]	[18.18]	[267]	[3.59]
1.2 Salesman and Demonstrators	[43]	[10.02]	[148]	[1.92]
2. Agriculture	152	35..44	4134	25.65
2.1. General Farmer	[92]	[21.44]	[1805]	[2.33]
3. Mining and Quarring	2	0.47	19	.52
4. Manufacturing and Other related activities	96	22.39	1786	24.05
	429	100	7429	100

Source: Central Bank of Ceylon, Colombo.
Survey of Sri Lanka's Consumer Finances, 1973, Part.II

Muslims in 1973 shows that they have been involved in trade and agriculture almost in an equal proportion. The number of Muslims who are in trade [18.18 per cent] is substantially higher than the national average. In terms of absolute numbners, there are more Muslims in agriculture [152] than in trade [78]. It could also be noted that the percentage of Muslims in the category of general

farmers [21.44 per cent] is just a little less than the national average [24.33 per cent].[22]

Thus, even though less than 1/3rd of the total Muslim workforce is engaged in trade, the Muslims are still designated as a trading community. The logic behind this is the political and economic self interest of the Muslim elites. They categorize the entire community as traders in order to safeguard their own interests and thus gain concessions from the state.[23]

Furthermore, it may be mentioned that even the traders are not a homogeneous group. They have been categorized under three heads: [1] the gem traders, [2] the urban entrepreneurs, and [3] the village boutique keeper. They differ in terms of their business interests and the products that they sell. The gem traders are rich and influential.[24] Falil Cafoor, the first of the three elected representatives from Colombo Central in 1965, happened to be a member of the gem trading community.

The Muslims in the Eastern Province have by and large been engaged in agriculture, weaving and fishing. In fact, about 50 per cent of the total paddy lands in Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts are cultivated by Muslims. There are a large number of Muslim cultivators in Nintavur, Kalmunai and

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[22]   Samarasinghe and Davood, **The Muslim Miniroty of Sri Lanka: A Business Community in Transition**, at a Seminar organized by the ICES/Naleemiah Institute, 1984.

[23]   Qadri Ismail, n.11, pp.79-81.

[24]   Mohmed Mahroof, n.10, pp.66-77.

Sammanthurai in Amparai district. Tobocco growing is also undertaken by the Muslims along the banks of the Mahaweli river. It is stated that 75 per cent of agricultural lands in Amparai district and 25 per cent in Batticaloa are owned by the Muslims.[25] The town of Jaffna in the Northern Province provides a unique phenomenon, in the sense that 95% of the tailors belong to the Muslim community.[26]

MUSLIM POLITICS

The political profile of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka reflects the political sagacity and pragmatism of its leaders. They have always played an 'actively passive politics" in order to gain maximum benefits from the majority Sinhala State.[27] Traditionally, the political leadership of Sri Lankan Muslims is comprised of rich businessmen and lawyers from the Western Province.

Though the Muslims form only 7.4 per cent of the population, they are present in almost all the electoral constituencies. They are a majority [more than 50 per cent] in four constituencies. Due to this geographical distribution, they have become a powerful factor in deciding the political fortunes of the major political parties in a large number of electorates.[28] That is why the major parties have been trying to woo them. By supporting the United National Party

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[25]   Vasundhara Mohan, n.2, , p.99.

[26]   Vasundhra Mohan, n.2, p. 96.

[27]   Qadri Ismail, n. 11, p. 81.

[28]   Urmila Phadnis, "Political Profile of the Muslims Minority in Sri Lanka", **International Studies**, Vol. 18, No.1, Jan-March 1979, pp.27-48.

[UNP] and sometimes even the Sri Lanka Freedom Party [SLFP], some of the Muslim leaders too have found it expedient to remain within the fold of the ruling Sinhala politics. They have been trying to gain concessions through a policy of accommodation. The Colombo based leaders have made it to the Parliament, even from Sinhalese-dominated constituencies.

The political diffferences between the West Coast and the East-Coast Muslims can also be seen in their political culture. The Eastern Province Muslims prefer regional loyalties and powerful family group influence. For a long time, they disregarded party affiliations. For instance, in 1947, A.R.A. Razik who was a prominent politician of the West Coast, was defeated by a local elite M.M. Ibrahim in the Pottuvil constituency. Again, in 1977, a formidable figure like Badiuddin Mahmud was defeated in Batticaloa. These facts reveal that the Muslims of the Eastern Province were not satisfied with their national leadership. Hence, they voted against them.

The highest concentration of the Mulsims can be found in the district of Amparai, Battcaloa and Trincomalee. This has increased their electoral strength.[29] Furthermore, the proposed merger of the North and East has left the East Coast Muslims in fear and apprehension. In the general elections of August 1994, the SLMC contested with the SLFP-led Peoples' Alliance. Out of the 16 Muslim members of Parliament, the SLMC managed to bag 6 seats. The

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[29]   T.D.S.A., Dissanayaka, *The Politics of Sri Lanka*, [Colombo: Swastika Press, 1994], pp.89-91.

party could win a seat each in Jaffna, Vanni, Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts and two seats from Digmadulla district.[30] The UNP was able to win 7 seats and out of them, only 2 were in the Eastern Province [Trincomalee and Batticaloa]. This shows the limited appeal of the Colombo-based parties in the Eastern Province.[31]

This brings to the fore the extreme cleavage in the Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. It has exposed that the unity of the Muslims under a religious banner is superficial. This shows the divergent political interests of the East and West Coast Muslims.[32]

CONCLUSION

The Muslims in Sri Lanka present a very diverse picture in every sphere of life — social, political and economic. It is therefore a myth that they are a homogenous unit. However, since it is the affluent people from the Western Coast who have traditionally been leading the community, the differnces within the community could not come to light. The emergence of the Eastern Province is the politics of the island has exposed the political cleavages within the community. Inspite of the cleavages within the community, the Muslims are trying to forge a distinct ethnic identity in the Sri Lankan plural society. The

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[30]   Ibid.,pp. 156-164.

[31]   It also reflects on the regional limitations of the SLMC in areas outside the Eastern Province.

[32]   Ameer Ali "The Sri Lankan Ethnic War: The Muslim Dimension" **Tamil Times**, Nov.15, 1992, p. 14 as quoted in Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (ed), **Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka** [Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1995], p.93.

strategies and causes behind their identity assertion shall be discussed in the followingchapter.

CHAPTER III

EVOLVING A MUSLIM IDENTITY: STRATEGIES
OF IDENTITY ASSERTION

In seeking to stabilize its identity, every minority group has two objectives: [i] to unify the group, and [ii] to show others that they are homogenous and different from the rest of the society.[1] The formation and assertion of ethnic identity occurs at two levels. First, the group becomes conscious of its differences with other communities. Second, this consciousness is expressed through a set of values, attitudes and behaviour influenced by religious, linguistic, social and cultural factors. Ethnic identity can be asserted through violent means like an armed struggle or guerilla warfare, or a more subtle way like adopting a particular dress code or language or cultural traits.[2]

This chapter seeks to analyse [i] the ways in which the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka has been asserting its distinct identity; and [ii] to identify the causes that have led to the formation and asssertion of a distinct identity.

Evolving a Muslim Identity: The Early Years

The Muslim miniroty of Sri Lanka was never oblivious about its distinct identity in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. They have been aware of this ever since they arrived in the island as traders in the seventh century. This

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[1]   Anthony D. Smith, The Ethnic Revival [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981].
[2]   Paul Brass, **Ethnic Groups and the State** [London: Croom Helm, 1985].

existence as a separate community was based on their religion and their Arabic descent.[3]

When the Portuguese arrived in the island in 1505, the Muslims were the first group to be targeted and persecuted. This was because of their religion: Islam and the traditional commercial rivalry between the Portuguese and the Muslims. In the beginning, the Muslim Traders of the West Coast tried to fight their persecutors, but there is no evidence of a united struggle against their foes.[4]

The arrival of the Dutch[5] did not alter the Muslim position. The Muslims were commercial rivals as well as business opponents, even to the Dutch. Therefore, they continued to be repressed. The Muslims were persecuted by the Europeans for 300 years. They survived this persecution. But at the same time, they were made aware of their distinctiveness in a new political environment.

The British period beginning in 1798 sought respite from the Portuguese and Dutch persecution. According to Matthison Mines, it is during this phase that the Muslim community began to see itself as a distinct ethnic group.[6] The

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3   Christian Wagner, "A Muslim Minority in a Multi-Ethnic State; The Case of Sri Lanka",
     Journal of Social Studies, Vol.5 No.2 October 1992, p. 93.

4   Ibid., p. 95.

5   The Dutch occupation of the island was undertaken by Veeringde Oostndische Compagnie
     [VOC] or the Dutch East India Company in 1602. M.M. M. Mahroof, The Muslims under
     Portuguese and Dutch occupaion, 1505-1790, in Mahroof and Azeez (ed), **An
     Ethnololgical Survey of the Muslims of Sri Lanka** [Colombo: Sir Razik Fareed
     Foundation , 1986], p.98.

6   Mathison Mines, "Islamization and Muslim "Ethnicity in South India, "**Man**, Vol. 10, 1995,
     pp.404-419.

process was initiated by the establishment of a Muslim newspaper, stricter adherence to Islamic principles; and the setting up of Muslim schools which were intended to combine Islamic ideals with western thought.[7]

Mines explains the development of an Islamic identity as a response to internal needs in order to acquire status and a sense of social position in an urban setting. Unlike the rural areas where they live in consolidated villages, in the urban areas it became necessary to acquire a corporate identity. It was in such a social setting that the Muslims in Colombo began to form an ethnic identity. Since religion was their only ethnic marker, they began to create a new group sense through Islam.[8]

The first attack to this newly emerging identity came in 1888. The Tamil politician Ponnambalam Ramanathan dispelled the fact that the Muslims were a separate ethnic group. He observed that the language and cultural traditions of the Muslims reflected their Tamil origin. He said that the Muslims were 'Mohammedans' in religion and 'Tamils' in nationality.[9]

The Muslim community was very upset by Ramanathan's statements. But since the roots of this new identity were still weak, they did not react

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[7] . The First Anglo Mohammdan Boys' School [Al Madarsathul Khairathul Islamiah] was set up in November, 1884.

[8] Mines, n.6, p. 415.

[9] Ponnambalam Ramanathan, "the Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon", The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch, Vol. X,No.36, 1888, pp234-62.

immediately. It was only in 1907 that I.L.M. Abdul Azeez came up with a criticism of Ramanathan's "Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon".[10]

He made a reference to the 'Arab blood' of the Sri Lankan Muslims. He explained the Muslim presence in the island as a conscious migration to a place of symbolic importance [Adam's Peak]. This was also in response to the Sinhala nationalists like Angarika Dharmapala who were insinuating that the Muslims were 'aliens' to the land'.[11] Azeez, thus strongly advocated the Arab origin of the Moors so as to counter the Tamil claims of the Muslims having a Tamil nationality. He also had to invent a Muslim 'right' to be a part of the country as natives and not as aliens. He therefore, emphasised on their association with Adam's Peak and a conscious peaceful migration.[12]

The use of the 'fez' cap was an instance of asserting thir distinct identity.This began in 1883 when Arabi Pasha, an Egyptian exile, came to Sri Lanka. The 'fez' cap, worn by Pasha and his group, greatly attracted the Muslims. They soon gave up their Surat caps and adopted the 'fez' instead. This was the same period when the Pan-Islamic movement was gaining its momentum.

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[10] I.L.M. Abdul Azeez, A Criticism of Mr Ramanathan's Ethnololgy of the Moors of Ceylon, [Colombo: Islamic Cultural Home, 1957] .

[11] For a details see the Kumari Jayewardena, Ethnic and Class Conflicts in Sri Lanka [Colombo: Centre for Social Analysis, 1985].

[12] Qadri Ismail, "Unmooring Identity: The Antinomies of Elite Muslim Self-Representation in Modern Sri Lanka",in Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Moden Sri Lanka, [Colombo: Social Scientists Association, p. 69.

The Sultan of Turkey was being recognized as the caliph and the 'fez' had become a hallmark of Islamic identity. It gave them the psychological satisfaction of linking themselves with their Arabic origins[13] and also being part of the great Islamic brotherhood 'ummah'. The appeal of the 'fez' however, remained confined to the Muslims of South and South-West Sri Lanka only. The 'fez' however, became a sensitive issue in 1905 when the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Sri Lanka, Sir Charles Layard, objected to advocate M.C.A. Cader's appearance in Court wearing the 'fez'. As a reaction to this the Muslim community mobilized public opinion. They were able to stir up great emotion within the community. Thirty public meetings were held throughout the country which culminated in the mass public meeting at Colombo's Maradana Mosqaue on December 31, 1905. The gathering was so immense that The Times of Ceylon called it a "monster meeting".[14] An appeal was made to the King [Edward VII] to repeal the ruling of the judge. Finally, on March 16, 1906, the ruling was repealed, whereby wearing the 'fez' was allowed in Court.

The Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915[15], was an event which made the Muslims conscious of their identity. They began to think seriously about their

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[13]   Vasundhara Mohan, **Identity Crisis of Sri Lankan Muslims**, [New Delhi: Mittal Publishers, 1987] p.68.

[14]   M.M.M. Mahroof, "The Fortunes of the Muslims in the Period 1901-1948", in. Mahroof and Azeez (ed)., **An Ethnologcial Survey of the Muslims of Sri Lanka** [Colombo: 1986, Sir Razik Fareed Foundation, 1986], p.96-124.

[15]   The Sinhalese-Muslim Riots of 1915, also known as the Gampola Perahara Case occurred when some members of the Muslim community threw stones at the tom-tom beating procession of the Gampola Perahara [A Buddhist Celebration of the New Year]. The procession was passing a   mosque. This was the immediate cause of the riots. But the latent cause lay in the Sinhala-Muslim rivalry in the area of retail trade. The stoning incident thus

security and means of survival in the plural set up. However, none of the Muslims members of the Legislature Council spoke out against the riots. It was therefore apparent that the Muslims were not a strong and articulate group at that time. Until the early years of independence period, the Muslims as a community were concerned about their identity, yet not vociferous enough to assert it. Their main concerns at that time were: [1] to ensure adequate reprsentation in the legislative bodies; and [2] the preservation of their culture and tradition.

Muslim organizations were very active in promoting and preserving Islamic cultural values. A number of such organizations had been established in the immediate post-independence period. The Moors' Islamic Culture Home [MICH] was established in 1944, under the presidentship of Razik Fareed [later 'Sir']. One of the main intentions in setting up the home was the need to organize the Ceylon Moors "in order to preserve and foster their pursuits as a distinct group."[16] The All Ceylon Muslim Associtaion and the Ceylon Muslim League were some of the other organizations working towards the preservation of an Ialsmic culture.

In order to get adequate representatition in the legislative bodies, the Muslims were in favour of communal representation.. Thus, they were cautious in supporting the Donoughmore Constitution of 1931. Yet they chose

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gave the Sinhales an opportunity to take revenge. Consequently, there was a large scale rioting in all the Sinhala dominated areas.
[16]   MICH Souvenir, 1964-65 [Colombo: 1965,], pp 139-40.

to support the British and the Sinhalese instead of the Tamils. This stance was adopted by them because they did not want to be clubbed with the Tamils. When the Soulbury Commission on further constitutional reforms was set up in 1943, the Muslims demanded for the provision of 12 seats in the state council.[17] In an effort to preserve their identity,the plan of action, adopted by the Muslims was two-fold, negative as well as positive. Negatively, they expressed their total dissociation with the Tamil community by siding with the Sinhalese. Positvely, they made certain demands on the administration, which would help in consolidating their distinct identity. The main areas on which they emphasised were education and the consolidation of the Muslim Personal Law. Some of the following demands made by Sir Razik Fareed in the State Council on August 4, 1936 would help elucidate the point further[18]

1. The appointment of Arabic teachers in Muslim schools;

2. Broadcast of Friday sermons over Radio Ceylon;

3. Two scholarships per year for the next ten years should be given to Ceylon Moors who wished to acquire English education;

4. Just and proper place for the Ceylon Moors in the matter of appointment to the posts of District Revenue Officers;

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[17]   This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

[18]   Mohan, n.13, p. 28.

5. Appointment of inspectors of schools with Arabic knowledge so as to oversee the work of 'Maulavis'.

6. Appointment of one Ceylon Moor for every three persons appointed to the govenment service; and

7. Setting up of a school for Muslim girls.

Besides, Razik Fareed also demanded the establishment of Muslim schools, the closure of government offices at noon on Fridays so as to enable the Muslim employees to offer '*Jumma Namaaz*' and the framing of Muslim laws regarding marriage, divorce, inhertiance and wills in accordance with the provisions of the '*Sharia*'.[19] The earlier code which was prepared during the Dutch period, had the approval of the Muslim '*Ulema*' or Clergy. Yet the insistence on the application of the '*Shariat*' provisions show that they wanted to assert their identity.[20]

Some of the other means by which the Muslim community tried to express its distinctiveness were by emphasising their affinity with Muslims of the other countries in the world. They began to show concern over incidents that occurred in other Muslim countries, even if it did not affect them directly or indirectly. On the outbreak of war between Israel, Egypt and Syria in 1973, the Moors' Islamic Cultural Home organized a meeting of all Muslim

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[19] Wagner, n. 3, p. 101.

[20] Mohan, n.13, p. 76.

organizations in Sri Lanka to provide moral and material support to the Arabs. Consequently, the Arab War Relief Fund was set up. they also sent an appeal to the trustees and management of all *Jumma* Mosques in Sri Lanka to hold a special prayer meeting and pray for the success of the Arabs. They also found great pleasure and enthusiasm in hosting reception to dignitaries and delegations from the Muslim countries and arranging condolence meetings on the death of Muslim leaders of those countries. Indian leaders and delegations were a conscious exception, because this could be used as a play by the Tamils to point out the Indian origin of the Moors of Sri Lanka.[21]

Their only attempt at emphasising their identity in the political fields was a brief and abortive one. In the July 1960 elections, some Muslim leaders had decided to form the All Ceylon Islamic United Front [ACIUF]. M.S. Kariapper [Kalmunai] and M.Z.K.M. Kariapper [Pottuvil] were the two candidates who had contested but both lost.[22] Thus in the pre-1980 period, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka tried to express their identity. But the efforts have been sporadic and confined to specific areas and issues.

INTENSIFICATION OF IDENTITY ASSERTION: THE POST-1980 PERIOD

The post 1980 period has witnessed an intensified effort to assert Muslim identity by employing even newer strategies. There has been a renewed

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[21]   Mohan, n.13, p.69.

[22]   Urmila Phadnis, "The Political Profile of the Muslim Minority of Sri Lanka", International Studies, Vol.18, No.1, Jan-March, 1979, pp.27-48

vigour in adhering to the Islamic cultural traits. There is a growing insistence on the adoption of *purdah* system and adherence of the *Shariat* norms. When a committee was appointed under Justice Minister Nissanka Wijeyratne in 1986 to examine and report on personal laws, requiring change or complete abolition, it unleashed 'an avalanche of protests' from the educated Muslim circles.. *Al-Islam* a Muslim daily of Sri Lanka reported that there was a virtual uproar among Muslims from all sections of the island, be it a lawyer, theologian, doctor, businessman, teacher, engineer or even a student: All the major Muslim organizations joined together in condemning the move. They insisted that Islamic laws have a divine origin and therefore, should not be tampered by human beings.The *Jama 'ate-Ulema* on the Council of Theologians demanded that the committe be scrapped and urged the Muslims wsithin the committee to withdraw from it. The Federation of Assemblies of Muslim Youth of Sri Lanka (FAMYS) protested to the President, J.R. Jayewardane, against the appointment of any committee comprising predominantly of non-believers in the religion of Islam to decide the Muslim Law. The Federation felt that the removal of the Committee would reaffirm the faith of the Muslim community that the government would not interfere in the Personal Law of a minority community particularly at a time when the country was facing a problem of national integration[23]. At a meeting held at the Islamic centre, Maligawatte,

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[23]   Ibid., p.8

prominent members of the community reiterated the point that the Muslims would not tolerate intellectual adventurism at the cost of their Divine Law.

There is also a continuing demand for the teaching of Arabic in Schools. Arabic, they argue is the language of the Quran. Just as the Quran unites people of diverse regions under the banner of Islam, Arabic would bring all the Muslims in the island under a common umbrella. Hence, Arabic is considered as the language of Islam.[24]

In an attempt to assert and stabilize their identity, the Muslims have increasingly begun to intensify their religious activities. They have begun to look upon the Mosque as the focal point of their communication. Religious practices such as *Zakaat* and *Sadaqa*[25] are increasingly being stressed upon. A federation of Mosque Associations has been formed in Kattankuddy, a major Muslim settlement in the Eastern Province. In this Federation, several mosque committees have got together to face the threat of Tamils in a more planned and unified manner. Similar attempts have been made in Mutur, Kinniya, Sammanthurai, Kalmunai and Erukkamapiddy and other Muslim concentrated areas in the North-East. These mosque federations provided the base for the emergence of the Sir Lanka Muslim Congress [SLMC]. They were the brain

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[24] Mervyn de Silva, "Violence: A Fragmentation Bomb", **Lanka Guardian**,Vol.13, No.8, Aug.15, 1990,p.1

[25] *Zakaat* is annual obligatory alms to specific poor people by wealthy Muslims, made duringthe month of *Ramzan*. *Sadaqa* is charity.

behind the *Jihad* movement in certain areas of the North-East, whereby Muslim were trained to combat Tamil atrocities.[26]

By far the most tangible strategy of asserting their identity has been the birth of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress as a political party to express the needs of the Muslim community. The SLMC under M.H.M. Ashraff feels that the interests of the Muslims will not be promoted by any of the national political parties like the UNP or SLFP. They felt tied down and constrained under these mainstream parties. It was as if their mouths had been padlocked.[27] It was therefore necessary for the Muslims to carve their own destiny and assert their political identity so that their voices may be heard as equal partners in the polity of the country. The SLMC has demanded for a separate Muslim Provincial Council. The Muslims have further asserted their Islamic identity by demanding an interest free banking system in the proposed unit and, if possible, in the entire country.[28]

The regional basis of the SLMC is yet another facet of their identity assertion. Identities are expressed from a position of strength. Since the Eastern Province accounts for one-third of the total Muslim population of the island and

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[26] S.H. Hasbullah "Mulims and the Ethnic Conflict: Dynamics of Muslim Politics with special refernce to the Indo-Lanka Accord", At an International Conference, Colombo:ICES, 1991,

[27] "Muslim Mouths Padlocked", News Report, Lanka Guardian, Vol. 9, No.15, Dec. 15, 1986, p.4.

[28] Ashraff in an inteview, **Economic Review**, Vol. 15,no.12, March 1990, p. 33.

also a one-third of the population of the region, the Muslims of this province give the leadership and formulate political programmes.

The most alarming feature of the identity assertion of the Muslims vis-a-vis other communities is their preference for the use of force, if necessary. It has been alleged that they are receiving military support from the Middle East. There have been reports that the Muslim youth are turning belligerent and taking to arms. Ashraff has gone on record saying that they do not condemn the Muslim youth who have taken to arms in a situation of sheer desperation.[29] The formation of a *Jihad* force is itself an expression of this trend. The SLMC leader has also stressed the need for the consolidation of *Jihad* forces so that they can protect the community from the onslaught of the LTTE. They feel that the *Jihad* movement would not onlyserver the '.national cause', but also the 'Islamic cause'.[30]

Last but not the least, the naming of a Muslim village in Batticaloa district as 'Saddam Hussain' may seem a very trivial episode, but in actuality it reflects the level of Islamic identification and assertion by a Muslim minority in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious society of Sri Lanka.

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[29]   Ibid., p.31.

[30]   Mervyn de Silva, "Muslims Mobilize: Endless Ethnic Wars", **Lanka Guardian,** Vol.15, No.7, August 1, 1992, p.3.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS THE ASSERTION OF IDENTITY:

Some of the major causes that have led to the assertion of ethnic identity by the Muslims in Sri Lanka are:

- The 1977 economic policy of the UNP;

- The bond settlement policy;'

- Elite interests

- Intensification of the Tamil-Sinhala conflict;

- Exclusion of the Muslims in Tamil-Sinhala negotiations relating to the ethnic problem;

- Tamil-Muslim conflict

- The external dimension

When the UNP government came to power after its resounding victory in the 1977 elections, it introduced a number of economic reforms. The liberalization of economy and led to a considerable level of reduction of the State intervention in the economy. The Governmental control over trade was substantially relaxed. Emplyoment of Sri Lankans in West Asia was given a boost. The Muslims were greatly benefited by the trade policy. Consequently,

small and medium business activities expanded quite rapidly. The estimated

annual flow of people to the Middle East for emploment increased from 2500

persons in 1976 to 70000 in 1980.[31]

However, these benefits accrued mainly to the Muslims in the urban

areas and those involved in trade. The Muslims of the North and East who are

primarily into agriculture, weaving, fishing or tailoring were obviously, were

not benefited by the economic policy of the UNP government. As a result, the

Muslims of the South and Southwest region became die-hard supporters of the

UNP. This is evident from the election results of 1982 and 1988. The UNP

also tried to consolidate its support base by giving more ministerial berths to the

Muslims.

The economic policy has had a far reaching impact on the assertion of

Muslim identity. These changes have increased the difference between the

ideas, attitudes and aspirations of the North-East Muslims and their

counterparts in Colombo and the Western Province. They began to realise

their relative deprivation vis-a-vis their co-religionists elsewhere in the country.

This extreme disenchantment of the Muslims offset their attempt to assert their

distinct identity.[32] It was for the first time that the East-West difference had

come to the fore in the politics of the island. This was an opportune moment

for the Muslim elite of the East to give shape to their political aspirations. They

[31]   Hasbullah, n.26, p.14.
[32]   Ibid., p. 12.

wanted the East to get due attention from the government. They also realised that this was the right time to shift the focus of Muslim politics from Colombo to the North and the East. Any initiative for peace in the North-East depended on the Muslim factor. Realising their importance in the region, they sought to take up the leadership of Muslim Politics in Sri Lanka.

The land settlement policies of the various governments has led to a situation where the Muslim existence as a community with its own culture is threatened.[33] The Muslims have not been given adequate land in proportion to their population. In order to explain their point Ahamed cites the example of Amparai district in the Eastern province. In the Amparai district, the Muslim votes have increased from 37,000 in 1947 to 78,000 in 1980. The Sinhalese strength, on the other hand has increased from 2,394 to 68,000 in the same period. Thus while the increase of Muslim voters has been a little more than two-fold, the Sinhalese have registered a thirty-fold increase. This could be attributed to an indiscriminate settling of the Sinhalese in the virgin lands of the Eastern Province. The following figures will further elucidate the point

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[33]   S.A.M. Azhar Ahamed, "Historical Analysis of Land Settlement and Its Impact on Muslims", in Muslim Women's Research and   Action Front, *Challenge for Change: Profile of A Community* [Colombo: 1990], p. 19-31.

VOTING STRENGTH IN AMPARAI DISTRICT

Year	Muslim Voters	Sinhala Voters
1947	37,000	2,394
1952	42,000	3,119
1956	44,000	3,905
1960	52,000	23,000
1965	57,000	31,000
1970	62,000	39,000
1977	68,000	46,000
1980	78,000	68,000

Source:Census 1981, Dept of Census and Statistics, Colombo 1981.

TABLE II
PERCENTAGE OF VOTERS IN AMPARAI DISTRICT

Period	Muslim Voter Increase	Sinhala Voter Increase	Sinhala Settlement
1947-52	13%	30%	17%
1952-56	5%	25%	20%
1956-60	9%	500%	491%
1960-65	9%	35%	26%
1965-70	9%	36%	17%
1970-77	10%	13%	3%
1977-80	14%	48%	34%

Source:Census 1981, Dept of Census and Statistics, Colombo 1981.

The land settlement policy has adversely affected the Muslims in terms of their electoral strength. Consequently, this has led to a fear of identity erosion on the part of the Muslim community. The Tamil-Sinhalese rivalry has also contributed to the identity assertion by the Muslims. In a society where two groups are already engaged in ethnic conflict, the other groups may also realise the need to assert their distinct identities. The Muslims in Sri Lanka have found themselves in such a political environment. They feel that they are

sandwiched between Sinhalese and the Tamils. Their precarious position has been further worsened due to the subsequent militarization of the region.

While the violence between the Tamils and the Sinhalese continued on an unprecedented scale, the Sri Lankan Government has made several attempts to solve the crisis. In these peace negotiations, the Muslim factor has been ignored. Two such instances are: [1] the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 29 July 1987 [2] and the recent peace packages of Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Apart from other things, the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord emphasised on the arrangement for the merger of the North and the East Provinces to form a single administrative unit.[34] The Muslims became very apprehensive about their position in the 'merged unit'. They constitute 33 per cent of the population in the Eastern Province. In case of a North-East merger, they woluld be reduced to 18 per cent of the population. They would become a 'minority within a minority'.[35] If the merger became a reality. This would obviously be a threat to their identity.

A very significant factor in the crystallization of the distinct Muslim identity and the subsequent politicisation of ethnicity has been the tensions between the Tamils and Muslims.[36] There have been sporadic cases of violence

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[34]   S.H. Hasbullah, n. 26, p.16.

[35]   K.M.De Silva, "Muslims: No More an Invisible Minorotu..." **Lanka Guardian,**
Vol.18, No.20, March 1, 1996, p.1.

[36]   Qadri Ismail, "The Muslim Factor Through Muslim Eyes", in Asghar Ali Engineer (ed), **Ethnic Conflict in South Asia.** [Delhi: Ajanta Publication, 1987], pp. 202-23.

against the Muslims in the North-East since 1983. In recent years, the problem has intensified further. The Muslims have been evicted from the North especially Mannar, Jaffna and Vavuniya. In the East, they live in fear of Tamils, specifically in areas like Batticaloa and Kalmunai. In such a situation, they have become apprehensive about their future.[37] This has made them assert their distinct identity.

Apart from the social and political dimensions within the island, there is also an external dimension to the issue. The Muslims of Sri Lanka have been greatly influenced by the events taking place in the Muslim world. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamization of the laws of Pakistan and Islamic revivalism throughout the Muslim world are some of the events which have greatly inspired the Sri Lankan Muslims towards forging a Pan-Islamic identity.[38] It was also alleged that the Sri Lankan Muslims were getting moral as well as material support from the Middle East.[39]

Conclusion

Certain crucial points emerge from the discussion above. From sporadic and mild efforts towards asserting identity, the process has intensified greatly

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[37] Bertram, Bastiampillai, "Battle for the East: The Muslim Factor", **Lanka Guardian**, Vol.16, No.20, February 15, 1994. pp 1-2.

[38] A.M.M. Sahabdeen, "Islamic Revivalism in International Perspectiv and Its Impact on Sri Lanka", in Women's Research and Action Front, **Challenge for Change: Profile of a Community** [Colombo: t, 1990], p.186.

[39] New Report, Indian Expressd, [New Delhi: Jan 4, 1988

in recent years.The Muslim community is now very consistent and forceful in asserting its identity. Islam as a factor in mobilizing the people has gained prominence.

CHAPTER IV

IDENTITY ASSERTION: POLITICAL
PROGRAMMES OF THE MUSLIMS

Identity assertion of the Muslims cannot be seen in a vacuum. It has to

be understood in the social historical and political milieu of the Sri Lankan

society. This chapter analyses the ways and means adopted by the Muslims to

assert their identity vis-a-vis the Sinhalese and the Tamil identities. It would

elucidate their response to three key issues: the language issue; territorial

representation; and more recently, the demand for the merger of the Northern

and Eastern Provinces, and the efforts of the Govenment to settle the ethnic

conflict. Their demand for a separate Provincial Council is analysed against the

background of their interaction with the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils in

the ethnic conflictual framework. Thus, the assertion of a distinct ethnic

identity would be understood in the light of their response to these issues.

It would be worthwhile to make a brief historical review of the political

preferences of the Muslims at the beginning of the century. The Muslims were

a passive political group. They were not actively involved in politics like the

Tamils or the Sinhalese. While these two groups were busy making demands on

the British goverment, the Muslims preferred to remain silent.

In the beginning, they chose to side with the British. They maintained a

distance from both theTamil and Sinhalese. One of the reasons behind this was

the outbreak of the Sinhala-Muslim riots of 1915. Due to the conflict, they obviously stayed away from the majority Sinhalese community. They remained aloof from the Tamils because the Tamil leader Ponnambalam Ramanathan spoke in favour of the Sinhalese who had been persecuted by the British after the riots.[1] For two years, he continued to speak vociferously against the British atrocities and also for the redressal of grievances. Sinhalese leaders, together with their Tamil allies kept up the issue even a decade after the riots. As a result, the Muslims chose to be closer to the British. Thus, the effect of the 1915 riots on the Muslim community was two-fold. First, they became quite wary of Sinhalese nationalism, and second, their political conservatism had become more deep-rooted.[2]

However, the situation changed substantially in the 1920s when the Muslims began to get closer to the Tamils. They became part of a phalanxs of minorities in the process of transfer of power.[3] A possible reason behind this was their growing disenchantment with the British. Until 1920, the Muslims had a single nominated member in the Council. However, between 1920 and 1924, two non-official members had been appointed by the British. The Legislative Council was further expanded during 1925-30; consequently 37

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[1]   It may be noted that the British took this opportunity to penalise the Sinhalese nationalist leaders of that time.

[2]   Vasundhara Mohan, **Identity Crisis of Sri Lankan Muslims** [New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987], pp.9-32.

[3]   Urmila Phadnis, "Political Prolfile of the Muslim Minority of Sri Lanka" **International Studies**, Vol. 18,No.1, Jan-March 1979, pp. 27-48.

non official members were included in the council. But the nomination of 'Moors' to the Council was not renewed.[4] The Muslims therefore, felt betrayed by the British. However, they never really voiced their grievances against the British. This is evident from their policies and programmes in the next two decades.

Territorial Representation

Until the second decade of the twentieth century, the political system of Sri Lanka was totally based on communal representation; and by a nomination of the Governor. From 1833 to 1889, three Europeans and one member each from, the Sinhalese, the Tamil and the Burgher communities were nominated to the Legislative Council. In1889, a Muslim and a Kandyan Sinhalese were also nominated to represent their respective communities.[5]

The electoral principle was first introduced in 1912, when an educated Ceylonese seat was introudced. The 1920 and 1924 Constitutions combined the territorial and communal representations. Hence, there were nominations as well as elections to the Council. The final abandonment of the system of communal representation came with the inauguration of the Dononghmore

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[4]   A.J. Wilson, **Electoral Politics in an Emegent State**, [London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975], p. 133.

[5]   Jane Russel, **Communal Politics Under the Danonghmore Constitution: 1931-47** [Dehiwala (Sri Lanka), Tisara Press, 1982], pp. 2-14.

Constitution.[6] In its report issued in 1928, the Dononghmore Commission denounced communal representation on the ground that it was a barrier to communal harmony.[7]

The Muslims and the Tamils were not in favour of the terrritorial principle. They felt that their interests would be hampered under the new system. The majority Sinhalese community was the greatest beneficiary of the new system. The Tamil leader, G.G. Pannambalam called it a "political windfall" for the Sinhalese.[8] Thus the Muslims felt that their interests would not be adequately safeguarded under the territorial system coupled with the universal sufferage.[9]

The first State Council under the Donoughmore Constitution was constituted on July 7, 1931. It consisted of 50 elected members, 9 nominated members, and 3 officials of the colonial administration. Out of 50 members, there were 40 Sinhalese, 9 Tamils, and only one Muslim member. Haji Mohamamed Macan Marcar [later 'Sir'] of Colombo had got elected from the Batticaloa South seat in the Eastern Province. The Council also had a nominated Muslim member - Khalid Sultan. During this period, the Sinhalese

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[6] Robert N. Kearney, Communalism and Langage in the Politics of Ceylon, [Durham, N.C; Duke University Press, 1967], pp.30-39.

[7] Ibid.,p.30

[8] Jane Russel; n.5, .p.15.

[9] It may be noted that the principle of universal adult sufferage was also introudced in the island by the Donoughmore Constitution.

accounted 65.5 per cent of the populaion, the Tamils constituted for 26.7 per cent, and the Muslims accounted for 6.4 per cent.[10] Thus minorities felt grossly underrepresented in the new system.

Despite their differences with the Tamils, the Muslims sent a joint memorandum to the Secretary of the State for the Colonies on June 8,1935. In the memorandum, they expressed their dissatisfaction with the system of territorial representation. They also objected to further constitutional reforms, in accordance with Sinhalese demands.[11]

The apprehension of the minorities was further reinforced after elections to the second State Council [1936-47]. In the elections held in 1936, not a single Muslims member could make it to the State Council. The number of Tamils elected was also much less than what they would have got under the system of communal representation. Hence, the Tamils and the Muslims had common grievances against the Donoughmore Constitution.[12]

The Muslims did not join the Tamils in voicing their demands. On the contrary, they adopted a very cautious approach towards the whole issue. Haji Sir Mohammad Macan, a leader of that time, made a statement in this regard at a reception on July 16, 1938. To quote him, "...The minorities do not want

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[10]   Figures quoted from the 1931 census data.

[11]   Jane Russel, n.5, pp.37-58.

[12]   Vasundhara Mohan, **The Muslims of Sri Lanka,** {New Delhi: Aalekh Publishers, 1985].

equal representation with the Sinhalese. But what we want is adequate representation and good government. I prefer this country to be ruled by the Sinhalese".[13] This statement indicates that the Muslims shared a common problem with the Tamils, but were unwilling to fight for it from a common platform. On the contrary, they preferred to pursue their interests through the goodwill of the Sinhalese.

The Soulbury Commission on further legislative reforms was appointed by the British in 1943.The minorities found it an opportune moment to present their demands and redress their grievances. The island witnessed hectic political activities. Shortly before the arrival of the Commission in Ceylon in 1944, the Ceylon National Congress [CNC], the All Ceylon Muslim League,and All Ceylon Tamil Congress [ACTC] were born.

The Tamil Congress, founded by G.G. Ponnambalam insisted on constitutional and statutory guarantees to protect the minorities against Sinhalese domination. They championed a plan known as "balanced representation, which was otherwise called the "fifty-fity" scheme. The scheme envisaged the allotment of 50 per cent of the seats in the State legislature to the Sinhalese and the other 50 per cent to all other minorities.[14]

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[13]   Souvenir Moors Islamic Cultural Home, 1979, p. 13.

[14]   Robert Kearney, n.6, p.36.

The Muslim League had initially supported the "fifty-fifty" scheme. But ultimately they withdrew their support due to three reasons. Firstly, they became wary of Tamil intentions. They felt that the Tamils wanted the entire quota of 50 per cent seats for themselves. Secondly, the All Ceylon Moors Association was not in favour of the scheme. Thirdly, they also felt that by aligning with theTamils, they would be accepting Ponnambalam's views that Muslims were Tamil converts to Islam.[15]

Even though they did not support Ponnambalam's "fifty-fifty" scheme, representation, they maintained that a "balanced representation" should be provided to them. The All Ceylon Moors'Association submitted a memorandum to the Royal Commission on Constitutional Reform in 1945. In the memorandum, they pleaded that their political aspirations may be sympathetically considered by the Commision. They stressed the need for adequate representation in the Council. They also assured the Commission that they were not 'over keen' to secure communal representation. However, they maintained that in a House of 100 members, there should be at least 12 Muslims.[16]

[15]   This controversy has been discussed in the previous chapter, n.3.

[16]   Umila Phadnis, n.3, p.32.

The Language Issue

The question of official language has always been a very sensitive issue in the politics of Sri Lanka. It would therefore be important to understand the Muslim perspective of the issue. Until 1885, the colonial government of Sri Lanka was concentrating on the promotion of the English language. The emphasis on vernacular education began in 1855. Consequently, there was a rapid expansion in vernacular schools and education in the Sinhala medium. However, the Tamils who had been the most keen in taking up English education still continued to enjoy a larger share in government representation. This infuriated the Sinhalese community, leading to the emergence of a strong Sinhalese nationalism and the 'swabhasha movements'.[17] The Sinhala only became a political slogan in 1956 and the movement for it was led by S.W.R.D.,Bandaranaike, the leader of the SLFP.

The Muslims were faced with a difficult situation. Tamil was an important language for the community as a whole. A substantial section of the Muslim population was Tamil-speaking, i.e., those living in the North and East. Even many others knew Tamil, because the Quran had been translated only into Tamil. But supporting the Tamil agitation against the Sinhalese was also not a

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[17]   Robert N. Kearney, *Communalism and Language in the Politics of ceylon*, [Durham: Duke University Prress, 1967], pp. 52-89.

very feasible option for them. It would re-establish the Tamil claim that they were Tamil converts to Islam. They also felt that it would be against their interest to antagonize the majority community.

Consequently, they supported the 'Sinhala only' policy of Bandaranaike. Dr Badiuddin Mahmud had gone on record saying that the Muslims of Sri Lanka did not have a language of ther own. The Tamils who were proficient in English were grabbing all jobs in the service. The Muslims did not mind the adoption of Sinhala only.[18]

Inspite of the support given by the important leaders like Sir Razik Fareed and also the two important Muslim organizations, there was a section of people within the Muslim community which actually opposed the policy. M.M. Mustafa, an elected representative of the Federal Party, had strongly opposed the policy. He even voted against it in the Legislature.

The Muslim stand on 'Sinhala only' brings forth three crucial points. One, they did not want to be clubbed with the Tamils at any cost. Second, the wedge within the Muslim community; and third, the accommodationist stance of the Muslim elites of the West Coast. Demanding a parity of status for both Tamil and Sinhalese language would been a viable option for the Muslim community as a whole. Instead, they insisted on parity of status for English

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[18]   Vasundhara Mohan, n.2.

and Arabic.[19] This also shows their ambivalent attitude: they were not sure whether the promotion of their identity was more important to them or their political interests.

The Peace Process

Ever since the outbreak of ethnic violence in July 1983, serious efforts have been made to resolve the ethnic conflict. Negotiations at various levels — between the Government of India and Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan Tamil groups and the Indian Government and the Sri Lankan Government and the Sri Lankan Tamil leaders since 1983 — produced several peace proposals . But they failed to bring about an enduring peace due to the lack of consensus among the competing ethnic groups. Each ethnic group competes with others in promoting its own interest and the goals in the conflict. Thus, the Tamils compete with the Sinhalese, the Muslims bargained with the Tamils and the Sinhalese.

The Muslims' position on the peace process is a clear indication of their desire to safeguard and promote their distinct identity. As early as 1986, when the Sri Lankan Government was proposing to set up Provincial Councils as a

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[19]   It may be pointed out that in his speech in Parliament in 1956, Fareed made this contradictory statement. He said : "...English in respect of the Burghers and Englishmen...and Arabic in respect of the Moors", should be given parity. In the same breadth he emphasised the importance of English for the Moors, See Qadri Ismail, "Unmooring Identity" Jeganathan and Ismaol (ed) **Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History of Modern Sri Lanka** [Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 1995], p. 85.

basic unit of devolution of power, the Muslim leaders made their political position very clear.

The East Sri Lanka Muslim Front [ESLMF] sent a memorandum to the President J.R. Jayewardene on August 9, 1986 signed by its President M.I.M. Mohideen and its General Secretay M.H. Isadeen. It demanded for the formation of a 'Mulsim majority Provincial Council'. The Memorandum emphasised the fact that the Muslim community is an integral part of Sri Lanka's ethnic mosaic; and its interests have not been promoted by the Government.[20]

The memorandum noted that devolution of power to local units could alone restore peace in the island. But this should not be confined to the Tamil or Sinhalese majority areas. Instead, the Muslim areas too should be given its due attention. It was proposed that a Muslim Majority Provincial Council be created in the East with Amparai as its headquarter. In the event of merger of the Tamil dominated areas of the Eastern Province with the Northern Province they suggested that areas of Muslim concentration in Mannar District should also be amalgamated with the Muslim Provincial Council. The non-contiguous Muslim areas should be made community oriented Pradesheya Sabhas. The memorandum ended with the hope that such measures would help foster unity and integrity among the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the Muslims of Sri Lanka.[21]

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[20] A proposal for a Muslim majority Provincial Council in Sri Lanka, Memorandum sent to the President J.R. Jaywardene by the ESLMF, Colombo: August 9, 1986,pp. 1-3.
[21] Ibid. pp. 6-9.

Again in December 1986, M.H.M. Ashraff, the leader of the SLMC, went on record saying: "We are very keen to preserve the territorial integrity and unity of our country. We do not want separation. We want equality of treatment, justice and fair play do not discriminate against us Please consult us in the determination of national affairs". He further stated that the Muslims were an impartial community which was in favour of having friendly relations with the Sinhalese as well as the Tamils. They would like to serve as 'ambassadors of peace' between the two communities.[22]

However, he made it very clear that the national ethnic crisis has gravely affected the future of the Musim community. "We will not accept a solution which will jeopardise the strength of the Eastern Province Muslims". He reiterated the need for the formation of a separate Muslim Provincial Council.[23]

Another significant development in Sri Lanka was the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement of July 29, 1987.[24] The Agreement contained three core elements:

1. The acknowledgement that Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual plural society;

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[22] "Muslim Congress on Padlocked Mouths" **Lanka Gauardian**, Vol 9 No. 15, December 15, 1986, p.4.

[23] Ibid.

[24] See Text of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, **Sri Lanka: The Devolution Debate** [Columbo: ICES, 1996], pp. 204-12.

2. The recognition that the Northern and Eastern Provinces have been areas of historical habitation of the Tamil-speaking people.

3. the arrangement that the Northern and Eastern Provinces will form one administrative unit if the people in the East decide so in a referendum.

Since the population distribution in the East is such that the Muslims hold the key to tilt the referendum either in favour of the Tamils or the Sinhalese In fact, even before the conclusion of the Agreement, M.H.M. Ashraff stated: The Indian Government should realise that only a proposal approved by the Mulsim community will provide a lasting solution to the ethnic conflice in the island. Hence, he asked the Indian Government, the Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil leaders to make the Eastern Province Muslims a party to negotiations."[25]

The Muslims were not happy with the 1987 Agreement. Ashraff, in an interview published in 1990, said, the Indo-Lanka accord was imposed on us, because we failed to solve our internal problems. He furtrher stated that the Agreement considered the North and East to be one region. It presented a 'region oriented' devolution of power. However, the conflict in the North and the East was not a regional conflict. It was actually a conflict between various ethnic groups with distinct 'political identities'.[26]

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[25]   **Lanka Guardian**, Vol. 9 No.15, December 15, 1986, p.4.

The Muslims form 33 per cent of the population in the Eastern Province and could, therefore, be in a position of controlling political power. However, if the East is merged with the North, their political strength would be reduced, to a mere 17 per cent. As such they would become an "insignificant political minority."

Ashraff maintained that the problems of Eastern Province Muslims concerns Muslims all over the island. They are scattered throughout the country; two-thirds of the total Muslim population lives outside the Eastern Province. Thus, the political strength of the Eastern Province is and will be the political stength of the entire Muslim community of Sri Lanka". He, therefore, stressed the need for a "community-oriented devolution of power", instead of a regional devolution.[27]

On the issue of merger, Ashraff felt that the government was trying to create a conflict between the Tamils and the Muslims by turning the referendum into a political issue. There has been frequent outbreak of violence in the region and the Muslims have been evacuated from the North. Such a situation has been madeuse of by the Government to show that the North and the East should be separated. He even pointed out that on many occasions, it

[26]   "Economic Review, Vol. 15,No.12, March 1990, p.10.
[27]   Ibid., p.11.

was the Govenment [the UNP or the SLFP] which instigated violence between the Tamils and the Muslims.[28]

The Muslims understand the aspirations of the Tamils for autonomy.. Moreover, since the result of the referendum is a forgone conclusion, the Tamils would never forgive the Muslims for it. If the problem is solved on a regional basis, the minorities in each of these regions would be totally marginalized. Hence, Ashraff suggested for a solution on a "humanitarian and democratic basis"— meaning redemarcation of existing boundaries to create new regions.

In the 1990s, there were renewed efforts for solving the ethnic crisis in the country. One of the major steps in this direction was the setting up of the Parliamentary Select Committee [PSC] under the Chairmanship Mangla Moonesinghe on 9th August 1991. Almost all the politial parties including the SLMC were its members.

In June 1990, the CWC leader S. Thondaman submitted a 'minimum programme' for the consultation of the PSC. The salient features of his formula were: unconditional permanent merger of the North-East; greater devolution of powers to the Provincial Councils and institutional units and constitutional safeguards to protect the interests of the Sinhalese and the Muslms living in the North-East. The strategy was to forge an alliance with the Muslims. The

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[28]   Ibid., p.12

S:LM.C agreed to the merger subject to an 'institutional mechanism' for the protection of Muslim interests. However, differences began to develop over the nature and structure of the mechanism. Finally, Ashraff backed out of the arrangement for preparing a comprehensive package of proposals to be considered by the PSC.[29]

The next move to resolve the conflict came with the electoral victory of the People's Alliance headed by Chandrika Kumaratunga of the SLFP. In a bid to solve the ethnic crisis, she offered a package of proposals on January 16, 1996, which envisaged for establishing councils with exclusive legislative and executive powers.On August 3, 1995, the legal draft of it was submitted to the Parliament Select Committee Originally, it was proposed that the existing provincial boundaries in the North-East would be redemarcated with a view to reconciling the Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim interests.[30] But the legal draft maintains silence on this count.

In his response to the peace package of Chandrika Kumaratunga, Ashraff stated : "if the government decides to merge the North and the East into one region, we ask that the Muslims of this country be given a unit for themselves, carved out of Muttur, Sannanthurai and Amparai. We go a step

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[29]   Ibid., pp.318-20.

[30]   For a text of the devolution proposal, see International Cente for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lanka: The Devolution Debate, [Colombo:ICES, 1996].

further and say whether the North and the East are merged or not, the Muslims of this coutry need a separate unit for themselves."[31]

Conclusion

The political programmes of the Muslims in Sri Lanka indicates the extent to which the community has begun to assert its identity. In the early years, they sided with the mainstream Sinhala parties—the UNP or SLFP. However, in the recent years, they have not only formed their own political party (SLMC), but also sought a separate Muslim political unit in the East.

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[31]   Sunday Observer, February 25, 1996.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The Muslims have finally emerged from the shadows as an acquiescent minority. they have begun to make their presence felt in Sri Lanka's ethnic mosaic. They might appear to be a homogenous community. But, in actuality, they are internally divided along historical, regional, linguistic, economic and political lines. They have, so far, presented a picture of an internally divided group with no strong group identity as an "unified community". By virtue of their dispersed character and the absence of a political party of their own, they gained a considerable bargaining power in the national politics of Sri Lanka.

However, there has been a reversal of these trends since the 1980s. The birth of the SLMC and the MULF, with their power base in the Eastern Province has been a turning point in the history of Sri Lankan Muslims. They have become more assertive on their equal rights and freedom. The SLMC leadership is very firm on its demand for a separate Muslim Provincial Council in the East. The SLMC leader , M.H.M. Ashraff, has even gone on record saying that they have a right to protect their community, with arms if necessary. The youth are turning belligerent. The formulation of the *Jihad* forces which are very active in the East is an instance of their belligerence. There are also reports of the Arabs giving them moral and financial support. There is a conscious attempt on the part of the community to emphasise their distinct Arab

heritage by insisting on an Arabic flavour to their language, cultural symbols like the '*purdah*' system and strict adherence to Islamic ethos.

In the early years, the West Coast elites were the stalwarts of Muslim leadership in the country. Now, the East Coast Muslims provide the leadership. The earlier leadership emphasised their distinct identity by seeking symbolic concessions from the State. The introduction of Friday sermons on the radio is an example of this symbolic demand. Now, the new brand of leadership demand for a Separate Provincial Council for themselves. Thus, the actors have changes, the issues have changed and the intensity of demand has also changed.

All these show that there is a strong desire among the Sri Lankan Muslims to assert their distinct identity not only in cultural and ethnic terms but also in political terms. This raises the question why do the Muslims seek to assert their identity. Not one, but a combination of reasons had led to the assertion and stabilization of the ethnic identity of the Muslims. It may be noted that the East Coast Muslims are championing the cause for a distinct ethnic identity. This is in view of the fact that the theatre of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is the North-East. The Muslims of this region obviously feel affected by the intense ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. They are also affected by the political solutions that are being offered by the government. They feel that their interests could be safeguarded only by asserting a distinct

Muslim identity. This proves valid our hypothesis that "intense ethnic conflict between two groups make other groups realise and assert their identity". The frequent outbreak of violence between the Muslims and the Tamils in the North-East and the consequent evacuation of Muslims from the North has further intensified the process of assertion of a distinct identity.

This phenomenon could also be explained in pure economic terms. The Muslims of this region could not benefit from the UNP government's liberalization policies. This has given them a feeling of relative deprivation vis-a-vis other groups in society as well as their counterparts in the West Coast.

Another possible explanation is the elite interests of the Eastern Province Muslims. They feel that their interests have never been genuinely represented by the West Coast elites. There is, therefore, a need for them to assert their identity. Furthermore, the Eastern Province Muslims have realised their strategic importance in the region. As it is the only province with a high concentration of Muslims, the East is their political backbone. They have also realised that they could act as the balance in the event of any political settlement in the North-East

The Islamic factor plays an important role in the identity assertion of the Muslims. It proves the basic framework for creating a common Muslim brotherhood or 'Ummah'. It also provides the way the express the Muslims' social and cultural differences vis-a-vis other groups. As a force to bind the

community, Islam as a common religion has tremendous appeal. With Islamic rivivalism sweeping the entire world, the Muslims of Sri Lanka could hardly remain unaffected.

The Muslims have thus created a niche for themselves in the plural set up of Sri Lanka. From a 'group in itself', they have definitely emerged as a 'group for itself. They are vociferously demanding their rights and an equal share in the decision-making process. Once their identity is stabilized and their political prorammes on the promotion of their interests are pursued more intensely and assertively, the rise of Muslim nationalism to compete with Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism is an inevitable result. In this connection, Islam can be a formidable force to unite and guide the community. Such an event is bound to create further strains on the Sri Lankan society.

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