

CONCLUSION

By the middle of the 19th century, the Sri Lanka Moors, having adopted Tamil, mostly, and Sinhalese as their mother tongue (while the political conscious Muslim leaders preferred to use the term 'home language') having married Tamil and Sinhalese women and having adopted the dress, customs, manners, etiquette and even the names of Tamil and Sinhalese, appeared well set on the path of integration in the Sri Lankan Society.

But it was only in appearance. No issue had so far arisen to test this apparent integration. When the British sought to nominate educated Ceylonese to the Legislative Council, they appointed the Tamils, the Sinhalese and the Burghers. The Muslims too demanded a separate representation for themselves on the Council even when they formed only 5 per cent of the population and not many English-educated Muslims were available. This demand for a separate representation could not be defended on any ground except that of religion. But, a religion-based demand would have helped not only the Moors but also the Malays, who were also the followers of Islam. However, the claim of Moors for a separate

representation was questioned by the Tamils, who argued that the Muslims of Sri Lanka were, after all, Tamil converts to Islam. Finding it hard to challenge this argument, the Meers invented the concept of their Arab descent, in order to sustain their claim for a separate identity and blamed poor Ponnambalam Ramanathan for having attempted to prove that they were Tamil-converts. The claim of the Meers of Sri Lanka that they were the progeny of the original Arab settlers may have been true in the case of a few families among them but not for the entire bulk of the Muslim population of Sri Lanka. We have earlier seen that the 'Meers' Islamic Cultural Home, Colombo, could not succeed in digging up the geneological history of Muslims families with Arab descent, in any great numbers.

True that the original Arab traders had made Sri Lanka their home in or about the 8th Century, but there is no recorded evidence as to the actual number of such Arabs. Even I.L.M. Abdul Azeez had to accept the reality, when he conceded that " it may be safely argued that the number of the original settlers was not much more than one hundred. " There could not have been a greater myth devoid of all truth to claim that

all the Meers of Ceylon are still of Arab stock. Yet, this myth has sustained and nourished the creation of a separate identity for the Sri Lanka Muslims. Apart from assiduously propagating the claim of an Arab descent, the Muslim leadership grabbed at each and every minute opportunity to assert a separate identity for the Muslims of Sri Lanka and looked at the Tamils as their potential adversaries. They started making the Tamils a scape goat for their own educational, economic and political backwardness. The community has not hesitated to take advantage of any event that could help build and strengthen its own solidarity vis-a-vis the Tamil community. One such example could be found in the Gampola Percharam case of 1915. The Sri Lanka Meers cried hoarse of Tamil hostility towards the Meers and appealed to the British government that Pennambalam Ramanathan should not be permitted to give evidence over the Sinhalese-Muslim riots, in spite of knowing that his evidence would have held the Coast Meers, and not the entire Muslim community of Sri Lanka, responsible for the riots. Religion united the Muslims here. Justice was not sought and the Sinhalese were forgiven. The Muslims would not allow a Tamilian to interfere and give evidence.

Similarly, when the Muslims could not elect a single candidate of their own for 6 years, to the second State Council, the Tamil community was held responsible for such a predicament, stating that the Tamils put up their own candidates in Muslim areas. The Muslim electorates in the Eastern Province comprised the Tamils also and there was nothing wrong if the Tamils put up their candidates. If the Muslim votes were cast in favour of the Tamil candidates and not in favour of a Muslim candidate, the former were, perhaps, more preferable than the latter.

Another fact which this study of Sri Lanka Muslims brings into focus is the existence of two distinct segments of, of the Muslim society in Sri Lanka viz., the Eastern Province and the West Coast Muslims. The former, mainly agriculturists, live among the Tamils. Traditional, educationally backward and economically weak, the Eastern Province Muslims differ in more than one respect from their west coast brethren, who have all along formed the elite of the community, having closer links with the Sinhalese and close to the seats of power.

The Muslim leadership of the Western Province has always considered the Muslims of the Eastern Province

as 'nobodys'. It is reflected in Haji Sir Mohamed Macan Markar's announcement in 1938 about the community's intention of accepting Sinhalese political authority. Even today, the Western Province Muslim political elite look down upon the Amparai and Batticaloa Muslims and push-push their ambition to play a leading role in politics. Secondly, despite religion being a cementing factor between the two segments and despite attempts at Islamisation of the community through promotion of Arabic, amendments to the marriage laws to keep in line with the Islamic principles and denunciation of un-Islamic practices, a sea of difference exists between the Eastern and Western Province Muslims, in their life styles and social position.

The West Coast Muslims consider the Eastern Province Muslims 'inferior' - a poor relative. Social relations between the two groups are virtually non-existent. The elite of the West Coast Muslims would not normally establish matrimonial relations with the Muslims of Batticaloa and Amparai districts, except in the case of a highly qualified boy or a girl of extra-ordinary beauty. Further, the economic interests of the two groups not only widely differ but, in fact, the Colombo Muslims have been supporting even such economic policies

which would adversely affect the interests of the Eastern Province Muslims. Again, the West Coast Muslim leadership has been silent in espousing a cause which affected the interests of the Eastern Province Muslims, be it the question of permitting import of cloth which proved a disaster to the Muslim weavers of the Eastern Province or the acquisition of Muslim paddy lands by the Sinhalese government either for settling Sinhalese under the colonisation scheme or for developing a Buddhist pilgrimage centre. The Muslim leadership had not hesitated to make a hue and cry against the policies of the SLFP government, imposing restrictions on imports and Nationalisation of all major industries, although these policies proved beneficial to the Muslims of the Eastern Province. Similarly, all important political decisions have been taken by the Political elite of the West Coast on behalf of the Muslim community and the Eastern Province Muslims have been taken for granted, even on an important question like the language issue.

So far, the Eastern Province Muslims have acquiesced in the political leadership of the West Coast Muslims. However, like an errant child, the Eastern Province Muslims have been occasionally joining the Tamil parties

on the eve of elections, only to be pulled up by the Muslim leadership of the Western Province, playing the role of big brother. Joining the Tamil political parties or supporting the Tamils would not only give an opportunity for the Tamils to say that Pennambalam Ramanathan was right when he said that the Muslims of Sri Lanka were Tamil converts, but also may be viewed with disfavour by the Sinhalese. It should, however, be recalled that the theory of Arab origin was put forward by the Muslims of the Western Province, where all the original Arab settlements had come up in the historical times.

The anti-Tamil policy adopted by the Muslims of Sri Lanka and their urge to maintain a separate identity did make the majority group cultivate this second largest minority of the Island as a counterpoise against the Tamils. The celebration of the 1400th Hijra as a National event, the issue of a special postage stamp(1968) commemorating the 1400th Hijra, the appointment of Muslims to important posts in the government, the appointment of a Muslim as Charge de Affairs at Mecca to help the Muslims going on Haj and the establishment of a separate department for Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs, under the charge of a Muslim Minister etc., were some of the small

concessions that the Sri Lanka Muslims could extract from the majority community, in the process.

It would be relevant to pose the question at this stage : Have the Muslims of Sri Lanka striven to integrate with the National mainstream so as to form a part of the Sri Lankan Society and not carved out a conspicuous individuality of their own ? The answer is not only have the Muslims not integrated with the main stream or the 'core society' but they have built up a separate identity of their own, which was not existing in the Colonial period. Enough instances have been cited in the Chapters on Society, Culture and Religion and Political Profile of the Sri Lanka Muslims. Dr. Badi-ud-din Mahmud's words may, perhaps, summarise the whole situation : " Our policy is to live and let live. Sinhalese treat us well and without reservations. Keeping in view the Religion, there is no question of our integration or assimilation with the core society. There is amity and harmony. Allow us to live our lives the way we want."¹

What they want is the maintenance of a separate identity and their rights as Citizens of Sri Lanka.²

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1. Dr. Badi-ud-din Mahmud in an interview with the author at Colombo, in June, 1981.
 2. M.H.Mohamed, Minister for Transport, in an interview with the author at Colombo, in July, 1981.

Sir Razik Fareed was, however, more concerned about the term 'Moors', which links the Muslim community of Sri Lanka with the original Arab settlers and the Arab lands. " They (the government) are trying to drop the column, 'Race' from the birth certificates; if they do so, we will lose our identity."³ regretted Sir Razik Fareed, in a tone which spoke volumes.

The Muslim community of Sri Lanka has reached a critical stage. It can not project a leadership which would look after the interests of the Nation-wide Muslim population in general and the Eastern and Western Province Muslims in particular. It can not also form a single political party of its own, because, such a step not only is not feasible with the Muslims forming only about 7% of the population and scattered all over the Island, but also may not pay dividends. There is a great deal of difference between the Muslims living on the Eastern and Western Provinces, touching the social, economic and political interests and such divergence of interests will continue to prevail and even widen with the passage of time. It is difficult to say if the Muslim community

3. Sir Razik Fareed, in an interview with the author at Colombo, in June, 1981.

will be able to throw up a leadership in the near future, acceptable to the different segments of the Muslim population in Sri Lanka. The separate identity which the Muslim community of Sri Lanka has projected has had political overtones, in as much as it was more in the nature of a device to keep the Community away from the Tamils. This separate identity will be honed to a further sharpness as long as the Tamils' demand for a separate State (Eelam) is alive and the Tamil-Sinhalese conflicts continue. It could, however, be assured that the desire of the Muslim Community to maintain a separate identity will not pose any threat to the Sri Lankan Society in the near future.
