

Mawanella in the Balance: Roots of Indoctrination of Muslim Youth: Preliminary Results of a Field Study

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Abstract- This presentation covers the preliminary results of a qualitative field study in Mawanella in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday suicide bombings in Sri Lanka. The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into the Easter Sunday Attacks heard that there were three critical networks, based in Kattankudy, Colombo, and Mawanella that helped stage the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. The Muslim community in Mawanella had not been suspected to breed extremism and fundamentalism hitherto. Therefore, it is important to find out the causes and roots of indoctrination and subsequent radicalisation of some Muslim youths in Mawanella, which has a relatively better educated Muslim population. These preliminary results reveal shrinking of space for inter-communal interactions and social cohesion in Mawanella over the past two decades. It also reveals the indoctrination of Muslim youths over a long period of time by orthodox and fundamentalist sectarian groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami.

Keywords— *Muslim extremism, Muslim youth, Mawanella*

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi religious country where a number of ethno religious groups have co-existed for centuries. However, the interactions between these communities have not all been peaceful, there have been episodes of violence throughout history. This is not surprising given that ethnicity, language and religious affiliation are key determinants of an individual's identity. Around 70.2% of the population identify as Buddhist and are typically of Sinhalese ethnicity, while those who identify as Hindu (12.6%) tend to be ethnically Tamil, Christians make up 7.6% and 9.7% identify themselves as Muslim, most being Sri Lankan Moors.

The Sri Lankan moors also known as "The Sonahar"/ "Marakkala (ship people) are the descendants of Arabs who were merchants and settled in the country

over a period of time in pre-colonial times (pre-1505). They were mainly involved in the global trade in spices (cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and pepper), for which Sri Lanka was famous historically. They formed eight considerable settlements along the north-eastern, northern, south-western, and western coasts of the island – Trincomalee, Jaffna, Mannar, Kudiraimalai, Puttalam, Colombo, Beruwala and Galle. Later, during the Dutch colonial (1648-1796) period the Sri Lankan Moors were the pioneers of coffee plantations in Sri Lanka in the 18th Century. Muslims of Sri Lanka have different ethno-social backgrounds. Based on this, they are called Sri Lanka Moors, Malays, Indian Moors (Moplas – Malabar Muslims, Pathans - North Indian Muslims), the Memons, Hambayas, Bohras, etc. Their diversity can be seen in their languages and practices. They had adopted the main languages of Sri Lanka as their mother tongue (Tamil and Sinhala) and incorporated some cultural practices into their own culture (Thowfeek 2019).

As mentioned earlier, religion, ethnicity and conflicts are inseparable in the political context of Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese have seen themselves as the nation forming ethnicity and in the post-independence phase; the nation's identity has become Sinhala – Buddhist and starting from the 1972 Constitution Sinhala – Buddhist majoritarianism was institutionalised in the country (DeVotta, 2017). During the post-independence period the polarization between the three communities have grown, especially with the beginning of the ethnic conflict in the 1970s. This does not mean that there were no inter-ethnic clashes during the colonial period or in the early post-independence period.

The anti-Muslim riots of 1915 were the deadliest anti-Muslims pogrom to date. A series of attacks happened in more than five provinces killing 25 people, four were raped and over 4,000 Muslim properties destroyed, with 17 mosques being burnt

and 86 damaged. Apart from that 119 were wounded (Roberts, 1994). These riots lasted for nine days and that Sinhala-Buddhist antagonism was directed at Muslim owned businesses.

On 22 May 1958 riots targeting the Tamil minority erupted and lasted until June 2. The most immediate reasons for this riot are the 1956 Sinhala Only Act and subsequent events such as the Bandaranaike - Chelvanayagam talks. Deaths exceeded 400 and most of the fatalities were Tamils, some Sinhalese civilians and their possessions were also affected. This was the first major race riots since 1915 Sinhala-Muslim clashes, the events of 1958 shattered the trust the groups of people had in one another leading to further distrust among people. As exclusion and discrimination gradually increased, so did the Tamil demand for a separate homeland. The anti-Tamil riots of 1977 and 1981 further strengthened support for the cause of Tamil Eelam and militancy. The burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981 and the incidents of 23 and 24 July 1983, also known as 'Black July,' which resulted in a week of massacres, which saw the deaths of over 4,000 Sri Lankan Tamils were catalysts for the country's civil war that lasted over 26 long bloody years, ending with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009.

While the focus on recent scholarship has been mainly on the conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils, there was sporadic violence between the Muslims and the Sinhalese and Muslims and the Tamils.

Mawanella has also been a main base of support towards various Islamic movements such as the Jamaat-e-Islami. Local sources revealed that many of its founding members in the country in the 1960s were from Mawanella. Since then, a majority of its past presidents have been from Mawanella. Jamaat-e-Islami's recent past President, Hajjul Akbar (who is in custody now), also reportedly went to Afghanistan in the 1980s to join the Mujahideen against the Soviets.

Mawanella is located in the Kegalle district and has a population of 111,727 (Census Data 2012). 68% are Buddhists and about 30% of the population are Muslim. The Muslims are mainly concentrated in the main city area, giving the impression that this is a Muslim dominated town.

The non-Muslim residents of Mawanella that we spoke to feel that the Muslim community is assertive and expansionist. One of the monks from a main

temple in the area told us that the number of mosques in the town had increased exponentially over the years, giving the impression of 'aggressive expansion' by Muslims.

According to data from the Department of Muslim Affairs in 2019, there were 30 mosques registered from Mawanella. There are however many more unregistered mosques and they were only asked to register after the Easter Sunday attacks.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF MUSLIM POLITICS IN SRI LANKA

The strategy followed by early Muslim settlers of Sri Lanka was the cultivation of the Sinhalese rulers, and this strategy was largely successful since the local Sinhala rulers allowed them to pursue their religion and trading interests peacefully. As Zarin Ahmad (2012) says in his *Contours of 'Muslim nationalism in Sri Lanka'*, Muslims up to the early 20th century were a 'collection of very different groups with different interests, "and that it was the rise of the Sinhala Buddhist identity and the Tamil Hindu identity" that propelled the formation of an Islamic identity.

In 1888, when Tamil leader Ponnambalam Ramanathan asserted (Ahmad 2012) that Muslims were Tamils by nationality because of their language, Muslim leaders such as M.C. Siddi Lebbe and I.L.M. Abdul Azeez opposed this claim and emphasized the Arab roots of the Muslims. Sri Lankan Muslims also demanded adequate representation in the State Council of Ceylon. Mohamed Cassim Abdul Rahman, the first Muslim unofficial member was nominated to the Legislative Council in 1889.

They were cautious during the Donoughmore Constitution of 1931 and Soulbury Constitution of 1947 (Britannica 2016) and disassociated themselves from the Tamil cause. However, they focused on having a separate education and consolidation of their cultural identity. In 1936, Sir Razik Fareed demanded (Ahmad 2012) the State Council to close government offices on Friday noon for prayers and formulate a Muslim Personal Law based on the Islamic Shariah. These show the Muslims' need for distinction from Tamils and the increasing importance of Islam as an ethnic marker. In the post-independence period, Muslims often allied with the Sinhalese to assert their distinctiveness from the Tamils. They also believed their sociocultural interests and political representation would be better protected by aligning with the Sinhalese majority and this decision made them a part of national political mainstream when

Tamil leaders were often relegated to the opposition in Parliament. Muslim leaders did not support S.J.V. Chelvanayakam's demand for five autonomous states in Sri Lanka (three Sinhalese, one Tamil and one Muslim) around 1970 and 71. Muslim ministers played a prominent role in both United National Party and Sri Lanka Freedom Party administrations and attempts to create a Muslim party named All Ceylon Islamic United Front in 1960 failed.

The 1980s were an important decade for Muslim politics. The hostilities between the Sinhalese and Tamils were rising and Muslims, especially in the East, were not able to escape the growing escalation. In August 1990 LTTE killed around 150 Muslims at the Kattankudy Mosque and the entire Muslim population of the Northern Province (from Jaffna, Mannar, and Mullaitivu districts) about 75,000 people, were expelled within 48 hours in October 1990 (Ali,2009). The LTTE harboured a suspicion that the Muslims in the North and East had helped the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) during their operations there. After the departure of the IPKF in 1989 and the subsequent massacres in the mosques in the East and forcible expulsion from the North (ethnic cleansing) in 1990, members from the community played a considerable role in Army intelligence and as home guards in the border villages of the Eastern Province. On the other hand, a large number of Sri Lankans, including Muslims, started going to the Middle East in the 1980s and the Sri Lankan Muslims were exposed to Wahabism, and Salafism practiced in the Arab countries. The returnees brought with them Arabic customs (Ali,2009) and with Gulf countries opening embassies in Sri Lanka aid poured into building new mosques, refurbishing old ones, and promoting Wahabism and Salafism. These developments spurred Muslim identity formation and political expressions of such identity through formation of Muslim political parties.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) was formed by M.H.M. Ashraff in 1981 and the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 made Muslims fearful that they would become a 'minority within a minority' in the merged northern and eastern provinces. Since the emergence of the SLMC, a number of Muslim political parties have emerged with support bases in minor and major Muslim communities.

III. BACKGROUND

Since the end of the war Muslim owned businesses, especially restaurants, were targeted by militant

groups like Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). Attempts to weaken the material wealth of Muslims by attacking Muslim owned enterprises have been a common feature in post-civil war Sri Lanka (de Silva et al 2019). Muslim owned restaurants were usually the first to suffer, particularly with the anti-halal and anti-animal slaughter campaigns as well as the sterilisation pill rumours perpetrated by BBS.

While the targets of boycotts are predominantly restaurants and large chain clothing stores owned by Muslims, Muslim businesses that provide other products and services too had been targeted.

Another demand of the BBS was the ban on burqas and niqabs. These garments are now linked to Wahhabism and Islamic extremism and a temporary ban was imposed on them under emergency regulations soon after the Easter Sunday bombings. Although the ban has now been lifted, the possibility of a ban continues to be whipped up as a talking point by the administration, a tool wielded as a marker of Muslim-ness/otherness as bait and distraction for its failures. The unending debate benefits both leading parties, playing their roles for and against even as it cements fear, distrust, and segregation between the communities.

The anti-Muslim sentiments created by these campaigns, on several occasions, had broken into riots at certain times. On 2 May 2001, a Sinhala mob rampaged through Mawanella, burning down Muslim owned shops and businesses, homes, and mosques. Two men were killed and 15 injured. The riots had been set off when Muslims protested against the inaction of the government against an attack, three days prior, of a Muslim owned hotel in Mawanella. The thugs, having demanded for the day's proceeds, dragged the cashier out, tied him to an iron fence and slashed his mouth. Two days later, on 4 May, Muslims in Colombo, Kandy, Puttalam, Hambantota and Ratnapura, after Friday prayers, protested against the continued injustice. The government responded by imposing a curfew. On 6 May, Muslim protestors retaliate in the East, blocked traffic and set fire to eight Sinhalese owned shops (Nagaraj and Haniffa 2017).

On 12 June 2014, Posa Poya Day, the Chief Prelate of Kurunduwatte Sri Wijerama Vihara Ayagama Samitha Thero, along with his driver, were allegedly assaulted by three Muslim men in Dharga Town, Beruwala. Members of the temple formed a mob and stormed the Aluthgama police station demanding immediate action be taken. Three Muslim men are

arrested (they were later acquitted of all charges in court) but the mob threw stones at the police and attacked Muslim shops. Three days later (15 June), BBS staged rallies in Aluthgama, Beruwala and Dharga Town, inciting violence against Muslims. After the final rally, the BBS mob, armed with Molotov cocktails and other weapons, marched into Dharga Town, attacking Muslims and looting and burning their shops, homes and mosques. When the mob finally dispersed, four people had been killed, 80 injured, over 60 homes and businesses set on fire and several mosques attacked in the towns of Aluthgama, Beruwela and Dharga Town in the Kalutara district. Ten-thousand people (including 2,000 Sinhalese) were displaced and the government imposed a curfew but the rioting continued unabated (Haniffa et al 2014).

More recently, on 22nd February 2018, a Sinhalese lorry driver was assaulted by four Muslim youth in Karaliyedda, Theldeniya over a traffic incident. On 26th February, a group of Sinhalese men dining at a Muslim owned hotel in Ampara town, claimed to have found remnants of tablets with the power to sterilise them for life, threatened the owner and filmed him nodding acquiescence - in fright - to their accusations even though he did not understand what was spoken in Sinhala. The video, immediately circulated in cyberspace, gathered a mob which attacked the hotel owner and several other Muslim owned shops in the town and surrounding areas (Riza 2018).

After the lorry driver succumbed to his injuries, on 2nd March, his body was taken to his hometown, setting off the first anti-Muslim attack in Udispattuwa on the night. Despite prior deployment of 1,000 Special Task Force (STF) personnel in several areas, Muslim owned shops were burned in Moragahamulla on 4th March. By the morning of 5th March, the violence had spread to Digana, where a large mob whipped up by BBS Secretary Gnanasera Thero and led by Amith Weerasinha (Borham, 2019) burned shops, homes and a mosque. By 3pm the Army was called in with 200 troops deployed, followed by declaration of curfew through the night. By the evening of 6 March, 4 mosques, 37 houses, 46 shops and 35 vehicles had been damaged in the Kandy district.

On Easter Sunday 2019 (21st April), Sri Lanka experienced seven separate near simultaneous suicide bombings in the western and eastern parts of the country. Carried out by members of the (it

couldn't have been shadowy because it was registered with the Muslim Religious Affairs Department) National Thowheed Jamaat (NTJ) organisation led by Zahran Hashim, the attack claimed the lives of 277 people and injured 400, as per the report of the Parliament Select Committee appointed to investigate it. Easter Sunday services were in progress when St Sebastian Church in Negombo, Zion Church in Batticaloa and St Anthony's Church in Colombo were blown up. Suicide bombers also attacked three five-star hotels in the heart of Colombo City, namely, Shangri-La, Cinnamon Grand and Kingsbury Hotels, as well as a lower grade Tropical Inn in the suburb of Dehiwela later in the day (Malone and Kath 2019).

In the immediate aftermath, as people reeled from the violence perpetrated, documents that showed the government of Sri Lanka had received advanced warnings of the attack were widely shared on social media. A number of members of Parliament including Opposition Leader Mahinda Rajapaksa revealed that their security officers had previously been informed of the possibility of such attacks taking place on Easter Sunday while Minister Harin Fernando stated that his father, who is well connected, had warned him not to attend mass on that day. Later a Presidential Commission of Inquiry into the attacks was established and the final report of the commission was handed over to the President in February 2021.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Following the Easter Sunday attacks, radicalism, violent extremism and terrorism, are at the forefront of Sri Lanka's public and policy discussions. The fear these phenomena have instilled, its connection to wider tensions between and within religions, and how such fear has exposed a lack of social cohesion in seemingly resilient societies, have impacted Sri Lanka in fundamental ways.

There were three critical networks that helped stage the Easter Sunday suicide attacks in Sri Lanka. The suspected mastermind and one of the suicide bombers, Zahran Hashim, was from Kattankudy (in the Batticaloa district of Eastern Province) and headed the National Thowheed Jamaat (NTJ) headquartered in Kattankudy and having numerous mosques throughout the country. Colombo based Jammiyat-ul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI) was the second network involved which had the highest number of suicide bombers on that fateful day. The third

network was based in Mawanella centred on the Ibrahim brothers.

While the Eastern province has been suspected of creeping Islamic orthodoxy and fundamentalism for a while (since the 1980s), a relatively better educated Muslim population of Mawanella was never suspected to harbour fundamentalist tendencies until the destruction of Buddha statues in December 2018. However, the Commission of Inquiry into the Easter Sunday Attacks heard that orthodox and fundamentalist sectarian groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami (from northern India) had taken roots in Mawanella since the 1960s. It was also reported that at least one person from Mawanella had gone to Afghanistan in the 1980s to join the Mujahideen against the Soviet occupation there. Additionally, Ibrahim brothers from Mawanella had gone to the Syrian territory via Turkey in 2014 to undergo arms and tactical training with the ISIS.

Therefore, as a first step towards our research into the pathways of radicalisation of Muslim youths in Sri Lanka, we planned to concentrate our fieldwork on Mawanella.

The objective of this presentation is to trace the timelines and processes of the roots of indoctrination and subsequent radicalisation of Muslim youths in Mawanella.

V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions addressed by this research study:

1. What makes Mawanella an attractive place for radicalization?
2. What attracts these youth to these religious groups/movements? Do they replace a lacuna for youth organizations in the area?
3. How are the parents/teachers not aware of what is happening to the boys? How do they fall through the cracks?

VI. METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the socio-economic background and the story of radicalization of the youth in Mawanella, the three field researchers Zahrah Imtiaz, Nushka Nafeel and Rathindra Kuruwita conducted a series of interviews in Mawanella on four occasions. The first fact finding visit was between June 14-18, 2019, the second was between June 20-24, 2020, September 14-15 and December 15. Each time, we conducted extensive one on one interviews with key community leaders,

teachers, religious heads and focus group discussions among young Muslim men between the ages of 16-35.

After the third visit in December 2019, we had to delay our next visit to June 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. Travel restrictions as well as health guidelines prevented us from visiting Mawanella earlier. Subsequent visits were also put off due to the ongoing pandemic situation in the country.

During the first visit we mostly concentrated on the elders and community leaders in Mawanella as the youth were rather shaken up with the recent arrests and were not forthcoming in interviews. Thereafter subsequent visits helped us identify individuals and groups to focus on further and it also helped build familiarity between the interviewers and interviewees.

By June 2020, the security atmosphere had relaxed quite a bit, allowing the boys to meet and discuss things in retrospect.

As researchers, we did not use a standard set of questions, but the research questions focused on two important points: firstly, their opinion and knowledge of what happened in Mawanella with the Sadeeq brothers and secondly what they believed was the root cause behind the radicalization of the youth in their community. The free form of questioning allowed interviewees to open up more. It also allowed the researchers to get more information on other suitable persons to interview, following a 'snow-ball' method to conduct further interviews.

When it came to focus group discussions however, the researchers felt that there needed to be more structure to the questions and a few questions were prepared beforehand to guide the discussion (See Annex 1).

In the four visits to Mawanella, we were able to interview 15 persons (six individually) and nine in three focus group discussions (three persons in each group).

The interviewees were not taped as it made interviewees in Mawanella uncomfortable, so they were not recorded.

The choice of interview persons in Mawanella were based on local recommendations on who had the most influence in the community. For example, we spoke to a community leader who headed the Mawanella Foundation for Mutual Understanding, a

civil society group formed after the 2001 riots by both influential Muslim and Sinhala persons. The group would come together to resolve any ethnic issues which flared up between the two communities from time to time.

Apart from that we also chose mosque leaders from two of the main mosques in Mawanella to discuss the religious background in the area. We also chose a few active politicians and youth activists to get a better understanding of the place. For the boys from the focus group, they were mostly those who were involved in community activities, and we were able to speak to some boys who were also exposed to the teachings of Sadeeq.

VII. LIMITATIONS

We were not able to cover the Eastern Province, especially Kattankudy, due to the pandemic. Kattankudy is the hometown of Zahran Hashim and more importantly, the Muslim community is the single largest ethnic group in two out of three districts in the Eastern Province (Ampara 42% and Trincomalee 35%). This makes it a hotbed for radicalisation. We hope to visit and conduct further research here once the pandemic situation improves.

One other limitation was not being able to reach many Muslim women in Mawanella. We had heard that the SLJI student movement had also conducted regular five day and seven-day courses for girls post Ordinary Level exams. However, post Easter Sunday attacks, these girls were not approachable and at that point we were told their parents feared for their safety if they spoke about it. Thus, we decided to give them some time before approaching them again. In future we hope to be able to reach some of the girls through online meetings.

VIII. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the World Youth Report (2003), the 'jihadism' promoted by al-Qaeda and Daesh is "almost exclusively associated with young men under the age of 25." While several suicide bombers on 21 April 2019 were in their mid-30s, the overwhelming majority of those arrested in Mawanella in connection with links to extremism were below 25. Groups such as ISIS promise an opportunity to 'fight the good fight', find employment, marriage and social advancement, and to live a traditional Islamic life — the precise deficits youth are experiencing across the globe. This is discussed in N Benotman and N Malik 'The Children of the Islamic State' Quilliam (2016); R Barrett

'Foreign Fighters in Syria; The Soufan Group (2014) 16-17; 'Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU' IPOL PE 509.977(2014); Neuchâtel Memorandum on Good Practices for Juvenile Justice in a Counterterrorism Context Global Counterterrorism Forum 4-5.

While making the connection between youth and violent extremism is relatively easy; policy and programmatic communities have been constrained by limited understanding of how the violent radicalization and extremism process evolves, including drivers, pathways and tipping points in intervening. One challenge is that there are no clear or universally accepted definitions that can be applied to radicalism, extremism and violent extremism. Indoctrination can also be understood as a benign phenomena, as the active pursuit of far-reaching societal change, that may or may not involve violence. However, in recent years the term has been generally used to imply violence. The UK's CONTEST or 'counter terrorism' strategy, for example, explained radicalisation as a "process by which people come to support terrorism and violent extremism and, in some cases, then to join terrorist groups" (Tusini 2019).

The concept of extremism too has evolved into present negative connotations such as rigidity, intolerance to alternatives and a penchant for violence. For example, Australia's 2015 'Living Safe Together' policy, defines extremism as a willingness to use or support the use of violence to further particular beliefs, including those of a political, social or ideological nature. (give reference here) The UK's Prevent strategy understands extremism as "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs." (give reference here)

When it comes to explaining the reasons why youth join violent extremist group, the most common explanations are the 'push' and 'pull' factors for radicalization and the decisions to join a violent extremist groups. A detailed description of these 'push' and 'pull' factors can be found in N. Bondokji, L Agrabi and K Wilkinson's 'Trapped Between Destructive Choices: Radicalisation Drivers Affecting Youth in Jordan' (WANA Institute 2016.)

IX. PUSH AND PULL FACTORS TOWARDS VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SRI LANKA

What can compel a young person to join a violent extremist group? Usually, academics claim that they

are driven by certain 'push' and 'pull' factors. Push factors are largely understood as the negative social, political, economic and cultural drivers of individual decision-making, while pull factors are positive characteristics or benefits offered by a group in exchange for participation.

There are a number of pull factors that extremist groups can use for its advantage in Sri Lanka. For example, there are deep seated communal and sectarian fault-lines that extremist groups can exploit to their advantage. These fault lines are discussed in depth in by Nagaraj and Haniffa (2017), where they discuss anti-Muslim violence over the past three to four decades outside of the North and East of Sri Lanka. Since the authors published their report, in 2017, the frequency of anti-Muslim riots has increased, thus increasing the fault lines. In fact, the Presidential Commission of Inquiry (PCoI) on the Easter Sunday attacks too noted that the deep seated communal and sectarian fault-lines have been a driving force for radicalization of Muslim youth. The Commission speaks about the anti Halal campaigns, boycotts of Muslim businesses and anti-Muslim riots, where Buddhist militant groups such as the BBS played a main role and the impact it has on Muslim youth. The Commission also speaks of how Zahran Hashim used the attacks on Muslims and various discrimination against them to attract and recruit young Muslim men.

Geographically too, South Asia gives Islamic extremist groups an opening to Central and Southeast Asia and offers great opportunities for hiding, recruiting, fundraising, and training in different parts of the region. For example, international terrorism expert, Rohan Gunaratna (2016) has mentioned that South Asia was pivotal to IS, in its eastward expansion into Myanmar and Southeast Asia and Westward expansion into Central Asia and the Caucus region. This has been discussed by Michael Kugelman (2015) in his article for Foreign Policy titled, "How ISIS Could Become a Potent Force in South Asia."

Another pull factor is the return of South Asian self-radicalised individuals who went to join IS in Iraq and Syria. Several witnesses at the PCoI on the Easter Sunday attacks revealed that those who had fought for IS were returning to Sri Lanka by 2016, as ISIS was suffering defeats in Syria and Iraq. The PCoI revealed that a number of factors, from interagency rivalry to political considerations, prevented the then government from taking the returning fighters into

custody. It was also revealed that Ibrahim brothers, who hail from Mawanella, too had received training in Syria.

The unregulated cyber space in Sri Lanka is another potential avenue which extremist organizations exploit vulnerable youth. There are 480 million internet users in South Asia and a significant amount of Sri Lankan youth have access to the internet through smart phones. In areas where terror groups cannot grow physically, they can use the cyber space to expand its footprint. The internet and social media were used by NTJ leader, Zahran Hashim to mobilize supporters and reach out to youths. While no systematic studies on this had been done in Sri Lanka, there is a wealth of resources to draw from other South Asian nations. Bibhu Prasad Routray, "Islamic State: Patterns of Mobilisation in India," (2015) and Farhan Zahid and Muhammad Ismail Khan, "Prospects of the Islamic State in Pakistan," (2016) explore the use of digital spaces by extremist groups and the emergence of educated militants from middle and upper-middle class of urban areas.

X. JUSTIFICATION FOR CHOOSING MAWANELLA AS THE RESEARCH SITE

We chose to concentrate on these areas because of the close connection the Easter Sunday attackers had to Mawanella and the story of radicalisation of its members from that town.

Zahran Hashim had three important networks that helped his organization carry out the Easter Sunday attacks. One was the JMI, run by Umair Mohammad, in Colombo and the other was in Mawanella run by Mohamed Ibrahim Sadeeq Abdulla. The JMI also included Abdul Latheef Jameel Mohamed, Mohomad Ibrahim Ilham Ahamed and Inshaf Ahmed Mohomad Ibrahim- three of the suicide bombers on Easter Sunday. According to the Easter Sunday Commission report and media reports, it seems that each of these networks were operating independently of each other prior to joining forces to attack on April 21, 2019. Each of them had their own pathway to radicalisation, be it from exposure to foreign preachers, cyberspace or local extremist organizations that planted the seed of radical Islam in their minds. Zahran brought all these groups together to execute the final plan.

When it comes to Zahran, he had built a strong following for the NTJ in Kattankudy and much has been written about the unique dynamics of the town which groom religious extremists (Ali 2009). However, less is known about how Mohamed

Ibrahim Sadeeq Abdulla, a youth born and brought up in Mawanella and able to attract a large number of youths to their cause.

The role of the SLJI in his transformation is also not highlighted much. This is an organization which has moulded youth for many decades in Mawanella, with branches around the country. It is recognized as a mainstream organization and was involved even in academic activities in Mawanella. The acceptance made it easy for certain SLJI members to convince a number of youth that violent extremism was a solution to their grievances.

In contrast, the NTJ and JMI did not have such exclusive access to youth in their communities. These groups instead were able to attract radicalised individuals from various parts of the country based on common beliefs or depended on their close family members for support.

Mawanella is a close-knit community and given the history of anti - Muslim riots, they tend to resolve issues within the community; similar to Velvettithurai the birthplace of the LTTE. SLJI, a large Islamist organization, has also been operating in Mawanella for decades. These factors allowed groups like the SLJI and NTJ to recruit youth and operate with relative safety, in a conducive environment for recruitment.

Mohomed Ibrahim Sadeeq Abdulla herein referred to as Sadeeq was all in all a product of Mawanella having spent the majority of his life and schooling there. Thus, we started our study with his story and looked at reasons that made Mawanella such a vulnerable place for religious extremism. It also helped us get perspective into some of the reasons which would have attracted youth like Sadeeq and others into organizations run by Zahran Hashim. Sadeeq was also able to attract many youths to his ideologies and organizations. These boys went under the radar of not only the authorities but also their families, with many not being aware of what their sons were being exposed to. Hence our final research question deals on the factors which led to these boys 'falling through the cracks'.

XI. THE IBRAHIM BROTHERS FROM MAWANELLA

According to the findings of the Easter Sunday Commission Report, Sadeeq studied at the Delgahagoda School and then at Zahira College, Mawanella in the mathematics stream (Tamil medium). He holds a BSc in Management from the

University of Dublin, Ireland through the ICBT Campus in Kandy.

Sadeeq like many of the young men in Mawanella joined the Sri Lanka Jamaat-e-Islami Student Movement (SLJISM) early on and like many he attended their five-day course for youth skills development after his Ordinary Level examinations. Thereafter he attended the seven-day course after his Advanced Level Examinations. Interviews conducted in Mawanella revealed that these programs have been carried out for decades by the SLJISM and it was common for young girls and boys to attend these courses (though the courses were designed differently for each gender).

His association with the SLJI gave him an early introduction to certain radical Islamic ideologies and helped him gain access to a body of young followers who would later be easily influenced by his teachings.

Initially, as Sadeeq became an active member of the SLJISM, he took part in several social services projects like flood relief, 'shramadana' activities in his local area, etc.... He was duly rewarded for his commitment when the organization appointed him as the National Youth Organizer from 2013-2015.

In 2011, investigations show that he met another member, Ahamed Munshif who approached him about an opportunity to travel to Turkey through SLJI, implying that he would be given arms training in Syria. In 2014, the trip became a reality and he travelled to Turkey for two months. Through the Commission we know that Sadeeq did cross the Turkey-Syria border and underwent a 40-day training program which included "physical and tactical training including weapon training."

Around October 2014, Sadeeq returned to Sri Lanka and according to interviews, started approaching young Muslims in the SLJI youth program about the ideologies he learnt. In 2015, there seems to be a backtracking of stance amongst the senior SLJI as they learn of the death of Mohamed Muhushin Sarfas Nilam aka Abu Surai Seylani; the first Sri Lankan Muslim fighting in Syria. They approach Sadeeq and ask that he leave his post in their organization. At this time, we also know that his brother Shahid had also been radicalized and he along with his father Ibrahim Moulavi were removed from the organization.

Interviews conducted in Mawanella had sources reveal that the SLJI leadership did not inform the rest of the membership as to why Sadeeq and his family

were removed. Thus, giving the family the opportunity to appear as 'ones who were wronged'. Sadeeq made use of this opportunity to build his reputation and following among a selected group of youth he has access to through the training programs. During his time as the National Organizer, he had also cultivated a special program called SMART for youth he said he saw 'potential' in. These were in addition to the five-day courses conducted by SLJI. These young men would later attend his and Zahran's special training programs in Hingula and other areas.

According to the Easter Sunday Commission findings, the camp in Hingula had close to 30 participants. These were children due to sit for their O/L examination from Mawanella, Kadugannawa and Delgoda.

"The lectures were on the IS. The participants were shown a small child being killed by the IS. The Digana incident was also mentioned, and the participants instructed that if attacked they should also attack."

Sadeeq was also responsible for the Buddha statue attacks in Mawanella in December 2018, an early warning of what was to come the very next year.

Soon after the Easter Sunday attacks, Sadeeq and his brother Shahid were arrested by the TID. Their families were asked to remain in Mawanella under house arrest and are being watched by intelligence officers. But the question is what happened to those boys Shahid and Sadeeq managed to convince of jihad?

Whilst we know of only 30 that were directly connected to the classes, interviews on the ground show that many more were exposed to these ideologies. In May 2021, the TID arrested another youth from Mawanella, Mohamed Shahim (29) for having conducted classes on Zahran's brand of extremism in Oluvil and Muttur. Thus, the authors believe that the network Sadeeq and his group managed to 'inspire' in Mawanella is very much alive and widespread, and many in the Muslim community may not be aware of this threat.

Post Easter Sunday attacks, the police took strict action to arrest many of the boys who were closely associated with the Ibrahim brothers in Mawanella. This left the close-knit community in Mawanella in shock with many of the parents, neighbours, teachers, and community members often noting that "They did not know what their children were up to". One teacher said, "We just thought they were going to

the mosque, there was no harm in that so we did not look into it."

Many of these boys were arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act noting that they would not be let out anytime soon. The government has set guidelines for a new deradicalization program but the authors of this research note that there needs to be a wider understanding of the problem before any program can be effective on the ground. Deradicalization of religious extremists is a much more complex task involving the participation of all community stakeholders including the religious establishment of the country.

Understanding the paths to vulnerability for these boys will, we hope, will also allow for regulators to better understand and design effective deradicalization programs.

XII. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

A study done by Iffat Idris (2018) on the recruitment process of youth to jihad in Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, sheds some light into what might be going on in Sri Lanka as well.

In Bangladesh Idris notes that youth were an attractive target due to their lack of previous criminal record, giving extremist groups more operational freedom. Further the youth were also more tech savvy, and able to navigate cyberspace to reach radical material online virtually undetected. In Bangladesh it was also noted that the extremist groups targeted youth from a diverse set of backgrounds, from "madrasa students to upper middle-class youth at private universities".

This was also seen in Sri Lanka where Zahran was able to attract youth like Sadeeq but also more well to do youth from Colombo like Abdul Latheef Jameel Mohammad who set off the bomb at Tropical Inn Dehiwala on April 21, and Inshaf Ahmed Ibrahim and Ilham Ibrahim; the sons of a rich spice trader and one of the main financiers of the Easter Sunday attacks.

The reasons why such a diverse group of individuals found common ground with each other despite their various situations in life is explained in Idris's report as the youth in Bangladesh being frustrated with a lack of "satisfactory levels of education, health and well-being, employment, political participation and civic participation".

Further Idris noted, "Young people share the frustration and anger of ordinary citizens at the political situation, weak governance, corruption and

failure to uphold the rule of law. A growing number of Bangladeshis are disconnected from family and community, disenfranchised from the country's disproportionately divided wealth and resources, and resentful against the existing political practices and deteriorating law and order situation."

Further the overall persecution of Muslims around the world seems to have a great impact in convincing youth towards joining jihad. A youth who spoke to us about this in Mawanella explained by the Sadeeq brothers would frequently show them videos of atrocities being committed against Muslims in countries like Palestine and Syria to get them on board with the idea of 'jihad'. "He would often tell us that we as Muslims have to fight back and defend ourselves against these crimes," said the youth. This trans nationalist view not only helped attract local youth in Mawanella to the cause of Jihad but also to the idea of being part of the larger cause of the Caliphate.

Youth grievances

The focus group discussions held with young men helped us gain a preliminary understanding as to what may have motivated many of the young men to join Sadeeq and his cause.

Firstly, the fear of being 'vulnerable' to attack as they lived surrounded by Sinhalese villages has been something that has often preoccupied the psyche of Mawanella Muslims. Many interviewees reported that whenever a riot broke down, they would always 'expect' it to spill into Mawanella. The anti Halal campaign, burqa ban and campaign against Muslim businesses had a great impact on the minds of the youth. This helped convince many youth to join the cause espoused by Sadeeq and Zahran.

Ahmed (32), one of the youth described it as follows:

"After 2016-2017, we realized that things had changed in Mawanella. People started to say that we need to fight back after Digana and Aluthgama. That, we as a community were vulnerable. People split into various groups. We ignored them, no one looked into what was happening in their own Masjid"

More importantly, he noted that, "All the boys went very quiet. These were very 'good boys', 'innocent' and some even from wealthy families".

According to Ahmed, the SMART program was attended by a few students chosen by Sadeeq after O/Ls. The SMART program changed the boys and within 4-5 months, "they returned home with a beard

and changed personality." Many noted that these boys kept to themselves and only mixed with Sadeeq and his group of friends.

Further Sadeeq, many of the young men informed us, was a 'polite and charismatic individual,' with an ability to convince the young. This greatly helped convert many followers onto his side.

Although mistrust about each community simmered among the youth in Mawanella, the researchers found that there was no safe space for them to openly express their worries or concerns. Each community, the Sinhalese as well as the Muslims, acted in silos, never finding common space to meet and quell their fears about the other.

Acting in Silos

Soon after the 2001 Mawanella riots, an organization called Foundation for Mutual Understanding (FMU) was formed. This was made up of community leaders from both the Muslim as well as the Sinhalese communities. They hoped that they would have regular meetings and events to come together and discuss any issues each might be having with the other. The aim was to prevent another riot such as that of 2002. It is noteworthy that there is no youth representation in this committee.

J. M Niwas, a teacher by profession is a founding member of the committee, he told us the researchers that in the early years they held many events but post 2008, there was a lull in activity. It was once again reactivated with the campaigns launched by the BBS in 2013-2014.

"This helped us successfully keep groups like the Sihala Raavaya and BBS at bay," he said.

Post Easter Sunday attacks, this group was once again called on to initiate an interfaith group with the involvement of key Buddhist monks in the area, to keep the peace in the area.

"In 2001 the issue was very local. Now it has become national," remarked Niwas.

He noted that they managed to act as a bridge between communities because the elders in the Muslim community still maintains strong ties with those in the Sinhalese community. Many of them had studied in school together and were able to appeal to personal relationships in times of distress. However younger Muslims and Sinhalese do not intermingle and it would be increasingly difficult for open debates and discussions. Mr. Niwas, noted that Muslims now mostly go to either Tamil or English

medium Muslim schools. There are also no social spaces for the youth of the two communities to mix.

“20 years ago, close to 50% of the student population in Mayurupada National School were Muslims. Now less than 10% attend it (due to both lack of interest and not getting admission into the school, girls do not attend due to the dress code).”

The generation which then studied in Tamil would also send their children to Tamil medium schools as they could then help with schoolwork.

“There is also a notion that if Muslims went to Sinhalese schools they would be ‘wrongly influenced’ and be ‘less Muslim,’” observed Niwas, adding, “Mawanella is located in a precarious balance. It can easily tilt either way.”

This tilt depends on the kind of group a young man may fall into in Mawanella. According to Imad (27), it is very important for a man in Mawanella to belong to an Islamic ‘sect’ or ‘movement’.

“You get isolated if you don’t belong to any of them,” he added.

Mawanella has provided an unusually fertile breeding ground for many of the Islamic movements in the country. Apart from the SLJI, the space is shared by organizations like the Thowheed Jamaat (and its many sub groups), Tabliq Jamaat, and other movements.

For the youth, these movements provide brotherhood and belonging, in addition to something to do, in a city which offers very ‘little entertainment’ or ‘activity’ for the young, said Zakir (26).

Najeeb (27) who runs his father’s construction company and attended an international school in Kandy, joined the Tabliq Jamaat movement in his early 20s. He said he “found peace and brotherhood,” with them. Soon after, he convinced his father to join the movement and they together would travel the country proselytizing the movement.

“I find this as an opportunity to help people understand what Islam is, to explain our religion to all,” he said.

When the researchers asked Najeeb if he was worried about the future and if he had any future plans, he said, “Our time in the world is very short, I am working towards my hereafter.”

It seemed that being part of movements such as these helped certain youth alleviate any fears they may have over their future economic or political survival. Thus not requiring them to be active participants in their wider social community, as they find ‘escape’ in the ‘movement’.

Did the parents know?

According to the Easter Sunday commission reports, a majority of the youth who joined Zahran’s group was from Mawanella. Over 30 young men from Mawanella have been arrested so far and are detained in various prisons. Given this scenario, the researchers also wanted to know how such a large number of youths went under the radar, unnoticed by their own families and the close-knit community in Mawanella.

M.Z.M. Ayub, the Secretary at the Masjidul Huda Mosque and a teacher at Zahira College said the arrests shocked them. He had taught some of those who had been arrested and saw many of them regularly at the mosque. However, he had found no reason for him to be concerned.

“The families of these boys definitely think it is wrong. They did not know this was happening to their sons. We thought they were learning Islam,” he said.

Post attacks, the heads of the Jamaat-e-Islami have stopped all five day and seven-day courses. Mr Ayub noted that parents and community leaders have now become more vigilant of the movements of their children, but it is unsure whether they can detect the kind of extremist material the children may be exposed to.

XIII. CONCLUSIONS

We would like to note that the details uncovered thus far call for further investigation and we hope to continue with our research in future. However, from our preliminary research we find that a few recommendations can be made.

Firstly, as there is a general lack of understanding as to what ‘religious extremism’ is and its outwards manifestations, we find that the government needs to make the parents and community leaders aware of the outward manifestations of extremism. What these signs are can be decided upon by a panel of religious experts, representatives of civil society and government officials. Secondly there needs to be greater monitoring of the role played by religious organizations at educational institutes. Finally, there

needs to be more common avenues created for communities to come together.

Future research agenda

1. The authors plan to meet young women from Mawanella as NTJ has been interested in attracting a female cadre. Mawanella was an area chosen to have these special classes for women and a few of them have been arrested. We are interested in finding out what reasons attracted them to join Islamic militancy and whether these reasons were different from the boys.
2. Further research has to be done to understand what makes Mawanella Muslims vulnerable to extremist propaganda and recruitment.
3. More investigations need to be done about various Islamic movements and their educational establishments operating in Mawanella and the critical role they play in the Muslim community.

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Annex 1

General Questionnaire used for interviews

Questionnaire

1. Please introduce yourselves to us (name, age, family background, and home town, school, employment)
2. Muslim community has been under a lot of pressure by various elements in the last few years, in your personal opinion since when do you think the targeting of the Muslims began?
3. Have you ever experienced discrimination, based on your religion? Please describe in detail (including security forces)
4. Has this changed your behaviour in any way? Are you hesitant to display symbols of your faith or are you more assertive in its showing? Are you worried about taking public transport? Are you worried about female family members?
5. How important is your Muslim identity to you?
6. How have things changed for you after the Easter Sunday attacks? Have you lost friends, etc..
7. What do you think of the MMDA?
8. Do you think that the Muslim community must change certain practices to better assimilate?

Women

1. Do you think the experiences of young Muslims differ by gender? If so, how?
2. Have things changed for you as a Muslim woman after April 21 attacks?
3. Anti-Muslim sentiments are not new, have these changed the way you look at yourself?
4. How does the choice of clothing affect your sense of identity?
5. Are you involved in issues related to young people? MMDA for example?
6. Do you feel that there are social mobility issues for young Muslims, especially women?

Religious education

1. Where did you gain your religious education from?
2. What are the other channels of receiving religious information?
3. Do you participate in any community events?

Participation in political activity

- Are you a member of a political party? Trade Union?

1. Do you take part in any political protests?
2. Do you belong any non-religious associations?
3. Do you think the government has done enough to ensure the security of the Muslim community?

Challenges of being a Muslim youth

Education/Work/ Language

1. Do you work/run a Muslim business? How has this affected you? And your views?
2. Do you think education is important for social mobility?
3. To what extent do you feel a sense of belonging in your- 1. Muslim community, 2. Wider non-Muslim community?

-What works to make you feel you belong? What works against this?