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THE IMPACT OF POST-TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION PROCESS ON ETHNIC HARMONY IN SRI LANKA: A STUDY OF MALAY ETHNIC COMMUNITY IN HAMBANTOTA

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ABSTRACT

Tsunami tidal waves struck off the western coast of Sri Lanka (SL) on the morning of 26 December 2004, causing a massive death toll in the coastal areas of the country, including the district of Hambantota. Hambantota is home to many ethnic communities where the SL Malay community was prominent over SL Moors (both communities were followers of Islam) and co-existed in harmony with other communities during pre-Tsunami. However, many cases were reported of the effect of ethnic disharmony with strident propaganda against Islamic practices in Hambantota during the post-tsunami context. Therefore, the study aimed to investigate the nexus between the SL Malay ethnic identity and ethnic harmony during the post-tsunami context in Hambantota using qualitative research techniques, and it was instrumented through twenty semi-structured interviews using a purposeful sampling method. Resultantly, it was found that due to the death toll of SL Malay community members and the acceleration of the religious radicalisation process in the post-tsunami context, the Tsunami had affected the ethnic identity of the SL Malay community in Hambantota, resulting in ethnic disharmony in the present-day context, even after 19 years since the Tsunami engulfed the country. Finally, this study urged the requirement to empower Malays, who were considered moderate followers of Islam, to engage in community-based ethnic disharmony prevention programmes while serving as the first line of defence in Sri Lanka against the propagation of ethnic radicalisation in the country as it could also be a threat to the national security of the country as well the region.

Keywords: *Ethnic harmony, Hambantota district, Sri Lanka Malay identity, Tsunami*

Introduction

Background of the Study

Studies on ethnic conflicts in developing countries have gained prominence in recent years with the escalation of socially fabricated overlapping differences amongst ethnic identities. Ranaweera (2021) affirmed that the best antidote to ethnic conflict is to break the imagined walls of socially constructed differences. In a diverse way, Rameez (2015) stated that due to the influence of dominant ethnic identities, minority ethnic identities become unstable and are subsumed subsequently. In this milieu, SL (Sri Lanka) has also been home to many ethnic minorities, including Malays, since the colonial era, and they have been able to co-exist in harmony with different ethnic communities in the country (Rassool, 2013).

Simultaneously, Rassool (2013) reports that the Malay presence in Sri Lanka is the product of Western imperial tactics, and they could have existed there from Portuguese dominance (which lasted until 1656). However, the majority of Sri Lankan Malays can trace their genealogy back to groups evacuated during

the Dutch and British administrations (1656-1796 and 1796-1948, respectively) (Hussainmiya, 1987). Dewaraja (1994) reports on the genesis of SL Moors, whose identity is inextricably linked to SL Malays. She claims that as the Caliphate of Baghdad declined in the late 13th century, Arab trade in the Indian Ocean reduced. This commerce was taken over by Indian Muslims, who arose along Sri Lanka's coastlines. The Dutch and British called these communities 'Coast Moors'. At present, both SL Malays and SL Moors follow Islam as their religion.

The religion of Islam has been experiencing a challenging anecdote worldwide, as mentioned in the chronicles related to tension among ethnic identities where some scholars, for instance, Singh (2012) stated that what has come to dominate in the security radar screen of South East Asian countries (and elsewhere) is extremism and terrorism associated with Islam. Notwithstanding the previous bout of anti-Muslim riots since the implementation of the Official Language Act of 1956 in the SL context, many scholarly contributions have emphasised that there is an escalation of strident propaganda against Muslims in Sri Lanka in the recent past that did not exempt even those who are considered as moderate followers of Islam in the country like SL Malays (Ali, 2019; Rassool, 2013; Saldin, 2001). However, the actual extent and nature of anti-Muslim campaigns and hate speech gained public attention mainly after the triumphant victory of Sri Lankan military forces against LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in the year 2009 (Ali, 2019). In this backdrop, Jayasuriya (2020) emphasises that empowering moderate Islam in SL is one of the interventions that the state could deploy to roll back or stagnate the radicalisation¹ process and without such mechanism has pushed the country towards a more significant security concern in the present day. Simultaneously, he states that Islamic extremism in Sri Lanka is a decades-long radicalisation process. Further, he argues that the present radicalisation process has displaced moderate Islam in SL, and Muslims are self-alienating from the rest of the communities in Sri Lanka.

Alarming the state and law-making apparatus in the country, Gunaratna (2023) stresses that if Sri Lanka needs to create another Zaharan, the ring leader of the Easter Attack of 2019, it is enough to lift the ban on foreign preachers. He questions why a rehabilitation programme has not been built yet, even after four years of the attack. His narrative appeals to those who are followers of moderate Islam in SL, like Malays, especially those with scholarly backgrounds, to confront and expose prevailing situations related to the radicalisation process at the grassroots level and foundational stages as well.

Adding a similar perspective to the issue at hand, the primary

¹ Romaniuk (2015) describes "Radicalization" as a method by which individuals adopt violent extremist views and ideologies which could trigger them to commit terrorist acts.

author of this study, being a native of Hambantota district, observed that even though both the ethnic identities (Malay and Moor) followed the religion of Islam, there was a situation where anti-Muslim campaigns were not dominant during pre-Tsunami context in Hambantota district. Nevertheless, this situation was changed during the post-tsunami context with the dominant presence of “Thawhid Jamaath” and “Thabligh Jamaath”.² Even though all community members co-existed in harmony during the pre-Tsunami context in Hambantota district, where the population of SL Malays was higher in number compared to the SL Moors³.

The present study examined the security landscape discerned above. It was backed by the key research findings of the thesis submitted by the primary researcher himself on the impact of the Tsunami on SL Malays in line with the research space Nordhoff (2013a) and the scholarly contribution of Jayasuriya (2020), who identifies the Easter Attack of 2019 as “Unpacking Islamic radicalisation in Sri Lanka.”

Accordingly, when analysing research data⁴, a dire requirement existed to ascertain whether there had been an impact of the post-tsunami reconstruction process on ethnic harmony in Hambantota district, which was a major Malay enclave affected by the Tsunami,⁵ Even those who were considered moderate followers of Islam in SL, like SL Malays, could have been subjected to both push and pull factors of the radicalisation process.⁶

The Effect of the Tsunami on SL Malay Identity

On the morning of 26 December 2004, Tsunami tidal waves were caused by a massive earthquake and it killed thousands of citizens, wrecked infrastructure, and inundated vast tracts of coastal territory (Sri Lanka, Disaster Management Center, 2005). More than 31000 deaths were reported in SL, and the tidal wave primarily impacted the coastal areas in the districts of Jaffna, Mullativ, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Hambantota, Galle and Matara (ibid).

Table No. 1 compares the SL Malay community members in the year 2002 and year 2012 in only the first, second and third largest Malay enclaves in Sri Lanka (by district): Colombo, Gampaha, and Hambantota. Hambantota district, which is also the area of focus in this study, is identified to be the severely affected SL Malay enclave in the country of its death toll. Hambantota district

² Dr. Ranga Jayasuriya describes “Tabligh Jamaat” as a peaceful missionary movement that is strict on religious observations. It was rooted in the Mid-1950 and claimed to eschew politics at beginning of its mission in SL. He also describes Thawhid Jamath was originally set up in SL as a branch of Tamilnadu Thawheed Jamaat and they are considered as the most active purveyors of Wahhabism in SL, a puritanical form of Sunni Islam.

³ Sri Lanka, Department of Census and Statistics. (Accessed in 2023) <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/abstract2020/CHAP2>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ As per Dr. Ranga Jayasuriya, push factors are the conditions emanating from the structural context like marginalization, poor governance while pull factors are individual motivations and processes. Further, Banlaoi (2012) identifies two pull factors of terrorism as ideational (such as beliefs, perspectives etc) and material (such as monetary inducement, perks etc).

reported a death toll of 3067 and 963 missing (Sri Lanka, Disaster Management Center, 2005)The data in Table No. 1 is taken from statistics for the 2002 and 2012 censuses, respectively, conducted by the Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics.

Table 1: Comparison of Malays by district in Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka, Department of Census and Statistics 2002 and 2012)

District	Number in the year 2002	Number in the year 2012
Colombo	21778	14,444
Gampaha	13683	11,658
Hambantota	7255	8164

Research Problem

Even though many studies have emphasised that many socio, political, religious and economic influences are subsuming the identity of minority communities that include Tamils, Moors and Malays (Banlaoi, 2012; Pieris, 2006; Perinpanayagam, 2008; Rameez, 2015; Rassool, 2013; Jayasuriya, 2020; Ranaweera, 2021; Gunaratna, 2023)These studies lack information on how the Tsunami has particularly affected the SL Malay ethnic identity and its impact on ethnic harmony in the country.

Nevertheless, the need for an exploratory study relating to the actual circumstances under which the Malays in Hambantota were exposed post-tsunami has been emphasised by many scholars (Nordhoff, 2013a, 2013b; Rameez, 2015; Rassool, 2013)Thus, many studies have overlooked the extent to which the Tsunami has contributed to the shift of circumstances in the Hambantota district regarding SL Malay ethnic identity and its impact on ethnic harmony in the area.

Significance of the Study

Rassool (2013) and Rameez (2015) state that Hambantota is where the SL Malay community members possess considerable social capital because they are multilingual, as most Malays can speak Malay, Sinhala and Tamil equally. Similarly, some non-Malays could fluently speak SLM (Sri Lankan Malay Language). He further states that there have been ample circumstances to prove that SL Malays co-existed in harmony with other communities in SL. However, Ali (2019), Jayasuriya (2020) and Gunaratna (2023) emphasise the continuation of anti-Muslim riots and strident propagation of Islamophobia in SL after the Easter Sunday attack as Muslims in SL were subjected to self-alienation from the rest of the communities in the country.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of the present study is to examine the impact of the post-tsunami reconstruction process on ethnic harmony in Hambantota. This prominent SL Malay enclave was severely affected by the Tsunami.

Research Questions

The study aims to address the research concerns that follow:

- i. What were the key elements of the post-tsunami reconstruction process that prevailed in Hambantota?
- ii. What were the push and pull factors of the religious radicalisation process that emanated during the post-tsunami context and its effect on Malays of the Hambantota district?
- iii. How did the post-tsunami reconstruction process impact the ethnic harmony in the Hambantota district and its effect on National Security?

Research Sites

Hambantota District is situated on Sri Lanka's south-east coastline. It covers a region of 2,593 km and possesses a dry environment. Hambantota town serves as both the district capital and administrative headquarters. The district consists of 12 Divisional Secretariat divisions (DS)⁷. The following Google image illustrates the sites where the SL Malay community members lived and were affected by the Tsunami.

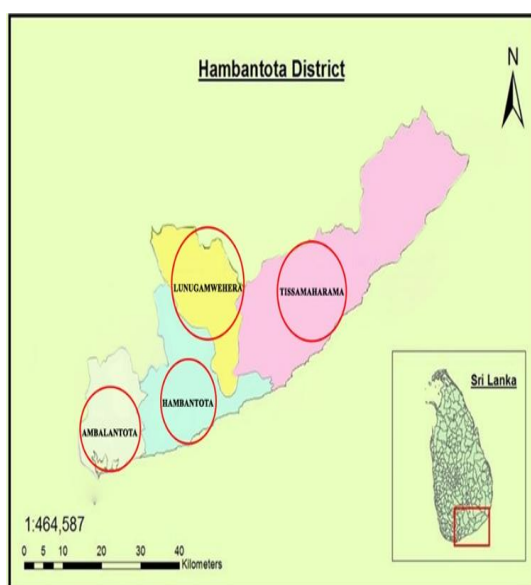


Figure 1. Areas affected by the Tsunami in the Hambantota district (Sri Lanka, Divisional Secretariat of Hambantota)

Research Limitations

The main limitation would be the reliability of responses since participants may not disclose certain sensitive information owing to security concerns. Due to religious and ethical obstacles, interview participants may also tend to conceal certain information. Another limitation is the sense of fear amongst participants, which would result in their being subjected to legal prosecution if the actual data is disclosed. Another limitation that the study has observed is the contradictory nature of the perspectives of individuals, especially on an ethnicity-based issue, to analyse data and derive a firm conclusion.

⁷ Hambantota District Secretariat. (Accessed in 2023) www.hambantota.dist.gov.lk.

Literature Review

Presence of Malays in Sri Lanka

There is a considerable amount of literary work on the presence of Malays in SL (Hussainmiya, 1987, 2008; Nordhoff, 2013a, 2013b; Rameez, 2015; Rassool, 2013, 2014; Saldin, 2001). These scholarly contributions have helped the present study about the maintenance of SL Malay identity during the pre-tsunami context and the challenges faced by the SL Malays during the post-tsunami period towards maintaining their identity.

To summarise the information about the presence of Malays in SL as per the available resources in literature, the Dutch period can be considered a defining movement for the Malay community in Sri Lanka as any other cases of the presence of Malays in Sri Lanka were numerically negligible or could have been absorbed into the dominant Sinhala Buddhist community (Hussainmiya, 1987).

Hussainmiya (2008) states that there were also two primary groupings during the Dutch. First, a group of famous exiles from the Moluku and Lesser Sunda Islands made up around 10% of the Malay population. Second, there were the troops who hailed from many ethnic groups.

The Effect of the Tsunami towards SL Malay Identity and its Impact on Communal Harmony in the Hambantota District

The principal author of this study, being a native of the area affected mainly by the Tsunami, i.e. Hambantota, witnessed the SL Malay community's circumstances change in the Hambantota area during the post-tsunami period. Further, the principal author of the current study experienced how the members of the SL Malay community in the area were constrained in terms of their identity and especially about the use of their language, not just because of the number of deaths that caused a setback for the Malay community members, but also due to many more subtle socio-economic and religious influences that engulfed the area after the Tsunami.

Although the study found no attempt by scholars to identify the actual effect of the Tsunami towards SL Malay identity, Nordhoff (2013a, 2013b) and Rameez (2015) have emphasised the significance of conducting studies on the impact of the Tsunami on SL Malay identity. Therefore, as stated, the study attempts to fill this scholarly lacuna in sociolinguistics.

The Role of Reflexivity in the Study

The research focus is mainly on the impact of the post-tsunami reconstruction process on ethnic harmony in Hambantota and its relation to Malay ethnic identity in Hambantota. To achieve the above, this chapter discusses the role of reflexivity throughout the thesis. Accordingly, this section describes the role of reflexivity in this study and how it has shaped the outlook of the present study. This reflexivity also leads to the study's research methodology.

Rassool (2013) emphasises the significance of the role of reflexivity

in the sociolinguistic study, and she defines the term reflexivity as an awareness and an acknowledgement of how the researchers' identity has influenced the way the researchers conducted the research. In the context of the present study, the primary researcher witnessed the Tsunami as a native of Hambantota when it took place and was also an active member of a youth community that helped the survivors of Hambantota amidst the calamity. Further, the primary researcher witnessed the entire shift of circumstances from the pre-tsunami context to the post-tsunami context as a youth.

Further, this study is influenced by the effort of the researchers to be more liberal in religious interpretations and be a follower of moderate Islam. Above all, the primary researcher is a survivor of the tsunami and has witnessed first-hand how SL Malay's identity was challenged after the tsunami. Furthermore, it caused ethnic disharmony in the area, the most crucial element in the current study. The entire research area is adequately familiar to the primary researcher. Therefore, the study had easy access to many participants since he knew the area where he had lived for more than 35 years.

Research Methodology

Introduction

Sarantakos (2013) defines a research technique as a theoretical perspective that outlines how research should be conducted in a particular order. Research is an organised effort to answer relevant questions concerning phenomena or occurrences using scientific techniques (Bist, 2015). Qualitative research evaluates data using words and sentences, whereas quantitative research uses figures and statistics (Cooper & Schindler, 2005).

Research Design

This is qualitative research by nature, where a thematic analysis of the interviews is conducted to formulate the results. Considering the requirement of conducting a study of the impact of the post-tsunami reconstruction process on ethnic harmony concerning the SL Malay ethnic community in Hambantota, a qualitative research method is utilised in the current research as it serves the objective of this particular work to investigate the impact of post-Tsunami reconstruction process on ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka concerning Malay ethnic identity in Hambantota effectively.

Research Strategy

Uyangoda (2010) states that interviews could be used as a research strategy in qualitative research studies, and similarly, the present study applied interviews as the research strategy.

Data Sources

The research would collect both primary and secondary data to serve the purpose of the research. Personal acquaintances conversing with the present ethnic issue in Hambantota were earmarked to gather data.

Primary data was collected from the following sources:

- i. Data would be collected from SL-Malay natives of Hambantota.
- ii. Data would be collected from non-Malay natives of Hambantota.
- iii. Data would be collected from Malays (with scholarly background) who are non-natives of Hambantota.

For the secondary data, evidence from both local and international literature was also gathered to understand the impact of post-tsunami reconstructions on ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka, with special reference to the SL Malay ethnic community. This is analysed with secondary sources such as books, commentaries, journal articles, and observations. Academic journal articles were also analysed, but the existing literature that relates the concepts of tsunami and radicalisation together is hardly observed.

Thematic Analysis

Maguire and Delahunt (2017) explain theme analysis as a method for interpreting qualitative data. It generally refers to a collection of texts, such as an interview or transcript. The research carefully evaluates the data to uncover common themes--topics, concepts, and patterns of meaning that appear again. There are several techniques for thematic analysis, but the most typical one involves six steps: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, evaluating themes, defining and labelling themes, and writing up. This is intended to avoid confirmation bias when formulating an analysis. Since qualitative data have been collected in the present study, data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach in order to derive a firm conclusion based on the data gathered.

Sampling Techniques

The present study used a purposeful sampling technique as the study could maximise the advantage of being a member of the community who studied in his own community. In order to ensure a balance of the two extremes of the individual perspectives about the impact of the post-tsunami reconstruction process on ethnic harmony in SL and its relation to Malay ethnic identity in SL, initially, it was selected to interview 14 individuals (10 from the Malay community and four from the Non-Malay community-Hambantota district). This includes 6 older speakers of SLM (above 50, including 2 females) and 4 Malay youth representatives (below the age of 30, including 1 female representative).

Further, another set of 6 Malays (2 older representatives including 2 females) were selected from other parts of the country with SL Malay identity. Then, in order to bridge the gap between two extremes in the socioeconomic spectrums in relation to Malay ethnicity in SL, Malays from three districts (Colombo, Gampaha and Kandy) were selected to represent the upper social class. In contrast, the Malays of the Hambantota district represent a rural faction. Further, all the interview participants (20 participants) were also subject to categorisation based on their education.

Category 1 is (10 participants) -above average-educated faction with a degree/government teachers with National Diploma/Technical Officers. Category 2 (5 participants) is an

averagely-educated faction who has up to Advanced Level education) Moreover, category 3 (5 participants) is an average educated faction attending Ordinary level standard and below. In addition, to maintain gender equity, the present study interviewed seven females (all Malays) and 13 males (4 non-Malays). Accordingly, the primary researcher, being a Malay community member and a native of Hambantota, purposefully decided on the sample to get an added advantage for the study.

Interview

According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), semi-structured interviews follow a middle path, which has positive outcomes because it enables the researchers to conduct a deep analysis and ask counter-questions about the interviewee's responses. Semi-structured interviews are often conducted using pre-formulated questions. However, depending on the interviewee's character and how they answer, the sequence can be varied, and the investigators may ask questions that are not predetermined.

On the other hand, in the current investigation, the researchers tried to retain the interviewee on course without diverting from the core issue at hand. Furthermore, the researcher was highly adaptable and approachable in doing the interview. It built up a friendly environment, making it comfortable for participants to engage effectively in the interview. Because of this flexible strategy, the questions depended on the interviewee's responses instead of the pre-determined questions for the interview.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Thematic Analysis - Situation prior to the Tsunami and during the transition

Themes	Codes
1. Key elements observed in the post-tsunami reconstruction process in Hambantota.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Conduct religious rituals for the deceased. b. To assist in finding missing ones from the Tsunami. c. Provide legal/ psychological aid for the affected people. d. Provide/shelter/finance food/clothing/sanitary requirements for the affected people. e. Construction of religious institutions.
2. Acceleration of the radicalisation process in Hambantota during the post-tsunami context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Severely deteriorated psychological condition of the affected people. b. Replacement of the Board of Management of religious institutions by non-natives of Hambantota. c. Condemnation of SL Malay identity/language in Hambantota. d. Propagation of the norm "uncertainty" in Islam and extreme

3. Self-alienating of Muslims from the rest of the communities in Hambantota	<p>devotion to religion.</p> <p>e. Firm establishment of radicalisation agents in Hambantota.</p> <p>a. Severely deteriorated psychological condition of the affected people.</p> <p>b. Replacement of the Board of Management of religious institutions by non-natives of Hambantota.</p> <p>c. Condemnation of SL Malay identity/language in Hambantota.</p> <p>d. Propagation of the norm “uncertainty” in Islam and extreme devotion to religion.</p> <p>e. Firm establishment of radicalisation agents in Hambantota. Emergence of many Madrasa in the area governed by non-natives of Hambantota. Gaining recognition by non-native (Hambantota) preachers of Islam who promoted Wahabism in public forums, replacing many Malay/Moor preachers who promoted ethnic harmony in the area but died due to the Tsunami. The tendency amongst female Muslims to wear a Burka/Abaya with or without face cover in Hambantota.</p>
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Thematic Analysis - The Post-Tsunami Situation

Themes	Codes
4. Moderate Islam being subjected to both push and pull factors in the post-tsunami context (Hambantota District)	<p>a. Funding/income generating sources by Arabic organisations.</p> <p>b. Marginalization of Malays</p> <p>c. Anti-Muslim riots/hate speech/Islamophobia that did not exempt Malays who peacefully co-existed with other communities in Hambantota.</p>
5. The prevailing situation in Hambantota in respect of ethnic disharmony.	<p>a. Presence of Moor community/ non-natives of Hambantota (Muslims) who currently govern many religious institutions. They do not represent moderate Islam in some cases.</p> <p>b. The identity of Malay ethnic identity has been challenged and subjected to degeneration.</p> <p>c. Muslims (both Moors and Malays) have become easy targets of the radicalisation process.</p>

The Impact of the Post-Tsunami Reconstruction Process on Ethnic Harmony amongst Communities in Hambantota

Considering the responses received from the SL Malay/Non-SL Malay community members in the Hambantota area, it is evident that there were bouts of anti-Muslim riots even before the Tsunami. The Malays proved this from another part of the country and the female responders who took part in the interview. However, it was affirmed only by natives of Hambantota (both Malays and non-Malays) that Muslims of Hambantota were well safeguarded by a set of older Malay community members against ethnic disharmony as they had a sense of respect amongst other ethnic identities.

Thus, it could be stated that SL Malays coexisted in harmony with other ethnic identities, as SL Malay identity was prominent during the pre-Tsunami context in Hambantota despite a few reported incidents of ethnic disharmony. However, it was either less dominant or not peculiarly related to the Malay ethnic identity in Hambantota but to the entire race of Muslims in SL.

In addition, some have highlighted that their village, Hambantota, has been sidelined in the endeavours of many Malay elites owing to the view that Hambantota is a village where low social class members live compared to the rest of the SL Malay community. Thus, the natives of Hambantota (Both Malays and non-Malays) possessed firsthand experience on the issue and provided the assertion that the older generation of SL Malays co-existed in harmony with other communities in the area, mainly because they were multilingual. They had liberalised points of view in terms of Islamic teachings in most of the cases. This older generation, who lived during the pre-tsunami, was the guiding spirit of the younger generation, setting an example of how to live in harmony with other communities. However, the death toll of most of the older generations from the Tsunami has created a damaging setback in this regard, and the present SL Malay population is subjected to a more incredible assimilation process in the event of intervention of religious groups (not only Islamic) governed by non-natives of Hambantota in the area.

Further, Malays were dispersed into different housing projects after the Tsunami as most of their habitats were damaged by the Tsunami. Meanwhile, non-natives of the Hambantota area also settled down in such housing facilities along with them by means of transfer of deeds and political lineage. This situation has also created a sense of suspicion among different ethnic identities in the area as they are not familiar with each other, which is observed to be a conducive factor in establishing ethnic harmony in the area. Some participants (Malays and non-Malays of Hambantota) responded that it also created severe psychological effects on the lives of SL Malay community members as they did not find a purpose to preserve an ethnic identity amidst a catastrophic situation.

Moreover, some pointed out the fact that even the death of the

young populace too must have affected them numerously as they had the association with the older generation so that they could have passed identity markers to the future generation if they had survived. The natives of Hambantota highlighted that many Malay children became orphans due to the Tsunami, and subsequently, they were adopted by their relatives with some other racial identity. Further, there were also instances where some SL Malay community members who became widows/widowers had to find alternative ways of nurturing their offspring through re-marriages with other community members where the practices of SL Malay identity by the remaining SL Malay community members were also subjected to deterioration ultimately.

Therefore, it can reasonably be concluded that the Tsunami had an impact on SL Malay identity in terms of the number of deaths that occurred to Malay members and also other social effects, which ultimately caused a massive setback in SL Malay identity. It has been replaced by the practices of other ethnic communities in the area, which is a deviation from the traditional SL Malay way of life.

As these practices are new to other ethnic communities in the area, traits of suspicion have begun to emerge amongst other ethnic communities towards the SL Malay community as well. On the contrary, the interview participants from other parts of the country vaguely knew about the actual situation in the Hambantota area regarding SL Malay identity and its relation to ethnic harmony. They just concluded that the Tsunami created a massive number of deaths of SL Malay community members in Hambantota. However, Malays from other parts of the country (non-natives of Hambantota) pointed out the importance of tracing the insights of the natives from the Hambantota area to get a clear idea of the issue highlighted in this study.

Thus, their responses revealed that they were subjected to a drastic transformation in terms of religion due to the sudden intervention of hardline religious groups in the post-tsunami context in helping to build up the lives of the victims against the backdrop of the norm of “uncertainty” gained ground in the hearts of the natives of Hambantota. To this end, specific Islamic movements such as “Thawhid and “Thabligh Jamaath” groups also pioneered the propagation of many region-based (Islamic) projects and reconstruction of religious places under the patronage of major Arabic organisations in the area. Resultantly, the hegemony of the Malay community over the religion in the area was replaced by the Moor community in the disguise of one umbrella term, “Muslims”.

They asserted that the organisations that funded the populace of the Malay community in Hambantota during the post-tsunami period were headed by the members of the Moor community, mainly the wealthy business people who were non-natives of Hambantota and settled down in the district after the Tsunami. This was well backed up by the political leaders who were

eagerly waiting to gain mileage through assimilating minority groups into one major sect, not only owing to their concern over votes but also due to the strident anti-Muslim agenda which was hovering in Sri Lanka during that time as a requirement existed for all the pursuers of Islam in Sri Lanka to be united under one flag called “Muslims”.

In this milieu, many organisations governed by non-natives of Hambantota thoroughly engaged in rebuilding activities that included generating income sources and reconstructing religious places with less participation in Malay organisations in such philanthropic activities. It was only the individual attempts of Malays across the Island and abroad that enormously contributed to helping the helpless but not as organisations highlighting the identity of “Sri Lanka Malays”. It was proved that the impact of post-tsunami reconstructions is visible in Hambantota even after 19 years since the Tsunami engulfed the area. It has been aggravating the causes leading to ethnic disharmony in the district of Hambantota in the present-day context as even those who represent moderate Islam in SL, like Malays, are also exposed to both pull and push factors of the radicalisation process in Hambantota.

Conclusion

The study found that a number of Malay speakers, including the younger generation, were able to maintain SL Malay identity in Hambantota prior to the Tsunami. Owing to their way of life, which included more liberal perspectives in their religious interpretations, they were able to register a sense of recognition amongst other ethnic communities. They were considered moderate followers of Islam in SL.

Further, it has been found that the involvement of Malay organisations during the post-Tsunami context has been inadequate or somewhat unrecognisable in contrast to the involvement of other organisations that mainly promoted “Thawhid” and “Thabligh Jamath” practices with a greater emphasis on “Uncertainty” in Islamic teaching and denounced SL Malay practices in the aftermath of the Tsunami. This move ultimately changed the attitude of Hambantota Malays towards SL Malay identity, who were also more liberal in their religious interpretation prior to the Tsunami. These groups criticised SL Malay practice for being liberal in their religious interpretation and use of the Malay language in religious forums. It resulted in a drastic change in SL Malay identity in the area. It created a sense of suspicion among other ethnic communities over 19 years after the Tsunami. There is a possibility that the situation will be aggravated in future if remedial measures are not implemented soon.

The situation has intensified with the dispersion of SL Malay community members from the area owing to massive construction programmes that ensued soon after the Tsunami in the area. Many “Housing Projects” were constructed, and the ownerships are

presently claimed by many non-natives of Hambantota who were unaffected by the tsunami from other parts of the country. Most of the present younger generation of Hambantota, irrespective of their ethnic identity, are unaware of the fact that all ethnic communities lived in harmony where the practices of SL Malay identity were dominant.

This created a sense of suspicion amongst different ethnic communities in the area during the post-tsunami context, especially among the younger generation, who have been exposed to the activities of antagonism towards other ethnic communities on social media. Thus, it is proved that elements in the post-tsunami reconstruction process, mainly the intrusion of the “Wahabi” movement and other religious agents, have exposed Malays in Hambantota, who were considered moderate followers of Islam in SL, towards both pull and push factors of the radicalisation process in the present day context. Further, it is revealed that traits of suspicion are also prevailing in the present-day context amongst communities in Hambantota as well, leading to an imminent threat of ethnic clashes if appropriate interventions are not deployed by the state and law enforcement apparatus immediately.

Recommendations and Future Research Space

The educated faction among the SL Malay community in Hambantota, with the support of Malay organisations and well-wishers of the SL Malay community, could resolve this issue by conducting a radicalisation prevention programme among all Malay community members. They serve as the first line of defence against the radicalisation process at the grass-roots level. SL Malay community members of Hambantota are the people who best understand this situation, and their engagement in resolving the issue is indispensable.

Malay community members need to unite as one team, prioritise using the Malay language, and understand the importance of living in harmony while enduring individual differences. Moreover, community-based radicalisation prevention programmes for all communities need to be organised, promoting harmony amongst different ethnic communities in Hambantota while emphasising the situation that prevailed in the pre-tsunami context. This study focused only on Hambantota, but a similar reconstruction process may have impacted minority ethnic groups in other parts of the country and other countries affected by the Tsunami. Thus, this can be one of the future research spaces in relation to religious radicalisation under National Security, as it is a hindrance to ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka and the world.

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