

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND SINHALA BUDDHIST NATIONALISM ON FACEBOOK

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Introduction

Islamophobia is defined as the contrived fear, prejudice, hatred or hostility towards Islam and Muslims. It is perpetuated through negative stereotypes, misrepresentation, and the construction of the Muslim as the ‘Other’, which leads to stigmatization and discrimination of Muslims.

Post - war Sri Lanka has witnessed the creation of a new “enemy”; although anti-Muslim feelings existed much earlier, as evidenced by the 1915 and 1974-5 riots, critics have identified the attacks as being primarily motivated by economic disparity and educational inequalities¹ unlike the recent hostility which is explicitly political in character. In recent times, the Muslim minority has been subjected to ethno-religious hostility from the Bodu Bala Sena (hereafter BBS), a movement that focuses on promulgating anti-Muslim rhetoric.

In the creation and distribution of anti-Muslim narratives, pro-BBS supporters have taken to Facebook to articulate Islamophobic sentiments. Facebook, with its popularity and easy accessibility, has become a relatively important platform on which a cohesive constellation of thematic is formed resulting in the transmission of the BBS Islamophobic analogy to a vast audience within a matter of minutes. Unaware of the ways in which the pedagogies of these pages position and regulate one’s perspectives, members of such pages (un)consciously subsume its ideological messages as autonomous and independent representations of a coherent reality.

Methodology

For the purpose of the study, public Sri Lankan pages on Facebook, which promote anti-Muslim sentiments and Islamophobia was used as

¹ De Silva, K.M. (2005) *A History of Sri Lanka*. New Delhi: Penguin Books,
Jayawardena, K. (1970) ‘Economic and political factors in the 1915 riots’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 29(2), p. 223.

primary data. All the groups that were studied reveal a close affinity with and follow the ideology of the BBS. Documentaries, speeches and petitions of the BBS circulated on Facebook were analysed.

Results and Discussion

The anti-Muslim narrative of these pages resonate a global pattern of Islamophobia. Associating themselves with a transnational Islamophobic movement, the anti-Muslim rhetoric of these Facebook pages converges with the narratives of Western and Indian anti-Muslim movements to create at once an internationally induced and locally disseminated form of Islamophobia. The narratives of the BBS and other anti-Muslim groups on Facebook constantly direct their attention to international events involving Muslims but is also always mediated by Sri Lankan comparisons. When reporting violence perpetuated by Islamic extremists in other countries, by aligning it with the socio-political context of Sri Lanka, the narrative makes the information not just threatening, but also captures an urgency calling for an immediate reaction to 'Islamic extremism' in Sri Lanka. Whenever an anti-Muslim stance is espoused by Western politicians, it is reported as a model that the Sri Lankan government needs to embrace. The ban on the headscarf in France was celebrated in many posts whilst urging the audience to fight until the Sri Lankan government follows France's commendable example.

The basis of the local Islamophobic narrative can be located under three interrelated premises: (1) cultural otherness (2) economic insecurity² and (3) expansionist politics. Muslims are constructed as threatening the very existence of Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka. The locating of the 'Muslim' as the demonic other whose scheme is to annihilate the Sinhala race is intricately connected to the threat of "Islamic expansionism." Islamophobia is justified under this paradigm of threat. Juxtaposed with the declining population of Buddhists is the ever-increasing Muslim population. In the BBS's publication on demographics titled "Encountering the Demise of a Race: An Enquiry into the Population Trends in Sri Lanka", it is claimed that the Muslims of Sri Lanka are striving to convert the country into "their next colony in an expanding

² Perera, V. (2013) 'The Transition of the Muslim from the "Comic Other" to the "Satanic Other" in Contemporary Sinhala Cyber Literature', *Sri Lankan Journal of English in the Commonwealth*, 10(11), pp. 97–103.

Muslim empire, sought to be established by the Wahabbi movement spreading from the Middle East, Pakistan and Malaysia” (Liyanage, 2014).

The rhetoric of the BBS abounds with the fear of globalization as a threat to Sinhala Buddhist hegemony, driven mainly by the belief that the minorities of Sri Lanka are more globally dominant than the Sinhala majority. In the alleged absence of international allies for the Buddhists, the Muslim minority is perceived as a threat due to its seeming facility to form connections with a powerful global political Islam. While the Muslims are depicted as having multiple “motherlands” (placing them within a homogenous Muslim Middle East), the Sinhalese are seen as having Sri Lanka as its only ‘motherland’. Invoking a sense of isolation, the narrative envisions a homogenous nation-state in which the hegemony of the Buddhist state exists unchallenged.

The perceived fundamentalism of the Muslims makes them the ‘alien’ to the normalized ideas of the Sinhala society. It should be noted that the othering process is in turn posited by the Muslims themselves. As a result of globalization, with a greater knowledge of ‘Muslim issues’ around the world, there is an increasing identification with the global Islamic community among Muslims of Sri Lanka. The self-conscious turn of the Muslims towards the Islamic ideologies especially that of Saudi Arabia in recent times (the increase in the number of females choosing to wear the Abaya is itself indicative of the systemic assertion of Middle Eastern practices) has marked the Muslims as a conspicuous social other.³

Conclusion

The nationalist rhetoric of the 1915 riots that identified the Muslim as a hostile economic competitor and an alien to the Sinhala Buddhist culture, has acquired a threatening urgency in the current anti-Muslim sentiment. Islamophobic expressions of anti-Muslim Facebook pages are demonstrated in a manner in which Islam is perceived as a fixed and static

³ Mcgilvray, D.B. (2010) ‘Sri Lankan Muslims: Between Ethno-nationalism and the global Ummah’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 17(1), pp. 45–64. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-8129.2010.00460.x.

entity. By doing so, by readily equating Islam with any action of any Muslim, by generalizing that action as 'Islamic', a specific interpreted (reductive, monochromatic) picture of Islam is supplied which stamps and fixes the identity of Islam which in turn serves to create a confrontational political situation pitting 'us' against 'Islam'.

The change of government seems to have diminished the passion of the nationalist zealots; the public demonstrations and hate speeches of the BBS have significantly reduced, but the hatred and stigmatization of Muslims continue in the Facebook pages.

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