

## RELIGIOUS CO-EXISTENCE IN EASTERN SRI LANKA

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### Introduction

The paper addresses one of the most important challenges that Sri Lanka faces today. The country ended its long civil war with a one-sided victory in the year 2009, and end that appeared to be a great relief to many. However, the evidence of recovery from war to peace is yet to be seen. Most importantly, the re-building of community relations has not been progressing satisfactorily. The paper is about the present status and future challenges of re-establishing inter-religious and ethnic relations with special reference to Eastern Province. It poses a question as to what delays the return of age old good relations between communities of the east. The paper highlights the importance of interventional measures that should be taken to repair the lost trust and mutual understanding between communities in the east in order to move towards reconciliation.

The paper draws mainly from the author's personal observations during the conflict and post-war periods. My involvement in formal (e.g., 2002 Peace Talks) and informal peace talks, and research on different aspects of the impacts of war in the east (e.g., war and tsunami displacement, land disputes and resolution, role of faith-based organization in peace building), have provided an opportunity to understand the causes for rifts between communities and the ways of addressing mistrust in order to lay foundations for lasting peace at the grass root level. The paper initially explains the broader political process of ethnic polarization in Sri Lanka following Independence in 1948. It goes on to explain the background to grievances of communities in eastern Sri Lanka, before introducing a scheme for re-establishing community relationships in the war-torn and *tsunami*-affected Eastern Province, and discussing this in the light of recent political developments.

### The multi-ethnic eastern Sri Lanka

Administratively, the Eastern Province includes three Districts: Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara. Geographically, the East coast is different from other areas of Sri Lanka in many respects. It is a long and a narrow coastal region. In terms of climate, it falls into the category of the Dry Zone. The economic activities of the region are dominated by coastal fishing and rain-fed rice cultivation. The population density is well below the national average (approximately 146 persons per km<sup>2</sup> in 2007, compared with the average of 326 persons per km<sup>2</sup> for Sri Lanka as a whole in 2010). The distribution of the population varies within the eastern region. While the coastal belt of the region has had high concentrations of population, vast areas of the interior have remained sparsely populated.

The region includes members of all major ethnic and religious groups in the country. A distinctive features is that all three major ethnic communities are almost numerically

equal in the Eastern Province, unlike in most other regions of Sri Lanka. There is a clear linguistic boundary between Tamil and Sinhala speaking populations, with the Sinhala-speaking population living in the interior of the region and the Tamil-speaking ethnic Tamils and Muslims living along the coast.

For a long time, the eastern region had remained at the periphery of development in Sri Lanka. Though rich in resources it has historically been neglected, The *Kandyan* kings treated the eastern region as a remote and marginal land in their kingdom. Colonial powers, especially the British, focused on the development of cash crops in the central and western parts of country only. However, after Independence, successive governments focused on the interior parts of the eastern region, which they considered as a potential space for developing irrigation and land colonization in order to ease the population pressure in the densely populated Wet Zone of Sri Lanka. The state-sponsored population transfer from land-scarce Wet Zone regions to the east coast colonization schemes has dramatically changed the east's demography in favour of the Sinhala population.

The population of the coastal belt has also increased significantly since Independence. Natural increase was the major cause due to a relatively high birth rate and declining death rate. At the same time, there have been population movements within the coastal belt and the immediate interior region during the last two decades, due mainly to the civil war. The main direction of movement was that of displaced people towards the narrow coastal belt of the eastern region which was considered as a more secure area than the immediate interior areas, where the rebels and government armed forces were in constant conflict. The war has pushed out the minorities from the interior regions as people moved to coastal areas in order to avoid conflict, rebel child soldier recruitment, and the difficulties faced on a daily basis in living in a rebel-controlled area (Hasbullah et al., 2005).

Elsewhere in the Province, there have been frequent incidents of violence between communities particularly in Pottuvil, Ampara and Trincomalee Towns. Ever since the escalation of ethnic conflict in the mid-1980s between the government forces and the LTTE, the eastern area has remained a politically turbulent area during the conflict period. By the early 1990s, more than one-third of the region's population had been subject to internal displacement partly due to the war situation prevailing in the region. Further the tsunami of 2004 disproportionately affected the coastal belt living Muslim and Tamil population, which further aggravated the suffering of the people who have already been affected by war and displacement.

### **Community perceptions and grievances in the eastern region of Sri Lanka**

Most of the changes that have taken place in the recent past have had an adverse impact on community relationships. The outcome of these changes has been mutual mistrust as communities blamed each other for the suffering they endured during difficult periods in the past. These perceptions of mistrust and discrimination are widespread, and caused further damage to amicable community relationships, preventing the possibility of reconciliation.

Tamils from the eastern parts of Sri Lanka have perceived the Sinhalese and Muslims not only as being responsible for their suffering but also as uniting to prevent Tamils achieving self-determination. The Tamils' perceptions of the Sinhala majority and the roles which the Sinhala leaders played in undermining their rights after Independence have been documented (Arasaratnam, 1979; Wilson, 1982). The Tamils' list of allegations against the Sinhalese includes state discrimination against the Tamil language, land alienation, and discriminatory resource allocation and employment (Ponnambalam, 1983). Furthermore, in recent decades, war and displacement, human rights violations, and denial of aid following the *tsunami* have been systematically used by the state to discriminate against Tamils in the East.

Tamils also harbour hostile feelings toward Muslims because they feel that the Muslims have a long history of having "collaborated" with the state against Tamils' interests (by being agents of the state which committed atrocities against Tamils especially during the war) in both the East and the North. In Ampara District, Muslim politicians, in connivance with ruling parties, gave land permits to Muslims while denying the same rights to the Tamils of the East. Tamils also strongly feel that some Muslim politicians holding ministerial positions in the government have worked against Tamils and undermined their educational and employment rights.

Muslims of the East assert that they are a separate ethno-cultural and religious group distinct from Tamils. Anger stems from the perception that Tamils do not recognize their identity and have undermined their aspirations. Some Muslims articulate strong views about being equal partners in the power-sharing of the East or claim they should be given a separate region (e.g., consisting of non-contiguous Muslim majority units of the Northern and Eastern Provinces). The Muslims have a special grievance against Tamil politicians who, they claim, have always undermined Muslim interests in the peace attempts and negotiations in the past. The Muslims say that it is the Tamil militants rather than the Sinhala government army who have terrorized the Muslims of the East and forced some of them to seek protection from the state's armed forces. The Muslims also claim that Tamil armed groups were responsible for massacres and displacement of Muslims which caused suffering on a scale equal to that which the Tamils suffered at the hands of government forces.

Sinhalese claim that their settlements in the East are of very ancient origin (6-10th Century BC) (Silva and Hasbullah, 2009). They assert that they were the first to inhabit the east, where they established extensive settlements along riverbanks (Peiris, 1997). Today, they are concentrated in the interior parts of the Eastern Province that have never been occupied by either Tamils or Muslims during the known history of this part of Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese of the east have also been affected by the ethnic conflict (Sri Gunawardana, 2001). Many have come to the east through colonization schemes that they felt that would give them security and stability. Instead, they have become the victims of ethnic tensions and civil war. In this respect, many have been affected since 1983. Many armed attacks by Tamil militants displaced hundreds of Sinhalese peasants from border areas and fishermen from the east coast. In the meantime, the Sinhalese people are

concerned about what they call an organized destruction of archeological religious sites in Ampara and Trincomalee Districts (Hasbullah et al., 2005).

### **Challenges in rebuilding community relations in the East**

Although the erosion in community relationships in the eastern part of Sri Lanka is significant, re-uniting different communities is still possible because of an ongoing mutual dependency for economic and social reasons in the east. Many find accommodation with a wide range of others within the region regardless of social, religious, linguistic, and cultural differences. Several distinct features of the eastern region, such as geography, economy, language, and culture, have provided opportunities for different communities to share and feel that the East belongs to them. For example, the distinct geographical distribution of communities in the East has allowed for community interactions based less on conflict and confrontations between the different communities of the region and more on mutual inter-dependence for mobility, exchange of goods and labour and in some cases of family links as well. This distinct spatial distribution of ethnic communities of the East has paved ways for inter-communal harmony through interdependence for a long period that is recognized and rehearsed through the oral history of the region.

The nature of the economy of the East is another factor which links different communities in the region. The region is rural and has an economy based on rice cultivation by peasants in the inland areas and inshore fishing in the coastal areas. Although the rice growing lands of Tamil and Muslim farmers are located at the tail end of the irrigation systems compared to those of the Sinhala farmers in most parts of the East, all are dependent on a common source of water for rice cultivation. In the past, fishing was not a competitive activity. However, migrant fishermen (e.g. Sinhalese) who come from other parts of the country have created a more competitive situation in this economic activity. Traditionally, Muslims dominated business activities of the region. But the war has restricted their ability to carry out their merchant role in recent years (Ali, 1986).

The socio-cultural and economic bases on which Tamils and Muslims are linked together are distinct and long-standing. The geographical integration of these two communities in the coastal belt has already been explained. Another inseparable area of Tamil-Muslim integration is the Tamil language is considered to be the mother tongue of both communities. Although linguistic links between Tamils and Muslims have been played down for political reasons by ethnicized political parties on both sides, they are a powerful means of uniting the two communities. Tamils and Muslims share many common cultural elements (McGilvray, 1974). In the past, commonalities in cultural practices were stronger than they are today.

### **Recognizing genuine community concerns in reconciliation**

In the process of rebuilding community relationships in the east it is necessary for all actors engaged in initiating reconciliation to acknowledge the genuine concerns and grievances of the respective communities. This could be done through peace forums that

are already established and functioning though with limited scope. Some of the community concerns were mentioned under the section in this paper in which mutual community allegations have been discussed. Beyond the allegations made by all parties against others, the sufferings and the constraints under which each community acts need to be recognized. For example, the genuine aspirations of Tamils to have a dignified life through an acceptable political reform must be recognized. Equally the minority rights and protection of Muslims and Sinhalese of the East as a whole have to be taken into account and openly recognised by all communities. Some of this could be achieved through existing social and constitutional arrangements. For example, neighbours of different ethnic and sectarian communities could be brought back to their former social, cultural and personal ties through dialogue. Some such initiatives have proved to be successful in the east. After the war, Kattankudy Muslims and Arayampathy Tamils of Batticaloa District were able to resolve some of the land and other issues through dialogues. Similar occurrences were observed between Akkaraipattu Muslims and Alayadiwembu Tamils, Addalachenai Muslims and Digavapi Sinhalese, and Muthur Tamils and Muslims. Unfortunately, the need for grass--roots conflict resolution has not been recognized at the regional and national levels, which has delayed the process of return to normal relations between communities.

#### **Ways of re-establishing relationships**

Identifying common benefits in rebuilding community relationships would be necessary at an early stage of the process. The return of peace and prosperity undoubtedly would be the most important achievement in community relationship rebuilding and a common benefit. The next issue is at what level the process should begin.

While recognizing the importance of such an initiative at all levels of community interactions, interactions at the grass roots level need to be emphasized and stimulated for several reasons. This is one of the areas where different communities have continued to interact for social, economic and other reasons. Furthermore this space for interaction has not yet been tried by peace activists and other peace building initiatives. The experience of post-*tsunami* relief activity in the East has provided sufficient evidence of the importance and need to activate community relationships at grass--roots levels. At the same time, it is also important to recognize the role of local institutions. The failure was the non-recognition of grass--roots networks for conflict resolution, which is still a gap that needs to be filled.

Starting point of the process is to have genuine and sincere dialogues between people. Given that this would be a post-war reconciliation process, it would be advantageous if communities would mutually recognize and acknowledge the sufferings which others have experienced during the dark days of conflict. This could be done in many ways. One way is to formalize institutional procedures to activate such recognition by appointing a forum where submissions of wrongdoing are facilitated and victims are in some way compensated.

Therefore by carrying out educational modes of raising awareness and through other means of mutual recognition of wrong doing and victimization, a period of healing can

begin. For example, Tamils and Muslims have much to apologize for and to acknowledge in terms of the atrocities carried out by others in their name, though neither community may be directly responsible for the violence. Further, many mutual community allegations of wrongdoing are prejudiced and are not often supported by facts. Therefore, there is a need for educating people about the different realities people lived in and how they had shaped perceptions of each other. The realities are that communities which may differ by religion, ethnicity and other forms of social organizations have to live in a space that cannot be divided among them on the basis all kinds of difference. Besides, interactions during the pre-conflict period cut across many barriers that are now considered insurmountable. People of Sinhalese border village such as Gonagala (where an LTTE massacre took place in mid-1996) recollect their good days with Tamils with whom they had trade and other contacts until the conflict intensified. Similarly, Muslims and Tamils of Akkaraipattu call each other cousins and mutually invite one another for home functions which is happening even now. By introducing a mechanism to bring people together to acknowledge the need for co-existence, one can get people to forget and forgive what happened in the past for the sake of the future.

The process of initiating community dialogue and understanding for peace and stability needs to be accompanied by other reconciliation measures, among which political reforms are important. As noted earlier, the East, like the North, has long been neglected in post-independent development activities. In order to correct the omissions of the past, it is necessary to devolve power to the region, in order to empower the people who have long been marginalized by various governments operating from Colombo.

When it comes to power-sharing at the regional level, it is necessary to recognize and accommodate the aspirations of different communities. Given the ground situation of the East, it seems that in some areas of power sharing, different communities of the region could reach a compromise.

### **Conclusion**

The Sri Lankan civil war has produced an ambivalent legacy for reuniting the east coast (Eastern Province) communities. War was concentrated in the North and East of Sri Lanka, where Tamils predominate. The civil war has taken the lives of many, repeatedly displaced several thousands of people, traumatized individuals and families, caused the destruction of property, interrupted normalcy, affected people's livelihoods, and broken the bond of ethnic cordiality that had existed for centuries. The *tsunami* of 2004 added another layer of problems to people who had already suffered grievously. The intensity of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict has spilled over to other groups and has driven other communities, including Muslims, from the North and East, thus widening the conflict. While there are grounds within each community that are conducive to reconciliation among different communities, nationalistic forces on all sides are responsible for delaying this. Re-establishing relationships among all communities is viable and essential for the region as well as for the country. From the analysis presented here, it may be concluded that it is still not too late to resolve this aspect of the ethnic problem which besets Sri Lanka. However, in order to resolve the problems it is necessary first to understand the root causes that led to the present situation and to address those problems

while simultaneously addressing the immediate needs and concerns of the affected people. Dialogue between neighbours and communities is one of the most urgently needed actions for re-establishing community relationships. This 'east to east dialogue' has already provided some positive outcomes. However such measures need to be recognized and promoted and could also be replicated in other areas of ethnic conflict (e.g., north-north and south-south dialogues) to help to build long lasting peace for all in Sri Lanka.

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