

## **Ethnicity, Minority and Groups Consciousness: An Examination of the Ethnic Group Formation of Sri Lankan Muslims Through Conceptual Analysis**

<sup>1</sup>Mohammad Agus Yusoff, <sup>1,2</sup>Athambawa Sarjoon, <sup>1</sup>Nordin Hussin,

<sup>3</sup>Mohammad Ghazali Zainal Abidin and <sup>3</sup>Azhar Ahmad

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,

School of History, Politics and Strategic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,  
43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya,  
20400 Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

---

**Abstract:** Sri Lankan Muslims form the second ethnic minority in the country. Referred to as 'Moors' in academic literature and in official records, they have suffered not only because of ethnic politics but also because of ethnicity discourse in the Sri Lankan context. Even though, Muslims have lived in the area for centuries and have maintained cordial relationships with other ethnic groups, their ethnicity and ethnic group identity has always been questioned and challenged by other major ethnic groups in the country. Beside, these challenges, Muslim revivalists, leaders, scholars and activists have attempted to counter-argue and prove their distinct ethnicity and ethnic group consciousness, throughout history. This study aims to investigate the distinctive features of ethnicity and the historical process of ethnic group consciousness of Sri Lankan Muslims, through, the extensive analysis of relevant concepts which is lacking in the existing literature. This research adopts only secondary data collected from various sources. The results indicate that Sri Lankan Muslims have a clear conceptual basis as well as cultural markers that identify them as a distinct ethnic group demarcating from other ethnic groups.

**Key words:** Muslims (Moors), ethnicity, group consciousness, ethnic minority, Sri Lanka

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many plural states, during and after the colonial rule have frequently suffered from political tensions that have been derived from elements of their multi-ethnic character of society as well as from the failure of governments to adequately accommodate the ethnic differences, interests and claims of different ethnic groups. The acceptance and accommodation of the features of ethnicity and their identity are crucial factors in the post-colonial governance and administration of many multi-ethnic countries. The absence of projecting a successful mechanism in accommodating the ethnic features of different groups, in many countries has caused a number of problems, especially in nation and state-building. Regardless of political ideologies in most post-colonial governments and administrations, the trend is usually the majority ethnic group ruling the country in a dominant manner without accepting other ethnic groups which are usually minorities. They used hegemonic and nationalistic ideas in discourses as a means to gain political power and

control systems over minorities. Therefore, ethnicity has become an important subject in the daily discourse of politics and academic investigations of developing countries.

Ethnicity is a pivotal concept in social and political theories and is practically pertinent in post-colonial history. The concept of ethnicity is of prime importance in the politics of minority group nationalism and is essential in constructing group identity and affiliations. It has gained such vital importance as an integral part of current hegemonic discourse and identity politics. Ethnicity is constructed from one or multiple primordial features such as religion, language, race or caste. In many post-colonial countries, these features were used as the inherent unifying element. As Miller (2011) argues, undemocratic governments in Asia and else where have also benefitted from ethnic and racial conflict by using the pretext of social disharmony to impose rigid forms of nationalism that reinforce the hegemony of the ethnic majority.

In Sri Lanka, ethnic and group affiliations have seriously influenced the governance and administration

---

**Corresponding Author:** Mohammad Agus Yusoff, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
School of History, Politics and Strategic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi,  
Selangor, Malaysia

process. Sri Lankan history reveals that it has been a plural and multi-ethnic country for a long period of time. However, the recognizing and accommodating ethnic aspects of minority groups, especially of Muslims has always been a challenging issue. Historically, even though the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has been living with its own ethnic identity while maintaining a peaceful co-existence with other major ethnic groups and both colonial and post-independent rulers have accepted their different ethnic affiliation, their ethnicity and ethnic aspects have always been questioned by the leaders and social and political activists of the majority groups from the colonial period to the post-civil war period. There have been serious debates among the ethnic majorities over the ethnicity and ethnic affiliation of Sri Lankan Muslims. In this context, this study attempts to locate the Muslim community within the 'ethnicity', 'ethnic group' and 'ethnic minority' discourses in the Sri Lankan context. This analysis of the ethnic group formation of Sri Lankan Muslims is part of a survey conducted for a 3 year research project which uses secondary data collected and historical document analysis methods. The analysis is descriptive and interpretive in nature and has been conducted through clearly defining the concepts of 'ethnicity', 'ethnic group' and 'ethnic minority' based on the existing literature and on the arguments prevailing in academic discourse within the Sri Lankan context, in order to identify the historical process of ethnic group formation (i.e., the construction of Sri Lankan Muslims).

#### **SRI LANKAN MUSLIMS: A SHORT NOTE ON HISTORY AND DEMOGRAPHY**

The people of Sri Lanka have been divided for census purposes into four major and a number of smaller, ethnic groups. Among them, the Muslims (ethnically labeled as 'Moors' in official records) form the third major ethnic group (i.e., the second ethnic minority). Initially, the Muslim community in Sri Lanka comprised Sri Lankan Moors, Indian Muslims and Malays. However, Malays have developed their separate ethnic identity through their language and cultural practices. Also, in due course, Indian Muslims have also incorporated the Moorish ethnic identity. Therefore, there is no such ethnic grouping called 'Indian Muslims' in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan Muslims (Moors), like other major ethnic groups form a separate ethnic group with their Islamic religion, Islamic culture and heritage, Arabic-Tamil language and have a history of mutual relations and peaceful co-existence with the other two major ethnic groups in the country, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. It is worth noting that the Sri Lankan Muslims are the only

ethnic group who have a single term (that is 'Muslim') to denote ethnicity and religion, along with the Malays. The majority of the Sri Lankan Muslims are the ancestors of Arabs while a considerable portion of them have originally come from South India. A small portion of them are Malay descendants (For more details on the anti-Muslim incidents in Sri Lanka, Jayawardena, 1985; Dewaraja, 1994; Yusoff *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, the Sri Lankan society is an ethno-religious mosaic and within the ethnic groups, there are clear religious divisions. For example, most of the Sinhalese are Buddhist but there exist followers of Christianity, identified as 'Christian Sinhalese'. Similarly, the majority of the Tamils are Hindus by religion; however some of the Tamils follow Christianity and are called 'Christian Tamils'. However, notably, almost all Muslims are followers of Islam.

Compared to other ethnic groups-Sinhalese and Tamils, the origins of the Muslim community are more recent which means that their presence on the island country for merely a 1000 years, has been discounted in ethno-nationalist debates (McGilvray and Raheem, 2007). Historical records reveal that the majority of the Sri Lankan Muslims are the descendants of Arab traders who had been travelling to Sri Lanka from the fourth century AD onwards. They have settled on the island from as early as the seventh century and have intermarried the local Tamils and Sinhalese. The rest of the Muslims appear to have come to Sri Lanka via Southern India, over a long period, some as late as the early 20th century. Almost all Sri Lankan Muslims are Sunni who mostly follow the Shafi School of Jurisprudence, a shared legacy of their earliest South Arabian forefathers (McGilvray and Raheem, 2007).

According to the latest census conducted in 2012, a total of 1,892,638 Muslims live in Sri Lanka and make up 9.3% of Sri Lanka's total population. They are scattered around the island country but one third of them are concentrated in 3 districts in the Eastern province. They form the majority of the district population of two districts, namely, Amparai and Batticaloa. Most of the Eastern Muslims live in the villages scattered along the coast from Pottuvil in the Southern edge to Pulmoddai, a small town in the Northern end of the Trincomalee District. Apart from the Eastern province, the concentration of Muslims is identifiable in the district population of Mannar in the Northern province, Colombo and Kalutara in the Western province, Kandy in the Central province and Puttalam in the North-Western province.

The ethnicity of Sri Lankan Muslims is now clearly defined and they, thus, have a separate ethnic identity and ethnic group consciousness based more

fundamentally on their Islamic belief and culture. However, since the nineteenth century, there has been one fundamental argument over the ethnicity of Sri Lankan Muslims (Moors) and the identity of their ethnic group. The specific Sri Lankan political context engendered a very different consciousness among the Muslims. According to McGilvray (1997), the central aspiration of Sri Lankan Muslims has long been their desire to develop a non-Tamil ethnic group identity, based on the religion they adhere to and the cultural practices they follow.

### **ETHNICIZATION OF SRI LANKAN MUSLIMS**

Prior to examining the ethnicization process of Sri Lankan Muslims, it is important to understand the term 'ethnicity' in a clear manner. Ethnicity is a term that has been increasingly used, since the 1960s to account for human variation in terms of culture, tradition, language, religion, social patterns and ancestry. It refers to the fusion of many traits that belong to the nature of any ethnic group shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, behaviors, experiences, consciousness of group, memories and loyalties. Therefore, a person's ethnic group is such a powerful identifier, because it cannot be denied, rejected or taken away by others (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2013). In many countries, a person's ethnic affiliation and identity have profound consequences for his or her physical safety, political status and economic prospects. Today, ethnic belonging matters when applying for civil service, running for parliament or joining government, in any multi-ethnic state. Therefore, ethnicity and ethnic matters are at the center of politics in divided societies.

Ethnicity is defined as thought and action stemming from identification with a community of putatively shared ancestry that exceeds the scale of face-to-face community (*gemeinschaft* in German). Cultural markers such as language, religion, customs and phenotype (or 'race') are used by ethnics to demarcate their boundaries so ethnic groups need to possess at least one diacritical marker (Indeed, the word 'ethnic' derives from the Greek expression *ethnikos* and from the Latin term *ethnicus*, both used to define 'people' and 'nation'. The former Christians applied the term to identify 'Pagans' or more extensively, people belonging to the nation of the 'non-believers'. In its earliest English use, the word 'ethnic' referred to culturally different 'heathen' nations, a sense that has lingered as a connotation. Some contemporary uses of the term identify it with national groups in Europe where with some exception such as Bosque, the link between ethnicity and nationality has appeared justified (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2013; Colla, 2009).

However, the changing nature of the criteria poses difficulties in defining 'ethnicity'. Indeed, there exists no working definition to 'ethnicity' and the term has been used in a variety of ways depending upon the various purposes for which the group has been identified. Therefore, not every ethnic group will possess all possible traits but all will display various combinations of them to varying degrees.

However, there are some definitions developed by scholars on the subject that help us to understand the concept. Kellas (1998) defines ethnicity as "the state of being ethnic or belonging to an ethnic group". Hutchinson and Smith treat ethnicity as "a social and cultural resource for different interests and status groups". According to Erikson, ethnicity is "an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with they have a minimum of regular interaction". Therefore, for ethnicity to be applied, the groups must have a minimum contact with each other and they must entertain ideas of each other as being culturally different from themselves" (Eriksen, 2002).

Based on the above definitions, ethnicity not needs to be considered a primary affiliation with given territorial or other claims. On the one hand, 'ethnicity' bears the stamp of essentialist thinking; it works as a way to connect with the literature and culture and invites problems as well. In cultural politics, contrast to class, interest and ideological politics for all 'ethnicity' ultimately has some form of cultural difference such as nationality, nationalism, language, religion, community, kinship, clan and caste all of which along with 'race' are themselves cultural constructs. Therefore, a neat distinction between interest politics and cultural or ethnic politics is not tenable either because interest too is culturally constructed, mediated and articulated.

However, in academic discourse, especially in social sciences, perspectives on ethnicity have in recent years been increasingly problematizing and open-ended and made it as an elusive concept. Ethnicity fades into race, nationalism, multiculturalism, identity politics and community. Since, the latter half of the nineteenth century and the middle of the 20th century, social scientists have attempted best to solve the 'puzzle' of ethnicity. Instead of conceptualizing ethnicity and ethnic boundaries as fixed, they described them as subjective, flexible and dependent upon circumstance and situation (Khanna, 2011). However, later, these views were changed. Some viewed ethnicity in an ascriptive sense while others viewed it through a primordialistic lens. Early scholars described 'ethnicity' in terms of inherited group behavioral characteristics argued to be biologically based

and as something fixed, fundamental and rooted in the unchangeable circumstances of birth (Cornell and Hartmann, 2006). According to them, primordial qualities such as common language, a collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history and allegedly inherited characteristics common to members of a group make them ethnically different groups (Poluha, 1998; Bayar, 2009). Some, especially instrumentalists, define 'ethnicity' as contextual, fluid and a function of structural conditions in society.

Besides, ethnicity can be perceived as a form of identity and only becomes relevant when people feel excluded and as a means of managing it. Therefore, states must adopt a means in order to better manage ethnic divisions in a country. Ethnic identities can be shaped via social, economic and political processes that especially occur in the context of discriminatory state policies and actions, inter group rivalry and resource competition. Ethnic consciousness is a frequent result of oppression by the state or the majority community while ethnic identity is mobilized by political agents to demand greater concessions and share in power and authority. Therefore, ethnicity as an instrument has also often been associated with nationalist and separatist movements and is usually harnessed by minority groups who see more representation, power, autonomy and separation as a means to end oppression.

It is further important to highlight Poluha (1998)'s claim that ethnicity like culture is always formed in a process. It is never static. Thus, new forms or characteristics are perpetually created. This flexibility makes it possible for members of ethnic groups to communicate their ethnicity in different ways. An individual from an ethnic group will play down all possible signs of ethnicity and alternatively enhance the required criteria and qualification. Political and other leaders who seek support, therefore, use ethnicity as a means to gain political power and support. In this way, ethnicity varies widely in terms of salience, intensity and meaning. Ethnicity can be unpacked by distinguishing four types that may be viewed as snapshots of ethnicity as a moving target. Pieterse (2004) categorizes them as follows:

- Domination ethnicity-considering the term 'ethnicity' itself to be a discourse of domination. In this context, ethnic mobilization is often a reaction to the imposition of a mono-cultural regime and discriminatory treatment or regional uneven development
- Enclosure ethnicity-this kind of ethnicity exists in three varieties, namely dormant ethnicity, cultural confinement and inward-looking ethnicity which all share a restriction of mobility and space

- Competition ethnicity-here, competition is with the state or other cultural formations in relation to state power, resources and development-which create the major problem zone of ethnic relations
- Optional ethnicity, a low intensity ethnicity shopping for identity (For more details on the types of ethnicity, inter alia Pieterse, 2004)

However, in classifying ethnicity, its dynamic nature and the shift from one mode to another pose a number of questions. A simple account is that ethnic group mobilization and nationalism awakens dormant ethnicity, imposing 'minority' status or enclosure ethnicity. Over time, enclosure ethnicity tends to progress towards competition ethnicity. Competition ethnicity, in turn, over time, tends to progress towards the widening of choices of cultural affiliation.

In the historical process of ethnicization in Sri Lankan polity, ethnicity has also gained an important position with regard to the Muslims in Sri Lanka. The major ethnicity feature of Sri Lankan Muslims was unique when compared with other major ethnic groups, namely, the Sinhalese and Tamils. For others, history, race and language played vital roles in the process of constructing their ethnicity and ethnic group identity. However, for Muslims, the salient and distinctive feature of their ethnicity is built upon the religion and cultural practices they follow. Therefore, not only the formation process of Muslim ethnic identity but also its recognition was severely challenged by other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka.

As noted above, unlike the major ethnic groups (i.e., the Tamils and Sinhalese) who define themselves their ethnicity and ethnic group identity to a considerable degree in terms of their language and history, the distinctive features of ethnicity and ethnic identity of Muslims in Sri Lanka is defined predominantly by their religious belief-adherence to Islam. This has prompted them a complex search for their ethnicity and identity during different periods, particularly in reaction to the growing ethno-nationalism of the Sinhalese and Tamils throughout the 20th century. In fact, the ethnic identity of the Sri Lankan Muslims, like that of many culturally-defined groups contesting for a secure place in plural societies around world today have undergone changes over the past century in response to ethno-nationalist pressures from the colonial to the post-colonial period.

One fundamental argument over the ethnicity and ethnic group identity of Muslims in Sri Lanka taken up for discussion, since the second half of the 19th century was whether Muslims are really a separate ethnic group or simply Tamils who follow a different religion than the one

the Hindu or Christian Tamils follow. The specific political context of Sri Lanka engendered a very different consciousness among most Muslims in this regard. Tamil nationalists have always argued that there is no separate Muslim ethnicity in Tamil Nadu, India where Muslims consider themselves as 'Tamils'. Therefore, they argued that the Muslims of Sri Lanka also do not have such a distinctive ethnic feature. It is worth noting the famous argument built by the Tamil political leader, Ponnampalam Ramanathan (later, Sir), in order to justify the majority Tamils' argument. According to him, "the Moor of Ceylon were ethnologically Tamils but recent converts, arguing that the language they spoke at home, their history, their customs and their physical features all cumulatively show that the Moor of Ceylon were ethnologically Tamils" (Ali, 2001, 2004; Imtiyaz and Hoole, 2011) (Ramanathan was the first Ceylonese appointed to the Legislative Council on the basis of educated Ceylonese. His advocate on questioning the distinctiveness of Muslim ethnicity was presented through a speech made by him during the debate on 'Muahmmadan Marriage Registration Ordinance' at the Legislative council in 1885 and through an academic essay on 'Moors of Ceylon', published in the Journal of Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch, in 1888).

However, in response to Ramanathan's claim, Muslim elites and politicians in the South, North and East started to search, construct and advocate the distinctive features of their ethnicity. In this process, they promoted to construct a non-Tamil ethnic identity to Muslims. They took the religious faith of the Muslims Islam as the major aspect of the ethnicity of the Sri Lankan Muslims (Moors), to make them unique and to demarcate them from the other ethnic groups in the country. The contributions made by Abdul Azeez and Siddi Lebbe are notable in this regard who spearheaded the anti-Ramanathan campaign, stressing on the search for the historical origins and separate ethnic identity of the Sri Lankan Muslims. As McGilvray (1998) argues, these Muslim leaders realized Ramanathan's claim as the 'planned sabotage' of Muslims' hopes for the appointment of a separate Muslims member in the Legislative Council which had been advocated by them from in middle of the 19th century. Furthermore, the Muslims found Ramanathan's argument as an academic excuse for the continued domination of the Moors (Muslims) by the Tamil leaders.

It is noteworthy to reveal the fact that the the British Colonial has played a decisive role (neutral role) in legitimizing the ethnicity of the Sri Lankan Muslims, when the British governor appointed a 'Moor' to the Legislative Council in 1889, sidetracking Ramanathan's argument on questioning 'Muslim ethnicity'. British administrators

used the term 'Moors' in official reports and documents in order to denote the Muslims as a separate ethnic group. Muslims are still known by this term in Sri Lanka, regardless of whether they are by origin Arabs, locals, South East Asians or Tamils from South India. Muslims clearly have a clearly separate ethnic identity based more fundamentally on their Islamic belief and culture.

This further emphasizes the fact that most researchers agree that religion is an aspect of ethnicity and has played a vital role in the process of constructing the 'ethnic identity' of many ethnic groups around the world. Accordingly, religion can act as a legitimizing force in society for mobilizing groups and achieving power and status. For example, Gurr argues that "in essence, communal (ethnic) groups are psychological communities: groups whose core members share a distinctive and enduring collective identity based on cultural traits and life ways that matter to them and to others with whom they interact. People have many possible bases for communal identity: shared historical experiences or myths, religious beliefs, language, caste-like system and customary occupations. Communal groups that are also referred to as ethnic groups, minorities and people are usually distinguished by several reinforcing traits". Horowitz (1985) has also put forward a similar argument, claiming that religion is an aspect of ethnicity with its importance varying over time and place. While, it can be the single and most important factor in some ethnic groups, it can have little relevance to others. The key factor that determines religion as a salient feature is the perception of the group itself. Therefore, based on the above two theorists, it is religion that can be one of the salient features of the ethnicity of any groups in order to be considered an ethnic group that is distinct from others. On the above basis, it can be argued that the ethnicity of Sri Lankan Muslims (Moors) has clearly proven that the religion and cultural practices they follow are emphasized as the salient features of their ethnicity. An analysis of 'ethnic group' as a concept would further help to differentiate them as a 'separate ethnic group' and to understand the position of Sri Lankan Muslims as an 'ethnic minority'.

#### **LABELING SRI LANKAN MUSLIMS AS SEPARATE ETHNIC GROUP**

When, ethnicity becomes influential in the societal and political life of people, ethnic grouping and group consciousness also become important in order for groups to be influential in and benefit from, ethnic politics. The term 'ethnic group' is generally understood in the social science literature as the designation of a population that

is largely and biologically self-perpetuating; shares fundamental cultural values; realizes in overt unity in cultural forms; makes up a field of communication and interaction; has a membership which identifies itself and is identified by others as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order (Barth, 1998). Based on the above view, understanding the term 'ethnic group' has come to mean something like a 'people'. However, it is as other concepts, very much contested one to define. Many scholars have defined 'ethnic group' with its connections to a particular culture-cultural aspects. However, putting boundaries to groups, especially an ethnic boundary is found as a very common problem in ethnic studies.

In the academic domain, different researchers and writers have used the term 'ethnic groups' in different senses. Among them, the founding father of sociology, Weber (1978), used the term 'ethnic group' to connote those human collectivities that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both or because of memories of colonization or migration. Schermerhorn defined ethnic group as "a collectivity within a larger society having a real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements that are viewed as the epitome of their peoplehood such as kinship, patters, physical contiguity, religious affiliation, language or dialect form, tribal affiliation, nationality or any combination of these". Smith (1998) defines ethnic group as "a type of cultural collectivity, one that emphasized the role of myths of descents and historical memories and that is recognized by one or more cultural differences such as religion, customs, language or institutions". Harff and Gurr (2004) define ethnic group as "a psychological community whose members share a persisting sense of common interest and identity that is based on some combination of shared historical experience and valued cultural traits such as beliefs, language, way of life and common homeland. They are often called identity groups". Ashcroft *et al.* (2013) simply defined ethnic group as "a group that is socially distinguished or set apart by others and/or by itself, primarily on the basis of cultural or national characteristics".

Based on the above definitions and characteristics, ethnic group can be conceptualized based on three popular domains. First, ethnic group is a culture-bearing unit sharing of a common culture. Therefore, the classification of persons and local groups as members of an ethnic group must depend on their habits of exhibiting the particular traits of the culture. Second, ethnic group is a form of social organization, concentrating on what is

socially effective. This classifies a person in terms of his/her basic, most general identity, determined by his or her origin and background. Third, an identity criterion, since belonging to an ethnic category implies a certain kind of person having that basic identity, it also implies a claim to be judged and to judge oneself by those standards that are relevant to that identity.

In the Sri Lankan context, ethnic groups are defined based on ethnicity features used by the British colonial rulers, for census and other political and administrative purposes. Accordingly, for census purposes, the Colonial rulers initially grouped Sri Lankans into four major ethnic groups, namely, Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Sri Lankan Moors (Muslims) and Indian Tamils, including a few smaller ethnic groups, namely, Burghers, Malays and Sri Lanka Chetty. The British rulers have also used ethnic grouping for increasing political representations whenever they wanted to increase the local representation in the legislative councils.

The Muslims in Sri Lanka are recognized as a separate group in two ways, namely as 'Moors' and as 'Muslims'. The labeling of 'Moor' was set by the Portuguese to denote the local Muslims of the time of their invasion. The word 'Moor' is originated from the word 'Moros', denoted to identify the Arabs in general. The British also used the term 'Moor' to denote ethnicity of native Muslims and to separate them in an official, independent category. In this way, the traditional (native) Muslims in Sri Lanka came to be identified as an ethnic group under the name of 'Moor'. The labeling of 'Muslims' was set, emphasizing the religious-based grouping of people. Under this grouping with the native Muslims, the Malays also were included, since both groups practiced the same religion. Even though, the majority of the native Muslims are labeled as 'Moors', in general, however, they prefer to be identified as 'Muslims', hence incorporating 'the Malays'. It is worth noting that the encouragement of grouping people ethnically by the British rulers for political purposes has contributed to the ethnic group's consciousness and ethno-nationalism or, in other words, 'ethnic politics' in Sri Lanka. The ultimate result of the ethnic politics in Sri Lanka paved ways for ethnic cleavages and for the domination of the majority ethnic group of the entire political system in the political and socio-economic sphere. One of the minority ethnic groups severely affected by the ethnic politics was that of the Muslims who form the second largest ethnic minority in the country. Due to their minority status, Muslims, in many aspects were not treated equally by the ethnic majorities and rulers, even though minority groups were protected by a number of international laws and norms. Defining Sri Lankan Muslims as an 'ethnic minority' requires conceptualizing that the 'ethnic minority' receives importance.

### **SRI LANKAN MUSLIMS AS AN 'ETHNIC MINORITY'**

Ethnic minorities are usually defined in contradiction to majority groups with whom they coexist in political systems. They are defined as groups that have experienced systematic discrimination and domination because of their numerical inferiority as well as a host of historical and sociological factors and have taken political action in furtherance of their collective interests. Therefore, almost as a rule, minorities who are not subjected to domination or discrimination and instead constitute dominant and hegemonic groups such as the Whites in colonial Africa and Asia, the Afrikaner Whites in apartheid South Africa, the Tutsi in post-1994 Rwanda and the Fulani in Nigeria are excluded from the category of proper minorities (Osaghae, 1998).

Encapsulated within the broad definition of minority offered in the earlier study of this research are various categories of minorities, differentiated in terms of the politically relevant identities, they assume: ethnic, religious, cultural or linguistic identities or combinations of these elements; access to power or political leverage; scope or arena of activities; interest in articulation at national, state or local levels and historical relations with other groups. In other words, beneath the blanket references, ethnic minorities differ historically, politically, socially, geographically and economically (Osaghae, 1998). Minorities can also be differentiated by a mixed criteria of geography, location in state power relations and other defining characteristics.

In trying to reach a consensus in conceptualization, it is possible to outline some common criteria for 'ethnic minority' which are as follows: distinct but non-dominant group-there must be an element of unity within the community to the extent that a non-minority member could not easily acquire the minority identity. The nature of distinction is not specified and the group does not need to be distinguished in the physical sense, i.e., the members do not need to live together in a geographically separate location. A specific homeland-commentators often regard minorities as associated with a specific homeland. However, this can be a damaging factor for groups such as the Roma in Yugoslavia who do not have this association. Indeed, the Roma community was excluded from negotiations on the future of Yugoslavia as they had no territorial boundaries over which to negotiate. This argument too becomes valid in conceptualizing Sri Lankan Muslims as an 'ethnic minority', since all Muslims in Sri Lanka also do not have a specific homeland, except for the Muslims of the Eastern province, particularly the South-Eastern Muslims who have a

continuous territorial basis. Numerical inferiority-this requirement appears to be uncontroversial when defining minorities. The maximum number that can constitute a minority is clearly established as <50% of the total population of a state. Excluded categories-there has been a general expectation among commentators and states that the rights conferred by Article 27 of the Declaration of the Rights of Minorities in 1992 are only available to 'citizens' or 'nationals' of the particular state. Therefore, many states restrict to provide many basic rights, even the rights listed on the United Nations (UN) guidelines, to those groups who were not given 'citizenship' status. As a result, certain groups are unable to claim protection.

The problem of loyalty-the issue of the loyalty of minorities to the state has been raised by several commentators. Community unity-here is an obvious requirement that the members of the group itself do not wish to be assimilated. For example, while the Roma may not be a universally homogeneous group with uniform value systems, their refusal to accept the majority goal of assimilation can be seen in virtually every state or country in which they live.

In Sri Lanka, unlike other countries, no issues prevailed in grouping the 'majority' and the 'minorities' in terms of their 'ethnicity'. The Sinhalese constitute 75% of the total population which give them a status of absolute majority. All other ethnic groups form only a mere 25% (Sri Lankan Tamils: 11.2%; Sri Lankan Moors (Muslims): 9.3%; Indian Tamils: 4.1%), according to the 2012 census report. However, as Tamils criticized the ethnicity and ethnic group identity of Sri Lankan Muslims (Moors) as previously mentioned in the post-independence period, the majority Sinhalese have attempted to marginalize the ethnic features of minorities through a number of policies and projects, especially due to the Muslims' status as an 'ethnic minority'. Conceptually as analyzed above, there are no issues in defining or labeling Sri Lankan Muslims as an 'ethnic minority'. Sri Lankan Muslims constitute the necessary basic features and conditions to be referred to as an 'ethnic minority'.

In Sri Lanka, the Muslims (Moors) constitute the second largest minority group in the national population. As a minority ethnic group, Muslims define themselves based on their religious and cultural features but their political and social status has always been questioned and challenged by both ethnic majorities, the Sinhalese and Tamils. Sinhalese treated the Muslims as an alien people and violently targeted their ethnic features (religious and cultural practices). The anti-Muslim violence of 1915 was among the first and famous incidents staged by the Sinhalese against the Muslims in Sri Lanka. This led to an inferior position of Muslims in education

and state sectors. But, Muslims continued to maintain cordial relations with both ethnic majorities, the Sinhalese and Tamils. However, the intense ethnic conflict and civil war that has emerged in the beginning of 1980s, once again impacted the ethnic features of the Muslims, especially of those living in the North-Eastern part of Sri Lanka. Due to their different 'ethnicity' and 'minority ethnic group' status, their lives, livelihoods, religious fundamentals forms and practices were targeted by Tamil militant groups supported by the major Tamil political parties and public who had historically claimed that Muslims are also Tamils ethnically. However, all these calculated attempts, on one hand indicated the fact that the ethnic group of the Muslims was regarded as different to a greater extent than that of the Tamils and on the other hand, induced the Muslims a group based ethno-political marginalization. This situation ultimately led to the formation of a distinct Muslim political party called the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), under the leadership of M.H.M. Ashraff which mobilized the Muslim community, especially in the North-Eastern part, towards ethno-nationalism and territorial-based advocacy politics, in the middle of 1980s.

### CONCLUSION

The Muslim community in Sri Lanka, a minority ethnic group mainly confined their ethnicity and ethnic group consciousness based on the religion and religious-cultural practices they follow. They are labeled as 'Moors' in official records and have long been living in Sri Lanka while maintaining a cordial relationship with majority ethnic groups in the country. However, historically, they have encountered a number of challenges against the process of constructing their 'ethnicity' and ethnic group distinctiveness by the major ethnic groups-the Sinhalese and Tamils. For the Sinhalese (Buddhists), Muslims are 'far others' (i.e., people who perceive themselves as being from a totally different ethnic and cultural tradition) and in that way, the Sinhalese fundamentalists perceived the minority Muslims as 'aliens' and 'threatening'. But, interestingly, Tamils viewed Muslims as 'new others', near neighbors or descendants. According to them, most Muslims and Tamils have much more in common and thus claim that the Muslims are also Tamils ethnically. However, Muslim scholars and leaders were able to put aside the criticisms of others and advocated for their ethnic group distinctiveness based on their religious-cultural features. A noteworthy fact in the discourse of ethnic group formation in Sri Lanka is that, unlike other ethnic groups such as the Sinhalese (who defined their ethnicity and ethnic group identity mainly based on their history and

linguistic factors) and the Tamils (who initially confined their ethnicity to religious and linguistic factors and later (in the late 19th century) to historic factors), the ethnicity and ethnic group consciousness of Sri Lankan Muslims is constructed mainly based on their religious and cultural attachments and affiliations. In fact, it is the ethno-nationalist fundamentalism of the Tamils and Sinhalese that has shaped the formation of 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' consciousness of Muslims in Sri Lanka. Even though, the Muslims in Sri Lanka share close linguistic and cultural ties with Tamils, they prefer to be recognized by their religious and cultural practices as the main identifiers of their ethnicity and thus claim they are a distinct ethnic group as the major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka.

Conceptually as extensively viewed in this study, the Sri Lankan Muslims (Moors) have clear basis and identity referents and cultural makers which confine their ethnicity. Similarly as theorists and experts argue, the ethnic group consciousness of Sri Lankan Muslims has historically been constructed mainly on those ethnicity referents and cultural makers, the religion and the religious-cultural traditions and norms, they follow. In fact, the 'ethnicity', ethnic group consciousness and identity of Sri Lankan Muslims is a reactive politico-cultural ideology that has been constructed and developed.

### REFERENCES

- Ali, A., 2001. Plural Identities and Political Choices of the Muslim Community. Marga Institute, Colombo, Sri Lanka, Pages: 16.
- Ali, A., 2004. The muslims of Sri Lanka: An ethnic minority trapped in a political quagmire. *Inter-Asia Cult. Stud.*, 5: 372-383.
- Ashcroft, B., G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, 2013. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, New York, USA., Pages: 200.
- Barth, F., 1998. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Waveland Press, London, England, Pages: 153.
- Bayar, M., 2009. Reconsidering primordialism: An alternative approach to the study of ethnicity. *Ethnic Racial Stud.*, 32: 1639-1657.
- Colla, E., 2009. Southeast Asia Ethnic Minorities in an Account by the Florentine Merchant Francesco Carletti: A 17th Century Manuscript. In: *Ethnic Minorities and Regional Development in Asia*. Cao, H. (Ed.). Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, Netherlands, pp: 33-48.
- Cornell, S. and D. Hartmann, 2006. *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. Sage Publications, 1000 Oaks, CA., Pages: 311.



- Dewaraja, L., 1994. The Muslims of Sri Lanka, 1000 Years of Ethnic Harmony 900-1915 AD. Lanka Islamic Foundation, Colombo, Sri Lanka, Pages: 160.
- Eriksen, T.H., 2002. Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspective. 2nd Edn., Pluto Press, London, England, Pages: 91.
- Harff, B. and T.R. Gurr, 2004. Ethnic Conflict and Changing World Order. In: Ethnic Conflict in World Politics. Harff, B. and T.R. Gurr (Eds.). Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, pp: 1-14.
- Horowitz, D.L., 1985. Ethnic Groups in Conflict. University of California Press, Berkeley, USA., Pages: 699.
- Imtiyaz, A.R.M. and S.R.H. Hoole, 2011. Some critical notes on the non-Tamil identity of the Muslims of Sri Lanka and on Tamil-Muslim relations. *J. South Asian Stud.*, 34: 208-231.
- Jayawardena, K., 1985. Ethnic and Class Conflicts in Sri Lanka: Some Aspects of Sinhala Buddhist Consciousness Over the Past 100 years. Center for Social Analysis, Colombo, Sri Lanka, Pages: 130.
- Kellas, J.G., 1998. The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity. 2nd Edn., St. Martin's Press, New York, USA., Pages: 386.
- Khanna, N., 2011. Ethnicity and race as symbolic: The use of ethnic and racial symbols in asserting a biracial identity. *Ethnic Racial Stud.*, 34: 1049-1067.
- McGilvray, D.B. and M. Raheem, 2007. Muslim perspectives on the Sri Lankan conflict. *Policy Stud.*, 41: 1-86.
- McGilvray, D.B., 1997. Tamils and Muslims in the shadow of war: Schism or continuity?. *J. South Asian Stud.*, 20: 239-253.
- McGilvray, D.B., 1998. Arabs, moors and muslims: Sri Lankan muslim ethnicity in regional perspective. *Contrib. Indian Soc.*, 32: 433-483.
- Miller, M.A., 2011. Why scholars of minority rights in Asia should recognize the limits of Western models. *Ethnic Racial Stud.*, 34: 799-813.
- Osaghae, E.E., 1998. Managing multiple minority problems in a divided society: The Nigerian experience. *J. Modern Afr. Stud.*, 36: 1-24.
- Pieterse, J.N., 2004. Ethnicities and Multiculturalisms: Politics of Boundaries. In: Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights. May, S., T. Modood and J. Squires (Eds.). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom, pp: 27-49.
- Poluha, E., 1998. Ethnicity and Democracy: A Viable Alliance?. In: Ethnicity and the State in Eastern Africa. Salih, M.A.M. and J. Markakis (Eds.). Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, Sweden, pp: 145-152.
- Smith, A.D., 1998. The Ethnic Origins of Nations. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
- Weber, M., 1978. Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology. Vol. 2, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA., USA. ISBN-13: 9780520035003, Pages: 1469.
- Yusoff, M.A., N. Hussin and A. Sarjoon, 2014. Positioning Muslims in ethnic relations, ethnic conflict and peace process in Sri Lanka. *Asian Soc. Sci.*, 10: 199-211.