

## **Social Interaction among Buddhists (Sinhalese) and Muslims in Moneragala District, Sri Lanka**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to investigate the social interaction among Buddhists and Muslims by measuring the mixed interaction and sharing of free time together in Moneragala, an administrative district among 25 in Sri Lanka. Moneragala consists of followers of both Islam and Buddhism, forming two religious groups that co-exist side by side in several villages namely; Bakinigahawela, Godigamuwa, Kanulwela and Medagama. This is an ethno-religious study about the social interaction among Buddhists and Muslims specifically in the administrative District of Moneragala. There are two major indicators ('mixed interaction' and 'sharing of spare time together') that have been prepared and applied in a questionnaire survey in order to measure the nature of the social interaction among the two religious groups. The samples together with the above mentioned indicators proved that the Buddhists and the Muslims in Moneragala have a positive mixed interaction and shared their spare time together. Therefore, the significance of the study is mainly associated with demonstrating the level of social interaction among both religious groups in this district.

**Key words:** Muslims, Moneragala, social interaction, Sinhalese, Sri Lanka

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Moneragala is one of the 25 administrative districts of Sri Lanka. This district was called 'Wellassa' by its ancient residents. It is located in the Uva Province in the South Eastern region of Sri Lanka. It has a terrain extension of 5,639 km<sup>2</sup>. The geographical land space is 2nd to the largest district in Sri Lanka, Anuradapura. In 2012, the total population in Moneragala was 451,058. Among these people, 97.7% live in rural areas and 2.3% live in estate areas. The population statistics information of Moneragala District has been separately maintained since 1958. In Moneragala, the predominant ethnic group is composed of Sinhalese (Buddhists) which make up about 426,762 of the total population. They speak Sinhala which is an Indo-Aryan language. The Tamils make up the second major ethnic group in Moneragala with 11,997 including both Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils. The Muslims are the second largest minority in the district, consisting 9,809.

The Muslims have settled down in Moneragala (or 'Wellassa') during the time of Portuguese rule (1505-1656) from Kandy and the Southern province of Sri Lanka. They have increased their settlements gradually during the Dutch (1656-1796) and British regimes

(1796-1948). Currently, they are spread out in 6 of 11 Divisional Secretariats (DS) namely; Medagam, Bibile, Badalkumbura, Wellawaya Buttala and Moneragala but the majority of them live in the Medagama division. In Moneragala District, Muslims represent the majority of the population in a total of five villages. There are many other towns and villages where the Muslims live as minorities. There are a few hamlets where the Muslims are also minorities. There are a small amount of Muslims that live in other DS divisions namely; Katharagama, Thanamalvila, Madulla and Siyamnbanduwa. In the Sewanagala DS division, there are no Muslim settlements. The Sinhalese are the majority in all of the above mentioned DS divisions in the district.

The history of Sri Lanka reveals that the Moneragala (Wellassa) region was popular in during ancient times. The arrival of the Aryans (06 BC), visits of king Dutugemunu and the activities of Vedddhas (Huntsmen) (Yalman, 1971) are examples to support this view. Therefore, the history of the Sinhalese (Buddhists) in Moneragala District began with the arrival of the Aryans who were the first to come to this region. The Vedddhas are the progenitors of the Sinhalese and Dutugemunu is a well-known Sinhala king who visited Wellassa during this ancient time.

There exists evidence that the Buddhists and the Muslims have maintained a cordial relationship in Sri Lanka to date including the Moneragala district as well. However, in the past few years in Sri Lanka, a number of religions including Islam and Christianity have been misinterpreted among society by a few third-party Buddhist nationalist groups. Consequently, a suspicious situation has developed to promote division among society, especially between the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in terms of social interaction. Hence, this study examines the level of social interaction by measuring the mixed interaction and the sharing of spare time together among the Buddhists (Sinhalese) and the Muslims in Moneragala with emphasis on the current context of Sri Lanka.

**Conceptual note on social interaction:** The term 'interaction' has different meanings in various disciplines. In the view of sociology, interaction is a mutual or reciprocal action between two or more individuals. Also, it is a dynamic interplay and relationship of joint determination between two or more variables (Borgatta and Borgatta, 1992). In the book of Shaw 1981, interaction is defined as the process by which individuals emit behaviour in each other's presence; they create products of each other or communicate with each other. Social interaction is the process of changing the sequence of social actions between individuals or groups who modify their actions and reactions according to the actions by their interacting partners (Alwi and Rashid, 2011). In the religious perspective, generally, interaction is a prominent role played by all religions in order to be kind to fellow beings. All religions promote a peaceful and harmonious life. One way to achieve this is through interaction among the believers and non-believers of their specific adherence. With regards to Buddhism and Islam, both have their own perspectives of social interaction and attitude towards other religions.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The data used in this study were collected from the Bakigahawela, Medagama, Kamulwela and Godigamuwa villages which are located in Moneragala District. The Muslim and Buddhist communities co-exist in these villages. Altogether, 100 informants have been selected as participants of this study from the above villages based on the convenience sampling technique. To measure the level of social interaction among them, simple frequencies percentages as well as means were calculated. Based on responses of the questionnaire among the 100 participants 74% were Sinhalese

(Buddhists) and 26% were Muslims. The results show that the Sinhalese male respondents made up the majority (55%) followed by the Muslim males (18%), Sinhalese females (19%) and lastly, Muslim females (8%). The frequency for each sex group showed that males made up 73% and females 27%. The next section presents details about the results.

**Social interaction among buddhists and muslims in Moneragala:** The major objective of this study is to determine the level of the social interaction among Buddhists and Muslims. There are various indicators that could be identified to measure the social interaction through the relevant literature. However, the 'mixed interaction' and 'sharing of free time together' are the significant indicators of measuring social interaction in this study. The detailed explanations of the two indicators are as follows.

**Mixed interaction:** In this study, mixed interaction is defined as a situation whereby the Sinhalese and the Muslims socialize in the community interacting with their people of other religions. Therefore, mixed interaction includes the frequency of their participation. In total, there are six items constructed in measuring mixed interaction among the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Moneragala District. Therefore, the study examines this by considering how frequently and actively the respondents participate in collective activities such as visiting each other, celebrating events together, going out together (going to restaurants or teashops) and helping each other in the selected villages.

Item one seeks to examine whether the neighbours have known each other well. The results clearly indicate that the majority of the respondents know at least the basic details of their neighbours. Accurately, 97% of them agreed that they have known their neighbours while only 3% of the participants stated that do not know their neighbours well. Therefore, item one indicates that the majority of the respondents have known their neighbours well mainly because of meetings on many occasions and public work for example, in 'Siramadana' (which is a shared effort to clean their surrounding environment) as well as in social gatherings such as preparing wedding ceremonies or funerals.

Item two asks the informants to confirm whether they interact with their neighbours of different religious faiths namely; Buddhism or Islam. A total of 84% responded that they have interacted with their neighbours while only 14% answered negatively. This demonstrates that 84% of the participants have interacted with their neighbours of other religious beliefs. Merely, 14% have responded that

they didn't have any interaction with their neighbours of different religions. Item three seeks to discover whether the participants regularly interact with Muslim or Buddhist neighbours. About two thirds of them (69%) answered that they often get together with Muslim or Buddhist neighbours. In contrast, only 31% responded negatively.

Item four ask the respondents to determine whether they often visit their Muslim or Buddhist neighbours. The results revealed that more than half of them (57%) often visit their neighbours' residences. With this result, it could be assumed that the relationship between them is sufficient. One resident claimed that he has a strong relationship with his next door neighbour, regardless of their religious adherences and that there was no racial discrimination. Item five attempts to discover the problems faced when dealing with Muslim or Buddhist neighbours. About 80% of the participants expressed that they have not realized any problems when dealing with their neighbours, regardless of their religious beliefs. Only 20% answered that they have had problems when dealing with their opponents of which 14% of them were the Buddhists. This shows that Buddhists had more problems compared to Muslims (only 6%). It could be assumed that the Buddhists were the predominant group in Moneragala district and are superior to Muslims in terms of political and economical power. However, because of the huge number of Sinhalese in the location, 14% faced problems in dealing with Muslims which is considered a small number. Perhaps, these could be labelled as rare cases compared to the majority.

Item six evaluates whether the respondents have tried to isolate themselves and keep away from any interaction with their neighbours. Noticeably, 95% of the informants firmly expressed that their neighbours socialize and interact well with them and there were no isolated feelings from the society. The rest (5%) claimed that they had feelings of isolation from society and refused to interact with them.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Sharing spare time together:** Sharing spare time together is taken as an indicator for the evaluation of social interaction among both ethnic groups in this study and this indicator measures the frequency of the gathering of the respondents with people of different religions during their spare time. This indicator consists of five items including spending time together, visiting neighbours of other ethnic groups, participating in collective activities together, minority Muslims feeling a sense of belonging and acceptance by the Sinhalese as well as the

approachability of the two groups. This segment generally seeks the views of the respondents on the level of satisfaction when interacting with residents of other religious beliefs in the selected villages for example, getting along well with one another being comfortable in the midst of one another, etc. This is an attempt to find the Sinhalese perception and interaction with Muslims in the research area and vice versa. Item one aims to find the extent to which the respondents are comfortable in dealing with their Muslims or Sinhalese neighbours. The results showed that the majority (88%) claimed that they were comfortable with their neighbours while only 12% claimed that they were uncomfortable in dealings with their neighbours. Once again, 10 people from the Sinhalese group were uncomfortable with their Muslim neighbours and two people from the Muslims claimed they were uncomfortable with their Sinhalese neighbours. A possible reason for the dissatisfaction of Sinhalese towards their Muslim neighbours is that they might have experienced uncomfortable behaviours by other Muslims and thus, they perceive their neighbours may project the same uncomfortable behaviours towards them.

In item two, respondents were asked whether they were comfortable with being in the homes of their Muslim or Sinhalese neighbours. A total of 71% of the respondents answered negatively stating that they were uncomfortable with being in the homes of other religious believers. Specifically, 26 Sinhalese mentioned that they were comfortable with being in the homes of Muslims while 48 Sinhalese stressed that they were uncomfortable with being in the homes of Muslims. On the other hand, 23 Muslims responded that they were uncomfortable with being in the homes of Sinhalese while only three mentioned that they did not have any problem with this.

Item three seeks to determine whether the respondents believe that their neighbours were good or bad neighbours. A total of 88% of the respondents responded positively while 12% mentioned their neighbours were not good neighbours. Out of these figures, 64% of the Sinhalese mentioned that Muslims were good neighbours while the 24% of Muslims insisted that Buddhists were good neighbours. Only 10% of Sinhalese mentioned that the Muslims were not good neighbours while only 2% of the Muslims responded negatively. This negative feeling might be due to the past experiences that have occurred such as having been treated badly or even engaged in several quarrels with the Muslims or Sinhalese.

Item four involved the respondents' verification on whether they believed that the Sinhalese or Muslim neighbours are proud of their professed religion. The

effects showed that the majority of the responses noted that their Muslim neighbours look upon their religion as superior to Buddhism and vice versa. More precisely, out of these figures 45 Sinhalese claimed that their Muslim neighbours were very proud of their religion and perceived it was superior to Buddhism. A total of 10 Muslims mentioned that their Sinhalese neighbours looked upon their religion as being superior to Islam. All other respondents (45) answered 'no'.

The last item ('sharing spare time together') attempts to determine the extent to which the respondents felt they were threatened by the opposite religious believers. It was observed that 80% of the respondents (60% Sinhalese and 20% Muslims) expressed that they were not threatened by each other. Only 20% of them responded that they felt threatened by the other religious followers that surrounded them. Out of the 20%, Sinhalese constituted to 14% while Muslims 6%.

### **CONCLUSION**

Two indicators mixed interaction and sharing of spare time together were used in this study in order to measure the social interaction among the Sinhala and Muslim groups in Moneragala District. Based on the analysis of the questionnaires, it was revealed that the Sinhalese and Muslims in the above mentioned location have a constructive blended interaction among each other. There are several other reasons for this. Firstly, the Muslims have no communication problems. Most of the Muslims in this area are fluent in speaking the Sinhala language and have many cultural similarities with Sinhalese (Hussein, 2009). Consequently, the Muslims are easily assimilated by the Sinhalese of the area and because of this, the communication process among them is smooth and successful. Moreover, because of their religious motivations to interact with one another, they have been freely adapted to do so. Thus, if they firmly stick of the religion, their peaceful co-existence may be improved.

According to the data collected, the outcome of the study demonstrated that the respondents had a blended cooperation among each other and also generally shared their spare time together. Most of the respondents claimed that they enjoyed the company of the neighbours of other religions. They also involved themselves in similar communal and shared activities run by both societies. They did not have problems with eating together at the same places and teashops and shopping together at supermarkets and shop retailers. It can be concluded that the Sinhala and the Muslim residents of Moneragala District, especially in Bakinigahawela, Godigamuwa, Kanulwela and Medagama, experienced a constructive blended interaction and shared their spare time together. It is noteworthy that there were no clashes or arguments reported in the Moneragala area throughout the history of Moneragala District. It was demonstrated that the people of Moneragala have been and continue to be in great cooperation with one another, regardless of their religious backgrounds.

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