



Restoring Tamil-Muslim Relationship and Political Co-existence in Post-War Sri Lanka: A Review on S.J.V.Chelvanayakam's Political Vision for the 'Tamil-Speaking People'¹

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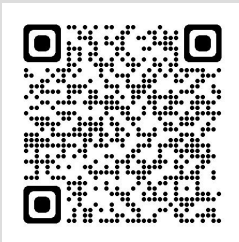
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Article History

Received: 25.08.2025

Accepted: 27.09.2025

Published: 14.11.2025



Abstract: In Sri Lanka, the 'Tamil-speaking' ethnic groups, Tamils and Muslims (Moors), have a long history of sharing various aspects of public and private life, indicating co-existence in many small villages, particularly in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka. The two ethnic groups have also portrayed a greater degree of political co-existence. However, the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict and the prolonged civil war have resulted not only in the gradual erosion of their relationship and interaction but also allowed the two ethnic groups to sharpen their ethnic, cultural, and political identities. This study examines the key dimensions of the relationship between the two ethnic groups, with a specific emphasis on political co-existence under the slogan of 'Tamil-speaking people.' A qualitative study, primarily based on secondary literature, has found that historical settlement patterns fostered the two ethnic groups to share ethno-religious, linguistic, and cultural aspects, while also making them interdependent in their daily affairs. Over time, this interdependence contributed to a common political co-existence,

emphasizing the sharing of common political ideas and voicing common political interests, including rights to self-determination and political representation. S.J.V. Chelvanayakam's notion of 'political co-existence of the Tamil-speaking people' further reinforced this bond, providing a platform for mutual political engagement. However, the promotion of civil war ideology, nationalist activism, and racist violence cultivated divisionist sentiment among the two ethnic groups. This resulted in increased prejudices and mutual mistrust among the two ethnic groups, even as their co-existence in villages remained crucial. Although several initiatives for reconciliation were proposed in the aftermath of the civil war, no meaningful attempt was made to restore the relationship among the groups. This study emphasizes that both ethnic groups will benefit mutually, particularly in managing the numerous issues and challenges commonly faced by them, if they revitalize the multi-dimensional relationship and political co-existence.

Keywords: *Tamil-Muslim relationship, political co-existence, ethnic conflict, civil war, post-war Sri Lanka.*

¹ This article was originally published in Tamil under the title "Tamil-Muslim Relations and Political Coexistence in Sri Lanka: A Study Focusing on S.J.V. Chelvanayakam's Political Pathway for the 'Tamil-Speaking People'" (pp. 180-210) in the edited volume *S.J.V. Chelvanayakam and Tamil National Politics* (2024), edited by S. Vijayachandran and M. Balamayuran. The present version has been further revised and expanded with new content and updated information.

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, the ‘Tamil-speaking’ ethnic groups, Tamils and Muslims (also called as ‘Sri Lankan Moors’), have a long history of sharing various things and living in a manner of brotherhood. In particular in the Northern and the Eastern regions, the two ethnic groups have lived together in the same village and in adjacent villages, with close social, cultural and economic ties. Similarly, there is a long history of the two ethnic groups pursuing politics in the Northern and the Eastern regions with a unified ideology. However, the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict and the civil war have resulted not only creating a major impact on Tamil-Muslim relationship and interaction, but also allowed the two ethnic groups to sharpen their ethnic and cultural identities and sensitivities. However, as of today, in most parts of the Northern and the Eastern regions, Tamils and Muslims continue to work together at various levels and it is essential for them to move accordingly. Although it is essential to strengthen ethnic and political relations between them as ‘Tamil-speaking people’ in the post-war context, the reality is that no meaningful and widespread efforts have been undertaken between the two communities towards it.

While commemorating the 127th birth anniversary of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, who is revered as the great leader of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka, this article aims to present some notes which will serve as a platform for strengthening ethnic relationships and the politics of coexistence between the two ethnic groups based on the analyses in the aspects such as historical relations between the ‘Tamil-speaking people’ who are Tamils and the Muslims living in Sri Lanka’s Northern and the Eastern regions, and on the ‘politics of coexistence between the Tamil-speaking people’ which was conceptualized and pioneered by Chelvanayakam. Historical narratives and arguments presented in this paper are based on secondary data and information obtained from books, research articles, newspaper articles and websites, and these data and information have been analyzed and presented in the appropriate places of the article as direct quotations, opinions, summaries and descriptions. Interpretations have also been presented for them where necessary by which it has been attempted to achieve the purpose of this article.

The demographic landscape and relationship of Tamil and Muslim ethnic groups in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a country with a pluralistic social structure in terms of ethnicity, religion, language and culture and its civil, historical and cultural heritage is the antiquity over 2500 years. Each ethnic group that has lived in Sri Lanka since ancient times has its own unique characteristics in terms of language, religion and cultural heritage (Coperahewa, 2009). This culturally pluralistic social structure has made the island of Sri Lanka a place of interest and attention of many foreigners.

The people of Sri Lanka are divided into four main ethnic and religious groups, along with some minor groups, and two main linguistic groups along with some minor groups. The main ethnic groups are the Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Moors (Muslims), and Indian Tamils. The Sinhalese speak Sinhala as their mother tongue and are predominantly Buddhists. The Tamils speak Tamil as their mother tongue and are predominantly Hindus. Small numbers of both groups are Christians. Muslims are the followers of Islam and almost all speak Tamil as their mother tongue. However, a significant number of Muslims are also proficient in Sinhala language.

According to the census conducted in Sri Lanka (2012), the total population of the country was 20,359,439. Of these, 74.9% are Sinhalese, 11.2% are Sri Lankan Tamils, 9.3% are Moors (who

are known as Moors for official registration purposes but are commonly referred to as Muslims), and 4.1% are Indian Tamils. In terms of religion, 70.1% of the total population is Buddhists, 12.6% is Hindus, 9.7% is Muslims, and 7.6% is Christians (Department of Census and Statistics, 2015). Similarly, from a linguistic perspective, about 96 percent of Sinhalese speak Sinhala as their mother tongue, and about 96 percent of Tamils and Muslims also speak Tamil as their mother tongue (Peiris, 2000). Thus, while Sinhala-speaking people belong to a single ethnic group, the Sinhalese, three ethnic groups, namely Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils and Moors (Muslims), all speak Tamil as their mother tongue.

Although there has been a consensus between groups based on language policy in various countries around the world, in societies with pluralistic structures - especially in societies with multilingual groups - due to the politicization of language policy in Sri Lanka after independence, the process of nation-building continued to be unsuccessful in advancing the program of building linguistic consensus among main groups that speak only two different languages, Sinhala and Tamil. This gradually led to an intensification of the conflict between the two main ethno-linguistic groups (Sinhalese and Tamils) and also led to the progress of conflict between two different ethnic groups that speak the same language (Tamils and Muslims).

In Sri Lanka, the Northern and Eastern provinces are predominantly inhabited by Tamils and Muslims who are the Tamil-speaking ethnic groups. In particular, in the Northern province, Tamils are the sole majority and Muslims are the major minority, while in the Eastern province, Tamils and Muslims are almost equally represented. The relationship and interaction between the Tamil-Muslim people living in these provinces are very unique. They have a long history of living together in various stages of life. In particular, the exclusiveness of Tamil-Muslim settlement structure in the Eastern province is characterized by the adjacent areas of settlement amongst the Muslims and Tamils. That is, in many parts of the Eastern Province, the settlements of the two ethnic groups can be observed side by side, such as a Muslim-majority village followed by a Tamil-majority village or villages where both ethnic groups live together. This settlement trend has led to the development of close interaction and relationship between the two ethnic groups. This has also created the need for one ethnic group to rely on the other in many ways. It is because many people would figuratively compare as Muslims and Tamils in the Eastern and the Northern provinces lived together like '*Coconut and Pittu*' – a traditional dish primarily made in Sri Lanka and South India (Raheem, 2023; Abdullah, 2004).

In fact, anyone travelling North to South along the coastal line of the Eastern Sri Lanka can see Tamil villages and towns and Muslim villages and towns that are consecutively located like a braid of long hair (Lajapati Roy, 2023). V.C. Kanthaiya, who wrote the book '*Batticaloa Tamilagam*' (meaning of Tamil Nadu) in 1964, states that the great uniqueness of Batticaloa Tamilagam is due to the strict unity and patriotism of the indigenous people here, such as the Tamils, Moors etc. and despite their different religions, Hindus, Muslims and Christians live together in unity due to the sense of their language by forgetting their differences" (Kanthaiya, 1964:464). The same scenario was observed in the Northern province as well. Muslims, who lived as a very small minority in small villages in various parts of the Northern province, have lived together with the Tamils who lived as the majority in those areas, maintaining social relations and business contacts (Yusoff *et al.*, 2018; Imtiyaz and Iqbal, 2011).

The following sub-sections describe in detail the shared interests and long-standing relationships in various fields between the Tamil and Muslim ethnic groups living in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka.

Socio-cultural interaction and relationship

As Tamils and Muslims lived together neighboring in the Northern and Eastern provinces, it was naturally growing for the cultural values and traditions of one group to be adopted by the other. The Tamil-Muslim people living in the villages of these provinces had close ties with each other and had a brotherly attitude. The two communities participated and shared their relationships in the special days, wedding occasions, festivals and all other goods and bads. The social, cultural, traditions and values of the two communities were seen as a two-way bond of affection. They were happy to respect, honor and help each other. There was a golden age when many Muslims in the Northern and the Eastern regions had acquired Saiva religious knowledge and in the same way the Tamils (Hindus) had Islamic knowledge and lived like the children of a same mother.

Muslims have also made their contributions to the development of the Tamil language by using Tamil as their mother tongue to develop their communication, education and relationships. Similarly, they have also followed the socio-cultural aspects of the Tamils and lived their lives. In particular, Muslims have followed many of the customs and traditions of the Tamils in the important events of life such as marriage rituals, puberty rituals, funeral rituals and so on. It is noteworthy that the important events of Muslim weddings to this day, such as tying the *Thali*, performing the *Aarti*, garlanding, shouting *Kuravai*, offering the dowry, and groom's home-going, are the events that differ from the cultural traditions of Arabian-Muslims and they were solely derived from the cultural traditions of the Tamils (Muhammad Sameem, 1997; Abdullah, 2004).

In particular, there are many evidences that Tamils and Muslims have lived in harmony with each other since ancient times particularly in the Batticaloa region of the Eastern province. It is a historical story that in the war between the *Thimils* and the *Mukkuvar*, the *Mukkuvar* defeated the *Thimils* with the help of Muslims and that therefore *Mukkuvar* provided various facilities to the Muslims for their help (Muhammad Sameem, 1997). There are many similarities in the customs and traditions of the Tamils and Muslims in the Eastern province. There are many similarities in the names of the Muslims and the Tamils (e.g. *Chinnathambi*, *Seenithambi*, *Thambirasa*, *Vellaith Thambi*, *Thangamma*, *Vellamma*). There are common family names (clan names) between the two communities (e.g. *Odavi Kudi*) (Muhammad Sameem, 1997).

It is noteworthy that Muslims have continued to depend on Tamil culture in terms of dressing culture. Sri Lankan Muslims have worn Western, Malay-Javanese, North and South Indian dressing culture for a long time. The saree (sari) and salwar kameez clothing that have become popular among Muslims are worn under the influence of the dressing culture of South Indian Tamils. In the recent times, a unique Islamic (Arabic) clothing (attire) culture has developed and dominated among the Muslims. However, in the areas where Muslims live majority, there is a tendency for Muslim women, men and children to continue wearing Tamil cultural dressing. Although a cultural change is natural in any society, the influence of Tamil culture remains influential among Muslims even today.

Although Muslims, who have been highly affected by ethnic conflict and the civil war occurrences, have attempted to highlight their ethnic, religious and cultural identity, especially due to the attacks by the influential Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), to the point of denigrating their (Muslim) ethnic, religious and cultural identities, and

due to their increased contacts with Middle Eastern Muslim countries, they have not completely denied the many cultural traditions or customs of the Tamils that they have continued to follow – which are inextricably linked to their way of life. Nor have they expressed complete opposition to them.

Linguistic interactions and relationship

In most parts of Sri Lanka, especially in the Northern and the Eastern provinces, language has been a major tool in uniting the Tamil and the Muslim ethnic groups. Just as Tamil is the mother tongue of the Tamils, it is also the mother tongue of almost all Muslims living in all parts of Sri Lanka. While there are various reasons why Muslims, who prioritize their distinctive ethnic and cultural identities, speak Tamil as their mother tongue, one important factor for this is the fact that the Tamil and Muslim communities in the Northern and the Eastern regions have lived with adjacent neighborhood and coexisted with each other. The language has been a major connecting tool in promoting communication and relations between the two communities in various disciplines. In particular, the contribution of Tamils and the Tamil language to the development of the educational and cultural sectors of Muslims has been extensive, and Muslims have also contributed in various ways to the development of the Tamil language.

In particular, Muslim scholars like Professor M.M. Uwais, A.M.Sarifudeen (Pulavarmani), Saiyathu Hasan Maulana, Professor M.A.M.Nuhman have made an immense contribution to the development of the Tamil language. Professor Uwais (along with S.Vidhyananandan) brought the subject of Islamic literature to the world. It is noteworthy that when Tamil scholar N.C. Kandhaiappillai published a ‘Tamil Literary Dictionary’ in 1952, he included the names of 95 Muslim literary works in the same. In his book ‘Batticaloa Tamilagam’, V.C. Kanthaiya describes the writings of five Muslim poets (Chinna Alim Appa, Sehu Madaru Sahib Poet, Muhammad Rabib Poet, Abdul Rahuman Alim Poet, Hashim Alim Bard) who were from the poet ancestry lived in Batticaloa (the area that includes most parts of the Amparai district with the present-day Batticaloa district) (see: Kanthaiya, 1964). While there was a political debate in the 1960s about whether the mother tongue of Sri Lankan Muslims was Tamil or Sinhala, Kandiah gloated that the Muslims of Batticaloa are the Tamil big clans who were born in Tamil, grew up in Tamil, and learned and flourished in the sweetness of Tamil (Kanthaiya, 1964:274).

Poet Neelavaanan, a Tamil literary figure from Neelaavanai village in the Eastern Sri Lanka, interacted very well with Muslims in his neighboring villages and had very close relations with Muslim writers. Many other literary figures and writers, including him, greatly helped in interacting with the Muslims and Muslim writers and in helping Tamils understand the lives of Muslims and increase their relations. In the Eastern Sri Lanka, Tamils and Muslims have contributed immensely to their society by sharing knowledge and expertise with each other. Swami Vipulananda, who was born in Karaithivu in the present Ampara district (then part of Batticaloa district), and Pulavarmani Periyathambipillai, who was born in Mandur in Batticaloa district, made great efforts to establish good relations with the Muslim community and establish social harmony (Subaraj, 2015). They are still commemorated among the Muslim literary community due to their good relations with Muslim scholars.

Many Tamil literatures and scholars have mentioned the contribution made by Muslims to Tamil language (see: Ponnuthurai, 1975(2002)). Tamils and Muslims have worked together in various artistic and literary forums and have performed various tasks. Muslims have held grand festivals in many areas in appreciation of the services rendered by Tamils for the multifaceted

development of Muslim community. In fact, even though the ethnic conflict escalated and erupted into violence and both ethnic groups as a result live in sharp isolation with their identities, the Tamil language has been the one that connects them in various common grounds to date.

Educational relationship

Education has also been an important tool in strengthening the relationship between the Tamil and Muslim communities in the Northern and the Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. As a result of the Tamils taking advantage of English education and education through missionaries, they have become the most educated people in Sri Lankan society and have filled more positions in the government sectors. Thus, since the establishment of government schools, Tamil teachers have served as teachers and school administrators in schools located in Muslim-predominant villages. Similarly, Muslims have also admitted their children to famous schools in Tamil-majority areas and educated them. Muslims have undertaken this action because of the excellence and good reputation of Tamil schools and Tamil teachers. There are many Muslims today who are proud of the Tamil teachers and Tamil schools that have contributed to their excellence in education and higher growth. In fact, for decades since the establishment of government schools in many Muslim villages, Tamils have been the principals and teachers in those schools, and the Tamils have played a major role in opening new schools in many Muslim villages and stimulating educational development. Although schools were segregated and managed as Tamil and Muslim schools following the outbreak of ethnic conflict, students from both communities' studies together and cultural events of both communities are held together at various levels in many schools even today.

Economic relationship and interaction

The close proximity of Tamils and Muslims in the Northern and the Eastern provinces has led to close economic ties between the two communities. In particular, both communities have been involved in local agricultural and other economic activities in the rural areas. In many villages, there has been a need and compulsion for both communities to work together in activities such as agriculture, small-seasonal cultivation, fishing, weaving and construction. There has been a great deal of linkage and dependence between the two communities in the agricultural cultivation. This is because the paddy-fields of Tamils were located in the Muslim-majority areas and the paddy-fields of Muslims were located in the Tamil-majority areas, which forced both communities to work together in activities related to agriculture. Thus, it has always been the case that one community leases paddy-fields to another, shares or rents agricultural equipment and using them with one another on a barter basis.

Muslims from many villages in the Eastern province would travel in groups to Tamil-majority villages in the Northern province, such as Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and Mannar, and stay there for months to engage in paddy-harvesting activities until the period where civil war was intensified. Similarly, local farmers from Tamil villages would travel to Muslim villages to sell their agricultural productions, and Muslim traders (especially paddy buyers, clothes and spice traders) would travel to Tamil-majority villages to engage in business activities, which were common economic activities.

The connection between the two communities in the economic activities has continued even during the civil war. In particular, villages like Kinniya, Mutur, Oddamavadi, Valaichchenai, Kattankudy, Maruthamunai, Kalmunai, Akkaraipattu, and Pottuvil in the Eastern province have

always been the economic hubs for the people of both ethnic groups. It is noteworthy that the same situation continues even today.

In addition to agricultural activities, Tamils and Muslims have also been dependent on each other and have worked closely together in the economic activities such as grocery trade, construction and carpentry, handloom weaving, and animal husbandry in many villages in the Eastern province. Even today, it is noticeable that many Muslims rely on Tamil workers and Tamil-majority areas for their economic activities such as construction and animal husbandry. There is a history in many villages where Muslims have participated in the economic development of displaced Tamils during the war crisis and Tamils have participated in the economic development of Muslims.

Political relationship and interaction

Politically, Tamils and Muslims living in the Northern and the Eastern provinces have worked very closely together. Due to the coexistence of Tamils and Muslims in these provinces and the lack of political movements or parties among Muslims, Muslims have continuously supported many Tamil political leaders since their political entry. In many villages where Muslims are predominantly live, Muslim leaders and village heads have been involved in the campaign activities in support of Tamil candidates. They have given them a majority of their votes and made Tamil candidates win.

When the Tamil Arasu Kadchi (Federal Party) was formed under the leadership of S.J.V.Chelvanayakam in the early 1950s, many Muslim leaders joined him in later years and have expressed their support in many of the struggles for rights launched by the Tamil Arasu Kadchi under the leadership of Father Chelvanayakam. In a political conference held in Kalmunai in 1956, poet Periyathambipillai expressed this in his speech through a poem with the meaning, 'We Tamils and Muslims are like the two petals of the heart of Mother Batticaloa. Only if both petals work in unison will the heartbeat be stable. If they do not work in unison, the heartbeat will stop. We must realize that our unity as Hindus and Muslims is essential for the life and survival of our mother. Let us protect ourselves from giving way to the dividing forces and going down the path of destruction' (Subraj, 2015).

Several Muslim leaders in the Eastern province contested as the candidates of the Tamil Arasu Kadchi in the general election of 1956 and subsequent elections. In the 1956 general election, Gate Mudaliyar M.S. Kariyappar contested and won from the Kalmunai constituency as a Tamil Arasu Kadchi candidate (he later joined the ruling party, the People's United Front (MEP) within six months). M.M. Mustafa, a lawyer from Nintavur, contested and won from the Tamil Arasu Kadchi in 1956 (he later also served as the Minister of Finance with the government) (Kalideen, 1996). This was his first electoral victory. In the general election held in July 1960, M.C. Ahamed, who contested on behalf of the Tamil Arasu Kadchi from the Kalmunai constituency, won (Department of Elections, 2020). This was his first parliamentary election victory.

In the general election held in March 1960, Mr. Thambaiah Ekambaram, who had contested on behalf of the Tamil Arasu Kadchi and won in the Mutur constituency which is a dual-member constituency, died in March 1961, whereby Tamil Arasu Kadchi supported M.E.H.Muhammad Ali, who contested in the by-election held consequent upon on 28th June 1962. While efforts were being meted out to divide Tamils and Muslims in the said election, Father Chelvanayakam went to Mutur and campaigned in support of Muhammad Ali and emphasized the need for Muslim-Tamil unity (Sabarathinam, 2023). It is noteworthy that Muhammad Ali won in the said election. Muhammad Ali also played an important role in the non-violence (non-cooperation)

protests organized and carried out by the Tamil Arasu Kadchi under the leadership of Chelvanayakam in 1961 (Tamilnet, 2005). It is noteworthy that he contested in the general election held in 1965 under the Tamil Arasu Kadchi and won again.

Z.M. Masoor Maulana, a native of Maruthamunai in the Eastern province, joined the Tamil Arasu Kadchi at his young age and became a prominent public speaker of the party. He actively participated in the Satyagraha struggles led by the party in the 1950s and early 1960s. As a result, he was also detained at the Panagoda Army Camp. Although he contested in the elections on behalf of the Tamil Arasu Kadchi several times, he was unable to win (he contested the elections held in March 1960 and the elections held in 1965 representing the Tamil Arasu Kadchi and lost by a narrow margin). Although many Muslim representatives who contested and won under Tamil Arasu Kadchi later changed their parties, due to Masoor Maulana's continued loyalty to the Tamil Arasu Kadchi, the Tamil Arasu Kadchi elected him as a member of the Senate (Upper House) in 1967 through the House of Representatives (Lower House). He is the only representative from the Eastern Muslim community to be elected to the Senate in the nearly 35 years that the Senate had been in action. This indicates the concern that Chelvanayakam and the Tamil Arasu Kadchi had regarding the political representation of the Tamil-speaking Muslim community.

When the Sri Lankan government declared Sinhala as the only official language, Muslims along with Tamils participated in the struggles for the rights led by the Tamil Arasu Kadchi under the leadership of Chelvanayakam for the official status of the Tamil language. Father Celvanayakam had led the struggle on the basis of the principle that Tamil was not a secondary language to other languages – it was the royal official language – and that it should be given equal status like the Sinhala language. That is, he struggled for equal rights for the ‘Tamil-speaking people’. Muslims also participated in large numbers in the demonstrations and satyagrahas related to that struggle. In particular, hundreds of Muslims from the Northern and the Eastern provinces participated in the Vaddukkodai Conference and the Thirumalai (Trincomalee) Conference convened by the Tamil Arasu Kadchi to demand various rights for the Tamil-speaking people, including obtaining official status equal to that of the Sinhala language. Muslims joined Tamils in the two-month-long peaceful Satyagraha (Movement against the law) conducted by the Tamil Arasu Kadchi in front of key government offices in the Northern and the Eastern provinces to protest against the implementation of the Sinhala Only Official Language Act in 1961. Similarly, Muslims continued to support for many struggles to achieve the political demands advocated by the leaders of Tamil Arasu Kadchi.

Since Muslims believed in the policies of the Tamil Arasu Kadchi and continued on its political path, the political vision and demands of Chelvanayakam were a broad vision and demands for the ‘Tamil-speaking people’, which also included the interests of the Muslim community. There are many excellent examples of this aspect. For example, he expressed strong opposition to the laws passed by the first government of independent Sri Lanka in the then parliament that deprived the citizenship of people of Indian-Pakistani origin (Tamil-speaking Tamils and Muslims) - considering it as a violation of their fundamental rights - and he openly advocated that the citizenship of all Tamil-speaking people should be guaranteed in the Constitution. Although some of the members of the Tamil Congress Party to which he belonged to at that time, supported the law, he boldly opposed it and left the party against their policy and founded the Tamil Arasu Kadchi as a separate political party.

During the period when the Tamil Arasu Kadchi was engaged in politics for the Tamil-speaking people, it had put forward the demand for regional autonomy units in the Northern and the

Eastern provinces which was a demand for political autonomy for the Tamil-speaking people. In this regard, in the historic bilateral agreement (1957) entered into S.J.V. Chelvanayakam and the then Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Chelvanayakam had included an arrangement that a separate regional autonomy unit should be established in the Northern province and more than one autonomous unit in the Eastern province (Ghose, 2003). In fact, this should be considered as an arrangement that was included with the political autonomy for the Muslims living in the Eastern province in mind. Nevertheless, Chelvanayakam, who opposed the government-sponsored land transfer (alienation) policies together with the irrigational projects implemented in the Northern and the Eastern provinces by the Sri Lankan government in favour of the Sinhala people, continued to advocate for the fair distribution of such lands to the Tamils and Muslims who had originally lived in those provinces.

In particular, it is noteworthy that when 6 Muslims were killed by a police firing at Muslims who engaged in prayer in Jumma Mosque in Puttalam in February 1976, despite the presence of several Muslim representatives representing the main political parties in the Parliament (S.M. Asenkudhous represented the then ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party from Puttalam district), it was Chelvanayakam who, as an individual, boldly raised his voice in Parliament in support of Muslims against the massacres (Athambawa, 2006; Hakeem, 1997; Siddique, 1987). Although there were eight (08) Muslim representatives in the Parliament during the said time, they were unable to speak out against this injustice against Muslims due to the policies of the parties they belonged to. The reason why Chelvanayakam spoke out for Muslims was the manifestation of his inclusion of Muslims in his political journey and struggle towards the rights, considering them as Tamil-speaking people.

The political bond of Muslims with Chelvanayakam continued until his demise. When there was an election ahead in 1977, the Tamils, who had been divided into the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress, united under the name of the Tamil United Liberation Front and campaigned for the elections, considering the election to seek public mandate (i.e. a referendum) for a separate Tamil state. The Tamil United Liberation Front was joined by the Muslim United Front, which was formed by many Muslim dignitaries from the Eastern Sri Lanka. The Muslim United Front included prominent figures such as lawyers A.M.Samsudeen, M.H.M.Ashraff and Fazeel A. Majeed. Until then, Ashraff, who had been working as a lawyer in Colombo, came to Kalmunai and engaged in election campaigning activities along with his United legal profession. Ashraf was a prominent speaker at many campaign rallies of the Tamil United Liberation Front. Ashraff articulated on campaign dais with the slogan 'if elder brother Amirthalingam does not bring Tamil Eelam for the Tamils, then younger brother Ashraff will bring it for them' (Sarjoon, 2020:26; Jeyaraj 2016). To such an extent, Ashraff was greatly impressed by Father Chelvanayakam and Tamil nationalist political ideology. Similarly, it is noteworthy that Tamil leaders who came to campaign in Muslim areas in support of Muslim candidates had spoken in support of the right of self-determination and other rights of Muslims.

Even though all the Muslim candidates who contested under the Rising Sun symbol of the Tamil United Liberation Front in the 1977 general election were defeated, Ashraff continued to be a member of the Tamil United Liberation Front's executive committee. In fact, Ashraf did not taint the struggle of the Tamil people for their rights. He was one of those who changed it properly. He was one of those who raised voices for Tamils' rights. The reality is that the Tamil people did not understand it properly in later days. Thus, it is noteworthy that Ashraff's political journey, which was, in later times, moved establishing a separate political party for Muslims and advanced Muslim national politics, began with the political alliance led by Chelvanayakam.

Therefore, Ashraff had been expressing his immense faith in the leadership of Chelvanayakam, who recognized the political identity of Muslims and accommodated their rights and interests in his political activities, even when Ashraff himself was leading a unique party, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. Seeing Father Chelvanayakam as a lover of peacemaking, Ashraff had paid his tribute to him in poetry. Some of the translated verses of the poem (written in Tamil) were as follows;

...I have come to take away the
great man who still lives even after death!
Lift him upon my wings!
Don't play wasting my time with vain pretext!
Bring back the image of nonviolence,
Oh angels! Is he your leader too?
That is why you are delaying
to send him on his way!
He will give you new lights from the earth!
But Sri Lanka needs him immediately.
Can't you send him to lay the foundation stone of the
house of peace that Chandrika (Bandaranaike) Kumaratunga wants to establish?
That is why I ask!
Lift this young river
into the ship called my wings!
I will carry it without spilling a bit
to wash away the
stain of blood that has settled in Sri Lanka! (Ashraff, 1997).

In fact, the above few lines clearly show Ashraff's affection for Chelvanayakam. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Ashraff had pointed out that "the Muslim Congress is a continuation of the struggle undertaken by Father Chelvanayakam" (see: Ashraff, 1999:108). In particular, it should be remembered that Chelvanayakam was the one who laid the foundation (progenitor) for the demand for 'Muslim autonomy,' which was later conceptualized and politicized by the leaders of Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. As an extension of this, it can be noted that Ashraff had close ties with the Tamil United Liberation Front even after the demise of Chelvanayakam.

Exaggerated ethnic rivalry, intense civil war and the rift in Tamil-Muslim relations

Although the relations between the Tamil-speaking people of Sri Lanka, the Tamils, and the Muslims were strong in many ways, the intensity of the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict and the resulting of civil war played a major role in creating a divide between these two ethnic groups. In the late 1800s, the then Tamil leadership refused to recognize the ethnic identity of the Muslims of Sri Lanka and grant them political representation, arguing that 'the Muslims of Sri Lanka are also Tamils.' However, due to the strong opposition and arguments from Muslim leaders and scholars, the British colonial government recognized the Muslims of Sri Lanka as a distinctive ethnic group (the Sri Lankan Moors) and for the first time granted separate representation for

Muslims in the then Legislative Assembly in 1889 (Ali, 2004). After this incident, the Tamils did not attempt to question the ethno-cultural identity of the Muslims to any great extent. Although Ramanathan's view and argument that Muslims were 'Islamic Tamils' was prevalent among certain Tamils, they either willingly or unwillingly recognized Muslims as a distinctive ethnic group by avoiding to express such a concept in the public arena. In particular, Chelvanayakam's political notion of 'Tamil-speaking people' was the first and foremost disclosure of the recognition of Muslims as a distinctive ethnic group in the Tamil national politics and to include their rights within the same. That is, while some were insisting that Sri Lankan Muslims should be brought under the definition of 'Tamils,' it is worth noting that Rauff Hakeem, the then Secretary General of the Muslim Congress, had mentioned that Father Chelvanayakam was the one who identified Muslims as having a distinct identity and embraced Muslims in the Tamil national politics by indicating the epithet 'Tamil-speaking people' (Hakeem, 1997).

As long as Father Chelvanayakam led Tamil national politics, Tamils and their political ideology were seen as concerned with the uniqueness and rights and interests of Muslims. However, the attachment of Muslim political leaders with Father Chelvanayakam's Tamil Arasu Kadchi (Federal Party) has always not been credible. Many Muslim leaders in the Eastern province won in the parliamentary elections under the Tamil Arasu Kadchi or with the support of that party and elected as members of parliament, but once they gained the political recognition, they worked in the parliament in support of the ruling party and held ministerial portfolios. In particular, when looking at the later political lives of the two persons who contested and won in the then Kalmunai and Pottuvil constituencies under the Tamil Arasu Kadchi in 1956, it is reasonable to ask whether they were attracted by the ideologies and policies of the Tamil Arasu Kadchi or they boarded the comfortable vehicles that occasionally came across their way on the paths of advancing their political careers (Kalideen, 1996). Although it is argued that the main purpose behind the concept of 'Tamil-speaking people', which was conceptualized and popularized by the Tamil Arasu Kadchi, was to gain more seats in the parliamentary elections by using the votes of Muslims, Muslim politicians had also cleverly used this concept for their own benefit. It is noteworthy at this point to mention M.A. Nuhman's opinion that after contesting in the Tamil Arasu Kadchi and being elected to Parliament under the same, they abandoned their party allegiance and switched to other parties (Jamaldeen, 2020). Although Muslim representatives and citizens justified this stance of party-defection politics as an essential pragmatic political decision for the multi-faceted development of Muslims, but it is obvious that it is a political betrayal.

However, even though Tamil politics began to shift towards radical ethno-national politics in the second half of the 1970s, Father Chelvanayakam, in his final speech in Parliament on 19th November 1976, had raised his voice for the rights of the Tamil-Muslim people with the ideology of 'Tamil-speaking people' (Sabarathinam, 2016). However, the rift in Tamil-Muslim relations intensified after the Tamil nationalist struggle began to turn into an armed struggle from the latter part of 1970s.

However, the Tamil-Muslim relations were good until 1985s (even during the LTTE was in power). In particular, many Muslim youngsters joined the LTTE movement and held important positions in the movement. Tamil militants sometimes sought refuge in Muslim villages. In the early days, the LTTE recognized the uniqueness of Muslims to some extent. A report of 1985 of the LTTE stated that the 'Tamil-speaking people' needed to unite because the laws and policies introduced by the Sinhala-majority government had caused hardship to the Tamils, as well as to the Muslims living in the Northern and the Eastern regions. Another report of 1988 by the LTTE reached a step further, calling on Muslims to join them in their struggle, stating that they were an

inseparable part of the Tamil nation and that Muslims were more devoted to the Tamil language than other Tamils (Lajapathi Roy, 2023:148).

However, the views and demands of the LTTE regarding Muslims were not encouraging. The violent attacks launched by the LTTE against Muslims in many parts of the Eastern region since 1985s, especially the worst attacks meted out against Muslims in many parts of the merged North-Eastern province in the 1990s, were anti-democratic and showed a view about Muslims as the most serious enemies. These attacks had a lasting impact on the lives of Muslims in many ways and created a permanent rift in Tamil-Muslim relations.

When the Muslims, who were affected by the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict and the civil war, attempted to highlight and build their distinctive ethno-religious and cultural identities separately, they were branded as ‘different’ and ‘others.’ The theme of ‘Tamil-speaking people’ that Father Chelvanayakam had conceptualized as the ideology of Tamil national politics until then, had become as ‘Tamils’ or ‘Tamil people.’ Political demands and struggles were reshaped towards that theme. Even the LTTE which fought for the liberation of the Tamils, acted in a way that was equivalent to Ponnambalam Ramanathan’s argument (thesis) that Muslims were not a separate ethnic group – but rather Islamic Tamils or Tamils who practice the Islamic religious faith by embracing Islam, – and therefore the LTTE had launched attacks on the ethno-religious and cultural identities of Muslims living in the Northern and the Eastern regions. This exacerbated the issues among Muslims in terms of their ethno-religious identity and security.

The anti-Muslim actions of the LTTE raised suspicions among Muslims that the Tamil national liberation struggle was not about absorbing Muslims but about building a separate Tamil nation. This was confirmed by the violent attacks carried out by the LTTE on Muslims in many parts of the Eastern province and the expulsion at gunpoint of the entire Muslim community (approximately 75,000-100,000 people) having lost (renounced) everything in the Northern province, who had been living alongside Tamils while sharing economic and social life for hundreds of years (Yusoff *et al.*, 2018; Jeyaraj, 2015). Since the mid-1980s, many villages in the Eastern province, where Muslims predominantly lived, was subjected to continuous attacks by the LTTE. Weapons were also pointed at those who engaged in worship in mosques. Armed atrocities were also carried out against the innocent Muslims who were asleep restless during the war situation. Hundreds of Muslim policemen were killed, singled out for being Muslims (see: Jamaldeen, 2020; Yusoff *et al.*, 2014; Internation Crisis Group, 2006).

The outbreak of ethnic and armed conflict in the Eastern province led to the growth of hatred and prejudice between the Tamil and Muslim peoples who had previously lived with mutual trust and dependence. The Report of the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna Wing) (Report No.07) described the fractured nature of Tamil-Muslim relationships in the Eastern province as follows:

“The Muslims lived in constant fear of the attack of LTTE and the Tamils of the attack of Muslim home-guards. Thousands of acres of paddy fields, once the base for rice production, were left abandoned. Thousands of cattle, which were used by both groups in many ways, including milk, were abandoned in the forests. Passenger buses belonging to one community speedily passed the villages of the other community without stopping. A large number of Muslim teachers and students did not visit the Eastern University, even though it was located close to a Muslim area,” (UTRH(J), 1991:2-3).

In response to the attacks by the liberation struggle groups on Muslims, Muslim counter-attacks also took place in some Tamil villages. However, such counter-attacks did not even remotely

resemble the intensity of the attacks undertaken by the Tamil armed groups on Muslims. However, there was no place in the Tamil nationalist politics of the time to prevent the armed attacks of the LTTE on Muslims or to speak out on their behalf, due to the absence of Father Chelvanayakam.

Muslims, who were caught in the grip of the attacks by the Tamil nationalist militant groups and were helpless, considered the formation of a separate Muslim party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), as a means of protection (Yusoff *et al.*, 2014; Imtiyaz, 2012). When the SLMC and its leadership spoke out for the Muslims who were affected by the civil war and were in a helpless situation, a support for the Muslim independent party politics, moving away from Tamil political parties, began to grow among Muslims. Ashraff, who founded the separate Muslim party, argued that the political voice of Muslims could be strengthened through a unique political representation for the Muslims, rather than blunting or belittling the political struggle of Tamils for their rights (See: Ashraff, 1999).

However, Muslims continued to be viewed as enemies during civil war, and there was also a strong opposition among Tamils (especially militant groups) against the distinct Muslim political party that had emerged for Muslims affected by the civil war and ethnic politics. In the situation where Tamils were actively campaigning and politicizing their demand for a separate state (and later regional autonomy) covering the entire territory of the merged Northern and the Eastern provinces, the SLMC also put forward the demand for a 'Muslim Majority Regional Autonomous Unit' as a constitutional solution (safeguard) for the Muslims community who were also affected by the ethnic conflict and civil war. A large number of Muslims supported that demand and the advocacy of the SLMC. However, Tamil militant groups and certain political parties largely opposed it, arguing that such demand was against the Tamils' demand for a separate state or autonomy – it was challenging it. All of these instances gradually led to the emergence of sharp ethnic ideology and ethno-social structures among Tamils and Muslims.

In the post-war context, not only the ethno-religious-cultural identity of Muslims was widely questioned by the cause of the rise of ethno-religious nationalistic hegemony of the majority of the country, but also opposition campaigns and violent attacks increased. At this time, there was no consensus in Tamil national politics as when Father Chelvanayakam led Tamil national politics to give a voice for Muslims, who were considered as fellow minority and spoke the same language. On the contrary, there was a great deal of opposition among Tamils against the cultural identity of Muslims, especially against the dress culture. The Trincomalee Shanmuga Hindu College affair was a prime example of this stance (See: Ramees, 2020). This created various arguments, rivalry and resentment between the 'Tamil-speaking people', Tamils, and Muslims. Ultimately, the Muslims who are the Tamil-speaking community was forced to take the issue, which should have been resolved through a very tactful negotiations, before the court to protect their right to their unique cultural attire.

After the Eastern province politically separated from the North in 2006, there was a situation where the 'Tamil-speaking people' – Tamils and Muslims – living in the Eastern province as a vast majority, could have come together and carried out a conciliatory politics in the Eastern province. The Eastern province still has a civil political structure in which no single ethnic group can enjoy provincial political power or autonomy (Sarjoon, 2020a; Yusoff *et al.*, 2019). However, unfortunately, the leaders of both communities have not tried to properly understand such a civil political situation and to carry out a conciliatory politics. As a result, the 'Tamil-speaking people' in the Eastern province, despite being the absolute majority, remain politically powerless.

Conclusion

Although there has been a long historical connection and bond of fraternity between the Tamil and Muslim communities living in the Northern and the Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, the intense ethnic conflict and civil war that escalated in the mid-1980s, greatly disrupted the continuity of such relationship. This has led to increase ethnic and religious divisions between the two communities and an increasing tendency to view each other as enemies. In the war prevalent situation, each side has a history of being attacked by the other. It is natural in the case of a war environment that would divide the group of people who live together in a harmonious manner.

However, in the post-war context, the restoration of the broken relations between the two communities with the perspective of ‘Tamil-speaking people’ will greatly help them to easily deal with multi-sectoral issues or needs they face and move towards a common mechanism for solutions. Today, Tamils and Muslims in the Northern and the Eastern regions are facing problems from different ways. Many of them are common issues faced by both communities. The policies and programs of the government engine push both ethnic groups into a suppression from many ways. The heritage lands of both communities are being taken away from different pretexts. If these two communities work together at this situation, solutions to many issues can be easily achieved. Therefore, the broad concept of ‘Tamil-speaking people’, initiated by Father Chelvanayakam, who recognized the fundamental ethnic, religious and cultural differences between the two communities and spoke out for the Tamil-speaking people, needs to be subjected to revive among both Tamil and Muslim communities and their political arena. It will be possible only through the joint efforts of academics, community and political leaders from both communities.

In the past, especially in the post-war period, there have been certain attempts to unite Tamils and Muslims, but most of them have been based on electoral politics. Those efforts have not been carried beyond elections and political events. All such events were utilized under the racial label for mere political gain as well as to castigate each other guilty.

In fact, the unity of Tamils and Muslims as minorities is very necessary to move towards a political settlement plan to rebuild the nation after the post-war Covid-19 pandemic and the massive economic crisis. The unity of both communities is the only weapon that the minorities have to obtain justice and peace from the majority rulers. However, building such a ethnic harmony between these two ethnic groups that are widely divided by ethnic conflict and civil war in terms of various policies and mechanisms, is not so easy to be achieved. It is possible only by means of a process of building intrinsic trust between the two communities at various levels (at the grassroots and higher levels). In fact, in political terms, neither the structures of civil society institutions nor the platforms for common socio-political discourse have been built so far expecting to broadly discuss and resolve the common problems of the two communities on a public platform. However, through such efforts, mutual trust and cooperation can be built between the two ethnic groups. Social, economic, and political issues affecting both ethnic groups can be properly addressed and mutually acceptable outcomes can be positively achieved as result.

In fact, Tamils and Muslims are connected – and can be connected in the Northern and the Eastern regions (provinces) or in the entire country, only in terms of language. Due to the ethnic sensitivity created by the civil war environment, the language is the only weapon that is possible to connect the two ethnic groups in the post-war situation. However, it is impossible in the case of Sri Lanka to generally call everyone ‘Tamils’ for just because they speak Tamil, as the case prevailing in India or Malaysia. Some people also make such an argument here in Sri Lanka as

prevalent in Tamil Nadu, India. Indian leaders and scholars, when they visit Sri Lanka and speak in India, often speak in their speeches emphasizing the mutual relationship and connection between the two ethnic groups. However, in Sri Lanka, a division or gap has been created between Tamils and Muslims in various ways. While there is a relationship, connection and dependence between the two ethnic groups in many ways, the institutions related to their daily activities such as schools and administrative-political structures, have been divided by means of ethnic lines in terms of different ways. Blaming political reasons or leaders for this consequence will not be useful at the moment. However, the brand or epithet of ‘Tamil-speaking people’ which Father Chelvanayakam conceptualized and praised, can build harmony, strength and unity between the two communities. The concept of ‘Tamil-speaking people’ has many socio-political meanings beyond being an epithet. It is a theoretical political concept. It is for such purpose that Father Chelvanayakam also strived to unite the two ethnic groups by using such concept. With the violent armed conflict having ended in Sri Lanka, the future political success of Tamils and Muslims depends on uniting the ‘Tamil-speaking people,’ the Tamils and Muslims, through the political ideology undertaken by Father Chelvanayakam.

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