

SOME ASPECTS
OF
MOORISH CULTURE
IN
SRI LANKA



Prepared by
M. MAZZAHIM MOHIDEEN
Associate Director, Marga Institute
&
Vice President - MICH

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It is often said that very little is known about the history and origin of the Ceylon Muslims. But this is not so to the student of research or ethnology. There is, however, vast material yet to be explored and research activity in this field is bound to yield rewarding results. In this paper I have of necessity to keep brevity in mind and am not quoting the various texts from which I have drawn, but they are available with me. The views expressed in this presentation are my own and do not in any way reflect the views of the organisation.

In Sri Lanka's population of nearly 15 million, 71% are Sinhalese, 18% Ceylon Tamils, 8% Ceylon Moors, the other 3% comprising the Malays, Burghers and others. In the 2nd century B. C. the trade with Ceylon was only in the hands of the Arabs, says T. W. Arnold in his "The Treachery of Islam", page 367. He also says "At the beginning of the 7th century of Christian era the trade with China through Ceylon received a great impulse". The Mahavamsa, the earliest known book on Ceylon History says that during the reign of Prince Vijaya's nephew (that is 2410 years ago) the capital of Ceylon was the present day Anuradhapura which was divided into six sections, in each section of which lived the King's subjects belonging to particular caste. In one of these sections lived a race, people who came from Yon which is the Sanskrit team for Arabic. Gieger's translation of the Mahavamsa elaborates on this point. According to some British writers such as Sir Alexander John-

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stone, the Arabs came to Sri Lanka during the 8th century. They landed in Jaffna and settled also in Colombo, Beruwala, Galle and Trincomalee. A Dutch report refers to team as pirates who were mainly Asians who came from India and the Maldives. It is interesting to note that the Maldivian language has many words of Sinhala origin and that the Maldivians are adherents of Islam.

Sir Emerson Tennant, however, rejects both the British and Dutch views. He says: "The Persians and the Phoenicians were trading between China and Asia Minor, and when the rays of Islam came in they embraced that civilisation and they still stuck to their profession as traders and commercial men". According to Tennant's theory, the Moor is as full-blooded a native of this country as any Sinhalese or Veddah since he has been here for the last 2,000 years. There is evidence to prove that pure Arabic stock—the pure Semitic type, Persian type—is still in this country. They can be easily recognised in many parts of the country—whether in Jaffna, Puttalam, Malwana, Galle or Trincomalee. The word "Moor" is of Spanish origin—"Mores". The Portuguese having resisted the Moorish influence in their government and learnt from the Moors the art of navigation, came into the Indian Ocean and saw in Ceylon the Moors, their erstwhile conquerors.

The first Islamic contact came with the Arab traders during the seventh century A.D., not many years after the passing away of the Holy Prophet in 632. In the years that followed up to the arrival of the Portuguese at the beginning of the 16th century, the Muslim Arabs were a prominent force on the Eastern seas and in trade, and were in a position to establish settlements on any coast. A considerable settlement of Muslims flourished at several points on Sri Lanka's coastal belt at that time "without the backing of arms or coercion of any kind and with the ardent patronage of the Sinhalese Kings". The new settlers were warmly welcomed by the rulers for the commercial

contacts they gained for them from abroad, and the religious tolerance that characterised Sinhala Buddhist society induced them to make Sri Lanka their home. The Arabs intermarried with the indigenous Sinhalese population. Ethnically they became a Tamil-speaking group because most of them first traded on the Malabar and Coromandel coasts where they adopted the Tamil language with a mixture of Arabic words. Islamic literature in Arabic Tamil produced in South India has had a profound influence on the socio-religious life of the Ceylon Muslim community, and in fact Islam in South India and Ceylon may broadly speaking be considered as forming a single cultural unit.

The Moorish contribution is characterised by the art of building towns, exploitation of material wealth (gemming in particular), methods of transportation (before roads were built) such as the use of two bulls and cart, expertise as practitioners of medicine, and enhancement of scientific knowledge of the time and the development of the social fabric of the community.

Some facts to establish their influence on the life of the people of this country are found in the Mahavamsa.

- (i) The name of Mira Lebbe figures as the Minister of King Vijaya Bahu V.
- (ii) When Asoka the Great was building a palace, he ordered Persepolitan pillars. The Ruler of Ethiopia was also called the Lion of Judah and he had the Lion Flag as his emblem. It was the Lion of Persepolis which was adopted by Asoka the Great on his pillars.
- (iii) Hugh Neville says in the "Taprobanion" of April 1886, page 106, that there is reference in the Mahavamsa to Vijaya Bahu giving preference to Mohammedan settlers called **Marakkalayas** (the traders who came in boats*) and was himself the son of a **Marakkala** woman.

Other factors worth mentioning are—

- (iv) Ibn Batuta who arrived in Ceylon in 1344 A.D. refers to his co-religionists in this country.
- (v) Many Muslim families carry Sinhalese ge names even today and many of their children are settled in **diga** or **binna** marriages.
- (vi) The Buddhist "Galmaduwa" shrine requires investigation and inquiry. The architectural design appears to be distinctly Arabic.
- (vii) The Baobab tree in Mannar has been referred to as having been brought in by the Arabs. This has to be during the period 900 to 1300 A.D.
- (viii) Most of the geographical books on the Arabs start from the 9th and 10th century. The word "Ceylon" was possibly derived from the Arabic word "Said" or "Siad" and there is reference to "Zindam Baba" and "Maana"—Adam and Eve—in Adam's Peak in Ceylon. This reference relates to the 9th century.
- (ix) The word "Colombo" is of Abyssinian origin, derived from the word "Cullumbo" which means a colony.
- (x) According to Sir Emerson Tennant the Muslims have been in Sri Lanka since the 6th century, if not from the 1st century, establishing extensive mercantile relations between Persia, Arabia and the Island. The Muslims of Sri Lanka are sometimes even now referred to as **Hambankarayan**. In fact, it should be **Sambankarayan**. The Muslims went up to the South Sea Islands and there the boat was called **sampan** and the people who came in boats were called **Sampankarayan**. Several Sinhalese in the South coast have the name "**Marakkalayage**" as their ge name. At

that time everybody who went by boat derived that name.

The first recorded observation we have of Sri Lanka's cinnamon occurs in the records of the voyages of that famous Muslim traveller, Ibn Batuta. He mentions the town of Kunakar (which is the modern Kurunegala). He states that Kunakar was the principal sultanate in this land and describes it as lying in a narrow valley and near a great lake called the Lake of the Rubies. Talking of Kurunegala, it is interesting to note that there was indeed a Muslim King—Vathimi or Vasthumini also known as Buvenaka Bahu II who ruled this land with Kurunegala as his capital. This Monarch was a son of King Buvenaka Bahu by his Moorish consort who was referred to as "Yon Bisava".

Arab poets sang the glories of Serendib or Sangeldib (which meant "The Island of the Sangha") as referred to by the Geographer, Abul Fida, who has been immortalised in our times by the name of a mount on the Moon as **MOUNT ABUL FIDA**.

The History of Sri Lanka is replete with the influence of the form of medicine practised by the Arabs, that is the Unani treatment for ailments. The Persian Muslim physicians gifted to King Kirtie Sri Rajasinghe a Lion Flag and several Muslim physicians were gifted land by the Sinhala kings and appointed as Royal Physicians.

Moorish culture in Sri Lanka is so vast and varied and has influenced music, architecture and poetry, thus enriching the heritage of our country. The violin, the guitar, the tabla and the tambourine are of Moorish (i.e. Arabian) origin. Due to the prohibitions of Islam, Islamic architecture lacked figurative forms. Consequently the followers of Islam created their very unique form of art with geometric and arabesque patterns. Their floral designs even today acknowledge no parallel in any part of the world. The building that houses the Department of National Museums in Colombo built in 1887 bears mute testimony to the skill and artistry of a well-known Muslim architect of the time, Waapchi Marikar who was entrusted by the colonial

government with the task of erecting a suitable edifice. It is reported that after the completion of the building, the Colonial Governor, Gregory, was so pleased with Waapchi Marikar's efforts that he granted his request that the building be closed to the public on Fridays, which edict is observed up to the present day.

Even in the preparation of certain foods and sweetmeats we find the Moorish influence; for instance such delicacies as buriyani, muscat, bibikkan, laveria, seenakku and wattalappam, among numerous others, which are of Moorish origin, not excluding the refreshing drink, sherbet. Even to this day, Muslims all over Sri Lanka sit together around a large sahan, six or five to a group, and have their meals in happy camaraderie. This eating together was introduced by the Holy Prophet of Islam in order to foster the concept of the Brotherhood of Man in the early years of his Mission in Arabia. Even the sarong we all sport is of Moorish origin and was costume fashioned for easy prostration during prayers of the followers of Islam. The sarong was originally introduced by the Arabs to Persia, thence to India and to Sri Lanka. It is not out of context to mention that it was a Moor physician's love of nature that prompted him to take the initiative and induce the establishment of the Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya in 1810. This is a fact recorded by Sir Alexander Johnstone in a despatch to his King in Britain.

From time immemorial and to this date Muslims in Sri Lanka are said to be traders. But this is no longer true. Ofcourse there are a few Muslims who are engaged in trade, but it is interesting to note that almost 80% of the Muslims are cultivators scattered in all the provinces of Sri Lanka.

Before I conclude I wish to dispose of a canard. There is a misconception that Muslims are rich. This impression is created by a mere handful of rich Muslims—around 3%. The vast majority of Muslims, however, are like any other Sri Lankan—farmers, wages earners and so on. ●

* Maram in Tamil is tree and Kulam is a vessel. Marakulam meant a wooden vessel.

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கலாநிதி ஆ. சதாசிவம்
அவர்களின்

நினைவு மலர்

Mem'oir of Late
Prof. A. Sathasivan

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