

**Inter-  
Religious  
Conflict  
in Four  
Districts of  
Sri Lanka**



**INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN FOUR  
DISTRICTS OF SRI LANKA**

**International Centre for Ethnic Studies**

**&**

**Equitas – International Centre for Human Rights Education**

**2018**

Inter-religious Conflict in Four Districts of Sri Lanka

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2, Kynsey Terrace

Colombo 8


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E-mail: [admin@ices.lk](mailto:admin@ices.lk)

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# **INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN FOUR DISTRICTS OF SRI LANKA**

**Nadine Vanniasinkam**

**Kasun Pathiraja**

**Mohamed Faslan**

**and**

**Dinushka Jayawickreme<sup>1</sup>**

**International Centre for Ethnic Studies**

**&**

**Equitas – International Centre for Human Rights Education**

**2018**

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<sup>1</sup> Nadine Vanniasinkam is a researcher at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. Kasun Pathiraja is a Senior Programme Coordinator at ICES. Mohamed Faslan is a lecturer at the Department of Political Science at the University of Colombo. Dinushka Jayawickreme was a programme officer at ICES and is currently freelancing.

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## Introduction

Religion and ethnicity are inextricable from the popular and political imagination of the Sri Lankan “Self” and pervade the nation’s discourses on nationalism, self-determination, sovereignty, and privilege. The centrality of religion and ethnicity in the formation of the Sri Lankan nation state, post-independence, is evident in the construction of the nation’s identity as Sinhala Buddhist and the privileging of Buddhism and the subsequent guaranteeing of protection to the Buddha Sasana under the Constitution which has cemented an ethos of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism in the country. It is unsurprising, therefore, that religion and ethnicity are bases for mobilization and conflict in a country which comprises three other ethno-religious minorities – the Tamils, Muslims, and Up-country Tamils who follow Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.

At a national level, the polarization between the Sinhala majority and Tamil and Muslim minority ethno-religious communities in Sri Lanka was further widened in the 1950s due to linguistic nationalism and the Sinhala Only language policy which has been deemed as the root of the ethnic war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and which was concluded militarily in 2009. Post-2009, ethno-religious fissures were further deepened with the state-sanctioned rise of religious nationalism and extremist Buddhist groups resulting in hate speech and riots against the Muslim minority and attacks against Christian and Hindu places of worship. This does not mean that religious tensions and violence did not exist in Sri Lanka’s pre-war period. Religion has, throughout the country’s colonial and post-independence history, been a locus for conflict and violence. From the massacre of Tamil Catholics in Mannar in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century by the Hindu King Cankili VI, to the anti-Catholic riot in 1883, the anti-Muslim riot in 1915, to post-independence and post-war violence against religious minorities, particularly the pogrom against Tamils in 1983 and more recent spate of attacks against the Muslim community,<sup>2</sup> religion and religious identity has consistently been (employed as) a spur to incite conflict and exert (political) dominance.

Political scientists and historians attribute ethno-religious violence to the machinations of larger political actors who, in their pursuit to outbid each other, manipulate ethnicity and/or language and/or religion for personal/party political gain (De Votta 2004 and 2018; Dewasiri 2017). Many studies have also acknowledged and/or examined the nexus between ethnicity, religion, identity, and politics in relation to religious violence in Sri Lanka (Tilakaratne 2015; Gunatilaka 2015 and 2018; Herath and Rambukwella 2015; Dewasiri 2017; De Votta, 2018). Furthermore, much of these recent studies<sup>3</sup> have (rightly) privileged Buddhist-Muslim relations due to increased campaigns, hate speech, violence and riots against the Muslim community post 2009 with tacit sanction of the state. In fact, the study of Buddhist-Muslim relations continues to be relevant in the light of the most recent anti-Muslim riots in Ampara and Kandy in February and March 2018, both stemming from personal disputes which were manipulated for political gain. These incidents reveal that ethnic and religious difference continue to be ideological bases for inciting violence and conflict in Sri Lanka.

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<sup>2</sup> See ‘Hate Campaigns and Attacks against the Muslims in Recent Sri Lanka’ by Razick et al.

<sup>3</sup> Many ethno-religious studies focused on Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu/Catholic relations in the period leading to the ethnic war and during the war from 1983-2009 such as the work of Gananath Obeyesekere, R.A.L.H. Tambiah, Jonathan Spencer and Patrick Peebles.

However, such macro, panoramic approaches to analysing ethno-religious relations and conflict in Sri Lanka tend to represent and examine the perspectives and trajectories of political elites (mobilizers), underplaying the importance and role of the masses (the mobilized) in shaping inter-religious relations. They also tend to fall into the trap of binaries, whereby ethno-religious relations are often examined in relation to the Sinhala-Tamil and/or the Buddhist-Muslim dichotomies, undermining other relational configurations between and among ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the metanarrative of ethno-religious conflict as employing and being informed by religion and religious ideology (Holt 2015), politically motivated and linked to the larger majoritarian national consciousness and which portrays the Sri Lankan polity as pawns in a larger political game, while important and relevant, also promotes a limiting understanding of Sri Lanka as a homogeneous landscape with similar minority-majority politics at play.

This paper adopts the position that ethno-religious relations in Sri Lanka are also spatially determined (Hasbullah and Korf 2012; Mayer 2013; Shepardson 2014; Spencer et al. 2015) and manifest distinctively in its different regions which vary historically, demographically, politically, socially, culturally, and geographically, not merely in terms of the northern-southern divide, but also within the different districts of the north and south. In support of this argument, Appadurai (1998) states that “it remains difficult to relate macro processes to the micro-events that characterize ethnic violence” (p. 3). Highlighting this fact, Nagaraj and Haniffa (2017) argue for more nuanced analyses of ethno-religious relations that move beyond preoccupations with the interplay of ethnicity and identity at national level and examine micro “political and economic geographies” (p. 41) that shape ethno-religious relations. Gunatillaka (2018) also tacitly supports this localized approach to analysing inter-religious conflict and relations when he observes that “specific local contexts and dynamics contribute heavily towards the occurrence and escalation of [inter-religious] violence” (p. 39). Therefore, considerations of the intersections of space and context, which are shaped by the historical, social, cultural, economic, religious, and the political, are integral to a nuanced understanding of inter-religious relations and conflict.

As already mentioned above, several studies have approached the analysis of inter-religious relations and conflict from the perspective of ethnicity, identity, and political hegemony. Others, like Stark and Finke (2000), have propounded a purely economic reading of religious economies within a marketplace where the rules of demand and supply operate. Others, as developed by the Religious Rivalries Seminar conducted by the Canadian Society for Biblical Studies, posit more open models which view the inter-relation between religions in the same environment or marketplace in terms of coexistence, cooperation, competition and conflict (Mayer 2013). Inter-religious relations, however, are not so neat and clear-cut due to the blurred distinctions and overlap between definitions of cooperation and competition and competition and conflict (also demonstrated in Faslan and Vanniasinkam, 2015). Mayer (2013) proposes an inclusive and open framework for analysing inter-religious conflict which, for the purposes of this study, is useful to systematically examine intersecting factors which impact inter-religious relations. She states that “religious conflict can be said to occur when the following conditions are satisfied:

- (1). two or more collective agents are involved and the agents derive, for example, from separate religions, separate factions of the same religion, from within the same faction in the same religion, and/or secular authority;

- (2). a domain – e.g., ideology/morality, power, personality, space/place, group identity – is contested, singly or in combination
- (3). there are enabling conditions – e.g., political, social, economic, cultural and psychological; and
- (4). religion is involved (the degree to which it is involved is deemed irrelevant).”

(p. 5).

In keeping with the aim for a localized understanding of inter-religious relations, alternative and complementary to macro narratives, this study examines and compares the agents, domains, and enabling conditions within and across four districts in Sri Lanka – Mannar and Jaffna in the Northern Province, Ampara in the Eastern Province, and Matara in the Southern Province. The districts are unique in context whereby each comprises a different religious majority (Catholics in Mannar, Hindus in Jaffna, Muslims in Ampara and Buddhists in Matara). Hence, the study moves away from a focus solely on the recent dichotomies of Buddhist-Muslim relations and instead attempts a nuanced, gendered and spatial understanding of the nature of inter-religious relations among the four main religious communities in Sri Lanka – Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims – to arrive at a deeper understanding of the ways in which ethno-religious relations and conflict manifest and play out in different socio-political, economic, and cultural settings in Sri Lanka.

Another point of departure, from previous studies on inter-religious relations is the deliberate and systematic inclusion of women into the research sample. Women, in discourses of war and conflict, are predominantly represented as passive victims or active objects of masculine agency. Hence, they have not figured representatively in research on conflict, religious violence, conflict mitigation, and conflict transformation. This study considers women as agents who contribute both tangibly and ideologically towards the promotion of coexistence and conflict. Hence, more than half of the total number of respondents are women.

The study was guided by the following overarching questions:

1. What inter-religious problems are encountered in each district and how do these problems play out in society? (enabling conditions and domains)
2. What/who are perceived as causes for these problems? (agents, domains, enabling conditions)
3. What conflict resolution mechanisms are adopted, by whom, and how effective are these mechanisms in addressing conflict? (agents and domains)
4. What are women’s concerns regarding inter-religious relations? Are they different from the concerns of men and to what extent are women involved in propagating and/or mitigating inter-religious conflict? (agents and domains)

Individual key informant interviews were held with male and female religious leaders, community leaders, government officials, representatives of religious organizations, and representatives of civil

society. Focus group discussions were held with Women's Rural Development Societies (WRDSs)<sup>4</sup>, Muslim Women's Societies, Rural Development Societies (RDSs), District Inter-Religious Committees<sup>5</sup>, inter-religious fora, Church societies, Hindu societies, and members of the general public. The rationale was to arrive at a nuanced understanding of how inter-religious relations are perceived both by socially active members of civil society as well as ordinary members of the general public in the four districts. Sampling, therefore, was purposive not only in terms of the gender and experience of the respondents, but also in terms of their geographical positioning i.e., respondents who live in multi-religious locales or border areas where two different religious communities live alongside each other or in areas where there have been incidents of inter-religious conflict. Key informants and respondents were sourced through networks built in the past with local inter-religious groups, individual activists in the four districts and through local civil society organizations. The snowball sampling method was also adopted as the research team was introduced to new respondents by the key informants and participants of the focus group discussions.

Twenty-two individual/key informant interviews and 17 focus group discussions in the four districts were conducted between March 2017 and June 2017 and from April to May 2018. Separate focus group discussions with men and women were conducted in order to discern whether there is a difference in perceptions of and approaches to inter-religious relations and conflict mitigation strategies among women and men (see Appendix A for table illustrating the research sample).

### **Limitations of the Study**

The data for this study was collected in early to mid-2017. Due to constraints of time and availability of respondents at the time of data collection, the study was unable to include opinions from Christian and Hindu respondents from Matara and the opinions of the Catholic clergy in Mannar. Hence, Matara and Mannar were revisited in early 2018 to fill this gap. Therefore, the findings from Matara in particular vary (not significantly) from the other district data in terms of time. It must also be noted that the study did not cover all the divisions in each district, but used the key informant interviews to identify issues pertinent to each district at large from which the locations for the focus group discussions were selected. Interviews in Jaffna were also largely centred in Jaffna town. Thus, the findings of the study capture the overall issues faced in each district as a whole and, where mentioned, are division/village specific.

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<sup>4</sup> Women's Rural Development Societies (WRDSs) are state-led community-based organizations for women. These societies are instituted in each Grama Niladari division of each district. Under the supervision of the Development Officer, WRDSs operate monthly saving schemes and rotational loan schemes to support livelihoods. WRDSs also provide training on income generating ventures and engage in social work. They have their own constitution and organizational structure. They are often recipients of trainings both by the state and NGOs.

<sup>5</sup> District Inter-religious Committees (DIRCs) were set up by the National Peace Council (NPC) in 2013 as part of a project which responded to the escalation of anti-Muslim sentiments and violence in Sri Lanka. NPC set up DIRCs in Jaffna, Mannar, Puttalam, Galle, Batticaloa, Ampara, Kandy, and Nuwara Eliya. The members of DIRCs were trained on conflict resolution, conflict sensitivity and prioritization of humanitarian needs. Another function of the committees is to foster pluralism, mutual understanding and coexistence. See <http://www.peace-srilanka.org/projects> for more details.

In relation to approach, it is acknowledged that data collection was positioned with the understanding that the four districts were already sites of inter-religious tensions or conflict. Hence, a shortcoming of the study is that it does not examine aspects that promote inter-religious coexistence. By focusing on inter-religious tensions and conflict, this study may seem to magnify conflict over coexistence. The purpose of this paper is to understand the nature of inter-religious tensions and conflict and how these are addressed at local level. It must be emphasized, however, that coexistence is predominantly the norm and not the exception at micro village level in all four districts.

### **The Significance of Space and Place**

The central thesis of this paper is that 'location' (space in the macro sense, i.e., each district, defined by its geographical positioning, ethno-religious composition, topography, history, and culture) and 'place' i.e., space in the micro sense, "a particular form of space...that is created through acts of naming as well as distinctive activities and imaginings" (Shephardson 2014, p. 9) are significant variables in the shaping of inter-religious relations which result in unique relational configurations in the four districts. Space, therefore, is not neutral, but viewed as a construct which is shaped and reshaped across time by agents who most often seek to benefit from a particular representation of space (Shephardson 2014). Power is therefore important to the production of space (Knott 2010) which instantly politicizes and impacts the way in which space is perceived, conceived, and lived. In heterogeneous communities, spaces can thus be layered and multifaceted and signify differently to different agents. This aspect of layered meanings further politicizes space particularly when ownership / entitlement of places are contested. Johnson (2012) states that "contested space primarily points towards the ways in which violent conflict, and the uncertainty which it provokes, outwork geographically and socially" (p. 8). This has particular significance for inter-religious relations in post-war Sri Lanka as will be discussed through a comparison of the four districts in the concluding section of the paper.

In keeping with the main thrust of the paper, i.e., that inter-religious relations are spatially determined and driven by agents, contested domains and enabling conditions, the paper examines and compares the agents, domains and enabling conditions that impact inter-religious relations across the four districts with an emphasis on unique and context-specific inter-relations which are important to propose appropriate, context-relevant solutions. The paper then goes on to discuss women's role in shaping inter-religious relations and concludes with an analysis of the dynamics in all four villages through the framework proposed.

## 1. 'Location' – An Overview of the Four Districts

**Mannar**<sup>6</sup> is a predominantly Catholic district comprising two minority communities – the Muslims and Hindus. According to the national census of 2012 by the Department of Census and Statistics, of the total population of 99570, 52415 (52.6%) are Catholic, 24027 (24.1%) are Hindu, 16512 (16.5%) are Muslim, 4790 (4.8%) are Christian, 1809 (1.8%) are Buddhist, and 17 are identified as belonging to other religions. According to the G.N Administrator's statistics, Mannar town has 8063 Catholic families, 7306 Muslim families, 3178 Hindu families, 494 Non-RC (Christian) families and 4 Sinhalese families who are migrant fishermen (Government officer, Catholic male, personal communication, March 8, 2017).

The Mannar district, since colonization, has been characterized by its Catholic identity, as it is the site of the venerated shrine of Our Lady of Madhu, as well as the place where Catholics were martyred in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>7</sup>. Mannar also embodies a strong Hindu identity and is the location of an ancient and revered Hindu temple, Thiruketheeswaram,<sup>8</sup> which is dedicated to Lord Shiva. In addition to its religious identity, Mannar's history is also shaped by the 30-year ethnic conflict, during which the then Bishop of Mannar, Emeritus Bishop Rayappu Joseph, played the role of de facto governor. The conflict also impacted the relationship between the Muslim and Tamil communities in the district, whereby Muslims were forcefully expelled from the Northern Province by the LTTE in 1990 (Hasbullah 2001; Nesiah 2012). This has implications on Tamil-Muslim relations at present due to the return of Muslim families to Mannar after the conflict and reclaiming their property as well as the championing of the Muslim community by an influential politician. Mannar was also a district severely affected by the war and a site of heavy confrontations between the military and the LTTE whereby a majority of its residents suffered losses, were displaced, and have been resettled.

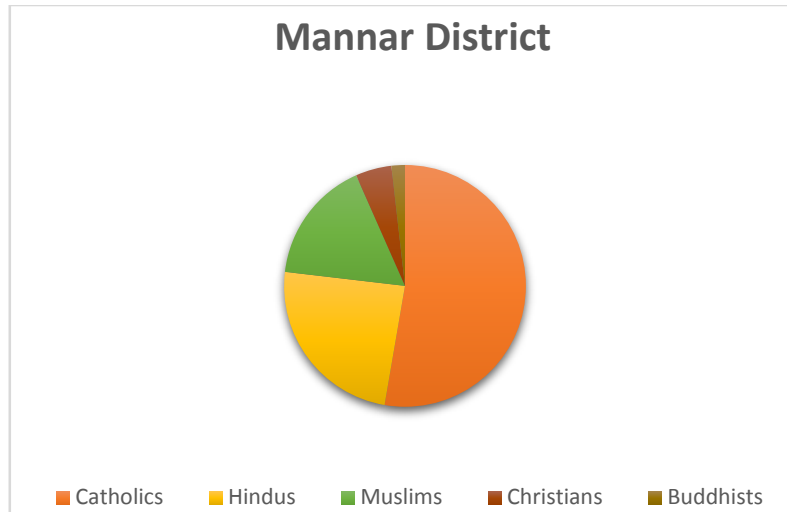
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<sup>6</sup> Nine personal interviews with religious leaders, government officials and key informants, three focus group discussions with women's rural development societies (WRDS) and one focus group discussion with key individuals from the Muslim community were conducted in Mannar from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, 2017 and one interview in April, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Catholicism was instituted in Sri Lanka by the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Hence, Catholics came under the persecution of Sinhalese and Tamil kings who were at war with the Portuguese. Pinto (2015) notes that "Catholic persecution in the north was more severe than the attacks in the south. Cankili, the king of Jaffna, massacred more than 600 Mannar converts between 1543 and 1544 in the village of Patim. Today, a church off Talaimannar Road, Mannar, marks the location where the Mannar martyrs were buried."

<sup>8</sup> "Thiruketheeswaram is an ancient temple in Manthottamam, in Mannar district, about seven miles north of the Mannar town. According to legend, it was at this ancient temple that Kethu Bhagavan worshipped Lord Easwaram (Shiva). Hence the shrine acquired the name of Thiruketheeswaram... This great temple was completely destroyed by the Portuguese in the 16th Century and the stones from here were used to build the Fort at Mannar, the churches and also the Hammersfield Fort at Kayts... Arumuga Navalar who was responsible for the renaissance of Saivism in Sri Lanka in the 19th Century made Hindus realise that they were duty bound to rebuild this historic temple. Following his appeal made in 1872, the exact location of the destroyed temple was traced in 1894 and some restoration work was done in the early part of the 20th Century." (The Hindu, 6<sup>th</sup> December, 2002, Online Edition).



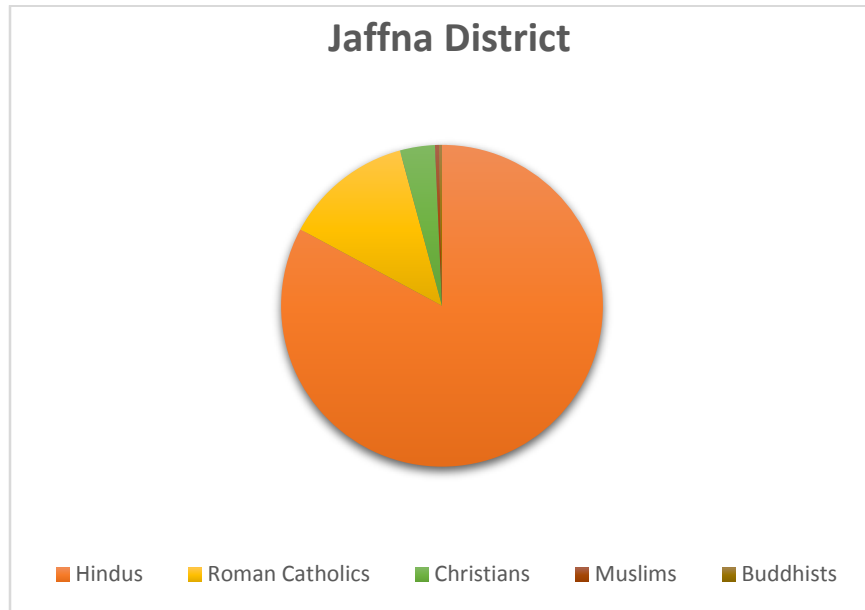


Inter-religious relations in the Mannar district were found to be complex with several agents, domains, and enabling conditions at play. While it must be stated that, on the whole, communities coexist peacefully, Mannar, due to its religious diversity and almost proportionate spread of minority religious groups, was a site of Catholic and Hindu conflict, Catholic and Muslim conflict, Intra-Christian conflict (Catholic and Non-RC), Catholic/Hindu Tamil and Sinhala Buddhist conflict (in order of intensity) at the time of data collection. These conflicts impacted the psyche and sometimes the actions of the respective religious communities significantly. They are fuelled by religious leaders, politicians, the Sri Lankan military, international actors, independent Catholic priests and lay individuals, and enabled by economic, political, spiritual, and cultural conditions.

The **Jaffna** district<sup>9</sup> is (and has historically been) considered the cultural and political capital of the Tamils of Sri Lanka and the base of the Northern Provincial Council (NPC). According to the census report of 2012, of the total population of 583,882, there are 483,255 Hindus (82.7%), 2168 Buddhists (0.3%), 75474 Roman Catholics (12.9%), 2363 Muslims (0.4%), 20511 Christians (3.5%), and 111 who are identified as belonging to other religions in the Jaffna District. Many factors contribute to the socio-political climate in Jaffna. On the one hand, post-war infrastructural development was begun after the war with heavy involvement of the military. The military has put up shops and hotels in Jaffna and their presence has created a sense of alienation among the Tamils from the process of development. On the other hand the NPC has limited capacity for service provision in comparison to other provincial councils in Sri Lanka whereby most of the development initiatives were conducted by the central government without consultation with the NPC. Furthermore, solutions to issues such as high security zones, missing persons, resettlement and land are dependent on the central government. The NPC is also considered discriminatory in their approach to the issues of the

<sup>9</sup> Two focus group discussions with Women’s Rural Development Societies and six key informant interviews with religious leaders, government administrators, a politician, journalist, and woman leader were conducted largely in Jaffna town but also in the surrounding areas of Kaithady, Madduvil, and Anaicoddai from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> of March, 2017.

Northern Muslims. All of these factors impact ethno-religious relations as will be illustrated in the subsequent sections of the report.



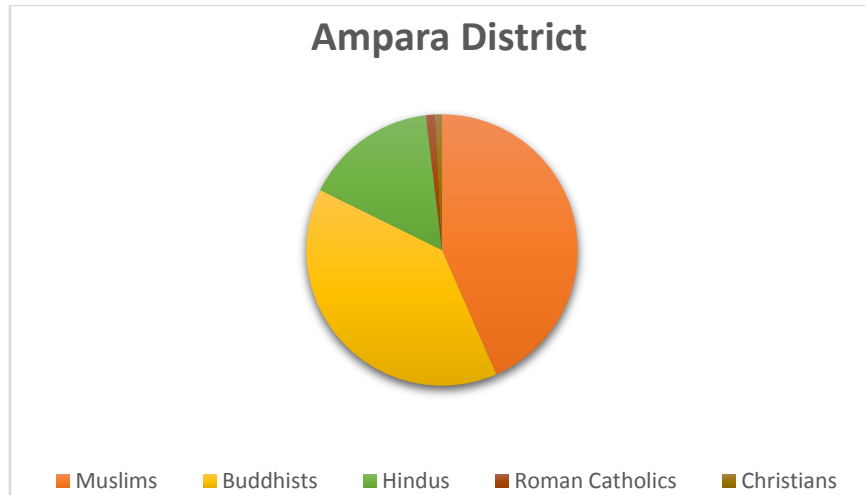
In Jaffna, it is ethnicity rather than religion that forms the basis of and sometimes manifests in inter-religious tensions/conflict. Muslim-Tamil/Hindu relations are tainted by the political expulsion of the Muslims from the North by the LTTE in the 90s. Sinhala Buddhist-Tamil Hindu/Christian relations are impacted negatively by the ethnic war and militarization post war. The only purely inter-religious tensions at the level of perception were those between Tamil Hindus and Tamil Christians over the issue of unethical<sup>10</sup> conversion of Hindus to Christianity and conflicts and inequalities arising out of Intra-Hindu relations on the basis of caste. These conflicts (like in Mannar) are influenced by the Sri Lankan military, politicians, religious leaders, and lay individuals and are enabled by political, cultural, economic, and spiritual factors.

The **Ampara** district<sup>11</sup> is on the east coast of Sri Lanka and is significant due to its ethno-religious composition. The majority community in Ampara is Muslim and of the total population of 649,402 (according to the census report of 2012), Muslims comprise 281,987 (43.4%). There are 252,427 (38.8%) Buddhists, 102,829 (15.8%) Hindus, 7588 (1.1%) Roman Catholics, and 5542 (0.8%) Christians.

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'unethical' in this paper does not represent the author's views but is representative of the popular 'discourse of unethical conversion', particularly among majority ethno-religious communities.

<sup>11</sup> Five focus group discussions with Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist men and women and four personal interviews with key informants were conducted between the 24<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2017.

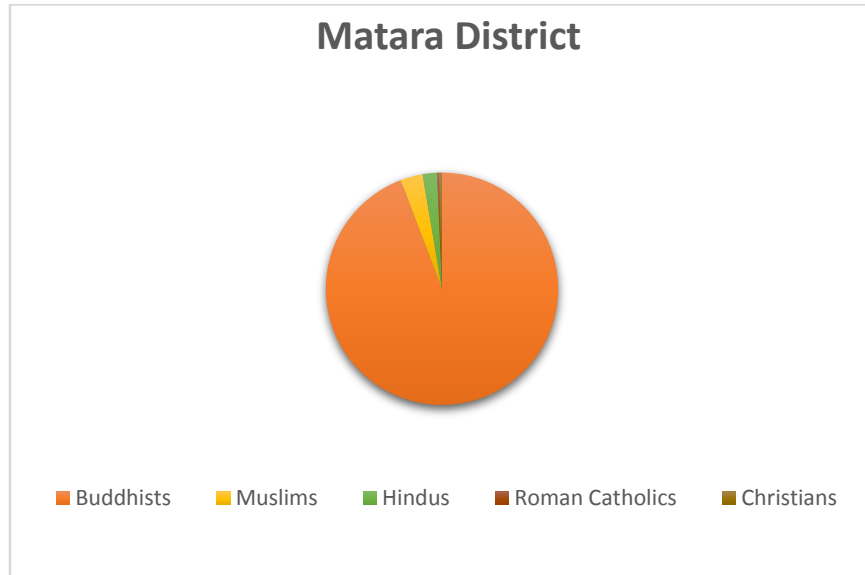


Ampara is an area with the largest concentration of Muslims who live geographically side by side with Tamils, and have little interaction with the Sinhala community which is concentrated in the town. The district is significant for its disputes related to the appropriation of land by the state and religious institutions claiming that they are religious/sacred/archaeological sites as well as for its complex and ethnicized local administrative systems. The Ampara district was also affected by the ethnic conflict and relations between the Tamils and Muslims were strained due to the forced expulsion of Muslims from the North by the LTTE, and the Kathankudy mosque massacre in 1990<sup>12</sup>.

Inter-religious conflict between Sinhala Buddhists and Muslims is the primary conflict in Ampara and is fuelled by politicians, government officials, and individual monks. The conflict is grounded in ideology, but manifests in the appropriation and desecration of (religious/private) spaces. Tamils and Muslims live in villages bordering each other in the Ampara District. They have historically been in interaction with each other because the traditional farmlands of the Muslim community are located near Tamil villages and this has not caused any conflicts between the two communities. Rather, Tamil-Muslim relations at present are strained on the basis of economics, land, and culture and is primarily driven by individual actions. While there are some tensions between Hindus and Christians and among Christians, these were deemed insignificant by the respondents in comparison to the other inter-religious conflicts in the district.

<sup>12</sup> Two mosques in Kathankudy were attacked by the LTTE on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 1990, killing more than 100 worshippers who were at prayer (Hasbullah and Korf 2012). This incident took place amidst rising tensions between Muslims and Tamils in the North and the East. With regard to the breakdown of Muslim-Tamil relations in the East, McGilvray (2003) notes that the historic Moor-Mukkuvar alliance celebrated in Batticaloa legend was shattered in 1990, when the Eastern command of the LTTE, acting on local grudges and resentments, launched a series of pogroms and attacks against Muslims, including the well-publicized Kathankudy mosque massacre” (101). McGilvray further notes that in response, the government armed the Muslims and established Muslim home militias, which have been “accused of vendetta operations against local Tamils” (101).

**Matara**<sup>13</sup> is a predominantly Sinhala Buddhist district in the South of Sri Lanka with a total population of 814,048 in 2012. The majority Sinhala community comprises 766,323 (94.1%) followed by 25,614 (3.1%) Muslims, 16,421 Hindus (2%), 2432 (0.29%) Roman Catholics, and 3,208 (0.39%) Non-RC Christians. The multi ethno-religious composition of the district, with a significant Buddhist majority which is exposed and susceptible to Buddhist nationalist and extremist ideology, makes this a site that has the potential for future conflict.



The primary conflict in the Matara district is between Sinhalese Buddhists and Muslims and manifests in various forms of discrimination, acts of violence, and hate speech. The conflict is driven chiefly by economic and cultural factors and grounded in ideological notions of religious supremacy and fear/ignorance of the ethno-religious other. Tamil Hindu/Christian and Sinhalese Buddhist relations are also strained on the basis of Sinhala nationalism, institutionalized racism, and memories of the violent ethnic riots in the past. These conflicts are enabled by religious leaders, government officials, and lay individuals.

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<sup>13</sup> Four focus group discussions in Matara town and Weligama were conducted with Muslims and Buddhists from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, 2017. Matara was revisited in May 2018 and interviews held in Deniyaya, a division in Matara which consists of Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist plantation workers, to obtain a clearer picture of relations between the four religious communities. Three key informant interviews with a Buddhist monk, moulavi and Non-RC pastor (a Hindu priest did not attend despite invitation) and two focus group discussions were held with Buddhist and Hindu/Christian members of an inter-religious forum in Deniyaya. The respondents were also members of other local youth and rural development committees in the village.

## **2. Domains of Contestation, Agents, and Enabling Conditions of Inter-religious Conflict**

This section draws from Mayer's (2013) understanding of inter-religious conflict as emerging from contestations over domains such as power, ideology/morality, personality, space/place, and group identity by agents acting as individuals or as part of a group or community. Conflicts also occur in context and there are various individual and often intersecting conditions in a particular village or district that help nurture conflict. Mayer (2013) identifies the economic, political, social, cultural, and psychological conditions specific to place as enabling/provoking agents to contest different domains. This approach allows for a broader focus, refraining from looking at conflicts that are driven by purely religious considerations, but at conflicts as deriving from contestations of a combination of domains where religion is only one driving force. Thus it allows the inclusion of political, economic, cultural, and ethnic considerations which often underlie inter-religious conflict.

In all four districts, the overarching enabling condition for inter- and intra-religious conflict is ethno-religious nationalism and majoritarianism which is embedded in all strata of social, political, and economic institutions and interactions. In the districts of Mannar, Jaffna, and Ampara, an additional and intersecting enabling condition is the fracturing of inter-ethnic relations between Muslims and Tamils due to the expulsion of Muslims from the North by the LTTE, which has resulted in animosity, fear, and disputes over land.

The data presents four primary domains of conflict, two associated with place and space – conflict over the appropriation of sacred spaces and imposition of religious symbols of one religious community on another, and conflict over the appropriation of land for the purposes of territorial expansion which is not motivated by religion, but manifests as religious conflict. The third domain is related to the tussle for power and economic dominance and the fourth domain with ideology and extremism.

Given the complexity and extent of the data which draws from dynamics in four districts, the thematic issues are sequenced in order of importance and frequency in which they were mentioned by the respondents. The analysis will also commence with the more religiously motivated conflicts and then move on to conflicts where the involvement of religion is incidental or employed as an additional spur.

### **2.1. Contestations over Sacred Space and Symbols**

#### **2.1.1. Buddhization of Tamil/Hindu Spaces: New Significations Post War**

In Sri Lanka, religious identity is symbolically represented in various forms through architecture, colour, clothing, motifs, and even sound. These symbols have, throughout Sri Lanka's colonial and post-colonial political history, been appropriated to further the causes of ethno-nationalism and thus gain an added layer of meaning and are ascribed with new significations. In the post-war context, in addition to the Buddhist flag and the statue of the Buddha, the bo tree in particular, which is revered both by Buddhists and Hindus but more popularly symbolizes Buddhism, has gained an added

meaning by being appropriated by the military as a means to signify victory, dominance, and triumphalism in the North and North East.

The primary concern expressed by both Christians and Hindus in Jaffna and Mannar was the building of Buddhist temples and installation of statues of the Buddha in areas occupied by the army or in areas where there are bo trees. This imposition of Buddhism is viewed as a deliberate act of nationalist triumphalism which is also seen in other parts of the Northern Province. In Jaffna, the army was also accused of having destroyed churches and kovils in high security zones in Palali and Kankesanthurai which is perceived as an attempt to erase history (WRDS member, Hindu female, March 8, 2017). Hoisting of the Buddhist flag in areas where there are no Buddhists is also viewed as an attempt to antagonize the residents of the area.

Another important agent contributing to this symbolic imposition are independent monks who capitalize on the military's Buddhization venture by establishing temples for their personal gain with the support of the military (Politician, Hindu male, March 9, 2017). A politician from the Jaffna District cited the example of Nedunthivu where a monk has taken over the area and constructed a shrine with the support of the army despite the fact that there are no residents in the area. Similarly, a Buddhist shrine has been put up within the premises of a *kovil* in Kilinochchi. Similar dynamics play out in Mannar as well and the Tamil respondents expressed displeasure at the construction of temples and installation of statues of the Buddha in certain locations, particularly where there is an army camp or a police station. Independent Buddhist monks are also believed to be using the presence of wild bo trees or surreptitiously planting new bo trees as an excuse to proclaim that there had been Buddhist settlements and temples in the area in the past and to justify the erection of new temples. Accordingly, when the research team asked for the history of a particular temple, the chief incumbents commenced their narratives with the existence of the bo tree. The team also observed a number of small shrines alongside (recently planted) bo trees along the Mannar-Medawachiya road. This strategy has resulted in a shift in the signification of bo trees where one Catholic respondent stated that in the past, Tamils respected bo trees. However, with the distortion of the significance of bo trees by the military and independent monks, respect for bo trees has decreased, leading some people to uproot young bo trees to prevent the areas from being claimed by Buddhists (CSO officer, Catholic female, March 6, 2017).

Another aspect of Buddhization which moves beyond ethnicity and is premised more on religious nationalism is the construction of Buddhist shrines or temples alongside or in close proximity to traditionally Hindu places of worship. One location where a temple is being built and a statue of the Buddha installed is Thiruketheeswaram which was once a stronghold of the LTTE, later abandoned by the predominantly Hindu residents due to the war and occupied by the army. When the residents were resettled in the area in 2015, they found that a Statue of the the Buddha had been installed on private land owned by a Hindu individual. A meditation hall has also been constructed in the area, a monk installed, a temple is being constructed and its 'history' (a series of newspaper cuttings in Sinhala)

displayed on a noticeboard. The justification is that Thiruketheeswaram is on the route that Sangamiththai<sup>14</sup> took.

Women respondents from Jaffna stated during an FGD that Naina Thivu, where there is a revered Hindu *kovil*, had also been seized, a Buddhist shrine constructed and a separate boat and path organized for Sinhala pilgrims. They stated that, in the past, there was only one boat for both Sinhala and Tamil pilgrims and that both communities had worshipped and partaken meals at the *kovil* together (WRDS member, Hindu female, March 9, 2017). This visible segregation of worship spaces and rituals post-war was viewed by the respondents as a deliberate attempt to separate Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims who shared religious practices in the past. Furthermore, the construction of a temple in Mathahal, at the site of Sangamiththai's entry to Jaffna, where previously there was only a commemorative statue, was viewed again as a deliberate attempt at Buddhization of historically shared spaces and undermining the Tamil/Hindu identity of the North. However, some respondents stated that Buddhism is not a barrier to Hindus as both religions have shared practices, while a local politician expressed a lack of faith in the government taking action regarding such matters due to its tenuous hold over the independent actions of the military.

This fact is further reinforced by the research team's observation that the Buddhist temples in the Mannar area were patronized solely by military and police personnel. The monks of two temples visited in Mannar also acknowledged that there were no Sinhalese settlements in the vicinity and that it is the military and the police who play a significant role in construction work, religious events and decoration of Buddhist temples in the area. Furthermore, all meals for the temple are sponsored by the police, army or officers of the Civil Defence Force. The military and the police were also observed playing an important role in the Buddhist temple in Jaffna town, providing meals to the temple and maintaining its physical infrastructure. A monk from the temple, therefore, expressed the view that the temple does not face any challenges from the people in the area and that it is a site of cultural activities and coexistence. He said, "There is no conflict between Buddhists and Hindus in Jaffna. This is mainly due to many cultural similarities between the two religions. Some of the gods are revered commonly by both communities. We have shrines for gods within the temple premises and it is common to see Hindus coming inside and worshipping their gods in those shrines. Hindus participate in Buddhist cultural and religious activities during Vesak and Posen. They help us to decorate the temple and surroundings during Vesak. The temple provides them the space to have some of their community meetings and is maintaining friendly relations with the Hindu religious leaders and the community in general" (Monk, Buddhist male, March 8, 2017).

Tamil-Buddhist relations in Mannar and Jaffna, therefore, seem to be based on systematized antagonism by the military and independent monks and no confrontation from the Tamil Hindus and Christians. As one respondent stated, "The government did this at a time when people could not protest" (WRDS member, Hindu female, March 9, 2017). The tension, therefore is not among lay

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<sup>14</sup> Also known as Sangamiththa in Sinhala is a female monk (Bikkuni) and daughter of the Emperor Ashoka who brought a sapling of the Bo tree to Sri Lanka from India

persons, but between lay Hindu/Christian Tamils and the state agenda of Buddhization and its representatives.

### **2.1.2. Identity and Dominance through Increasing Visibility: The Competitive and Symbolic Installation of Religious Statues**

While the military's attempt to Buddhize the Northern Province speaks to the larger national discourse on ethno-nationalism, regional nationalisms also play an important role in impacting ethno-religious relations. At a national level, the military could be viewed as encroaching on private (Tamil/Hindu) spaces. However, at a micro district level, different competing religious institutions encroach on and transform public secular places into spiritual spaces. The districts of Mannar and Ampara, in particular, demonstrated regional religio-nationalism in various forms, one of which is the competitive installation of religious statues in public spaces by both Catholics and Hindus in Mannar and Buddhists in Ampara which results in public confrontations, vandalism, and sometimes violence.

The Mannar district identifies and is identified as a Catholic district. Hindus and Christians have been coexisting in Mannar since the introduction of Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with no conflicts despite a bloody history when in 1544 the Northern Hindu ruler Sangliyan (Cankili I) ordered the killing of Catholics in Mannar when they refused to reconvert. Six-hundred Catholics were killed and their remains discovered when constructing a church now known as the Martyrs Church which for some Catholic respondents is symbolic not only of a history of inter-religious conflict, but also of the staunch Catholic identity of the district.

The competitive installation of religious statues is a conspicuous conflict in the Mannar district where one cannot miss the relatively recent (post-war) placement of small golden statues of the Lord Ganesh alongside or opposite Catholic statues on public roads. The Catholic respondents argued that statues have always been placed at the top of roads, junctions etc., as a practice in Mannar and that Hindus are now competing by installing their own. The Hindu respondents accused the Catholics of breaking statues of the Lord Ganesh, which has resulted in public clashes (sometimes involving violence) between the two communities. The destruction of Hindu statues allegedly by Catholics is attributed to fear that the placement of a Hindu statue in a public place could lead to the gradual expansion of that area from an informal place of worship (secular) to a formal temple (sacred) (Priest, Catholic male, April 14, 2018). Hindus were also accused of vandalizing Catholic statues and the Hindu respondents' justification is that Catholics surreptitiously put up new statues in Hindu areas on privately-owned property overnight in order to circumvent the need to obtain state approval to install a statue. This also makes it difficult for government officers and the public to contest or demand the removal of the statues out of respect for their religious significance. As one Hindu respondent stated, Hindus respect all Gods and therefore will not destroy statues (Medical officer, Hindu male, March 6, 2017). Examples of areas of contention over the competitive placement of statues are the Adamban junction, Manthai West, Musali, Nanattan and the Checkpoint at Nayattru Road. It is possible to argue that the placement of religious statues in spaces 'belonging' to religious others, or the spiritualization of secular spaces is an attempt at symbolic territorial expansion whereby, for example, a traditionally



Hindu space is marked as Catholic or a Catholic space contested by Hindus. Minority-majority relations are also at play with the insecure minority driving this expansion and the majority reasserting its status.

The perception among both Catholic and Hindu respondents was that this competitive installation of religious statues is not the act of lay individuals, but funded and promoted by politicians for their gain. Another opinion was that the conflict is incited by Hindu extremist groups such as Shiv Sena and RSS based in India that have local arms in the North. Nevertheless, it impacts relationships between lay Catholics and Hindus at the level of perception and creates tension between both communities.

The dynamics in Mannar play out similarly in Ampara where the Muslim community enjoys majority status and the Sinhala community is (uncharacteristically) a minority concentrated in the town. A reactionary practice of the Sinhala Buddhist community is the installation of statues of the Buddha in areas that are predominantly Muslim. This leads to confrontations between the two communities which often result in violence. An example is Pottuvil, an area which has a Muslim majority. Respondents explained that some Buddhist individuals had put up a statue of the Buddha on the main road. In response, the Muslims went on strike and were shot at. Another example is Ashraf Nagar where a stone has been placed to build a statue of the Buddha and land demarcated to expand the boundary of the Buddhist shrine. Here too, these acts were perceived to be politically motivated; however, the acts also reflected the sentiments of the general public.

## **2.2. Growth of Extremism, Hate Speech, Mistrust and the Role of Social Media**

While the three districts in the Northern and Eastern Provinces experienced the physical manifestation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and regional Catholic and Hindu nationalisms in the tangible form of appropriation of religious spaces and symbols, minority religious communities in Matara district in the South experience conflict as a result of religious extremism entering the ideological domain at grassroots level. In Matara, inter-religious conflict is based primarily on economic rivalry and business grievances (as will be subsequently discussed) which are aired out through hate speech on social media. Respondents stated that those engaging in hate speech are supporters and sympathisers of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) which uses social media as a platform for their propaganda. The Muslim women respondents from Matara town emphasized the importance of banning the BBS on social media. They stated that numerous antagonizing SMSs are sent warning people against patronizing Muslim businesses, but no action is taken against hate speech on facebook and that facebook groups managed by Ravana Balakaya, Maha Soan Balakaya and Dayan Prasad are not stopped. The Buddhist respondents in Weligama also echoed this view stating that there is still no reconciliation although the war is over and that the media is playing a strong role in disrupting reconciliation in the country.

Youth were cited as the most vulnerable to incitement through hate speech on social media. The Muslim women also expressed concern about the youths' response to such provocative hate speech on social media. They stated that these posts anger the youth and the mosque is working hard to preach patience whereby the sermons at mosques focus on how the youth should be patient and not

act rashly. In Weligama, Buddhist respondents also stated that while there were no conflicts at grassroots level, the youth were a cause for concern as there are conflicts among them. The respondents in Deniyaya also expressed concern that the youth are easily susceptible to incitement and therefore, required a lot of awareness raising and sensitization, particularly to linguistic differences which can cause misunderstanding and conflict.

Extremism manifests differently within the psychological domain in Weligama, leading to suspicion and mistrust among minority communities that extremist groups are plotting against them. While Muslim respondents stated that coexistence is the norm in the area and asserted that it is racist organizations and not the communities they live with who instigate violence/trouble, they view the BBS as their greatest threat. The respondents express fear and suspicion over covert plots against their community hatched by the BBS which operates and meets in temples in Sinhalese villages that border Muslim villages. The respondents also expressed concerns about a committee that has formed in order to conspire against the Muslims. They stated that one initiative of this committee is to spread hatred towards Muslims whereby some Montessoris (nursery schools) instil negative stereotypes of the Muslim community, teaching children that Muslims wear the *thoppi* and beard and that they think ill of people and want to do harm. The penetration of the ideological domain of multi-ethnic communities, particularly of young children, with prejudice and negative stereotypes by extremist groups thus causes concerns about the emergence of inter-religious conflict in the future. Thus, considering the future of their youth, the Muslim women respondents expressed fear that Muslims will be discriminated against in relation to job opportunities and at hospitals if such poisonous anti-Muslim ideologies spread and grow in the community.

The Muslim respondents, however, emphasised that not all monks are involved in such activities and that there is a monk who defends Muslims even when they are in the wrong. They noted that there is a need for all good monks to stand up against Gnanasara and the BBS as they are the biggest threat to inter-religious harmony.

Confronted with the reality within their district, the Buddhist respondents in Matara and Weligama were introspective and self-critical in their analysis of religious extremism. They agreed that the extremist Buddhist practices of people like Gnanasara are very harmful to coexistence as they create unnecessary and irrelevant problems. The Buddhist respondents in Weligama were extremely critical about the behaviour of Gnanasara. He was referred to as a “mad man” and a “thug”. The community sees him as a man with political backing and motives and who uses media to spread hatred among different communities. They were all in agreement that people like him should be controlled. They also added that temples have become highly commercialized and have become centres of collecting money which hardly support the poor. The respondents noted that certain monks have become undisciplined and corrupt and are creating a wrong picture about Buddhism to others. Religious extremism, as perceived by the Buddhist respondents, is a means for individual monks to enrich themselves financially (Participants of FGD, Buddhist men and women, June 17, 2017).

Reiterating the above, a monk candidly discussed conflict among the Buddhist clergy distinguishing between monks who “pretend to be religious” and create conflict and moderate monks who comprise

a minority of the *Sasanarakshaka* (a body that protects the Buddha Sasana) which he belongs to. He also expressed his fear to participate in inter-religious activities as this resulted in censure not only from the other monks in his sasana, but also the community who visits the temples. He cited the suspicious demise of a liberal monk as resulting from his participation in inter-religious programmes. Thus, moderate monks such as the respondent, are fearful and find it difficult to engage positively with other religious communities in the village (Monk, Buddhist male, May 26, 2018).

Extremism, particularly among the Buddhist community (neither the Buddhist nor Muslim respondents mentioned Muslim extremism), thus, seems to be driven by powerful individual agents with personal and political motivations. Their propagation of hatred and hate speech not only incapacitates liberal monks from expressing their views and engaging in inter-religious activities but also sows the seed of confusion, suspicion, and mistrust among communities.

Thus, a significant finding of the study is that it is mistrust and suspicion, rather than misconception, which are key factors that promote inter-religious conflict. This has to do with fear stemming from the insecurities of each ethno-religious community, both at local and national levels, which are framed and fuelled by hate speech and propaganda of extremist elements. In Ampara, the Muslim community is of the opinion that there is a larger (national) plot of ethnic cleansing and this opinion is fed by individual acts of vandalism and violence against the community. A Muslim hotel in Ampara town was burnt down and a mosque wall damaged in 2017. This was attributed by the Muslims to the impunity granted to the Sinhalese by the State whereby they are able to act on their prejudices without fear of censure.

Another manifestation of mistrust and possible discrimination is in relation to the human-elephant conflict. A few Muslim respondents from Ampara stated that they are facing problems due to elephants in recent times. According to them, there was not much movement of elephants in these areas 30-40 years ago and their argument is that elephant fences have been put up in Sinhala villages and the elephants chased to Muslim villages like Alayadivembu and Palamunai. The justification that this act is deliberate is because the elephants are not wild as they have iron rings around their legs. Irrespective of whether their suspicion proves accurate or not, the fact that such occurrences are attributed to anti-Muslim sentiments among the Buddhist community emphasizes how mistrust can cause tension between communities.

Similar to the Muslim respondents, the Buddhist respondents in Ampara also expressed mistrust in the actions of the Muslim community. They felt that there is a bigger conspiracy behind the Muslims requesting for the removal of the forces from the North and the East which will not be in their (Sinhalese) favour. They also fear a conspiracy for the separation of the North and East and this fear is in keeping with the national discourse on the preservation of the Sinhala Buddhist Nation, which is fuelled by extremist groups. The extent to which extremist views have permeated the grassroots is evidenced in a Buddhist respondent's opinion that the Sinhalese should live in a Sinhala country and that Muslims should live in a Muslim country and that there is a need to protect Sinhala culture and refuse aid from Muslim countries (Member of village development forum, Buddhist male, May 25, 2018). Some respondents also expressed their respect for Gnanasara (BBS) because he is a monk.

They argued that while the Bodu Bala Sena's (BBS) religious reasoning and feelings for the country are justifiable, its actions based on such reasoning are wrong. A few respondents echoed this view by reflecting that Buddhism is in jeopardy in the current context and that the Sinhala population is not responding in a fitting manner that is respectful of the religion. Furthermore, they believed that Muslims and Tamils do not respect Buddhism, whereas they respect their religions, thus unsettling the foremost position of Buddhism in the country.

### **2.3. Evangelism, Inter-marriage, and 'Unethical' Conversions**

An important reason for both inter- and intra-religious conflict is evangelism, particularly among and by the Christian community. Evangelism affects inter-religious relations as it threatens 'group identity' which is based primarily on religion and ethnicity, but also on socio-economic and political power. It also affects intra-religious relations which are defined by religion and caste.

Among the Catholic and Christian communities, the increase and proliferation of evangelical churches particularly in the Mannar, Ampara, and Matara districts rupture the identities of previously homogeneous religious communities resulting in both inter- and intra-religious conflicts at personal, social, and political levels. In the Mannar district, there are three broad groups of Christians (as defined by the respondents) – the traditional Catholics (Roman Catholics), the Mainline Churches and the Free Churches (both broadly referred to as Non-Roman Catholic). The Catholic respondents did not express much concern about the Free Churches, but focused more on their relationships with Muslims and Hindus. At institutional level, the Catholic Church (which is at the top of the religious hierarchy in Mannar) does not have any official interaction with Free Churches, but can have interactions with what it identifies as Mainline Churches such as Anglicans and Baptists. According to a representative of the Catholic Church, building a relationship with the Free Churches would be something that might occur in 15-20 years' time (Priest, Catholic male, April 14, 2018).

While the Catholic respondents did not raise any concerns about the Non-RC community, the respondents representing the Free Churches expressed several concerns against the Catholics. According to a pastor of a Free Church, 2.6% of the population in Mannar is Non-RC and conflict with Catholics emerge on the basis of land and identity. This is due to the mushrooming of Free Churches and the fact that most of the Free Churches are built on privately-owned land (often on the personal land of the pastor or his/her relatives) due to difficulty in obtaining local government approval to establish a new church in the area. The construction of Free Churches is met with hostility by Catholic villagers and neighbours (who are also relatives of the pastor) who throw stones at Non-RC churches and even vandalize the often makeshift buildings. It is important to note that while these forms of violence are based on intolerance and opposition to intrusion on the Catholic identity of a village, they are also personal problems because the perpetrators are most often close relatives and neighbours of the individual who are disgruntled by the fact that their Catholic relative has left the Church for a new church. Thus, a pastor said, the Catholics in his village were not his enemies because 80% of them are his relatives (Pastor, Non-RC male, March 7, 2017). He cited the historical identification of Mannar as a Catholic Diocese as the root cause for people's antagonism towards the

emergence of new Christian denominations. This has also resulted in opposition to intra-Christian marriages.

The pastor of the Free Church was also self-critical about the reasons for opposition to the proliferation of new Christian denominations in the Mannar District. He stated that when theological disagreements occur among a Free Church community (*sabai*), a few members break away and start their own church. This new church is often situated within a kilometre of the parent church. The pastor was also critical of the fact that Free Churches do not have a standardized theology. While some pastors study theology at Non-RC universities, others do not. He stated that those who do not have a background in theology are merely using their churches as a means of making profit. Thus, registration of churches is important according to him. This requirement for registration is circumvented by basing one's private church within the premises of one's home.

Concomitant to the mushrooming of Free Churches is the increase in religious conversions. In Jaffna, 'unethical' conversions by evangelical churches create unpleasantness between Tamil Catholic and Hindu communities. The Catholic and Non-RC respondents stated that their relationship with the Hindu majority is amicable. The Hindu respondents, on the other hand, expressed concerns that members of their community are easily being converted to Christianity by Non-RC evangelical groups. In the past, Hindus converted to Christianity to escape caste discrimination, to advance in terms of education, for financial gain, and also to acquire Christian names to avoid persecution during the war (Government officer, Hindu male, March 10, 2017). At present, conversions to Christianity are motivated by miraculous healing received, prophecies fulfilled and monetary incentives provided by evangelical churches such as the Assembly of God and the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission (President of WRDS, Hindu female, March 9, 2017). Conversion to Christianity even to Buddhism and Islam is also effected through inter-marriage. The respondents observed that it is almost always the Hindu partner who converts. One respondent stated that this is because Hinduism is polytheistic whereby they are more accepting of other gods. Though some respondents stated that they consciously resist conversion, the impact of Christian evangelization results in some Hindus worshipping both at Christian churches and at Hindu kovils. All the respondents stated that there had been no overt conflicts as a result of conversions despite the fact that there was disappointment at the level of perception. However, the Jehovah's Witness is the only group over which the Hindus and even the Christian respondents expressed dislike due to their intrusive methods of conversion.

In Ampara, the Hindu respondents stated that relations between the Hindus and Christians were amicable despite the fact that religious conversions take place. One respondent echoed the general attitude towards Christians stating that "If there are Christians next door, they will somehow convert you. I don't know whether it is some form of black magic" (Member of mediation board, Hindu female, May 24, 2017). According to another respondent, the two communities had cordial relations because several mixed marriages take place and most Hindu converts worship in both the kovil and the church (echoing the opinion from Jaffna). The Hindu respondents, however, could not tell the difference between the different Christian denominations such as Jesus Calls, Jesus Lives, Catholics, and Methodists even though they were able to name these denominations. A Hindu priest was critical of his own community stating that Hindus convert to Christianity and Islam because the Hindu temple

administration is self-serving and comprises of the priest's relatives. A contributing factor is that there is no single unifying Hindu institution and each temple is independent. Therefore, most temple administrations do not have a social outreach that provides charitable services to its community unlike the Christians and Muslims. The only grievance that the Hindus expressed against the Christians is that they sing loudly during worship and this disrupts the studies of children of surrounding Hindu families. However, a Christian pastor said that Hindus throw stones and protest when a new church is instituted in a village. An example is an area called Thambalavil where Hindus have stopped Christians from building churches by setting fire to and destroying the constructions.

In Deniyaya, the Hindu respondents echoed concerns about Christian evangelical churches. They clearly distinguished between the Catholic Church, which does not evangelize, and the Christian churches such as Assembly of God, Calvary and other new, small churches which convert individuals by spreading false attitudes about other religions. The Hindu respondents did not express opposition to conversion. They justified conversion as stemming from the capitalist and disinterested attitude of Hindu priests who view the kovil as a business and not as an institution of service. However, their primary objection with evangelical churches was their encouragement of disrespectful practices such as throwing out images of gods onto the street which is offensive to Hindus and contests the Hindu identity.

While much of the conflict based on evangelism in intra-religious or concerns Christians and Hindus, in Deniyaya, the relationship between Buddhists and Christians, on the other hand, has not been cordial where a church of the Assembly of God was attacked in 2013 and in 2016 a Methodist church attacked, vandalized, and its occupants assaulted, threatened and forcefully evacuated from the building by monks (who were considered followers of the BBS) and a large number of lay supporters. While the Buddhist justification was that the Christian churches were accused of converting through deception and bribes, a representative of a Christian church denied these allegations stating that the church only provided social service and repudiated the allegation of unethical conversions (Pastor, Non-RC male, May 26, 2018).

#### **2.4. Caste Discrimination and Inequalities**

Caste is a hidden and seldom discussed issue which influences intra-religious relations among both the Hindu and Catholic communities in Jaffna and in Ampara. Caste places individuals and communities along a hierarchy of spaces and social, cultural, and economic roles. Among the Hindu respondents from Jaffna, caste was mentioned as a factor affecting religious rituals and practices whereby members of lower castes are not allowed to perform certain functions such as preparing and serving meals during temple festivals. Altercations at kovil festivals over the denial of space and roles for Hindus considered of lower caste has caused conflict, leading to the filing of legal action against a high caste temple administration in one instance and, in another, to the lower caste devotees refraining from visiting the temple. In such situations, new temples are built by members of the lower caste as an alternative, though they did express a longing to visit their ancestral temples (*kula kovil*).

Caste is also an issue among the Tamil Catholics, one of its manifestations being that a priest belonging to a higher caste is considered to have a special stamp of authority. Similarly, in the Hindu community, lower caste priests are allocated temples of 'lesser' Gods and higher caste priests the temples of 'greater' Gods like Shiva. However, the respondents stated that while Hindu priests do not discriminate based on caste and perform *pujas* at all *kovils*, it is the temple administration groups comprising lay persons and community leaders that preserve caste distinctions. They further stated that caste is mostly observed in villages, but is not pronounced in urban parts of Jaffna. A Tamil politician corroborated this view stating that while there are those who capitalize on the caste system for political gain, there is no discrimination based on caste in public relations. He noted further that it is the smaller, family-owned temples that observe caste differences, whereas public temples in Jaffna do not impose any restrictions based on caste.

An observation made by the research team is that the issue of caste was brought up only by members of lower castes and that too on employing probing questions. Respondents from higher castes dismissed the issue stating that caste was not a problem in Jaffna. Furthermore, caste impacts not only religious relations, but also permeates to social institutions such as schools. A few respondents stated that some schools in the villages discriminated against students based on caste and restricted their access to opportunities, but this was not the case for schools in more urban areas.

Caste is also a phenomenon that makes an ethnic community vulnerable and is capitalized on by other communities such as the Muslim community (consciously or unconsciously) in their expansion of territorial boundaries. In Ampara, the Muslim community is said to purchase land belonging to low caste Tamils which Tamils of higher castes are reluctant to purchase. With regard to the Christian community, caste was also mentioned as manifesting in subtle ways in church practices whereby those belonging to higher castes occupy higher posts in the church administration. However, a pastor stated that caste is not a divisive factor during church services where everyone sits together. This was similar across Jaffna, Mannar, and Ampara.

## **2.5. Territorial Expansion: Land as a Symbol of Ethno-religious Dominance**

The appropriation of land (sometimes belonging to the ethno-religious other) by an ethno-religious community as a means of exerting dominance through territorial expansion is also a manifestation of competing regional ethno-religious nationalisms stemming from insecurities of minority ethnic groups. This was particularly evident in Ampara and Mannar among the Muslims and Buddhists who consider themselves minorities in relation to Tamils in the Northern and Eastern Provinces and in relation to Muslims in Ampara as well as in Jaffna where territorial expansion through the settlement of military families on state and private land in the district is a state-led venture.

Land is particularly a source of inter-religious disharmony in the Ampara District. At the time of data collection in 2017, Muslim-Buddhist relations had the potential to become violent and they did in February and March 2018. There are several layered factors that influence the relationship between the two religious communities – Muslims' influence in local administration, Buddhists' insecurity as they are a minority in the district, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, the role of Buddhist extremist groups

and lack of interaction between the two ethno-religious communities. All of these factors manifest in land disputes whereby the Buddhist community is accused of encroaching on Muslim lands with the goal of expanding geographical control of the region using religion as a pretext to achieving this.

The primary means by which the expansion of Buddhist spaces is achieved and justified is through the Sacred Areas Act which allows (among other clauses) the Department of Archaeology and the state to acquire privately-owned land using the argument that it is a sacred area. The Muslim respondents in Ampara claimed that this Act was being used by politicians to acquire land belonging to the Muslims for the purpose of garnering the support of Buddhist constituents by catering to the community's insecurities. One example is Sambunagar where Buddhists have declared land belonging to Muslims as sacred land. Another incident is regarding a Buddhist temple which has been (arbitrarily) built on a land in Iraikkamam which belongs to a Muslim. This issue was one of the burning issues between the Buddhist and the Muslim communities at the time of data collection in 2017. A similar land issue in Wattamadu has led to legal action being taken. The Buddhist respondents, however, argued that although there is a degree of coexistence between Buddhists and Muslims in the district, the Sinhalese have not been allowed to construct shrines for religious worship such as in Manikkamadu (another area of contention) where they have been prevented by the Muslim community from building a vihara. They claimed this as being unfair as the Muslims build mosques in Sinhala villages.

Deegavapi,<sup>15</sup> an ancient Buddhist site, which is located in a Muslim division of the district (Addalachenai), is another cause for contention between Buddhists and Muslims in Ampara. Despite this being a Muslim Division, many Sinhalese have settled in the area ignorant of the fact that they are settled in an area controlled by the Addalachenai Divisional Secretariat. Roads leading to Deegavapi have also been constructed through surrounding Muslim villages in an attempt to popularize the Sinhala name and identity 'Deegavapiya' in the region. This has also caused unpleasantness among the Muslim and Buddhist communities. The Buddhist respondents also stated that the main issues in the area are in relation to Digavapi and Manikkamadu. They argue that although the Muslims claim it as theirs, there are ancient Buddhist relics that have been found in the area which justifies its Buddhist identity. They claimed that Muslims are destroying statues of the Buddha that are being put up in that area and obstructing attempts made by government officials to intervene. There is also a committee that has been formed in the temple to look into this issue, led by monks (Members of village development forum, Buddhist men and women, May 25, 2017).

A different tussle for land between the two religious communities is in relation to the distribution of houses under the tsunami housing scheme in Nuraichcholai which was funded by the Saudi Arabian government for Muslims. The houses have not been distributed to the Muslim community due to the Sinhalese' claim over it which led to a court case. The court's verdict was to distribute the houses among the three communities, but, the ruling is yet to be carried out.

Despite these tensions, the Buddhist respondents expressed a positive attitude toward their position as Sinhala Buddhists in Ampara. They said that the different ethno-religious communities in the

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<sup>15</sup> See Dewasiri (2016) for a detailed history of the Deegavapi issue.



district are involved in combined activities unlike during the time of the war and that there is coexistence among the people. However, they specified that their main interaction is with Tamils, and association with Muslims is minimal. This was also reflected in the attitudes expressed by Buddhist women from Deegavapi who identified more with the Tamil community stating, “Hindus are an innocent community, they are the worst off even after the war. You can see their plight if you visit the Thiruthkovil area. We have many similarities with the Hindus. We share the same gods. Before the war also our relations were very strong. However, the Muslims are the opposite. They are selfish and competitive with other communities to own the land” (Member of village development forum, Buddhist female, May 25, 2017). This is an example of the complexity and context specificity of ethno-religious relations whereby in Ampara, where Tamils and Sinhalese are the minority, the Sinhalese empathize with the Tamils who were once viewed as the ‘other’.

While the Buddhist-Muslim conflict in relation to territorial expansion stems from Buddhist insecurities as a minority community, Tamil-Muslim relations over the gradual expansion of Muslim settlements could be attributed to the Muslim community’s minority status in the north-eastern region of Sri Lanka. However the strategies used by the community to expand their territory, unlike the Buddhist approach, is to capitalize on the relative poverty of the Tamil community in the area. The Tamil respondents in Ampara accused the Muslims of gradually expanding their spatial boundaries by offering sums of money, far above market value, to Tamil individuals and purchasing land. Thus, villages that were once populated by Tamils have now become Muslim villages. An example is Sinnamuhathuwaram, a tsunami resettlement area for a Tamil community, which has now become a Muslim area because Tamils needed money and sold their land to Muslims. Caste also plays an important role in this issue of land, as land is one of the primary markers of caste affiliation. The tsunami resettlement area is on land that is considered belonging to lower caste Tamils. Hence, this land is eschewed by Tamils of higher castes. The Muslims, on the other hand, offer good prices for such land and purchase them. The Tamil respondents, however, emphasized that caste was not a serious basis of discrimination in Ampara, as it is in Jaffna.

Another means of gaining access to Tamil lands is through inter-marriage, unethical conversion, and political influence. The Tamil respondents in Ampara viewed inter-marriage between Muslims and Tamils as a deliberate attempt to appropriate Tamil lands. The Hindu respondents also cited conversion of members of their community into Islam as a current problem. They stated that there are about 5-6 Hindus in the Alaiyadivembu Division who have converted to Islam and are now converting the rest of their families. This was viewed as a plot hatched by the Muslim community to justify the building of a mosque in a Tamil area. Poverty was also highlighted as an important reason for conversion. “There are no secure livelihoods or markets for Tamils. Therefore, Muslims brainwash Hindus to convert for economic gain as job opportunities are available mostly in Muslim areas” (Government officer, Hindu male, May 24, 2017). It was also noted that some Tamils converted to Islam during the ethnic conflict in order to escape the LTTE.

Territorial expansion in Ampara is also achieved through political influence in the district. An example is where Muslims allegedly engaged in gerrymandering by using a powerful politician to gazette that 34 families in a Tamil division now belong to the Muslim division, whereby expanding the borders of

the Muslim division. The respondents stated that such things are allowed to happen because Tamils are politically weak in the district. Both the Christians and Hindus unanimously stated that they are not ready to accept Muslims, the chief reason being land disputes and their appropriation of Tamil land.

Territorial expansion for the purpose of exerting dominance, therefore, manifests as a result of minority-majority insecurities where the Buddhists who are a national majority react to their minority status in the Ampara district and the Muslims, who are a majority in Ampara, act in response to their minority status against the Tamils in the Northeast. Land is a means by which both communities assert dominance, but is appropriated through the manipulation/subversion of the land market, social (inter-marriage), legal (Sacred Areas Act), and political capital of each ethno-religious community.

## **2.6. Land and Entitlement: Post-war Considerations**

The three-decade-long ethnic war in Sri Lanka and the many forms of displacement it induced has also resulted in contestations over land between different ethno-religious communities post war. In Mannar, it is impossible to discuss the issue of territorial expansion without consideration of the history of the ethnic war which resulted in the LTTE ordering the expulsion of Muslims from the North in 1990. This resulted in the Muslim community abandoning their lands and property sometimes leaving them under the care of their Tamil neighbours and sometimes selling them due to the belief that they would not be allowed to return. On their return to Mannar and even Jaffna their gradual territorial expansion triggers feelings of insecurity among the majority Tamil community.

The relationship between Catholic Tamils and Muslims in the Mannar district has transformed over the years, with the repercussions of the ethnic conflict and the expulsion of the Muslims from the Northern Province impacting present day interactions between the two communities. According to a key informant, in the past (i.e. before expulsion), inter-religious and ethnic coexistence was the norm in Mannar, whereby, not even the party politics of post-independence Sri Lanka could disrupt it (Priest, Hindu male, April 14, 2018). The expulsion of the Muslims by the LTTE in 1990 is considered to be the turning point which created a significant rift between the two communities. Prior to this, the relationship between Muslims and Tamils is likened to the relationship between “younger and older brothers” respectively whereby a Tamil could chastise a Muslim in public for a wrongdoing without causing uproar in the Muslim community (Field officer, Catholic male, March 6, 2017). This analogy suggests not only the ‘filial’ amity between both communities in pre-1990s Mannar, but is also suggestive of a hierarchical relationship arguably based on the greater population size of the Catholic Tamil community.

On the return of Muslims to Mannar post war, economics and politics lie at the heart of Catholic-Muslim relations and even Hindu-Muslim relations in the district. The perception of Hindu and Catholic respondents was that the Muslims are returning to Mannar more prosperous than they were before. Furthermore, the political patronage they receive from a prominent Muslim politician causes

riffs between the two communities. Two Catholic respondents were of the opinion that it is this politician who is inciting conflict between the two communities for his personal political gain.

Therefore, at the heart of Tamil/Catholic-Muslim relations is the issue of land and growth of the Muslim population. A retired Hindu medical officer expressed his concern about the disparity in the birth rates between Tamils and Muslims and stated that soon the Muslims would outnumber the Tamils (Medical officer, Hindu male, March 6, 2017). The increase in population among Muslims (which could be argued is a natural occurrence over a period of twenty years) has also led to the need for more land. On one hand, a particular Muslim politician is said to be using his influence to clear forest areas and resettling Muslim families which has also resulted in an increase in the number of mosques in the district. On the other hand is the claim by Muslims that the Catholic Church has appropriated the lands that they had abandoned when fleeing the area and a demand that they be returned. This has resulted in several disputes, particularly in border villages.

An example of such a dispute is two adjoining villages which are currently Catholic and Muslim villages respectively. These adjoining villages are experiencing conflict over the presence of a Catholic chapel on allegedly Muslim land. Several contesting arguments made by both communities make this issue complex. The argument of the Catholic community is that the Muslims are claiming the land as their own because the population of Catholics has decreased in the area and that of Muslims increased. The Muslim community claims that the land in question is a traditional Muslim burial ground which was later used to build a chapel with the influence of the LTTE after the Muslims were expelled. Several counter arguments from the Catholic quarter state that the land originally belonged to the Catholic Church which allowed the Muslim community to use it as a burial ground, that the Muslims had sold their land after leaving Mannar between 2004 and 2007 when they felt that there was no opportunity to return, and that some Muslims fled to India giving power-of-attorney to their relatives who had sold the land. These factors add to the complexity of Tamil-Muslim relations in Mannar.

The Muslim respondents stated that apart from this one issue, there are no conflicts between the two communities as the Catholic village is dependent on the Muslim village for shops and the post office. There is also a long-standing Catholic school and church in the Muslim village whereby day-to-day interactions take place between both religious communities without any conflict or confrontations. However, some Catholic respondents stated that the Muslims had thrown stones at the church during service and disrupted the service by playing loud music, but such violence had ceased after the court affirmed the Catholics' ownership of the land.

Disputes over land are also a result of displacement of Tamils during the civil war which resulted in certain villages being abandoned. The Catholic respondents stated that as a result of displacement, a village called Erukkalampiddy has been occupied by Muslims and is now a Muslim village. The respondents claimed that there is a church in this village and the Muslims are not allowing them to use it for worship. Some Catholic respondents from another village also expressed dissatisfaction regarding the construction of a mosque adjoining their church.

Such transformations of Tamil villages into Muslim villages as a result of displacement, tensions over ownership of land, and access to religious places of worship that occur as a result of both political

interventions and the consequence of war and displacement are triggers of conflict between communities in Mannar.

While the conflict in Mannar is between Muslim individuals and the Catholic Church, in Jaffna the conflict is between the Muslim community and the Northern Provincial Council. One of the tensions between the Muslims and the Tamil community is in relation to resettlement. According to a key informant, there were 4300 Muslim families in Jaffna when the LTTE ordered them to leave. The families were allowed to take only Rs. 500 with them and many of these families sought refuge in camps in Puttalam, Negombo and Panadura. They started to return to Jaffna in 2002 and at present there are 700 Muslim families and 13 mosques in Jaffna (Moulavi, Muslim male, March 8, 2017). Respondents stated that Muslims have not been included in the Indian-funded or local housing schemes by government officials; of the 700 families, only 60 were given houses under the Indian housing scheme (Moulavi, Muslim male, March 9, 2017). Furthermore, the Muslim respondent stated that the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) takes the side of the Tamils irrespective of the facts. Muslims are also encountering problems in reclaiming the lands they were forced to abandon. For example, when they started to resettle in Pommaveli, the Divisional Secretariat Office did not allow it claiming that the land is paddy land. One respondent stated that the issue of the returning of land to the original Muslim owners is one that is ignored when raised at public meetings (Moulavi, Muslim male, March 9, 2017) However, a Tamil politician stated that there are no problems between Tamils and Muslims in Jaffna and that it is Muslim leaders from outside the district who are creating problems. He also stated that some Muslims had sold their lands and shops for large sums of money and that it is wrong for them to claim land afterwards. He further stated that nobody in Jaffna would object to the resettlement of Muslims. “We want the real Jaffna Muslims,” he said, noting that Muslim leaders from outside of Jaffna were attempting to encroach on issues related to the district for political gain (Politician, Hindu male, March 9, 2017). The Muslim respondents stated that they had had good relationships with the Tamils in Jaffna before 1990. The expulsion of the Muslims caused a rift between these two communities and the relationship has not yet been rebuilt. The issue of resettlement and restitution of land aggravates tensions between both communities.

## **2.7. Access to Employment and State Benefits: Demands for Equality**

Regional nationalism and ethno-religious majoritarianism is not only promoted by political and religious leaders, but also permeates all state and regional institutional structures. Therefore, discrimination on the basis of religion and ethnicity is both anticipated and in certain instances experienced by minority communities.

All of the respondents from Mannar intimated that politics and political actors were at the heart of inter-religious conflict in the district. Several inequalities arising from political patronage were raised; the funding Muslims receive from Arab countries in the form of zakath<sup>16</sup> which has enabled Muslims to expand their territories in areas such as Musali, Murungan, Wilpattu, and along the Chilaw Road.

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<sup>16</sup> A portion of one's income donated to charity – A fundamental aspect of Islam

Concomitant with the expansion of Muslim villages is the emergence of new mosques. Furthermore, it was also stated that Muslim politicians are sourcing funds to develop the infrastructure of these villages by building schools. Thus, there are pockets of developed areas in the Mannar District adjoining rural non-Muslim villages (Representative of CSO, Catholic female, March 6, 2017).

Nepotism and favouritism by influential Muslim politicians in the case of securing government appointments for members of the Muslim community is another issue raised by the Tamil respondents in Mannar who expressed that they felt that their rights were being denied. However, the Muslim respondents stated that Muslim politicians also use the funds received to help Tamil villages. They in turn accused the Northern Provincial Council for discriminating against Muslims in the allocation of government job postings. Conversely, the Catholics said that it is they who are being quashed due to the influence that Muslims have at ministerial level. This discourse of victimhood adopted by both parties appears to be one basis on which Tamils and Muslims interact and their relationship defined.

An important point of contention between the Hindus and the Catholics in Mannar is due to the powerful role played by the Catholic Church in governance and decision making. Hence, there is a feeling among the Hindu as well as the Evangelical Christian population that their interests are not taken into consideration in administrative decisions. Though the previous Bishop Rayappu Joseph was replaced by Bishop Lionel Emmanuel Fernando who is considered less fervent in the politics and governance of Mannar, the general view is that the Church has a powerful influence in all spheres of administration. Furthermore, a Hindu priest stated that the Members of Parliament who represent Mannar are mostly Catholic and though they argue that they treat everyone equally, they take sides (Priest, Hindu male, personal communication, March 6, 2017). An example of the exercise of this authority cited by the Hindu respondents is the putting up of banners during Hindu festivals by kovils for which approval has to be obtained from the police. When the kovil approaches the police with all the documents duly completed, they find that an influential Catholic has already procured a preemptive order to obstruct the erection of banners and cut-outs and the kovil is unable to contest this order.

Similarly, the Christian (Non-RC) community spoke of problems experienced in establishing and obtaining approval for the construction of their own churches, access to Non-RC religious instruction in schools (though all schools except four – including one school in Vangalai – have introduced ‘Non-RC’ as a separate subject under religious education) and obstruction by the Catholic Church and its parishioners from felicitating Non-RC preachers who have contributed to the development of a village. For example, in Jeevanagar, the Catholic Church and its parishioners had prevented a billboard being put up to honour such an individual (Pastor, Non-RC male, March 7, 2017)

Another issue faced by members of the Non-RC community is at institutional level where the category of Non-RC is subsumed under the category of Roman Catholic. Thus, a Non-RC pastor stated that they are not invited to represent the community at government meetings and events. Therefore, while Catholic priests, Hindu kurus, and Muslim moulavis are invited, Non-RC priests are excluded. This suggests a need for awareness and inclusion of the different Christian denominations in the district.

The Tamil community in Ampara also shared their views on the victimization of their community due to the political and administrative influence wielded by the Muslim community in Ampara. The Tamil respondents stated that educated Tamils find it difficult to secure government jobs because appointments are granted to Muslims through political affiliations. They also complained that most of the lawyers, judges, and police officers in the district are Muslim, therefore, there is no fairness in treatment and the Muslim police officers are disrespectful. Conversely, the Muslims stated that they have been discriminated against regarding government job opportunities particularly in relation to top-level administrative positions. According to the Muslim respondents (who are minorities in the province), it is only the Tamils who secure those top-level administrative jobs. They also stated that when the University Grants Commission selects students for university admissions, there is no discrimination, but when it comes to jobs, Muslims are discriminated. They asserted that job appointments should be granted according to the ethnic ratio in the district. These contradictory views shared by the two communities suggest, on the one hand the lack of dialogue between both communities leading to misconceptions, and on the other hand, the way in which perceived inequalities pitch communities against each other.

Despite shared religious practices between the Buddhists and Hindus, respondents stated that the Hindu community was antagonised by the predominantly Buddhist government officials in Deniyaya. This is in the form of using vacant land adjoining a Hindu temple for a public playground and erecting a statue of the Buddha alongside a bo tree on the premises. The Sinhalese youth, who frequent the playground, are viewed as hindering the kovil and its activities and the erection of the statue of the Buddha has raised suspicion as to the future intentions of the government authorities. Relations between Buddhists and Hindus in Deniyaya were not always strained. The Hindu respondents stated that prior to 1983, there was unity between Buddhists and Hindus in Deniyaya whereby the first pooja of the Hindu kovil festival would take place at the Buddhist temple. The respondents argued that such relations have deteriorated due to the ethnic conflict, the presence of the BBS in the village, politics, and racist allocation of government funds where money was channelled towards the playground and not the kovil (Members of inter-religious committee, Hindu and Christian men and women, May 26, 2018).

## **2.8. Institutionalized Racism and Seizure of Institutions Belonging to Minority Communities**

Territorial expansion takes yet another form in the Matara district where a group of Muslim female respondents expressed fears that the Southern Province Education Ministry based in Galle is attempting to transform their traditionally Muslim school into a Sinhala school by appointing Sinhala vice principals and teachers. They perceived it as a plot to start Buddhist worship in the school. The Ministry has also not appointed a Tamil language teacher from the Tamil community to the school even though the language at home for Muslims is Tamil. Muslim graduate teachers are also not given appointments and there are court cases regarding this issue in progress. This gradual appropriation of a traditionally Muslim institution by a state ministry demonstrates the imbalance in ethno-religious

representation and institutionalized racism in state ministries, which potentially leads to the erasure of and disregard for the institutions built and developed by ethno-religious minorities.

Such racism extends to actors within the education system as well whereby the Muslim women respondents also stated that some people are disgusted by their attire (hijab) and ask, “Why don’t you wear sari?” They complained that Muslim students are not allowed to wear Muslim dress (head scarf) to Sinhala schools in Matara whereby even during sports, Muslim girls cannot wear covered clothes (Member of women’s group, Muslim woman, June 18, 2017). The respondents in Deniyaya also commented on the racist nature of the education system which contributes to the segregation of Tamils and Sinhalese and results in racism being embedded at a very young age. Racism among teachers and government officials was also seen as a contributing factor.

Conversely, the Buddhist respondents from Weligama stated that they felt that the Tamils and Muslims in ministries favour people of their own communities in exams. As a result, they hold many of the top government positions.

## **2.9. Economics and Business Rivalry**

Economics is a crosscutting factor affecting ethno-religious relations in all four districts, but was more pronounced in Ampara and Matara. In Ampara, poverty was a significant factor which was said to impact relations between Tamils and Muslims. Two similar, yet contradictory, narratives on poverty emerged from the interviews with both Tamils and Muslims. The Tamil respondents stated that Tamils in the Ampara district are relatively poorer than the Muslims whereby many of them work as domestics in Muslim households and businesses. They claimed that this results in sexual abuse of Tamil women and the corruption of Hindu youth by Muslims through their use of foul and suggestive language. They further stated that the war has crippled the Tamils both economically and politically, whereby the Muslims are more powerful in the District. Conversely, the Muslim respondents stated that Tamils have become richer after the LTTE because the diaspora channels funds to them which they use to create problems for the Muslims. The views expressed by the Tamils seem to be at the level of community perception, while the views of the Muslims is a general observation in relation to the Tamil community in the North and East. These perceptions have not manifested into any large conflicts between the communities, though small altercations over land have taken place.

Muslim-Sinhalese relations, however, are greatly impacted by economic considerations in the Matara district. The Muslim women respondents stated that there are no ethno-religious problems in Matara town. However, the spread of anti-Muslim sentiments is primarily related to business rivalry. These rivalries are based on jealousy whereby Buddhists do not patronize Muslim stores such as Fashion Bug. They stated that Muslims have faced losses as a result and, in response, they too do not patronize Sinhalese shops. Furthermore, in relation to violence against Muslim businesses, the women noted that no action was taken when a Muslim shop was burnt during the fasting period. They also expressed the opinion that this was a planned act to disrupt the fasting period.

Such antagonism against the Muslim community could be attributed to fear among the Sinhala community of Muslims' territorial expansion within 'the market'. In Weligama, where there is a large concentration of Muslims, the Buddhist respondents stated that Muslims are strategically chasing the Sinhalese out of the public market places and expanding their meat stalls. They were of the belief that the urban council administration is also biased in favour of Muslims and discriminates against Sinhalese as the Mayor is Muslim. They also expressed concern about the fact that there are only a few Sinhalese shops left in the town and that there is an unseen power behind such attempts "to capture this country". They predicted that in two years, there would not be any Sinhalese shops in the town and that the Sinhalese are increasingly becoming weak in Weligama as it is almost under the control of the Muslims. According to the respondents, the Muslim community's strategy is "to capture this land" (Weligama/Sri Lanka) in three ways: land, population and economy. However, they were also self-critical stating that the Sinhalese are not doing well because of their own laziness and that this should not be a reason to attack Muslim businesses (Members of inter-religious forum, Buddhist men and women, June 17, 2017).

The above fear of the alleged strategy to capture land, population and economy is reflected in Deniyaya as well where Muslim 'jamaat' (preaching) activities, the legal expansion of a Mosque's outbuildings and commencement of businesses by Muslims are obstructed not only by Buddhist individuals and monks, but also by the Buddhist community at large. An example is the forceful shutting down of a Muslim business by the BBS and its supporters in the village and the installment of a Buddhist businessman instead in 2018. More subtle methods of intimidation of Muslim individuals, in the form of personal communication through letters, are also adopted.



### 3. Inter-religious Conflict: A District-based Analysis

#### 3.1. Mannar

The discussion of inter-religious relations in Mannar in the previous section shows that inter-religious conflict is based on relations and contestations of power, attitudes of majoritarianism among the Catholics, a sense of entitlement among the Muslims, and responses of minority communities such as the Hindus and Christians in asserting (spatially and symbolically) their own religious identities. Furthermore, (the perception of) unequal distribution of and access, based on ethno-religious identity, to resources, development schemes, and justice are also factors that pit religious communities against each other. While these inequalities have unique manifestations in the Mannar district as a space with its own identity, the case of Buddhist temples, speaks to the macro narrative of the deliberate Buddhization of ethno-religiously 'other' (Catholic and Hindu) spaces as part of the post-war nationalist agenda. However, such Buddhization could also be alternatively viewed as a natural consequence of the war whereby the Buddhist soldiers stationed in the area fulfil a human need for a religious space near their camps by erecting shrines for their personal worship.

In addition to these spatial and relational factors, an important fact to note is the role of political actors and religious leaders in aggravating inter-religious tensions particularly between the Tamil and Muslim communities as well as the Tamil and Buddhist communities. All of the respondents stated that there is no animosity felt among ordinary citizens against their religious counterparts and that coexistence is the norm and not the exception. Catholic and Muslim politicians were identified as the chief agitators of conflict among religious communities for their own political gain. Furthermore, Catholic, Hindu, and Muslim religious leaders were also cited as having great influence over their religious communities whereby they can not only influence how people vote, but also provoke them to violate laws and commit acts of vandalism. The zealotry of young priests and their sermons was also mentioned as a reason for conflicts arising in localities. One respondent also blamed the Indian government ('Modi's government' in his words) for its influence in Jaffna and accused India for providing the statues of Lord Ganesh which are being installed in the Mannar district as a strategy to promote Tamil Hindu nationalism in the North.

#### 3.2. Jaffna

In Jaffna, ethnic difference rather than religious difference was the chief factor influencing ethno-religious relations with the primary conflict stemming from the war and post-war militarization of the North. The use of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism symbolically in the form of hoisting the Buddhist flag, resettlement of military families in the North and the construction of Buddhist temples to encroach on Tamil spaces antagonize the majority Tamil community which is politically less powerful. Tamil-Muslim relations are also defined by land issues arising from the expulsion of the Muslim community from the North in the 90s and the alleged interference of Muslim politicians outside of the North in the affairs of the NPC. The purely religious tensions derive from the socio-cultural aspect of caste which causes inequalities among Hindus and sometimes Catholics in the practice of and engagement in religious activities which leads to confrontation, animosity, and bitterness at individual level. The

conversion of Hindus by evangelical churches was also considered problematic, but tolerated by the Hindu community.

Thus, ethno-religious relations in Jaffna are shaped by political, relational, and deeply entrenched cultural norms, both of which operate to establish and sustain dominance and hierarchical relationships.

### **3.3. Ampara**

In Ampara, the Muslim respondents were of the opinion that politicians, lack of law enforcement, and international conspiracies were the reasons for inter-religious conflict in the district. It was believed that the BBS, which was said to have links with Norway and Israel, works on an international agenda which is against the Muslims. Furthermore, when Muslims start to talk about their rights in relation to inter-religious problems, the BBS tries to deflect attention to their claims by creating violence.

The respondents also stated that there are many racist local agencies inside and outside the government that are working against the Muslims. The Department of Archaeology and the Forest Department were particularly accused of working against Muslims and grabbing Muslim lands.

Ethno-political parties also cause religious tensions; though they are a voice for different religious and ethnic groups, the respondents expressed suspicion over the (nature of) relationships among those political parties. The respondents believed that inciting inter-religious tension could also be a plot of these different political parties in order to garner a following. Individual politicians, particularly in relation to the Manikkamadu Buddha Statue, were attributed to being responsible for creating issues against Muslims.

False rumours and news about Jihad groups among Muslims were also cited as reasons for inter-religious conflict. Some of the Buddhist respondents' opinions were also shaped by the news and the media. They stated that the obstacles to coexistence include laws not being implemented, mistrust, and land issues. They also echoed the Muslim community's sentiments stating that politicians in the area do not talk about coexistence and refer to it only when a government or civil appointment needs to be made.

The Buddhist respondents also mentioned that while the general public does not have a preference for any particular ethno/religious group, there is a prevailing perception that Tamils are better than Muslims. However, the respondents did not subscribe to this belief. They also stated that the general public believes that Muslims are "crooks" but argued that this does not correlate to their success in business and that Muslims being better at business is a false belief (Members of village development forum, Buddhist men and women, May 25, 2017).

The above reveal that at the heart of inter-religious relations and conflict in the Ampara district lies the insecurities of the Sinhala Buddhist State due to the Muslims' control over economic and administrative activities in the region which manifest in attempts to displace Muslims' power by

appropriating their lands. The Tamils, on the other hand, harbour prejudices against Muslims as economically better off, culturally different, and view them as corrupting Tamil cultural values. A shared source of contestation among all three major ethnic groups in the district is land as it is viewed as a means of amassing power and dominance.

### **3.4. Matara**

Underlying the tensions and the reasons for inter-religious conflict in the Matara district is fear of the majority Sinhala Buddhist community of losing their ethno-religious identity which is based on majoritarianism. This fear is exploited by politicians and extremist elements to incite the ordinary citizen to react either through violence or other acts of racism.

The main reason cited for the general public's susceptibility to racist influence was the Sinhalese community's lack of knowledge about other cultures. The Muslim respondents also agreed that this ignorance applies to their community as well. The Muslim women said that since communities are mixed in Matara Town, Muslims in Town interact with other cultures whereby they know about other communities. However, there are Muslims in mono-ethnic villages in Weligama and Dikwella who are isolated from other communities and sometimes hurt the feelings of Sinhalese by their ignorant actions (Members of women's group, Muslim women, June 18, 2017).

Language is also a cause for conflict in these mono-ethnic villages. The respondents stated that Muslims in such villages do not know how to speak Sinhala properly and there is miscommunication and misunderstanding between ordinary people. Therefore, the main challenges to inter-religious coexistence are the language problem, lack of knowledge about other religions and their practices, and lack of interaction among Buddhists and Muslims, particularly in remote/rural areas.

One example of misunderstanding and wrong perceptions is the belief that Muslims are supporters of ISIS. This is also used as a justification for attacking Muslims. The women respondents asserted that Muslims are against ISIS. Lack of knowledge about the Muslim community was also discussed in relation to the contributions that Muslims make to the local community which go unacknowledged on social and mainstream media. For example, they stated that ethno-religious problems decreased after the severe floods in 2016 and 2017 because many Muslims contributed a lot to flood relief. The Buddhist respondents from Matara town corroborated this view stating that Muslims are very humane as they help the poor and the neglected and that they had been very helpful during floods (FGD, Buddhist men and women, June 17, 2017).

In Weligama, the Muslim respondents expressed a different aspect of ignorance stating that people do not know history and that is why there is conflict. They stated that those who do, know that Weligama is a Muslim village and before that it was a Tamil village. It is the new people who don't know this old information who are easily brainwashed by extremist groups into believing that the village is of Sinhalese origin (Members of religious institution, Muslim men and women, June 18, 2017). The Muslim respondents in Weligama were also self-critical stating that sometimes, it is their own community that provokes individual Sinhalese to join extremist groups like the BBS. They stated

that a few Muslim farmers steal cows from neighbouring Sinhalese farmers. Muslim youth in the area also loiter and play cricket on the street obstructing traffic. In retaliation, Sinhalese grab the *thoppis* (caps) off Muslim youths' heads when they are on their way to prayers. However, some of the respondents disagreed stating that the grabbing of *thoppis* is a premeditated act by the temple in the area. They also expressed concern about some Muslim youth groups that look to create problems.

The Buddhist respondents in Weligama explained their side of the story stating that Muslims always organize cricket matches on Poya (full moon) days. Their use of loudspeakers throughout the day disturbs the tranquil environment Buddhists need to engage in religious activities. They stated that they feel so helpless in such situations that "Buddhists in this Buddhist country are losing their rights to follow their religion" (Participants of FGD, Buddhist men and women, June 17, 2017).

On the other hand, the Sinhalese respondents also acknowledged and showed awareness of the fact that the majoritarian attitude among the Sinhalese aggravates inter-ethnic issues. They stated that the Sinhalese do not want their dominance challenged by other communities. They also stated that Weligama is a site of conflicts and clashes that took place several times in the past. The origin of most of these conflicts was personal disputes which flared into inter-religious/ethnic conflicts due to this majoritarian attitude among the Sinhalese.

Such Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism permeates governance structures as well, whereby the police and those responsible for maintaining law and order such as the GN (Grama Niladhari) fail to intervene in times of inter-religious conflict when the perpetrator/s is/are Buddhists. Thus, Muslim, Hindu, and Christian minorities expressed their helplessness in seeking redress for acts of intimidation, discrimination, and violence against them. This culture of impunity is further encouraged by politicians who stir inter-religious tensions by spreading hatred against Muslims. The Muslim respondents stated that this issue goes unresolved because Muslim ministers are unable to do anything about it as they have to protect their seats in Parliament (FGD, Muslim men and women, June 18, 2017). The Buddhist respondents in Weligama also echoed the view that politicians instigate inter-religious conflict to further their own agendas. Access to justice for victims of inter-religious violence is thus barred by political influence and Sinhalese majoritarianism within the law enforcement structures.

#### 4. Conflict Resolution Strategies in Addressing Inter-religious Conflict and the Role of Inter-Religious Committees

That inter and intra religious conflict and contestations would be addressed by law enforcement authorities such as the police is a logical assumption. However, in heterogeneous communities where ethno-religious majoritarianism shapes the practices of state institutions, there is discrimination and a lack of trust in the impartiality of state law enforcement mechanisms. This lack of faith results in certain communities such as the Muslims in Mannar and Ampara placing faith in the impartiality of the legal system seeking legal recourse for conflict with the Catholic majority in Mannar and Buddhist state representatives in Ampara. Similarly, in Deniyaya, Muslims and Hindus experience discrimination by the police who side with Buddhist extremist elements.

Thus, mediation or mitigation of inter-religious conflict is most often achieved by the intervention of religious leaders in their individual capacities at local/private level. All four districts also had inter-religious fora or committees (formal or informal) in operation and which were founded with the intention of maintaining good relations between members of different religions. A common narrative from representatives of inter-religious fora in Mannar and Matara was the lack of capacity to intervene and resolve inter-religious conflict, particularly in taking immediate action at the site of violent confrontations. Respondents in Ampara and Matara also called for politicians to solve inter-religious conflict as they stem from larger factors such as nationalism and regional nationalisms which are shaped by political motivations.

##### 4.1. Mannar

An informal body that concerns itself with conflict mitigation is the Mannar Inter-religious Forum which comprises both lay and religious leaders who come together to address inter-religious problems in the district. This council was instituted 20 years ago through the initiative of the Church and a moulavi. The group was not active during the war, but at present, with the support of two NGOs, has resumed its activities. The president and secretaries of the Forum comprise clergy representing all four religions and the other office bearers are lay male and female leaders recommended by the clergy. The council meets once a month and hears complaints regarding the illegal/competitive placement of statues, land disputes, child abuse and gender-based violence. One way in which they attempt to promote inter-religious coexistence is by inviting a prominent religious leader as chief guest for an event conducted by a community of a different religion. They have also managed to solve an issue related to an easement claimed by the church from a Hindu temple amicably. However, a representative of the Forum stated that while they do function as a group, they do not have the social recognition and importance required to intervene on the spot in cases of inter-religious violence. The extent to which they intervene is in informing the relevant government officials of the problem/dispute and withdrawing from that point onwards.

A challenge faced, as one older respondent explained, is that there were mediation boards and trustee boards in the past and everyone respected the decisions of the board. Today, however, because of the

rift in the relationship between Tamils and Muslims, the decisions of inter-religious fora or councils are not respected.

According to another respondent, at village level, individual parish priests or the kuru overseeing a Hindu temple should ideally solve local disputes. However, the parish councils and members of the kovil administration, who comprise lay persons, displace the priests and exert more influence and authority in the resolution of disputes and decision making. This could also be due to the fact that the priest/kuru does not have the time amidst other duties to address local issues or does not have the personality to command authority over prominent members of a parish/administrative society.

Conflict resolution strategies adopted were also district-specific. All of the Non-RC respondents in Mannar expressed a lack of faith in law enforcement and government officers due to the power the Catholic Church has in influencing decisions. For example, a Non-RC respondent stated that in an instance where Catholics had thrown stones at their place of worship, the police had arrested only the Non-RC individuals and not the Catholics who had instigated the violence (Pastor, Christian male, 7<sup>th</sup> March, 2017). Thus, religious minorities in Mannar are more confident in seeking legal recourse to solve issues, particularly in the case of land disputes. The Non-RC individuals also stated that they recruit Muslim lawyers to represent them in court as they feel that Catholic lawyers would be biased in favour of the Church. The land disputes mentioned above (including those between Catholics and Muslims) had been settled through legal action though some of the judgments were not in favour of the Christian/Muslim plaintiffs.

#### **4.2. Jaffna**

The respondents interviewed were not members of any inter-religious groups or councils except for one male who was part of a group that engaged in cultural activities and theatre to unite different ethno-religious communities. This group was inspired by an inter-religious dialogue organized by NGOs working on peacebuilding and conducts educational activities around religious festivals to create awareness about the practices of different religious groups. Another female respondent was also a member of an inter-religious forum. Both stated that there were no overt conflicts between different religious groups, hence implying the lack of urgency for the formation of inter-religious fora.

This lack of urgency could also be due to the fact that civil society and individuals in Jaffna are still preoccupied with post-war recovery and transitional justice whereby the need for truth, justice, and reparations were foremost in the minds of the participants. Inter-religious relations, particularly between Hindus and Buddhists and Tamils and Muslims were, thus, viewed through the lens of ethnic supremacy rather than religion.

### 4.3. Ampara

In Ampara, the respondents considered conflict mitigation as the responsibility of politicians. They stated that Muslim politicians need to and should engage in dialogue with the government when there is an issue. Merely making a public statement will not solve the problem. Some respondents stated that Muslims had lost their trust in Muslim politicians' ability to solve problems faced by their community. "The Muslim business community can and must pressurize Muslim politicians to act on their behalf. There is also a need for Muslims to empower civil society and encourage civil society to come forward to resolve civil issues" (Participants of FGD, Muslim men, May 23, 2017).

The Buddhist respondents in Ampara stated that in order to resolve inter-religious conflict, people should be allowed to build places of worship according to their right. Everyone should live in harmony, learn each other's languages, and interact with each other. They also stated that the solution to the Muslim issue is to send them (Muslims) to Muslim countries (Members of village development forum, Buddhist male and female, May 25, 2017).

Given the extent of mistrust among Buddhists and Muslims in Ampara, conflicts (particularly those related to appropriation of land) are addressed through legal measures, which is considered an impartial channel.

### 4.4. Matara

The Muslim women in Matara town were members of a Muslim organization that celebrates a Peace Day event annually. Their activities involve speaking to the Sinhalese about ISIS and informing them that they (ISIS) are not Muslim. They contribute articles to a Sinhala magazine and respond to people's curiosity about the Muslims' cultural and religious practices.

The Muslim men and women in Weligama, however, were critical of inter-religious groups, stating that inter-religious groups form only when there is a problem. "People from outside come and form groups which break up. They call us for meetings and give us lunch and money, so we go" (Members of religious institution, Muslim men and women June 18, 2017). They highlighted the importance of building links between different religious leaders.

The Inter-religious Committee in Deniyaya seemed more active in terms of attempting to address inter-religious conflict. A strategy used by the group is to enable a space for both parties to meet and listen to each other's claims with close collaboration with the police, GN (Grama Niladhari) and GA (Government Agent). However, when the problem is between Buddhists and a member of another religion, the committee encounters problems in solving issues as their solutions are not taken up by the authorities. Thus, the group felt that a solution for the problem of Buddhist-Muslim/Christian/Hindu tensions could only be resolved at a political level as it is political will that can sway extremist elements. They further commented on the importance of training in conflict mitigation, but also the fact that the training is ineffective as the group does not possess the clout to intervene directly in matters of inter-religious conflict. This is due to the fact that law enforcement

officials and decision-making bodies in the area do not share or accept the values of coexistence that the committee promotes. The committee members further stated that they did not have opportunities to refresh and update their knowledge and skills in conflict mitigation.



## 5. Women and Inter-religious Conflict: Participation and Roles

The importance of equal participation and the role of women in conflict mitigation is one that is not only overlooked in patriarchal societies at large, but also trivialized and reinforced by religious norms, beliefs, and institutions. UNSCR 1325 emphasizes the importance of women's equal roles in terms of prevention of conflict, participation and inclusion in decision-making processes, protection and respect of human rights, and relief and recovery. While these roles and entitlements are defined in relation to armed conflict, it can nevertheless be applied to women's engagement in inter-religious conflict and conflict resolution. Thus, this section examines the status of women's role in inciting conflicts, their participation in conflict mitigation, the barriers women face to participate effectively in religious/inter-religious groups or associations, their concerns regarding protection, and the ways in which women might contribute actively towards promoting coexistence.

It is important to note that at the level of perceptions about religious others there were no significant differences between the attitudes expressed by men and women. However, the degree and depth of women's understanding of inter-religious conflict and their participation in conflict mitigation varied both within and across the four districts. Thus, Muslim women in Ampara were found to be most active in inter-religious committees than their counterparts in Mannar and Ampara whose activities were constrained by religious norms of the community. Similarly, Hindu women (despite their activism and entrepreneurship in the social and economic sphere) were also the least involved in inter-religious committees and kovil administrative groups due to the patriarchal underpinning of Hindu beliefs and practices. Buddhist and Catholic women were seen to be most active in inter-religious committees, though it was difficult to discern the extent to which their input is taken up by the groups they belong to. Location is also a significant determinant of women's agency. Therefore, the subsequent analysis focuses separately on women's participation, agency, and vulnerability in each of the districts.

### 5.1 Mannar

A general observation regarding women respondents in Mannar (irrespective of religious affiliation) is that while they are aware of the inter-religious conflicts in their villages and in the district. Except for the Christian women, they did not seem to have much influence in conflict mitigation initiatives, religious groups, or inter-religious group activities. The Muslim and Hindu women interviewed also did not see it as their role to directly engage in addressing inter-religious problems in their communities, though the Muslim women were very vocal in their description of the issues and their desired solutions.

The Muslim women respondents did not consider themselves as having a role in matters related to religion at community or institutional levels. When asked why they could not have played a role in seeking a solution to inter-religious disputes, they said that they did not see themselves as being able to initiate finding a solution. They did not have membership in any inter-religious forum, though they were part of a WRDS.

The Hindu women's groups were primarily concerned about the development of their villages, paving of roads, livelihoods, and job opportunities for their children. Their perception was that Catholics have better chances of obtaining employment in the Government service since they had contacts in the ministries and that Hindus are marginalized.

The Catholic and Non-RC women were more active in church administrative groups and shared strong opinions on inter-religious conflict. The fact that church administrative groups have great influence over the parish priests (as mentioned earlier in the report) shows that Catholic women have some influence in decision-making and contributing to or mitigating conflict as these groups consist mostly of women. The present secretary of the Mannar Inter-religious Federation is a Catholic woman and the federation includes female members as well. However, these women are 'influential' members of society as they are engineers, doctors, or teachers. The level of participation of these women in inter-religious fora is also uncertain. One male representative of the inter-religious federation stated that the female members of the federation did not take leading roles in the activities of the federation. However, they did engage in their feminist advocacy separately (Priest, Catholic male, April 14, 2018).

## **5.2 Jaffna**

In Jaffna, Hindu women are not included in kovil administrative committees and in decision making. They can voice their opinions in public gatherings, but not at kovil administrative meetings. Women get involved in smaller kovil administrative activities such as clearing the temple compound. On the other hand, Catholic and Christian women participate actively in church administration. Thus, of the women interviewed, it was the Hindu women who were adversely affected by their religion. None of the Hindu women interviewed were aware of, or were members of, inter-religious fora, though they were knowledgeable about inter-religious tensions in the district. They were also very active in their WRDSs and worked towards the development of their villages.

The Hindu women in Jaffna, however, expressed how they are particularly discriminated against by their religion. Women's agency and mobility are curbed by religious beliefs and customs when they are either widowed or childless. Furthermore, the Hindu belief in astrology results in some women being deemed born under inauspicious planetary conditions whereby they need to find marriage partners who share the same astrological conditions. This results in families marrying such daughters off without consideration of the character of the men. Such women live under unhappy conditions and some are abandoned by their husbands and are cheated of their dowry. Despite these factors, one respondent stated that women have gained power and have been thrust into roles of leadership after the war, due to the death, injury, or disappearance of many men during the war (President of WRDS, Hindu woman, March 8, 2013). Therefore, there is a need to engage women and empower them to not only take up roles of leadership, but also to address issues such as caste, and traditional discriminatory practices reinforced by religion that restrict them from full participation in society.

### 5.3 Ampara

The Hindu women stated that their participation in kovil administration meetings is high in terms of voicing their opinions, but there is little respect for their opinions. Women don't engage in decision-making and they are not allowed to handle finances. It is only in the general meetings that women's opinions are considered. Women's role in the temple is to collect taxes, clean the surrounding areas, and serve food at almsgivings. The Hindu women also expressed their lack of understanding of the conflict between the Buddhists and Muslims in Ampara over the claiming of sacred land. They suspected the involvement of the military in a plot to make the country a Buddhist country. The women also stated that it is men who instigate inter-religious conflict.

Muslim women in the Ampara district interact with other communities only when seeking services at government offices. Young Muslim women are also not allowed to interact with others as there is a fear, particularly among undergraduates in the Oluvil University, regarding conversion. There are a few incidents of Muslim girls eloping with Sinhalese boys. Hence, the women's reluctance to interact with others. It can be said that like in Mannar, a majority of Muslim women are not involved in activities promoting inter-religious coexistence at least in the public sphere.

### 5.4 Matara

The Muslim women interviewed in Matara town, on the other hand, seemed to be very active in religious groups and were engaged in peacebuilding activities such as organizing an annual Peace Day and writing articles to Sinhala newspapers in an effort to clarify the misconceptions held against the community. A majority of the women were also professionals and were more economically active in the public sphere than the women interviewed in Weligama, Mannar, and Ampara. Their opinion was that women are better at peacebuilding because they have the patience to explain and clarify people's doubts.

The Buddhist women from Matara said that women have gradually become liberal in the area. They expressed the need to be empowered more. They said that they were familiar with different interventions for coexistence – Divisional Secretariat office-level work and NPC (National Peace Council)-led dialogues – and expressed disappointment about the government as it is not taking action against extremism. They were of the opinion that change should come at attitudinal level to resolve these conflicts. They stated that their experience of coexisting with other communities has been beautiful and that the value and advantage of coexistence should be promoted. This was echoed by the Muslim women too when reminiscing on the past (which they referred to as pre-BBS times). A Buddhist male member of an inter-religious committee, however, was of the opinion that women are not active in inter-religious committees and do not attend meetings as they feel they do not benefit from participation.

Young Hindu and Christian women from Deniyaya, who were members of an inter-religious committee stated that they were able to participate equally with men in decision-making processes. However, respect for age and seniority resulted in the opinions of the male members being taken up

more often. They expressed the concern that youth required a lot of training on leadership and conflict mitigation in their mother tongue. As most training programmes are conducted in Sinhala, Tamil speakers are disadvantaged. Another barrier faced by these young women was discrimination on the basis of ethnicity by government officials, due to which these women were hesitant to approach authorities with solutions to problems. They also stated that women were a reason for inter-religious conflict as it is they who are most susceptible to conversion by means of financial assistance. Awareness-raising among women, was thus highlighted as an important intervention to prevent inter-religious conflict. Women's experience of empowerment and participation in conflict mitigation, therefore, varies in terms of region/village dynamics, ethnicity, caste, class, exposure, age, interest, as well as religion. These intersecting factors either promote or hinder women's access to active participation and uptake of their opinions in inter-religious committees. Thus, Muslim women from Matara town who were professionals and had access to mobility in public spaces were more empowered in terms of meaningful participation than their counterparts in other parts of Matara, Mannar, and Ampara. The Hindu respondents across all districts, while being discriminated by religious institutions, also revealed that the extent of women's participation is dependent on their interest in the subject matter and prioritization of concerns. For example, the Hindu women in Mannar were more interested in pressing issues such as infrastructural development and employment for their children than in inter-religious conflict. Age and a culture of respect for seniority is also a factor which affects the extent of participation of youth, particularly girls, as they deferred to the opinions of older members of groups as a sign of respect. Finally, the economic status of a woman also determines her interest in participation whereby her engagement is dependent on what economic benefit she receives as a result.

Irrespective of these factors that influence women's participation, the researchers observed that meaningful and active participation of women in a collective occurred only when the group comprised of the same gender. Thus, the Muslim women's religious group in Matara town as well as the WRDSs in Mannar, Jaffna, and Ampara were working and engaging with stakeholders on issues such as capacity building, livelihoods training, infrastructure development, and loan schemes which are of importance to them. Therefore, it could be argued that what hampers their engagement in inter-religious committees is the inherent patriarchal attitude that women do not have anything meaningful to contribute on issues of conflict mitigation, which was expressed by two male religious office bearers of different inter-religious committees in Mannar and Matara as well as the Muslim women members of a WRDS in Mannar (quoted previously in the report). The factors that impinge on women's participation in inter-religious committees and conflict mitigation, therefore, are multiple, inter-sectional, and context specific. These create disparities not merely between men and women, but among women as well.

## 6. Conclusion

The discussion in sections 1-5 reveals that while inter-religious conflict manifests differently in the four districts, the underlying causes or enabling conditions for tension and conflict remain the same. Dynamics in all four districts show that at the heart of inter-religious conflict lie not only the state-sanctioned agenda to promote Buddhist nationalism in the country and impunity granted to perpetrators of inter-religious violence, but also local/regional nationalisms based on religious identity among the Catholics in Mannar, the Hindus of the Northern Province and ethno-religious identity among the Muslims in Ampara. This is manifested most overtly in the contestation over sacred space and religious symbolism. This not only impacts the political milieu of each district, but also the psyches of communities as a whole whereby, for example, conflict between Catholics and Christians in Mannar is a result of the feeling that there is a rupture of the Catholic identity of the district. Similarly, but across all four districts, anti-Muslim sentiments (and negative sentiments towards Christians to a lesser degree) is due to the challenge posed by Muslims to the majoritarian imagination of the Buddhist community which stems from state-sanctioned Buddhist nationalism. This rupture to the imagination of ethno-religious purity or absoluteness of each district engenders a climate of fear of the small (insignificant) minorities (Appadurai 2006) present in the community. This fear is fanned further by economic and social inequalities aggravated by cultural and social factors such as caste and poverty among the different ethno-religious groups. Inter-religious tensions and conflict are, thus, precipitated in a psychological desire to approximate the imagination of ethno-religious purity or dominance by challenging the threatening 'other'. This challenge is primarily accomplished through the appropriation of place belonging to the threatening 'other'. Thus, in all four districts Catholics, Hindus and Buddhists seize secular, ethnicized spaces and infuse them with ethno-religious significance by acts of renaming, erecting religious statues, and constructing places of worship. On the other hand, the Muslim communities in Mannar, and Ampara assert their identity and dominance through the purchase of land and territorial expansion.

The post-war climate of the country is another significant enabling condition for inter-religious conflict between Tamils and Buddhists in Matara, Jaffna and Mannar and Tamils and Muslims in Mannar and Ampara. Much of the (alleged) actions of the military such as the installment of statues of the Buddha in the Northern Province and the destruction, renaming and appropriation of Hindu places of worship in Jaffna was viewed by the community as stemming not from religious insecurity or rivalry, but on the basis of ethno-nationalism. Similarly in Deniyaya, the Tamil respondents defined their relationship with the Sinhalese community in relation to their memories of the ethnic violence in 1983. Muslim-Tamil relations are also mostly based on ethnic difference and fractured relationships due to the expulsion of Muslims from the north in 1990, more than religion. Thus, conflicts and violence which on the surface seem to be based on religious grounds, actually stem from inter-ethnic tensions, but can manifest or be perceived as religious conflict. However, this important role of ethno-nationalism in inter-religious relations whereby ethnicity trumps over religion, is also determined by who the majority community in the district is. Thus, in Mannar, Buddhists empathize with Hindus in the face of a Tamil Catholic majority and in Ampara, Buddhists express animosity towards the Muslim majority by identifying with the Tamil community. Victimhood, thus brings different (and in other

circumstances conflicting) minority communities (ideologically) closer when they are confronted with a significant majority.

While these overarching enabling conditions, produce different patterns of tensions and conflict in the four districts, a consistent theme emerging from all Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, and Non-RC respondents, irrespective of enabling conditions was suspicion, mistrust and/or animosity towards the Muslim community. Muslim-Tamil relationships in Mannar, Jaffna, and Ampara are tainted by the repercussions of the expulsion of the Muslim community by the LTTE in 1990. Due to the expulsion Muslims, these districts have not been able to experience the organic increase in the Muslim population whereby, on their return, problems have arisen in relation to access to land and reclaiming of property. Political leaders who are pursuing their own agendas further aggravate these tensions. However, the interviews (particularly in Mannar and Ampara) also reveal a common discourse of fear and suspicion in the Buddhist psyche (and to a certain extent among the Tamils) against the purported increase in the Muslim population, their economic prosperity, the proliferation of mosques, unethical conversions, and territorial expansion.

While the conflict between Tamils and Muslims seems to be based on tangible economic factors such as poverty (Ampara), economic dependence (Ampara), land (Mannar, Jaffna, and Ampara) and access to resources (Mannar and Ampara), Buddhist-Muslim relations, on the other hand, are based more on ideological conflicts at the level of perceptions that manifest in tangible outcomes. Thus, in Matara and Ampara, the attitude of the Buddhist respondents towards the Muslim community was in relation to their 'otherness' as members of a religion not indigenous to Sri Lanka and as 'threats' to the Sinhala Buddhist identity. This manifests in the need for symbolic reinforcement of the Buddhist identity in Ampara in the form of claiming land as religious sites and the challenging of Muslim attire and businesses in Matara. It is also important to emphasize the ideological and moral conflict within the psyches of the Buddhist community which is demonstrated by their attempt (during interviews) at 'political correctness' in qualifying their racist observations with self-criticism. It could be argued that it is these moral insecurities, confusion, and lack of conviction regarding facts that make communities susceptible to exploitation by agents such as extremist Buddhist nationalist groups, extremist religious leaders, and politicians.

Geographical positioning and demographic spread of different ethno-religious communities in a particular district are also important enabling conditions which impact ethno-religious relations. This is reflected particularly in the attitudes expressed by the Muslim respondents. While the actions/sentiments of the Sinhala and Tamil communities against Muslims in the four districts is based on ethno-religious mistrust and insecurity, the Muslims mostly adopt a victim stance as well as demonstrate a sense of entitlement, particularly in Mannar and Jaffna in terms of their status as a persecuted minority in the districts whose rights need to be reclaimed and safeguarded. Conversely, in Matara Town, the Muslim respondents demonstrated a conscious effort taken by the community to construct a positive image of Muslims as seen by their acts of philanthropy and attempts to address misconceptions held by the Sinhala community. However, this does not take place in Weligama where the Muslims are more densely concentrated unlike in Matara town.

Catholic-Christian (Non-RC) as well as Hindu-Christian relations in all four districts and Buddhist-Christian relations in Matara are linked to unethical conversions by evangelical churches. Intra-religious conflict (which was not a focus of the paper) was also a significant feature that emerged from the conversations in all four districts. Intra-Christian conflict was more pronounced in Mannar whereby it manifests in physical violence between both Catholics and evangelical churches and among evangelical churches as well. However, these conflicts are at the level of the village and family. Mannar is also an example of regional religious nationalism, whereby the district has been and is identified as Catholic. This is symbolically represented in the presence of the venerated shrine of Madhu, the administrative and political authority wielded by the Bishop of Mannar and Catholic priests in the area, and the historical significance of Mannar which is linked to Catholicism. The emergence of (reactionary) Hindu nationalism in the post-war context, characterized by the instalment of statues of the Lord Ganesh alongside Christian statues as a challenge to Christianization of public spaces is a significant development in the district that merits further study despite the fact that it is attributed to political motivations. Despite this manifestation in Mannar, Hindu-Christian relations in Ampara, Matara, and Jaffna appear more cordial and tolerant despite the issue of unethical conversions to Christianity.

Intra-Buddhist conflict is also a significant factor which manifests not only among extremist and moderate Buddhists and Buddhist clergy, but also operates within the psyches of Buddhist individuals grappling with traditional Buddhist values and conflicting extremist influences. This is evident in Matara and Ampara where liberal Buddhist respondents expressed challenges faced due to resistance by extremist groups to their inter-religious activities and a sense of helplessness in countering extremism of the mind.

Approaching the causes for inter-religious tensions and conflict (Mayer's domains of conflict) from a macro regional perspective, in Mannar and Ampara, encroachment of and contestations over power, group identity and space by/among the different religious communities is enabled by the political, economic, and psychological (e.g., fears of Muslim expansion, myths or misunderstandings about religious others, and fear of losing one's identity as a dominant group) conditions in both districts. Similarly, in Matara, grievances between the Buddhist and Muslim community are based on contested business spaces and group identity which are enabled by economic and psychological conditions. In Jaffna, contestations between Muslims and the Tamil political administration regarding space and place are enabled by political conditions. Intra-Hindu relations which are affected by discrimination based on caste (i.e. group identity) is enabled by the cultural, economic and political conditions in the district. Furthermore, Hindu-Buddhist relations in Jaffna are shaped by contestations of the personality, space, and identity of the Hindu community by the military, which is enabled again by political conditions.

The conditions in each district also influence the conflict resolution mechanisms and strategies that are adopted. Mitigation strategies in each of the districts are therefore highly context sensitive. The interviews reveal that conflict resolution mechanisms vary in the districts and are dependent on the faith that communities have in law enforcement and legal mechanisms. It is, thus, interesting and significant that victims of inter-religious disputes in Mannar seek legal recourse rather than alternative

dispute resolution mechanisms as they lack faith in the impartiality of Catholic local government administrators. Conversely, in Ampara and Matara, there is a lack of faith in law enforcement officials and legal systems and their will to resolve inter-religious disputes because the disputes deal with challenging the Buddhist identity of the nation. Furthermore, dialogue around some of the issues related to contested religious and archaeological sites take place at the macro level with involvement of politicians and print and social media. This results in multiple understandings of the situation which aggravates conflict. More subtle strategies of promoting inter-religious coexistence were also adopted in Matara and Mannar through inter-religious committees and educational initiatives, but these approaches were deemed inadequate or limited in their capacity to address and resolve conflict. The interviews suggest that there is space for these committees and initiatives to be strengthened.

The role of women in conflict mitigation and/or propagation of inter-religious conflict is again determined by the conditions in each district. The findings show that women hold strong opinions (positive and negative) about members of other religious communities, are aware of the nuances of inter-religious conflict in their localities, and sometimes take part actively in acts of intra-religious violence. There is a disparity, however, in their agency and acceptance into/participation in inter-religious fora and peacebuilding activities. This disparity is not merely determined by their ethno-religious background, but also by their caste, culture, standing in society as well as geographical positioning. Thus, while Muslim women in rural Mannar and Ampara were seen to be having less agency in terms of initiating discussion around local inter-religious issues and devising solutions, Muslim women in urban Matara Town demonstrated more participation in peacebuilding activities. Similarly, Hindu women in Jaffna and Ampara were seen to engage more in local women's groups than their counterparts in Mannar. It is the Christian and Buddhist women who showed a consistent ability to engage in inter-religious affairs, though it is difficult to state to what extent from the data. However, irrespective of their levels of agency, it is important that women be engaged more in inter-religious committees and peacebuilding activities as the findings show that they can be agents of both conflict and peace.

To conclude, inter-religious conflict in the various forms described, stem from different levels of encroachment of space, identity and power of one ethno-religious community by another. This is facilitated by national and local enabling conditions which influence/shape the actions and inactions of local government structures which are governed by racism and majoritarianism, and are exploited by the private agendas of political manipulators. The findings of the study show that while negative perceptions of religious others exist, these manifest into violence primarily due to the impunity enjoyed by the ethno-religious majority in a district. Individual actions of government officials and religious leaders, business rivalries, social disparities in class and caste, poverty, land and abuse of social media are also central factors that facilitate the formation of misconceptions regarding religious others which leads to conflict. Thus, reform of state governance structures and lawful administration of justice would be the ideal in countering inter-religious conflict and violence. However, in the face of a lack of political will for institutional reform, strengthening skills, and inclusivity among local civil society organizations, religious leaders and inter-religious committees seems to be the alternative



though inadequate solution to addressing the issue of inter-religious tensions and conflict in the four districts.

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## Appendix: The Research Sample

Method	Mannar	Jaffna	Ampara	Matara
Key Informant Interviews	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Representative of the Mannar Inter-religious forum (Hindu, man)</li> <li>2. Field officer of CBO</li> <li>3. Three representatives from three CSOs (one woman, two men)</li> <li>4. Previous president of Consortium of Hindu Temples (Hindu, man)</li> <li>5. Christian pastor (man)</li> <li>6. GN Administrator (Govt.) (Catholic man)</li> <li>7. Representative of the Mannar Inter-religious Forum (Catholic man)</li> <li>8. Two head monks of two Buddhist temples (men)</li> <li>9. One civil defence force officer stationed at a Buddhist temple (Buddhist man)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Buddhist Monk (man)</li> <li>2. Moulavi (man)</li> <li>3. Freelance journalist and member of Catholic Society (man)</li> <li>4. Past president of WRDS (Hindu, woman)</li> <li>5. Politician (Hindu)</li> <li>6. Representative of the Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation, Kilinochchi (Buddhist)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Methodist priests (1 man and 1 woman)</li> <li>2. Catholic nun</li> <li>3. Lawyer (Muslim, man)</li> <li>4. Monk</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Buddhist monk</li> <li>2. Non-RC pastor</li> <li>3. Moulavi</li> </ol>

Focus Group Discussions				
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. WRDS (3 Hindu women)</li> <li>2. WRDS (5 Muslim Women)</li> <li>3. WRDS (8 Catholic Women)</li> <li>4. Muslim lawyer and lay persons (3 men)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. WRDS (5 Hindu women)</li> <li>2. WRDS (4 Hindu Women)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Women's society (CBO, 17 Hindu women)</li> <li>2. Retired government servants, ex-office bearers of Hindu societies, officers from GS office (9 men and 1 Catholic woman)</li> <li>3. WRDS and government sector (12 Muslim women)</li> <li>4. Government servants, civil society members and religious leaders (16 Muslim men)</li> <li>5. Buddhist men (8) and women (12) from a village development forum (Deegavapi)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Members of an Islamic society (7 women from Matara)</li> <li>2. Buddhist women who are members of community forums and CBOs, teachers and businesswomen (8 women from Matara town)</li> <li>3. Members of an Islamic institution and the general public (3 women, 5 men from Weligama)</li> <li>4. Buddhist men (11) and women (9) comprising undergraduates, businessmen, businesswomen, teachers, members of CBOs representatives of inter-religious committee and one retired army officer, (Weligama)</li> <li>5. Hindu, Muslim and Christian men (7) and women (4) members of a DIRC in Deniyaya</li> <li>6. Buddhist men (8) and women (2) members of a DIRC in Deniyaya</li> </ol>





# INTER-RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN FOUR DISTRICTS OF SRI LANKA

The report draws from qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with women and men from the districts of Mannar, Jaffna, Ampara, and Matara in Sri Lanka and unpacks the intersecting domains of contestation among Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists including the agents and enabling conditions that fuel conflict. It adopts a localised and context-specific lens to the analysis of inter-religious conflict as well as conflict resolution mechanisms with a focus on the role of women's participation.

The study discusses how inter-religious conflict manifests differently in the four districts while the underlying reasons for conflict remain the same. It argues that conflicts stem from different types of encroachment of space, identity, and power of one ethno-religious community by another which is facilitated by national and regional enabling conditions such as institutionalised ethno-religious majoritarianism, religious extremism, regional ethno-religious nationalisms, business rivalry, cultural aspects such as caste and poverty. These dynamics also shape communities' approaches to conflict mitigation differently. The study concludes that while misconceptions and prejudice against religious others exist, these manifest into violence primarily due to the impunity granted to/enjoyed by the ethno-religious majority in each district.

Nadine Vanniasinkam is a researcher at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. Kasun Pathiraja is a Senior Programme Coordinator at ICES. Mohamed Faslan is a lecturer at the Department of Political Science at the University of Colombo. Dinushka Jayawickreme was a programme officer at ICES and is currently freelancing.



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