

The perils of being a woman and a Muslim

Problematic narratives about Muslims make the present moment in Sri Lanka politics dangerous



NIYANTHINI KADIRGAMAR

As Sri Lanka struggles to bring itself together three months after the deadly Easter Sunday attacks, the country's Muslims continue to face constant scrutiny, with the security apparatus and reactionary forces turning their violent gaze on them.

The enhanced surveillance across the country since the bombings has disrupted the educational and economic life of Muslims. Chauvinist groups have repeatedly called for boycott of Muslim businesses and trade, even though Muslim communities have unequivocally condemned the Easter blasts attributed to a local hard-line Islamist group.

Sri Lanka's Muslim minority, constituting about 10% of the island's population, has faced several bouts of violence in the past. The LTTE evicted the Muslims en masse from the north in 1990 and carried out massacres against them in the east. In the years following the civil war, hate and violence have largely originated from Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists, often led by influential saffron-robed monks. Over the last decade, Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism has primarily targeted Muslims, whereas previously Tamils earned their ire.

Targeting Muslim women

In this context, there is an urgent need to resist efforts to alienate the Muslim community. Of greater concern is the systematic targeting of Muslim women through attempts to regulate their attire and mobility, in the name of security, as was seen in a circular of the Ministry of Public Administration. Discrimination began to manifest in every corner of the island following the blasts, as accounts by Muslim women at a recent forum on coexistence, in Jaffna, showed. They spoke of harassment in markets, government offices and hospitals, and their insights challenged reductive, patronising readings of "the plight of Muslim women".

These women pointed to a larger and deeper ideological attack unleashed on them. The onslaught had originated from different sources:



AFP

the global Islamophobic narrative, Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian assertions, glaring economic rivalry and control of women's bodies.

The dialogue in Jaffna, which included religious leaders and progressive activists from across the country, helped identify the central challenge of confronting the powerful ideological attack on Muslims and the need to bust the many Islamophobic and misogynistic myths that would heighten discrimination.

While there appears to be a gradual softening of security measures, the myths built around "dangerous" Muslims continue to circulate. Almost no conversation is had without the mention of the 'burqa', a term that is unfamiliar even among Muslims in Sri Lanka. Apart from claiming the attire to be a security threat, the attire is dissected for its suitability in terms of colour, material and shape, with men asking whether it was imposed or worn out of free will.

It is the construction of the Muslim woman as the subject of a supposed 'security concern' after the Easter attacks that is giving explicit, racialised speech a new level of permissibility. Engaging only with the objects of attack, like the burqa, or the halal certification trade, or Muslim personal law will not suffice in confronting the centres of power deploying this ideological assault.

The prevailing discourse about Muslims, who are widely perceived as prosperous and upwardly mobile, is related to Sri Lankan politics drifting towards right-wing xenophobia, exploiting the growing discontent among people due to the government's failure to revive the economy to benefit the majority and establish

democratic governance. The starkest manifestation of this is seen in the resurgent campaigns of Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist forces that enjoyed tacit support by the previous Rajapaksa regime. They have again gained ground, with an obvious agenda of constructing Muslims as the new enemy for the 'Sinhala nation'. Again, they turn to Sinhala women implanting fears about threats to their reproductive ability, and thereby to the Sinhala race.

Spreading fabricated stories of forced sterilisation, making contorted claims about a declining Sinhala population and flagging unsubstantiated statistics on religious conversions – all unfaithfully use a gendered discourse, focusing on Sinhala women's bodies. Such an attempt at consolidating a pure Sinhala Buddhist identity will repress not only Muslims and other minorities, but also those seen as dissidents within the Sinhala majority community.

With presidential elections expected this year, it is the contest for state power and those political forces seeking to gain electorally by riding on the anti-Muslim rhetoric that will likely intensify the attacks in the months to come. In this interregnum of forming new alliances, regressive Tamil and Hindu nationalist forces too will likely fuel protests against Muslims to gain political points.

Complicity of liberals, the Left

It is not just the supporters of the Rajapaksa camp who are being swept by the troubling anti-Muslim sentiments. The complicity of liberal and Left groups in abetting the discourse makes an alternative politics a challenging task. Influenced by the global

discourse on Islamophobia and 'burka' bans in the West, these groups support similar reactions at home.

Invariably, Muslim women are made the pretext for any urgent calls for liberal reform of Muslim religious practices, laws, attire, educational institutions and curriculum in the post-Easter attacks scenario. There is little reflection on the discursive constructions of saving the 'oppressed Muslim woman' and how it might lead to more repression.

The underlying focus on women enables the ideological attack on Muslims to permeate via misogynistic forces deep into society. Even the male Muslim leadership prohibited women from attending Tarawih prayers in mosques this year, and responded mutely to face veil bans.

If chauvinist forces are attempting to demonise the entire Muslim community, Left and liberal actors are engaged in inculcating the Muslim citizen worthy of acceptance by Sri Lankan society. Liberals adopt a language of tolerance, where differences are permissible, only as long as they are acceptable to the mainstream and adhere to majoritarian governance. Their preferred image of a 'good' Muslim is one that is synonymous with elite middle-class Muslims, favouring a return to a romanticised past before the influence of 'Arabisation'. The liberals claim Muslim religion and lifestyle were Sri Lankan before working-class migrants returned from the Gulf. The classist liberal discourse attempts to alienate some Muslims while embracing others as Sri Lankans.

Convergence of different problematic narratives about Muslims is what makes the present moment in Sri Lankan politics dangerous and slippery. Muslim women are resisting these attacks by defying the restrictions placed on their mobility and confronting the myths being spread about their community. However, Muslims alone cannot take on the ideological onslaught. Only a collective struggle by progressive sections of society confronting the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist, global Islamophobic and misogynistic narratives building against Muslims can prevent the country from heading in the direction of a disastrous, possibly fascist, path.

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Transforming livelihoods through farm ponds

Ponds can be an effective tool for rainwater harvesting



NIRMALYA CHOUDHURY & SACHIN TIWALE

With an increased variability of monsoons and rapidly depleting groundwater tables, large parts of India are reeling under water stress. A number of peninsular regions like Bundelkhand, Vidarbha and Marathwada have been facing recurring drought-like situations. Given the enormity of the crisis, at a recent NITI Aayog meeting, Prime Minister Narendra Modi explicated the need to implement innovative water management measures, stressing particularly the importance of rainwater harvesting both at the household and community levels. Here, one intervention that has been tried out in various States, and perhaps needs to be taken up on a bigger scale, is the construction of farm ponds.

Farm ponds can be cost-effective structures that transform rural livelihoods. They can help enhance water control, contribute to agriculture intensification and boost farm incomes. However, this is possible only if they act as rainwater harvesting structures and not as intermediate storage points for an increased extraction of groundwater or diversion of canal water. The latter will cause greater groundwater depletion and inequitable water distribution.

In a recent study on farm ponds in Jharkhand and West Bengal, we found that they aided in superior water control through the harvesting not just of rainfall but also of surface run-off and subsurface flows. Some of them functioned exclusively as recharge points, contributing to groundwater replenishment. They also helped in providing supplemental irrigation in the kharif season and an enhanced irrigation coverage in rabi. The yield of paddy, the most important crop in kharif, stabilised, thus contributing to greater food security.

Retention of water

Farm ponds retained water for 8-10 months of the year; thus farmers could enhance cropping intensity and crop diversification within and across seasons. The area used to cultivate vegetables and other commercial crops also increased. Further, figures indicated that the ponds were also a financially viable proposition, with a fairly high Internal Rate of Return, of about 19%, over 15 years.

However, in parts of peninsular India, the idea of a farm pond as an *in-situ* rainwater harvesting structure has taken a complete U-turn. Here, some of them are benefiting farmers at an individual level, but not contributing to water conservation and recharge. They are being used as intermediate storage points, accelerating groundwater depletion and increasing evaporation losses as the groundwater is brought to the surface and stored in relatively shallow structures.

Need for inlet, outlet provisions

In Maharashtra, the State government is promoting farm ponds under a flagship programme that aims to dig over one lakh structures by offering a subsidy of up to ₹50,000 per farmer. However, most of them are being constructed without inlet and outlet provisions and their walls are raised above the ground level by only a few feet. They cannot arrest the excess run-off as there is no inlet, and therefore they cannot be used effectively for rainwater harvesting. Further, farmers line them at the bottom with plastic, restricting seepage and converting the ponds into intermediate storage points.

Such farm ponds have an adverse impact on the water tables and accelerate water loss. The usual practice here is to lift water from a dug well and/or a borewell, store it in the pond and then draw it once again to irrigate the fields, often using micro-irrigation. While offering secure irrigation facility, this intensifies competition for extraction of groundwater from the aquifer, which is a common pool resource.

In such cases, in the command area of the irrigation project, farmers fill up their farm ponds first when the canal is in rotation and then take it from the pond to the field. This can impede circulation of water.

During canal rotation, the aquifer will get recharged because of the return flow of water coming from the irrigated fields. This return flow benefits all, as most of the farmers access water through wells in this command. But if canals fill up the farm ponds first, it restricts their benefits only to the pond owners and, in the long term, reduces the overall return flow at the system level.

Overall, farm ponds can act as effective harvesting structures and also yield healthy financial returns. But if they are promoted merely for on-farm storage of groundwater and canal water, they could accelerate, rather than reduce, the water crisis in the countryside.

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Cauldron of sexual misconduct

So often do Indians encounter the horrific act in their consciousness that it has escaped their conscience

MADHURIKA SANKAR

As India boldly leaps into space and proudly increases its tiger population, feats deserving praise, foreign investors leave this increasingly disturbing landscape of cultural hegemony and faux-nationalistic fervour. I am drawn to understanding the connection, if it exists, between the current economic and sociopolitical landscape in India and the violence against women. Naysayers will argue that the sharp rise in statistics of violence against women and children in India is on account of better reporting and accounting of crimes, as well as more legislation. Indeed, the recent introduction of the POCSO Amendment Bill, 2019, in the Rajya Sabha, creating 123 fast-track courts for women, is a step in the right direction. But this is palliative care in a system where the emergency room is filling up at a faster rate than the system can address.



ical environment, one that pivots itself on the narratives of India's ancient texts and scriptures to excoriate women, that brings about their subjugation, for selfish gain.

Cycle of violence

There is violence even before birth of a girl child. India has one of the highest incidences of female foeticide. Then, as a young child, a girl is part of an incontrovertible landscape where there has been a 336% rise in sexual crimes against children in the last decade. As a young woman, she is in the most unsafe country in the world, according to a recent Thomson Reuters Foundation survey, which recorded around 40,000 rapes a year. She is subject to the routine threats of honour killing and

trafficking. As a widow or single mother, she is ostracised in a patriarchal society. Indian women do the most unpaid domestic work of any country globally, next to Kazakhstan. The insensitivity, reluctance, and hostility of the police, legal and medical fraternity, coupled with the fact that most assaulters are known to the victim, creates an increasingly intimidating environment in which to move forward with justice. Courts in the country are severely back-logged.

The worst narrative is perhaps what psychologists refer to as a kind of 'emotional contagion' for the rapist, where he sees others committing the crime and has become inured to it, thus, taking the leap towards crime. Similarly, we as a nation, have perhaps become inured by contagion, to sexual crimes against women. So often do we encounter the horrific act in our consciousness that it has escaped our conscience. Imparting healthy sex education in schools, providing means by which socially and emotionally marginalised men are given the opportunity to be identified and rehabilitate themselves, is paramount, before it leads to further tragedy.

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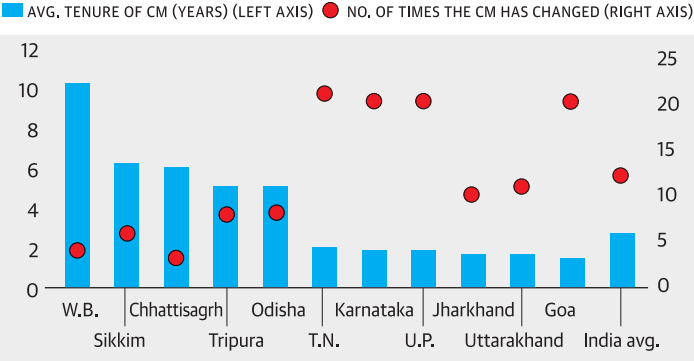


DATA POINT

Power equations

Stability factor

The average tenure for a Chief Minister in West Bengal is over 10 years, the highest among all States. Goa had the lowest average tenure of 1.5 years for a CM. The graph shows the tenure data for only outlier States



Longest reigns

With five full terms in power, Pawan Kumar Chamling, former Sikkim CM, has been the longest-serving Chief Minister of a State since Independence. Jyoti Basu of West Bengal held the Chief Minister's post for 23 years

Chief Minister	State	Party	Cumulative years as CM
Pawan Kumar Chamling	Sikkim	SDF	24
Jyoti Basu	West Bengal	CPI(M)	23
Gegong Apang^	Arunachal	Congress	23
Lal Thanhawla	Mizoram	Congress	22
Manik Sarkar	Tripura	CPI(M)	20
Naveen Patnaik	Odisha	BJD	19
Okram Ibobi Singh	Manipur	Congress	15
Raman Singh	Chhattisgarh	BJP	15
Sheila Dikshit	Delhi	Congress	15
Tarun Gogoi	Assam	Congress	15

SDF: Sikkim Democratic Front, CPI(M): Communist Party of India (Marxist), BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party ^Apang served as CM of Arunachal Pradesh for 19 years as part of the Congress and four more years as leader of the Arunachal Congress, a party he formed

Tamil Nadu: CMs have changed in T.N. the highest no. of times due to imposition of President's rule in multiple instances, frequent shifts of power due to high anti-incumbency and a stand-in CM being sworn in because of legal troubles of the incumbent

Karnataka: CMs have changed 20 times in the period

West Bengal: The CPI(M) ruled West Bengal for over 30 years with just two CMs

No CM at the helm

Jammu and Kashmir has recorded the highest cumulative period of President's rule or Governor's rule since 1977. The table lists the top five States with the most months without elected governments

State	Cumulative months of President's rule/ Governor's rule
J&K	109
Punjab	83
Assam	35
Uttar Pradesh	33
Manipur	28

The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 1, 1969

Bengal policemen storm Assembly

Three thousand angry policemen in uniform, carrying the body of a constable who had been killed while on duty in a clash at Basanti in 24-Parganas, to-day [July 31] stormed the West Bengal Assembly which was in session, smashed furniture and beat up the members. They also gheraoed Mr. Jyoti Basu, Deputy Chief Minister who is in charge of Police portfolio, for over an hour demanding justice in the case of their colleague who, they said, had died at the hands of political elements. Mr. Basu expressed concern at the death of their colleague, but rebuked them for their disorderly behaviour. He took them around the Assembly premises and showed them the vandalism committed by them in their moment of anger. Mr. Basu succeeded in pacifying the demonstrators and their leader shook hands with him. The policemen later left the Assembly premises with the body of their colleague to the burning ghat. The policeman had been reportedly killed on Tuesday in a clash with the workers of the Socialist Unity Centre.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 1, 1919.

On Communal Representation.

In to-day's sitting of the Joint Committee [in London on July 28] Lord Southborough replying to Mr. Bennett said, he was of opinion that Bombay was probably ahead of other Provinces with regard to the franchise of women. Evidence was divided with regard to whether elections in Madras were entirely governed by caste considerations. He concluded that one of the reasons of the trouble in Madras was that a considerable body of intelligent political thought which was springing up found itself bumping up against Brahmins. Replying to Lord Sydenham, Lord Southborough said that, if they were to provide a constitution with an absolutely free hand, he would scout the principle of communal representation. He agreed that the non-Brahmins were not a homogenous community. Indian Christians were given three seats because they had no chance of election. There was a great deal to be said for Indian Christians, because they were more likely to break down caste restrictions than any other body. The Franchise Committee thought the proper way to deal with Indian Christians was to give them some representation so that they could make their views known.