

A new fault line in post-war Sri Lanka

After 10 years of a fragile peace, the deadly bombings on April 21 have blighted the eastern lagoon landscape of the island nation, pitting religious communities against one another. **Meera Srinivasan** reports on the simmering tensions in the aftermath of the attacks

Every few metres in Batticaloa a white poster with the words 'Kan-neer Anjali' (tribute with tears) appears, tied to trunks of trees, walls of churches, or gates of mosques. Right below the bold letters is an image of a pair of eyes, weeping.

Near town, the narrow lane leading to the evangelical Zion Church, where one of the bombers blew himself up, just as his fellow jihadists did at two Catholic churches in Colombo and Negombo, is cordoned off. A huge banner with mugshots and names of the victims hangs at the entrance. Many of them are studio pictures of well-dressed children smiling at the camera.

Sri Lankans are yet to fully comprehend the dreadful Easter blasts that shook the country less than a fortnight ago, killing over 250 people across churches and hotels in and around the capital Colombo, and in this eastern city some 300 km away. They are grappling with possible reasons and necessary responses with urgency, evident in the many statements and solidarity messages emerging from different religious and civil society groups.

But the people of Batticaloa have an additional burden.

Batticaloa's burden

While Sri Lanka's Muslims, who make up nearly 10% of the population, are scattered across the island, their highest concentration is in the Eastern Province, comprising Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara districts.

Apart from losing 28 of its residents, including 14 children who were at Sunday school on April 21, Batticaloa is also where Zahran Hashim, the alleged mastermind of the Easter attacks, hailed from. Perhaps for that reason, the district has remained in the spotlight, more often figuring in tales about a radical Islamist-turned-suicide bomber and much less in those about victims of his ghastly act.

Stories of pastor Kumaran who lost his 11-year-old son, the parents of young siblings Sharon and Sarah, and the family of Ramesh Raju, who tried intercepting the suicide bomber and died, faded within days.

Even as different narratives of the distressing episode compete for credibility, Muslims and Christians suddenly find themselves cast on either side of the atrocity as "perpetrators" and "victims", despite many knowing that those who perished were not all Christians and despite much of the Muslim community vehemently condemning the attacks carried out by a small radical group as "barbaric". More perplexing is the nature of the attack itself — of Muslims targeting Christians, fellow minorities, with whom they have no known animosity. In fact, in Sri Lanka's post-war years, Muslims and, in fewer instances, Christians have faced violent attacks from hard-line Sinhala-Buddhist forces.

While scores of affected families struggle to cope with the shock and those stubborn Easter morning memories that won't leave, the people of Batticaloa appear to be bracing for other likely repercussions, not fully known, but potentially dangerous. Their scenic coastal town with lush paddy lands around, and a calming lagoon running through, unexpectedly turned into a site of horror on Easter day.

"The Christians are shattered," says Fr. Rajan Rohan, attached to the St. John's church in Batticaloa, which is run by the American Ceylon Mission. Hailing from the nearby Valaichchenai town, he returned to Batticaloa last September, after completing assignments in the northern Jaffna city during the final years of the war, and later in Nuwara Eliya, in the Central Province. "When I came back here, I was shocked to see how much this place had changed."

As a child, Fr. Rohan recalls being thrilled around Ramzan. "We loved that *kanji* (porridge) our neighbours made with beef stock. It was a delicacy that we eagerly awaited every year," he says. Muslim families sharing treats with children in the neighbourhood was not uncommon, and words like "co-existence" had no use in an effortlessly multi-religious society.

But in 2018, things were different in Fr. Rohan's home town. "There was a lot of Islamophobia among our Tamil people. In a country that has paid a heavy price because of Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism, it was startling to see Tamils so preoccupied with Muslims," he recalls. "They would say things like 'we can never trust Muslims' easily in conversation."

Sri Lanka's Muslims are mostly Tamil-speaking, but identify as a separate ethnic group, distinct from Tamils, most of whom are Hindus and the rest Christians. The three-decade-long civil war not only saw raging hostility between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils, who bore the brunt of the carnage, but also witnessed Tamil-Muslim relations sour.

Despite being bound by language, they grew apart, with the Tamil mili-



A policeman frisks a devotee as he arrives at a mosque to attend prayer in Colombo after the bomb blasts on April 21. (Below) Kattankudy, which is among the most densely populated areas in the island. •AFP



There was a lot of Islamophobia among our Tamil people. In a country that has paid a heavy price because of Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism, it was startling to see Tamils so preoccupied with Muslims.

FR. RAJAN ROHAN
St. John's church, Batticaloa

tants seeing the Muslims as aligned to and aiding the state security forces that they were fighting. The 1990 mosque massacres in Kattankudy and nearby Eravur, in which the LTTE mowed down nearly 150 Muslims at prayer, and the LTTE's mass expulsion of Muslims from the north later that year, have left a long shadow of bitterness and resentment.

On his return, Fr. Rohan, who leads an interfaith initiative, found it hard to bring Tamils and Muslims together. "But we were trying. And just when we had begun working on those lines, this [bombings] has happened," he says, pointing to the "daunting" task ahead.

Strained ties

It is not just Tamil-Muslim ties that witnessed a change in the past decades. The Muslim community has seen substantial changes within, according to A.L.M. Sabeel, a member of the local Urban Council and a former secretary of the Kattankudy Mosques Federation.

Starkly different from the rest of Batticaloa, Kattankudy town stands out. Short date palm trees line the median cutting through this town for some 50 metres, with shops on either side selling garments, gadgets and other essentials. Several mosques and cultural centres can be seen along the main road, while thousands of families live in crammed houses along the streets off the main road. The township is among the most densely populated areas in the island.

"Women of my mother's generation used to wear a saree, wrapping their heads with the pallu. But in the last 15-20 years, we see more women switching to the abaya [full gown]. The face veil is an even more recent thing," notes Sabeel, 45, who was raised here. Among men, the full-length white robes and long beards are recent imports. "My

father was clean-shaven. But many men of my generation, including myself, sport a beard," he says, attributing the relatively newer trends to more labour migration to West Asian countries, Arab funding for local institutions and consequent interactions, and social media exposure. "I don't think some of these ideas suit us, especially these clothes in such hot weather."

However, changes in attire, he points out, coincided with "a more significant shift". "We are a minority in this country and have historically embraced a Sri Lankan identity. But in recent times, many Muslims appear keen on asserting their religious identity, often in the name of culture." The community, in his view, also turned more insular during this time.

Meanwhile, some within the community question this new, relatively more rigid idea of "Islamic culture". Culture is about convenience, argues a 40-year-old mother of three. "I wear the abaya when I go out somewhere but prefer a salwar kameez with a headscarf when I visit my doctor. Culture is what you want to make of it. Some people might criticise you over your choices but isn't that the case in every community?"

Accommodating different shades of opinion on the practice of Islam, Islamic culture and assertion, Sri Lankan Muslims have largely remained together as a community, with trade being a key binding factor. Although Muslims of the east were engaged in agriculture, fisheries and livelihoods such as weaving in the past, they became a predominantly trading community over the years.

"It is true that Muslims mobilise well and maintain good networks within the community. And that irritates many Tamils," Sabeel notes.

A troubled youth

Thangavel Roshan, 28, took the Easter weekend off and travelled from Colombo, where he works at a construction site. "We usually work all seven days to accumulate our days off to travel home," he says, seated outside his home in Navatukudah in Batticaloa. A few metres into this locality, concrete roads give way to rickety mud roads.

His right leg is bandaged and kept raised on a plastic stool. Roshan, along with his family, was at Zion Church on

Easter Sunday when he saw the bomb explode right in front of his eyes. "I was lucky, I escaped with this injury," he says. His parents and siblings too did, as they were further away. Doctors have advised Roshan three months' rest before he can get back to work. "If there were enough jobs here, I wouldn't be working so far away. A big chunk of my salary goes for the commute [Colombo is an eight-hour bus ride away]. I haven't saved a rupee so far," he says.

His older brother Thangavel Nelson works at a highway project in Kurunegala in the North Western Province. "They say post-war development and all that; I think that happened only in the north. The east hasn't got anything... no factories, no development, no jobs. We have to struggle outside for such little money," he sulks, blaming Tamil politicians "who don't care."

"But look at Muslims," he says, voicing what appears to be a popular grievance among many Tamils. "They get government jobs, they prosper in business. Unlike us, they are very secure."

Much of the antagonism is also linked to the ongoing struggles around resources in the district, according to Sitralega Maunaguru, retired professor at the Eastern University in Batticaloa.

"There are a lot of simmering tensions between the communities over allocation of land in many areas, and in sharing water. People of different communities accuse each other's local politicians of manipulating and favouring their people," she says, adding that conversations on these subjects often quickly escalate to anti-Muslim speech. "The recent bombings are bound to fan those tensions."

Muslim politicians and their patronage networks are common talking points among Tamils. As partners in Sri Lanka's ruling coalition, Muslim leaders hold key ministerial portfolios, while the main Tamil party is in opposition. Tamil leaders, in turn, are seen as lacking political power or the will to make a difference.

With clashing interests of the political class and the leaders' vote bank manoeuvres shaping their realities, people, especially the youth, appear to be entangled in a web of insecurities — political, economic and social.

"Their politicians take good care of them. Muslim people can get away with

anything," says Nelson matter-of-factly.

Old prejudice, new fear

This view, which is shared by many others, is precisely what makes Fr. Rohan rather nervous. Inter-community relations, which are also ethnic relations in this context, are fragile and need to be handled with great care, he observes. "We have to sensitise our [Tamil] community, including children. Even in jest, a Tamil child should not tell a Muslim friend anything like, 'we can't trust you guys, you'll drop a bomb'."

Clearly, Fr. Rohan's immediate concern was about preventing any backlash against the Muslims. "While we comfort the affected families, it is important to try and prevent adverse reactions. We don't want others to use our name and attack the Muslims for what a small, isolated group did. That will lead to more hate and clashes in our society."

His apprehension is rooted in two main reasons. One, the delicate social relations that prevail in the multi-ethnic districts of the Eastern Province, where Muslims are the single largest group, constituting 38% of the population. The province is also home to some 6 lakh Tamils (Hindus and Christians), and 3.5 lakh Sinhalese (Buddhists and Christians), making it one of Sri Lanka's most diverse regions. Two, the spate of anti-Muslim violence in varying intensities, and led by hard-line Sinhala-Buddhist groups in the last seven years, has made Muslims more vulnerable.

Further, he emphasises that Tamil society cannot afford another cycle of violence and distress. "If our youth resort to militancy again, some of us will turn targets very soon. We saw that happen with the LTTE, where the organisation we nurtured turned against us when we voiced disagreement or dissent."

The government too has a role in preventing any retaliation, he notes. "They were quick to ban the radical Islamist organisations behind the attacks as 'terrorist' outfits. They ought to show the same promptness when it comes to radical Sinhala-Buddhist organisations notorious for inciting violence."

In the current Sri Lankan context, his fears of a backlash are well-founded — where post-war reconciliation has dragged, a political solution to the Tamil question remains out of sight, and youth across ethnicities are disgruntled amid growing joblessness. Especially so in the wake of Sri Lankan authorities naming the little-known local radical Islamist group, the National Thowheed Jamaath (NTJ), and its allies as perpetrators of the Easter attacks, which the Islamic State has also claimed.

Whether it is the NTJ's links abroad, or the rationale for their targets (churches and hotels) or the extent of radicalisation within the Muslim community, questions outnumber answers at this point. But those feeling uneasy about the likely impact of the attacks say there is no time to waste.

The peril of radicalisation

With the government claiming that Hashim was among the nine suicide bombers who carried out the coordinated bombings, some may believe the problem is over, but it is hardly so, according to M.B.M. Firthous, a Kattankudy-based preacher, who also heads a lo-

A few youth were perhaps ideologically drawn to a more rigid practice of Islam. Others, who were deeply affected by the anti-Muslim attacks, found the radical path speaking to their outrage. But they were very, very few and didn't have the community's support.

A.L.M. SABEEL
Former secretary of the Kattankudy Mosques Federation

cal school. "The conciliatory statements that different religious leaders made after the attacks talk about peace and co-existence, but those are things that have to be said. The problem, unfortunately, runs deeper," he says. The sooner it is acknowledged, the greater the chances of addressing it, he notes.

After every incident of an anti-Muslim attack in recent years, "some forces" within the Muslim community tried to radicalise youth through classes and videos, urging them to retaliate. But the community had no appetite for it and rejected it outright, according to different mosque leaders in the province.

"A few youth were perhaps ideologically drawn to a more rigid interpretation and practice of Islam, at times due to social media influences. Others, who were deeply affected by the anti-Muslim attacks, found the radical path speaking to their outrage. But they were very, very few and didn't have any support from the community," says Sabeel.

But radicalisation is not about numbers, Firthous cautions. "If the idea has been sown in even one person's mind, we have to be very worried," he says, pointing to an "urgent need" for introspection within the Muslim community. "We cannot afford to isolate ourselves. There is a lot to be done by all communities." He also blames the many peace-building efforts that followed the civil war: "They were run by NGOs and well-funded by donors, but they merely scratched the surface without any meaningful effort or reflection on the part of communities."

And today, the outrage over the disparities and injustices accumulated over years of war and peace is manifesting in new, grievous ways. About a week after the victims of the blast were laid to rest in Batticaloa, and amid several interfaith meetings and messages of assurance, a group of young men went around parts of Batticaloa on motorbikes, distributing flyers asking Tamils to boycott Muslim-owned shops and to quit working there. "We, the youth, must be aware and prevent terrorists who, in the garb of traders, enter our towns," says the provocative leaflet attributed to 'Tamil youth, Eastern Province'.

According to a resident who received it on Wednesday night, a trishaw (three-wheeler) followed the motorbikes, with someone inside speaking through a loudspeaker. They were "clearly stoking hatred", says the resident, who asked not to be named. "We don't know who got the youth to distribute the flyers. It could be anyone seeking political mileage from this tragic moment. But sadly, they might get it. Even at the cost of more violence and bloodshed, perhaps."

