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Exploring the History of Islamic Revivalism in Modern Sri Lanka

Menerokai Sejarah Kemodenan Islamik Revivalisme di Sri Lanka

Mohamed Arkam* and Fatmir Shehu**

Abstract

This research seeks to revisit the history of Islamic Revivalism in Modern Sri Lanka highlighting the contribution of Muslims in various phases using several approaches. The objective of this paper is to explore the history of Islamic Revivalism in the context of the three primary methods adopted by Muslim intellectuals, namely, the individual approach, social movement approach, and academic institutional approach. This study uses historical, descriptive, and analytical methods. The focus of discussion in this work is on Muslims in Sri Lanka emphasizing their individual and social movements, as well as academic institutional approaches to Islamic Revivalism. This work concludes that the revivalist movement among Muslims had a great influence on Sri Lanka's community's spiritual, social, governmental, and educational domains.

Keywords: Revivalism, Sri Lanka, Muslims, Modern, Approach.

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Abstrak

Penyelidikan ini dijalankan bertujuan untuk mengkaji semula sejarah kemodenan Islamik Revivalisme di Sri Lanka dengan sorotan utama tertumpu kepada sumbangan golongan Muslim dari pelbagai peringkat dengan menggunakan beberapa pendekatan. Matlamat utama kertas kajian dilakukan adalah juga bagi meninjau kembali sejarah Islamik Revivalisme dalam konteks tiga kaedah utama yang diterima pakai oleh para cendekiawan Muslim. Antaranya adalah melalui kaedah orang perseorangan atau individu, melalui pendekatan gerakan sosial, serta melalui pendekatan institusi akademik. Pada masa yang sama, kajian ini turut menggunakan kaedah sejarah, kaedah deskriptif dan juga kaedah analisis dalam usaha mencapai matlamat kajian. Selain itu, perbincangan di dalam kertas kerja ini turut berfokus kepada pendekatan yang digunakan oleh kaum Muslim di negara yang sebelum ini terkenal dengan nama Ceylon itu. Pengkaji mendapati golongan itu sangat menekankan semangat pergerakan baik secara individu mahupun secara berkelompok. Di samping itu, mereka turut memanfaatkan pendekatan lain seperti secara institusi akademik dalam usaha menghidupkan kembali semangat Islamik Revivalisme. Hasil kajian ini merumuskan bahawa pergerakan revivalis dalam kalangan orang Muslim ini sememangnya mempunyai pengaruh yang kuat dalam menyemarakkan semangat kerohanian baik dalam komuniti mereka sendiri, sosial, kerajaan mahupun kekuasaan pendidikan di negara berkenaan.

Kata Kunci: Revivalisme, Gerakan Dakwah, Sri Lanka, Muslim, Kemodenan, Pendekatan.

Introduction

Muslims of Sri Lanka have a history of more than a thousand years which proves Islam to be an ancient and prominent religion in the country. Sri Lankan Muslims have followed the teachings of Islam in line

with *al-Qur'ān* and Prophetic Tradition since its inception in their landscape. Regional and international Muslim intellectuals and scholars have contributed to the spread and revival of Islam based on the country's context throughout history. Significantly, throughout the colonial phase of the nation, the Sri Lankan community witnessed numerous challenges, mainly from Christian missionaries focusing on conversion through educational institutions. During the colonization and the post-colonial period, certain intellectuals of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims revived the community according to their religious beliefs to sustain their religions and cultures as well as to provide opportunities for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

The beginning of contemporary nationalism in Sri Lanka, like in many other regions of Asia, may be traced back to religious revivalist movements that were a reaction to Christian missionaries. The last three decades of the nineteenth century would be considered the initial phase of the rise of nationalism in Sri Lanka. Indeed, the early nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of its resurgence on the island when the Dutch attempted to replace the Roman Catholic Church with the Calvinist Protestant Church by focusing on the indigenous religions of the Sri Lankan coastline. This happened when missionary enthusiasm resulted in a significant rise in the Christian population, notably along the Western seaboard and in the Northern Province. This alerted the followers of other religions and especially intellectuals as it posed various challenges to them, their ideas, and communities, to counterattack against Christian proselytism. Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim revivalist organizations were formed in Sri Lanka, and therefore, posed a threat to the country's Christian dominance. The revival of Buddhism might be interpreted as a response to the missionary assault. The Southwest coast was the center of Buddhist revival efforts, which were accompanied by Hindu and Muslim revival movements. The Hindu resurgence was more extensive, as it started earlier compared to Muslim revivalism that took place later in the century. Significantly, there were several ways and phases in the country's Islamic revivalism practices.

A few works that have been published highlight the general overview of the contributions of Muslims to Islamic revivalism in the country. Jalaldeen's pioneering study addresses the acts of revivalist movement efforts undertaken by Hindus and Muslims in Sri Lanka. Since foreign occupation, religious revivalism has been the cornerstone of

social movement activity. He tried to find similarities and differences in revivalist movements' approaches to revivalism in Sri Lanka.¹ Mujahid highlights M.C. Siddi Lebbe's major contributions and services to the development of the homeland, both to Muslims and other fraternal communities in the nineteenth century, highlighting his essential role in fostering modernization and reform. It effectively underscores the significant impact of his work in multiple areas, making it a valuable exploration of his legacy.² Ameer Ali investigates Islamic revivalism in the Muslim world and its impacts in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, demonstrating that the movement's consequences are diverse due to varying political, economic, and social contexts. Overall, it shows that Islamic revivalism creates more challenges than solutions, and because of its complexities, there is a need for further study.³ Shamara Wettimuny's examination of the changes undertaken by Muslims in Ceylon between 1883 and 1905, as well as their participation in the global Islamic resurgence, throws insight into a frequently ignored facet of Islamic history in South Asia. Ceylon's Islamic revival was separate from political restoration focusing on English-language education and symbolic pan-Islamism. This study contradicts established narratives about Islamic revival in a larger context.⁴ The information provided by the authors of all these works contributes greatly to this research, even though, comprehensive approaches to history of the Islamic revivalism in a modern context have not been discussed.

The methods used in this research paper are of a historical, descriptive, and analytical nature. The historical method deals with the exposition of historical data that are collected from various literature related to revivalism history in the nation, i.e., Sri Lanka, and its development concerning the field of reform and revival of Islamic thought. The descriptive method is used to present historical facts and

¹ M.S.M. Jaladeen, "Revivalist Movements in Sri Lanka – A Comparative Study of Hindu and Islamic Revivalist Movements," *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies (JETERAPS)*, Vol. 7 (6), (2016) pp. 391-398.

² A.L.M. Mujahid, "Contribution of Siddi Lebbe for Educational Development of Sri Lankan Muslims – A Historical perspective," *Indian Journal of Tamil*, Vol. 3 (1), (2021), pp. 1-7.

³ Ameer Ali, "Islamic Revivalism in Harmony and Conflict: The Experience in Sri Lanka and Malaysia," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (March 1984), pp. 296-313

⁴ Shamara Wettimuny, *Imagining a 'National Headgear': Islamic Revival and Muslim Identity in Ceylon*, (2021). <https://www.academia.edu/44767398> (Accessed, November 12, 2023)

comprehensive approaches related to the contribution of Muslims. The analytical method is utilized to identify and analyze the approaches to Islamic revivalism in the country. Hence, examining the historical stages and strategies of Islamic revivalism in Sri Lanka, this study highlights the roles played by Muslim individuals, social movements, and educational institutions. Also, it underscores the role of Islamic Revivalism as a response to challenges posed by the colonization in the country.

Muslims of Sri Lanka

To understand the identity of Muslims in Sri Lanka, it is useful to situate them in relation to the local population. The Muslim population on the island is the third-largest group in the Sri Lanka community. Sri Lanka's social fabric is made up of different ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural groups. There is a very clear distinction between different ethnic groups in Sri Lankan society. Buddhism is practiced by the majority of the country's Sinhala population, many Tamils are Hindus, and Muslims are adherents of Islam. Christianity is followed by both Sinhala and Tamil-speaking people. The 2012 census revealed that the Sinhalese make up 74.9%, Tamils (including Hindus and Christians) 15.3%, and Moors (Muslims) 9.3% of the total over 20 million population in the country. Furthermore, 70.1% are Buddhists, 12.6% are Hindus, 9.7% are Muslims, and 6.2% are Roman Catholics.⁵

The Muslim minority in Sri Lanka is dispersed throughout the country, but they constitute 9.3% of the island's population. Even though the majority of Sri Lankan Muslims are Sunni, the community is diverse, with some adhering to the mystical form of Islam known as Sufism and some adhering to the modern form of Islam as Salafism. Since most of them are Tamil speakers, along with Hindus and Christians, they frequently blend in with the Tamil minority on the island. Sinhala is the language most often spoken by Muslims.

The Muslim community of Sri Lanka can be traced back to medieval trade routes between South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In the seventh century, traders from the Middle East (Arabs and Persians) developed business interests in southern India, which later

⁵ Census of Population and Housing 2012, provisional information based on 5% sample, Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning. (www.statistic.gov.lk)

expanded to Sri Lanka. Middle Eastern merchants married Tamil and Sinhalese women and settled in Batticaloa and Ampara in the east of the island.⁶ The Portuguese, who took control of Sri Lanka in the 16th century, referred to the island's Muslims as "Moors". As a result, the community developed a "Moorish" identity. Some Muslims pushed this as a distinct "Ceylon Moor" racial identity in the early twentieth century (the island was called Ceylon during the colonial period). They claimed to be of Arab origin, which set them apart from the indigenous Tamil people, which originated in southern India and northern Sri Lanka.⁷ This section describes the identities of the Muslims in Sri Lanka. It emphasizes their religious and linguistic variety, dating their roots back to medieval trading routes influenced by Middle Eastern merchants. The influence of Portuguese colonization in the 16th century, which labeled Muslims as "Moors," established a unique identity that was subsequently asserted as "Ceylon Moor" in the early 20th century.

Islamic Revivalism in Sri Lanka

Islamic revivalism was one of the main intellectual responses to Western colonial influence and the political loss of Muslim nations in the eighteenth century. Islamic revivalists attempted to break through a perceived impasse in the development of Islamic societies by recognizing the West's technological, scientific, and legal achievements with various degrees of critique or enthusiasm. Islamic revivalists resisted Western colonialism and the imposition of secular Western values on Muslim countries. They aspired to restore Islamic values. Supporters of Islamic revival argue for a larger effect of Islamic ideas in the modern world as a counter to Western and secular inclinations. As a result, many people believe that returning to Islam in its purest form is the solution to the issues that Islamic communities and contemporary society face in general. Modern Muslim intellectuals and Islamic movements, particularly in their Salafi form, were one expression of revival.⁸

⁶ M. A. M. Shukri, "Muslims of Sri Lanka- A cultural perspective," in *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity*, (Beruwala, Sri Lanka: Jamiah Naleemia Inst., 1986), pp. 338-340.

⁷ Ameer Ali, "The Genesis of the Muslim Community in Ceylon: A Historical Summary," *Asian Studies Association of Australia* 19, no. 2 (1984), pp. 65-82, <http://asj.upd.edu.ph/mediabox/archive/ASJ-19-1981/ali.pdf>.

⁸ M.S.M. Jaladeen, "Contribution of Naleem Hajiyar (Sri Lanka) and B.S. Abdurrahman (Tamil Nadu) for the Development of Muslim's Education of their Countries - A

At the same time, Sri Lankan Muslim elites seized the chance to imitate a religious consciousness and spread awareness of a religious ideology, which gradually developed at the end of the 19th century as a religiously oriented ethnic ideology, much like their Buddhist and Hindu counterparts who had emerged in an anti-colonial and anti-Christian wave. The phenomena of Islamic revivalism in Sri Lanka started in this manner. “Muslim revivalism arose basically to consolidate elitist interests through creating wider community awareness in response to Sinhala and Tamil revivalist programs and encouraged by their activities”⁹. This group, which was mostly centered around Colombo and Kandy and was largely led by an elite group representing the wealthy merchant class and the burgeoning middle class, took inspiration from the contemporary political and revivalist movements in Turkey, Egypt, and India.

Islamic revivalism evolved into a movement aimed at bringing Muslims together spiritually and culturally based on Islamic teachings, as well as giving the community a sense of identity and direction. When the British colonial authorities exiled Orabi Pasha from Egypt to Sri Lanka in 1883, he brought with him fresh knowledge about a transnational Muslim identity and gave a Muslim identity an intellectual boost. The Muslim community was experiencing the perfect storm when Orabi Pasha came. He remained on the island for over two decades, inspiring Muslims intellectually and promoting political action while also inspiring a resurgence of Islam. When referring to the history of Islamic revivalism in Sri Lanka, there are three distinct approaches to consider: individual, social movement, and academic institution. Therefore, through these three approaches, I demonstrate in detail how the Islamic Renaissance occurred throughout the history of Sri Lanka.

I-The Individual Approach

The first approach of Islamic revivalism began in the late 19th century under the direction of educated Muslim elites who were eager to combat Christian dominance while simultaneously advancing and

Comparative Study,” in proceeding of 3rd International Symposium, 30 May 2016, Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil, Sri Lanka, p. 577.

⁹ M. A. Nuhman, *Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity*, (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2007), p. 104.

encouraging Muslim social mobility and ethnic consolidation. The Muslim community in Sri Lanka was strongly opposed to conversion throughout the early days of western colonialism. Sri Lankan Muslims were well-known for refusing to be allured by Christian enticements. Despite conversion resistance that lasted far into the 19th century, Islam's existence in Sri Lanka was secured in part by social and economic prosperity. Because the education provided in schools was mostly an English education, Muslims in Sri Lanka developed a negative attitude towards it, fearing that a foreign culture would influence Islam. Even though most of the schooling nature was Christian, they were fearful of losing their children's religious beliefs. When British rule was established in this country at the turn of the nineteenth century, the Muslim community prospered because of the British's beneficial policies towards them, though their prosperity was based on commercial activities, and their political, social, and educational backwardness was apparent throughout the century. According to Samaraweera,

“The educational backwardness of the Muslims which resulted in their stagnation in the political and social fields was due to their attitude towards the Christian missionaries and the system of education practiced in these schools. The Muslim indifference to missionary and English education was that they as a community rejected it to protect their religion from the possible encroachments of a foreign Western culture. The second cause for this apathy towards English Education was the trading interests of the Muslims developed at the expense of their intellectual attainments.”¹⁰

When Muslims were far behind in education, politics, and community organization during the British administration, they were aware of the present Buddhist and Hindu revivalist movements in full swing. These two movements immensely benefited and accelerated the revival of the Muslims. The founders of these two organizations realized that establishing well-organized Buddhist and Hindu schools was the only way to break the backbone of Christian-dominated English

¹⁰ Samaraweera, Vijaya, “Aspects of Muslims Revivalist Movement in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity*, edited by M.A.M. Shukri, (Sri Lanka: Beruwela Jamiah Naleemia Inst., 1986), p. 370.

education. Muslims realized that for an Islamic renaissance to take place, they needed leadership and leaders. M.C. Siddi Lebbe (1838-1898) and Orabi Pasha, an Egyptian exile in Sri Lanka from 1883 to 1901, were the two leaders they found.

M.C. Siddi Lebbe was one of the great personalities of Sri Lanka. He was a lawyer, educationist, scholar, philosopher, writer, publisher, social reformer, proctor, visionary, and Muslim community leader. Also, as the leader of the Sri Lankan Muslim community, he guided the Muslims to be released from the traditional conservative thoughts of refusing modernization to a forward-looking one to survive in the prevailing contemporary situation. Muslims experience serious setbacks in all fields, including political, economic, and social, during his time. His contributions to Sri Lankan Muslims' politics, economy, education, culture, and religion were several and far-reaching.¹¹ When there is made an examination and evaluation of his services rendered while considering the conditions that occurred for Muslims in the 19th century, these facts may be determined.

M.C. Siddi Lebbe was able to recognize the changes taking place due to his intrinsically strong intuition and intellectual background. This convinced him that education was essential to the survival of his community. To strengthen Muslim identity and advance Muslims' social and political advancement, Islamic awareness among Muslims was encouraged through the founding of the Muslim educational movement. The arrival of Orabi Pasha gave Siddi Lebbe's mission a tremendous boost. The Muslim educational movement began in November 1884 with the opening of the first "Anglo-Mohammedan school" (*Al Madurasathul Khairiyyatul Islamiah*) in Maradana at Colombo with the assistance of Orabi Pasha and the aid and affection of Wapchie Marikkar who was a builder, architect, educationist, and philanthropist. The scholars' dedication and labour led to the establishment of the first Muslim school, in 1882, he introduced a Madrasa called '*Madrasatul Zahira*' in Maradana, Colombo. Later in 1892, the '*Madrasatul Zahira*' became a school under the name of Zahira College. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, challenges included educating Muslims about a new

¹¹ See, Iqbal, A., *Marumalarchchi Thandhai: Siddi Lebbai Vaalkai Varalaru* (Father of Renaissance: Biography of Siddi Lebbe), (Sri Lanka: Vinmathy Publication, 1971), pp. 21-67.

educational tradition in Sri Lanka, changing attitudes towards the English language, and emphasizing the value of education. In that context, Siddi Lebbe worked primarily to increase educational awareness among Sri Lanka's Muslim minority. After the establishment of Zahira College, several further schools offering an English education opened in the following years of the century.¹²

Furthermore, M.C. Siddi Lebbe emphasized the need for Muslims in Sri Lanka to have sufficient knowledge of Arabic, Tamil, and Sinhala. He emphasized the need for Tamil language skills for Sri Lankan Muslims. The Muslim educational movement had a modernist orientation, but to respect the Muslims' religious sensibilities, some important traditional aspects were given priority of place. Until the 1890s, Tamil and Sinhalese were the languages spoken by Muslims in Sri Lanka. Even the Holy Quran was translated into Tamil for use in Islamic education because Arabic was not widely spoken by Muslims. In the beginning, Imams from Turkey and Egypt were dispatched to Sri Lanka to further Islamic instruction in the 1890s. However, with the arrival of Orabi Pasha and the emergence of revivalism in Sri Lanka, Islamic educators started to advocate for and eventually demand the use of Arabic. By the end of the 19th century, schools in Sri Lanka began to include the Arabic Language in Quranic study.¹³

He actively participated in initiatives to improve society by emphasizing education. He attempted to implant the significance of education in the minds of the people. The monthly publication of "Muslim Nesan" (The Muslim Friend) was another important work of M.C. Siddi Lebbe, which was started on the 21st of December 1882. The publication " *Muslim Nesan* " served as a vehicle through which the government was informed of the desires and complaints of the Muslim population. The Muslim Friend Journal highlighted propaganda directed towards the British, the imperial system, and the ruling class. The editorial was prominently presented. This was created to record the prevailing opinion. It was seen as a resource for Muslim social transformation and for enhancing their educational system. On top of it, articles on literature, philosophy, economics, politics, and culture were

¹² See, *Ibid.*

¹³ Ali, Ameer, "Islamic Revivalism in Harmony and Conflict: The Experience in Sri Lanka and Malaysia," *Far Eastern Survey* (1955) 24 (3), pp. 296–313.

published. The news from India and around the world, business, religion, education, politics, and society were just a few examples. "Muslim Nesan", a magazine, had a key role in promoting the writing of Sri Lankan Muslims' history.¹⁴

Furthermore, M.C. Siddi Lebbe has written several literary works to restore the Muslims of Sri Lanka. He authored and published the book "*Assan Beyudaiya charithram*" (The Story of Hassan Bey) in an endeavor that, at the time, no one had ever dared to undertake in the history of Tamil literature. "*Asambe Charithram*" is a work of literature that leads readers on adventures, mysteries, and unexpected turns. It was a historical fiction book written in the form of an early Tamil novel. It is important to note that, despite the novel's historical setting and exciting adventures, some of the incidents and concepts in the *Asambe* narrative fit the bill for a social fiction that advocates for Muslim social change. The "*Gjana Theepam*" (Torch of Wisdom), a monthly journal on the science of enlightenment, was first published in 1892 by M.C. Siddi Lebbe. For a whole year, the magazine was released.¹⁵

The First Book of Tamil, an Arabic grammar summary "*Tuhuwathul Nahwa*" (Key to Grammar), *Kitab al-Hisab*, The Story of Abunawas, the histories of the *Sri Lankan Sonkar* and the *Turkish Greek War*, "*Shurut As Salat*" (Observance of Prayer), *Hidayatul Qasimiyah*, *Azrarul Alam*, *Alladur Rasool*, and the *Ulama* were among the works he did. According to Allama Iqbal, "M.C. Siddi Lebbe, the inspirational leader of the Muslim writing club, was instrumental in attracting the public's attention to the pace of writing."¹⁶

M.C. Siddi Lebbe passed away on February 5, 1898, at the age of 60. He had devoted his life to boost Muslim students' academic development and social transformation in Sri Lanka. M.C. Siddi Lebbe is regarded as the "Father of the Renaissance" by the Muslims of Sri Lanka because he consistently emphasized that social change and the introduction of modern education are necessary to reverse the

¹⁴ See, Iqbal, "*Marumalarchchi Thandhai: Siddi Lebbai Vaalkai Varalaru*" (Father of Renaissance: Biography of Siddi Lebbe), pp. 21-67.

¹⁵ See, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See, *Ibid.*

backwardness of the Muslim community.¹⁷ His interests were diverse, ranging from general education to literature, law, current events, and foreign politics.

To preserve their religious and cultural identities, the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka was afraid to send their kids to missionary schools under the British occupation. However, Muslim intellectuals like Siddi Lebbe and Orabi Pasha urged the Muslim community to enroll their kids in missionary schools so that they might receive an English education. More Muslim educators appeared in Sri Lanka after it gained independence, following in the footsteps of these two educators. Muslim education and other developments have been substantially improved because of the passion and commitment of certain prominent Muslim scholars, politicians, and benefactors. The Sri Lankan community would not have made educational progress at least to this point without their support and commitment. However, the revivalist movements fueled Muslim literary and cultural production in the first decade of the 20th century. Many literary and companionship organizations were formed during this time. It is important to highlight that the Muslim revivalist movements had a big impact on the political consciousness of the community, which resulted in a planned political campaign for Muslim participation in the legislature and Sri Lanka's independence from British rule.

II-The Social and Religious Movement Approach

The second approach of Islamic revivalism began in the early 20th century under the direction of the Muslim social and religious activist leaders in the country. Since the turn of the 20th century, a wide range of Islamic revivalist movements has appeared in Muslim societies all over the world, especially in those places where Muslims historically experienced a gradual decline in important Islamic institutions and threats to their identity, primarily because of European colonization. Islamic revivalist organizations have since been established to advance religious teaching via institutional development, social and political action, and missionary preaching throughout the Muslim World.

¹⁷ A.L.M. Mujahid, "Contribution of Siddi Lebbe for Educational Development of Sri Lankan Muslims – A Historical perspective," *Indian Journal of Tamil*, 3(1), 2022, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.54392/ijot2211>.

The Sri Lankan Muslim community's already-existing religious consciousness made religion its constant focus in this period. The revivalist movement in Sri Lanka is referred to by the nature of this obsession that resulted from it. The essential aim of the revivalist movement which began in this century was to safeguard Muslims' religious and cultural identity, which was one that the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has consistently preserved. There were many different types of Islamic organizations, and they promoted many different parts of Sri Lanka's Muslim communities and lifestyles, but Islamism was the overarching philosophy of many of them. The submission of Muslims to Islam was a common objective shared by the majority of these groups or organizations.

The Islamic reformist movements in Sri Lanka are from either South Asia (India and Pakistan) or the Middle East. The Jamaate Islami and Thablighi Jamaat, which are based in Pakistan and India respectively and arrived in Sri Lanka during the 1950s¹⁸, were the main reformist movements in the country. Also, the Middle East (Saudi Arabia) based Thawheed Jamaat was an Islamic movement that adhered to Abdul Wahab's interpretation of Islam. This organization incited violence and strife among Muslims in Sri Lanka and was more extremist than the other organizations. Movements like Tabligh Jama'at and Jama'at-e-Islami were leading this endeavor and had both demonstrated their ability to significantly impact spiritual and social changes, particularly in societies where Muslims were predominant. The "Islamization" of Sri Lanka during the past several decades has been attributed to organizations like Tabligh Jama'at and Jama'at-e-Islami, which have their historical roots in the Indian Sub-Continent because of the colonial intrusion. But these two organizations significantly contributed to the country's tremendous Islamization.¹⁹ In order to demonstrate how Islamic revivalism developed as a movement approach, I henceforth briefly outline the acts of these two groups and their role in reviving Islam in Sri Lanka.

One of the most influential revivalist movements in Sri Lanka, the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ), has networks across the country. The TJ, which

¹⁸ M.A. Nuhman, "Understanding Sri Lankan Muslim Identity," *Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies*, (2004), p. 29.

¹⁹ Mohamed Faslan and Nadine Vanniasinkam, "Fracturing Community Intra-group Relations among the Muslims of Sri Lanka," *International Centre for Ethnic Studies*, November 2015, p. 2.

arrived in Sri Lanka in the 1950s, has its foundation in changing Sufi beliefs. TJ endorses strict conventional Islam and eliminates the Sufi practices and beliefs in Sri Lankan Muslim societies.²⁰ Since the 1960s, the Tablighi movement has been highly active in the nation and has drawn activists from a wide range of individuals, including school children, merchants, magistrates, doctors, and engineers. The Tablighi Jamaat evolved progressively from a broad concept of religious obligations to a socio-political agenda, and then to a spiritual renaissance of Muslim religious awareness. Bringing Muslims into conformity with true Islam and enticing people to wage an internal Jihad, or conflict, are the two objectives of the Tablighi Jamaat that are most frequently mentioned. Its main goal is to get Muslims to the mosque for the five prayers. Going door to door to Muslim homes is how this is done. Tablighis go on three-day, forty-day, and four-month missions to preach in mosques outside their hometowns to draw Muslims there. They also provide distinct religious programs for Muslim women and have a women's wing. The Tablighi Jamaat's annual national meeting, known as Ijithima, takes place once a year. The Tablighi Jamaat is a peaceful reformist group that promotes safety.²¹

Although one of their objectives is to reform Muslim society, their method of doing so is limited to strictly defined activities. In adhering to these methods, they have very little opportunity to take on controversial issues. Maintaining community harmony on religious issues is vital in Tabligh's opinion. However, according to their popularity among ordinary Muslims and their outreach among them, they have unmistakably inspired radical reformism by personal example. The TJ has had a greater and more immediate impact on Islamism in Sri Lanka. Some factors contributed to that, the expression of Muslim conscientiousness and a distinct Islamic identity, the growth of Islamic institutions like mosques and Madrasas. By encouraging people to visit mosques, the TJ also significantly contributed to the rise in religiosity and religious activities. The TJ is not seen to have had a significant impact on the extreme reformism that emerged among Muslims. They don't adamantly or outwardly support a change in religious customs. This isn't because they disagree with the shift; rather, it has more to do with how

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²¹ M. Nilam, "Ilangai Islamiya Iyakkangalin Waralaru" (History of Islamic Movements in Sri Lanka), *Alhasanath 40th Anniversary Magazine*, 2009, p. 10.

they approach preaching and teaching about religion. By encouraging Muslims to practice their religion and strengthening their feeling of Muslim identity, the Tablighi Jamaat has significantly aided Islamism in Sri Lanka. They are also particularly interested in having influence over management committees for mosques and Madrasas. They firmly exclude involvement in the mainstream of local or national politics.

Another revival movement that primarily targets middle-class-educated-Muslim is called Jamaat-e-Islami. The Sri Lanka Jamaat-e-Islami (SLJI) is one of the most important socio-religious groups for Muslims in Sri Lanka. It focuses mostly on enlightened religious activities that are meant to strengthen Sri Lanka's Muslims. According to Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi's and Sayyid Qutb's teachings, the SLJI is a special organization that implements very rigorous Islamic programs. In 1954, the SLJI was established.²² The Muslim community in Sri Lanka had long-standing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly those in the South Asian area.

The SLJI has been involved in educational endeavors since its beginning. At first, they could only work in a few places, but by the 1960s, the movement had started to quietly grow and expand to other places. Mostly educated Muslims were said to find the movement appealing. Teachers, university professors, and student organisations at the institution served as their foundation of support. The SLJI's work has started to gain recognition among the teachers and directors of Arabic institutions and Madrasas. As the Madrasas were initially under the jurisdiction of Sufi organizations and then the Tabliq Jamath, this procedure proved challenging. The attraction of the SLJI was greatest among the few Muslims who were beginning to enroll in higher education at national colleges and institutes for the first time after

²² A.R.M. Imtiyaz Razak and Ms. Minna Thaheer, *Sri Lanka Jamaat-e-Islami Affiliation*, academia (2012). https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/57618381/SLJI_10262012-libre.pdf?1540298268=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3Dtitle_Sri_Lanka_Jamaat_e-Islami_Affiliat.pdf&Expires=1711986303&Signature=bAHKg83x14ucL0y1sC2sPft6hUvfECojoKtt8Au0Aq6cX~bs0gjzvGFfSdXOvhWzTaf~qHDUVSpcaVGJ0uXi9cYOkis2b4o5pGHSONfdRblYLBGQMviQPIH7gGsrDjSGif783CqmZJKt6-T9dok~FJAH51~bHgEx2EB5oigydiYNEwd4UE62ImjcqeFihyA7dtV3T5IOPnk7pACTvjWah3rSWHqPgcd3g9KZfvQ2gnP9A54PnGCDNIvpIRbCCadl0YAxEgZWrf5qwy3MMdDvhNcDUz9J3Yu~lhbkeT8CyY765J02FF3btZg~1PstII3zVq4lcAK3GZzgFrKGygpIFVA__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA

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independence. The SLJI's philosophy was to blend secular educational material with Islamic thought, ideology, and analysis, as it became known in colleges and among educators. The SLJI had established and was expanding the number of educational institutions as well as other religious and social organizations by the 1980s. The SLJI has an active women's wing and student movement.

Two important elements had a role in shaping the ideology and goals of the SLJI in Sri Lanka: first, the minority status of the island nation's Muslims in a predominantly Buddhist nation; and second, their relationship to other religious groups there. The SLJI has elements that are reminiscent of Mawdudi's philosophy. The aim of SLJI is to guide Muslims in the right direction. This stance is presented in accordance with Mawdudi's doctrine, minority status, and position among other Islamic religious sects. Due to the various erroneous assertions made by the misled people, it is therefore important to adhere to Islam "in full," which encompasses all facets of life.

The SLJI's strategies for disseminating the movement's philosophy, education, and publications are still well-liked throughout Sri Lanka. Conducting several classes and study groups is its primary method of instruction. It is not possible to institutionally relate all the movement-aligned pedagogical efforts to them. Under the banner of their movement, they hold open forums on a variety of topics in mosques and community centers. The movement's early activities, such as weekly Quran courses, open talks, and training programs, were supported by the movement's members. Additionally, they started producing their own publications, including the Tamil-language monthly devotional journals *Arul Joti* and *Valihatti*. These educational initiatives helped the movement flourish in the 1950s and 1960s. Its main function has been to produce *Al Hasanath*, a respected Islamic journal published in Tamil that is well-liked among well-educated Muslims in Sri Lanka. Additionally, it has been putting out *Prabodaya*, *Engal Thesam*, and *The Trend*, respectively, in Tamil, Sinhala, and English on a monthly and quarterly basis. Monthly SLJI publications are also widely dispersed. Additionally, this movement organizes separate special religious classes for men and women, and it has a social service organization that

manages various island-wide social tasks including disaster aid and Zakat distribution.²³

Since the SLJI have been there for more than 60 years in Sri Lanka, they have also helped lay the foundation for a transformation in Sri Lankan religion. By urging people to "return to the Quran," they were in charge of directing people toward a more accurate understanding of Islam. This means that they had pointed Muslims to what they saw as "the most genuine religious source" much earlier than other groups through their efforts translating the Quran into Sinhalese and Tamil and teaching classes on Tafsir or comprehending the Quran. The SLJI has made numerous contributions to the reformation of religion. The most important religious development that the SLJI is responsible for is a rise in religious awareness of common political, social, and economic challenges. The concept of global Islam has also been developed and Sri Lankan Muslims have been placed in this transnational context due to the work of SLJI. Institutionally, they were against "traditional Islam," but they also wanted to avoid enraging those who were in favor of it. The SLJI connected with the non-Muslims and participated in community co-existence initiatives more than any other group, but oddly, they also used the same vocabulary of othering as other groups. To offer the "moderate," "medium route," the SLJI carefully positioned itself in the center of Sri Lanka's fight for religious space. As a result, they have been able to cultivate a specialized fan base, notably among professionals with advanced degrees, and may now influence Islamism.

Social and religious movements are vital to the advancement of civilization. The SLJI is one of the socio-religious groups that has been serving Muslims in Sri Lanka effectively. To help the Muslims of Sri Lanka, the group has very specific objectives. They desire the Muslims of Sri Lanka to support the larger socio-political objectives of Islam and create an Islamic-based society. They insist that Islam is the only way to address human problems.

The Jama'at-e-Islami and the Tabligh Jama'at both show via their past journeys and current endeavors that revivalist groups are frequently creations of a specific time and area, reacting to local conditions or international issues, or occasionally both. In fact, it is a

²³ M.Nilam, "*Ilangai Islamiya Iyakkangalin Waralaru*"(History of Islamic Movements in Sri Lanka), p. 10.

fundamental tenet of the philosophy of Islamic awakening that it would not only usher in institutional advancements, the construction of an Islamic state, and political and social reforms but also an enduring restoration of Islamic splendor throughout the world. The sizeable Muslim community in Sri Lanka clearly demonstrates the growing impact of Islamic revivalist groups like the Tabligh Jama'at and Jama'at-e-Islami in private spheres and socio-political circumstances. The fight against Westernization and secularization has taken the place of the fight against colonialism. The growth of these revivalist groups has also been influenced by a number of complicated circumstances in the country, including rising literacy rates, the reduction of economic disparity, and political stability.

III-The Academic Institutional Approach

The third approach of Islamic revivalism began in the late 20th century under the direction of the academic institutions in the country. Islamic education was introduced to the Muslim community under the direction of revivalist M.C. Siddi Lebbe. The basic component of Muslim identity in Sri Lanka was the revival of religious and cultural traditions through Arabic education. Arabic was not widely spoken by Muslims, even the Holy Quran was translated into Tamil and Sinhalese for educational purposes. Scholars and Imams from India, Malaysia, the Middle East, and Egypt were initially dispatched to Sri Lanka to further Islamic instruction.

Islamic education began in the Madrasa education system in the late 19th century and eventually assumed the form of an institutional approach. Emerging academic institutions have been working in Sri Lanka to bring about the Islamic Renaissance since the 20th century. These institutions significantly aided in the production of academics who would benefit the nation as a whole and the Muslim community in particular. In the early years, Madrassas had a traditional structure and function. At the time, the Madrassas gave the Muslim community the guidance it desperately needed, but they were unable to continue doing so afterwards. Various difficulties have recently been experienced by the Muslim community. When these educational institutions failed to provide the workforce required to fulfill the needs of the modern world, other academic institutions emerged. Islamic Organizations and individuals founded a variety of educational institutions to support the

Sri Lankan Muslim population and uphold the Islamic faith. In line with the guiding ideas, they established several educational institutions around the country and started to work on the Islamic Renaissance. I examine the role Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies (Jamiah Naleemiah) played in the Islamic Renaissance in its capacity as one of the most important educational institutions in Sri Lanka's Muslim history.

Jamiah Naleemiah was founded in 1973 to fulfil the important need for an integrated system of Islamic education, which accommodates modernism within the framework of the traditional system of education among the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. The establishment of Jamiah Naleemiah in the year 1973 was a milestone in the history of Muslim education in Sri Lanka. The idea of founding an institution to produce scholars who are learned both in Islamic studies and modern disciplines was conceived by Al-Haj M.I.M. Naleem, and this idea was given a form and content by a group of eminent scholars. Jamiah Naleemiah is a private institution and has been managed by the Board of Management and its society incorporated by an Act of Parliament.²⁴

Since its establishment, it has provided an integrated education system to the students who completed their ordinary-level exams and qualified for tertiary education. The education objectives, the curriculum, and the academic program of the Jamiah Naleemiah have been planned to produce a generation of scholars who have the academic background, intellectual vision, wider outlook, moral training, and spiritual strength to provide dynamic leadership to the community, having a broader outlook to appreciate the cultural values of the different communities of the multi-ethnic society of Sri Lanka. The Jamiah Naleemiah has a unique character of bridging the gap between exclusive Islamic education imparted in the country's Madhrasas and exclusive general education imparted in secondary schools and undergraduate institutions. It provides a broader understanding of modern knowledge-based education with a blend of traditional Islamic studies. The Study program of this institution consists of two sections, Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS) which consists of three years, and the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FIS) which consists of four academic

²⁴ Establishment history of Jamiah Naleemiah. www.naleemiah.edu.lk (accessed 22.12.2023); M.J.M. Arafath Careem, *Jāmi'ā Naḥīmiyyā Kalāpītam: Eṇṇakkaruvum Tōṛramum* (Jamiah Naleemiah: Concept and Emergence), (Beruwela: Naleemiah Bureau of Islamic Publications, 2023), p. 32-48.

years. Since its inception, the Jamiah Naleemiah has been promoting moderate thinking and a balanced attitude as its basic ideology and principle. Its educational policy constantly emphasizes a balanced and context-conscious approach free of extreme and rigid ideologies.

What is most important is that Al-Haj Naleem's philanthropic activity led to the establishment of the Institute of Jamiah Naleemiah. He founded this institute to support Muslims in education at a time when Muslims lagged significantly behind all other populations in education. In 1973, he willingly donated his own funds to start this institution in Beruwala. He offered complete boarding facilities to the hundreds of students who travel from across Sri Lanka to study there.²⁵ This is, indeed, a gracious task he initiated for the service of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. He facilitated hundreds of students in this institute by providing free accommodation, free meals, and free education. This institute produced many Islamic scholars. The graduates of this institute serve the Sri Lankan communities in many ways. The past graduates of this institute work in many fields. Many are serving in Sri Lanka as teachers, lecturers, civil servants, commissioners, and in other fields and many more graduates are continuing their higher education abroad and many have already completed their Master and Doctorate studies in various studies. Furthermore, this institution has relations with several foreign colleges in the Muslim world, including the International Islamic University in Islamabad. Despite several obstacles, this educational institution is currently quite effective in its efforts of the Islamic renaissance. Apart from this, Jamiah Naleemiah has been rejuvenating Sri Lanka's Muslim community since 1978 by publishing a quarterly study magazine of *Islamiya Sinthanai* (Islamic Thought).

After this institution, many other Arabic colleges, institutions, and centers were founded to further Muslim education within the Sri Lankan Muslim population. In their conceptual approaches to education, the founders of these contemporary educational institutions and Arabic colleges diverged from traditionalists. Instead of dividing information according to religious and secular schooling, modernists blend the two

²⁵ M.S.M. Jaladeen., Contribution of Naleem Hajiyar (Sri Lanka) And B.S. Abdurrahman (Tamil Nadu) For The Development Of Muslim's Education Of Their Countries - A Comparative Study. Proceeding of 3rd International Symposium. 30 May 2016. Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil, Sri Lanka. p.577

in their college courses and syllabi. To advance Muslim education and Islamic revivalism in Sri Lanka, Muslim well-wishers, and philanthropists donated money to establish such as Iqra Technical College for Muslim Students, Aisha Siddeeqa Girl College, Islahiya Arabic College for Boys, Islahiya Arabic College for Girls, Tanveer Academy, Fatih Institute of Islamic Studies, and numerous other Arabic colleges and institutions. Thus, it can be seen that the Islamic Renaissance mission is likewise moving forward through an academic institutional approach.

Challenges of Reviving Islam in Modern Sri Lanka

Although there has been a revival of Islam in Sri Lanka since the eighteenth century, this effort is currently confronting a significant obstacle today in the country. The Islamic Renaissance mission in Sri Lanka is now facing two different sorts of challenges. The first is an internal challenge, while the second is an external one. Internal challenges are perceived to originate from inside the Muslim community. Muslims make up a small minority in Sri Lanka, and because the Islamic Renaissance movements there are not cooperating and communicating with one another, they are fighting among themselves. The Islamic Renaissance in Sri Lanka has likewise suffered from a lack of such unity. This division has hampered Sri Lanka's Islamic revival and given rise to false perceptions of Islam and Muslims among non-Muslims. Sufism is one of the major internal challenges that pose a danger to Sri Lanka's Modern Islamic renaissance movements. The community's circle shrank because of leaving the traditional Sufi system and uniting with the new Islamic revivalist organizations, and as it gained popularity, other movements turned hostile. Significantly, they are preparing the ground for action against Renaissance groups by disseminating information about them. At the same time, the work of the Islamic Renaissance is challenged by the absence of a correct knowledge of Islam and the distortion of authentic Islam that has led certain Muslims to extremism.

External challenges are the second biggest obstacle to the Islamic Renaissance's implementation in Sri Lanka. Both the Islamic uprising in Sri Lanka and the global Muslim Ummah are challenged by islamophobia. In modern Sri Lanka, anti-Islamic acts are being carried out because of these fears. These types of operations are carefully planned and executed

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by Buddhist nationalist organizations with the assistance of local politicians and other agencies to halt Islamic revivalism in the nation. In general, these actions continued after the end of the 30-year conflict between Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government in 2009. Such action has increased and continues to pose a threat to the Islamic renaissance in the wake of the 2019 Easter Sunday massacre. Some Buddhist nationalist groups, particularly in Sri Lanka, such as *Bodu Bala Sena (BBS)*, *Sinhala Ravaya*, *Mahasen Balakaya*, *Rawana Balakaya*, and *Sinha Lea*, are engaged in similar actions. Despite these difficulties, the Islamic revivalist movements in Sri Lanka are methodically planning and assessing their operations.

Conclusion

The Muslim community on the island had the worst educational standing, according to widespread consensus by the latter nineteenth century. Given their awareness of the loss of their faith and culture, Muslims shunned secular education in Christian institutions. Muslim revivalism focused particularly on educating people. During the first decade of the twentieth century, Muslims were able to advance in terms of education, culture, and literature because of the Sri Lankan Islamic revivalist movement. In the first decade of the 20th century, the revivalist movement sparked Muslim cultural and literary activities. It should be noted that the revivalist movement among Muslims had a significant influence on the community's political, spiritual, and educational consciousness and gave rise to an organized organization. Sri Lankan Muslim's efforts to revive Islam have relied on three key approaches. Each of these approaches has a distinct feature that must be investigated separately. To give a brief comprehensive explanation of how Sri Lanka's Islamic Renaissance came to be, I've collated these approaches here, should be aware that despite several challenges, the Islamic Renaissance, which began in the late nineteenth century, is still thriving today. We need to be grateful to the individuals, teams, and academic institutions who finished this project. The Islamic renaissance initiatives marked a turning point in Sri Lankan Muslims' history. We must grow used to assigning the same role to every historical figure. The Islamic awakening is an uprising of action as well as of thought.

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