

As travelers journey along the main road, they are greeted by the sight of the world's largest statue of Swami Vipulananda, a beacon of dedication to fostering prosperity in Tamil-Muslim relations, nestled in the historic and legendary traditional Tamil village of Karaitivu in the Amparai district. Yet, amidst this awe-inspiring sight, the tension between the Tamil-Muslim communities persists, casting a shadow over the landscape like an unrelenting wildfire.

"Religious matters are profoundly delicate; meddling with them jeopardizes the faith of adherents, while the fractures within Tamil-Muslim relations persist without resolution."

Jeevakaran Swami, the visionary behind Karaitivu Sri Sivashakti Guru Kudaiswamy Sarvamad Peetha, articulated this sentiment. The Guru Kudaiswamy Sarvamad Peedam operates under the guiding principle of providing sanctuary for all, welcoming individuals from diverse faith backgrounds.

Despite longstanding efforts to promote interfaith harmony, the communities residing in Karaitivu, located 30 miles south of Batticaloa, and neighboring villages, continue to grapple with the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks even five years later. However, this tragic event was not the sole incident that disrupted the relationship between Tamils and Muslims.

Jeevakaran Swami disclosed one of the most harrowing incidents, which occurred on August 3, 1990, involving the attack on the First Kurichi Meera Periya Juma Mosque in Kathankudi, Batticaloa District, and the Masjidul Hussainiyya Mosque in the same area. During night prayers, 103 individuals, including elderly and children, were tragically killed, while over 140 others sustained injuries.

Accusations are directed towards the LTTE for the massacre attacks, perpetuating the belief among Muslims that tigers symbolize Tamils, and vice versa. Despite the passage of 33 years since these tragic events, the scars of these massacres persist, dealing a significant blow to the historic Tamil-Muslim relationship.

The assault on the worshippers at the Kathankudi mosques remains etched as a somber day in the collective memory of the majority of Muslims in Sri Lanka, particularly those in Kathankudi, who annually commemorate it as Suhadas Day.

I. M. Ilyas Maulavi, a prominent member of the Batticaloa Multifaith Organization, vividly described the aftermath: 'The toll of death echoed in every household, each one mourning the loss of a loved one. Those who survived, bearing wounds, wandered like walking corpses among the living.'

"On the day and night of the incident, the electricity was cut off, prayers happened under generator light... They fired and lobbed grenades. I sustained injuries on my knees and both hands, unable to return to my former state, much like the wounded Tamil-Muslim relationship," recounted Muhammad Labir, one of the survivors of the massacre at the Meera Periya Juma Mosque.

"The walls of the mosque have been left untouched, preserving the traces of the tragedy unchanged. While forgiveness may be possible, the events must never be forgotten. Additionally, the details of the deceased are solemnly displayed," conveyed Muhammad Ibrahim Muhammad Zubair, formerly the head of the Meera Periya Juma Mosque.

Human rights lawyer Perinpam Premnath expressed concern about the troubling incidents of attacks on Muslims, emphasizing that the enduring scars from these events remain unchanged. He underscored that the significant responsibility for rebuilding relations among Tamil-speaking communities lies in the actions of religious and political leaders.

At the 2021 Remembrance Day event, Reverend Rohan of St. John's American Church in Batticaloa volunteered to apologize for the massacres. His gesture was praised as a cornerstone for rebuilding relations among Tamil-speaking communities. However, simultaneously, it cannot be overstated that the Saharan group, originating from the same village of Katankudi, perpetrated suicide bombings targeting Christian churches on Sunday, resulting in a national tragedy.

The attacks on the Kathankudi mosques were just one among many incidents that intensified tensions in Tamil-Muslim relations during the three-decade civil war. Both Tamil and Muslim youths were drawn into the conflict against the government initially. No sacred site was spared from the violence, including Kandy Talada House, Jaffna Navali St. Thomas Church, Kathankudi Jumma Pallivasal, and Veeramunya Chinthayatrai Pillaiyar Temple in the Amparai district. These reprehensible acts have left enduring stains of blood. Despite the end of the civil war, the repercussions of these attacks on places of worship persist.

Jeevakaran Swami has unveiled another tragic event: the Veeramuna Chinthayatra Pillaiyar Temple massacre, occurring just nine days after the atrocities at the Kathankudi mosques. Amidst the turmoil in the Sammanthurai region during the war, hundreds of Tamil residents from Veeramune and nearby villages sought shelter in public areas, including the Veeramune Chinthayatra Pillaiyar Temple and Ramakrishna Mission School, for a duration of three months.

On August 12, 1990, armed gangs raided Veeramune village, indiscriminately targeting and killing Tamils, including the elderly, women, and children. Many sought refuge in

the Chindayatrai Pillaiyar temple. While initially attributed to collaboration between the Muslim village police and the army, recent suspicions suggest the involvement of a Muslim militant group, especially in light of the Easter Sunday attacks.

There is no precise tally of the casualties from the incident, with many killed or disappeared without a trace. A memorial obelisk now stands in the temple grounds, inscribed with the names of 40 known victims. Yet justice remains elusive, perpetrators unnamed and unpunished. Annual commemorations are held, though some politicians exploit these events for their own gain, offering insincere condolences. Notably, a tribute event for Karuna Amman garnered significant media attention in recent years.

The ruthless attacks on innocent Tamil people, including those seeking shelter in the temple, were abhorrent, fracturing Tamil-Muslim relations instantly, particularly in Amparai district, where communal harmony among Tamil-speaking communities was shattered. "Such acts are unconscionable," remarked Sellaiah Rajaiah, former chairman of Karaitivu Pradeshiya Sabha, executive director of Pushpa Economic, Education and Social Development Organization, and national adviser of the All Sri Lanka Hindu Federation.

S. Loganathan, a senior trade unionist and president of the All Sri Lankan Government Public Employees' Union, reflected on the repercussions of these massacres. He expressed concerns about the looming threat of invasion on Tamil villages, drawing parallels to the disappearance of villages like Athipatti, as depicted in the movie "Citizen." Additionally, he highlighted the vulnerable position of Karaitivu Tamil village, which finds itself encircled by Muslim villages on three sides. Loganathan noted that Karaitivu had already been subjected to attacks in 1985 and 1990.

Journalist Deshamanya I. L. Jaliljee condemned the Weeramunna massacres, especially the Chindayatra Pilliyar temple massacres, stressing that rebuilding Tamil-Muslim relations requires forgiveness and reconciliation. He warned against exaggerating these bitter incidents, as doing so could perpetuate feelings of revenge and vengeance, passing them on to future generations.

Incursions onto places of worship persist in various forms, posing a significant obstacle to repairing Tamil-Muslim relations. Former Eastern Province Governor Dr. M. L. A. M. Hizbullah has publicly acknowledged demolishing a Kali temple and constructing a public market in its place, a move allegedly aimed at garnering more votes from Muslims. Additionally, legal disputes have arisen over land adjacent to the Arasati Sri Siddhivinayakar Temple in Karaitivu, with Muslim individuals claiming ownership rights to the property.

Kalunai Municipal Council's former Mayor, Attorney-at-Law M. Raheeb, attempted to demolish the Pilliyar temple situated within the Kalmunai Tamil Division Divisional Secretariat premises. However, the court intervened and prevented the demolition.

Despite the myriad challenges, efforts to revive Tamil-Muslim relations through places of worship are underway on the other side. A former minister from Ebravur spearheaded the consecration of the idol of Kudaiswamy Siddha at Karaitivu Sri Sivashakti Guru Kudaiswamy Sarvamad Peetha. Meanwhile, a political, social, and public interest media activist from Katankudi provided loudspeaker facilities. Every year, Thaga Shanti arrangements are made by the Ampara District Journalists Association, which predominantly comprises Muslim journalists, for devotees undertaking the Kathirgama Pada Yatra. During the fasting period of Ramadan, Tamils purchase fasting porridge from mosques and consume it at home. Consequently, mosques near Tamil villages refrain from including cow meat in fasting porridge.

It is indeed a ray of hope to see the younger generation actively engaged in initiatives aimed at fostering harmony between communities. Journalist Jaliljee's 13-year-old daughter, Minha, has been actively promoting the Green Revolution's work projects, emphasizing inter-community harmony as a crucial aspect. She also visits Hindu temples to seek blessings.

The Eastern Youth Organization, primarily led by Muslim youth, organizes an annual Iftar for Reconciliation, which also includes participation from Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian priests, fostering interfaith dialogue and community harmony. Jeevakaran Swami is a regular participant in these events, emphasizing the importance of cross-community engagement and unity.

Despite their religious differences, the Tamil-speaking communities in the Eastern Province have coexisted for many centuries, deeply intertwined throughout history. They are often likened to nails and flesh, putty and coconut flower, or two sides of a coin, illustrating the inseparable connection between them. That scent still lingers in their lives.

The maternal origin of Eastern Province Muslims is Tamil. Historical records show that during a significant conflict in Batticaloa, Patani Muslims provided assistance to the Tamils. As a gesture of gratitude, the Tamils offered Mukkuwa women in marriage to the Patani Muslims. Subsequently, the Patani Muslims settled in Batticaloa and expanded their lineage.

Not only in the Batticaloa district but also in many Hindu temples across the Eastern Province, the Patani festival held significant prominence. For instance, until the 1990s, Muslims conducted the Patani Festival at the Kokkatcholai Thanthonreeswarar Temple. While the festival is now organized by Tamils themselves, it still retains the name Patani festival. Similarly, the Patani festival continues to be celebrated at the Pandirupu Draupadi Amman temple in Amparai district.

Former minister and intellectual Basheer Segu Dawood from Eravur recounted that when the Kokkatcholai Thanthonreeswarar temple was constructed, his ancestors used to send bricks as gifts in canoes.

In the Akkaraipattu area of Ampara district, the foundation stones of Akkaraipattu Pathirakali Amman Temple and Akkaraipattu Juma Periya Pallivasal were laid on the same day, with leaders from both the Islamic and Hindu communities participating in the ceremonies. Muhammad Mustafa Muhammad Nizam, a public interest activist from the same region, mentioned that they have been passing down this information to the next generation. Retired teacher and journalist Julpika Sharif noted that Hindus have significantly contributed to the Kalmunakudy beach temple festival, worshipping the Nagor goddess by lighting sampirani and offering salt.

The esteemed leader of the Muslim community, M. H. M. Ashraf, generously contributed a significant amount of cash towards the construction of the Mani Mandapam for Swami Vibulananda, a revered figure born from the soil of Karaitivu, who dedicated himself to fostering the prosperity of Tamil-Muslim relations. H. M. Ashraf facilitated the allocation of funds for this noble endeavor.

Pushpa Economic, Educational, Social, and Development Organization was the first to personally visit the family of Risana Nabeek from Muthur, Trincomalee district, following her execution in Saudi Arabia. They offered financial assistance as a gesture of support during their time of need.

Eastern Province Governor Senthil Thondaman's participation in the Iftar event held in Khatankudi, wearing hats traditionally worn by Muslims, is commendable and serves as a symbol of goodwill towards social harmony.

Like two sides of the same coin, the Tamil-Muslim communities should thrive together once more. At this critical juncture, let me recall the words of Bharathiar's song: "Let the challenges to social harmony through places of worship be like clouds that temporarily hide the sun."