

The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities (2022) 43:1, 67-86

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.4038/sljh.v43i1.7289>

Published online: 01 July, 2022



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Pedagogical Activism and Ideological Duality as seen in YouTube Videos

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ABSTRACT

In March 2018 riots broke out against Muslim minorities in the Kandy district in Central Sri Lanka, in a climate of growing anti-Muslim sentiments in the country. It was said that Facebook and YouTube videos played a key role in inciting the public which lead to communal violence. These videos were produced by both parties, the rioters, and the victims. By adopting Stuart Hall's theories of encoding and representation, together with Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, this article undertakes a study of the YouTube videos uploaded during February and March 2018. It examines the encoding strategies, representations and forms of identity, nationalism and corresponding imaginations of these YouTube video content and debates, and maps the content and viewership for their diversity and openness. YouTube exhibits a democratizing and hegemonic duality. The challenge lies in exploiting this duality in developing pedagogical activism and strategies of democratization and socio-political awareness.

Keywords: YouTube, hegemony, ideology, pedagogy

¹ I wish to thank Prof. Sivamohan Sumathy for her guidance which greatly improved the manuscript.

Sri Lanka is an island nation with a rich history of cultural diversity. The Census of Population and Housing (2012) reported that the Sri Lankan population consisted of 8 ethnicities: the majority Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Indian Tamils, Sri Lankan Moors, Burghers, Malays, Sri Lankan Chettis, and Bharathas. The Sinhalese stood at 74.9% and Muslims 9.3%, as per the same source.

During the past decade, paralleling global trends in Islamophobia, and mainly owing to the impact that the protracted civil war had had on people's perceptions, certain factions of the Sri Lankan media and internet public forums have featured conspiracy theories about how the Muslim community was secretly seeking to become the demographic majority of the country. It was said that Muslim businesses were supposedly introducing "sterilization drugs" through food and clothing items sold to unsuspecting Sinhala customers to limit the growth of the Sinhala population. On the other hand, extremist Muslim groups have produced videos in the Sinhala language, condemning Buddhist religious principles and beliefs. Social media has provided a ready platform for this provocative content, contributing to increased tensions between the Sinhala and Muslim communities.

History of Sinhala-Muslim Hostilities in Sri Lanka

In the general Sinhala perception, Sri Lankan Muslims are believed to be a homogeneous society. In identifying these homogeneous tendencies among Sri Lankan Muslims catalysed by developments of ethnic consciousness and religious fundamentalism, Nuhman describes the Sri Lankan Muslims as a heterogeneous community, like the Sinhalese and Tamils in the country (Nuhman, 5). In the Sri Lankan context, nearly 30% of the Muslim Population is in the North and the East with a high concentration in the Eastern Province. They dominate the Ampara district numerically, economically and politically (Nuhman 6). However, 70% of the Muslim population is thinly scattered around the rest of the country. This scattered population has a considerable concentration in Colombo and Kandy. They are mainly into trade and commerce, while the Muslims in the North and East are engaged in paddy cultivation and fishing. The Northern and Eastern Muslims are mostly monolingual and speak only Tamil. On the other hand, those who are scattered in Sinhala speaking areas are mostly bilingual and speak both Sinhala and Tamil. Yet it remains that in most occasions their mother language is considered to be Tamil.

Throughout history, the Southern Muslim elite monopolized the Muslim representation at national level politics and they depended on major political parties. Although 25% of the total Muslim population of Sri Lanka is concentrated in the East with a strong majority in the Ampara district, they did

not seek the establishment of a strong ethnic identity and political leadership until the 1930s. However, the introduction of universal franchise in 1931 under the Donoughmore constitution created a socio-political atmosphere that demanded such involvement (Nuhman, 2-6). With these developments Eastern Muslims were able to gather themselves under the flag of a separate political party. Nuhman identifies these political developments, along with the competition in the economy, as the predominant causalities for anti-Muslim sentiment among both Sinhala and Tamil communities (Nuhman, 31).

Nagaraj and Haniffa in their 2017 study titled *Towards Recovering Histories of Anti-Muslim Violence in the Context of Sinhala–Muslim Tensions in Sri Lanka*, look at three incidents related to anti-Muslim hostilities in Puttalam (1976), Galle (1982) and Mawanella (2001). According to their study, the causalities of the Puttalam incident (14-19) include: a Sinhalization process and the post-colonial nationalism of the ruling party; Sinhalese disaffection in class terms where certain perceptions - such as the Sinhalese as economically marginalized and the Muslims enjoying lavish lifestyles - became dominant, subsequently mobilizing the Sinhala underclass. Further, the research also uncovers the oppositions' attempt to discredit the ruling party which was believed to have contributed to their election victory the following year, in the case of the 1977 general election. In Galle, Nagaraj and Haniffa (26-36) draw upon two reports: one is an investigation by the retired Supreme Court Judge Justice Alles who was appointed by then President J. R. Jayawardana; and the other, a research study conducted by George Scott. The reports refer to the incident as a confrontation between two rival gangs. Alles's report further suggests some commensurability between the organised actions of the Sinhala and Muslim groups (27); Scott's report interpreted the incident as reflective of an economic rivalry between the Muslim traders and the up-and-coming Vahumpura business people at the Galle Bazaar (28). In both these narratives, the "anger of the Sinhalese" through which the violence occurred is rendered legitimate through calling attention to the recalcitrant and irresponsible behaviour of the Tamil and Muslim minority leadership.

The mid 1980s saw the formation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). In the 1989 provincial council election, SLMC members were elected as council members. In the same year, at the parliamentary election, the SLMC had their first parliamentary representation. In 1994, the SLMC became the decisive political group to form a government, and hence was hailed as the "king-maker" of Sri Lankan politics. With these developments in local politics, the country experienced another episode of anti-Muslim hostility in Mawanella in 2001. Nagaraj and Haniffa identified the general notion, that "Sinhala majority was taken hostage by Muslims" (34-41), as one of the drivers of these hostilities. In addition, during the late 1990s, the rise and consolidation of Sinhala-Buddhist

nationalist organizations, which subsequently incited the mobilization of outsiders bringing them into conflict areas, are seen as key players in this incident. Furthermore, Nagaraj and Haniffa (36) state that, “the mid-to-late 1990s was marked by a projection of Muslim political power from the East (in the form of the SLMC) and the LTTE’s military power from the North. This contributed or was mobilized to further fuel Sinhala majoritarian and nationalist anxieties”.

When histories of these hostilities are analyzed, they lead to two main narratives. On the one hand, it is about the social dissatisfaction of marginalized Sinhala communities in the Muslim dominated areas. This narrative also includes the poverty and lack of access to business as experienced by the Sinhala community. This creates a bipolar phenomenon among the Sinhalese, where some sections of the Sinhala community feel that they are the majority in the national context but are marginalized in the regional context. On the other hand, it is about trying to gain political mileage by both major political parties, the SLFP and the UNP, as well as ethnic based groups and movements. These two narratives tend to nurture and influence each other at various levels. On these grounds, as Nagaraj and Haniffa emphasise, “the “riot” as an ethnic frame often masks its political economic foundations and character” (Nagaraj and Haniffa, 45).

The Significance of the 2018 Sinhala-Muslim Hostilities in Sri Lanka

On the 3rd of March 2018, a Sinhalese truck driver was beaten to death in Digana (Kandy District) by a group of Muslim men under the influence of alcohol. This incident stirred a series of violent acts igniting a simmering anti-Muslim consciousness, with mobs of Sinhalese people taking to the streets to attack Muslim homes and businesses in Digana and Teldeniya over several days (“Digana Turns Divisive”). It has been said that Facebook and YouTube played a key role in inflaming the public through their capacity for widespread and instant dissemination of the kind of incendiary material described above. Consequently, one of the key government actions to control the situation was to block all social media nationwide and disrupt internet access in the affected regions (“Sri Lanka blocks”). This indicated that the government and the public believe that social media possesses the power to promote ideologies, set agendas, and call for action.

The communal violence in Ampara that had occurred in the previous month was a precursor to the Kandy incident. The event which triggered the Ampara violence took place on 26 February 2018 at the Muslim-owned Hotel Cassim, when a group of Sinhalese diners (allegedly under the influence of alcohol) forced the cashier to confess that their meal had been contaminated with a “sterilization pill” (“Ampara Calm”). The incident was captured on video and circulated on

social media by the accusers as proof positive of the alleged Muslim plot to destroy the demographic advantage of the Sinhalese community. As a result, several shops were damaged in a clash between Sinhala and Muslim groups. However the police were able to control the situation within 24 hours having stated that the allegations against the restaurant would be investigated (“Muslim shops”). During the Ampara incident, the government did not attempt to limit social media activism at any level. For the foregoing reasons, I believe the communal violence in Ampara provides some scope to understand social media activism in relation to the Sinhala-Muslim conflict, with special emphasis on YouTube videos.

It is evident, in both these events, that social media in general, and YouTube in particular, played a major role in communicating a plethora of information associated with these incidents. Considering the history of similar violence and hostilities, it can be argued that this is the first time in recorded Sri Lankan history that social media had become a prominent stakeholder in such an episode. Moreover, both Sinhala and Muslim activists used social media for agenda setting, to create awareness and dialogue on matters that arose from the Ampara and Kandy occurrences. Both these incidents can be understood as moments in history where the Sri Lankan community at large experienced social media as a mass communication tool in the hands of masses during a moment of crisis. Considering the significance of these manifestations in Sri Lankan history, it would be interesting to explore the scope for social activism and the democratizing tendencies of social media, by mapping the terrain of social media activism with relevance to the Ampara and Kandy incidents, with emphasis on YouTube.

The Impact of Social Media on Anti-Muslim Violence in Kandy

In order to examine the scope of YouTube activism with reference to the 2018 anti-Muslim violence in Kandy, a search using the keywords “Kandy riots” was conducted. The search results brought videos captured by both perpetrators and victims of the violence, as well as by observers who happened to be passing by and also footage obtained through CCTV cameras, in addition to news uploads. It is noted that videos containing strong messages: opinions, and lucid accounts, like news segments, attracted a large number of comments. In contrast, fly-on-the-wall point-of-view (POV) videos such as CCTV footage and videos captured by observers that documented events, generated fewer comments. It can be argued that these YouTube videos predominantly serve a journalistic purpose. Almost all videos are made to inform or create awareness or make a statement regarding relevant incidents. From a journalistic perspective, these POV and opinion videos can be associated with having objective and subjective approaches

respectively. The subjective approach to journalism is referred to as opinion or 'advocacy journalism'. This genre of journalism which I loosely defined, is associated with supporting or making an argument for a cause, policy or ideology. In the contemporary media sphere including mainstream media, advocacy journalism has become the trendy and popular form of journalism. Online independent journalists - in particular bloggers and YouTubers who depend heavily on "likes", comments and subscribers - prefer to practice advocacy journalism as a strategy to out-manoeuvre competition. They use controversial subject matter, in black and white, delivered with a speak-your-mind attitude, to draw high levels of traffic to their sites/channels. Therefore, it is apparent that opinionated videos attract more comments and arguments as is evident in the Ampara and Kandy videos. Opinionated videos carry something to respond to, and hence create the environment for debate and dialogue. Although these opinionated videos may be biased and cater to various ideologies and agenda, they provide space for public activism and agency in some way, showing the potential to create an online public sphere.

Traditional news media, on the contrary, tend to make use of CCTV footage and public videos to build strong narratives. These news segments, along with opinion videos uploaded by individuals, attract more responses in the form of "likes/dislikes" and comments. The latter revealed that most commentators had clear and fixed opinions regarding the violence. It is observed that the dominant interpretation of Sinhala language forums depicted Muslims as a closed and homogenized community. Its extreme narrative framed Muslims as conspirators against Sinhala majority rule. When they felt that the narrative of a video or news segment on YouTube was contradicting the aforementioned conceptual framework, such videos received offensive and provocative comments from viewers.

Moreover, research shows that Sinhala language videos, including anti-Muslim videos, were shared mainly among the Sinhala-speaking community, and that the comments and arguments were also predominantly made in Sinhala. Tamil language videos were mostly shared among the Muslim community. Hence, the comments and debates relevant to these Tamil language videos were predominantly done in Tamil, where a majority of the participants were Muslims. According to Stuart Hall (1973), the dominant / hegemonic position shared among relevant communities provides little space for oppositional and negotiated positions. One of the culprits of this type of decoding by the respective publics is language. The Sinhala community predominantly speaks the Sinhala language, and the majority of Muslims speak Tamil. This language barrier stands in the way of the two communities sharing their perspectives. Each group speaks primarily to its own public and fails to communicate with the other; hence, their dominant

subject position prevails. This paper predominantly focuses on the Sinhala language material uploaded to YouTube.

The successful use of YouTube videos, to communicate with a like-minded public, reveals the potential of the medium to generate/reinforce populist appeal and hegemonic tendencies, including the propagation of rumours and gossip. Nevertheless, the government's blocking of all social media during the riots to bring the situation under control limits our understanding of the scope of social media activism surrounding the incident and to what extent and at what level it would have affected ground conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the Ampara incident that occurred the previous month that would have, to some extent, influenced the Kandy riots to further understand the attitude and trends of social media activism in an ethnic conflict situation.

The Impact of Social Media on the Anti-Muslim Violence in Ampara

Social media activism surrounding the Ampara incident starts with the aforementioned confession captured on video, which was uploaded multiple times on YouTube and came to be shared through other social media. Over 20 uploads of the same video can be found on YouTube, uploaded by various individuals and groups mostly on the same day as the incident. The video was released to social media by the accusers as evidence of the covert sterilization of Sinhalese by Muslims.

The major part of the comments consists of hate speech directed towards the Muslim community. Moreover, commentators suggest that members of the Sinhala community should avoid patronizing Muslim restaurants and businesses in general, as a solution to this covert sterilization operation. The majority of the Sinhala commentators believed the "evidence" provided by the video. The less vehement of them, engaged in hate speech, calling for a boycott of Muslim businesses, while the hardliners demanded action to destroy Muslim establishments and communities.

A few comments by both the Sinhala and Muslim communities tried to interrogate the dominant position and often tried to sympathize with the Muslim shop owners and put forward possible explanations to counter the contamination accusations. Some of the comments suggest that the restaurant incident was staged to provide motivation to attack Muslim businesses. While the comments point some debate and argument, they also show that people enter such forums, armed with fixed prejudices and opinions regarding the situation at hand. Furthermore, they try their best to hold on to their beliefs and opinions and do not demonstrate a capacity to engage in a reasonable dialogue to create change.

Hence, these debates hardly go beyond an exhibition of opinions and ideas dominated by extreme points of views, hate speech and hard language.

A second video, an extension to the original, was circulated on the following day (28 February 2018), depicting the accusers making their police complaint and providing evidentiary substance that they claimed to have found in the food. There are various comments and responses to the original video. Both videos were later picked up by mainstream media and used in news stories.

The YouTube videos quickly prompted reactions at national level. These sentiments were picked up by the national media and drew responses from government authorities and health experts. During this period, there were many YouTube uploads by numerous individuals on various social media platforms, claiming to be expert opinions, with content both for and against the plausibility of chemical sterilization. Various individuals and groups started representing the incident in alignment with their respective ideological belief and/or to satisfy their sociocultural environment. Therefore, it is fair to say that the Ampara incident generated considerable social media activism, mainly via YouTube.

Identity Politics and Imagined Communities

Online communities are made of geographically scattered individuals. They interact in virtual public spaces that cater to their interests. The viewer interactions on YouTube, with likes and comments implicitly reveal subject positions on given subject matter. In other words, viewer interactions can come to be associated with viewer opinions and attitudes towards what is represented in the video. With relevance to the Ampara and Kandy videos, the Muslim identity that has been projected, for the most part, has a homogenized profile. This creates a stereotype that depicts Muslims as Tamil-speaking, wealthy, business-people wielding socio-political influence. Hence it can be argued that, these images have the potential to propagate stereotypes. The Ampara pre-incident video is about a Muslim-owned eatery that served food contaminated with sterilization pills. Both the Ampara and Kandy “incident” videos, emphasized that the rioters attacked Muslim businesses.

Moreover, post-incident on-site videos carry opinions and grievances of affected Muslim businessmen. This homogenization of Muslims and simplification of their ethnic profile make it easy for a geographically-distanced individual of Sinhala origin to apply this profile of a Muslim to his/her own community and to connect it with the incident, feeling that it happened in his/her backyard. Similarly, it also serves the purpose of Muslim leadership in creating a homogenized Muslim community, which provides them with better political

stability as a political movement with an ethnic basis. This notion is also expressed by Nuhman (31) who observes that the “Muslim identity is a reactive politico-cultural ideology”, which was constructed and evolved as a reaction to “Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalistic ideologies”. What is gleaned here is that Muslim leadership likely prefers not to contest these homogenizing tendencies and stereotypes on social media or any other forum.

With reference to the YouTube communities and their forums, both the content productions as well as the comments associated with these incidents were made in Sinhala or Tamil. This makes it more acceptable and appealing to an average individual with minimal linguistic and communication skills to interact or relate with these videos. When the language component (Sinhala/Tamil) is added to this ensemble, it can create an ethnic divide. This facilitates these scattered individuals to imagine themselves as a community, with common values, goals and beliefs. In these two cases, identifying with or distancing oneself from an imagined homogeneous Muslim community, with an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ relationship.

Benedict Anderson in his book titled, *“Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism”* articulates this matter in detail. Anderson (1983) the nation in the context of an imagination of its constituents. He points out that, “it is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). Emphasizing the devotion of such members of an imagined community, Anderson states that there are “so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (7). On these grounds, it can be argued that YouTube and social media activism can strengthen the image of homogeneity of the Muslims as well as the notion of nationalism amongst the Sinhalese. Subsequently, this creates imagined communities, different from real people belonging to real communities who live amidst ethnic tension and conflict. This homogenization of Muslims by both Sinhala and Muslim leadership indirectly fuels hostilities among the two communities, which can be easily ignited even with individual, isolated incidents where there happened to be Sinhalese and Muslims on either side.

Furthermore, the notion of virtual proximity that is created by social media connects people from different geographical regions with a certain identity or profile in the form of ethnicity, religion or nationalism, among other things. Therefore, it can be argued that SM activism has the potential to create imagined communities. This explains why an arbitrary roadside brawl, where a group of drunkards who happened to be Muslims murdered a truck driver who happened to be a Sinhalese, took on a Sinhala-Muslim hostility narrative. At first glance, it was interpreted in social media as well as across all media platforms as ‘a group of Muslims killing a Sinhalese’. In Ampara, the narrative took shape as a Muslim

eatery selling food contaminated with sterility drugs to unsuspecting Sinhala customers. These emotional sentiments also helped Sinhala extremists to recruit and mobilize their cadres ideologically, attitudinally and behaviourally through ethnicity-based political economy narratives that create opportunities which they then capitalize on. Similarly, this perception of homogenization also has the potential to trigger fear and panic among Muslim communities who now dread facing hostilities just for being Muslim. Moreover, this mindset also has the potential to agitate and mobilize extremist groups who operate outside mainstream Muslim politics. There are also YouTube videos uploaded by such groups who are not recognized by mainstream Muslim activists.

It is noteworthy that the videos related to the incidents in Ampara and Kandy, and the public response they generated, were the results of information/attitudes and opinions that existed prior to these incidents. During the past decade, the public domain has entertained notions of Muslim businesses attempting to sterilize the Sinhala community through their products. In addition, there are numerous attempts to produce video evidence with journalistic narratives to support this decree, shared online, predominantly through YouTube. Hence, over the years such media representations have developed a certain hegemonic view of the Muslim community amongst the Sinhala community. As Hall articulated, it is the representation, or the way in which meaning is given to things that are depicted, which produces such hegemonic views. Hall also argues that media messages can have multiple meanings, and that they can be decoded in various ways, meaning something different to different people. Hence, representation is constitutive (Hall, "Representation & the Media" 7). Conversely, we experienced such interrogations and reproductions during the post-riot reconciliatory efforts.

The Riots in Kandy and Reconciliation

When the riots occurred in Kandy in March 2018, following the Ampara incident in the previous month, the Sinhala majority went silent. The silence of the majority Sinhala community can be interpreted with reference to the dominant position of the sterilization accusation which is not adequately contested in the public sphere. Consequently, the Sinhala extremist minority was able to justify their hostility towards Muslims, depicting it as a counter-action against the Muslim conspiracy against the Sinhala majority. Therefore, it might be argued that with respect to the Kandy incident, while hostile sentiments may have had roots in the political and economic motivations and agendas of various groups and movements, the passivity of the Sinhala community in general can be understood as a complex, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or

behavioural consequence of the anti-Muslim attitude, during the Ampara incident, with reference to Hall's articulations on decoded meaning and its effect.

When the Sri Lankan government took the decision to block all social media and disrupt internet nationwide to control the Kandy riots, this action was justified on the grounds that the rioters were using social media as a communication and recruiting platform to mobilize hostile groups. Moreover, action taken by the government by way of issuing curfews and deploying military personnel to support the police, brought the situation under control within a few days. When the situation eased and the internet and social media became available, YouTube videos of a different narrative were shared online. They portrayed the reconciliation efforts and rebuilding process of people in affected areas. There were stories about the Sinhala community and Buddhist monks protecting their Muslim neighbours from the rioters and later helping them rebuild what had been damaged or demolished. Both the Sinhalese and the Muslims in these videos emphasized that the rioters were predominantly outsiders and not members of the local community, who predominantly targeted residences of wealthy Muslim businessmen and their businesses.

In the next few months, the Sinhala-Muslim hostilities in general seemed to fade away. With these developments, sterilization evidentiary video uploads also ceased. Muslim groups responsible for uploading provocative and defamatory video content targeting Buddhists and Buddhist teachings also disappeared from online forums. It appeared that the anti-Muslim notions developed and shared on social media were interrogated, exposed and deconstructed on social media itself. During the next few months, Sinhala-Muslim hostility related issues were not reported on social media as well as mainstream media. However, the true culprits of these hostilities were never brought to justice or revealed. The true motivations and agendas behind these incidents too remained unrevealed.

When the heat of the Kandy incident subsided, content related to riots and violence were also readily replaced by entirely different content and themes that began trending among social media users. Subsequently, social media activism on the Kandy event and related matters faded away from online forums. Hence, the issues and differences of these two communities also disappeared from the online public sphere, without seeing resolution. One could argue that social media users are bombarded with a profusion of new content every passing second. Therefore, the shelf-life for a given topic is likely to be lower than higher.

Grainge (1-2) identifies this as a salient feature of contemporary audio-visual culture. According to him, its exponential growth, "has seen proliferation of short-form media geared towards mobile audiences whose attention are more fleeting and dispersed" (3). At the same time, high speed platforms with heavy

traffic flow like YouTube, accommodate unfiltered, disordered new content in abundance. Under these circumstances, the not so new content disappears into the archives at almost the same speed. The YouTube community also goes with the flow, picking up and responding to trending and immediate topics. Grainge refers to this behaviour as “entertainment snacking” (8). He believes that the “snack culture” is a distraction for a passive audience and not a site for potential user engagement. The short-lived user interest and engagement of the YouTube community on both the Ampara and Kandy incidents, can also be viewed through the lens of Grainge’s ‘snack culture’. Conversely, YouTube also facilitates archiving these images in its massive storage. This results in providing its communities the access and ability to retrieve and resurface these images with ease with a single mouse-click. Grainge believes that “in this dual moment towards speed and storage, immediacy and archiving” (3), such YouTube content assume a particular cultural and textual significance. Hence, the snack culture of YouTube content makes meanings and representations that are short-lived and are readily replaced. This nature of the platform raises questions about its ability to sustain a productive discourse that could positively contribute to public discussion.

Ideology, Identity and Nationalism

Looking at social media activism surrounding the Ampara incident, it could be observed that the videos and related debate failed to change opinion among the respective communities. It is observed that participants used YouTube to exhibit and disseminate their journalistic investigations and evidence to support and justify their subject positions and activism. Contrary to their original intentions, this YouTube “evidence” has served a variety of purposes in different forums and platforms involving the traditional media, government institutions, activist groups, and NGOs. The material initiated a national discourse and also prompted responses by government stakeholders.

Even before the Ampara incident during times when there was no social or political strife, the video content on YouTube including mainstream news uploads as well as content by independent YouTubers (particularly in the Sinhala Language sphere) had predominantly coded the local Muslim population as a closed homogenized community which thrives in commerce and trade. On the other hand, in an effort to find a separate ethnic identity, independent of Sinhala and Tamil identities, the local Muslim community also started to develop and endorse visual and cultural representations of themselves by adopting certain mannerisms and ideologies from Middle Eastern and Arabic Islam culture, Nuhman’s research points out that this Arabic influence on local Muslims lead to the formation of the Muslim Congress as a political movement which

represented the Muslim community, creating a representation separate from other ethnicities in the country. With these ideological contradictions, subsequent ethnic tensions developed in acts of reciprocity by extremists in both Sinhala and Muslim communities. Social media platforms with their connectedness, operational simplicity and mass communicability, were able to exaggerate and multi-fold these issues associated with ethnic tensions. In the context of the YouTube platform and its consequential video material, the interpellation or the hailing of ideology concerning nationalism and ethnic identity is clearly visible. On YouTube, the rendition of Muslim conspiracy is created by various video uploads with content depicted as evidentiary material to show Muslims attempting to sterilize the Sinhalese or attempts by Muslim leadership to generalize Muslim laws or stories about how the Muslims are plotting to monopolize trade and commerce in Sri Lanka. Such video content escalate further with comments that dominantly decode these aspects, subsequently leading to the interpellation of anti-Muslim notions among the Sinhala community. Thus, such interpellation silences the moderate Sinhala audience and strengthens the nationalist argument.

Despite the fact that such coding can be experienced across all media outlets, it can be readily experienced on SM platforms like YouTube, where video content as well as the comments have the liberty to violate all socio-ethical boundaries. While the situation eased both on the ground and in the social media space after heavy state intervention, and some reconciliation efforts from the public and NGOs, the negative coding of the Muslim community was neither countered nor deconstructed. Both mainstream and social media outlets did not address these images developed by Sinhala nationalist ideology that portray the local Muslim community as a threat to the Sinhala majority.

On the other hand, there were no substantial efforts on the part of the Muslim community and its leadership to address these issues. It may be stated that the Muslim leadership might have believed that they could gain political mileage from the homogenization aspect of the coding, to subsequently create and establish a separate cultural and ethnic identity for the Muslim community. This attitude of the Muslim leadership arguably would further strengthen the anti-Muslim rhetoric of Sinhala nationalism and its conspiracy theories in which the Muslim community is depicted as a closed homogenized community which schemes to dominate local politics, commerce and culture by becoming the majority ethnic group in the country. These accusations were further strengthened due to various cultural and religious practices and representations associated with the Muslim religious leadership in the light of, lobbying to adopt *halal* certification for locally produced consumer products as well as the popularization of Arabic dress codes and cultural displays among Muslims. Such matters were again and again

forwarded as evidentiary material on YouTube to strengthen the anti-Muslim narrative.

The research shows that the Digana event cannot be taken as an isolated incident that followed an unfortunate event where a group of Muslim drunkards killed a Sinhala truck driver. The immediate reference to the Kandy riots is the Ampara eatery incident that escalated to a situation in which mobs attacked Muslim establishments. However, the gradual heightening to such ethnic tension and violent activism can be traced back over a century to the colonial period.

Simultaneously, the historical development of the said ethnic tension parallels the attempts of the local Muslim community to develop a separate ethnic identity for themselves based on Islamic values and culture. Events leading from the riots of 1915 to the formation of the SLMC in the 1980s show that this need for the creation of a separate identity for the Muslim community is motivated as a result of the democratic process and the representative electoral system. This created a need to convert the geographically and ideologically scattered Muslim public into a block vote to develop a strong lobbying group, who they themselves hailed as kingmakers. Arguably, it is in the interest of the Muslim leadership to create a homogenized community with strong Islamic religious identification to achieve their political goals. Hence, it can be viewed that the ethnic tensions among local communities, in light of the Sinhala-Muslim situation, is directly linked to the democratic process in a neoliberal political system. This argument exposes the crisis of democracy in a multiethnic, multireligious and multilingual society.

The free, accessible and unregulated nature of social media platforms has the tendency to fuel these ethnic tensions under the influence of dominant ideologies, leading to riots and violence. The social media content created by the general public (most of whom are politically illiterate and lacking understanding of the democratic process) influenced by the dominant ideology, reciprocally feeds dominant ideology and the nationalist narrative, further widening the ethnic divide. Ironically, the responses of the relevant minorities with reference to online activism also have an equivalent negative effect on ethnic relations. In most cases, collective responses of the Muslim community and its push towards fundamental Islamic values provided more references to the homogenized-closed community argument. On the other hand, government authorities do not seem to be equipped with an understanding, knowledge or the capacity to counter and address these situations with reference to social media activism other than to block or ban them completely. During the Kandy riots, in some instances, the government even restricted access to the internet in entirety, shutting down all online activities. However, it is observed that the core elements of the issue with regard to ideology and identity, that made a particular community hostile towards another, are neither addressed nor understood.

Understanding the Image, the Real and the Representation

YouTube videos and other media content from before the Kandy riots can provide some understanding of how the Muslim community is represented in the media sphere dominated by Sinhala nationalism that has been developing over the years. Although they inherit an elitist political and economic agenda, the general public that lives under its ideology perceives these representations as real.

The meaning given to these images or how the public read these images can be viewed as interpretations, that were constructed over the years through ideological representations. According to Hall, an ideology tries to fix meaning to such representations. In relation to the Ampara incident, the first video shows people investigating and reporting a potential sterilization scenario to align with the representation of the Muslim community constructed over the years as conspirators who try to gain demographical advantage over the Sinhala population. The video that followed showed people reporting the incident to the local police and producing the evidentiary material they collect in video format pertaining to the accusation. This depicts them as law-abiding citizens following the correct legal procedure to bring the perpetrators to justice. Hence, the accusers and viewers who are under the dominant ideology would have genuinely felt as though the people at the eatery did their duty as conscientious citizens. Therefore, the incident can be interpreted as an outcome of an ideology fixing meaning to representations of images, in this case, the members of the Muslim community and their sterilization conspiracy.

In the very next month, when a group of drunkards, which happened to be Muslims beat a man to death, who happened to be a Sinhalese, all the ideological representations that had been brewing over the years came to the forefront to be associated with and give shape to the incident. It was interpreted as a group of Muslims killing a Sinhalese. Moreover, the interpretation extended the meaning to make the incident constitutive to the Muslim conspiracy to eliminate the Sinhala population. It can be argued that such representation and respective interpretations fuelled the Kandy riots. Furthermore, it also silenced the majority of the Sinhala population. I believe it is fair to say that the ideas and the corresponding evidentiary material regarding a Muslim conspiracy are predominantly shared on social media, where most videos were uploaded to YouTube. Hence, when the potential of YouTube and social media are employed to facilitate and empower individuals as producers and distributors of media content, it appeals to the entire spectrum of ideas including extremism and racism. In this case, it is utilized to create a stereotype of Muslims as extremists and conspirators, where such representations could have also contributed to

nurturing the majority mindset that subsequently either endorsed the Kandy rioters or maintained silence about the associated violence.

Conversely, the versatility or plurality of the YouTube platform is revealed during the post-violence reconciliation efforts that were also trending on YouTube. Because of the global capacity of social media, fixing meaning is comparatively a comparatively difficult task. In Hall's view, an image has no fixed meaning. It has a potentially wide range of meanings. Furthermore, meaning is always a process interpreting what is represented, where the interpretation is subjected to the historical and cultural context. Parallel to Hall's viewpoint, it can be argued that social media platforms like YouTube open up their borders to allow multiple representations, hence exhibiting plurality and inclusivity, subsequently unfixing and loosening hegemonic representations. This ability of social media to interact with the image and its meaning depicts its potential to create a public space for interrogation, cognition and discourse. The post-riot activism on YouTube showed its potential to contest the conventional stereotypes of the Muslim community created on the same social media platform. Ironically, since the representation is constitutive and there can be no fixed, essential and true meaning (Hall), there is no guarantee that representations associated with Muslim conspiracies will not surface again. Hall's solution to contest negative stereotypes and hostile representations is to interrogate such images and to make them uninhabitable, destroying their naturalness and normality.

There was little effort by the government or activist groups or the Muslim community itself to vigorously interrogate these incidents and the associated representations that led to the violence, and to ultimately prevent such misconceptions being spread among the general population. When the riots petered out, the counter-argument and activism that contested such racism, got diluted and disappeared gradually from both social media as well as everyday life. However, the causalities of the riots and the violence in light of identity politics and extremist ideologies and associated representations continue to exist, with the potential of detonation in the future.

Writings on the [YouTube] Wall

Further research should be conducted on the socio-political context of the areas where communal violence took place, which is outside the scope of this study. However, the present research illustrates that a continuous study of YouTube provides immense data to understand public opinion and activism, along with opportunity for tracing the potential for violence. This information could be used to identify and take preventative measures to manage future risks and crises. Moreover, if social media activism connected to the Ampara event had been

appropriately analyzed, it may have helped mitigate the Kandy situation sooner. Most importantly, unless and until issues related to the construction and context of dominant ideologies and associated representations in both social media and mainstream media is addressed adequately, an ill-developed democratic society will be prone to such ethnic tension and conflict. When the energies of the people are focused and motivated to hate each other, it weakens society, upending all social, political and economic frontiers, further exacerbating underlying conditions. The challenge lies in turning people's energies and using the capabilities of current technology into pedagogical activism, to focus on democratizing tendencies and to create socio-political awareness.

The next couple of years since 2018, were shadowed by crisis situations that further escalated the anti-Muslim narrative among Sri Lankan communities. The 2019 Easter Sunday attack in Sri Lanka, was aggressively showcased by majority hegemonic institutions to justify their rendition of the Muslims as extremists and Islam as a violent religion (Mihlar; Haniffa). Arguably, with the 2019 Easter attack, the publics of the non-Muslim communities in general distanced themselves from the local Muslim community, subsequently pushing them into deeper isolation among Sri Lankan communities. In early 2020, when COVID19 came to spread in the South Asian region, a situational anti-Muslim narrative started to surface in the region, targeting Muslims as the spreaders/vectors of the virus. This regional narrative was adopted by the local hegemonic institution in the light of mainstream media as well as social media to endorse the anti-Muslim narrative and Islamophobia among local communities (Mihlar). Social media platforms became a prominent public space for such information, discussion and debates. Social media users and producers were highly active acquiring and reproducing and disseminating content associated to these events and incidents. Such activism further strengthens the significance of social media platforms and their virtual communities to understand the attitudes and behaviour of people and communities living in real environments. I believe my research on the 2018 anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka prompts further studies on such phenomena in both local and international contexts.

Conclusion

One cannot say that social media per se (or the internet) is responsible for the communal violence in Ampara and Kandy which took place in early 2018. However, at the same time, the videos related to the incidents clearly reveal their potential to create and promote ideological positions. In general, the public participates in these online debates with fixed ideologies / perspectives. Their objective in participating in online debates is to strengthen their argument and to gather likeminded interlocutors.

The development of mass media technologies including film, radio and television in addition to print, as well as further formations of media conglomerates and empires, created a pseudo public sphere engaged in manipulating and manufacturing public opinion and consent in favor of the system and their agenda. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky consider this scheme to be 'manufacturing consent'. Mass media consume the leisure time of the public with advertising, media socialization, political propaganda and culture industry, diverting us further from realizing the enlightenment dream. Mass media provide lifelong education on consumerism, how to be a faithful consumer and a grateful facilitator of the capitalist system. On the other hand, institutionalized education promotes established value systems and practices in social conformity, success in competition, vocational training and political economic success or subsistence. Schooling in a capitalist society is never about the democratization of knowledge and creating an autonomous rational community. Althusser (85 -126) refers to formal education as a part of the 'ideological state apparatus' appropriated to produce/reproduce ruling ideologies and social control in capitalist societies. On these grounds, it can be argued that the traditional education system and mass media in general never intended to uphold enlightenment values in their curriculum and agenda.

However digital convergence, along with the world wide web and the introduction of social media, has empowered the individual and small collectives who had no power earlier to be heard in mainstream opinion-making spheres to become a stand-alone media center, even an active participant in the public sphere. The user-friendly technological arrangements and efficiency and zero marginal costs of production and distribution justify the potential of new media for knowledge sharing and democratization, subsequently creating a space for pedagogical interaction.

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