

The Voice of Reform: Muslim Nesan and Muslim Society in Colonial Ceylon

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Abstract: During the late 19th century, British colonialism spurred significant transformations across South Asia. In Sri Lanka, Tamil-speaking Muslims urgently required social reform and educational advancement to navigate colonial power, Christian missionary efforts, and internal stagnation. The establishment of M.C. Siddi Lebbe's *Muslim Nesan* newspaper in 1882 marked a crucial turning point in this Muslim renaissance. This research investigates how *Muslim Nesan* served as a voice for marginalized communities, simultaneously acting as a catalyst for intellectual illumination, cultural revitalization, and political awareness among Muslims in Sri Lanka. A historical thematic analysis of the newspaper reveals its profound impact on reshaping contemporary Muslim identity. Functioning as an essential platform between 1882 and 1889, *Muslim Nesan* ignited a social and religious awakening within the Muslim community. Under M.C. Siddi Lebbe's leadership, the 48 published issues championed Muslim upliftment through educational reform, social progress, religious restoration, and resistance against colonial rule and missionary interference. By actively promoting community identity and resisting cultural erosion, the newspaper fostered an embrace of modern knowledge integrated with Islamic values. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study primarily analyzes secondary data, including extant issues of *Muslim Nesan* and relevant historical and cultural publications. Through descriptive analysis, the research examines key thematic areas, highlighting the newspaper's contribution to Muslim community identity and resistance to colonial influence. The concluding discussion reflects on these findings and proposes avenues for future research on media-driven social movements within historical Muslim societies.

Keywords: Colonialism, Muslim Nesan, Siddi Lebbe, Sri Lanka.

INTRODUCTION

The 19th century marked a period of profound socio-political and religious transformation for Muslim communities across South Asia. In Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), a British colony characterized by a complex ethno-religious landscape, this era witnessed the burgeoning of Islamic revivalist movements, mirroring similar trends from the Middle East to Southeast Asia. These movements arose in response to the multifaceted challenges posed by colonial governance. Within this broader historical context, the establishment of the *Muslim Nesan* newspaper in 1882 by M.C. Siddi Lebbe, a seminal figure in Ceylonese Muslim society, emerged as a pivotal platform for the articulation of aspirations, the assertion of identity, and the advocacy for reforms essential to the nascent Muslim renaissance on the island. This research paper undertakes an examination of the critical role played by *Muslim Nesan* in spearheading this Muslim Renaissance in Sri Lanka. Specifically, it analyzes the social, religious, educational, and moral contributions of the newspaper under the intellectual and visionary leadership of M.C. Siddi Lebbe, a distinguished lawyer, educationist, and reformer deeply influenced by contemporary Islamic intellectual currents, notably those associated with Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (Ridgeway, 1908).

Nineteenth-century Muslim society in Ceylon was characterized by social inertia, limited access to

modern education, and a degree of religious syncretism. The prevailing colonial education system had largely marginalized the Muslim populace, resulting in a growing disparity between them and other communities who were increasingly embracing Western educational paradigms and experiencing concomitant economic advancement. This engendered a sense of marginalization among Muslims, who increasingly perceived a decline in their societal standing within a rapidly modernizing context. This socio-intellectual milieu gave rise to a cohort of forward-thinking leaders who recognized the imperative of intellectual and social revitalization through the strategic deployment of education, journalistic endeavors, and community organization. Among these influential figures, M.C. Siddi Lebbe occupies a central position. Demonstrating a keen understanding of the press as a potent instrument for mass communication and communal enlightenment, he initiated the *Muslim Nesan* press, which produced the first Muslim newspaper in Ceylon. This publication served a crucial function in cultivating awareness regarding the exigency of educational reform, the purification of religious practices, and the overall social upliftment of the Muslim population. Through his influential writings, Siddi Lebbe exhorted Muslims to relinquish antiquated customs, embrace modern educational

opportunities, and rediscover the core spiritual and ethical tenets of Islam. The term "renaissance," as employed herein, signifies not merely a resurgence of Islamic knowledge and cultural heritage but also the awakening of a collective consciousness among Ceylonese Muslims. The *Muslim Nesan* newspaper provided a vital forum for dialogue, intellectual debate, and the dissemination of ideas that challenged prevailing norms and fostered progressive thought. It addressed critical issues such as the education of women, the adherence to religious orthodoxy, the pursuit of economic empowerment, and the cultivation of community solidarity. In so doing, it laid the intellectual and social groundwork for the development of a modern Muslim identity that was both firmly rooted in Islamic tradition and responsive to the evolving realities of the contemporary world (Wilson, 1998).

Siddi Lebbe's vision for the advancement of the Muslim community was significantly informed by pan-Islamic ideals and the reformist fervor of influential thinkers such as Al-Afghani, whom he regarded as a significant intellectual mentor and source of inspiration. The very title of the newspaper, *Muslim Nesan*, translating to "The Muslim Friend," underscores this transnational intellectual connection, as it was deliberately modeled after Al-Afghani's Persian-language journal, *Urwatul Wuthqa*. Indeed, *Muslim Nesan* actively translated and republished numerous articles from *Urwatul Wuthqa*, thereby introducing the broader discourse of global Islamic reformism to the local Muslim readership in Ceylon. This not only expanded the intellectual horizons of Ceylonese Muslims but also situated their local concerns within a larger global Islamic awakening. Furthermore, the newspaper played a critical role in bridging the perceived dichotomy between traditional religious knowledge and secular education. It consistently advocated for the establishment of educational institutions that effectively integrated Islamic studies with modern subjects such as science, mathematics, and the English language. Siddi Lebbe himself was instrumental in the founding of several key educational institutions, most notably Colombo Zahira College, which subsequently served as a paradigm for Muslim education across the nation (Salman, 2016). The persistent emphasis within the paper on education as a catalyst for empowerment reflected a profound understanding of the transformative potential inherent in knowledge acquisition.

Moreover, *Muslim Nesan* engaged with salient social issues prevalent within the Muslim community, including poverty, instances of social stratification reminiscent of caste discrimination, and gender disparities. It actively promoted charitable endeavors, initiatives for community development, and the principles of mutual assistance as integral components of the Islamic ethical framework. The newspaper's articles frequently underscored the importance of communal unity, moral rectitude, and civic engagement, thereby fostering a sense of shared purpose and ethical conduct among its readership. In the religious sphere, the newspaper contributed significantly to the purification of Islamic beliefs and practices by challenging prevalent superstitions, syncretic rituals, and the undue influence of non-Islamic customs. It championed a return to the foundational sources of the Qur'an and Sunnah, advocated for the revival of authentic Islamic teachings, and critiqued the exploitation of religious tenets for personal gain or the exacerbation of social divisions. This reformist orientation was carefully balanced with an inclusive vision of Islam that emphasized principles of tolerance, rational inquiry, and individual spiritual development. The historical significance of *Muslim Nesan* and the multifaceted contributions of Siddi Lebbe cannot be overstated. Within a colonial context where Muslim voices were often marginalized or overlooked, the newspaper effectively created a vital space for intellectual empowerment and the articulation of cultural identity. It served as a crucial link between local struggles and broader global intellectual and religious movements, thereby fostering a sense of belonging to the wider *ummah*. More significantly, it played a formative role in redefining the very essence of Muslim identity within a rapidly modernizing and increasingly pluralistic society.

This research endeavors to undertake a critical analysis of the content, stated objectives, and demonstrable impact of the *Muslim Nesan* newspaper within the analytical framework of the Muslim Renaissance in Ceylon. It seeks to elucidate the ways in which Siddi Lebbe strategically employed journalism as a vehicle for social and religious reform and to assess the enduring legacy of these efforts for subsequent generations. Drawing upon primary source materials, including archived editions of the newspaper and relevant historical records, alongside pertinent secondary scholarship, this study adopts a multidisciplinary methodological

approach that integrates insights from history, religious studies, sociology, and media analysis. The structure of the research is as follows: the literature review will critically examine existing scholarly work on Islamic reform movements, the history of Muslim journalism in South Asia, and the life and intellectual contributions of Siddi Lebbe. The methodology section will delineate the specific research design, the primary and secondary sources employed, and the analytical framework guiding the study. The results and discussion section will provide a detailed analysis of the key themes, central arguments, and multifaceted impact of *Muslim Nesan*, organized around its social, religious, educational, and moral contributions to the Muslim community. Finally, the conclusion will synthesize the principal findings of the research and offer potential avenues for future scholarly inquiry and community development initiatives. By revisiting the significant legacy of *Muslim Nesan*, this research aspires to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the potential of media as a catalyst for profound social change, religious reform, and transformative educational advancements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intellectual landscape surrounding the Muslim Renaissance in Sri Lanka, particularly during the latter part of the 19th century, has garnered considerable scholarly attention. Researchers have focused on the intricate interplay of religious reform, educational advancement, the burgeoning role of journalism, and broader socio-political transformations within the context of colonial South Asia. Central to this historical narrative is the seminal figure of Muhammad Cassim Siddi Lebbe and his pioneering journalistic endeavor, the *Muslim Nesan*. This literature review undertakes a critical examination of extant research and scholarly interpretations concerning Siddi Lebbe's multifaceted contributions, the instrumental role of *Muslim Nesan* in cultivating Muslim communal consciousness, and the overarching Islamic reformist currents that significantly shaped its discursive framework. The late 19th century presented a period of considerable challenges for the Muslim community in Ceylon. Historical analyses by scholars such as Ameer Ali (1980) and Lorna Dewaraja (1982) provide valuable insights into the prevailing socio-political and economic conditions experienced by Muslims under British colonial administration. These scholarly works underscore the systemic marginalization of

Muslims within the colonial education apparatus and their comparatively limited participation in the civil service and burgeoning commercial sectors, particularly when contrasted with the dominant Sinhalese and Tamil elites. This discernible disparity served as a potent catalyst, fueling a collective aspiration among Muslims to reclaim their social and intellectual standing through concerted efforts in educational reform and a revitalization of religious life.

Dewaraja's analysis elucidates that Ceylonese Muslim society of the time was largely characterized by deeply entrenched traditional structures, with a notable lack of engagement in secular education, especially within English-medium institutions. The colonial educational system, while ostensibly secular and modern in its structural design, inadequately addressed the specific cultural and religious needs of the Muslim populace, thereby creating a significant void that reform-minded individuals such as Siddi Lebbe sought to address. The observed socio-religious inertia within Ceylon was not an isolated phenomenon but rather resonated with broader concerns within the Islamic world, thus situating the Muslim Renaissance in Sri Lanka within a wider global framework of reformist thought and action. The ascendance of print journalism in South Asia played a pivotal role in the dissemination of reformist ideologies among diverse Muslim communities. Scholars such as Gail Minault (1998) and Francis Robinson (2001) have conducted extensive research on Muslim journalism in India, demonstrating how newspapers evolved into critical platforms for articulating communal grievances, propagating reformist ideologies, and shaping identity politics. These scholarly inquiries highlight the intricate ways in which journalistic practices became intertwined with religious revivalist movements, initiatives for educational reform, and broader social activism.

Within the specific Sri Lankan context, *Muslim Nesan* occupies a unique historical position as the inaugural Muslim-owned and edited newspaper explicitly oriented towards a Muslim readership and dedicated to addressing issues of specific concern to the community. Siddi Lebbe's strategic utilization of the press as an instrument for social and intellectual reform reflects the discernible influence of earlier seminal Muslim publications, such as *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and *Urwatul Wuthqa* co-edited by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Scholarly

research by M.M.M. Mahroof and M.M. Nayeem underscores the profound significance of *Muslim Nesan* as a crucial medium through which modernist and pan-Islamic discourses were introduced and disseminated within Ceylon. The newspaper regularly featured translations of articles from *Urwatul Wuthqa*, thereby exposing local Muslim intellectuals and the broader reading public to prevailing global reformist thought. It is evident from the historical record that Lebbe conceived of the press not merely as a conduit for information dissemination but as a potent moral and intellectual instrument for the upliftment of what he perceived as a stagnating society. Siddi Lebbe has been widely recognized as a leading figure in Muslim reformist movements in Sri Lanka, often drawing comparisons with contemporary figures such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in India. His multifaceted roles as a legal professional, an educator, a publisher, and a community organizer have been explored in various biographical studies, including those by I.L.M. Abdul Azeez and others. These scholarly works consistently portray him as a deeply religious and intellectually visionary leader who skillfully integrated core Islamic values with modernist principles and perspectives. Azeez (1973) posits that Siddi Lebbe's reformist agenda was fundamentally rooted in his acute recognition of the multifaceted decline of the Muslim community across social, economic, educational, and spiritual domains. Through his extensive writings and active engagement in community affairs, Lebbe consistently advocated for a balanced approach that harmonized the acquisition of traditional religious knowledge with the embrace of modern secular education. His significant educational endeavors, most notably the establishment of Zahira College in Colombo, were integral components of a broader strategic vision aimed at cultivating an enlightened Muslim intelligentsia capable of effectively engaging with the modern world without compromising core religious tenets. Subsequent scholarly studies have further explored his advocacy for the advancement of women's education, the promotion of community-based self-help initiatives, and the fostering of harmonious inter-communal relations. Notably, Siddi Lebbe directly challenged the prevailing notion that Western education was inherently incompatible with Islamic principles. Instead, he persuasively argued that the pursuit of knowledge (*ilm*) was a fundamental religious obligation and that the Muslim community could not achieve meaningful progress without

embracing modern scientific inquiry and rational thought.

The instrumental role of the *Muslim Nesan* newspaper in instigating social and religious reform constitutes a recurrent and significant theme within the existing scholarly literature. Analyses of articles published in the newspaper reveal Siddi Lebbe's persistent and determined efforts to combat ignorance, superstition, and perceived religious deviations within the Muslim community. According to Mahroof (1989), the newspaper explicitly critiqued the uncritical adherence to the veneration of *pirs* (saints) and other syncretic practices that had, in his view, diluted Islamic orthodoxy. Furthermore, *Muslim Nesan* actively promoted ethical behavior, emphasized the importance of moral conduct in both public and private life, and consistently called for a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah as the primary and authoritative sources of religious guidance. The newspaper also addressed pressing social concerns such as pervasive poverty, unemployment, and the limited opportunities for professional advancement among Muslims. It advocated for the implementation of vocational training programs, the promotion of entrepreneurial endeavors, and the establishment of cooperative ventures among Muslim youth. These thematic concerns align closely with the core tenets of Islamic modernism, which emphasized the inherent compatibility of Islamic principles with social reform and rational progress.

The profound influence of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani on the intellectual development and reformist vision of Siddi Lebbe is well-documented in both primary historical sources and subsequent secondary scholarly analyses. Al-Afghani, a prominent and influential advocate for Islamic unity and resistance against colonial domination, traveled extensively across the Islamic world, actively promoting the concept of a pan-Islamic revival. His influential journal, *Urwatul Wuthqa*, co-edited with Muhammad Abduh, enjoyed wide circulation and exerted a significant intellectual impact on numerous Muslim intellectuals of the era, including Siddi Lebbe. Siddi Lebbe's deep admiration for Al-Afghani is clearly evident in the very naming of *Muslim Nesan*, which was consciously modeled after *Urwatul Wuthqa* and shared many of its core thematic concerns—reform, the imperative of unity, resistance to colonial cultural hegemony, and the overarching goal of Islamic revival. By actively translating and

disseminating articles from *Urwatul Wuthqa*, *Muslim Nesan* effectively served as a crucial conduit for the dissemination of pan-Islamic thought within Sri Lanka, thereby introducing its readership to the broader intellectual debates and currents within the global *ummah*. This pan-Islamic dimension is of critical importance in understanding the underlying ideological foundations of the Muslim Renaissance in Sri Lanka. It situates *Muslim Nesan* not merely within the context of local reformist initiatives but also as an integral part of a larger transnational movement that sought to redefine Muslim identity in response to the dual challenges of colonial domination and internal societal decline. Additionally, the existing body of scholarship exhibits a relative paucity of comparative analysis between *Muslim Nesan* and other contemporary reformist publications in the wider South Asian region. Such a comparative study could potentially illuminate the unique characteristics of Ceylon's Muslim Renaissance and its specific linkages with the broader South Asian Islamic revivalist movements. Furthermore, the specific role of *Muslim Nesan* in shaping Muslim political consciousness during the colonial period has received comparatively less scholarly attention. Given that the newspaper addressed salient issues of justice, governance, and the assertion of community rights, it arguably laid a foundational groundwork for subsequent Muslim political activism in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, primarily employing historical and content analysis to investigate the social, religious, educational, and moral contributions of *Muslim Nesan*, the newspaper established by M.C. Siddi Lebbe in late 19th-century Sri Lanka. The methodological framework is designed to critically analyze primary and secondary sources that shed light on the role of *Muslim Nesan* within the Muslim Renaissance of Ceylon and to evaluate its influence on the Muslim community during the colonial era. The principal primary source for this research comprises digitized and printed editions of *Muslim Nesan*, which offer a rich repository of editorials, translated works, religious discourses, advocacy for educational reform, and social commentaries. These articles were predominantly published in Tamil, with occasional instances of Arabic-Tamil, and included translations from influential reformist newspapers such as *Urwatul Wuthqa*. Select translated excerpts and scholarly summaries of *Muslim Nesan* articles, as found in

conference proceedings and academic compilations, have been utilized to supplement the analysis of the original newspaper material.

Complementing the primary sources, this study draws upon a range of secondary sources, including scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and biographical studies focusing on Siddi Lebbe, the history of journalism during the colonial period, and Muslim social reform movements in South Asia. The works of scholars such as M.M.M. Mahroof, I.L.M. Abdul Azeez, and Lorna Dewaraja provide particularly valuable interpretive frameworks for analyzing the historical and intellectual significance of *Muslim Nesan*. The study implements a thematic content analysis approach. Articles and editorials extracted from *Muslim Nesan* were systematically examined and categorized under four overarching themes: (1) social reform, (2) religious revival, (3) educational advocacy, and (4) moral instruction. Within each thematic category, the analysis focused on the rhetorical strategies employed, the underlying ideological messages conveyed, and the relevant historical context. Through the integration of these methodological approaches, this study aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted ways in which *Muslim Nesan* functioned both as a mirror reflecting the currents of the Muslim Renaissance in Sri Lanka and as an active catalyst propelling its development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research holds significant importance for understanding M.C. Siddi Lebbe's perspective on fostering awareness, promoting education, and encouraging literary production across all strata of society, with a particular emphasis on the empowerment of women and youth. Notably, Lebbe actively solicited literary contributions, including both poetry and prose, from men and women for publication in *Muslim Nesan*. Furthermore, the newspaper serialized the novel *Aasen be Sarithiram* (purportedly a fictional narrative exploring a romantic relationship between a British woman and a Moor man from Colombo). This literary inclusion provided a platform for public discourse and debate concerning the reform of Muslim personal law, prevailing sociocultural challenges, advancements in education, and the quality of religious leadership within the community. Moreover, *Muslim Nesan* served as a vital conduit for Islamic movements and religious organizations to

disseminate their perspectives, ideas, and guidance to the wider populace through the medium of print. Consequently, the newspaper functioned as a potent voice for reform, communal awakening, and the cultivation of unity among Muslims in colonial Ceylon. It laid a foundational groundwork for the subsequent Muslim Renaissance in Sri Lanka, significantly shaping both political consciousness and communal identity. Through its integrated approach encompassing religious guidance, critical social commentary, and advocacy for educational progress, Muslim Nesan played a pivotal role in the modernization and empowerment of the Muslim community during the late 19th century.

Launch and Background

Ideology: Muslim Nesan commenced publication in 1882 under the editorial stewardship of M.C. Siddi Lebbe, whose primary objective was the educational advancement and modernization of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. The newspaper transcended the conventional role of a news disseminator, functioning as a crucial platform for educational, religious, and social reform initiatives. The publication's stated motto underscored its commitment to enlightenment and progress. In its ideological orientation, Muslim Nesan drew inspiration from analogous reformist movements prevalent across South Asia, strategically adapting pertinent ideas to the specific socio-cultural context of the local Muslim population. Prior to the emergence of Muslim Nesan, earlier journalistic endeavors such as *The Muslim Friend* and *Sarvajana Nesan* had been initiated but lacked long-term sustainability. In marked contrast, Muslim Nesan evolved into a prominent and enduringly influential publication, a testament to its consistent guiding vision, the strength of its leadership, and the sustained relevance of its content to its readership.

Name and Logo: The inaugural page of the newspaper bore the Tamil title 'Upavali Guest' alongside the English translation 'The Muslim Friend', both conveying the meaning 'Muslim Friend'. Notably, in 1877, a Hindu newspaper named 'Ilangai Nesan' (Lanka Friend) commenced publication in Jaffna, suggesting a potential trend or rationale behind such nomenclature during this period. Several Sinhala newspapers emerging in the country also adopted the title 'Mithraya', which carries the same semantic weight as 'Nesan' (Friend). The masthead of the Muslim Nesan newspaper featured the prominent symbol of the crescent moon and star. The adoption of the

crescent moon and star as an identifying emblem for Muslim communities gained traction in the 19th century. Historically, this symbol can be traced back to the Byzantines around 300 AD. By the 5th century AD, Sasanian (Persian) coinage also depicted this motif. Even following the Muslim conquest of Persia in the 7th century AD, coins bearing the crescent moon and star continued in circulation. However, this emblem largely fell into disuse during the Middle Ages, experiencing a resurgence with its incorporation into the flag of the Ottoman Empire from the 18th century onwards. During this era, the Ottomans, observing the practice of European states utilizing flags with distinct emblems, actively developed the crescent and star as their national symbol (Ridgeway, 1908). Subsequent to 1844, a five-pointed white star against a red backdrop became the established Ottoman Turkish flag. Concurrently, the crescent moon and star were introduced into regions under Ottoman local control. Consequently, the association of the crescent and star became deeply ingrained as a symbol of Muslim identity, largely due to its prominent use as the emblem of the Caliphate (Kunnecke, 2016). The significant revivalist movement that commenced within the Muslim world in the 19th century also had its origins centered in Turkey. The Pan-Islamic Movement, arising as a major revivalist force, employed a ten-pointed star, sometimes on a green background, in conjunction with the crescent moon. This movement, which emerged partly as a response against European influence and expansion, focused on mobilizing Muslims with the aim of liberating Muslim-controlled territories from European empires. However, the specific rationale behind this movement's utilization of the ten-pointed star alongside the crescent moon remains unclear.

Theme of Muslim Nesan: Beneath the logo and title on its front page, Muslim Nesan featured a thematic statement that encapsulated the newspaper's core purpose. The Tamil phrase "Muzj;ij Nju; G+uzj;ijg; ghu;" served as this guiding principle, clearly articulating the *raison d'être* of Muslim Nesan. This thematic text centers on the concept of 'Aranam', which translates to Dharma, with the overarching idea being "Achieving perfection by following the Dhamma." Notably, the Tamil word 'aranam' also carries the meaning of knowledge. Interpreting "Aranam" in this context suggests a parallel to the well-known English adage, "Reading makes a complete man." Consequently, it becomes evident that Muslim

Nesan newspaper accorded significant emphasis to both education and religious doctrine as integral components of individual and communal development.

Related Publications and Influence: Prior to and following the publication of Muslim Nesan, several other newspapers were launched both in Sri Lanka and internationally, including The Muslim Friend (established in 1877 by Syed Ahmad Khan) and Sarvajana Nesan (initiated by A.L.C. Mohideen). However, Muslim Nesan distinguished itself and achieved prominence due to its sustained and consistent publication alongside its robust ideological underpinnings. The newspaper's scope extended beyond merely addressing the immediate concerns of the local Muslim community; it also engaged with broader global Muslim issues, reporting on significant events and developments in countries such as Egypt, Turkey, and India. This coverage played a crucial role in fostering a sense of connection and solidarity between the Muslim community in Sri Lanka and wider global Islamic movements.

Objectives of the Muslim Nesan: According to Sakeef (2022), the establishment of the Muslim Nesan newspaper was driven by a clear vision of instigating educational and social reform within the Muslim community of Sri Lanka. Throughout its publication from 1882 to 1889, the newspaper consistently directed its editorial content towards the advancement of the community. This period coincided with significant transformations in Sri Lanka under Western colonial rule, notably the emergence of modern education and institutions. However, the Muslim community, at the time, faced relative social and educational отставание. Recognizing this disparity, Muslim Nesan aimed to cultivate awareness and facilitate the upliftment of the Muslim populace through its journalistic endeavors. Its key objectives included:

- Disseminating important news and information, potentially sourced from foreign languages, to its readership through translation or information compilation.
- Fostering dialogue and engagement among Muslim religious scholars, thereby supporting and promoting academic revival within the community.
- Reporting news and developments from the wider Muslim world, such as the Turko-Russian War, the Afghan War, the Egyptian War, and the movement led by Orabi Pasha in Egypt.
- Responding to the significant educational advancements achieved by Buddhist and Hindu

revival movements through their respective newspapers by 1880, thereby creating an impetus within Muslim society to embrace education as a means of modernization and societal progress.

- Promoting the reformation of what were perceived as degraded religious beliefs and practices, and actively working to eliminate superstitions and practices deemed contrary to religious tenets.
- Spearheading a Muslim religious revival or renaissance within the community.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF MUSLIM NESAN FOR ISLAMIC SOCIAL RENAISSANCE

Socio-economic Development through Arabic and Islamic Studies

Muslim Nesan was conceived as an instrument for the holistic development and reform of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. Recognizing the contemporary reformist movements gaining momentum among the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, the newspaper similarly aimed to revitalize the Muslim community across social, educational, and religious spheres. Its publication directly addressed the prevailing religious and social backwardness of Muslims, serving as a crucial platform for raising awareness, disseminating information, and guiding the community towards modernization. Notably, Muslim Nesan consistently underscored the paramount importance of education, literacy, and modern knowledge as essential catalysts for elevating the social standing of Muslims.

Social Reform: Challenging Cultural Stagnation

Muslim Nesan actively fostered social awakening within the Sri Lankan Muslim community by critically examining the socio-intellectual stagnation prevalent among Muslims during the 19th century. The newspaper unequivocally condemned detrimental social customs and earnestly urged the community to embrace modern practices and progressive modes of thought. A significant aspect of its social reform agenda was the upliftment of women through advocacy for their education and the promotion of their respect within society. Functioning as a catalyst for social change among Sri Lankan Muslims in the late 19th century, Muslim Nesan, under the guidance of Siddi Lebbe, provided a platform for critiquing entrenched customs and championing modernization. Key issues addressed included

excessive expenditure on weddings, the persistence of superstitious practices, and the neglect of women's fundamental rights. By promoting rational inquiry and ethical conduct, the newspaper encouraged the community to shed outdated traditions and adopt progressive values, aligning with broader reformist trends within the Islamic world that emphasized internal renewal as a necessary response to external colonial pressures. Beyond the realm of education, Muslim Nesan played a pivotal role in broader social reform within the Muslim community by openly criticizing superstitions, harmful traditions, and regressive practices prevalent at the time. Siddi Lebbe strategically utilized the newspaper to:

- Advocate for enhanced cleanliness and hygiene within both domestic and public spheres.
- Promote appropriate dress codes that effectively balanced religious modesty and social decorum.
- Oppose the financially burdensome practices of exorbitant dowries and lavish wedding ceremonies.
- Condemn the practices of child marriages and forced marriages conducted without the consent of the individuals involved.

Muslim Nesan effectively raised awareness regarding the importance of cleanliness, appropriate social conduct, and the necessity for active engagement with the broader society. It urged Muslims to transcend social isolation and actively participate in national progress, emphasizing the critical need for community unity, the advancement of women, and the promotion of entrepreneurial initiatives. The newspaper consistently encouraged the community to critically reflect upon Islamic teachings and to implement them in a manner that upheld human dignity and fostered societal progress. The powerful statement, "Religion should not be an excuse for ignorance. Islam is a religion of wisdom, order, and cleanliness. Let us not distort it through blind tradition," exemplifies this approach. By strategically incorporating both Quranic verses and Hadiths, the newspaper reinforced its moral message, demonstrating that social progress was not antithetical to religious principles but rather inherently aligned with their true essence.

Religious Reform: Advocating for Authentic Islamic Practices

The newspaper played a crucial role in clarifying core Islamic teachings and rectifying prevalent religious misconceptions among Muslims. It

actively promoted a return to authentic Islamic principles and fostered unity within the Muslim community while simultaneously discouraging sectarian divisions and the perpetuation of superstitious beliefs. Muslim Nesan significantly contributed to the reinforcement of Islamic identity within a society under colonial dominance by effectively addressing the pressures exerted by Christian missionary activities. The newspaper's pivotal role in religious reform was manifested through its consistent advocacy for a return to genuine Islamic teachings. Siddi Lebbe critically examined and challenged the uncritical adherence to local religious leaders and the incorporation of non-Islamic practices into Muslim rituals. He emphasized the critical importance of directly understanding the Qur'an and Hadith, actively encouraging readers to seek knowledge from these primary religious sources. This initiative was aimed at purifying religious practices and cultivating a more informed and devout Muslim community. By challenging established religious authorities, Muslim Nesan empowered individuals to assume personal responsibility for their faith and its practice.

The scope of Muslim Nesan extended beyond local concerns, frequently featuring reports, editorials, and translations pertaining to significant global Islamic reform movements, including:

- The impactful work of Syed Ahmad Khan in India and his dedicated efforts to modernize Muslim education.
- The Urabi Revolt in Egypt, which was widely interpreted as a significant Muslim response to colonial domination.
- The progressive modernization policies implemented by the Ottoman Empire.
- News and reports from various regions including Turkey, India, and the Middle East, particularly those focusing on Muslim progress and resistance against colonial powers.
- Through this international focus, the newspaper aimed to:
 - Cultivate a strong sense of global Muslim identity among its readership.
 - Inspire local activism by showcasing successful examples of Muslim progress and reform in other parts of the world.
 - Encourage a sense of solidarity and mutual support among Muslims across national borders.
- This outward-looking perspective distinguished Muslim Nesan from many other

local newspapers of its time, as powerfully articulated in the statement: “We are part of a global ummah. What happens in Turkey or India must matter to us in Sri Lanka. We must learn, unite, and uplift ourselves.”

Educational Reform: Establishing Modern Institutions

The newspaper consistently championed the cause of modern education among Muslims, actively encouraging families to enroll their children in schools and placing particular emphasis on the education of women. Recurring statements such as “education is the foundation of development” and “an ignorant community cannot prosper” underscored this commitment. For instance, the paper cited the Oxford University Press stating, “Without knowledge, no community can develop,” and referenced UNESCO statistics to highlight global literacy initiatives. It critically addressed the low literacy rates prevalent among Muslims at the time, promoting learning as the pathway to both religious and worldly success. A central tenet of its mission was the vigorous promotion of modern education within the Muslim community, including the crucial establishment of educational institutions. The newspaper actively supported education in English and Tamil as vital tools for social mobility and empowerment, and it strongly advocated for female education, a stance that was often met with controversy at the time. Recognizing the significant educational backwardness of Muslims, Siddi Lebbe prioritized the establishment of modern educational institutions. His efforts led to the founding of several schools, most notably the first Anglo-Mohammedan school in Colombo in 1884, which later became the prestigious Zahira College. These institutions offered instruction in Arabic, Tamil, English, and Sinhala, reflecting a comprehensive approach to education. By strategically integrating both religious and secular subjects into the curriculum, these schools aimed to cultivate well-rounded individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to both their faith and the broader society. Siddi Lebbe's pioneering efforts laid the essential foundation for a new generation of educated Muslims who were better equipped to navigate the complexities of colonial Ceylon. At the time, a general hesitancy towards Western-style education, particularly English education, prevailed within the Muslim community, often stemming from fears of potential religious decline. The newspaper directly confronted this mindset

through numerous editorials that clearly articulated:

- That education, in its essence, is not contrary to the principles of Islam.
- That the acquisition of knowledge, encompassing both religious and worldly domains, is a fundamental duty within Islam.
- That the Muslim world had historically achieved significant advancements in sciences, arts, and literature.

Muslim Nesan earnestly called upon parents to actively send their children to school and to embrace English-medium education while steadfastly maintaining their Islamic identity. Siddi Lebbe frequently cited the notable progress achieved by other communities in Sri Lanka, such as the Tamils and Sinhalese, in embracing education and the resultant benefits accrued to their respective communities.

Advocacy for Women's Education

A particularly groundbreaking contribution of Muslim Nesan was its unwavering advocacy for the education of women. At a time when female literacy rates were alarmingly low and prevailing cultural taboos actively discouraged girls from attending school, the newspaper adopted a remarkably bold and progressive stance. Key points emphasized by the publication included:

- The assertion that Islam inherently supports and encourages the education of women.
- The crucial recognition that an educated mother is instrumental in raising an educated family, thereby benefiting the entire community.
- The argument that female literacy is indispensable for the moral and intellectual growth and advancement of the community as a whole.

The newspaper presented compelling examples from Egypt and India where Muslim women had begun actively participating in educational and reform movements. It also highlighted the educational progress of Hindu and Christian girls in Sri Lanka and the positive impact this had on their respective communities. Muslim Nesan directly addressed religious leaders and conservative families, earnestly urging them to critically re-evaluate outdated customs and traditions, powerfully stating: “No nation can rise if half of it remains in darkness. Women are the backbone of society. Denying them education is denying the future.” This progressive message was revolutionary for its time, firmly establishing

Muslim Nesan as a pioneering and forward-thinking force within Islamic journalism.

Moral Development: Cultivating Ethical Consciousness

The articles published in Muslim Nesan consistently encouraged ethical living, the cultivation of discipline, and personal reform in accordance with core Islamic values. The newspaper directly addressed prevalent issues such as alcoholism, dishonesty, and laziness, promoting moral uprightness as a fundamental prerequisite for the progress and well-being of the community. Muslim Nesan underscored the essential role of moral development in achieving communal advancement. The newspaper tackled issues including dishonesty, indolence, and moral decay, earnestly urging its readership to uphold the highest standards of Islamic ethics. By clearly highlighting the detrimental consequences of immoral behavior, Siddi Lebbe sought to instill a strong sense of personal accountability and collective responsibility within the community. This unwavering focus on morality effectively complemented the newspaper's broader reformist agenda, reinforcing the critical understanding that individual character and ethical conduct were integral to the overall advancement of society.

Political Engagement: Advocating for Representation

Beyond its significant contributions to social and religious reforms, Muslim Nesan actively engaged in political discourse, advocating for the fair and just representation of Muslims within the structures of colonial governance. Siddi Lebbe directly challenged prevailing narratives that often marginalized the Muslim community, forcefully arguing for their rightful place and voice in the Legislative Council. Furthermore, the newspaper addressed critical economic concerns, cautioning against the negative impacts of unchecked foreign competition and urging Muslims to adopt modern business practices and entrepreneurial endeavors. By strategically linking political and economic empowerment, Muslim Nesan effectively encouraged Muslims to actively participate in shaping their own future within the existing colonial framework.

Muslim Nesan extended its focus beyond educational and social issues to actively cultivate political awareness within the Muslim community. It encouraged Muslims to:

- Develop a comprehensive understanding of their rights and responsibilities as citizens.

- Actively participate in public life and administrative processes.
- Engage with national-level issues that affected all communities within Ceylon, not solely the Muslim population.

During the late 19th century, a significant wave of political reform movements and nationalist ideologies was spreading across Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), India, and various other colonized nations. Muslim Nesan played a vital role in bringing these crucial developments to the attention of the local Muslim populace. The newspaper provided coverage of:

- Parliamentary debates and significant legal changes enacted under British rule.
- Public grievances and instances of administrative inefficiencies.
- The critical importance of unity and cooperation among all Ceylonese communities—Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims—for the overall progress of the nation.

The powerful statement, “If we remain isolated, we will be forgotten. Let us join hands with others in building our nation. Let us be citizens who contribute,” encapsulates this inclusive approach. The newspaper further emphasized that Muslims should not isolate themselves either religiously or culturally but should actively integrate into the national mainstream while steadfastly preserving their distinct Islamic identity.

Defense of Islam against Misconceptions

During a period when Islam was frequently misunderstood or misrepresented, particularly within colonial circles, Muslim Nesan served as a strong and articulate defender of the faith through well-reasoned and intellectually engaging articles. It diligently explained core Islamic teachings in relation to crucial concepts such as:

- Peace and tolerance
- The rights and status of women
- Principles of justice and equality
- The importance of rationality and scientific thinking

The newspaper took particular care to articulate that Islam was not inherently opposed to modernity or progress. It strategically cited historical examples from the rich tapestry of Islamic history, showcasing periods when Muslim civilizations had led the world in diverse fields such as science, art, and governance. Furthermore, Muslim Nesan directly and respectfully responded

to criticisms leveled by Christian missionaries and other religious publications that sought to portray Islam in a negative light. These responses were characterized by their scholarly rigor and respectful tone, drawing upon Quranic verses, Hadith, and verifiable historical evidence. The powerful statement, “Islam is not what others say it is. It is what the Prophet (peace be upon him) taught and lived. Let us educate others through our actions and words,” exemplifies this approach, which aimed to correct misunderstandings and foster greater interfaith understanding.

Development of Tamil Muslim Journalism

Muslim Nesan occupies a foundational and historically significant position in the evolution of Tamil Muslim journalism in Sri Lanka. At a time when Muslim participation in journalism and media was limited, this pioneering newspaper introduced innovative journalistic methods and content styles that profoundly shaped the trajectory of Muslim media in the region. Key contributions of Muslim Nesan to the development of Tamil Muslim journalism include:

- The deliberate use of simple and clear Tamil language, ensuring accessibility and comprehension for a broad segment of the population.
- The judicious integration of Arabic and English words where contextually appropriate, particularly for religious and modern terminology.
- The comprehensive inclusion of diverse journalistic formats, such as editorials, letters to the editor, in-depth articles, news items, and moral narratives.
- The active encouragement of public participation, providing a platform for readers to submit questions, share opinions, and engage in dialogue.

The newspaper also adhered to high editorial ethics, consciously avoiding sensationalism and demonstrating respect towards other communities. Its consistently respectful tone and informative content cultivated a broad and trusting readership. Muslim Nesan served as an influential model for subsequent Muslim publications and inspired writers, scholars, and religious leaders to recognize and utilize the press as a potent instrument for community reform and overall development, as eloquently stated: “A newspaper is like a teacher—it informs, corrects, and inspires. Let us use it to awaken our people.”

News Reports

The publication of news held a significant place within the content of Muslim Nesan newspaper. Weekly important events were regularly featured. Pages 02 to 04 of Muslim Nesan were specifically allocated for the dissemination of news reports. The Muslim Nesan Anupandam (Muslim Nesan News Summary) included a dedicated section for news. On the Muslim Nesan Anupandam page, under the Nudana Samacharam (Current Affairs) section for local news ('Ilangai') and the Anya Desa Napantam section for foreign news, Muslim Nesan typically published between 7 to 15 news items for each region. The news items published in Muslim Nesan were characterized by concise titles and were often presented in brief narratives, sometimes as short as one or two sentences. Notably, the reporting of certain news items extended beyond mere factual presentation, often incorporating the reporter's (frequently the author's) perspective. Among such news, numerous items held particular significance for the Muslim community. The author employed various news sources to gather information, with a considerable amount of local news being sourced directly from readers, and the editor also facilitated the publication of news procured through diverse channels. Additionally, the newspaper utilized other local publications of the time as sources for local news (Muslim Nesan, 1886 & 1887).

The local news published in Muslim Nesan can be broadly classified under several key sections:

- Socio-economic Development through Arabic and Islamic Studies
- News related to government and administration
- News related to court and legal proceedings
- Legislature-related news
- News related to agriculture and weather patterns
- News specifically relevant to the Muslim community
- News addressing social issues
- News introducing new inventions

A notable feature of the news reporting in Muslim Nesan was the significant attention accorded to both foreign and local news. Telegrams served as the primary source for foreign news. Additionally, both local and international newspapers were utilized as sources for foreign news reporting.

Legacy and Impact of Muslim Nesan

Even though Muslim Nesan ceased its publication in 1889, its long-term impact on the Muslim

community in Sri Lanka remains significant. The journal provided a crucial groundwork for the subsequent intellectual, social, and educational revitalization of the community. The heightened consciousness cultivated by *Muslim Nesan* directly contributed to:

- The establishment of educational institutions specifically for Muslims, most notably *Zahira College* in 1892. This development was inspired by the intellectual foresight of *Siddi Lebbe* and received notable support from figures such as *Ahmed Orabi Pasha*.
- A discernible increase in the participation of Muslims in various aspects of public life, including enhanced representation within governmental administrative structures and diverse professional sectors.
- The expansion and diversification of Tamil Muslim journalistic endeavors, evidenced by the proliferation of new newspapers and journals throughout the 20th century.
- The implementation of social reforms aimed at community advancement, encompassing the promotion of female education and the active contestation of detrimental traditional practices.

Siddi Lebbe subsequently became an emblematic figure of the Muslim Renaissance in Sri Lanka. His strategic employment of the newspaper as a vehicle for social and intellectual reform established a significant precedent for future generations of Muslim leaders and scholars.

CONCLUSION

In summation, *Muslim Nesan* transcended the conventional role of a newspaper, functioning as a catalyst for comprehensive societal transformation. It proactively confronted intellectual stagnation, social inertia, and communal insularity by championing education, advocating for reformative agendas, and fostering a sense of collective unity. Furthermore, the publication served as a conduit, connecting the Sri Lankan Muslim populace with broader global movements of Islamic reform and cultivating a renewed sense of communal pride and aspirations for progress. Specifically, the paper:

- Disseminated knowledge and fostered literacy among the general populace.
- Critically examined and challenged detrimental social customs and practices.
- Advocated for the expansion of women's rights and educational opportunities.

- Promoted a cohesive national identity and inter-communal harmony.
- Provided an intellectual defense of Islamic principles and beliefs.
- Pioneered the development of journalistic endeavors within the Muslim community.

The founder of this influential publication, *M.C. Siddi Lebbe*, effectively harnessed the power of the written word to instigate profound change within a community that had historically experienced neglect and marginalization. His endeavors through *Muslim Nesan* stand as a significant historical paradigm illustrating the potential of media as an instrument for religious and social awakening. The *Muslim Nesan* newspaper, under the astute leadership of *Muhammad Cassim Siddi Lebbe*, marked a seminal moment in the intellectual and cultural resurgence of the Muslim community in 19th-century Ceylon. Amidst a period characterized by social stagnation, educational deficiencies, and theological ambiguities within the island's Muslim population, *Muslim Nesan* offered a vital platform for intellectual invigoration, societal reform, and communal empowerment. Through its publications, *Siddi Lebbe* articulated his reformist ideals, skillfully synthesizing traditional Islamic principles with modern advancements and integrating religious tenets with progressive thought.

On a social level, *Muslim Nesan* directly addressed the imperative for internal communal reform. It offered a critical analysis of deeply entrenched customs that impeded social cohesion and progress, notably the marginalization of women, the prevalence of superstitious beliefs, and the community's general resistance to change. *Siddi Lebbe* underscored the significance of self-esteem, communal solidarity, and civic responsibility, urging Muslims to transcend inherited norms and embrace collective reform for the betterment of society as a whole.

In the religious sphere, the newspaper played a crucial role in the purification of Islamic practices within the community. It provided readers with education on the core tenets of Islam, thereby distinguishing them from cultural accretions and doctrinal innovations. *Siddi Lebbe* championed a return to the foundational sources of the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* and advocated for widespread religious literacy among the Muslim populace. The concerted effort to combat religious illiteracy, sectarian divisions, and un-Islamic rituals became

a defining characteristic of the paper's agenda, aligning it with broader reformist movements across the Islamic world.

The contributions of the newspaper extended beyond the realm of internal communal reform. It actively engaged with broader political and economic discourses, advocating for increased Muslim participation in public life, greater political representation, and the adoption of modern economic strategies. Furthermore, it exposed its readership to global currents of Islamic reformist thought, thereby establishing transnational intellectual connections that integrated Sri Lankan Muslims into wider pan-Islamic awakening movements.

In retrospect, Muslim Nesan was more than a mere periodical; it functioned as a reformist movement encapsulated in print. It served as a mirror reflecting the community's realities, a school nurturing intellectual growth, and a pulpit disseminating a progressive vision of Islam and modernity. Siddi Lebbe's enduring legacy, as powerfully conveyed through Muslim Nesan, stands as a compelling testament to the transformative potential of informed journalism in fostering social change.

Recommendations

To ensure the enduring impact of Siddi Lebbe and Muslim Nesan on future generations and broader society, the following recommendations are proposed:

- The significant contributions of Siddi Lebbe and Muslim Nesan should be formally integrated into national educational curricula, particularly within subjects such as history, civics, and Islamic studies. This inclusion will cultivate an appreciation among future generations for the historical roots of their intellectual and social reform traditions.
- Concerted efforts should be undertaken to digitize and meticulously preserve the complete collection of Muslim Nesan issues. Furthermore, translating the newspaper's content into English and Sinhala would significantly enhance its accessibility to a wider scholarly community and the general public, thereby fostering greater interfaith understanding and highlighting the pluralistic heritage of Sri Lanka.
- Muslim civil society organizations are encouraged to organize seminars and public discussions inspired by the central themes addressed in Muslim Nesan, with a particular

focus on women's education, religious ethics, and social responsibility. These initiatives can serve to rekindle the spirit of reform and intellectual engagement within contemporary Muslim communities.

- The establishment of a dedicated research center or institute focused on the life and works of Siddi Lebbe is recommended. This center should encompass not only Muslim Nesan but also his significant contributions to education and legal reforms. Such an institution could also facilitate comparative studies with other prominent reformist figures in the Muslim world, such as Syed Ahmad Khan in India and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani.
- Contemporary Muslim media platforms can draw valuable inspiration from the model established by Muslim Nesan by adopting its principles of ethical journalism, community empowerment, and educational outreach. Media outlets today possess the potential to play a constructive role in countering misinformation and promoting informed moral discourse.
- Scholars in the fields of history, religious studies, and communication should be actively encouraged to undertake further research into the multifaceted contributions of Muslim Nesan. Its pioneering role in Tamil Muslim print culture and its profound influence on subsequent reformist movements remain areas deserving of more comprehensive scholarly attention.
- The strategic approaches employed by Siddi Lebbe—which effectively combined faith with rational inquiry, ethical principles with practical activism, and respect for tradition with a commitment to reform—can serve as a valuable framework for addressing contemporary challenges facing the Muslim community, such as unemployment, educational attrition rates, and religious polarization.

In conclusion, the enduring legacy of Muslim Nesan and Siddi Lebbe stands as a powerful testament to the transformative capacity of informed thought, ethical conviction, and visionary leadership. Their impact extends far beyond the confines of the 19th century, offering enduring lessons for Muslim societies as they navigate the complex interplay of tradition and modernity, faith and reason, and the pursuit of identity and progress. The rediscovery and revitalization of this rich intellectual heritage is not merely an academic

pursuit but a necessary step toward fostering a more informed, unified, and future-oriented Muslim community, both within Sri Lanka and in the wider global context.

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