

Eastern Muslim Settlements

Mareena Z. Ismail¹

The Muslim settlements in Sri Lanka dates back to the 7 century A.D. Arab/Muslim traders frequented the coast and traded with the inhabitants. By the 9th century there were Muslim settlements along the west coast from Colombo to Matara. Muslims had also settled along the east coast as traders from Arabia and South India resorted to the ports of Trincomalee, Kottiyar and Batticaloa and the smaller harbours such as Sammanthurai. However the bulk of Muslim settlement in this area took place after the advent of the Portuguese in 1505

The Portuguese, also traders, were the rivals of the Muslims. They found that the Muslims carried on both the import / export trade as well as the internal trade of the Island. They introduced restrictive measure to curb the power and the influence of the Muslims who not only carried on the trade but were also a hindrance to the spread of their religion.

Finally in 1628 when de Saa ordered the expulsion of the Muslims from the ports they had to resettle in areas not under Portuguese control. It was at this time that most of them fled to India, to the hill country and to the eastern coast. The Kandyan King allowed them to settle in his Kingdom and also encouraged them to occupy the fertile eastern area and carry on trade from those ports.

Muslim migration to the east coast continued during Dutch times and today the eastern province has the largest concentration of Muslims. Reliable statistics as to the number of Muslims who migrated to the east during and after the Portuguese era are not available. However evidence can be gathered from legends popular in the area, from the family history of some of the prominent east coast Muslims and from the presence of old mosques and tombs

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¹ 79/1, Barns Place, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka.