

## Case 1: The arrest of Dr. Segu Siyabdeen Mohamed Shafi

While communal tensions in Sri Lanka had reached a boiling point following the Easter Sunday suicide bombings of churches and hotels by Islamist militants on 21 April 2019, which killed 269 people and injured around 500, Dr. Segu Siyabdeen Mohamed Shafi, also known as Dr. Shafi, of government teaching hospital, Kurunegala, 105km from Colombo was arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act on May 24, 2019, on suspicion of illegally sterilising thousands of Sinhalese women.

Dr. Shafi was arrested after the Sinhalese-language daily 'Divaina' reported unverified allegations that he had sterilized 4,000 Buddhist-majority women in the District of Kurunegala. The news also linked him to the Islamic group 'Thawheed Jamath organization,' which was blamed for the Easter attacks. Other media outlets jumped on the charges, accusing Shafi of performing 8,000 caesarian section procedures and secretly sterilising solely Sinhala Buddhist women. The report also claimed that the secret sterilisations were performed without the knowledge of the women involved by tubal ligation while they were undergoing caesarean section surgeries.

Police stood watch at the Magistrate Court and its surrounding area in Kurunegala, a Buddhist heartland, where Buddhist monks and other local citizens had advocated for Dr. Shafi's continued detention.

The claims were combustible on an island where hardliners within the Buddhist majority have accused Muslims of attempting to spread their influence through a greater birth rate.

The doctor was later granted bail of 2.75 million rupees (\$15,600) in July 2019.



Multiple posts on Facebook shared screenshots of the Divaina front page report or the television clips-

The post in Sinhalese-language Headline read: “Through caesarean Thowheed Jamath Doctor Sterilised 4000 Sinhala Buddhist women with evidence it is revealed. To arrest the doctor serious investigations going on.”



Kottawagama Dhammajothi

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*This Facebook post, uploaded May 23, 2019, called for the doctor to be given “punishments meted out during the era of ancient kings” — a reference to torture.*

Citing the purported sterilisations as justification, a Facebook Sinhala post by a Buddhist monk named Kottawagama Dhammajothi uploaded May 23, 2019, citing “Realise the danger now? This is Wahabism. He is a worse terrorist than the terrorist who carried out the bombings.” It called for the doctor to be given “punishments meted out during the era of ancient kings” — a reference to torture. Parliamentarian Athuraliye Rathana Thera stated that the doctor has not been acquitted from all charges even though he was reinstated by the Health Ministry despite the Magistrate’s Court had observed that there was sufficient evidence against him.

Furthermore, there were multiple misleading news that Dr. Shihabdeen Shafi has been reinstated in service.



Photo: Mawbima newspaper published news titled “Allegation of illegal contraceptive treatment; Dr Safi returns to service.”

When this was inquired by the fact checking organization “Fact Seeker”, the director of the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital said that a letter had been sent to Shihabdeen Mohamed Shafi asking him to pay the arrears. He also mentioned that he had not yet been informed about his appointment.

However, the Public Service Commission has asked the Health Secretary to reinstate Dr. Shafi in service, they were informed that the Health Secretary has sent a letter to the hospital asking Shihabdeen to pay Mohamed Shafi’s salary arrears.

Therefore, although the Secretary to the Ministry of Health had sent a letter to the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital requesting that Shihabdeen pay the arrears for the period when Mohamed Shafi was on compulsory leave, Shihabdeen Mohamed Shafi did not inform the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital until December 17, 2021, to reinstate himself in service.

Actor	Behaviour	Content	Degree	Effect
● Prime actors: Sinhalese-	Intent: suggests aspersion intent	It was reported that Dr. Shafi had sterilized	Target audience: Buddhist and	Human rights: religious freedom, the

<p>language daily 'Divaina' and due to them, he was arrested by the Police.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Secondary actors:</i> Other media outlets, Social media, hard-line Buddhist monks.</li> </ul>		<p>4,000 Buddhist-majority women in the District of Kurunegala without their knowledge and linked him to the Islamic group 'Thawheed Jamath organization,'</p> <p><i>Truthfulness:</i></p> <p>The content was untrue and not based on proof.</p> <p><i>Narrative:</i> It is aligned with the disinformation narrative.</p>	<p>Anti-Muslims</p> <p><i>Platforms:</i> media outlets &amp; Social media</p>	<p>right to life and liberty, unlawful arrest &amp; detention, hate speech, communal violence</p>
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**ABCDE Framework Analysis:**

**Actor:** Media and Social Media platforms were involved in producing and engaging with the suspected disinformation. It was the Mainstream Sinhala language daily newspaper, Divaina that published the information on May 23, 2019, which claimed that some 4,000 Sinhalese Buddhist women had been sterilised without their knowledge by a Muslim doctor at a hospital in Kurunegala, a town in Sri Lanka’s northwest.

**The report headlined:**

“Thawheed Jamath doctor has sterilized Sinhala Buddhist mothers after C-section surgeries. Details revealed with proof. Widespread investigations carried out to arrest the doctor”

**Behaviour:** The mentioned article was not based on any substantiating evidence and fuelled communal violence which amount to ill intention. Some hard-line Buddhist monks waded into the issue, demanding for the “stoning to death” of the renowned State surgeon.

A police investigation into the allegations proved negative. In a court hearing, Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officials had said there was not enough evidence to substantiate

the allegations against the doctor. Later on, the other claims of terrorist links and illegal assets he acquired through radical Islamic organizations were all dismissed.

**Content:** The video had elements of menace and harm to Muslims in a region where a narrative against Muslims had been built up in this country for more than a century, based on business rivalry and jealousy." The languages utilized to deliver the material or messaging are critical in determining the target audience and the scope of the threat. Furthermore, the contents that was published and distributed was deceptive and false. It also fit into the disinformation narrative. The media report was both deceptive and misleading, with no supporting proof.

**Degree:** The content was targeted against Muslims and newspaper platforms along with social media were used to distribute the content.

**Effect:** The content violated Dr. Shafi's human rights while inciting additional communal violence and hate speech. It has an impact on various fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom, the right to life and liberty, and Dr. Shafi was unlawfully arrested and detained. Through misrepresentation and deception, it also posed a threat to society and individuals' health and medical safety.

**Diagnosis:**

The Case has been identified as **incident of disinformation.**

**Conclusion:** The Sri Lankan government reinstated the Muslim doctor who had been placed on indefinite vacation. Following the Dr. Shafi incident, word spread those Muslim cafes provided food laced with birth control pills, and numerous stores in the Eastern Province were attacked. There was a lot of tension in some Muslim areas that were being terrorized.

The article was written around a week after Buddhist mobs in Sri Lanka's North-western Province burned Muslim houses, stores, and mosques in rioting sparked by coordinated bombings in the capital Colombo and two other cities.

It also had political ramifications, as Hilmy Ahmed, vice president of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, claimed that the Shafi allegations were mostly "stage-managed" by Rajapaksa allies to incite opposition to the government before of that year's Presidential Election. He was unable to give evidence to back up his claim.