Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society
ISSN: 2815-0961
Vol : 02 , No.01, Dec 2021 – Jan 2022
http://journal.hmjournals.com/index.php/JLLS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.21.1.8

Politics of Language and Education: An Evaluation of Tamil Separatism in the Sri Lankan Civil War

Sudha Rawat*

**Phd Research scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru Univesity, New Delhi, India.*

Received: 22 September 2021 **Accepted:** 02 December 2021 **Published:** 08 January 2022

Abstract: Sri Lanka, at present, is haunted by memories and experiences of the protracted ethnic conflict which lasted for nearly three decades due extremities of extrajudicial and rampant killings, suicide bombing, and human rights violation. The war was mainly fought between the Liberation of Tamil Tiger (LTTE) and Sinhalese dominated state government. At the primary level, the conflict is viewed as the manifestation of ancient ethnic rivalry between the Tamil minority and the Sinhala majority. However, the causes of this conflict are far more complex than ethnic differences among the communities and stem largely from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence history of the country. Albeit many circumstances and situations have contributed to Tamil separatism and consequent insurgency but this paper is centred on the role of language politics and education in the conflict. The politicization of the issue of official language during the various phases of thewar turned out to be the most powerful manifestation of the Sinhala –Tamil conflict, since language is a crucial factor in the maintenance and preservation of the cultural and ethnic identity, here the language became the exclusive marker of the ethnographic boundary between them. The language issue later manifested in the form of discrimination against Tamils in education. The indiscriminate practices after 1972, especially standardization policy and quota system for admission into universities based on language and pro-sinhala policies in the government sector paved the way for Tamil demand for a separate traditional homeland for Tamils. Hence this paper will analyse language politics and policies -Sinhala only act, and policies standardization and quota to understand the Tamil separatism during Sri Lankan civil war.

Keywords: Sinhala Only Act, Language, Education, LLTE, Quota and Standardization Policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Backdrop: The Setting and Ethnic Conflict

The whole of the last century had experienced interstate ethnic conflict and international war. Most of these wars can be associated with the question of ethnic nationalism and can be proclaimed that these wars took ugliest form- vehemently immersed in political strife, ideological rivalry and unspeakable brutality, torture and terror. Analogous to the global pattern, the entire region of South Asia had at some point faced the issue of acute ethnic

Copyright The Author(s) 2022.This is an Open Access Article distributed under the CC BY license. (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society
ISSN: 2815-0961
Vol : 02 , No.01, Dec 2021 – Jan 2022
http://journal.hmjournals.com/index.php/JLLS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.21.1.8

conflict. The Tamil issue in Sri Lanka, the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh problem at division of India-Pakistan, riots in Pakistan, ethnic and terrorism predicament of Afghanistan and the Chakma conflict of Bangladesh had attracted global attention to an extreme extent (Sahdevan2002:103). The incidents of numerous ethnic conflicts in post- colonial era in the region is a consequenceof prevalence of complex inter-ethnic, intra ethnic and religious interaction in multi-ethnic communities; and contention for political power within a multi-ethnic or multicultural society may lead to ethnic hostilities among groups. The ethnic issue of Sri Lanka was a complex, overtly sensitive and burning topic of contemporary period of South Asia. In Sri Lanka, post independence, owing to the majoritarian affirmative ideology to push for a Sinhalised and homogenized state to the disadvantage of minorities sowed the seed of ethnic conflict in the island (Bandarage 2008, Devotta 2000, 2004 and Navaratnam 1991).

Sri Lanka attained its independence in 1948. The political power was transferred smoothly and peacefully, unlike other states of South Asia, into the hands of the educated and westernized elite belonging to both Sinhala and Tamil communities. Since the country was politically stable at the dawn of independence especially when the universal adult franchise was already in place and new democratic institutions and traditions were introduced it was expected that the country would turn into a model democracy. Nevertheless, those devoted to the task of building a 'nation' began to alienate the Tamils from mainstream politics; which ended up creating fault lines among the two communities

In the years following independence, a flood of events from the disenfranchisement of Tamil plantation workers in 1949 to the commencement of the new constitution in 1972, left no iota of doubt among Tamils about the fact that they must stand for their self-respect and dignity. In addition, the Sinhalese community's pressure on the government to assert Sinhalese dominance in all aspects of life –political, social and economic, caused extreme resentment among the Tamils. The communal enmity and political opposition became a part of day to day politics, within one decade immediately after independence, as each ethnicity in Sri Lanka strived hard to preserve their identities and rights (Kearney 1985). The Sinhala community's collective aspirations to reassert their position as majoritarian became a major philosophy of national government which collided with political and cultural aspirations and interests of other ethnicities, especially Tamils. These events alienated the Tamil minorities, forged and ultimately pushed many Tamils to fight for a separate homeland.

At the primary level, the conflict is viewed as the manifestation of ancient ethnic rivalry between the Tamil minority and the Sinhala majority. The causes of the civil war are far more complex than ethnic differences among the communities and stem largely from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence history of the country.

There are multiple overlapping factors which are perceived as potential potent of this war. Devotta (2000, 2004) and Navaratnam (1995) pointed towards the linguistic nationalism and role of political elites in the exaggeration of fractured identity between Tamil and Sinhalese people, which originated the continuous political rancour between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil (James 2015). Bandarage (2008) maintains that along with nationalpolitics, the root of the modern conflict lies in the colonial history of the island. However, after independence, the state-sponsored colonization of the traditional "homeland" of Tamils and subsequent use of discriminatory political measures, schemes and acts, disintegrated trust between the Tamils and Sinhalese; acted as a catalyst behind the emergence of LTTE and subsequent violence (Manogaran 1987; Tambiah 1996). Although there are many factors that have caused to ethnic separatism and then war, however, this research paper is more oriented

Copyright The Author(s) 2022.This is an Open Access Article distributed under the CC BY license. (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society
ISSN: 2815-0961
Vol : 02 , No.01, Dec 2021 – Jan 2022
http://journal.hmjournals.com/index.php/JLLS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.21.1.8

towards analyzing the contribution of language subsequent political schism and education policies. The paper is relying on secondary literature such as textbook, books, novels, review article, newpaper and meta analysis for analysing the role of language and education in political segregationa and insurgency in Sri Lanka. Apart from that work also approache govenmetn documetns, statistifal databse and historical records to better analyse various elemert in creating war like situation and alter war.

Sinhala Only Act: Politics of Language

The politicization of the issue of official language during the various phases of the war turned out to be the most powerful manifestation of the Sinhala –Tamil conflict and managed to attain the central stage in Sri Lankan politics. As language is a crucial factor in the maintenance and preservation of the cultural and ethnic identity, here in the case of the internal politics between Tamils and Sinhalese, the language became the exclusive marker of the ethnographic boundary between them. Stavenhagen (1996) , notes that " through its language, a given group expresses its own culture, its own societal identity; languages are related to thought processes and to the way the members of a certain linguistic group perceive nature, the universe and society". The imposition of dominant language, in many cases, on the other ethnic communities is termed as a repressive action, both in outcome and intention.

Prior to the independence, a swabhasha (own language) movement was launched against the status of English as official language because the vernacular speaking -Sri Lankan felt discriminated against by privileged and elite members of the English speaking community (Kearney 1978: 527). However, soon after independence the public outcry to make native language as official languages, the demand among the Sinhala communityturned from 'Swabhasa' to 'Sinhala only' as the official language.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLPF), inspired by resurgence of Buddhist nationalism, advocate the idea of constituting Sinhala alone as official language of the island. Perera (2001) mentioned the disproportionate number of Tamil employees entered in government sector services, particularly administrative and professional grades, whereas Sinhalese relatively were less employed, might be the push factor for this proposal. The Sinlhala-only demand was propelled, in part, by the desire to cor- rect and compensate for the (often grossly exaggerated) communal in- balance in government employment during the colonial era (Kearney 1978,527).

After several uneasy years following independence, Solomon Bandaranaike won the general election in 1956 by appealing to Buddhist revivalism and Sinhala Chauvinism. The Sinhala petty bourgeoisie composed of Buddhist monks, Sinhalese educated school teachers and medical professionals supported the Bandaranaike government (Ponnambalam 1983:23). They felt neglected and discriminated against by their westernized rulers. Therefore, they supported their leaders to protect the interest of their community (Manogaram 1987:47). The administration quickly following victory introduced the pernicious Official Language Act of 1956. The act declared Sinhala as the country's official language, replacing English, thus delegitimizing the status of Tamil speaking people. During the election, Bandaranaike campaigned that without Sinhala only policy, the Sinhala race and its culture would vanish (Manor 1989 and Wriggins 1960).

Shortly after passage of the bill, the Sinhalese employers rose progressively in the government services, predominantly in the civil services. The issue contained both material and symbolic dimensions. If Sinhala were the language of governmental administration, the courts, and, for

Copyright The Author(s) 2022.This is an Open Access Article distributed under the CC BY license. (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society
ISSN: 2815-0961
Vol : 02 , No.01, Dec 2021 – Jan 2022
http://journal.hmjournals.com/index.php/JLLS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.21.1.8

the most part, higher education, persons whose mother tongue was Sinhala would have an advantage in entering and advancing in the most desired careers. From 1956 to 1970, the proportions of Tamils employed by the state fell from 60 to 10 percent in the professions, from 30 to 5 percent in the administrative service, from 50 to 5 percent in the clerical service, and from 40 to 1 percent in the armed forces (Shastri 1997:146).

Public Sector Employment

In the island of Sri Lanka, the central government is the provider of a large number of employment opportunities partly due to the development of the economy and expansion of state services. Post-independence economic stagnation of the early 1950s left administration with limited scope of employment within the public sector. As Samaranayake (1991:162) mentioned, even though employment opportunities dwindled, however due to expansion of better education opportunities the numbers of employment seekers increased. The circumstances stimulated Sinhalese to emend the explicit imbalance of representation in the public sector employment making both the Tamil and Sinhalese communities the main competitors for public sector employment. The enactment of Sinhala as the official language in 1956 offered better prospects for the Sinhala-educated to secure employment in the government sector (Samaranayake 1991:162). It was this competition that gave the language issue a communal dimension. Due to the geographical dry region in the northern part of Sri Lankan, predominantly resided by Tamils, was not conducive to any other sources of employment leaving them to pursue public sector jobs only.

The enactment of Sinhala as the official language in 1956 offered better prospects for the Sinhala-educated to secure employment in the government sector. The Tamils perceived the Sinhala-only policy as a countermeasure aimed at ousting or excluding them from state employment and the private professions. Their fears were further reinforced by an additional requirement that those seeking state employment have a working knowledge of Sinhala. From a Tamil perspective these measures seemed to have been designed to exclude large proportions of otherwise eligible Tamils from gaining access to state employment and thereby from attaining social mobility. Unemployment and the lack of opportunities for employment were phenomena faced by both the Tamil and Sinhalese youth from the 1960s onward. The Sri Lankan Tamil community still claims that Tamils have been denied fair access to employment and have been severely discriminated against in other ways (Samaranayake 1991:162-165).The ratio of Tamil representation in the state sector is significantly lower than the ratio three decades ago. Prior to independence, 30 percent of those employed in the government services in Sri Lanka were Tamils, but by 1975 the figure had dropped to nearly 6 per cent (Schwar 1975:13).

The loss of the Tamils' long-standing dominance in government services, however, created frustration and disappointment among the Tamil youth. This situation was further aggravated by the new university admission policies introduced by the United Front (U. F.) Government. The adoption of ‘standardization system with district quota’ in the 1970s, denied and constrained the various opportunities of getting admission into universities for Tamil students(Chattopadhyaya 1994). Till the year 1969, the process of admission into university followed the former system of GCE (advanced level) Examination, and performance of a candidate in the examination secures a seat to them into universities (Chattopadhyaya 1994).

The exceptional result and performance of the Tamil students at GCE in natural sciences prevailed a misinformation that Tamil teachers advertently favored Tamil candidates, especially

Copyright The Author(s) 2022.This is an Open Access Article distributed under the CC BY license. (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society
ISSN: 2815-0961
Vol : 02 , No.01, Dec 2021 – Jan 2022
http://journal.hmjournals.com/index.php/JLLS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.21.1.8

those attempting examinations in their native language, Tamil (Chattopadhyaya 1994). According to Samaranayake (2008), the Sinhalese pressure made national authorities to make changes in the system of admission to the Sri Lankan Universities for higher education. Resultant in early 1970s, the United Front (U.L.F) government took steps to replace GCE with Standardization formula and district quota system, in the pretext of assimilating the students of neglected section of rural sector.

Under 'standardization formula' as explained by Kearney (1978: 531), the scores of examinations were readjusted according to the medium of study, language, resulting the student taking examination in Tamil language need to score high marks than Sinhala in order to gain admission into university. These measures took a significant toll on the number of Tamil student admission into higher education institutions and significantly reduced the number of Tamil students in the universities (Silva 1979).

Like the Standardization procedure, the national authority also applied the 'District Quota System' in 1973. Under the quota system, admission of the students into universities was decided via a quota fixed per district based on population (Samaranayake 2008). In the quota system , the districts were discriminated against with one another in respect of the number of students to be admitted. This system along with the standardization placed Tamil students at a disadvantage situation. Such an unequal educational system was resented by all sides of the Tamil community (Samaranayake 2008). These changes in the education system had fruitfully maintained and created a gap between the younger generation of different ethnicities, especially among Tamils and Sinhalese students. This severely affected the chances of Tamil students' admission in higher studies.

Subsequently, the proportion of Tamil students in the medicine and engineering stream witnessed a decline of more than 50 per cent of their earlier strength.. After the introductionof the district quota system only 34 and places were open for these Tamil candidates. It was a well-known fact that ethnically the major blow fell on the Sri Lankan Tamils (Bastian 1984). Practically it wiped out the last resort of many Tamils, i.e., professional employment. Tamils felt they were systematically squeezed out of higher education. Evaluation of ethnic representation in the higher state services by Sinhalese scholars like Charles Abeysekera also highlighted that "in most state services minority ethnic groups are represented well below their population proportions". He confirmed the increasing dominance of the Sinhalese in administrative services and their representation was in excess of their population ratio while the minority Tamils have less than their due (Abeysekera 1984). Such restrictions emerged as a potent source of frustration and resentment during the 1970s.

It was observed that if the use of Tamil as a national language in a decentralized administrative system has been seriously implemented the Tamils position would be different. But the successive Sri Lankan Governments denied this opportunity, despite agreements and empty promises.

Tamil's Youth Response: Formation of LTTE, Insurgency and Eelam war

The Tamil insurgency emerged in response to the discriminatory policies adopted by the Sinhalese government since independence. The Tamil Student Front, a youth movement, was the first group which resorted and vehemently supported the policy of political violence against Sinhalese government to achieve political end to decades of politicalized violence at the hands Sinhalese counterpart. The student group was composed of students who were disproportionately affected by the standardization of Education policy (Hoffman 2009).

Copyright The Author(s) 2022.This is an Open Access Article distributed under the CC BY license. (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society
ISSN: 2815-0961
Vol : 02 , No.01, Dec 2021 – Jan 2022
http://journal.hmjournals.com/index.php/JLLS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.21.1.8

Meanwhile, Tamil United Front (TUF), another group with moderate thinking and belief in the effectiveness of constitutional and peaceful agitation, integrated the disparate Tamil political parties with an aim to fight politically and gain concessions from the then government.
However, despite consistent efforts the TUF failed to reach any concession and bring policy changes. Therefore, in 1976 various organizations and parties representing Tamils, Indian Tamil and Tamil speaking other ethnic groups met to form a political party the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). This party replaced the Tamil United Front (TUF) (Hoffman 2009). The party Vaddukoddai , according to Hoffman (2009) and Vaddukoddai resolution(1976) , resolved to create a ' free, sovereign, secular, socialist' independent state for Tamils known as *Tamil Homeland* or *Eelam*. The party adopted a more uncompromising and strict approach in demanding a separate independent Eelam. The demand for separate state later attracted a large chunk of Tamil youth as for them Eelam became inevitable to safeguard the cultural and political rights of the Tamil speaking community. Meanwhile some disparate Tamil militant groups began to engage in insurgency and guerrilla attacks on Tamils who were government supporters and sympathizers (Flynn 2011).
The first organized militant groups were the Tamil New Tigers (TNT), a quasi-criminal force, that later proliferated into 35 other militant groups (Gunaratna 1987:27). In the succeeding year in 1976, Prabhakaran renamed the TNT as Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Gunaratna 1998). In the initial phase of civil war, the process of politicization of Tamil youth in the North and the East started to form militant groups. The most prominent of these groups was the TNT, which changed its name to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or the LTTE in 1976. The LTTE initially carried out a campaign of violence against the state.

2. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the seeds for the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka were sown, well before the independence, broadly encircling political interest and territorial aspirations of different communities that in due course become a serious threat to the national security and stabilityof the island. The discontentment of the minority Tamils against the discrimination by majority Sinhalese, and their resentment over prejudiced policies in the field of education and economy. Furthermore, the question of language, Sinhala only Act, and consequent riots caused the growth of alienation among the minority. A large literature on nationalism notes how education and literacy played an imperative role in the creation of a nation. Ichilov (2004: 65), for example, notes that "educational systems that operate within nationalist movements and newly emerged states are often totally mobilized to instill in the younger generation national visions and ideologies". In the recent decades, a large number of scholars have recognized that education performs essential roles in sharpening the ethnic divide and therefore contributing to ethnic violence in a state. Consequently, the unresolved grievances of the Tamils and their struggle for survival pushed them to choose armed struggle to achievetheir desires. In 1983, the ethnic tension between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority of Sri Lanka erupted into a violent and costly civil war lasted till 2009, disrupting the economy and demeaning the future growth prospects.

Acknowledgement: This research paper is part of my PhD work.

Copyright The Author(s) 2022.This is an Open Access Article distributed under the CC BY license. (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society
ISSN: 2815-0961
Vol : 02 , No.01, Dec 2021 – Jan 2022
http://journal.hmjournals.com/index.php/JLLS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.21.1.8

3. REFERENCES

1. Abeysekera, Charles. (1979). Ethnic Representation in the HigherState Services", in Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka : Papers Presented at a Seminar Organized by the Social Scientists Association : Sri Lanka
2. Bandarage, Asoka.(2009). Seperatist conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, Ethnicity, Political Economy.London : Routledge
3. Bastian, S. (1984)., 'University Admission and the National Question', In Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka, Social Scientists Association.
4. Chattopadhyaya. H.P. (1994). Ethnic Unrest in Modern Sri Lanka. New Delhi: M.D.
5. Publications
6. De Silva, C.R. (1997). Sri Lanka :A history, New Delhi : Vikas Publication House.
7. De Silva, G. (1979). A Statistical survey of elections to the legislatures of Sri Lanka, 1911-1977. Colombo, Marga Institute.
8. DeVotta, Neil (2000). Control Democracy, Institutional Decay, and the Quest for Eelam: Explaining Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka. Pacific Affairs, 73(1).: 55-76, doi "https://doi.org/10.2307/2672284
9. DeVotta, Neil. (2004). Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka. Stanford: StanfordUniversity Press.
10. Flynn, Kyle (2011). The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam : A revolution in military affairs (unpublished Master's thesis). Georgetown university : USA.
11. Gunaratna. Rohan. (1987).War and Peace in Sri Lanka.Sri Lanka: Institute of Fundamental Studies
12. Hoffman, Bruce. (2009).The First Non-state Use of a Chemical Weapon in Warfare. Small Wars and Insurgencies,20 (2-4). 463-477.doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310903026969
13. Ichilov, Orit (2004).Political Learning and Citizenship Education under Conflict: The Political Socialization of Israeli and Palestinian.London: Routledge
14. Kearney, Robert N. (1978).Language and the Rise of Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka.
15. Asian Survey, 18 (5):521–534
16. Kearney, Robert N.(1967). Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon. Durham: Duke University Press.
17. Manogaran, Chelvadurai. (1987).Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka. Honolulu: Hawaii University Press.
18. Manor, James (ed.) (1984).Sri Lanka in Change and Crisis, London:Croom Helm.
19. Manor, James (ed.) (1984).Sri Lanka in Change and Crisis, London:Croom Helm.
20. Manor, James. (1989). The Expedient Utopian: Bandaranaike and Ceylon.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
21. Navaratnam, V.(1995). The Fall and Rise of the Tamil Nation. Tamil Nation: Montreal and Toronto.
22. Peebles, Patrick. (1990).Colonization and Ethnic Conflict in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka.The Journal of Asian Studies, 49(1): 30-55.
23. Perera, Sasanka. (2001). The Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Historical and Sociopolitical Outline Washington, DC: World Bank, February 2001. Web. Aug Aug 2021 .http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/727811468302711738/The-ethnic-conflict-in-

Copyright The Author(s) 2022.This is an Open Access Article distributed under the CC BY license. (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society
ISSN: 2815-0961
Vol : 02 , No.01, Dec 2021 – Jan 2022
http://journal.hmjournals.com/index.php/JLLS
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.21.1.8

Sri-Lanka-a-historical-and-sociopolitical-outline.

24. Ponnambalam, Satchi. (1983). Sri Lanka: National Conflict and Tamil Liberation Struggle, London: Zed Books.
25. Ponnambalam, Satchi. (1983). Sri Lanka: National Conflict and Tamil Liberation Struggle, London: Zed Books.
26. Sahadevan, P. (2002). Ethnic Conflicts and Militarism in South Asia. International Studies, 39(2), 103–138. doi:10.1177/002088170203900201
27. Samaranayaka, Gamini. (2008). Political Violence in Sri Lanka, 1971-1987. Gyan Publication House: New Delhi.
28. Shatri, Amrita. (1997). Government Policy and Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka. In Michael
29. E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly (ED.), Government Policies and Ethnic Relations in Asia and the Pacific, Cambridge: MIT Press Mass.
30. Stavenhagen, R. (1996).Ethnic Conflicts and the Nation-State. Germany : Macmillan Press Ltd.
31. Walter Schwarz, "The Tamils of Sri Lanka", London, Minority Rights Groups Report, No. 25, (1975) p. 13.
32. Wriggins,W. Howard. (1960). Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Copyright The Author(s) 2022.This is an Open Access Article distributed under the CC BY license. (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)