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## Genesis of the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

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**ABSTRACT:** Sri Lanka, the Island which gained independence from colonial baggage in 1948. As Sri Lanka step forwarded towards the development, it was gripped in the gruesome ethnic conflict between the two main ethnic groups, Sinhalese and Tamils. The conflict lasted for decade and the conflict has eluded the peace of the Island. The main focus of this paper is to discuss the root cause of the ethnic conflict of the Sri Lanka which destroys the peace of Sri Lanka. The brutal conflict left behind the destruction in every sphere of life.

**KEYWORDS:** Background, Ethnic differences, Political consensus, Language problem, Education problem, Employment and Land problem, Conclusion.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The ethnic conflict means violent conflict among the groups who differ from one another on the basis of their religion, culture, physical features or language. Ethnic conflict, in recent years, has become the most collective form of group violence in the world.[1]The phenomenon of ethnicity is an intrinsic component of the socio-political realities of multiethnic states in south Asia as well as in other parts of the world. The concept of the ethnicity has become a critical variable in the formation and reformation of states. The terms “ethnicity” and “ethnic group” are derived from the Greek word ethnos, generally translated as “nation” or usually said people of the same race that share a distinctive culture. Nations today are involved in integrating their ethnicities. The two effective words here that can be sorted into several suitable definitions are “ethnic” and “nation”. Ethnic means concerning to a people or group that shares a culture, religion or language. “Nation” is a group that (1) shares one or more identifying characteristics, such as common history, language, religion, racial background, culture, and/or territory; and (2) is politically mobilized and/or amenable to such mobilization. Most countries in South Asia right now nations in the making and ethnicity has become a significant variable in the formation and reformation.[2] Like many countries of the modern world Sri Lanka also consists of many ethnic groups. The majority of these are the Sinhalese community whom are Buddhists and they speak the Sinhala language. About 2500 years ago, it is believed that have come from North India. Another major group is the Sri Lankan Tamils who have shared the Island with the Sinhalese from ancient times.[3] They are descendants of south Indian community known as Indian Tamils who migrated to Sri Lanka in 19<sup>th</sup> century for the work on plantations. While Muslims constitute the third largest ethnic group, there are also small minorities such as Burghers and Malays (table 1). These have either eliminated or incorporated with other groups.[4]

Table: 1

S.No	Ethnic Group	Population	Percentage
1.	Sinhalese	13,876,245	82%
2.	Sri Lankan Tamils	732,149	4.3%
3.	Indian Tamils	855,025	5.1%
4.	Sri Lankan Moors	1,339,331	7.9%
5.	Burghers	35,283	0.2%
6.	Malays	54,782	0.3%
7.	Others	36,874	0.2%
	Total	16,929,689	

Source: Census of Population and Housing 2001 Sri Lanka

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The ethnic plurality of Sri Lanka might not have been a major problem had the various groups been evenly distributed throughout the island. Sinhala's who are actually in minority in eight (8) districts out of the twenty four (24) districts into which country is administratively and electorally divided. Sri Lankan Tamils are in absolute majority in five (5) districts out of these eight (8) districts and have the largest numerical strength in one. It is the same with the Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Moors though only in one district each.[5]

The Sri Lankan Tamils are settled in the areas of North and East and the Sinhala's in the South and west. The Tamils which are mainly concentrated in the northern and eastern area regarded it as traditional homeland. In 1948, the Sri Lanka achieved independence from the UK; there were expectations that the country would become a model democracy. Universal adult franchise had been introduced in 1931, democratic institutions and traditions had been in place and political violence was not issue. Moreover, by the 1950's literacy in Sri Lanka was on the rise and there were no serious indicators of economic or social disasters of the years to come. However, even before independence, there was clear indication of ethnic politics that were to emerge later.[6]

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has many root causes and repercussion that are closely interlinked. There were number of the factors that were responsible for giving the birth to the ethnic conflict. These factors cannot be ignored. The primary causes of the conflict are considered as ethnic politics, language, education and other factors including employment and land.

## **II. ETHNIC DIFFERENCES**

Sri Lanka is a multiethnic society. This multiethnic society forms the basis of the modern nation Sri Lanka, with the exception of Sri Lankan Tamils other groups have more or less integrated themselves with the national life or at least are not in a position to disturb the harmony seriously.[7] The status of Indian Tamils even prior to independence had been a matter of controversy between the then colonial ruler of India and Sri Lanka, even though it was Britain in both cases.[8] Sri Lanka was unwilling to accept the Indian Tamils as its citizens on the reason of not having the permanent roots in the country. As a result, the Indian Tamils faced a problem of statelessness. This problem was solved to some extent by negotiation with India. Now, the Sri Lankan Tamils however stand on a different footing. They not only live in Sri Lanka but they are men of Sri Lanka even though they are very similar to the Tamils living in South India. They are culturally and emotionally closer to the Tamils living in South India than Sinhalese of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Tamils have maintained their separate identity and there is little intermarriage between them and the majority community in spite of long living there.[9] Social customs also remained different due to differences but except for those who have been influenced by western culture.[10] They are mainly settled in northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka and to some extent in Sinhalese regions. The Sri Lankan Tamils is said to be in a positions of authority tended to prefer the members of their own community in matter of public service appointment and promotions.

## **III. POLITICAL CONSENSUS**

Politically the Sri Lankan Tamils came closer to the Sinhalese after the establishment of colonial rule in the country. The colonial impact produced by the Portuguese, the Dutch and finally the British brought about many changes. The administrative amalgamation of the northern area with the south tended to combine Tamil areas into the governmental structure of a united Ceylon. The development of road and rail transport strengthened this effect.[11] The educated section of both the communities jointly started a movement for constitutional reforms against the imperialist rulers. Towards the later part of the 19th century the members of the emerging English-educated Sinhalese and Tamils middle class began to take an interest in the problem of constitutional reform. They were eager to obtain a progressive greater share in the country's political and administrative life. These urban English-educated Sinhalese and Tamils were regarded as the mainstay of the Sri Lankan nationalist movement.[12] Most of the two groups (the Sinhalese and the Sri Lanka Tamils) during British period seldom clashed. On the contrary their educated worked in close liaison on the question of constitution reforms.[13] In 1912 Ponnambalm Ramanathan occupies the educated Ceylonese seat of legislative council elected by the whole country of Sri Lanka. Later both the communities cooperated to form the Ceylon national league in 1917 which was converted to Ceylon national congress by the Tamil leader Ponnambalm Arunachalam, brother of Ponnambalm Ramanathan. The 'Swabhasha' (own language) movement which arose the prior

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to independence implied that English was gradually to be replaced as the official language of the nation by both Sinhala and Tamil.[14]

Both the Tamils and the Sinhalese had laid their separate organizations also. The Tamil Mahajana Sabha was founded in 1921 to safeguard the political interests of the Tamils. In 1937 the Sinhala Mahasaba was organized. In 1944 the All Ceylon Tamil Congress was formed by G.G. Ponnambalm. The Tamils pleaded for protected representative in the legislature for their community but the Sinhalese leadership was opposed to the principal of separate communal representation.

In 1928, Donoughmore Commission on the basis of territorial representation used the system of communal representation and recommended universal adult franchise. The Tamils believed that the British recommendation was the result of Sinhalese pressure but the Sinhalese were satisfied with the recommendations. In the new elections 38 seats out of 50 elected seats were won by Sinhalese. In the house of sixty-one (eight were nominated by the government and three seats were reserved for officials). This system was considered unstable by the Tamils for their interests and towards the close of the second world war when it became clear the transfer of power would take place in near future, the Tamil leader G.G. Ponnambalm suggested a scheme of balanced representation which proposed to give the Sinhalese fifty percent seats in the legislature as well as in the cabinet, and the rest would remain reserved for minorities.[15] The Sinhalese were opposed to it.

In 1944 further recommendations by the British government under Royal Commission headed by Lord Soulbury. The Tamil Congress of G. G. Ponnambalm raise the demand for balanced representation but the commission upheld the Sinhalese view point in favour of territorial representation.[16] However it suggested a number of constitutional safeguards to protect the interest of ethnic minorities which virtually lost all their significance after power was transferred to Sri Lanka in 1948.

The Tamil did not adopt any obstructionist attitude towards the process of transfer of power unless they were failed in the bargain to realize balanced representation. Elections were held under this commission and D.S. Senanayake formed his ministry. He tried to maintain a unity between the two communities and the Tamils adopt policy responsive cooperation. In spite of their differences both the communities were then guided by leaderships which were inspired by the Modern National Secular Political Culture. The new states therefore emerged in an atmosphere of comparative peace and mutual harmony. The Sinhalese-Tamil accommodation was based on the concept of secular state where all religious and communities were entitled to equal treatment and full protection. Under such condition G.G. Ponnambalm joined the cabinet of the D.S. Senanayake and the later was able to persuade the leaders of Sinhala Mahasaba also join the United National Party which he formed in 1946.[17]

Despite the growing rift between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities in the post-independence period the Tamil Congress maintained a fairly friendly attitude towards the United National Party and in the context of rising discontent of the Tamil community it tended to appear somewhat conservative.[18]

Now, in such a situation a new party appeared in Tamil politics known as the Federal Party. A section of the Tamil Congress broke away under the leadership of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam protesting against the laws by which a larger number of the domiciled Indian Tamil minorities of Sri Lanka were deprived of their franchise and citizenship rights.[19]

The Indian Tamils were attempted to mobilize under the banner of Federal Party but the party did not succeed because the nature of their problem was basically different from that which the Sri Lanka Tamils were confronted with. The party stood for a federal constitution for Sri Lanka in which the predominantly Tamil areas in northern and eastern region would enjoy autonomous self-rule. The federal party tried the various ways for the federal constitution, they did not get support from the Indian Tamils living in the predominantly Sinhalese areas and Sri Lankan Muslim minority did not support it also. The party emphasized the difference of the Tamils from the Sinhalese and maintained that they were two different nations. Federal party of Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon declared in 1951 that 'the Tamils constitute a nation distinct from that of the Sinhalese by every fundamental test of nationhood'. Again in 1961 federal party president observed, "we are a nation by all stands, we inhabit a geographically compact and well-defined territory; we speak a common language; we are proud inheritors of a common heritage and culture as ancient as man himself; and above all, we are bound together by that feeling of oneness which is a necessary ingredient for nationhood".[20]

Though the Federal party describes the Sri Lankan Tamils as a nation, it did not demand until 1976 separate independent Tamil states on that basis. It at first concentrated on three main objectives: to protect the use of Tamil language, along with the Sinhala, to secure autonomy for the Tamil-speaking in the northern and eastern provinces of

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Sri Lanka through the introduction of regional councils with substantial administrative power, and to prevent the planned settlement of Sinhalese in the traditional Tamil areas through the government-sponsored colonization scheme.[21]

## IV. LANGUAGE PROBLEM

In addition to the barriers imposed by the continued use of the English language as the official language after independence, the emerging nationalist forces perceived that Sri Lankan Tamils had access to a disproportionate share of power as a consequence of educational opportunities in the colonial period and were also disproportionately represented in the civil administration. Moreover, considerable mercantile interests were also controlled by non-Sinhalese groups. These fears and concerns were a basis for the politics of language that was to emerge. As early as 1944, politicians proposed resolutions in Parliament to declare Sinhalese the official language, while other amendments proposed both Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages.[22] A 1944 resolution specified that Sinhalese and Tamil would become the languages of instruction in schools, examinations for public services and legislative proceedings. The resolution was approved by 27 to 2 in the Sinhalese-dominated legislature. Committees were established to advise on how these changes were to be implemented, however, there was little progress in implementing the policy. In 1956, S.W.R.D Bandaranaike was elected Prime Minister with a main election promise of establishing Sinhalese as the official language of the country, replacing English. The new government fulfilled this promise—through the passage of the so-called “Sinhalese Only Bill” (Official Language Act, No. 33 of 1956)—soon after the election giving no status of parity to the Tamil language. The language issue in many ways brought the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict into the forefront of Sri Lankan politics. In terms of the dominant strands of Sinhalese nationalism, the Sinhalese language along with the Buddhist religion necessarily had to occupy the pre-eminent position in society. This was perceived to be the only way the glory of ancient Sinhalese civilization could be revitalized. Even though Tamil has been determined as an official language along with Sinhalese in terms of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (in 1987), the damage caused by the politics of language generally remain unaddressed. Moreover, the vast gap between the official recognition of Tamil as an official language and the practical implementation of the provisions and conditions it entails, is yet to be bridged.[23]

## V. EDUCATION PROBLEM

Since the 1970s, access to education particularly access to higher education has been ethnicized. In addition, many other aspects of education including the structural organization of schools and universities, contents of textbooks and training of teachers have impacted directly on ethnic conflict. Compared to other ethnic and religious groups in the country, Tamils have had strong cultural norms which valued education. Many Tamils attended English language schools which were the passport to higher education and better employment in the colonial period. As a consequence of well funded American missionary activities, the Tamil-dominated Northern Province had comparatively better facilities for English language and pre-university education.

There was also a limit beyond which Tamils could not be absorbed within the traditional land based occupations in the arid areas where they predominated. This further encouraged many to seek employment through education. The net result was the relative over-representation of Tamils in higher education, professions and the administration in comparison to their status in the general population.[24]

In this context, post independence Sinhalese nationalism sought to curb the Tamil presence in education and thus also in the professions and civil administration. While the passing of the “Sinhalese Only Bill” was one attempt in this process, more direct hurdles were placed on the path of Tamils’ realization of educational goals since the 1970s. The constitutional provisions in the 1972 Constitution favoring the Sinhalese language and Buddhist religion, along with their educational policies, convinced many Tamils that they had been perceived as a marginal community.

From 1971 onwards, a new “standardization” policy was adopted, which ensured that the number of students qualifying for university entrance from each language was proportionate to the number of students who sat for university entrance examination in that language.[25] In real terms this meant that Tamil speaking students had to score much higher than Sinhalese speaking students to gain admission to universities. This also meant that for the first time, the integrity of

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university admissions policy was tampered with by using ethnicity as a basis. In 1972, a district quota system was introduced in order to benefit those not having adequate access to educational facilities within each language. These changes had a serious impact on the demographic patterns of university entry.[26]

In general, these policies seriously impacted upon not only the chances of Tamils to gain access to higher education, but also on the overall process of ethnic relations as well. In 1977, the language based admission policy was abolished and since that time various adjustments have been introduced on the basis of merit, district quotas, disadvantaged area quotas, etc. While the obvious ethno-linguistic discrimination of the 1971 policy has long been dismantled, many Tamil youth still feel that they are discriminated against in access to higher education.

Furthermore, the ethnic divisions in Sri Lanka tend to manifest within the education structure in a number of other ways that is the organizational structure of educational institutions, the training of teachers and the content of textbooks and syllabi—which are much more long lasting and far more insidious than the more visible ethno-linguistic policies of the 1970s.

Related to the organizational structure of educational institutions, it is clear that language-based segregation takes place. This does not apply to privately-owned institutions in which instruction is in English, but applies to institutions with more than one language of instruction (such as some universities, mixed media schools and technical institutes) where a system of internal segregation takes place. In real terms Sinhalese students are segregated into Sinhalese-language schools and Tamil and Tamil-speaking Muslim students are segregated into Tamil-language schools. If they enter universities or technical institutes, this segregation is likely to continue unless they opt to, and have the money to receive, a no segregated further education in English in private institutions.[27]

The training of teachers poses similar problems, as most teachers in the system today are products of the segregated education system they are teaching in. Moreover, they are also trained in institutions that are internally segregated except in the training of teachers specializing in subjects such as English. Few teacher training institutions in operation today, have seriously taken into account the need to train teachers who can teach in a context keeping in mind the challenges of a multicultural society. There is a clear disjuncture between current state policy towards ethnic relations and the manner in which teachers are trained.

Since the early-1980s, many have stressed the role school texts play in shaping ethnic relations in the country. Ideally, school texts (e.g., texts used for teaching religion, language, social studies, etc.) should portray the multi-cultural reality of Sri Lankan society and address issues that are important in this context while approaching the prescribed subject matter. School texts have been written, supervised, produced and distributed by agencies of the state, meaning that their contents reflect state policy or thinking. Furthermore, ethnic politics have also been played out in the process of text production. In recent times some of the more problematic contents in these texts have been removed in the process of revision and re-writing.[28] Ironically however, sometimes this has gone to the opposite extreme—e.g., in some texts all references to ethnicity and related issues have been removed.

## **VI. EMPLOYMENT AND LAND PROBLEM**

As mentioned above, both language and education policies have placed barriers on employment, especially in the administrative and professional ranks in which Tamils were at one point “over-represented.” In the private sector which for the most part continued to work in English employment opportunities for Tamils and other minorities remained relatively open. As a result, today some of the leading business ventures in the country are Tamil-owned. However, as a result of the discrimination that has occurred in state sector employment practices over time, there is a tendency among many Tamils to perceive of themselves as generally discriminated against in employment. According to the census of public sector and corporate sector employment in 1990, Sri Lankan Tamils accounted for 5.9% of those employed in the state services. This represents a significant drop from earlier years.[29]

The issue of ownership over and access to land has also been a consistent area in which ethnic politics in Sri Lanka have manifested, and have sustained themselves over the years. As noted, one of the peculiarities in the demographic patterns in Sri Lanka is the relative concentration of certain ethnic groups in certain geographical regions. The clearest site of politics of land and ethnicity has been in the sparsely populated areas of the dry zone in the North Centre Province and the Eastern Province.[30] When post independence governments decided to settle poor Sinhalese farmers from the densely populated wet zone areas of the country, many Sinhalese politicians and people in general viewed the process as a “reclamation and recreation in the present of the glorious Sinhalese Buddhist past”. The so-called



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“colonization schemes” became an integral aspect of Sinhalese Buddhist ‘nation-building.’ Not surprisingly, the Tamils had a completely different perception of the colonization of the dry zone. The notion of the ‘traditional Tamil homeland’ became a potent component of popular Tamil political imagination. Since Sinhalese irrigation settlements in the North Central and Eastern Provinces occurred under direct state sponsorship, it appeared too many Tamils as a deliberate attempt of the Sinhalese-dominated state to marginalize them further by decreasing their numbers in the area. The colonization schemes did alter the demographic patterns, particularly in the Eastern Province in a significant way.[31] A decision was made in the late-1970s to accelerate the development of the dry zone through the “Accelerated Mahaweli Program,” that provided for the opening up of dry zone areas further for agriculture and resettlement of people. Only in 1986, as a result of continuing Tamil agitations, did the government agree to allocate the remaining land under the Mahaweli Program on the basis of the ethnic distribution of each ethnic group in the total population. Meanwhile, the Muslim community tended to reject the countervailing notion of a traditional Tamil homeland in the North East region. Growing cooperation between the security forces and Muslim home guards led to LTTE attacks on Muslim villages in the East, armed counter attacks on Tamil communities in the South East and to the eviction of 55,000 Muslims from the North in 1990 most of whom remain displaced today.[32]

## VII. CONCLUSION

Ethnicity has been the root cause of internal strife and civil wars the world over. The case with the trouble in the island nation of Sri Lanka is no different. The major ethnic and cultural differences among the two major population groups in the nation have caused friction, which have only been worsened by the pro Sinhala policies of the government.

The largest segment of the population, the Sinhala people, consider themselves to be descendants of the original occupants of the island, who are supposed to have hailed from the northern states of India, and were themselves of Aryan descent. The second largest population group is the Sri Lankan Tamils who are descended from the settlers who arrived here from the more southern states of India, and are Dravidian in descent. Both ethnic groups consider the island nation their rightful ancestral home, although the Sinhala section sees the Tamils as outsiders who have no right to be in the land that the Sinhala see as their own. The hugely divergent cultures, language, history, and sense of identity of the two groups have led to the ongoing strife that has created one of the largest movements of refugees in the world.

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