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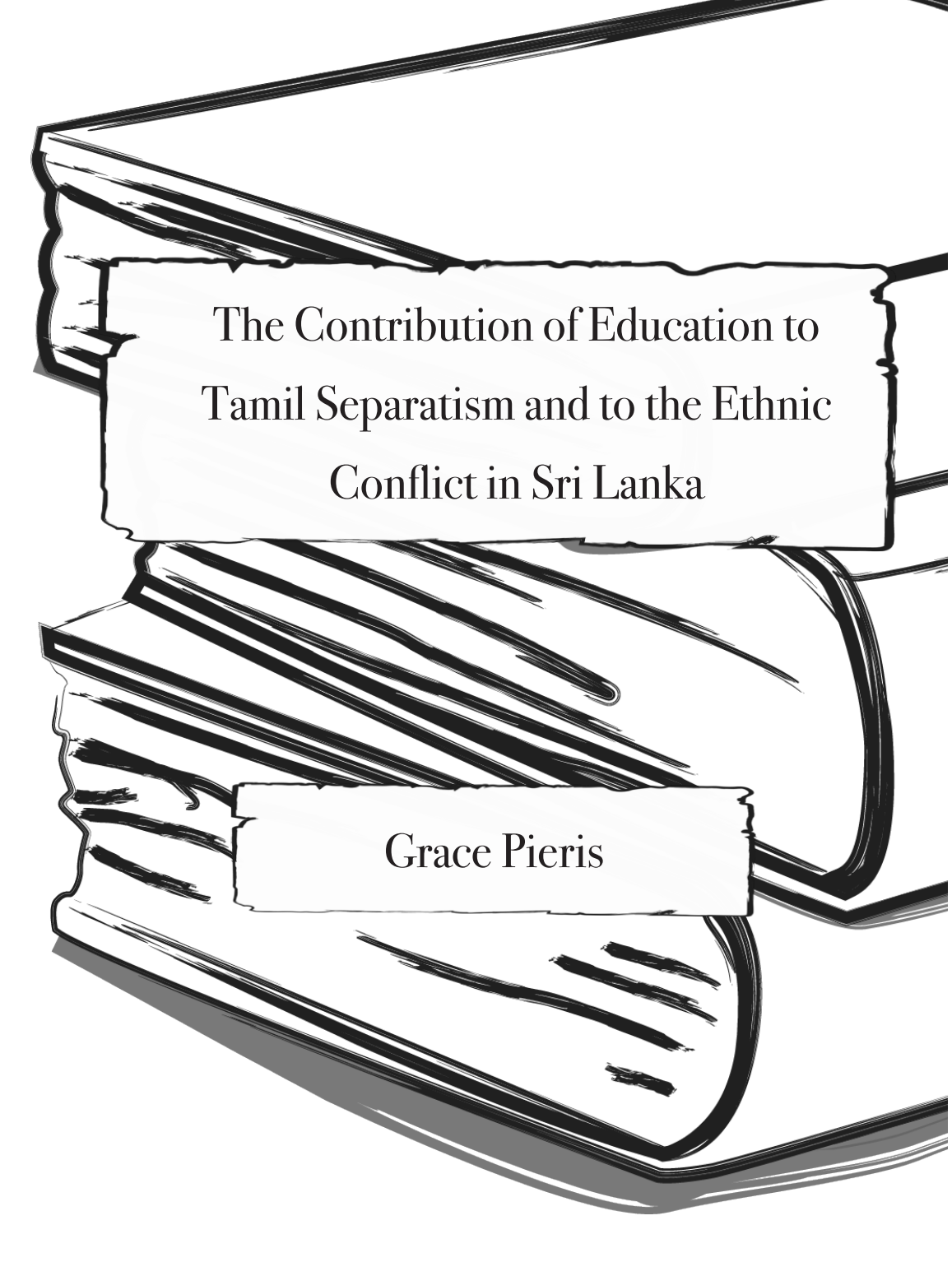
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The Contribution of Education to  
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Conflict in Sri Lanka

Grace Pieris

# The Contribution of Education to Tamil Separatism and to the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

Grace Pieris



**Abstract:** Although there are many factors that have contributed to ethnic separatism and the 30-year ethnic war in Sri Lanka, this paper explores just one factor: education. Prior to the war, the discrimination against the Tamils through education was done explicitly through outright anti-Tamil rhetoric, programs, and policies. However, modern discrimination against the Tamil community through education is implicit because it is embedded and legitimized in the culture. Prior to the war, the education system continued to teach students in their native tongue despite the Swabhasha movement for a Sinhala-only language policy. This resulted in poor educational and employment opportunities for Tamil students because the Tamil language was devalued in the education system. Practices in education, the 1972 admission policies, and the 1974 quota system explicitly discriminated against the admission of Tamils into higher education. Now, the discrimination against Tamils is normalized within the culture by pro-Sinhala practices and policies. Popular textbooks express a Sinhala-centric view, and second language education policies are ineffective. Although such racism was explicit prior to the war, it is more naturalized within the culture today.

**Keywords:** *Education, Ethnic Separatism, Sri Lanka, Ethnic Conflict, Institutionalized Racism*

## Introduction

*Discrimination in education had become one of the key slogans of the Tamil minority of Sri Lanka agitating for its rights. It became a main subject for the resolutions adopted by the TULF [Tamil United Liberation Front] at Vaddukoddai when the demand for a separate State was proclaimed.*

— Sunil Bastian (qtd. in Anuzsiya 804)

Sri Lanka is home to many ethnic groups, including the Sinhalese, Moors, Malays, Burghers, Veddas, and Tamils (i.e., Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils) (“Census of Population and Housing 2001”). In 2001, the Sinhalese accounted for 82% of the population while Tamils accounted for 9.4%. In geographical terms, the Sri Lankan Tamils occupy the northern and eastern region of the island while the Sinhalese predominantly occupy the remaining land (“Census of Population and Housing 2001”). Additionally, the Sinhalese and Tamil communities traditionally speak separate languages, Sinhala and Tamil respectively (Kearney 522). Since the 1950s, Sri Lanka has experienced an ethnic conflict between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhalese. For the purpose of this paper, “ethnic conflict” refers to the dispute and clash between the two ethnicities, and “ethnic separatism” refers to the segregation and discrimination of communities and people based on ethnicity. Furthermore, the term “war” in this paper only refers to actual battle. From 1983 until 2009, Sri Lanka experienced a war that was initiated by this ethnic conflict (Perera 5). The reasons for the war evolved over time to include economic, social, political, and historical motivations. As a result of the ethnic conflict and the 30-year war, economic, political, and social development in Sri Lanka slowed. Understanding how the war developed will help avoid future ethnic conflicts between the many ethnicities in Sri Lanka while simultaneously aiding the development of the country. This paper focuses solely on the contribution of education to Tamil separatism and to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Historically, education has been used to explicitly benefit the Sinhalese population over the Tamils, such

as through the ethnic segregation of students in schools and discrimination in admission of Tamils to universities (Perera 12). Even though the war ended in 2009, educational practices continue to benefit the Sinhalese at the expense of the Tamils. However, unlike in the past, these practices are more legitimized forms of racism that are now considered the norm. These practices include hegemonic, Sinhala views and minority phobia in school textbooks, as well as ineffective language education techniques. In the pre-war era, discrimination against the Tamils was very explicit; distinct quotas blocked Tamils from higher education, and the language of the dominant group was explicitly prioritized over the other. However, Tamils are now discriminated against in the education system very subtly and implicitly by Pro-Sinhala practices and policies. Currently, these discrimination practices are legitimized and naturalized in Sri Lankan culture. Although explicit racism in the education system has contributed to ethnic separatism in the past, implicit forms of racism contribute to ethnic separatism today.

### **An Overview of Other Contributions to the Ethnic Conflict and War**

Although education contributed to the ethnic conflict and war in Sri Lanka, these tensions were also influenced by economic, political, and social factors. For example, the Tamil population benefited from the British rule because of the British “divide and conquer policy,” which refers to the colonial strategy of favoring the minority groups in order for the entire country to be placed under British control. Thus, the Sinhalese viewed the Tamils as elitist and privileged, which resulted in a poor relationship between the two ethnicities during the colonization period (Anuzsiya 799). Further, the Sinhalese community advocated for the country’s official language to be switched to Sinhala through the Swabhasha movement (also known as the “our own language” movement). The Sinhalese community also pushed for the implementation of the 1972 constitution, which conferred a special status to the Sinhala Buddhist community and alienated the Tamil community (Kearney 527). The Swabhasha

movement resulted in economic, educational, and cultural consequences such as an increased difficulty in finding jobs, daily inconveniences such as paying taxes to the local government, and an overall devaluation of the Tamil culture (Kearney 528). Each of these economic and cultural impacts further drove ethnic separatism. In response, the Tamil United Front (TUF) organized a conference in May of 1976 and announced the grievances of the Tamil community that had been brought upon them by the Sri Lankan government. These grievances included making the official language Sinhala and depriving the Tamil nation of “its territory, language, citizenship, economic life, opportunities of employment and education, thereby destroying all the attributes of nationhood of the Tamil people” (Kearney 532). As advocacy for the equal rights of the Tamil community continued, it became clear that policy alone could not bring about a change. Therefore, the Tamil community participated in militant attacks to fight for equal rights of Tamil citizens in Sri Lanka. There are certainly more reasons for the Tamil conflict, including pro-Sinhala socio-political movements, unemployment, education, the threat of Tamil cultural loss, and the lack of change through political will alone.

This multitude of reasons for ethnic separatism and conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese resulted in the Tamil community advocating for a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka. Although Tamil leaders attempted to advocate for the equal treatment of the Tamil community in May 1976, there was no resulting policy change (Kearney 529). Thus, in order to gain equality and fair opportunities for their community, Tamil political leaders advocated for the separation of Sri Lanka into two regions: the northern and eastern areas for the Tamils, and the southern, central, and western areas for the Sinhalese. This proposal advocated for the “restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular Socialist State of Tamil Eelam” either through peaceful means or direct action (Kearney 532). In July 1977, the Tamil community showed support for the separate state solution through a parliamentary vote (Kearney 533). However, due to the ineffectiveness of political processes, the Tamil youth attempted to initiate change through violence, such as militant

attacks. Most significantly, a Sinhala policeman was killed in Jaffna, a city in the north of Sri Lanka, which resulted in vengeful actions against Tamil communities in Sinhala-majority areas (Kearney 533). The United National Party government attempted to curb the violence by imposing a curfew and deploying the military and police into troubled areas. Nevertheless, these attacks catalyzed the 30-year war (Kearney 533).

### **The Contribution of Education to the Ethnic Conflict**

Education was important in contributing to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka for two main reasons. Firstly, the Swabhasha movement separated students by ethnicity in schools. Secondly, university admission policies blatantly discriminated against the Tamil community. Both of these factors led to the poor education of the Tamil community, which resulted in worse job opportunities. In fact, the TUF suggested that the lack of employment was a sufficient reason to divide the land.

#### ***(i) The Segregation of Education by Ethnicity***

The Swabhasha movement advocated for Sri Lanka to have its own official language. Under British colonial rule from the end of the 18th century until 1948, English was the dominant language in government and commerce, a policy which favored the English-speaking community. Those that spoke English had better access to jobs and a higher standard of living. The Swabhasha movement began prior to independence from Britain because the Sri Lankan people felt oppressed under the privilege and elitism of the English-educated community (Kearney 527). The Swabhasha movement served as the public cry to make Sinhala and Tamil the official languages in Sri Lanka. However, shortly after independence, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) advocated for the official language to be “Sinhala only” (Kearney 527). One reason for this proposal was that there was a disproportionate number of Tamils in government service at that time (Perera 8). Tamils had greater access to government positions for two main reasons. Firstly, the British prioritized the Tamil minority in order

to assert colonial control. Secondly, Tamils were more fluent in English as a result of the early English language education in the North, the region where most of the Tamil community lived (Kearney 527). Thus, the Tamils had higher representation in government, and the Sinhalese associated the Tamils with the elite. Significantly, however, most of the public data about Tamils in government was highly exaggerated (Kearney 527). Despite this inaccuracy, Sinhala was declared the official language in Sri Lanka in 1956. Swabhasha became Sinhala-only, completely disregarding Tamil.

However, despite this language shift, Tamils were not being educated in Sinhala (Mathews 79). Thus, when Tamils applied for jobs after college graduation, they were unprepared for the language barriers awaiting them (Kearney 527). They further experienced inconveniences when dealing with government agencies, such as having to obtain a translator in order to file income taxes (Kearney 528). These education and employment deficiencies frustrated the Tamil community and motivated it to demand a land of its own. As previously discussed, the May 1976 TUF conference announced the grievances placed upon the Tamil community by the Sri Lankan government. The Swabhasha movement had originally focused on the oppression of the Sri Lankan community by the elite English-speaking community, yet it quickly morphed into a conflict between two ethnic communities in Sri Lanka.

The policy of continuing education solely in students' native tongues (either Sinhala or Tamil) rather than teaching Sinhala and Tamil to all students caused Tamil separatism and, subsequently, the ethnic conflict. In Sri Lanka, language is still considered a marker of ethnic identity; Tamils speak Tamil, Sinhalese speak Sinhala. In order to value all of Sri Lanka's ethnic groups, it is important that every language is equally valued and learned. However, from 1950 until 1990, the education system did not adapt to this need for social cohesion. From the 1950s until the 1970s, the Sri Lankan policy required students to learn only their native language. All subjects were taught in the student's respective native tongue. Therefore, the education of the students was divided by ethnicity (Perera 12). Despite



the Swabhasha movement recognizing Sinhala as the official language for economic purposes and general livelihood, Sinhala was not compulsory for the Tamil students. Conversely, Sinhala students were not encouraged to value Tamil culture by learning the Tamil language. Thus, Tamil students faced unemployment and inconveniences in their daily lives (Kearney 528). These students were made to feel like aliens in their own nation because they were not taught Sinhala (Kearney 527). As a result of the Sinhalese not learning about the Tamils and their language and vice versa, racism sprouted and spread from the education system. If the education system taught Sinhala for economic means and Tamil language and ethnic studies for cultural valuation, Tamil separatism would have been greatly reduced. The education system promoted social incoherence, Tamil separatism, and the ethnic conflict.

***(ii) 1970s: The Standardization of Admissions***

By standardizing higher education admissions through the merit system and district quotas, the majority-Sinhala government restricted educational opportunities for the Tamil community. This fueled unemployment and economic deterioration, resulting in anger and resentment. Subsequently, this resentment led to Tamil separatism and the ethnic conflict.

Prior to 1970, the admissions process to universities in Sri Lanka was based on merit (Anuzsiya 801). To reiterate, many Sri Lankans believed Tamils were disproportionately represented in government and professional jobs because of their greater access to higher education. In 1970, on the eve of the engineering course admission announcement, a rumor began: out of the 160 admitted students, 100 were supposedly Tamil (Anuzsiya 801). As a result of the disproportionate number of Tamils in government, education, and professional jobs, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress campaigned that the merit system be abandoned. Under pressure from the campaign, the Ministry of Education lowered the qualifying marks for the Sinhalese students in comparison to the Tamil students (Anuzsiya 801). This policy resulted in fewer Tamil students being admitted to university.

This discrimination against the Tamils was compounded by the 1974 quota system. This new system based admissions on Sri Lanka's district populations. It was advocated for because it would provide more equal opportunity to students from underdeveloped areas, including Vavuniya, Batticaloa, and Monaragala (Anuzsiya 802). Thus, from 1976 until 1977, the admissions were weighted 70% on merit and 30% on district (15% of which came from underdeveloped districts) (Anuzsiya 802). In 1979, the admissions standardization was further restricted: 30% was weighted on merit, 55% was weighted on district, and 15% was weighted on students from underdeveloped districts (Anuzsiya 803). These residence quotas worked against the districts that the Tamils lived in, further limiting the number of Tamil students that could qualify through merit-basis. Therefore, the education policy further contributed to ethnic separatism. As a result of the compounding admissions criteria, the number of Tamils qualifying for university declined substantially, as did the percentage of Tamils admitted (Anuzsiya 803). In 1983, 75% of all students were Sinhalese and only 19.3% were Tamil (Anuzsiya 804). Restricted access to universities resulted in the Tamil community having poor access to employment. The standardization of admissions for higher education thereby fueled Tamil separatism and the 30-year ethnic conflict.

### **The Contribution of Education to Ethnic Separatism in Modern Times**

The discrimination against Tamils through school segregation and disproportionate university admissions prior to the ethnic war resulted in the division of Tamils and the Sinhalese. Additionally, it led to Tamils being deprived of opportunity in education and employment. Despite the end of the ethnic war in 2009, discrimination against Tamils continues. However, it is no longer as explicit. The rhetoric surrounding this discrimination is pro-Sinhala rather than anti-Tamil, making it an acceptable cultural norm.

### ***(i) Sinhala-Centric Textbooks***

Up until 2017, the textbooks in the Sri Lankan education system promoted Sinhala-centric views. The World Bank reports that textbooks printed in the past indicated a sense of Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony, most often in social science, religion, and language textbooks (Perera 13). Sinhalese textbooks depicted Sinhala kings as heroes who defeat the Tamil “invaders,” even though it has been historically proven that such battles were due to territorial disputes, not ethnic hegemony (UNESCO 11; Samath). Later textbooks indicated no stereotypes of Tamils, choosing instead to completely disregard Tamil culture, religion, and influence in Sri Lanka, thereby depicting a Sinhala-centric history of the country (UNESCO 11). However, there are several recent initiatives to include conflict resolution and reconciliation mechanisms in Sri Lankan textbooks, although these have not been extensively researched (UNESCO 12). Textbooks are students’ primary resources for information. When textbooks depict racist ideologies, students learn these ideologies and are socialized to believe them. This is especially true because textbooks are believed to be inherently factual. Although textbooks are not explicitly anti-Tamil like the Swabhasha movement and the 1970s’ admissions criterion, they imply a pro-Sinhala agenda. The discrimination of Tamils in the post-war era is thus naturalized into the culture unlike the blatant anti-Tamil rhetoric during the pre-war era.

### ***(ii) Ineffective Language Education Policies***

Despite efforts by the Sri Lankan government to foster inclusion and equality through the enforcement of both Tamil and Sinhala education in schools, this language education policy is not effectively implemented. The constitution states that “the official language of Sri Lanka is Sinhala (Article 18.1) ... Tamil shall also be an official language (Article 18.2),” and “a person shall be entitled to be educated through the medium of either of the national languages” (qtd. in IRIN). The law also states that all students must take Ordinary Level (O/L) Examinations for both

the Tamil and Sinhala languages. Although Tamil is being taught in schools, most of the population continues to be monolingual in either Sinhala or Tamil (IRIN). According to IRIN, a news agency that focuses on under-reported, ignored, or forgotten humanitarian stories, very few Tamils in the south speak Sinhala, and very few Sinhalese people speak Tamil. In the north, where most of the Tamils reside, the majority of the 15,000 policemen cannot speak Tamil which raises implications for police arrests and crime control (IRIN). Tamils also complain that it is difficult for them to get jobs (especially in the government) because the majority of the population speaks Sinhala (IRIN). The government has enforced that all students learn Sinhala and Tamil for the O/L Examinations with the aim of fostering social cohesion. Yet, the exams only test students on reading and writing composition; there is no speaking or listening component, nor a requirement to study the language's associated culture. Thus, students just learn the languages for the exam rather than for daily use. As a result, Tamils and Sinhalese are separated linguistically and face many obstacles. Although the current law promotes Sinhala and Tamil as the official languages of Sri Lanka through the enforcement of the national curriculum, these educational policies are not effectively implemented, and Tamil separatism continues to occur. This ineffective policy is not due to anti-Tamil rhetoric, but, rather, because the government values Tamil as a second language and Sinhala as a first language. The pro-Sinhala sentiment naturalizes the discrimination of Tamils in the Sri Lanka education system.

## **Conclusion**

Even though racism in the education system has been pervasive in Sri Lanka since the pre-war era, the present-day rendition of this is implicitly pro-Sinhalese rather than explicitly anti-Tamil. The Swabhasha movement resulted in the country's official language being Sinhala. However, the education system continued to teach students in their native language. As a result, educated Tamil students were unemployed because all jobs required Sinhala fluency, leading to frustration in the Tamil community. Further, the failure of the education system to teach

Sinhalese students Tamil language and culture (and vice versa) promoted social disjointedness within the Sri Lankan society. Tensions and alienation were exacerbated with the standardization of higher education admissions and the 1974 district quota system. It is significant to note that these particular policies of language learning and admissions were explicitly anti-Tamil. The discrimination and sense of isolation stemming from education policies fueled Tamil separatism, contributing to the ethnic conflict and the 30-year war. In contrast, modern culture and policies are pro-Sinhala and discrimination is more implied, legitimized, and naturalized. The current education law of students learning both Tamil and Sinhala is not effectively implemented, leading to a language gap between Tamils and Sinhalese today. This is due to Sinhala being viewed as the nation's first language and Tamil as the second, resulting in students being taught only to read and write Tamil for national exams rather than learning for the purpose of engaging with the Tamil community. Further, textbooks in the education system have historically shown Sinhala-centric views and suggested that Sinhala is the hegemonic culture in Sri Lanka. Therefore, there is no explicit reference to anti-Tamil rhetoric, but the Sinhala culture is promoted by hegemonic language education and textbook policies. The policies and resources are thus more hidden and normalized in the culture. Learning from the Sri Lankan example, we need to question the norms within our society that lead to the oppression of communities, as well as take steps to ensure that all identities are treated equally.

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