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ABSTRACT

The author provides a brief cultural history of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), giving particular attention to the relations between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority and the effects that differing religions, languages, cultures, and educational opportunities have had on that relationship. (IRT)

ETHNICITY, COMMUNAL RELATIONS, AND EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA (CEYLON)

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ETHNICITY, COMMUNAL RELATIONS, AND EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA (CEYLON)

Sri Lanka is an island country separated from India by a narrow strait eighteen miles wide. It is a pear-shaped mass of crystalline rock and limestone about 25,000 square miles in area, with the plains skirting the hills and mountains that are located in the south-central portion of the island. The maximum north-south distance is 270 miles and east-west, 140 miles. The climate is tropical--warm and humid, with little seasonal variations. The southwest plain and the southwest side of hill country annually receive 100 to 200 inches of rainfall and comprise the Wet zone. The Dry zone comprises north-central and eastern parts of the island which receive 50 to 70 inches of annual rainfall.

The Historical Past:

The history of Sri Lanka up to 1500 A. D. is, by and large, a confused record of wars, invasions, usurpations, and dynastic rivalries. From the thirteenth century onwards, the country was virtually divided into two kingdoms: a Tamil kingdom in the north and a Sinhalese kingdom in the southwest. In 1505, the Portuguese came to the island and established settlements on the west and south coast. Despite their desperate efforts to control the whole island, the Kandyan kingdom in the interior remained unconquered and unsubmissive.[1]

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[1] Charles Jeffries, Ceylon - The Path to Independence (London: Pall Mall Press, 1962), p. 5.

In 1612, the king of Kandy formed an alliance with the Dutch to defeat and dislodge the Portuguese but, in the process, he himself became subservient to them. In 1646, the country was, in effect, partitioned between the Portuguese and the Dutch. In 1656, the Dutch thoroughly defeated the Portuguese who finally left the island. For a century and a half, the Dutch were in control of a greater portion of the island. In 1796, they capitulated to the British who effectively ruled the whole country until 1948, when Sri Lanka became independent.

The Ethnic Composition of the Society:

The population of Sri Lanka is composed of several self-conscious ethnic groups. These groups are differentiated by language, religion, social customs, and, to some extent, racial extraction. The main ethnic groups are: Sinhalese (about 69 percent), Tamils (about 23 percent), Moors (about 7 percent), and Burghers (people of Dutch or mixed descent) (about 1 percent). The other ethnic groups- Veddahs, Malays, Europeans--are in small numbers.[2]

The following table gives the ethnic composition of the population based on 1963 census. Although the population is now about 13 million, the proportions remain almost unchanged.

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[2] Richard F. Nyrop and others, Area Handbook for Ceylon (Washington, D. C.: Superintendent of Documents, United States Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 75.

Table 1

Ethnic Composition of Sri Lanka, 1963[3]
(in thousands)

Sinhalese	7,513
Ceylon Tamils	1,165
Indian Tamils	1,123
Ceylon Moors	625
Indian Moors	57
Burghers and Eurasians	46
Malays	33

Most of the people of Sri Lanka are of Indian origin. Except the Veddahs, the handful of aboriginal inhabitants who are largely forest dwellers, the remainder of the population is the result of immigration over the past 2,500 years, by chance or design, in the interest of trade, war, religion, or economic opportunity. The ancient history of Sri Lanka (except for the past 400 years or so) is recorded in the Great Chronicles whose historiographic authenticity is questionable.

Theravada Buddhism was introduced from India in the 3rd century B. C., and is the religion of the majority of the inhabitants. Hinduism, the other major religion on the island, was also brought from India in the ancient times. The Arab traders and the Western colonists brought along with them Islam and Christianity, about the tenth and sixteenth centuries, respectively. The following table shows the religious affiliations of the people:

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[3]The Statesman's Yearbook, 1975-76 (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), pp. 483-484.

Table 2

Religious Affiliations of People of Sri Lanka, 1963[4]

Buddhists	7,003,287
Hindus	1,958,394
Christians	884,949
Moslems	724,043
Others	11,330

Buddhists constitute about 64 percent of the population, Hindus 20 percent, Christians 9 percent, and Moslems 7 percent.

How did this plural society come into being and what effect has it had on communal relations and education of the people? To answer this question, it is necessary to analyze the nature of each ethnic group first.[5]

The Sinhalese: Both legend and linguistic evidence suggest that the Sinhalese came to the island probably as invaders from North India about 500 B. C. According to Mahavamsa, a chronicle written by an unknown Buddhist monk in the fifth century A. D., the Sinhalese are a unique and specially favored people of Aryan stock with an Indo-European language, Sinhala. They are the chosen guardians of Buddhism, and Sri Lanka is a place of special sanctity for the Buddhist religion.[6] Their ancient history is replete with themes of recurring struggles to protect Buddhism from external incursions

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4 Ibid.

5 W. Howard Wriggins, Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 20-29.

6 B. H. Farmer, Ceylon - A Divided Nation (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 4-8.

and to establish the Sinhalese culture on the island. They are particularly proud of the cultural and economic achievements of the ancient Sinhalese kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa that existed from 200 B. C. to 1300 A. D.

The Sinhalese (the lion race) consitute the largest ethnic group. They are divided into two subgroups based upon geographic and cultural distinctions. The Low-Country Sinhalese, who principally live in the southern and western coastal regions, comprise 62 percent of the Sinhalese community and form nearly 43 percent of the total population. The Kandyan Sinhalese occupy the highlands of the south-central region, compose about 38 percent of all Sinhalese, and are nearly 26 percent of the island's population.

The vast majority of the Sinhalese are farmers and live in villages largely organized according to the traditional cast system and feudal relationship. The countryside people are mostly educated in their native language, Sinhala, with virtually no exposure to the Western thought. The Kandyan Sinhalese are substantially more conservative than the Low-Country Sinhalese. The latter, being coastal people, have come in contact with travelers and traders from other countries over the centuries and have developed a more cosmopolitan outlook than the former. Also, they encountered the European colonists first, intermingled with them, absorbed their culture, and served as interpreters between them and the island people. The Kandyans, on the other hand, insulated by their formidable terrain and shielded by their political independence, almost remained impregnable to any foreign influence prior to the establishment of the British rule which brought the region under its effective control. In fact, the Kandyan region served as a haven to those conservative coastal Sinhalese who found the Christianity and

European culture repugnant, could not counteract them, and therefore decided to migrate. The cultural differences between the two groups were accentuated during the rule of the Portuguese and Dutch colonists who could not subjugate the Kandyan kingdom and whose influence was therefore largely confined to the coastal areas. Despite the more pervasive and uniform British rule for over 150 years, a readily observable cultural gap between the two groups persists. The Kandyans, by and large, continue to be conservative, tenaciously clinging to the traditions of the past, committed to the preservation of Buddhism, and devoted to the restoration of the ancient Sinhalese culture. The Low-Country Sinhalese, on the other hand, having availed themselves of the Western education and profited from business and commercial contacts with the colonial powers, consitute a progressive, dynamic, and forward-looking segment of the Sinhalese community.

The Tamils: The Tamils, who constitute about 23 percent of the population, are the largest and longest established minority in Sri Lanka. They arrived from South India at various times, beginning about 2,500 years ago. By the medieval times, a Tamil kingdom was established in the northern part of the island. The Tamils are primarily of Dravidian stock, profess Hinduism, and speak Tamil which is one of the South Indian languages.[7]

The Tamils are divided into two subgroups--the Ceylon Tamils and Indian Tamils. The Ceylon Tamils form about 50 percent of all the Tamils, are largely descendants of the Tamil kingdoms of Sri Lanka, and are known to have inhabited the island for at least a thousand years. They are concentrated in the north, particularly around Jaffna, as well as in the eastern coastal region. Being industrious and venturesome and impelled by the general

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7 S. Arasaratnam, Ceylon (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 98-103.

poverty of their areas, the Ceylon Tamils have in recent years somewhat scattered to other parts of the country. But the Jaffna region is their ancestral home, the center of their cultural and intellectual life, and the source of their inspiration and strength. The Jaffna region is densely populated and is not very fertile. Therefore, the Tamils of this area, who are mostly farmers, have to work very hard for a living. The eastern part of the country, not so densely populated, is not very productive either.

The Indian Tamils were brought from South India by the British planters during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mainly as indentured laborers to work on the tea estates of the Kandyan highland region. They were mostly illiterate and poor and were settled on self-contained tea estates carved out of the forests. They have provided cheap labor for the tea industry, but have had no meaningful communication or interaction with the other groups on the island, and have played no other significant role in the national life. They use Tamil language, practice Hindu religion, and over the years have maintained tenuous contacts with their kin in India.

Indian Tamils have been economically exploited, socially isolated, and politically humiliated. They form a backward community and are looked down upon by the neighboring Kandyan Sinhalese peasantry. The Ceylon Tamils who mostly belong to the higher castes and who are educationally and economically more advanced, also maintain a social distance from them. Although they have made a matchless contribution to the economic well-being of Sri Lanka, they have not had a right to shape their own destiny. In spite of their residence on the island for several generations, shortly after independence they were declared to be non-citizens subject to deportation. According to the agreements of 1964 and 1974 between Sri Lanka and India, about two-thirds of the Indian

Tamils will be repatriated to India and the remainder will be eligible for the citizenship of Sri Lanka.[8]

The Moors: The Moors, so called by the Portuguese, profess Islam and account for about 7 percent of the total population. Generally, they speak Tamil as a home language, observe distinctly different social and religious customs, engage in trade and commerce, and form a separate ethnic community. Although they can be found all over the island, their concentrations are in the eastern and western coastal areas.

Moors are divided into two subgroups: the Ceylon and Indian Moors. The Ceylon Moors are the descendants of the Arab traders who arrived at various times during the past 900 years and many of whom settled in Sri Lanka. As a result of intermarriage with the local people and proselytization into Islam, their number has grown substantially. Most of the Moors on the east coast are farmers and are not very advanced educationally or economically.

The Indian Moors are descendants of Arab traders who had settled in South India for several centuries, had intermarried there, and then migrated to Sri Lanka in more recent times. These people are primarily traders and merchants.

In the eighteenth century, the Dutch brought some Indonesians and Maylaysians as soldiers to the island. They have religious affinity with the Moors, share communal solidarity with them, and constitute about 20 percent of the Moslem population. They are principally concentrated in the western region.

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8 The Statesman's Yearbook, 1975-76, Op. cit., pp. 483-484.

The Burghers: The Burghers are a community of Eurasian and European descent and account for about 1 percent of the population. They are the result of intermarriage of European colonists with local families. The term Burgher comes from the Dutch and originally referred to Dutch nationals and their descendants. Gradually, it came to be applied to all local residents of European ancestry, including Eurasians.

The Burgher community includes the descendants of the early Portuguese settlers, many of whom married into local families. The Dutch settlers, in turn, augmented the size of this community substantially. With the British contribution, the Burgher community further expanded and adopted English as its home language. The Burghers are Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, and are concentrated in urban areas.

The group known as the Dutch Burghers claims to have unmixed European blood and tends to exclude others from its social circle. Since independence, with the upsurge of the national spirit, repudiation of the Western style of life, and decline in the use of English language, the Burgher community has suffered loss in its prestige and status, and its members are migrating in large numbers to Australia, New Zealand, and other white nations of the Commonwealth.[9]

The Veddahs: The Veddahs are the aboriginal inhabitants of Sri Lanka who form a negligible fraction of the total population. Very little is known about the origin, culture, and language of these people. They are gradually being assimilated into the general society, and soon they will cease to be recognized as a distinct ethnic group.[10]

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[9] Richard F. Nyrop, Op. cit., p. 86.

[10] Ibid., p. 87.

Communal Relations: Relations between ethnic communities have had a significant bearing on all aspects of the national life, including education, in Sri Lanka. The most intense rivalry and extreme antagonism have existed between the Sinhalese majority and the Ceylon Tamil minority. The Sinhalese history has contributed to the bitter relations in no small measure.[11]

According to the Mahavamsa chronicle, the Sinhalese were firmly established in Sri Lanka by the fifth century A. D., and so were the Tamils; and the two communities were in frequent conflict with each other.[12] Before the tenth century A.D., both of the communities were situated in the northern region of the island, and there was considerable assimilation between them for many centuries.[13] About the eleventh century A. D., the Chola invasions started from India and large-scale warfare ensued which devastated large areas of the country and pushed the Sinhalese into the middle and the southern part of the island.[14] For about the next four centuries, prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the two major ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and the Ceylon Tamils, had established two kingdoms separated by uninhabited wilderness. During this period, there was virtually no contact between the two groups and apparently no conflict.

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[11] B. H. Farmer, Op. cit., p. 12.

[12] Ibid., pp. 5-10.

[13] Robert N. Kearney, Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1967), pp. 6-8.

[14] T. L. Green, "The Problems of Expanding Education in a Plural Society - Ceylon," The World Year Book of Education, 1965 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1965), pp. 371-373.

Historically, the view that the Sinhalese hold of their origin, of their peculiar destiny, and of their relationship to the Tamils has given an unsavory twist to the conflict. The Mahavamsa points out a special bond between Buddhism, Sinhala, and Sri Lanka. The connection between religion, language, and national identity established in the ancient scriptures exerts a profound influence on Sinhalese thought. The Sinhalese consider Sri Lanka to be the exclusive homeland of Sinhalese culture and are anxious to revive, preserve, and strengthen it.

The Mahavamsa protrays the Tamils, who are Hindus, as a threat to Buddhism and describes the Sinhalese kings as its defenders, preservators, and propagators. Moreover, there are many Sinhalese today who fervently believe that the decline and fall of the ancient Sinhalese civilization was caused by the Tamils. They point out that the Tamils deliberately destroyed the irrigation works of the Dry zone which sustained the earlier Sinhalese settlements. There is no evidence to support these allegations. Nonetheless, the myths of former Sinhalese greatness and of the evils brought on Sri Lanka by the Tamils have been fondly nurtured and faithfully passed on to the succeeding generations.[15]

These historical antecedents tend to generate and sustain a feeling of hostility and impede the development of cordial communal relations. Nevertheless, since Hinduism and Buddhism are both pacific and tolerant religions, the Sinhalese and the Tamils have lived on the island in amity for centuries.

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15 B. H. Farmer, Op. cit., pp. 8-12.

Only at times of stress, often occasioned by economic factors, the differences of language and religion and the anecdotes of the Mahavamsa combine to exacerbate the communal tensions. The religion and language by themselves need seldom be the cause of conflict, but they are readily available issues to inflame the communal frenzy, and an invocation to the ancient hostility provides a convincing justification for the struggle. The vision of the Sinhalese to restore their ancient glory on the island has prevented them from developing a spirit of accommodation.[16]

Although the Sinhalese constitute the overwhelming majority on the island, they are a small and isolated group in the world. Since the Sinhalese are found nowhere else in the world and no one else speaks Sinhala, the fear of loss of their culture and language from Sri Lanka is a matter of grave concern to them. The Ceylon Tamils are a minority on the island, but have religious and linguistic affinity with the vast number of Tamils in South India, and have a rich common cultural heritage. Although, traditionally, they have not shown interest in aligning themselves with the Tamils of India, the Sinhalese nonetheless consider this to be a distinct possibility. They cannot tolerate Sri Lanka under the domination of the Tamils. The Tamils, on their part, seek to preserve and further their own culture and would not like it to be smothered by the Sinhalese. The violent disturbances of 1958 clearly evidenced the distrust and fears of the two communities of each other. The Sinhalese extremists have agitated for the suppression of the Tamils. The Tamil extremists, in retaliation, clamor for the creation of a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka. Thus,

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[16] Ibid., pp. 65-72.

suspicion and hostility of the two groups continue toward each other despite the current ostensible placidity.

The colonial policies, particularly those introduced during the British rule, have generated in the society of Sri Lanka certain stresses that have continued to date with vehemence. Of particular significance is the use of English language for the administration of the country. The knowledge of English gave certain minorities, especially the Ceylon Tamils and the Burghers, enormous power and influence. The Jaffna region, the homeland of Ceylon Tamils, is a poor farm land. The population pressure has forced them to explore other avenues of livelihood. They early discovered in formal education a valuable source of opportunities for other desirable vocations. Being impressed by their habits of industry and avidity, the Christian missionaries established a large number of their schools in the Jaffna region enabling the Ceylon Tamils to excel in English education. This prepared them to enter the government service and the professions in numbers disproportionate to their strength in the country.[17]

The Burghers, although only one percent of the population, exercised inordinate influence in Sri Lanka throughout the colonial period. Because of their racial extraction and knowledge of English, they occupied privileged positions in civil service, armed forces, professions, and trade. In fact, almost until the middle of 1930's, the Ceylon Tamils and the Burghers dominated the government services, professions, trade and the educational fields on the island.[18] This certainly did not go unnoticed by the Sinhalese majority.

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17 Richard F. Nyrop, Op. cit., pp. 87-91.

18 Ibid.

The Low-Country Sinhalese, although relatively more advanced than the Kandyan Sinhalese, had less access to English education and therefore less participation in the national life. The Kandyan Sinhalese, on the other hand, being geographically isolated and culturally conservative, were almost totally cut off from the modernizing forces and virtually absent from the government services and the professions.[19]

The British educational and administrative policies led to the creation of a relatively small English-educated elite drawn from all principal communities in the country. The members of this group mostly came from affluent homes that could afford English education in fee-paying missionary schools.[20] The provision for English education and with it the provenance of this elite were very unevenly distributed over the island. The Low-Country Sinhalese and the Ceylon Tamils from the Jaffna region, apart from the Burghers, were most advanced in English education and provided the nucleus of the elite. This group imbibed Western values, beliefs, attitudes, and habits, and had only marginal association with the vast majority of the people, thereby forming a class of its own.[21] The British government relied on this group for the administration of the country. These people were familiar with the social and political thinking of the West, and, unlike the Burghers who aligned themselves with the ruling power, they were loyal to Sri Lanka, and spearheaded the nationalist movement for the independence of

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19 Ibid.

20 S. Jayaweera, "British Educational Policy in Ceylon in the Nineteenth Century," Paedagogica Historica, IX (1969), 84-85.

21 W. Howard Wriggins, Op. cit., pp. 29-33.

the country.[22] Because of their English education and privileged position, there developed a wide gulf between them and the majority of the people, which gave rise to severe tensions in the post-independence era.

The English planters, finding the Kandyan Sinhalese peasantry not very receptive to the idea of working on the tea estates, imported Tamils from South India in large numbers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In spite of their having lived in the country for several generations, the Indian Tamils continue to be considered as foreigners and are looked upon with disdain by all other ethnic groups including the Ceylon Tamils. Being of humble origin, brought to the island as indentured laborers, and confined to the tea estates in the Kandyan hills, they are, by and large, illiterate and ignorant, with no effective national participation. They have become the target of rancor of Kandyan Sinhalese peasantry as the tea estates have progressingly encroached upon the villages, and have dispossessed them of their lands and means of livelihood. The Ceylon Tamils, who have been aloof from the Indian Tamils because of their low caste origin and general backwardness, have shown interest in them since the rise of Sinhalese nationalism in the late 1950's. The two groups have begun to develop a feeling of unity and to forge an ethnic solidarity against the common adversary.[23]

Nationalistic movement prior to independence was largely initiated by the English-educated natives who formed the elite of the society. In the early years of independence, Sri Lanka was governed by the elite members of the various communities. Since English was the language of administration, the common people of the society, not conversant with English, could not

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[22] John M. Jayarajah, "Problems of Development and Education in Ceylon," The Catholic Educational Review, LXV (April, 1967), p. 264.

[23] B. H. Farmer, Op. cit., p. 69.

participate in their government. With universal suffrage and popular awakening, the Sinhalese, especially the Kandyans, realized that they had been unjustly excluded from the national government by the English-educated elite. They also noted that the Ceylon Tamils and the Burghers had taken an unfair share of power by virtue of their English education. They expressed the fears that, despite their being a majority in Sri Lanka, Sinhala language, Sinhala culture, and Buddhism faced the danger of extinction, and that Christianity and Hinduism were getting a preferential treatment.[24]

Leadership for this movement came from the Sinhala-educated intellectuals who comprised the ayurvedic (indigenous medicine) physicians, the village priests, and the village school teachers who had considerable influence in the rural areas. They had only one objective in mind: the revival of Buddhism, Sinhala language, and Sinhalese culture in Sri Lanka. Gradually, the Sinhalese majority began to press its demands for what it considered to be its rightful place in its own homeland and to rectify the injustices suffered through the centuries.

Immediately after independence, in 1949, under pressure from the Sinhalese majority, the United National Party government of the elite rescinded the Sri Lanka citizenship and the franchise of most Indian Tamils who had acquired them through the Donoughmore Constitution in 1939. These people were rendered stateless and lived in extreme insecurity and uncertainty until the agreements of 1964 and 1974 between the governments of Sri Lanka and India.[25]

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[24] S. A. Pakeman, Ceylon (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1964), pp. 179-192.

[25] Robert N. Kearney, Op. cit., pp. 13-14.

The M. E. P. (Peoples' United Front), with the support of the Sinhalese majority, won the election in 1956 on the slogan of "Religion, Language, and Nation" and formed the government. About the same time, the Report of the Buddhist Commission entitled The Betrayal of Buddhism led to urgent calls to protect and further the Buddhist religion which embodied the Sinhalese culture. Soon the government passed legislation adopting Sinhala as the sole official language of the country, to the exclusion of English and Tamil. This severely curtailed the power and influence of the English-educated elite, Burghers, and Ceylon Tamils in the government.[26]

The most intense rivalry has been between the Sinhalese majority and the Ceylon Tamil minority. The English-educated elite have lost their position of preeminance, have disavowed their Western and cosmopolitan garb, and have identified themselves with their respective communities. The Burghers, Moors, and Malays are too small in number and too scattered to pose any serious challenge. The Indian Tamils, because of their disabilities, have played an inconsequential role so far, but are full of potential, particularly in alliance with the Ceylon Tamils. In the language legislation, the Sinhalese see a means to retrieve their ancestral heritage and to exercise their prerogatives as the majority. The Ceylon Tamils view in it a domination of the Sinhalese majority and a threat to their culture and identity. The official language issue precipitated a violent confrontation between the two communities in 1958.

Education:

Ethnicity has traditionally reflected itself in the provision of education in Sri Lanka, and is intertwined with the development of communal

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26 S. A. Pakeman, Op. cit., pp. 179-192.

relations in the more recent times. In the ancient times, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, by and large, occupied separate geographical territories and nurtured their respective cultures. Both in Sinhalese and Tamil kingdoms, education was associated with Buddhism and Hinduism, respectively, and was patronized by the kings.

The earliest known schools in the Sinhalese kingdoms were the village schools, pansalas (temple schools), and pirivenas (colleges) which would approximate the modern elementary schools, secondary schools, and colleges, respectively. Education was essentially religious, based on Theravada Buddhism, and was supervised by the Buddhist Sangha (community of monks). The monastic orders imparted education in the ancient times and this tradition has continued to date.[27]

In Tamil kingdoms, the pattern of education was essentially the same as in the Sinhalese kingdoms. The Brahmans served as the priests as well as shouldered the responsibility for learning and teaching, and the Hindu scriptures formed the subject matter. The Tamil indigenous educational institutions have survived through the historical times.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Arab Moors brought to the island their own tradition of education. Along with their permanent settlements, mosques were erected where the Moslem priests imparted instruction in Islamic scriptures. This tradition was reinforced by the coming of the Indian Moors later, and it subsequently served the Malays on their arrival.

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27 T. Ranjit Ruberu, "Educational Tradition Indigenous to Ceylon", Paedagogica Historica, XIV (1974), pp. 106-117.

The Portuguese came to Sri Lanka at the beginning of the sixteenth century and established the first Western schools in 1505 with the explicit purpose of proselytization into Catholicism. The schools were set up by the Catholic orders to teach Christianity. They were financed by the Portuguese government, but were organized and administered by the Catholic priests. The method of learning was memorization and the curriculum consisted of Catholic scriptures. The Dutch missionaries, beginning in 1656, continued the practice of providing Western education but with a more secular purpose, although conversion into Protestantism was their dominant objective.[28]

With the advent of the British rule in 1796, there was a change in the direction of education. The government did not actively and directly promote Christianity, but permitted the English and American missionaries to do so through the establishment of schools. Also, as English became the language of administration, people with English education gained access to government jobs and the professions, and a knowledge of English came to be regarded as a key to social mobility, status, and power. Consequently, the missionary schools providing English education, despite their Christian bias, were established in large numbers in the north, west, and southwest of the country where they received ready welcome.[29] In addition, the English plantation owners established schools on tea estates for the children of the laborers which aimed at imparting nothing more than a veneer of literacy at best.[30]

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28 "Educational Development in Ceylon," Bulletin of the UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Asia, Bangkok, VI (March, 1972), pp. 25-36.

29 S. Jayaweera, "Recent Trends in Educational Expansion in Ceylon," International Review of Education, XV, (1969), 278-281.

30 T. L. Green, Op. cit., p. 381.

By 1900 several types of schools had come into existence: government schools, government-assisted schools, Christian schools, Buddhist schools, Hindu schools, Moslem schools, and plantation schools. This motley of schools was characterized by a disparity of objectives, curriculum, standards, products, control, and support, and served distinct groups in the variegated society of Sri Lanka.[31] Of these, the Christian mission schools have been quite prominent and have played a dominant role in the political and social life of the island. Although the Christian missions engaged substantially in the educational and humanitarian tasks, their main thrust was toward proselytization. As a result of their aggressive efforts, a large number of the natives, mostly Sinhalese and Tamils, were converted to Christianity. These missions adroitly exploited the poverty and ignorance of the people, although the Portuguese and Dutch missions used the brute force as well. Paranthetically, it must be stated that some conversions also took place among the educated and well-to-do families as a result of persuasion and conviction or allurement of material gains. The proselytizing activities of the missions, therefore, severely undermined both Buddhism and Hinduism and engendered a great deal of resentment among the adherents of the two religions. In the latter part of the nineteenth century and in the early part of the twentieth century, as a reaction to the Christianizing activities of the missionaries, a religious resurgence, primarily of Buddhism but also of Hinduism, started. Combined with Sinhalese nationalism, resurgent Buddhism became, by the mid-1950's, a powerful political and cultural force to reckon with. After the independence, Christianity lost its influence, and some of its members got converted back to Buddhism.

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31 N. D. Wijesekera, The People of Ceylon (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena and Company, Ltd., 1965), pp. 108-111.

The Christian missionaries also drew the wrath of the native people, especially the Sinhalese, for their educational activities. The mission schools provided English education which prepared the youths for careers in government service and the professions. As a consequence, English education during the British rule was highly prized, greatly respected, and most coveted, and the mission schools were immensely popular and in great demand. Conversely, the vernacular education came to be considered as inferior, fit only for the poor, and virtually of no value in the modern times, and the indigenous educational institutions lost prestige and suffered atrophy. The Mission schools were therefore despised by the masses as predators on native education and culture and became the target of intense hostility and indignation.[32]

The mission schools had yet another pernicious effect on the society of Sri Lanka. Being private and fee-paying, they were within the access of only affluent families. Therefore, they divided the society into two classes: one was the small English-educated minority consisting of members from all communities but with a preponderance from the Jaffna region Tamils and the Low-Country Sinhalese. The other included the vast majority of the masses who were either illiterate or educated in the native languages. The one enjoyed the power, status, and glamour; the other was subservient, frustrated, and sullen. The schism created severe strain between the two classes. When leadership emerged from the masses, particularly from the Sinhala-educated majority, to fight for their due share in the polity, their fury

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[32] S. A. Pakeman, Op. cit., pp. 179-192.

was directed first against the English-educated elite and Burghers and then against the Ceylon Tamils. The legislation by the Sinhalese majority government in 1956 installing Sinhala as the only official language was, at least in part, designed to deprive these groups of the superiority they had hitherto enjoyed by virtue of their knowledge of English.[33]

Until December 1960, a dual system of educational control existed in Sri Lanka. Schools were owned by the government and private denominational bodies in the proportions of 53 and 47 percent, respectively. In that year, the denominational schools were nationalized and were made part of the state school system.[34] The real target of this legislation was the Christian mission schools that charged tuition, provided English education, and commanded enormous prestige. These schools were deemed to have aggravated the inequality of opportunity, created severe social cleavage, and eroded native culture. Since the Burghers , Ceylon Tamils, and Low-Country Sinhalese benefitted from them more than the other segments of the society, the legislation by the Sinhalese majority government to nationalize them was, to some extent, politically inspired and based on communal and religious considerations.[35]

The legislation by the Sinhalese majority government declaring Sinhala as the only official language and effecting nationalization of private schools has created fear and suspician in the Tamil minority. The Tamils view it as directed primarily against them and also consider it as a threat to

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33 J. E. Jayasuriya, "Current Educational Trends and Controversies in Ceylon", International Review of Education, VIII (1963), pp. 294-295.

34 UNESCO, World Survey of Education, Vol. IV, Higher Education, Paris, 1966, pp. 300-302.

35 E. F. C. Ludowyk, The Modern History of Ceylon, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), pp. 260-261.

their identity, culture, and livelihood. It took violent agitation, loss of lives, destruction of property, national turmoil, and untold human sufferings in 1958 to persuade the Sinhalese majority government to recognize Tamil as the secondary language of administration and education. The Tamils feel that they are the real target of the Sinhalese maneuvering, and point out that they are being systematically squeezed out of the government service and the professions. It is conceded in knowledgeable circles that many of the actions of the Sinhalese majority government are prompted by a feeling of animosity directed against the Tamil ethnic group, and that the Tamils are discriminated against in numerous subtle ways in all spheres of life including education.[36]

Educationally, on the whole, the Tamils lag behind the Sinhalese. The literacy among the Tamils in 1960 was only 54 percent as against 68 percent among the Sinhalese. Only in the Jaffna region, due to the efforts of the mission schools, the Tamil literacy was as high as that of the Low-Country Sinhalese, about 72 percent. Other Tamil areas (the Dry zone, the eastern part, and the tea estates) have low literacy rate because of lack of educational facilities. Ethnic disparity is also reflected in school enrolment. In 1960, proportionately, more of the Sinhalese children were enrolled in schools than the Tamil children.[37]

The situation on the plantations is pitiable. There are over a million workers on the tea estates. In 1960, their children attending the school constituted only 4.7 percent of the total school enrolment, far below their proportion of the school-age children in the country. Further, only 50 percent of the school-age children on the plantations attended school, and only

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[36] T. L. Green, Op. cit., pp. 382-384.

[37] Ibid.

9 percent proceeded from estate schools to further education. In estate schools, the classes are crowded, the teacher-pupil ratio is about twice as much as in other schools in the country, and an overwhelming majority of the teachers are unqualified. The estate schools continue to be poor and neglected.[38] The plantation workers of Indian origin continue to be discriminated against politically, socially, and educationally.[39]

There is discrimination in admissions policy to the teacher training institutions directed against the non-Buddhist in general, and the Tamils in particular. In 1960, there were 800 students in the teacher training programs in the three universities of Sri Lanka (the University of Ceylon, Vidyalankar, and Maha Vidodya). Only a very small number of them were Tamils. The number of Tamil entrants to teacher training programs has been further reduced.[40]

In the past, the Tamil youths have gone to Indian universities in large numbers for higher education. This is now prevented by the imposition of foreign exchange control regulations.[41]

The Tamil Hindus, newly graduated from the universities, are generally not employed as teachers or in other government positions. This is causing a serious unemployment problem among the highly educated Tamils and forcing them to seek employment overseas and leave the country.[42]

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38 Ibid.

39 India Times, Chicago, Illinois, Vol. 2, No. 3, Friday, March 5, 1976, Page 2, Column 4-5.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

There is a systematic and planned discrimination against the Tamil-medium schools. In December 1963, trained science teachers and equipped laboratories were available to Tamil-medium pupils only in the great Tamil centers. Elsewhere, even in secondary schools, such facilities were not available to Tamil-medium pupils except in a Moslem school or in a dual-medium school. Also, in 1964, by contriving reorganization, the opportunity to pursue science education was denied to Tamil pupils in the long-established well-organized mission schools in the greater Colombo area where they had traditionally enjoyed it.[43]

The Tamils form about one-fourth of the total population. They have been asking for the setting up of a Tamil university in the northern region. Despite the ligitimacy of their demand, they have not been able to secure the establishment of the university in their region so far.[44]

Conclusion

The resurgent Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism is the prevailing force in Sri Lanka today, and any individual or group unacceptable to it has no chance of constitutional power in the polity. Some small minorities appear to be trying to make adjustment to this reality through conversion to Buddhism, emigrating from the country, learning Sinhala, and forsaking the Western style of life. The Tamils, who constitute the largest minority, have resisted Sinhalese chauvinism and paid the price for it.[45]

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Richard F. Nyrop, Op. cit., p. 158.

[45] B. H. Farmer, Op. cit., pp. 67-72.

The problems of Sri Lanka are grave and multifarious. Population pressure, unemployment, and scarcity of wherewithals of life would top the list.[46] When economic conditions, which are always less than satisfactory, worsen, communal tensions rise creating the possibility of violent disturbances. Politicians often exploit the situation to their advantage.

Although Buddhism is not the state religion by law, it has acquired that position in practice. This tends to undermine the richness and contribution of the other religions in the country. Sri Lanka today is a de facto theocracy, which is an anachronism in the space age and a retrogressive step in the evolution of the country. Buddhism is a tolerant religion. But the ghastly deeds of 1958 hardly exemplify its true spirit or the sublimated conscience of its followers.

The Sinhalese culture and Buddhism have survived the vicissitudes of the last 2500 years, and the possibility of their extinction now is inconceivable. Therefore, the need to restrict the cultures and religions of the other groups in order to preserve and promote the Sinhalese culture and Buddhism is hardly justifiable. The large-scale Tamil emigration, the failure to use their abilities to the fullest extent, and the undeniable restrictions placed on their access to education would have a detrimental effect on the well-being of Sri Lanka. Whereas it is only just to eradicate the special privileges and vested interests, it is a national waste to stymie the development of the potential of a segment of the society. The proper thing to do is to develop the weaker components of the society through remedial measures, not by stifling the stronger ones.

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[46] Jacques Hallak, Financing and Educational Policy in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), (Paris: UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning, 1972), pp. 29-37.

Sri Lanka has taken an ambitious and laudable step in commiting itself to providing free education to all of its citizens from elementary to university stage.[47] Every child is entitled to equal educational opportunity under the law. It remains to be seen how seriously and impartially the provisions of the law are enforced. Education, when used to serve only a select group, will act as a devisive force, stultify the democratizing process, and debilitate the whole society, with consequences beyond imagination.

In Sri Lanka, a determined Sinhalese majority is faced with a resolute Tamil minority. Neither can exterminate the other; both can enrich each other. They have much to gain by mutual cooperation than by internecine confrontation. There is nothing in Buddhism and Hinduism that should breed mutual hatred. In fact, they are the most tolerant religions in the world. What is needed on the part of the two communities is the realization of the inevitability of coexistence and interdependence and of the necessity of reconciliation and cooperation for the benefit of all. When the two communities understand their mutual obligations, recognize and respect the rights of each other, and do not feel threatened by the other, a golden era would dawn in the history of Sri Lanka.

Assuming that the Sinhalese succeeded in ridding Sri Lanka of the non-Sinhalese and in restoring the Sinhalese culture according to their perception of the history, they will still have the problems of poverty, hunger, disease, and unemployment menacing the country, and the society will lose its richness stemming from the variety of its people, in addition. The problems of today cannot be solved by gloating over the laurels of the past; they require application of science and technology, pragmatism, and commit-

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47 UNESCO, World Survey of Education, Vol. V, Educational Policy, Legislation, and Administration, Paris: 1971, pp. 279-280.

ment. People who are enslaved by the traditions of the past, are seldom creative enough to deal with the present, much less imaginative to plan for the future.

The criteria of greatness have varied in different periods of history. The determinant of greatness in the twentieth centure is the mastery of science and technology to harness the forces of nature for the betterment of mankind. A nation that fails to recognize it and ignores to strive toward it will find greatness to be ever elusive. Obsession with the past cannot solve the problems of the present and would only lead to stagnation and retardation. The challenge confronting the Sinhalese today is to free Sri Lanka from the shackles of traditional feudalism and to transform it into a dynamic progressive modern society with social justice for all. In this endeavor, all segments of the society have a vitally important role to play. Attempts to cripple any of the segments overtly or covertly, besides being unjust and inhuman, would only dissipate human resources, impede communal integration, and hinder national development. Sri Lanka needs leadership capable of inspiring the masses to eschew communal frenzy and to dedicate themselves to the task of building a truly great country.

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