

## CONTEMPORARY SRI LANKAN EDUCATION POLICIES AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE ORIGIN OF THE TAMIL MILITARY MOVEMENT IN BEGINNING OF 1970S

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### ABSTRACT

The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE has lasted nearly three decades and was one of the longest running civil wars in Asia. The crucial influences of this war caused catastrophic damage to the Tamil and Sinhalese social lives. A large number of people lost their lives due to this terrible conflict. In this pathetic situation various researchers have attempted to decipher the grass root reasons which contributed towards the Tamil youth uprising and the establishment of the LTTE during the 1970s. Contemporary educational policies which were introduced by UF Government (*United front Government*) had given clear directions to the Sri Lankan Tamil youth to start military activities. However, this research aims to find out what were the real facts which drove the Sri Lankan government to introduce these education policies. Further this research aims to decipher the real impact of the new education policies which were introduced by the Sri Lankan government. The conclusion of this research will draw an impartial analysis of the relevant facts.

**KEYWORDS:** Education, Tamil, Sinhala, District Quota, Standardization, Effects

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Education Level of Tamils during the Colonial Period

Prior to the colonial period, Sri Lankan education was conducted by Temple Schools (*Pirivena*), which provided an elementary education with emphasis on religion, reading and writing. But this situation completely changed under the European rulers. They promoted the western education system in Sri Lanka, especially to prepare the Sri Lankan students for positions in colonial administrations. They focused their priority of the Island's education to the Christian missionary societies who promoted English, and a western oriented education.

The British implemented the divide and ruling policy in Sri Lanka to separate the different communities from each other. The government policies which were introduced by the British rulers halted the spread of envy between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority (Bandarage, 1999, p 32). During the British administration most of the exclusive and exceptional educational privileges were offered to the Jaffna high caste (Vellalar) Tamils over the Sinhalese majority (Gunasinham, 1999, pp88-89). A large number of high class missionary schools was established in the Jaffna peninsula. The Jaffna Tamils received a very fluent understanding of the English language. By 1930, literacy of the English language in the Northern Province was second only to Colombo which was the commercial capital of Sri Lanka. Under this condition Vellala caste Tamils held high positions in the Sri Lankan political administrative and the education field as well. For example Vellala caste Tamil leaders like Arumugnathapillai Coomaraswamy, Ponnambalam Ramanathan and Ponnambalam Arunachalam held a prominent place in the political arena during the colonial period of Sri Lanka. But even

within the Tamil community the low caste Tamils were unable to benefit from such privileges. Compared to the high class Tamils, even the majority Sinhalese people experienced fewer privileges under the British rule due to their lack in competency in English. Many Sinhalese were cultivators, laborers and village traders.

The Ceylon Tamils were over represented in the administrative service relative to their proportions in the Island's population. In 1925, the Sinhalese constituted 42.5 percent of the governments medical service and the 43.6 percent of the Civil Service, whereas, the Sri Lankan Tamils made up 30.8 percent of the medical services and 20.5 percent of the Civil Service although their respective proportions in the Island's population were 67 percent and 11 percent(Thambiah,1955,p 129).

### **Special Features of Sri Lankan Education after Independence**

Since Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948, Sri Lanka was ruled by the Sinhalese majority based government. The Sinhala Buddhists expected more rights and privileges under the majority Sinhalese governments. Sinhalese felt although they were the majority community, that they had been severely discriminated during the colonial period. This eventually led to the government taking steps to introduce various supportive welfare policies. In the meantime the free education system that opened up education to children from all levels of society even in the colonial rule. Education opportunities were broadly scattered after the independence. In 1956the Sri Lankan government replaced English with Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka. The medium of education also changed to Sinhala and Tamil. Due to this a vast number of Sinhalese students benefited from educational opportunities after the independence. But most of the Sinhalese students entered the faculty of humanities. But the Tamil percentages of faculties of Science disciplines were numerically higher compared to the Sinhalese. The reason was, at the beginning of the 1970s competency in English was a valuable extra qualification to enter faculties of Science disciplines. High class English educational opportunities had been protected in the Jaffna peninsula even after the independence (Silva, 1997, p86). But science oriented educational facilities were not properly established in the Sinhala rural areas even after the independence(Jayasuriya, 1965, pp 91-95).Towards the beginning of the 1970`s the number of Arts graduates that were produced was vast however the UF government failed to provide satisfactory job opportunities for such a large number of Arts graduates. Owing to this the mental and social depressants of unemployment caused the rural youths to take up arms on the 5<sup>th</sup> April 1971 against the government. More than 10,000 Sinhala youths participated in the uprising of 1971 (Hallidy, 1998, p 8-10). However the April uprising was totally suppressed within a month by the government.

### **Standardization Policy**

After the 1971 riots, a variety of policies were introduced by the Sri Lankan government to solve problems of the Sinhala youths. The standardization policy was a very important measure which UF government took during this period. The Government hoped to create similar representations in the science faculties of universities according to the racial representations of total population, through this policy. So due to mass education facilities of the Northern province, the government implemented a policy which stated that Tamil students should take higher marks compared to the Sinhalese students, in order to enter the science faculties of universities (Silva, 1997, p248). Eventually the Tamil percentage within the science faculties of Sri Lankan universities decreased after the introduction of the standardization policy. But still the Tamils were able to establish 30 percent of the total number of students in the science faculties of universities (Even though, as mentioned before their total representation of population was 11 percent). Therefore upon comparison of the

ratio of the Tamils to Sinhalese of the total population, it was apparent that the general level of Tamil representation in Sri Lankan science faculties had held a prominent place even after the standardization policy. Even though S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, who was prominent Tamil leader, pointed out that the current education policy would create high barriers of education for the Tamils (Wilson, 1994, p122). Tamil youth of the Northern Province were organized by high-caste Tamil leaders against this policy.

### **The District Quota System**

Due to Tamil oppositions, the standardization policy was terminated by the government and implemented a new policy called the District Quota System (Silva, 1978, pp89-90). Educational facilities were spread out unequally over the country in that period. For instance the Northern and Western provinces experienced excellent educational facilities. In contrast, Central, Uva, Saparagamuva provinces experienced less educational facilities. Due to this situation only a very few students of those provinces were qualified to enter the university. So the government hoped to give special offers and chances to students of less developed districts under this policy. As a result, students of less developed rural provinces were given the maximum advantages in university education. For instances, Sinhala students made 75.4% of science faculties, 78% of engineering faculties and 70.0% of medical faculties in 1974. The percentage of university entrance of Sinhala student was increased in 1975. 78.0% of science faculties, 83.4% of engineering faculties and 78.9% of medical faculties were made by them in that year. They held the most prominent place of Arts faculties as 85% in 1975 (Silva, 1978, p 93). Not only Sinhalese, representations of Muslims also had increased more than before (Silva, 1978, p 93). The number of Muslim citizens had scattered in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka. Until now they had received fewer opportunities in Sri Lankan education system. But after introducing the District Quota system they qualified to enter the prestigious faculties of universities. Their number in science faculties doubled between 1970-1975. Tamil representations of Universities had decreased drastically. Representation of Tamils in science faculties had decreased up to 20.9% in 1974. (They were made 25.9% in 1973 and 35.3% in 1970). Similarly their percentages of engineering and medical faculties had decreased up to 16.3% and 25.5%. In 1973, 337 Tamil students qualified to enter the science faculties of universities. Even though in 1974, that limit had been decreased up to 294. This situation worsened in 1975. Their percentages of science and medical faculties decreased up to 14.2% & 17.4% in that year (Silva, 1978, p 93). Their overall representation of science discipline had been decreased up to 19 % in same year. But even now according to the Tamil ratio representation of the total population the Tamils had been able to hold a good position in university education. Similarly Tamil students from relatively backward districts such as Batticaloa, Trincomalee and hill country plantation areas who previously lagged behind in educational opportunities were able to acquire the maximum benefits through this policy. But due to decrease in previous representations of Tamils, the variety of opposing movements was organized by the Tamil leaders against the District Quota System. They expressed their strong oppositions over current standards of Sinhalese students of Universities and identified the positive improvement of Muslims in the university education under this policy as a threat. The Sinhalese saw the current changes 'as reversing the discrimination they had been subjected to in the past'; while the Tamils felt they were being deliberately discriminated against (Balasuriya, 2012). They thought that the Sinhalese had stolen their previous opportunities.

## CONCLUSIONS

According to above explanation it is able to identify that why the UF government implemented those educational policies and what the real effects were of above policies. Actually overall the Tamil representation of the Sri Lankan universities had decreased through these policies. But they had enjoyed privileges and opportunities since the colonial period over the Sinhalese majority. Therefore the government tried to give similar opportunities to every community according to their representation of ratio level. So indeed the majority Sinhalese acquired the maximum educational opportunities automatically due to their ratio level. Even among the Tamil community, only over privileges educational rights of high class Jaffna Tamils were decreased due to the above educational policies. As mentioned previously most top level employment opportunities, access to education and other services were favorably enjoyed by Jaffna Vellalar Tamils. It is a common acceptance that there are social differences among Tamils. Caste is a factor to divide Tamil society into diverse groups. Vellalar caste became a powerful group in the society though there were some regional and social differences between Mukkuwas in Batticaloa and the eastern Tamils due to their socio-economic and regional diversities. (Balasuriya, 2012) Apart from that up-country Tamils have lower socio-economic reputation among other Tamils because they belong to the lower caste based social setting in India. So upper caste Vellalar did acquire highest education skills with English language ability. Those elite upper-caste Tamils were not cooperated with other lower-caste Tamils in Jaffna peninsula as well as the eastern and up-country Tamils due to their inherent caste barriers (Balasuriya, 2012). Most of those elites settled down in Colombo and carried out their own agendas being a special group in the Tamil community. Low caste Tamils were not able to acquire good education or high class professions due to caste barriers of the Tamil society. They had been providing labor for farming in the lands of upper caste and were servants for upper caste Tamils (Balasuriya, 2012). So it is clearly visible that the low caste Tamil community was a relatively deprived group in the Tamil society. The Sri Lankan Tamil military movement was started by them. For instance the LTTE leadership and other main leaders came from the lower caste. The EPRLF had a significant number of personal from depressed-castes--- (Roberts, 2011, p 84) who were less educated or probably uneducated and unprivileged among other Tamils.

There is evidence some of the LTTE members were of upper caste Vellalar, some of them are Uma Maheswaran, Ponnamma, Kerdelz, Yogi and Rahim (Balasuriya, 2012). However, the LTTE leader was able to keep those members away from the top ranks of the organization (Roberts 2011). As a result of attraction of radical position of LTTE movement a vast number of low caste Tamil youths joined the LTTE. So we can't accept that educational policies which were introduced by PF government had influenced the Tamil military groups. As mentioned before they were generally depressed groups in the Tamil society and they did not inherit educational rights or opportunities that were cut off by the Sinhalese government. These policies negatively affected the privileges of only Vellala Tamil community, not the whole Tamil community. Particularly those policies did not directly affect the radical Tamil youths. Even though, as a result of negative impact of Vellala elites, they were organized Tamil youths as violently against the Sinhala government. Elite class Tamil leaders were encouraged to engage in anti Sinhala violent behaviors towards Tamil youths. Especially elite Tamil leaders were the main group which spread anti Sinhala attitudes among the Tamil community. But at the end of 1970s elite Tamils were not able to control violent behaviors of young Tamil community. Their violent involvements had gone beyond the exceed level. Young Tamils who challenged both elite Tamils and Sinhala leadership used various terrorist activities and released their pressure on the society. It is important to note here number of high caste Tamil leaders were killed by the Tamil youths declaring that those elites as 'enemies of the Tamil nation' (Hoole, 1992, p 17).

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